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VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE FORMS OF LIFE: CONSCIOUSNESS, LANGUAGE, AND THE TEXTURE OF THE ORDINARY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the link between Woolf's literary modernism and the philosophical ideas presented in Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work, focusing in particular on his concept of forms of life. We will demonstrate that in Woolf's novels, "Mrs Dalloway" (1925) and "To the Lighthouse" (1927), the representation of consciousness reflects Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas in his book "Philosophical Investigations" (1953) about the role and place of language in human relationships. Both Woolf and Wittgenstein turn from abstraction towards the ordinary, attempting to discover meaning in the spaces or gaps which exist in everyday human intercourse. Through an insight which emerges through an intertextual comparison between Woolf's literary texts and Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas, it will be argued that Woolf's literary techniques, including the fluidity and porousness of consciousness, the presence and power of silence, and the replication and depiction of interpersonal understandings, all foreshadowed Wittgenstein's philosophical revelation and insight in his "Philosophical Investigations": namely, the insight that language, emotions, and ethics are all inextricably intertwined with forms of everyday life.

KEYWORDS: Virginia Woolf, Wittgenstein, Consciousness, Ordinary Language, Forms of Life, Modernism.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ORDINARY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM

Both the novelist Virginia Woolf and the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would at first seem to be working in vastly different realms. Woolf's narratives flow with an intuitive narrative richness, while Wittgenstein's texts involve a rigorous philosophical commentary. However, in each case, the writer engages with a concern with what can only be labelled the texture of the ordinary. This notion of the ordinary refers to an investment in the richness of the quotidian plane, an interest which challenges the abstraction characteristic of much thought in the earlier part of the twentieth century.

For example, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, "For a large class of cases of the use of the word 'meaning'—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953: §43). This statement moves the locus of meaning from the interior world of ideas to the social world of use and practice. Similarly, the world that is revealed in the novels is the drama of human thought as an intersubjective process that is rooted in the realm of gestures, tones, and silences that form the rhythm of daily experience.

Indeed, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that it is the role of a word's use within language that ascribes meaning to it, emphasizing the social aspect of meaning as opposed to the psychological. This argument parallels the modernist approach to writing that Virginia Woolf adopts in her works, which portray the human process of thought as something that happens between people, involving everyday life, as opposed to something that happens within the isolated realm of psychology.

Indeed, the storylines tend to revolve around the conflict between the world of consciousness and engagement with the wider social world. Moreover, the internal monologue of the characters in works such as *Mrs. Dalloway* tends to be framed within the context of social engagement and observation. The internal monologue of the characters, as reflected through the novelistic narrative, provides insight into the manner through which the internal narratives tend to be informed through, and respond to, their surroundings and engagements with other individuals (Doko et al. 2019). Such a methodological stance tends to bear out the assertion of Wittgenstein.

Moreover, Woolf's writing explicitly problematizes the idea of a lone individual self. As discussed in the literary domain, Woolf starts to

establish identities in a collective perspective to demonstrate how individuals' thoughts and discoveries interact with societal norms and universal human experiences. Kumar explains: "The modernist approach of Woolf restates definitions of experienced realities and places characters in a scope defined in terms of memory and perception, showing that individual and individualized thought depend upon wider social contexts" (Kumar, 2025). Similarly, using free indirect discourse helps to cross boundaries among individual characters' minds to explain in what way intersubjectivity aids in understanding meanings and existence.

In her novel *To the Lighthouse*, the proposition is further developed through character interactions, which convey as much meaning as the words spoken. These interactions are the key sites of meaning-making and reinforce the idea that individual thoughts are not isolated events but are shaped and influenced by various interactions in the social world (Schneiderman, 2002). The experiences in the narrative suggest that understanding and meaning-making are the result of the dynamic relationship between the self and the world, drawing once again upon Heideggerian themes of "Being-in-the-World," which Woolf handles adroitly in her modernist enterprise (Simone, 2017).

Furthermore, Woolf's use of style, such as her use of deixis, enables her to change the focus of the narrative in order to demonstrate the intersubjective quality of experience. As explained, the use of deixis enables readers to respond to the characters' consciousness, allowing for a stronger resonance with the themes of perception and shared reality (Panggabean et al., 2025). This feature of the narrative reinforces the interrelation between thought and language, confirming the construction of individual meaning through public use, as advocated for in Wittgenstein's claims.

