

Original Paper

Narrative Perspective and its Spatial Effects in *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract

To the Lighthouse is one of Woolf's representative works. The choice and shift of narrative perspectives in the novel create a unique narrative mode and also give rise to a spatial effect. This article focuses on the narrative perspectives in *To the Lighthouse* from the perspective of spatial narration, investigating that how zero focalization presents physical space, internal focalization contributes to the formation of multidimensional space of character consciousness and subjective emotional space, and how perspective shifts construct the spacial juxtaposition or switch, as well as narrative structure. In this essay, we can gain insights into Woolf's unique narrative artistry.

Keywords

To the Lighthouse, Woolf, narrative perspective, space

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf is a pioneer of modernist literature, whose writing techniques is different from the traditional realistic ones, for she emphasizes “spiritualism” by depicting the inner world of characters. In her novels, Woolf often retreats into the background, allowing the characters in the novel to tell the story and utilizing stream of consciousness to portray continuous thoughts or fleeting emotional fluctuations. Woolf's classic novel *To the Lighthouse* is such a work, in which she abandoned the traditional omniscient perspective and employed frequent perspective shifts, reflecting modernist creative ideas in narrative techniques. Currently, there have been many studies on the narrative perspective of *To the Lighthouse*, mostly focusing on analyzing the types of perspectives used in the novel, or discussing the methods of perspective shifts, or emphasizing the role of perspective shifts in shaping characters and themes. For example, Norman Friedman, in *Point of View in Fiction: the development of a critical concept discusses types of perspectives*, arguing that the narrative perspective of *To the Lighthouse* is “Multiple Selective Omniscience”. In *Story and Discourse*, Seymour Chatman describes the focalization

mode of the novel as “Shifting Limited Mental Access”. Scholar Han Shiyi analyzed Woolf’s narrative perspective and discourse modes, and Qu Shijing mentioned Woolf’s abandonment of the “omniscient viewpoint” and adoption of “inner monologue” when discussing the subjectivity of narrative in the novel. The narrative perspective of *To the Lighthouse* is innovative, playing an important role in creating the novel’s unique narrative form, and its role can be further explored. With the “spatial turn” in narrative studies, perspective, as a crucial factor influencing narrative, can further expand its function in the realm of space narratology.

2. The Narrative Perspective and its shift in *To the Lighthouse*

French narrative theorist Genette, in *Narrative Discourse*, categorizes perspectives into three main types using the concept of focalization: firstly, zero focalization (or non-focalization), which refers to the narrator that “says more than any of the characters knows” (Genette, 1980, p. 189). Zero focalization is commonly employed in traditional novels. Secondly, internal focalization, where the narrator uses the senses of one or more characters in the novel to receive information and convey thoughts and emotions. Thirdly, external focalization, where the narrator can only stand outside the characters and observe without entering their consciousness. *To the Lighthouse* contains both zero focalization narration and internal focalization narration, with frequent shifts between perspectives.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the characters’ inner worlds, presented through an internal focalization, occupy much of the narrative and structure the entire work. This perspective is subjective and limited, constraining the perception to specific characters. For instance, when Mr. Banks silently gazes at Mrs. Ramsay sitting by the window, Lily turns to look at her painting, recalling the night Mrs. Ramsay came to her room urging her to marry. In Lily’s eyes, she cannot comprehend Mrs. Ramsay, feeling that “Mrs Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand” (Woolf, 2004, pp. 46-47). Meanwhile, lost in her thoughts, Lily fails to notice Mr. Banks leaning in to see her painting, which makes she suddenly rouse from her thoughts. These descriptions exemplify a clear internal focalization.

Although the novel presents most of its content in internal focalization, it also interspersed with zero focalization to drive the plot forward. For example, “‘There’ll be no landing at the Lighthouse tomorrow,’ said Charles Tansley, clapping his hands together as he stood at the window with her husband” (Woolf, 2004, p. 6). This sentence serve as a stimulus to stir Mr. Ramsay’s unpleasant feeling towards Tansley, enabling the focus shifts to Mrs. Ramsay’s mental activities. Another instance can be found in the second part of the novel, where the Ramsay’s villa becomes uninhabited and gradually deteriorates. This process of change in time and space is described through zero focalization.

