

**Time, Place and the Confusion of Both:  
Redefining Modernism in Selected Works of  
Tony Morrison and Virginia Woolf**

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**Abstract**

Modernist writers like Woolf and Morrison not only present (or represent) reality but they create a linguistic representation of the inner experiences borne in the modern life and one of those characteristics is the confusion of time and place. This article analyses the narrative technique of Morrison's *Sula* and Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* which use a language to de-form and de-structure the reader's rational way of thinking where they have to play in the confusion with the writers.

**Keywords:** confusion, modernity, time, place

On multiple occasions, Morrison has shared her musings on language and its functionality. She holds the opinion that one needs to create a method of expression if one finds that there are no pre-existing means by which they can successfully express a story that needs to be told. Her views depict a certain sense of reverence towards the power of language. Furthermore, her perspective puts into question the impact structuring, de-structuring, and restructuring has on literary expression. In a similar spirit, Woolf has described writers as being constrained by some 'unscrupulous tyrant' that insists upon there being elements such as a 'love interest, tragedy, comedy' and the like in a novel. Her contention lies in her question: 'Is life like this?' (*Modern Fiction* 189). All the contents of this essay in one way or another tie back to this question. This essay will attempt to explore Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Virginia Woolf's *The*

*Mark on the Wall* within the broader trends and narratives of literary modernism. Both Woolf and Morrison mark a distinct break from convention in terms of language, structure and form. By this framework of reasoning, both Morrison and Woolf are revolutionary in the manner in which they tread the grounds of that which is otherwise unsaid, unheard of or unmentionable.

## **RATIONALITY**

Morrison and Woolf's works, in many senses, go beyond what is rational or reasonable. The characters in *Sula* and the trajectory of thoughts in *The Mark on the Wall* do not fit the normative definition of rationality. Reading Morrison is an unsettling experience because it defies rationality, in particular by blurring the lines between the ordinary and the extraordinary. In the midst of fun and frolic Sula's young friend Chicken Little accidentally drowns because of her mistake (Morrison 60-61). Lighting the yard fire, an action which she probably did on a regular basis, ends up burning Hannah, Sula's mother, to death in the most painful and ghastly mishap (Morrison 75-78). In *Sula*, Death, hence, is always deprived from a logical causality. An overarching trend in the novel is to treat death not as something separate from life but as an everyday experience that coexists with other mundane occurrences. Even in the manner in which Sula reacts to her older white and male bullies or to her mother, Hannah, burning to death there is a certain unsettling sense that arises when something lacks logical progression. Sula harms her own self by drawing blood simply to prove a point to the bullies which was that if she was capable of harming herself what could she do to them (Morrison 54-55). Sula, rather than turning away in horror, keenly watched Hannah burn, not because she was in shock but because she was interested. Sula's self-harm and her expression of interest is monumental because it delves into a dark space that shows human beings as deriving a certain sadomasochistic pleasure from brutality and violence. This incident throws light on the largest

fallacy that the rational narrative of human beings' gives birth to- innate goodness within every human.

*The Mark on the Wall* critiques rationality in the approach it adopts to express the nature of the human phenomenon. The methodology of Woolf's stream of consciousness draws a divide between the objective external reality of the mark on the wall and the subjective psychological reality of the narrator who uses her variegated experience of the mark to reflect on several passing thoughts. The mark on the wall seems to be the pivot that anchors the narrator to external reality. The mark is experienced by the narrator as a 'satisfying sense of reality' (Woolf *The Mark* 9) which she repeatedly returns to after going through one trajectory of thought followed by another. The stability and constancy of the mark should have ideally given it a significant position in the story but ironically enough the mark is completely irrelevant. The mark is irrelevant because a thousand other arbitrary things could have played the same role. Undoubtedly the aforementioned metaphor also holds true for the state of the human experience in the twentieth century.

The Enlightenment and subsequent developments in the intellectual sphere in Europe gave birth to the idea of a human being as a rational and thinking individual. A distinct shift from this perspective can be traced in the twentieth century as a result of the World Wars. Rather than portraying human beings in their greatness or highness, both Woolf and Morrison, following the larger trend of their times, display a great sense of disillusionment with the human condition. One can reason that this was markedly due to the fact that rationalising becomes hugely insufficient when one is to comprehend the magnitude of loss, destruction and tumult that the world experienced in the twentieth century. In a certain way, attempting to understand modernity by rationalising it is like attempting to reach infinity by counting. Morrison and Woolf grapple with that realm of human experience that is not rational but at the same time is very decidedly a part of lived experience. The unconventionality of their forms

and styles can perhaps be attributed to the fact that they were compelled to create a new linguistic computation to understand their experience of life because existing forms were unsuitable.

### **(DE)FORM AND (DE)STRUCTURE**

To study the form and language used by Morrison and Woolf, in a certain sense, is ridden with irony because language itself is developed according to the tenets of rationality where else both authors use language in a manner which helps push its boundaries to realms which it cannot always do justice. If we metaphorically think of the content which any given author wishes to put into words as water, then we can reasonably conceive of forms in terms of various types of containers which would give the water a different shape and quality without altering its original universal essence. The kind of content which Morrison and Woolf grapple with is not well fitted for the water metaphor because it is more obscure and less tangible than water. Both authors grapple with content which can be better understood as air. Since air cannot be contained in the manner in which water can, it has to be represented in a manner which helps ground it, just enough, to make it palpable to our understanding. One would have to add smoke to it or release fragrance into it or maybe even add helium balloons to indicate and channel its presence. Morrison and Woolf grapple with content that is all pervasive and universal but lies on the periphery of our sensory awareness and intellectual understanding.