The connection between Woolf's ideas and those of Wittgenstein comes to the forefront when considering their shared rejection of the Cartesian nuance of consciousness. Woolf's novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* demonstrate how Woolf valued the imperfections of human communication in constructing the world of consciousness, whereas the world of content would be dependent on the creation of "language-games" by Wittgenstein, which "are carried out in 'language'" or in the 'forms of life.'

This relationship has been generally acknowledged. Stanley Cavell (1979) argues that the ordinary language philosophy, which arose in the

middle of the twentieth century, sought to “restore to the everyday the depth it had lost in modern culture” (p. 33). Woolf, in the previous decade, is seen to prefigure this return through her literary skill. Woolf’s novels encode the extraordinary in the ordinary – the tremor of consciousness as it passes over petty objects – a glove, a clock, a bowl of fruit – and there discovers the moral beat of life.

In fact, Woolf’s essay *Modern Fiction* from 1919 directly expresses an aesthetical philosophy which corresponds with Wittgenstein’s objection against abstraction in his late philosophy. It reads: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.” (Woolf, 2008, p. 12)

Woolf’s “atoms” are “not private sensations but minute registrations in the usual language of life” itself, what Wittgenstein would call “the continuous fabric of our life” (§580). These writers urge us to listen for and identify the meaning in these atoms and to seek out the philosophy in the gestures and repetitions underlying everyday experience.

2. CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE GRAMMAR OF EXPERIENCE

Virginia Woolf’s most radical contribution to modernism lies in her remapping of consciousness. While her predecessors worked with the interior as a purely psychological space separate from society, Woolf’s remapping of consciousness reveals them to be inherently grammatical, structured according to commonalities of language. Her experiments with narrative form and language demonstrate her conviction about the way in which thought is guided both by the rules of grammar and the regulations of society. Stream of consciousness narrative has been a major innovation in the literary tradition of modernism.

Indeed, the use of the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, which was once a notion about which the boundaries were always somewhat unclear, goes beyond simple internal monologues. The works of Woolf suggest that consciousness is shaped through collectively expressed linguistic norms, which is achieved through her writing style that involves free indirect discourse, resulting in the narrated voices that represent societal as well as personal perspectives on it all (Zhang, 2021). Such writing underscores the societal aspect of human experiences, as well as the idea that consciousness cannot be isolated from those linguistic structures that define it (Kılınc, 2020).

In Woolf’s novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the narrative depersonalization features indicate an inclination toward a portrayal of consciousness with “the world seen without a self,” where the narrative perspectives fade to a linguistic environment implying a shared consciousness (Ohi, 2025). The narrative approaches found within Woolf’s novels make explicit the complexities of emotions and time, proving how memories and perceptions are linguistically mediated, thereby supporting the claim concerning the shared characteristics of an individual’s inner life being linguistically constructed (Larbi, 2019). Furthermore, the narrative representation of a character like Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* sustains such an interpretation with a fragmented representation of his thoughts reflecting the tumultuous reality of the post-war period interwoven with linguistic representation (Kriukova & Koval, 2021).

The use of innovative syntactic devices in Woolf’s work marks a move away from traditional narrative structure. It is argued that Woolf’s use of style in her work brings about a shift in grammatical constructs, offering an experimental mode of syntax that reflects the disorder associated with human experience (Lee, 2023). As structures of meaning are reformed and words are deployed in complex patterns, Woolf’s narratives provide an understanding of the way in which language can be made to convey internal experience, allowing for explorations of the realm of subjectivity while acknowledging the collectively constructed discourse of society (Ohi, 2025).

It would be useful to juxtapose the presentation of Clarissa’s thoughts in *Mrs Dalloway* as both a monologue and a dialogue. The chiming of Big Ben punctuates Clarissa’s trains of thought, as London goes about its business, intruding upon Clarissa’s mind and mingling with Clarissa’s personal connections. At the beginning of the novel, Woolf writes: “What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air.” (Woolf, 2005, p. 3)

The exclamation and repetition not only serve a stylistic function but demonstrate a linguistic performance which enacts consciousness through engagement with a certain form of life. The rhythm of Clarissa’s thoughts has an intrinsic connection with an idiom of English discourse. This connects with the significance and resonance of past dialogues. Her consciousness, like Wittgenstein’s notion of meaning, is in use.