In addition, a remarkable narrative art feature of the novel is frequent perspective shifts, including the shift between single perspective types (internal focalization and internal focalization) and the shift between different perspective types (internal focalization and zero focalization). Taking the example of two paragraphs in the first chapter of the first part, when Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Tansley go into town

for errands:

A. “Let us all go to the circus”. No. He could not say it right. He could not feel it right. (Tasley’s perspective) But why not? she wondered. What was wrong with him then? She liked him warmly, at the moment (Mrs Ramsey’s perspective) (Woolf, 2004, p. 10).

B. It was terribly dangerous work for a one-armed man, she exclaimed, to stand on top of a ladder like that (Mrs Ramsey’s perspective)—his left arm had been cut off in a reaping machine two years ago (narrator’s explanation) (Woolf, 2004, p. 6).

The change of perspective in *To the Lighthouse* is a common phenomenon, with all kinds of perspectives changing between characters, and between narrators and characters.

3. Spatial Effects Presented by Narrative Perspectives

3.1 Zero-Focalization and Changes in Physical Space

In zero focalization, the narrator is not only all-knowing, being able to perceive even the subtlest changes in space, but also possesses absolute authority to control the pace of the narrative. Zero focalization is mainly seen in the second part, “Time Passes”. As the title suggests, this part describes changes in worldly affairs over a period of ten years: Mrs. Ramsay’s passing, Prue’s death during childbirth, and Andrew’s death in World War I. However, for the description of time passing, the narrator almost presents it through the physical space of Ramsey’s house. After the sudden death of Mrs. Ramsey, the novel lost the perspective of the characters, and turned to the all-powerful narrator to describe the seasons and natural changes of the gradually obsolete empty villa in the past ten years. The narrator is well aware of the changes within the space: as people leave, the house becomes filled with “saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked” (Woolf, 2004, p. 123). Day after day, the house becomes neglected, and “Once only a board sprang on the landing; once in the middle of the night with a roar, with a rupture” (Woolf, 2004, p. 6). In an unknown summer’s day, “weeds that had grown close to the glass in the night tapped methodically at the window pane” (Woolf, 2004, p. 126). In spring, “the garden urns, casually filled with wind-blown plants, were gay as ever” (Woolf, 2004, p. 128). The vacant house left traces of vicissitudes, and the reliable narrator captures these changes one by one, implying the passage of time through the gradual decay of physical space, spatializing time and making it concrete.

In addition, the narrator in zero-focalization can change the space at will, choosing what scenes to present during the process of spatial transformation. Thus, the time passing reflected in the novel is either fast or slow. In the fourth chapter of the second part, when people rolled up the carpet, locked the door and left, the air broke into the house and found broken saucepans and china, faded dresses and so on. The cracking of utensils and the fading of clothes were supposed to occur after the house was deserted for a long time. However, the narrator skipped the gradual process of change and directly showed the already worn-out spatial state, causing a certain degree of time jump. This is also one of the reasons why the novel able to depict ten years passing seemingly overnight.

3.2 Internal Focalization and the Flow of Psychological Space

Although internal focalization can still shows physical space, it no longer offers the comprehensive view provided by zero focalization. Its observation of space is confined within the characters' perspectives. Therefore, internal focalization makes it comparatively easier for readers to return to the characters' own thoughts, follow the flow of their consciousness and explore their psychological space. The psychological space of the characters can be free from external time and space restrictions, and can shuttle back and forth between the past, the present and the future in a moment, connecting reality and illusion, thus creating a specialized effect. For example, in the second chapter of the first part, when Banks and Lily walk to the gap of the fence, Mr. Banks looks at the sand dunes in the distance, remembering that he was once on a path in Westmorland where he has doubts about his friendship with Mr. Ramsey. He recalled that Mr. Ramsey got married later, which makes him felt their "the pulp had gone out of their friendship" (Woolf, 2004, p. 19). Then his thoughts came back to the present, and he felt that his friendship with Ramsey "his affection for Ramsay had in no way diminished" (Woolf, 2004, p. 19), and at the same time "He was anxious for the sake of this friendship" (Woolf, 2004, p. 6). In this passage, Mr. Banks' consciousness flow connects the past and the present, forming an emotionally intertwined psychological space.

