

**THE MARK ON THE WALL –
SYMBOLS AND REFLECTIONS OF THE SELF**

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Abstract: *The Mark on the Wall is a short story that centres on inner thoughts and inwardness. Universal topics such as gender and the voice of women, the understanding of nature and the nature of humans, and the concern of finding a balanced direction in life find reference within its pages. They complete the thematic framework of the story, the focus being on the topic of consciousness. The exploration of the flow of consciousness might be viewed theoretically as a representative theme featured in writings included within the frame of literary Modernism. Virginia Woolf, the author of this short story, was one of the prominent authors of this artistic movement. The purpose of the present paper is to follow a critical reading of the story through close reading and symbolic interpretation, focusing on the last part of it. Under the spectrum of Carl Gustav Jung's theories and notion of 'archetype', we engage in describing the main symbols that reveal a possible image of the Self archetype. The abstract entity of the Self implies many layers, such as psychological, ontological, existential, and social. Thus, we explore the psychological insights traced through literary devices, namely interior monologue and stream of consciousness.*

Keywords: *Modernism, Self, symbols, circle, tree*

The Mark on the Wall is a short story revealing many elements related to life and struggles. They are emphasised in direct quotes in the story, such as: “Men perhaps, should you be a woman” or “If freedom exists”¹. These quotes reflect the issues Virginia Woolf encountered when the inequality between men and women was still an issue affecting women who wanted to evolve besides their inherited duties, such as doing the chores, being mothers and being good wives. They were discussed in the author's essays as well. In *A Room of One's Own*, the professional discrepancy between men and women was observed and highly criticised: “Few women even now have been graded at the universities; the great trials of the professions, army and navy, trade, politics and diplomacy have hardly tested them. They remain even at this moment almost unclassified”². The symbol of the mark on a wall was engaged in reflecting this aspect: “There is no mark on the wall to measure the precise height of women”³.

Nonetheless, the mark on the wall would symbolise balance, equality and intellectual freedom. It can be viewed as one possible solution explored and proposed by Virginia Woolf to anyone who might need order in their thoughts. Her story, *The Mark on the Wall*, centres on inner thoughts, leading towards universal topics such as gender

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Mark on the Wall*, UK, Hogarth Press, 1919, p. 6.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1935, pp. 128-129.

³ *Ibidem*.

and the voice of women, the understanding of nature and the nature of humans, and the concern of finding a direction for oneself.

The purpose of the present paper is to follow a critical reading of the story through close reading and symbolic interpretation, focusing on the last part of it and including an overall view of the story. We suggest that the last part of the story reveals two main symbols that reflect a possible image and understanding of the Self entity. The two symbols identified and connected here are the tree and the circle. They can both be associated with the idea of a centre and content. In this case, the specific content we refer to is psychological content.

Regarding Virginia Woolf's reflections on selfhood, self-consciousness, or awareness, her essays are strongly connected with engaging symbolisation and literary means to explore the inner struggles of humans and the way people develop their understanding of inwardness. Therefore, we focus on her essays: *Montaigne*, *The Death of the Moth* and *A Room of One's Own*.

Montaigne reveals Woolf's fascination with the imprint of the self through the language of art, namely her literature. The French philosopher Michel Montaigne was her initial source of inspiration when developing her method of self-writing. Several studies reveal this connection between Montaigne's philosophy and her creative path, and we want to show that Virginia Woolf not only claimed a feminist identity in her essays and writings but also that her modernist aesthetic reveals culture through high forms of awareness. Exploring Montaigne's essays and Walter Pater's writings led Woolf towards the challenge of expressing her inner self through her writings⁴. The following quotes from her essay, *Montaigne*, demonstrate how consciousness is at first an issue referred to as an aspect of the natural world and person. The connected difficulty then creates the narrative mode, expressing self-knowledge as a narrative voice: "For beyond the difficulty of communicating oneself, there is the supreme difficulty of being oneself"⁵.

