

Musicality in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and Graham Swift's *Ever After*

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to find similarities in the use of musicality in the structure of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and in Graham Swift's *Ever After*. The paper will be based on the findings of Elicia Clements and Claire Fabbri as to their narrative techniques in respect to connections between music and literature. Clements argues for Woolf's *Transforming musical sounds into words*, while Fabbri notices that Swift's novel *Ever After* has a rhythm which is built upon a movement in three time very much like the waltz. However, Swift "innovatively beats an inverted time" (Fabbri 1992). Similarities between musical techniques and structures and these novels will thus be explored. The way these similarities contribute to lyrical features of these novels will also be taken into account. If we search a dictionary for the term "lyricism", we are given features such as subjectivity, musicality, intense emotions, and so on. Such features are recognized as features of poetic prose.

Keywords: narratology, rhythm, lyric mode, pastiche

Motivation

Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift write lyrical novels and musicality is part of what makes a lyrical novel.

Virginia Woolf seems to have had her own theory about the lyrical novel. In her diary, in an entry from 1927, she writes down her intention to use prose poetically. In her view, this new type of novel should contain both features of prose and of poetry. Such prose should also be dramatic, not only poetic, in the sense that the writer will use the influence of music, for instance, to create a dramatic feel.

Mixture of genres and intertextuality, together with a subjective perspective which shape the story in a certain way seem to be at work in the lyrical novel. Also, the less the omniscient narrator, situated outside the fabula, intervenes in the story, or at least offers the impression of not intervening by not expressing a direct opinion, the more the feeling of a novel whose characters are presented to the reader as if acting on a stage and then

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revealing their inner thoughts in a confession-like manner is given. Characters and various situations seem to be without the control of an omniscient narrator. This allows the readers to judge for themselves, and to be drawn by the characters to participate to their emotional experience and to the creation and understanding of the story.

Certain statements about Woolf's novels compare them with poetry to some degree. I think that such statements are significant and they may be analyzed by using narratological methods. We may also find out the contribution of the context of the literary trends of those times.

The novel *The Waves* is seen by McNichol as a playpoem, *To the Lighthouse* as an elegy, *Between the Acts* as "pure poetry". The narrator in *Jacob's Room* has an elegiac voice and "poetic connections are made between the episodes as images and motifs become interwoven into the fabric of meaning." In *Mrs. Dalloway*, McNichol notices "poetic rhythms" (1990: xii). These observations are similar to those mentioned by Ali Güneş (2003) in his paper: Lytton Strachey views *Jacob's Room* as similar to poetry; Woolf approves his view on the Romantic aspect in this novel. Woolf calls *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* serious, poetic, experimental books, while *Orlando* is an escapade. G. Lowes Dickinson writes to Woolf about *The Waves*, telling her that it is a poem, and a very good one. According to Bloom (1994: 406), "Woolf is a lyrical novelist: *The Waves* is more prose poem than novel, and *Orlando* is best where it largely forsakes narrative." According to Freedman (1963: 213), *Jacob's Room* is not yet a lyrical novel; however, it "describes the act of cognition in which awareness unites with objects and other selves, or separates from them, to create a world of imagery that directs the flow of the novel. In her following two books, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf sought to reconcile this poetic insight with the novel's form, until in *The Waves* she found herself fully a poet in prose."

The lyrical novel may be regarded in analogy with the poem, yet at times it may also be regarded in analogy with a theatre play or with various other arts (painting, music) as far as the structure or rhythm are concerned.

Elicia Clements (2005), in *Transforming musical sounds into words: narrative method in Virginia Woolf's "The Waves"*, points out to the connections between music and literature which fascinated Woolf. Clements notices a musicality in Woolf's *The Waves*. Claire Fabbri (1992) notices something similar in Graham Swift's *Ever After*. There, the order of the novel's sections "to be born, to love and to die" is changed to "to die, to be born, then to

love". This offers a new viewpoint and "a new rhythm, which overturns the vision of the whole structure. As to the author, he considers the structure and shape of a novel "in terms of rhythm, movement, pace and tension [...]. And it isn't a very intellectual process. It's very much a sort of musical thing" (Smith, G9). The adjective "musical" is particularly significant in *Ever After* since the rhythm is built upon a movement in three time very much like the waltz. However, Swift innovatively beats an inverted time" (Fabbri 1992).

To what extent can a narratological approach explain the musicality which seems to be at work in *The Waves* and in *Ever After*?