Meanwhile, internal focalization is subjective and introspective, presenting a psychological space with personal emotional tendencies. In chapter twelve of the first part, at dusk, Mrs. Ramsey and Mr. Ramsey go out for a walk together. They reach a gap between two hedges with fiery red iron fences, where they both gaze at the town and the bay in front of them. Mr. Ramsey is rational and talented, caring about his own career, but occasionally self-doubting. Therefore, when Mr. Ramsay sees the scenery from his perspective, he recalls his unmarried days when he could work for ten hours at a stretch and wander all day in the village where "walk all day without meeting a soul... One could worry things out alone" (Woolf, 2004, p. 64). Suddenly, his thoughts are interrupted by the realization that "He had no right. The father of eight children" (Woolf, 2004, p. 64). He feels that "looking at the land dwindling away, the little island seemed pathetically small, half swallowed up in the sea" (Woolf, 2004, p. 64). This leads him to say in a discouraged tone, "poor little place" (Woolf, 2004, p. 64). It is evident that although their view from the gap between the hedges is expansive, due to Mr. Ramsay's emphasis on his career, this vast physical space was reflected in his mental space as a pitiful and tiny place. Clearly, the space has taken on the subjective color of Mr. Ramsey's perspective.

Psychological spaces presented in such a subjective manner, as with internal focalization, also include memory spaces. "The important memories in our lives are always associated with specific spaces (places). Or, those places of particular importance easily become carriers of our memories" (Diyong 2009, p. 56). Memory spaces carry the personal experiences and emotions of characters, which is personalized, so it is very suitable to adopt the perspective of returning to characters themselves. In the second and forth chapter of the third part, ten years later, Lily and the Ramsay family return to the house, and there are things that Lily could experience that are of special significance to her. For

example, the floral pattern on the dining table reminds her of “ten years ago... she had looked at in a moment of revelation. There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture” (Woolf, 2004, p. 141); on the edge of the villa’s lawn, she pitched her easel once again, thinking, “it must have been precisely here that she had stood ten years ago. There was the wall; the hedge; the tree. The question was of some relation between those masses” (Woolf, 2004, p. 141). The lawn also aroused her other experiences, as she recalls, “Charles Tansley used to say that.....women can’t paint, can’t write. Coming up behind her, he had stood close beside her, a thing she hated, as she painted her on this very spot” (Woolf, 2004, p. 152). Internal focalization confines these memories about Lily’s personal viewpoint from beginning to end. Her own experiences and emotions can give this space its own special meaning. Even if others are in this space with her, it is difficult for others to spy on her special feelings.

3.3 The Shift of Narrative Perspective and the Construction of Spatiality

3.3.1 Perspective Shift and Spatial Juxtaposition or Switching

In the narrative process of *To the Lighthouse*, the narration often shifts from one character’s perspective to another in the next moment, opening or continuing another narrative at the other end. This technique weakens the continuity of the narrative, but collectively constructs a three-dimensional novel through the various narrative blocks from different character perspectives. It achieves “the narrative method of using temporal and spatial cross-cutting and juxtaposition, breaking the traditional linear time sequence and revealing a tendency to pursue spatial effects” (Diyong, 2009, p. 23).

The perspective shifts in *To the Lighthouse* involve multiple narrative threads that switch back and forth, coexist, or overlap within the same time period or moment, creating a sense of spatial juxtaposition and switching. In the first part of the novel, during the time span from the beginning of the story until the start of dinner, multiple spaces are juxtaposed through perspective shifts. These spaces include Mrs. Ramsay knitting near the window, cutting pictures with her son James, Lily painting at the edge of the lawn, the fence gap where Lily, Banks, and the Ramsays pass by during their walks, and the beach where Minty and Paul go together. The presentation of these scenes doesn’t follow a specific chronological order. On the contrary, through different character perspectives, one could observe that they are juxtaposed or intertwined. For example, when Mrs. Ramsay sits by the window cutting pictures, she hears her husband reciting poetry on the terrace outside. At the same time, Lily, painting on the lawn outside, also hears him shouting, “Boldly we rode and well” (Woolf, 2004, p. 16). This indicates that the events in the window and lawn spaces are happening simultaneously. Another instance is when Lily and Banks walk to the fence gap and then return to the lawn. When Mrs. Ramsay engages in her knitting, she happens to look up and sees Lily and Banks passing by in front of the window. Two narrative lines intersect there, shifting the perspective to Mrs. Ramsay, transitioning to the space where she is located for further narration.

Similarly, perspective shifts can also juxtapose the emotions and thoughts between characters, as well as allow the thoughts of characters to shuttle back and forth, so as to achieve a juxtaposition or

switching effect of psychological space. In the first chapter of the first part, when Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Tansley is on their way to the town, two different psychological spaces coexist in their conversation. Tansley envisions a future where Mrs. Ramsay sees him wearing a gown and a hood, walking among scholars. He hopes that Mrs. Ramsay will see him in this way. However, when he looks at Mrs. Ramsay, he discovers that she focused on a man pasting a bill: “‘will visit this town,’ she read. It was terribly dangerous work for a one-armed man, she exclaimed” (Woolf, 2004, p. 10). Although they are in the same time and place, their inner worlds are completely different, and through the shift in perspective, these two different psychological activities are juxtaposed.