The existential dilemma of the modernist writer was, according to Woolf, the consciousness of a self that cannot be silenced. On the contrary, the modernist writer would use the power of language to narrate valuable echoing modes of self-consciousness: "Montaigne teaches Woolf that the essayist does not condescend or tell others how to live their lives, but rather traces the flexibility of identity and its ability to reflect self-consciousness in the narrative"⁶. Examples of these echoing modes are traceable in the present short story analysed. Through metaphoric language, the narrator envisions the image of the fish to express the 'loudness' of thoughts that should reach the surface of the world. The first instance presents the contrast between outward and inward realities: "Yes, one could imagine a very pleasant world. A quiet spacious world [...] a world which one could slice with ones thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the water-lilies". Thus, the ideal flow of thoughts would continue their way in a gentle and mild manner. It is suggested that this evolving pace requires a 'clean' environment, namely clean waters, so the fish would see the stems and

⁴ Dudley M. Marchi, *Virginia Woolf Crossing the Borders of History, Culture, and Gender: The Case of Montaigne, Pater, and Gournay*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 34(1), 1–30, 1997, p. 15.

⁵ Virginia Woolf. *The Common Reader*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1948, p. 86.

⁶ Beth C. Rosenberg, *The Essays*. In Anne E. Fernald (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf* (pp. 277-290), Oxford Handbooks UK, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 283.

would not be disturbed by any intricacies from the surface. The world has to be ‘quiet’ to allow thoughts reveal themselves and be traceable. Unfortunately, as the quote indirectly suggests, the world can never be totally and continuously quiet. Thus, the thoughts must persist in intensity to create their course at the surface: “I like to think of the fish balanced against the stream like flags blown out”. This second echoing mode in the story reflects the harshness of reality. The parallel between imagined instances and reality mirrors the balance between imagined Self-images and real ones.

These modes reflected by Virginia Woolf through her writings turn out to be the inner self in its psychological and aesthetic forms⁷. Since they were meant to be accessed by any ‘common reader’, her essays and writings project moments of intimacy that catch the attention of the reader through the cultural access they offer: “In writing choose the common words; avoid rhapsody and eloquence-yet, it is true, poetry is delicious; the best prose is that which is most full of poetry”⁸.

The Death of the Moth continues the trend of using figurative language to portray the struggle against death. The sharp contrast between life and death and between light and dark mirrors the dialectic of modernist art. The mixture of opposing sides subdues thinking to find solutions or answers to issues. Surprisingly, throughout this essay, the reader first faces the observer's emotional challenge and then the moth's situation. The rapid evolution of events forces the subjective narrator, “I”, to decide. Choosing between interfering or staying passive in the course of someone's life, the moth, in this case, implies real pressure and concrete action. The symbolic layer of the essay thus creates two levels of reference: the metaphysical and the literary. The first level questions the nature of life and death. The observer in the essay has doubts about whether to help the moth because the consequences of offering such help are unknown. The second level strikes through the symbolism of the chosen object, the pencil: “I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself [...] I laid the pencil down again”⁹. These levels portray the way in which power flows out from the inside, with the last successful effort of the moth to right itself symbolising inner will and the suggestive solution available to people, namely writing in this case which is the artist's case. Pencil writing and writing itself are outer activities, but placed in the hands of anyone, they can empower the person to express themselves inwardly. For Woolf, the discovery and practice of essay writing helped to nurture her refinement as a novelist¹⁰.

A Room of One's Own can be viewed as a metaphor asserting the personal and narrative voice of the author Virginia Woolf. Thinking, cultivating consciousness, and expressing true feelings and thoughts are the main targeted actions recommended by this essay. Creating a room of one's own reflects Virginia Woolf's claim for women's status and part of the culture of the time and of all times¹¹. At the same time, it illustrates critical convictions regarding culture and consciousness. According to her essay, reading and writing are the necessary tools for developing an educated mind and for attaining

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 278.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1948, p. 89.