A narratological approach

I think that the aspect of rhythm is present not only because it explains why certain scenes are more dynamic or seemingly more static since they include dreamy reflections, but also because it shows a certain characteristic of the novel's overall structure. This is what Claire Fabbri seems to claim. By referring to *Ever After*, Fabbri notices aspects of rhythm which interfere with the story's non-linear chronology. Non-linear narration becomes thus an occasion for poetic aspects, since it also generates a certain rhythm which is compared to the structure of a musical piece. The time in the story's presentation is inverted by comparison to the time of life. The way the chapters are presented, in terms of "to die, to be born, then to love" structure the readers' experience of time in a different way. It is the order the main character decided to talk about his experiences; the way he structures the story of his experiences is the way he feels about them and about life generally speaking.

In an interview (October 2006), Swift says that "He feels the words should flow musically, creating an underlying rhythm."

Rhythm may account for the fragmentation and discontinuity expressed in the novels' structure, which moves them away from traditional, chronological narrative and thus towards poetry. Rhythm is created by the use of other texts which parallel the text of the novel, either by direct or indirect reference. The reader draws parallels between the present text and other texts and brings his/her knowledge to create a certain atmosphere or to intensify the lyrical atmosphere in various scenes in Swift's novels.

Representations of time show their influence on the novels' structure. All of Swift's novels contain non-linear chronology, with characters' minds going backwards and forwards

in time as they tell parts of the story which the reader will rebuild in order to make sense of it.

The “underlying rhythm” refers to mixture of genres, or to pastiche. Since the reader may compare music to the novel’s structure at some points, this is an instance of pastiche. The pastiche also includes other genres as previously seen, belonging to literature (poetic, dramatic, narrative). I think that the rhythm refers to the way the novel is structured in terms of the story’s presentation but also to a dramatic and lyrical aspect.

Fabbri gave such an example as she analyzed the structure of *Ever After*. The well-known process “to be born, to love, and to die” includes a reshaping of the readers’ experience of time in Swift’s novel. The rhythm in *Ever After* is thought to be comparable to the movement in three times of the waltz. By reshaping the process in a different non-chronological way, Fabbri believes that Swift “innovatively beats an inverted time.”

The lack of linear chronology reinforces the lyrical character of the novels by its shift of focus away from narrative, away from traditional, dynamic, external action.

Lyrical novel

Which novels by Woolf best illustrate the theory of the lyrical novel?

Goldman (2010) refers to *The Waves* as “representing for many the culmination of her experimental lyric technique”. She believes that the novel *The Waves* is a “tour de force in high modernist poetic fiction”; thus, *The Waves* would be the best illustration of the lyrical novel in Woolf, as this novel represents “for many the culmination of her experimental lyric technique”.

If we think of *The Waves* as the best realization of the lyrical novel, then we may compare it to Swift’s novels. If we think of the lyrical novel as being made up of monologues, with apparently no intervention from the author and with the elements of coherence left to the reader to reconstruct, then we may compare Woolf’s novel with Swift’s.

To what extent does Woolf’s theory of the lyrical novel apply to Swift’s novels? Can we really say that only certain novels by each author are lyrical or that they are “more and more poetic” (Goldman, 2010)?

I think that the following aspects are relevant as far as the lyrical novel generally speaking is concerned:

- (a) Presence of lyrical scenes – lyrical scenes make up the monologues; they are used to move the narrative mode away from its narrative cohesion, from the usual cohesion of the plot; the connections of cause and effect are left to the reader's interpretation, as they are no longer represented directly in the story's presentation; the reader is left to find the connection between the lyrical scenes in his/her way of understanding the story and going actively through it;
- (b) Linear vs non-linear chronology – non-linear chronology has a significant effect on the story's presentation and on the way the story is structured; it serves to represent the workings of memory and to take the structure far away from the traditional narrative mode, from the cohesion of the narrative mode and more towards the poetic mode;
- (c) The stream of consciousness – which seems an important technique for the poetic representation of emotional states;
- (d) Dramatized narrators – they are the subjective narrators; they can be first-person narrators or otherwise third-person narrators which have the same privileges as first-person narrators according to narratological theory and to Bal (1997: 8); they present their monologues, which make up the lyrical novel; they present the story to the audience (to the reader) more or less completely in the lyrical novel;
- (e) Intertextual references – since their role is to intensify the lyrical experience of both characters and readers or to place it in an ironic context (in Swift especially);
- (f) The representation of incidents in time – the representations of time in the lyrical novel also affect the way the incidents are perceived by characters and then by readers; it seems that there is a synchronization between characters' mental states and their description of incidents or a certain projection of their mental states on the setting at least; since mental states play an important part in the representation of the incidents, the representation of mental states in relation to incidents brings dynamism and thus an active, intense participation on the part of the reader as far as emotional experience is concerned;
- (g) The effects of Modernism or Postmodernism on narrative structure – since both trends seem to promote a different narrative structure, a different representation of plot compared to traditional novels; mixture of genres is a feature of both trends and it seems that it is reflected on the lyrical novel in the mixture of poetic, narrative and

dramatic modes; the non-linear chronology is also a common feature, as well as the presence of an active reader; however, it seems that only Modernism promotes a mixture of poetry and prose which is specific to this trend.