Another example is in the seventeenth chapter of the first part of the novel, a dinner party is held, during which an episode takes place. Mrs. Ramsay becomes aware of her husband was dissatisfied with Mr. Augustus for he has asked for another plate of soup, and in the process, the couple’s psychological activities alternate. It starts from Mrs. Ramsay’s perspective as she looks at her husband: “He was screwing his face up, he was scowling and frowning, and flushing with anger. What on earth was it about? she wondered” (Woolf, 2004, p. 88). Then, according to the narrator’s suggestion in parentheses, the perspective shifts to Mr. Ramsay’s psychological activity: “It was unthinkable, it was detestable (so he signalled to her across the table) that Augustus should be beginning his soup over again. He loathed people eating when he had finished” (Woolf, 2004, p. 88). Their thoughts exchanged in this passage: “And why not? (Mrs. Ramsay’s perspective)—He hated people wallowing in food. (Mr. Ramsay’s perspective)—But why show it so plainly (Mrs. Ramsay’s perspective)” (Woolf, 2004, p. 89). This passage exemplifies the interplay and entanglement of the two characters’ thoughts through the repeated shift in perspective, revealing the complexity and multi-dimensionality of human psychological activity.

3.3.2 Perspective Shift and Spatial Metaphor of Novel Structure

To the Lighthouse can be divided into three parts in terms of its structure. The first part is called “The Window”, which comprises more than one-third of the entire book. The second part, “Time Passes”, is less than one-tenth of the novel’s length. The third part, “The Lighthouse”, is slightly shorter than the first part. The overall narrative structure exhibits a unique pattern of “long-short-long,” resembling an “H” shape.

It is interesting that Virginia Woolf, in her manuscript, used a spatial metaphor to arrange this narrative structure. When preparing to write *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf sketched a drawing in her diary depicting a scene where two buildings were connected by a long corridor (Woolf, 1982, Appendix A). This represents the three parts of the novel, with the first part being “the first building”, the second part as “the long corridor”, and the third part as “the second building”. In these three parts, there are multiple shifts in perspective, giving rise to various plot lines that intertwine with and echo each other, creating three distinct temporal and spatial segments.

The first part is the one with the most frequent perspective shifts, involving multiple characters’ viewpoints, including Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, Tansley, Lily, Banks, Paul, and Minty, etc. As a

result, the storyline is the richest and also the most fragmented, with each subplot having its own narrative. However, they intersect and correlate with other parts of the story at certain points, mirroring each other, thus presenting a three-dimensional effect of nonlinear narrative and constructing “the first building”.

In the second part, the perspective becomes more singular, with a predominant use of zero focalization. The once bustling house is now abandoned, gradually being reclaimed by nature. Over the course of ten years, time passes naturally, and only a few scenes depict the psychological activities of characters like Mrs. McNab, who comes to clean the house. This section lacks the intricate temporal and spatial elements found in the previous part, featuring a linear progression of time and a narrative presented in accordance with that linear timeline. As a result, it constructs a more straightforward and singular “long corridor”.

In the third part, there are still multiple perspective shifts, which form two narrative threads. One follows Mr. Ramsay along with Cam and James as they journey to the lighthouse, while the other focuses on Lily’s attempt to complete the painting she started ten years ago in front of the Ramsay family’s villa. In this section, both the external actions of the characters and their inner thoughts resonate with the fragments from ten years earlier in the first part, constructing “the second building” and echoing the other end of the temporal corridor.

4. Conclusion

In his book *The Craft of Fiction*, literary critic Percy Lubbock remarked, “The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of the point of view—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story”. (Lubbock, 1957, p. 251) The influence of perspective on narrative is always pivotal, and in *To the Lighthouse*, the role of narrative perspective is particularly obvious. The narrative perspective in the novel also has a significant impact on the spatial presentation: the use of zero focalization shows the physical spatial aspects, while internal focalization highlights the psychological space unrestricted by time and space. Perspective shifts present spatial juxtaposition or switching, echoing the spatiality of the novel’s narrative structure—these aspects highlight Virginia Woolf’s noteworthy narrative techniques, which hold certain significance for the development of current narratology theory.

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