

THE MODERNIST CONCEPTION OF TIME AND THE POETICS OF
CONSCIOUSNESS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S NOVELS

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Abstract: Purpose — This paper examines how the modernist reconceptualization of time is structurally enacted, rather than merely thematized, in the fiction of Virginia Woolf, and asks how this temporal poetics is bound up with the technique conventionally termed "stream of consciousness." Methodology — The study applies a qualitative, theoretically informed close-reading methodology, combining Henri Bergson's philosophical distinction between mechanical clock time and lived duration with Gérard Genette's narratological categories of order, duration, and frequency, to a purposive corpus of five Woolf novels: *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, and *The Waves*. Findings — The analysis shows that Woolf's fiction consistently subordinates chronological sequence to the heterogeneous rhythms of subjective duration through three interlocking devices: the radical compression and dilation of story-time, the use of free indirect discourse to fuse narratorial and characterological perspectives, and the deployment of impersonal interludes that figure time without a perceiving consciousness. Recent scholarship (2022–2026) on embodied duration, minor narrative agents, and pandemic-era rereadings is shown to extend rather than displace this account. Originality/value — By reading the five novels together as stages in a single, increasingly radical temporal poetics, and by integrating very recent Woolf scholarship with the foundational Bergsonian and narratological framework, the paper offers an updated synthesis of a long-standing critical debate and identifies directions for further corpus-based and cognitive-narratological research on modernist temporality.

Keywords: modernism; Virginia Woolf; stream of consciousness; Bergsonian duration; narrative time; free indirect discourse; interior monologue.

Annotatsiya: Mazkur maqolada Virjiniya Vulf ijodida modernistik vaqt konsepsiyasining shunchaki mavzu sifatida emas, balki strukturaviy jihatdan qanday ifodalangani hamda ushbu temporal poetikaning an'anaviy ravishda "ong oqimi" deb ataladigan badiiy usul bilan qanday bog'liqligi tadqiq etiladi. Tadqiqotda sifatli va nazariy jihatdan asoslangan yaqin o'qish metodologiyasi qo'llanilib, Anri Bergsonning mexanik soat vaqti hamda yashalgan davomiylik haqidagi falsafiy qarashlari Jerar Jennetning narratologik tartib, davomiylik va takrorlanish kategoriyalari bilan uyg'unlashtiriladi. Tadqiqot uchun Virjiniya Vulfning besh romani — *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* va *The Waves* tanlab olingan. Tahlil natijalari Vulf nasrida xronologik ketma-ketlik subyektiv davomiylikning turli ritmlariga uch asosiy vosita orqali bo'ysundirilishini ko'rsatadi: voqea vaqtining keskin siqilishi va kengaytirilishi, muallif bayoni hamda qahramon nuqtayi nazarlarini uyg'unlashtiruvchi erkin bilvosita nutq va vaqtni idrok etuvchi ong mavjud bo'lmagan holatda ifodalovchi impersonal intermediyalar. 2022–2026-yillardagi tana orqali idrok etiladigan davomiylik, minor narrativ agentlar va pandemiya davridagi qayta o'qishlarga bag'ishlangan zamonaviy tadqiqotlar mazkur

yondashuvni inkor etmasdan, balki uni yanada kengaytirishi ko’rsatiladi. Maqolaning ilmiy yangiligi besh romanni yagona va tobora radikallashib boruvchi temporal poetikaning bosqichlari sifatida birgalikda tahlil qilish, zamonaviy Vulf tadqiqotlarini Bergson falsafasi va narratologiyaning fundamental konsepsiyalari bilan uyg’unlashtirish hamda modernistik temporallik bo’yicha uzoq yillik ilmiy bahslarning yangilangan sintezini taklif etishdan iborat.

Kalit so’zlar: modernizm, Virjiniya Vulf, ong oqimi, Bergson davomiyligi, narrativ vaqt, erkin bilvosita nutq, ichki monolog.