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth: and other Essays*, USA, Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1942, p. 5.

¹⁰ Beth C. Rosenberg, *The Essays*. In Anne E. Fernald (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf* (pp. 277-290), Oxford Handbooks UK, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 278.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

‘intellectual freedom’: “So as long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters”; “Poetry depends on intellectual freedom”¹². Her pursuit of the truth lay in the acts of reading and writing: “I truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth? Thus provided, thus confident and enquiring, I set out in the pursuit of truth”¹³. The essay anticipates the evolving material culture as well as the way in which it affects all layers of society and precisely the education and the writer’s opportunities: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”¹⁴. This famous statement resonates with the present state of society, where possessing a laptop or mobile phone is necessary for anyone who desires access to information and education. Thus, material culture is part of the cultural consumption phenomenon. The concept of consumption came to be studied as an acknowledged part of every layer of human life. A chronological perspective of the evolution of studies and sources related to material culture can be found in *Handbook of Material Culture* (2006), edited by Christopher Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Küchler, Michael Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer.

Once we mentioned and highlighted in the author’s essays how consciousness is a central topic in Woolf’s critical approaches towards society, life issues, and art-related aspects, we focus on the process of thinking because there are recurrent mentions of thinking during the last part of the story analysed in this analysis. The narrator creates this environment of thinking through interior monologue intertwined with the stream of consciousness. The interior monologue is reflected through several repetitions of the personal pronoun “I” and the upcoming connected paragraphs describing the narrator’s feelings, ideas, and views about life: “I understand Nature’s game [...] Indeed, now that I fixed my eyes upon it, I feel I have grasped a plank in the sea”¹⁵.

The moment this first-person narrator shifts the interest to new thoughts or new aspects that have suddenly risen in mind, the text is marked by an ellipsis, and this new flow of thoughts comes. Through interior monologue, the author shows the nature of the narrator’s speech and “nature” becomes the issue tackled within this part. As the narrator’s flow of thoughts emerges, we suggest that readers are shown a psychological game of meanings. “Nature’s game” is, on the one hand, the way we understand the environment and its rules. On the other hand, it is how we choose to understand or view the nature of things and human beings’ nature. A possible solution to understanding the game suggested in the story is “by looking at a mark on the wall”¹⁶.

Placed under the spectrum of the unknown in the beginning, the mark on the wall turns out to be a snail in the end. The shell of the snail hypnotises the viewer with its circular shape and its brown-coloured nuances. The illusion of the infinite course portrayed on its shell seems to transcend the limits of reality. Virginia Woolf asserted in one of her essays precisely this transcendence or immersion into one’s imagination, but considering the real-connected factor, namely order: “Movement and change are the essence of our being [...] fling out the wildest nonsense, and follow the most fantastic

¹² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1935, pp. 160-163.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Mark on the Wall*, UK, Hogarth Press, 1919, p. 8.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

fancies without caring what the world does or thinks or says. For nothing matters except life; and, of course, order”¹⁷.

At a symbolical level related to the shell of a snail, order resides in its centre. The hypnotic course of the shell has a centre, namely, a starting point. We suggest that the state of consciousness might be the starting point when thinking of humans’ inner evolution because the narrator talks about the fleeting nature of life: “Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one’s hair!”¹⁸. Still, when facing it, a stable point can always guide the narrator throughout life, ‘the mark on the wall’ symbolically leading to Self-images. Besides associating the mark with the symbol of the circle, this mark is filled with essence, which can be viewed as the essence of a person’s self. The self is described here as “something real”¹⁹. We suggest that the expression of conscious thought is, first, the inner voice and then, the outward reveal of it. Thus, the formation of the Self, and implicitly the becoming of the person, is traced through these conscious thoughts and queries that we read in the story throughout the last part.

