



Unity and Fragmentation in the Novel “Between the Acts” by Virginia Woolf

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Abstract: Adeline Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941) is a prominent modernist author known for her novel "Between the Acts" (1941). The book, published posthumously by her husband Leonard Woolf, unfolds over a single day in 1939, coinciding with the outbreak of World War II. The story revolves around Giles Oliver and his wife Isabella, highlighting their strained relationship, and gradually unveiling the complexities of their marriage during a village pageant. Woolf portrays the couple's psychological turmoil and inner conflicts despite their underlying love, reflecting the challenges and complexities of romantic relationships. Through her unique narrative style and character portrayal, Woolf hints at emerging literary trends, prefiguring elements of postmodernism. Despite their initial discord, the characters ultimately reconcile, symbolizing resilience and the potential for renewed hope and growth in their lives. The novel explores Woolf's treatment of the couple, shedding light on her innovative approach to depicting human connections and challenging traditional familial bonds through intricate language, fragmented storytelling, and psychological depth in her final work.

Keywords: Narrative, Personal identity, Virginia Woolf, Between the Acts

Between the Acts opens on a summer night for a discussion among some neighbours, and ends the next night in the same place: Pointz Hall, home of Giles and Isabella Oliver. They want to attend the amateur performance of a historical play written by Miss La Trobe, in which various epochs of English history (the Elizabethan era, the Restoration period and the 18th century, the Victorian era, and the fictional present) are presented in four acts. In this play, Miss La Trobe, an ambivalent artist figure whose mood oscillates between belief in the unifying power of art and a desperate fear of artistic failure, tries to shape contingent historical events into an aesthetic unity. The opening scene of the novel creates an image of the transgression of the system as well as of values. The problem with the cesspool is paralleled by the flow of emotion between Isa and Mr. Haines, a gentleman farmer. Like the cesspool issue, this emotion is unsettled, and there is little or no chance that it can be fixated. Isa is infatuated with Mr. Haines, the way Giles flirts with Mrs. Manresa. The novel maintains a fragmented narrative, with broken sentences ornamented with periods.

Through its narrative Woolf brings the past into the present, but it is neither fully flashback nor fully stream-of-consciousness. Rather, it is diffused, incorporating elements of wordplay, poetry fragments, and nursery rhymes without forming a coherent whole. The novel exhibits characteristics of postmodern fiction such

as narrative fragmentation and reflexivity, exploring how storytelling shapes history. The concept of dissociation, as described by Donnel Stern, is highlighted through Isa's struggle with self-understanding and communication barriers. The novel intertwines past and present, illustrating the continuous presence of history in everyday life. The symbolic use of violence underscores the complex interplay between characters in Woolf's depiction of postmodernism.

Woolf incorporates a news piece about the rape of a deceived girl from *The Times*. This news profoundly impacts Isa, blurring her perception of reality, emotions, fantasies, frustrations, commotions, and violence. The violence against the girl affects Isa's sense of time, interrupted by the presence of a hammer and Mrs. Swithin. Isa's hallucination of "mahogany door panels" symbolizes violence not just towards the girl but towards Isa herself, who rejects domestic and possessive aspects. The news reveals Isa's inner turmoil, the girl's outspokenness, and suppressed anger, prompting Isa's struggle for self-expression and empowerment, addressing societal barbarism. Conversations between characters like Bart and Lucy signify a hopeless, monotonous cycle. Woolf delves into Isa's internal conflicts, highlighting the constraints of societal norms and the disillusionment post-World War I. Isa's fragmented self, yearning for unattainable love and coping with a neglectful husband, reflects her deep emotional struggles and desires for connection. The narrative weaves together themes of unfulfilled desires, societal constraints, and the complexity of human emotions within a modernist framework.

Isa, a character in the narrative, grapples with inner conflicts and dissatisfaction with herself. Her complex emotions manifest as a split between her subconscious passion and her reality, leading to a dichotomy of love and hate in her life. Isa's struggles with domesticity and her relationships further exacerbate her inner turmoil. Seeking an escape, she idealizes romantic love and projects heroic attributes onto certain characters. The novel explores themes of time, intertwining past and present in a non-linear narrative structure. Characters' interactions and experiences depict a spatial landscape where individual suffering merges into a collective experience. Through dissociation among characters and their associations, the author challenges traditional notions of shared meaning and collective identity, reflecting postmodernist tendencies of questioning established conventions. The narrative weaves together themes of modernity, spatiality, and relationships, blurring the lines between

There is a shift in spatial and temporal dynamics in postmodernity, where traditional notions of space and place give way to a fluidity driven by information and investment. It portrays the polarized relationship between Giles and Isa, reflecting broader English-Irish tensions. Giles's actions, like stamping on the snake and toad, reveal his self-relief through violent means, symbolizing a reaction to the imminent threat of war. The presence of Mrs. Manresa serves as a conduit for Giles to channel his anger and frustration, showcasing a power dynamic that challenges Isa's endurance and perception of masculinity. Woolf's narrative explores themes of conflict, violence, and gender dynamics within a changing spatial and temporal framework.

The central thematic contrast in the novel between unity and dispersity is shown in the constellation of characters, who, as in *The Years*, come from three generations. On the one hand, some seek unity, harmony, and meaning based on beauty ('unifiers'), on the other the group of 'separatists', whose thoughts revolve around greed, hatred, and sex, testify to a fatalistic devotion to the meaningless and fragmented existence of modern man. This opposition characterizes, for example, the conflict-ridden relationship between the imaginative, passive, and melancholic Isabella Oliver and her equally frustrated and aggressive husband Giles, whereby this marriage also points to the timeless problem of emotional tensions between the sexes, which is also addressed in the play being

performed. In this representation of the history of England, the original unity of the community has been subject to increasing signs of decay since the early modern period, culminating in the fragmentation that is characteristic of modernity. Woolf's lifelong interest in historical topics is also expressed in the siblings Bartholomew Oliver and Lucy Swithin, who are part of the audience and who, despite their different assessments of intuition and rationality, are both equally influenced by the tradition of English history and literature. The retreat of political history in favour of literary, intellectual, and social history reflects Woolf's view that the decisions of great personalities are only important insofar as they affect the lives of average people. By juxtaposing cyclical, progressive, and degenerative views of history, the novel raises the question of the viability of civilization and culture, which was threatened on the eve of the Second World War. However, this question remains unanswered, as does the question of the meaning of the historical play, which is discussed by the audience. By partially blurring the boundaries between the perspectives of the individual characters in the depiction of the collective reaction of the audience to the historical play, she makes a collective historical consciousness visible, behind which a specifically British mentality appears.

In "Between the Acts," Virginia Woolf explores the interplay of past, present, and future, showcasing the complexities of human relationships and societal tensions amid looming threats. Through dissociation and paradoxical association, characters navigate turmoil and come closer together. The novel delves into themes of sexuality, tradition, and creativity, reflecting Woolf's love for and doubts about England. Despite the uncertainty of war, the narrative ends with a sense of new beginnings and a transcendent triumph over darkness, hinting at a hopeful future beyond modernism.

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