His later thoughts in *Philosophical Investigations* support this statement: "If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word 'pain' means—must I not say that of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case so irresponsibly?" (§293)

The rejection of a purely private language corresponds with Woolf's literary agenda. The interior world of Clarissa is not a private realm but a nexus of linguistic echoes and public references. Even loneliness is peopled by voices—remnants of remembered language, social niceties, the background murmur of city life. For Woolf, consciousness is not the opposite of the external world but its echo.

This hypothesis is reinforced in *To the Lighthouse* when the mental processes of Mrs. Ramsay are contextualized within the linguistic practices that emerge within the world of the family. Indeed, the internal narrative is staged alongside the events of speaking and listening as they occur around her in the dining room; the experience of the meal itself takes on the quality of a syntax that is collectively shared in her experience with the world around her. Woolf says: "They all sat down, and while she waited, looking at the plate, she said, thinking perhaps they were going to say grace, but they did not say grace; she waited, looking at the plate, and thought of things that had happened long ago, of people she had met, of what she had said and what they had said back again." (Woolf, 2003, p. 83)

This is an example of what Toril Moi (2017) has called "the ordinary as event," that is, meaning is produced not by metaphysical vision but by attunement to the communal practices that permeate everyday experience. Mrs. Ramsay's waiting and her awareness of ritual and rhythm show that consciousness is always tied to "grammar" in the widest sense of the term, that is, to the way of life on which understanding relies. In each of these novels, Woolf restates consciousness itself as a social fact, thereby accomplishing in narrative form what Wittgenstein accomplishes philosophically, that is, the return of thought to the ordinary.

3. THE CITY AND THE HOUSE: SPACES OF SHARED LIFE

By considering Mrs. Dalloway and *To the Lighthouse* together, it is possible to uncover two types of life that complement one another: the world of the public and the world of the domestic, the city and the home. Each realm is treated by Woolf as the site not only for her characters' actions but as the very framework by means of which the fabric of words

and mind is formed. Meaning through both Mrs. Dalloway and *To the Lighthouse* is arrived at through engagement with the shared practices that become the customs of a tribe, as described by Wittgenstein (1953).

London itself becomes a massive series of interlocking consciousnesses in the novel Mrs. Dalloway. The action toggles between the perspectives of Clarissa, Peter Walsh, Septimus Warren Smith, and many other characters with fleeting points of overlap. Such a narrative approach—commonly referred to as free indirect discourse—is clearly more than mere stylistic flourish and encodes the notion that, as Wittgenstein argued, "understanding is communal." Each consciousness, as depicted in Woolf, has its place in the larger social grammar.

The most interesting manifestation of this is in the novel's portrayal of Septimus, whose war experiences unsettle his own living in the shared world of meaning. Woolf describes the person hearing voices, seeing meaningful patterns in meaningless occurrences, and doubting the ordinary uses of words. "Men must not cut down trees. There is a God" (Woolf, 2005, p. 71) Septimus screams, showing not the ramblings of madness but the struggle Septimus encounters in his form of life, in the way that Septimus no longer lays in the same world of ordinary words.

Indeed, Wittgenstein writes, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (§223). The statement is not, of course, one about the intelligence of beasts, but rather one that illustrates the relationship between understanding and shared practices. Here, of course, Septimus becomes a kind of linguistic stranger: while still able to speak English, he does not engage within the realm of shared understanding. Thus, the tragedy of Mrs. Dalloway can be seen to be one of catastrophe, one of the breakdown of the social order of post-WWI Britain.

By contrast, in *To the Lighthouse*, the focus is inward, upon the domestic rhythms, and it is revealed in this novel that the household itself is in effect a linguistic community, with its own rules and regulations. The summer house of the Ramsays is a miniature version of shared forms of life, including meals, polite talk, gestures of kindness and annoyance, and the silent coordination of emotions. Mrs. Ramsay, in this linguistic community, is both a participant and an interpreter. The ethical content in Mrs. Ramsay's character is in her attention to what is left unsaid.