The abstract entity of the Self implies many layers, and I will mention just a few, such as psychological, ontological, existential, and social. The view that the entity of the Self is an archetype can be traced back to Carl Gustav Jung, the 20th-century psychoanalyst who defined and described archetypes for the first time in his study *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1968): “The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear”²⁰. This definition highlights that the term ‘archetype’ refers to content already present in an individual’s mind and that each consciousness evolves differently, being essentially individual. One might see a contradiction in this, and indeed, many scholars have claimed that there is insufficient scientific information in Jung’s theory, but our interest is the resolution of the existence of archetypes, i.e., the fact that they reveal themselves along with consciousness. This means that the unconscious is a real part of a person’s inwardness, and its contents reveal themselves in one way or another.

Any approach to understanding any archetype also leads to the notion of the symbol. Many scholars interchange the terms ‘archetype’ and ‘symbol’ since both nouns offer insightful meanings. Juan Eduardo Cirlot explained in *A Dictionary of Symbols* (1971) the valences of symbolism and the differences between the mentioned terms: “the symbol and the archetype, we might say that the latter is the mythical and merely human aspect of the former, whereas a strict system of symbols could exist even without human consciousness, since it is founded upon a cosmic order”²¹. The basic conclusion we draw from these explanations is that an archetype can be discovered through the recurrent

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, USA, Harcourt Brace & World, 1967, p. 22.

¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Mark on the Wall*, UK, Hogarth Press, 1919, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

²⁰ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Translated by R. F. C. Hull; 2nd edition, New York, Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 5.

²¹ Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Translated by Jack Sage, London, Routledge, 1971, p. XXXVI.

symbols and their significance. Thus, our analysis reveals ways of envisioning the Self archetype through all the symbols identified as part of the literary work.

It is worth noting the fact that Carl Gustav Jung analysed the Self archetype and described the main symbol of this archetype, namely the image of the mandala: “But the mandala is a symbol of individuation”²². Individuation refers to the process through which individuals acknowledge their psychological self²³. The concept of ‘mandala’ has its origins in Indian culture and is represented as a circular shape. It is the symbol of the universe, totality and psychological self-equilibrium: “1. Hindu and Buddhist art: any of various designs symbolising the universe, usually circular; 2. Psychology: such a symbol expressing a person's striving for unity of the self”²⁴. All the representative pictures within a mandala are symbols relevant to understanding an individual's evolution. The point here is that besides the monumental work of Carl Gustav Jung, there are studies that confirm the existence of this inner entity. Edward F. Edinger observed that the Self is “the archetype of wholeness” because the Self is understood as wholeness and unity from a Jungian perspective: “Jung's most basic and far-reaching discovery is the collective unconscious or archetypal psyche. [...] This is the central archetype or archetype of wholeness which Jung has termed the Self”²⁵. Carol S. Pearson, meanwhile, emphasised the abiding nature of archetypes: “Jung described archetypes as deep and abiding patterns in the human psyche that remain powerful and present over time”²⁶. More recent approaches follow the patterns of archetypes as the driving force of one's life: “Archetypes are the new language of power. [...] Archetypes speak to us in a language of myths and symbols, perfectly suited to a society that has become fluent in high-tech code, instant messages, and Twitter-speak. [...] Archetypes are the keys to our personal power”²⁷.

Coming back to the circular shell that is revealed at the end of the story, there is the consistent part of the final image of the snail, namely “the tree”, which is also frequently mentioned in the ellipsis passages where the technique of stream of consciousness flourishes into symbolical imagery and meditations on life. The tree becomes a symbol of centrality due to several reasons. Firstly, there is its process of growth that is slow-paced and unknown, according to the narrator. This mirrors precisely the human being's transition from childhood into adulthood. The person's evolution comes along many years, following steps and stages. Thus, there is an apparent similarity between these processes of growth.

Additionally, the voice of the narrator's thoughts highlights the inner nature of this growth process. Even if one can see the physical growth of trees and humans, one cannot see their inward growth. The tree is personified here since the narrator insists on

²² Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Translated by R. F. C. Hull; 2nd edition, New York, Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 35.

²³ *Ibidem*, 275.