Аннотация: В данной статье исследуется, каким образом модернистская концептуализация времени в творчестве Вирджинии Вулф реализуется не только на тематическом, но и на структурном уровне, а также рассматривается связь этой темпоральной поэтики с техникой, традиционно обозначаемой как «поток сознания». В исследовании применяется качественная, теоретически обоснованная методология пристального текстуального анализа, сочетающая философское различие Анри Бергсоном механического времени часов и переживаемой длительности с нарратологическими категориями порядка, длительности и частотности Жерара Женетта. В качестве целенаправленно отобранного корпуса анализируются пять романов Вирджинии Вулф: *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* и *The Waves*. Результаты анализа показывают, что в прозе Вулф хронологическая последовательность систематически подчиняется неоднородным ритмам субъективной длительности посредством трёх взаимосвязанных приёмов: радикального сжатия и растяжения времени повествуемой истории, использования свободной косвенной речи для слияния нарративной и персонажной перспектив, а также введения безличных интерлюдий, репрезентирующих время вне воспринимающего сознания. Показано, что современные исследования 2022–2026 годов, посвящённые воплощённой длительности, минорным нарративным агентам и переосмыслению творчества Вулф в период пандемии, не вытесняют данную интерпретацию, а расширяют её. Научная новизна работы заключается в рассмотрении пяти романов как последовательных этапов единой, всё более радикальной темпоральной поэтики, а также в интеграции новейших исследований творчества Вулф с фундаментальными бергсоновскими и нарратологическими подходами.

Ключевые слова: модернизм, Вирджиния Вулф, поток сознания, длительность Бергсона, нарративное время, свободная косвенная речь, внутренний монолог.

Introduction

The early twentieth century witnessed a fundamental rupture in the literary representation of time. Where the nineteenth-century realist novel had generally organized narrative around external, sequential, and socially legible chronology, modernist fiction turned inward, seeking to render the irregular, associative, and non-linear rhythms of subjective consciousness. Virginia Woolf occupies a central position in this transformation. Alongside Marcel Proust and James Joyce, she developed a narrative poetics in which the passage of clock time becomes almost irrelevant to the organization of the text, while the depth, intensity, and duration of a single remembered or perceived moment can expand to occupy dozens of pages. Despite a century of Woolf scholarship, the precise relationship between her temporal poetics and her techniques of interior representation remains

contested rather than settled. Studies tend either to treat "time" and "stream of consciousness" as separate objects of analysis — one philosophical, the other stylistic — or to subsume the discussion of time under a general account of narrative voice without specifying the narratological mechanisms involved. This separation leaves an explanatory gap: it does not clarify how, mechanically, Woolf's sentences produce the effect of duration, nor how this effect differs across her five major novels of the 1920s and early 1930s. The present study addresses this gap by pursuing one central aim: to specify the narratological mechanisms through which Woolf's fiction enacts, rather than merely represents, a Bergsonian conception of duration. This aim is pursued through two research questions: (RQ1) How does Woolf's fiction translate a philosophical intuition about the nature of time — closely allied with Henri Bergson's concept of duration — into concrete, describable narrative technique? (RQ2) What is the relationship between this temporal poetics and Woolf's technique of interior representation of consciousness, commonly labelled "stream of consciousness"? The paper argues that in Woolf's work these two questions cannot be separated: her handling of time is inseparable from her handling of consciousness, because for Woolf time is not an external container in which events occur but a quality of experience itself, produced anew in every perceiving mind. The paper contributes to modernist studies and narrative theory by integrating foundational Bergsonian and narratological frameworks with Woolf scholarship published between 2022 and 2026, thereby testing whether recent, more localized readings (of embodied gesture, minor characters, and pandemic-era reception) are consistent with, or require revision of, the classical account of Woolf's temporal poetics. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature and identifies the specific gap addressed here. Section 3 outlines the methodology and corpus. Section 4 presents the results and discussion, organized around three textual mechanisms. Section 5 concludes, noting the study's limitations and directions for further research.

Literature review

Henri Bergson's distinction, developed in *Time and Free Will* and elaborated in *Creative Evolution*, between temps (spatialized, measurable clock time) and durée (qualitative, heterogeneous lived time) provided modernist writers with a philosophical vocabulary for a sensibility that was already emerging in their fiction [4]. Bergson argued that the mathematical, spatial model of time used in ordinary life and in physics falsifies the actual experience of consciousness, in which past and present interpenetrate and duration is felt as continuous flow rather than a series of discrete, measurable instants [4]. Although Woolf never systematically adopted Bergson's philosophy as doctrine, and scholars continue to debate the precise nature and extent of her engagement with his work, the affinity between Bergsonian duration and Woolf's narrative practice is widely recognized in the critical literature. Banfield's influential study [3] situates Woolf's narrative technique within a broader philosophical context that includes both Bergson and the analytic tradition of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, arguing that Woolf's fiction stages a persistent tension between subjective, embodied time and an impersonal, objectless perspective from which time and consciousness alike are absent [3]. The narratological apparatus for describing this technique owes much to Genette's categories of narrative time [8] — order, duration, and frequency — which allow us to specify how Woolf manipulates the relationship between story-time (the chronological sequence of events) and discourse-time (the sequence and pacing of their narration). Genette's concept of the "pause" [8], in which narrative discourse continues while story-time is suspended, and his concept of the "scene," in which discourse-time and story-