Woolf's rendering of the dinner scene in *The Window* epitomizes this delicate balancing act:

"They came to the table; they were hungry. Mrs. Ramsay went from one to another with her hands out and a smile. She had a feeling that they were all warmed and supported by this, that the world might be built again out of their togetherness." (Woolf, 2003, p. 91)

This is the aesthetic of the everyday: the acknowledgement of the common gesture and the common language as the substance of sense. It is exactly these practices that Wittgenstein's forms of life rely on—the repetitive, corporal performance of sense-making itself. Cavell (1979) argues that "acknowledgment, rather than knowledge, is the moral mode of our relation to others" (p. 372). In regard to hospitality, Mrs. Ramsay practices a form of acknowledgment, one which might be called the unthought or the tacit affirmation of the shared. It is the acknowledgement of shared existence that Woolf suggests in her depiction of Mrs. Ramsay's hospitality.

Overall, these novels of Woolf's make it clear that meaning is at once spatial and social. The world's these novels create, from the agitated city to the private sphere of domesticity, is neither simply signifying nor simply grammatical, and it's certainly neither simply spatial nor simply social; it's grammatical in such a way that it marks the possibility of meaning within it, and it's signifying in such a way as to indicate meaning in and through those grammatical possibilities.

4. THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE: SILENCE, VISION, AND UNDERSTANDING

Thus, in both Woolf and Wittgenstein, meaning never concludes within the limits of language but begins to point itself in the direction of that limit itself. In Wittgenstein, the statement holds good again: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (*Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, §7). In Woolf, the unsayable often takes the form of the ultimate mode of truth itself.

In *To the Lighthouse*, this silence becomes a medium of vision. The central consciousness of the second section, "Time Passes," is not human at all but temporal: the voice of the house itself, observing decay and renewal. Woolf writes: "So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof, a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias." (Woolf, 2003, p. 127).

Perception is re-shaped here into a form of showing rather than saying; this is clearly in line with the propositional and the expressive distinguished by Wittgenstein. "The world is revealed through the rhythm of words, through syntax of light and dark." The writing style here is similar to that found in the remarks of Wittgenstein; both are performance models that describe.

Similarly, in *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa's unspoken recognition of Septimus's suicide at her party becomes a moral revelation beyond language. When she retreats to a small room and reflects, Woolf writes: "Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man there a woman in a kind of twilight, like a mist, and to be left alone, to feel the emptiness of the room, the strangeness of life which made one so solemn." (Woolf, 2005, p. 184)

The implicit communication of Clarissa with Septimus, a character whom she has never met, exemplifies "the difficulty of reality" as identified by Cora Diamond (1991). This difficulty involves acknowledging another's pain as a constituent of one's own moral world. "The moment" challenges propositional expression and represents a form of perception—an "aspect-seeing" that roughly matches Wittgenstein's "seeing-as." "The expression of a belief, thought, feeling, is, among other things, the expression of an attitude. It belongs to our form of life," says Wittgenstein. (§241) Clarissa's gazing, Mrs. Ramsay's silence, and Lily Briscoe's artwork symbolise an attitude subsumed in a form of life shared among them. Such expressions defy propositional translation and can only be apprehended through perception and feeling. The artful intention of Woolf's writing, much like Wittgenstein's philosophy, teaches us how to pay attention to the ordinary as that which contains "the unsayable."

Martha Nussbaum writes, "In literature, the nuances of human perception escape the confines of abstract ethics. The syntax of Woolf embodies this as it demonstrates moral attentiveness through the syntax that lingers at the edge of language, mapping the path of thought preceding the formulation of assertion. This syntax does not represent the failure of language but its triumph, the ability to say what can never be defined."

Silence in *Mrs Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse* therefore is not an absence but an understanding that marks the line separating words and life; it reiterates that the truth is not an essence to be uncovered but an activity that involves looking and living.

5. THE ETHICS OF THE ORDINARY

Whereas Wittgenstein argues that understanding is necessarily rooted in our "forms of life," Woolf

develops this idea further in a philosophy of attentiveness. Her characters find meaning in a way that is not reducible to a system of dogma or a set of stated precepts but is instead attentive to the nuances of everyday experience. Such attentiveness might well be said to constitute a phenomenology in Woolf's work and clearly relates to Wittgenstein's statement that "ethics and aesthetics are one" (*Tractatus*, §6.421).