The influence of music on the novel's structure

It seems that the use of music could have an effect on the narrative structure. Music and literature can be compared or used in parallel to make a novel more dramatic and more poetic at the same time. A comparison with music can give narrative and more precisely lyrical scenes a certain rhythm.

Crapoulet (2008) highlights the relationship which Woolf noticed between literature and music:

"[...] music was an art which directly inspired Virginia Woolf's own literary compositions, playing a central role in her work as a writer. Woolf's early technical proficiency, and wide-ranging experience of music-making will lead her to question the nature of musical expression in relation to her own writing in her diaries, letters and essays, to such an extent that she planned to write a book "investigat[ing] the influence of music on literature" (1980b: 450), a project which unfortunately was curtailed by her death in 1941."

In this respect, I think that we could regard Swift as taking the aspect of the influence of music on the narrative structure further in his novel *Ever After*.

The musicality in *Ever After* is reminiscent of Woolf's own desire to be able to capture and dramatize those influences which play such an important part in life, the force of music among others (visual stimuli and their effect on us, the joy of movement), as she mentions in *Granite and Rainbow* (1958: 18).

In *Ever After*, the influence of music is shown on the structure of the novel, perhaps on the structure of the lyrical scenes as considered by the reader after reading the book and in terms of the dramatism of the structure due to the rhythm induced by the comparison with the waltz.

Since Woolf believed that the new novel should also make use of music so as to influence and create the dramatic mode, in order to intensify the lyrical aspect of the novel, then it seems that Swift actually put this theory into practice.

Conclusions

What insights are offered by the narratological approach as far as the representation and structure of the lyrical novel is concerned?

The way in which certain incidents are depicted, as more or less dreamy or more dramatic, more intense, seem to be in relation with representations of time. Time affects the way in which certain scenes are perceived by the readers. Certain scenes are more dramatic, more visual and thus cause the reader to move faster through them in the reading process. Other scenes seem more static. However, the emotional experience is as intense in dreamy as in more dramatic, more dynamic scenes. By rhythm I understand the pace at which the narrative is felt as progressing for the reader, faster or slower, as well as the type of representation of emotional experience: dreamier, more intense, more dramatic or quite static. What is more, the way the novel is structured, sometimes like a musical piece (the waltz in *Ever After*) also brings about aspects of rhythm. The reader will refer to previous experience and impressions of such musical pieces and the representation of time related to them and bring them into the perception of the novel's structure.

Swift seems, on certain occasions, to take further certain aspects present in Woolf's novels, such as the way the experience of grief is represented or the way certain structures found in music (such as the waltz in *Ever After*) influence the story's temporal structure. Also, dramatized narrators seem to be perfected in Swift's novel, if we compare them with the narrators found in Woolf. The way an omniscient narrator, one that is outside the fabula and looks at it from the outside is absent or at least seemingly so also seems to be taken further in Swift. Swift also seems to take the structure of *The Waves*, the novel which was considered the closest to a poem, further as he structures his novels explicitly around the monologues of characters. These novels are *Out of This World* and *Last Orders*, where, as mentioned the chapters' titles are the names of the characters who present their monologues.

The intensification of the lyrical atmosphere as well as the dynamic feel of the story are created by introducing intertextual references not only to other texts but to other genres or to other arts (music, painting), so that the reader experiences intensely together with the characters their emotional states (sympathy).

What could be a definition of the lyrical novel, especially if we think of Woolf's and Swift's novels and about musicality? I think we could start from the statement made by

Woolf about a novel which would be acted, not read, and where the influence of music will bring in dramatic aspects, a novel which will make use of poetry mostly, not prose.

I think that the lyrical novel's purpose is to represent the emotional experience in a visual and poetic way. The intensity of the emotional experience is always felt in the way the perceiving characters shape the story for the reader, the incidents and even the setting. Intertextual references or references to other arts intensify the lyrical or dramatic aspect of the emotional experience.

Characters deliver their monologues in front of the readers like actors on stage. The reader may have to suspend judgement in some respects in the lyrical novel. This happens with respect to the poetic language which may not necessarily be realistic, since in everyday life it is not necessarily true that such language is used. Also, when the experience of grief is represented, the representation of the emotional experience goes outside the fabula, creating the illusion that dead characters deliver their monologue.

The lyrical novel may be regarded in analogy with the poem, yet at times it may also be regarded in analogy with a theatre play or with various other arts (painting, music) as far as the structure or rhythm are concerned. I think that the analogy with musicality and rhythm brings this kind of prose close to poetry, as it is there where such aspects related to rhythm that are discussed.

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