time are roughly equivalent, are especially useful for describing the dilation of single moments in Mrs Dalloway [15] and To the Lighthouse [16]. Equally relevant is Auerbach's landmark discussion of To the Lighthouse in Mimesis [1], in which he identifies Woolf's technique of using an ordinary, externally minor occurrence as the occasion for extensive interior exploration, describing this multiplicity of perspectives on a single moment as a defining feature of the modern novel [1]. A cluster of studies published between 2022 and 2026 has revisited Woolf's temporal poetics from more localized angles. Felin [7] demonstrates that Woolf's material objects encode a serious epistemological project concerning perception and mathematics. Balossi [2] shows, through cognitive-stylistic analysis, that the seemingly impersonal "Time Passes" interlude of To the Lighthouse is in fact partially anchored in the marginal consciousness of the charwoman Mrs McNab. Hou [9] locates a further register of duration in repetitive embodied gestures such as knitting. Caleb [5] argues that Mrs Dalloway's fusion of clock time and bodily experience has made the novel newly legible to readers of a recent pandemic. None of these studies, however, integrates its localized finding back into a general, narratologically specified account of Woolf's temporal technique across her major novels; each treats a single text or a single device in isolation. This is the gap the present study addresses by synthesizing these recent, localized findings within the Bergsonian–Genettean framework across a five-novel corpus.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven close-reading design, appropriate to research questions concerned with the internal textual mechanisms of literary works rather than with quantifiable outcomes across a population of readers or texts. Close reading is combined with a structured application of two external analytic frameworks — Bergson's philosophy of duration [4] and Genette's narratology [8] — so that textual observations are not merely descriptive but are systematically related to explicit theoretical categories (order, duration, frequency, pause, scene; mechanical versus lived time). The corpus comprises five novels by Virginia Woolf — Jacob's Room [14], Mrs Dalloway [15], To the Lighthouse [16], Orlando [17], and The Waves [18] — selected purposively rather than randomly, on the grounds that they represent (a) Woolf's principal sustained experiments with narrative temporality, (b) a chronological span covering the full development of her mature style, and (c) the range of narrative situations (single-day narration, tripartite compression, biographical parody, and choral soliloquy) needed to test the generality of the study's claims. Secondary or minor works (short fiction, essays, diaries) are referenced only where they illuminate the primary corpus and are not treated as primary data. The analytic procedure followed three steps. First, passages exhibiting marked asymmetries between story-time and discourse-time (extreme compression or extreme dilation) were identified in each novel and classified using Genette's categories [8]. Second, passages in which narratorial and characterological perspectives could not be reliably distinguished were identified as instances of free indirect discourse and examined for their syntactic and rhythmic construction. Third, the resulting inventory of devices was cross-checked against the 2022–2026 secondary literature identified in Section 2.3 to determine whether recent, more localized findings were consistent with, extended, or complicated the general pattern. This procedure is interpretive rather than statistical; its validity rests on the transparency of the categories applied and on triangulation with existing peer-reviewed scholarship rather than on inter-rater reliability coefficients, a limitation discussed in Section 5.2. Figure 1 summarizes this research design

end to end, from the corpus and theoretical frameworks through the three analytic steps to the synthesis presented in Section 4.4.