The ethical moment in Mrs Dalloway is manifest in the social rituals and, in particular, in the party given by Clarissa. While it appears to be a banal and inconsequential affair, it actually represents an ethical endeavour, namely the attempt to repair the shattered lives after the experience of war. According to Cavell (1979), "the acknowledgment of another's voice" is at the heart, in the ordinary language philosophy, of ethical seriousness (p. 372). It is exactly this kind of acknowledgment that takes place in the gesture of hosting others, opening her house, and, therefore, her mind, in the case of Clarissa.

At the height of the party, Clarissa learns of Septimus's suicide and feels a tremulous moment of recognition – an epiphany that links her to a stranger she has never known. Woolf's writing pauses in the moment between thought and words: "She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun." (Woolf, 2005, p. 186)

This act of empathetic identification is one that resists paraphrase. Here, Clarissa's "gladness" is clearly a signification not of moral approbation but of ontological recognition – that is to say, a recognition of our shared vulnerability that is the foundation for all forms of communication. In this regard, the text can be seen to instantiate an ethical understanding that is merely adumbrated by Wittgenstein.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the ethical element is represented by art. The artist's task in Lily Briscoe's endeavour to complete her painting is, in essence, the same as the ethical task of truthfully looking at another. The final act, in which the defining line across the canvas is drawn, represents both artistic and ethical satisfaction. Woolf says: "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision." (Woolf, 2003, p. 209)

One must also consider Lily's alleged "vision" in terms of recognition rather than vision itself. Lily recognizes and affirms the fleeting nature of the

world, its ordinariness, and its forms of life. Lily's painting thus also becomes a "picture of life" in the sense of Ludwig Wittgenstein, as it participates in the practice of sight and comparison which constitutes understanding.

Taking up this challenge is Cora Diamond's (1991) reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy as an encouragement to live philosophy and see the world as it is. The "moments of being" that Woolf renders in her fiction embodies this challenge in aesthetic terms. These "moments of being" become acts of philosophical seeing that shine a light on the ordinary.

In both Woolf and Wittgenstein, ethics is better understood as a function of responsiveness rather than moral systems per se. The life in sync with the grain of reality – that is, the sounds, silences, and rhythms that constitute the shared world we inhabit – is, in effect, the ethical life. On this reading, ethics is realized in literary form, where life and meaning are inextricably bound together.

6. CONCLUSION: LITERATURE AS A FORM OF LIFE

A reading of Woolf's novels together with the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein suggests that the ordinary is the point at which art and thought meet. Both the novel and the philosophy reject the kind of approach that seeks the transcendental in favour of what is already there: the language spoken, the movements made, the lives lived.

Wittgenstein (1953) writes: "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain." (§126)

This statement itself can serve as an epigraph for the modernism of Woolf's work. Her fiction does not explain human experience but reveals it. By rhythm, by syntax, by voice, she "puts everything before us" in order to reveal the richness of the ordinary. In Mrs. Dalloway, the beat of the city streets becomes the beat of the human mind; in *To the Lighthouse*, the practices of the household become the grammar of life.

Both texts establish what might be called the literature form of life. In other words, they do not represent or convey meaning; they enact it through the mechanisms of the language game, into which the reader is inserted through the process of reading the sentences that Woolf creates.

Indeed, as Cavell argued, "The job of philosophy is not discovery but recovery – the recovery of our natural wonder in the face of the ordinary" (emphasis mine) (Cavell, 1979, p. 34). Woolf's art of

writing achieves this recovery. She turns the banal into the beautiful, the everyday into the event. Woolf's writing asks of her readers the same as Wittgenstein's philosophy, to remain in language, not beyond it, to find meaning in the common places of life itself.

And to return us to the ordinary in this way is not to reduce experience, but rather to restore to it the sense of the present, with all the mystery that implies.

The ringing of Big Ben, the fluttering of a candle flame, a brush mark on canvas – all become symbols of the threads of experience that comprise life. Thus, to read Woolf is to engage in a philosophical act, an exercise in attention and acknowledgment. Philosophy, in the way Woolf practices it, is an acknowledgment that truth is not somewhere “out there” in abstraction but is, in fact, in the details of the everyday.

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