²⁴ Collins English Dictionary. (n.d.). *Mandala*. In Collins dictionary.com. Retrieved August 30, 2023, from https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/mandala#google_vignette

²⁵ Edward F. Edinger, & Carl Gustav Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, *Ego and Archetype: Individuation and the Religious Function of the Psyche*, New York, Putnam for the C.G. Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, 1973, p. 3.

²⁶ Carol Pearson, *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By*. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1989, p. 6.

²⁷ Caroline Myss, *Archetypes*, USA, Hay House, 2013, p. XIII-XIV.

the trees' indifference towards humans: "and trees grow, and we don't know how they grow. For years and years they grow, without paying any attention to us"²⁸. This indifference informs on the unique growth rhythm for both trees and humans because the way they "bloom" is different.

Secondly, towards the end of the story, the narrator mentions one specific tree, "this tree"²⁹ and this passage from general to particular is the important detail here. Any tree has a "delicious ooze of sap"³⁰. This might be a biblical reference to the Tree of Knowledge. The symbols of the Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge are part of the Christian culture and faith. The fall of man from paradise is well remembered among Christian parishioners due to Adam and Eve's choice in Heaven, namely between eternal life and knowledge of good and evil. The outcome of disobedience is considered man's primordial sin due to lust. The fact that fruit from trees were food for the first human beings has a double significance. On the one hand, it is clearly emphasised that human needs to feed their body and mind to survive. Thus, both spiritual and physical food is necessary. On the other hand, at the symbolic level, the essence of human life lies within a tree, The Tree of Life. Nonetheless, the specific tree at the end of this story, "this tree", might reflect the centre of the narrator's Self due to its positive aura: "It is full of peaceful thoughts, happy thoughts, this tree"³¹. "Peaceful" and "happy" are two elements describing balance. To balance oneself is one of the quests of human beings throughout life.

Therefore, we can view the tree, and implicitly its sap, as the symbol of the centre of oneself. The narrator's symbolic centre, "this tree", is reflected within the mark on the wall. The reflection proves itself true since both the physical eye of the narrator and the eye of his/her mind keep returning to the mark. The beginning of the quest was the focus on the mark, and it continued to be the reference point all along the story: "and if you can't be comforted [...] think of the mark on the wall"³². Moreover, the image of this reflection is doubled by the fish metaphor. The balance of the fish "against the stream"³³ symbolises a person's fight with life. Questions and meditations about life, its fast pace, and its meanings are found throughout the story. In the first part of it, the narrator meditates on the mystery and uncontrollable way of life: "O dear me, the mystery of life! [...] Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life [...] all so haphazard..."³⁴. Then the narrator figuratively fights life: "But what I really resent is that she resents me-life being an affair of attack and defence after all"³⁵. Survival requires fighting, similar to Self-balance, which requires effort. They both mean struggle, and the present story is about the struggle to identify the mark on the wall and, at a symbolic level, to gradually develop Self-consciousness with patience even when "moving, falling, slipping, vanishing"³⁶ interruptions appear. Self-balance and Self-consciousness are considered complementary parts in completing the life cycle, mirrored in this case through the shell

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Mark on the Wall*, UK, Hogarth Press, 1919, p. 9.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 2-3.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

of the snail. The previously mentioned ‘order’ from Virginia Woolf’s essay reflects this balance, including both parts.

In conclusion, we have shown how these two symbols, the tree and the circle, reflect a possible image of the Self entity. Interior monologue and stream of consciousness are the literary techniques used by the author to shape the inner quest, and literary devices such as ellipsis, metaphor, personification, and imagery complete it in a meaningful manner. The mark on the wall is not only an image that reflects a vision, a spot, or an illusionary creation of the mind. It is the image of the real centre of balance that can be found only within one’s inwardness. Outer factors and outer life are just challenges during one’s inner evolution, and embracing development requires awareness. Thus, through its symbols and imagery, the story reveals this exercise of reading that might contribute to increasing self-knowledge.

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