Figure 1. Research Design and Analytic Procedure

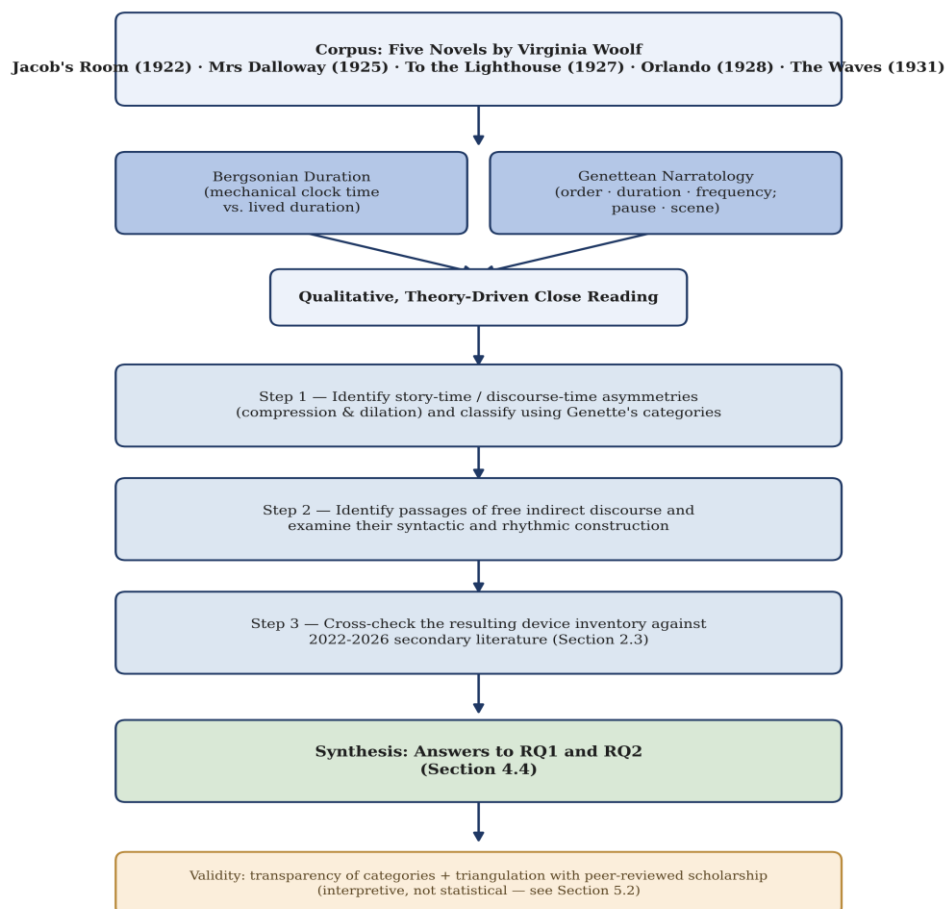


Figure 1. Research design and analytic procedure, from corpus selection through the three-step analysis to the synthesis of findings.

Results and Discussion

Woolf's manipulation of narrative duration follows a consistent pattern across her major novels: externally minor events, often occupying mere minutes or seconds of story-time, are narrated at great length, while years or even decades of story-time are compressed into a few pages or, in the case of *To the Lighthouse*, into a single short interlude. This asymmetry is the formal correlative of Woolf's underlying premise: that psychological significance bears no necessary relation to chronological duration. Mrs Dalloway offers the clearest demonstration of this principle. The entire novel unfolds within a single day in London, its structure loosely organized around the striking of Big Ben and other public clocks, which punctuate the narrative at intervals and remind both characters and readers of the steady advance of mechanical time [15]. Yet within this rigid external frame, the narration continually departs from linear chronology, moving backward into the memories of Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and Septimus Warren Smith with such fluidity that the transitions



between present perception and remembered past often occur within a single sentence [15]. The clock, in this sense, functions ironically: it measures a day of externally trivial events — a walk to buy flowers, a party in the evening — while the true dramatic substance of the novel occurs in the accumulated weight of the characters' remembered pasts, which press upon and reshape their experience of the present. Caleb sharpens this point [5] in a recent reading of the novel's opening pages, arguing that Clarissa's suspended, pre-chime hesitation before Big Ben fuses clock time with a bodily and historically inflected experience of illness and aftermath, so that objective and subjective temporalities are entangled rather than opposed from the very first pages of the novel [5]; Caleb further suggests [5] that this entanglement is part of what has made the novel newly resonant for readers who lived through the collective temporal disorientation of a recent pandemic. To the Lighthouse develops this temporal asymmetry even further through its tripartite structure. The first section, "The Window," narrates a single afternoon and evening with the dilated, associative density characteristic of Woolf's mature style [16]. The central section, "Time Passes," then compresses ten years — including the First World War, the deaths of several central characters, and the physical decay of the summer house — into a brief, formally anomalous interlude narrated largely without human consciousness as its organizing center [16]. Auerbach [1] and, more recently, scholars working in the tradition of narrative theory (e.g., Miller [11]) have noted that this section constitutes one of the most radical experiments in the modernist novel: it presents time as it might appear without any perceiving subject at all, an impersonal duration measured only by the encroachment of dust, wind, and decay upon an empty house. This reading of the interlude as purely consciousness-less, however, has recently been complicated. Balossi undertakes a cognitive-stylistic analysis [2] of the passages devoted to Mrs McNab, the charwoman who intermittently tends the decaying house, and argues that this minor, working-class figure functions as a structurally essential narrative agent whose limited, embodied perspective quietly mediates the reader's access to the passage of time [2] — so that "Time Passes" is not wholly impersonal but anchored, however faintly, in a marginal consciousness. In a complementary argument, Hou [9] locates a further, non-cognitive register of duration in the novel's recurring images of repetitive bodily labor, above all Mrs Ramsay's knitting in "The Window"; for Hou [9], such habitual, embodied gestures generate a form of duration that operates beneath conscious reflection, extending Bergsonian time from the domain of thought into the domain of the working body. The return to dense psychological interiority in the third section, "The Lighthouse," thus acquires its full force only in contrast to this intervening vision of time only partially redeemed by consciousness. Woolf's broader philosophical seriousness about time and perception is further underscored by Felin [7], who shows that the material objects of the Ramsay household — most notably the kitchen table and its cloth, recurring points of reference for Mr Ramsay's philosophical speculation — encode Woolf's own engagement with contemporary early-twentieth-century debates in the philosophy of perception and mathematics [7]. Felin's argument [7] that Woolf pursues a serious epistemological project through such quotidian objects, rather than simply an aesthetic effect, reinforces the claim that the novel's temporal experiments cannot be separated from a wider inquiry into the nature of reality and the reliability of subjective experience. The Waves represents the culmination of this poetics [18]. Structured as an alternating sequence of soliloquies delivered by six characters across the whole span of their lives, the novel is punctuated by italicized interludes describing the movement of the sun across the sea from dawn to dusk [18]. These