In the case of *Sula*, this aspect is sufficiently proven in the manner in which Morrison chooses to represent the manner in which the First World War had made death into a mundane daily reality. Shadrack, a soldier who loses his sanity for the rest of his life as a result of the War, was the founder of 'National Suicide Day' (Morrison 14-16). Shadrack was not afraid of death but of the unexpectedness of dying which had become a lived reality as a consequence of the war. The manner in which he chose to grapple with it was assigning one day of the year

which he could devote to dying and killing, thereby falsely exercising a certain control over death. 'National Suicide Day' became a 'part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom' in Medallion, Ohio (Morrison 14-16). Morrison weaves in profound satire in the manner in which she describes people referring to 'National Suicide Day' as any other day of the year. A woman describes her labour pains as having begun on National Suicide Day. A bride-to-be tells her lover that she did not want to get married on 'National Suicide Day' because the cowbells would disturb the wedding. A grandmother says that an old hen started laying double yolks right after Suicide Day (Morrison 14-16). Morrison's works are ridden with metaphors of this kind which are representative of a certain experience of life in her day and age which cannot be told by simply giving an account, summing up a narrative or by recalling certain instances. Morrison is a strong proponent of the belief that language is a move towards the 'ineffable' (Reception Speech) and that it could not and should not believe that it can capture life in its totality. She creates a new style of storytelling to describe the experience of living with death and dehumanisation in such a regular routine way.

Woolf also attempts to put into words a sense of ephemerality and fleeting time wherein arbitrariness reigns supreme and human control over circumstances is illusory. Woolf likens life to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour.

Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked! Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadows like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office! With one's hair flying back like the tail of a race-horse. Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard... (*The Mark 4*)

Time is blurred in the reverie of the narrator because the reader is unaware of how much time has passed between its beginning and end. After all, Woolf directly expresses her thoughts without describing or explaining them. Firstly, there is no clear sense of whether these thoughts are coexisting or follow one after the other. If they take place altogether then presumably the time taken in the reverie would be lesser. Secondly, the thoughts do not arrive at any logical conclusion but rather trail off as is made evident through the ellipses. The ellipses could be representative of any amount of time because one is particularly unsure about what happens in the narrator's mind between the void of one thought and the other or if at all there is a gap between two thoughts. Her reflection resonates exactly the kind of lives people in the Bottom lead: without much care or question no matter how morbid it gets. The manner in which human beings compute time can be read as a human attempt to rationalise mortality. If one is caught by the unawares as far as time is concerned or if one is unable to clearly perceive of time, a certain sense of stability and control is automatically eliminated from the experience of life. If time evades us then life itself evades us. Time, mortality and the occurrence of death in both works is unconventional, lacking causality and beyond the control of any human endeavour. Such is the nature of life itself in the era of modernity.

### **UNIVERSALITY IN THE PERSONAL**

The works of authors like Morrison and Woolf qualify as presentations rather than representations. Their literary stylisation is like the artwork of their contemporaries wherein a message, a sentiment or an experience is symbolically represented. If one attempts to conceive of either Morrison or Woolf's works as an account or an excerpt from their lives, one would only superficially understand their content. *Sula* and *The Mark on the Wall* in spite of belonging to the genres of novel and short story respectively, do not concern themselves with the recapitulation of incidents as much as they do with the representative expression of a certain

state of being. When Toni Morrison wants to depict humiliation she taps deep into the crevices of the human body itself to state in clear cut terms what it means to be black, and second to a human being. Helene was unable to relieve herself at the railway station because after Birmingham there were no restrooms for coloured females. Her face was ‘drawn’ with the need to ‘relieve’ herself. Ultimately, she and her daughter, amongst other black women and children were forced to squat in the fields by the tracks in the all subsequent stations (Morrison 23-24). The words of humiliation are never used by Morrison. She uses her language to describe the human body at in its most uncomfortable and basal states and leaves the rest unsaid. Her silence speaks profoundly. The visceral quality of Morrison’s expression makes the sentiment and tone of the novel universal. The use of a black language or a woman’s language does not alienate but finds a space which is the literary equivalent of infinity wherein the local and the universal are the same.

Modernist storytelling is not about retelling or revisiting an incident as much as it is about creating a linguistic representation of the inner experiences borne in the modern life. For Woolf, the reader is an active participant rather than recipient in the process of storytelling. The form used by Woolf makes her works both alienating and universally understandable because she expresses her thoughts in the raw form in which they occur to her. Unlike the easy comfort of previous literary traditions, the stream of consciousness requires active engagement wherein the reader has to experience not only the story but the content of the story from the repertoire of their own life experiences. Woolf repeatedly likens objects of everyday life to the dust indicating the fact that the dust is the ultimate end for all things dead or alive. ‘Opals and emeralds’ lie at the ‘roots of turnips’ (*The Mark* 4) and the ‘dust on the mantelpiece is the same that buried Troy three times over’ (*The Mark* 5). The universality of death overpowers the alienating effect the complexity of style could possibly have on the reader. Woolf and Morrison write about deeply personal experiences but instead of alienating the reader their works have

the opposite effect. If their works are any a precedent, the personal and universal are synonymous.

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