interludes function as an external, non-human temporal scaffold — analogous to Big Ben in Mrs Dalloway but far more abstract and cosmic — against which the interior, non-chronological unfolding of the characters' consciousnesses is set. Because each soliloquy is presented without conventional narrative framing or descriptive context, the novel largely dispenses with story-time as a distinct category altogether: what remains is a series of superimposed, choral durations, in which individual consciousness is shown to be permeable to and constituted by its relation to others. The technique conventionally called "stream of consciousness" — a term borrowed from James's psychology [10], where it describes the continuous, associative flow of mental experience — is realized in Woolf's fiction primarily through free indirect discourse rather than through the unpunctuated interior monologue associated with Joyce. Woolf's narration typically maintains a third-person grammatical frame while adopting the vocabulary, rhythm, and evaluative perspective of the focalizing character, producing a text in which it is often genuinely ambiguous whether a given sentence should be attributed to the narrator or to the character's own unspoken thought [3].

This technique allows Woolf to move between multiple centers of consciousness within a single scene or even a single paragraph, a mobility that has direct consequences for her treatment of time. Because free indirect discourse permits the narration to shift focalization without the interruption of explicit narratorial markers such as "she thought" or quotation marks, transitions between different characters' streams of memory and perception can occur with a fluidity that itself enacts the porousness of subjective time. A single object or sound — the striking of a clock, an aeroplane writing in the sky, the closing of a door — can serve as a hinge connecting the interior durations of otherwise unconnected characters, momentarily fusing their separate experiences of time into a shared, if unstable, present [15]. It is important to distinguish this technique from a simple transcription of unstructured thought. As Miller and other narratologists have observed [11], Woolf's interior representations remain highly crafted, rhythmically organized, and syntactically controlled; the appearance of spontaneous associative flow is itself a rhetorical achievement rather than a naive mimesis of mental process [11]. The long, subordinated sentence structures characteristic of Woolf's late style, with their accumulating clauses and suspended main verbs, produce a syntactic enactment of duration: the reader's own experience of processing the sentence becomes analogous to the character's experience of a moment stretching under the pressure of memory and association [12]. Woolf's earlier and later fiction extends this temporal poetics into an explicit meditation on the instability of identity across time. Jacob's Room, often regarded as Woolf's first fully experimental novel, approaches its protagonist obliquely, constructing him almost entirely through the fragmented perceptions and memories of other characters rather than through direct interior access to his own consciousness [14]; the effect is to render Jacob's life legible only as a series of discontinuous temporal fragments, a structure that anticipates the elegiac absence at the center of the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* [16]. Watts [13], in a recent reading of the novel's maternal elegy, argues that this formal absence is itself gendered: the temporal gaps and silences surrounding Jacob's death are focalized through his mother, Betty Flanders, so that the novel's non-linear, atmospheric treatment of loss is inseparable from its feminist reworking of the elegiac mode. Orlando, by contrast, pursues the Bergsonian premise to its most fantastical conclusion by allowing its protagonist to live for over three centuries while ageing only slightly, and to change sex partway through the narrative without narrative rupture [17]. Here Woolf makes explicit what remains implicit elsewhere in her fiction: that

the experience of duration bears no fixed relation to the number of years lived, and that identity itself, rather than being a stable substance persisting through time, is continuously reconstituted by memory and by the accumulated experience of duration [4, 17]. The novel's playful treatment of biographical convention — its parody of the chronological, fact-based biography — functions as a direct critique of the spatialized, mechanical time that Bergson associated with conventional historiography [4].

Table 1. Dominant Temporal Mechanism by Novel

Novel	Primary Temporal Mechanism	Key Textual Device	Scholarship
Jacob's Room (1922)	Elegiac fragmentation; gendered absence	Protagonist known only through others' discontinuous perceptions	[13, 14]
Mrs Dalloway (1925)	Clock time entangled with psychological duration	Big Ben's chimes set against associative backward movement into memory	[5, 15]
To the Lighthouse (1927)	Impersonal interlude; radical compression	"Time Passes": ten years compressed into a brief, near consciousness-less section	[1, 2, 7, 9, 16]
Orlando (1928)	Suspension of biographical, chronological time	Three-century lifespan and sex change without narrative rupture	[4, 17]
The Waves (1931)	Choral, superimposed duration	Six soliloquies set against cosmic, non-human solar interludes	[18]

(Bracketed numbers refer to the numbered reference list). This table synthesizes the close-reading results presented in Sections 4.1–4.3 as a basis for the cross-novel discussion in Section 4.4.

Returning to RQ1, the analysis shows that Woolf translates Bergsonian duration into narrative technique through three describable, cross-novel mechanisms: (i) systematic asymmetry between story-time and discourse-time [8], (ii) the impersonal interlude as a formal figure for time without a perceiving subject, and (iii) the parody or suspension of biographical, chronological convention in *Orlando*. Regarding RQ2, the evidence indicates that these temporal mechanisms are not separable from Woolf's handling of consciousness: free indirect discourse is the syntactic vehicle through which asymmetric duration and multiple, interpenetrating perspectives are realized on the sentence level [3]. The recent literature reviewed in Section 2.3 does not contradict this synthesis; rather, it shows that the impersonal pole of Woolf's temporal poetics (the "Time Passes" interlude) is less absolute than earlier criticism assumed, since even ostensibly consciousness-less passages retain traces of a marginal, embodied perspective [2, 9].

Conclusion



Across the trajectory of her fiction, Virginia Woolf develops a coherent and increasingly radical poetics of time in which chronological sequence is consistently subordinated to the qualitative, heterogeneous rhythms of subjective duration [4, 15, 16, 18]. This poetics is inseparable from her development of free indirect discourse as a technique of interior representation [3]: the fluidity with which her narration moves between memory, perception, and the immediate present is at once a stylistic signature and an epistemological argument about the nature of selfhood and experience [6]. The impersonal interludes of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* demonstrate that Woolf's engagement with time was not confined to the celebration of rich subjective experience; she was equally concerned with the vision of time as it exists independently of any perceiving consciousness, and with the fragility of the self that such a vision implies [2, 9]. Theoretically, the study suggests that Bergsonian and narratological frameworks remain productive when combined with, rather than superseded by, more localized cognitive-stylistic and reception-oriented approaches: recent scholarship refines the classical account without overturning it. For teaching and curriculum design, the three-mechanism framework developed here (asymmetric duration, free indirect discourse, impersonal interlude) offers a transferable analytic vocabulary applicable beyond Woolf to other modernist writers engaged in similar temporal experimentation, such as Proust and Joyce. This study is limited in three respects. First, its qualitative, interpretive methodology, while appropriate to the research questions, does not permit statistical generalization and relies on the analyst's judgment in classifying passages; a corpus-linguistic or computational-stylistic replication, quantifying sentence length, subordination depth, and tense-shift frequency across the five novels, would provide complementary, more readily replicable evidence. Second, the corpus is restricted to Woolf's five major novels; her short fiction, essays, and diaries, which also engage extensively with time, fall outside its scope and merit separate treatment. Third, the study does not undertake a systematic comparative analysis with Proust or Joyce, despite repeated reference to their shared modernist context; a dedicated comparative study remains a promising direction for further research, as does an extension of the cognitive-stylistic approach exemplified by Balossi [2] to other minor characters across Woolf's oeuvre.

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