

## **PLACE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S AND GRAHAM SWIFT'S NOVELS**

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*Abstract: Place is, from the point of view of the emotional experience, not a static element in Woolf's and Swift's novels. Places are the result of the characters' perception, as they add their own emotional states to the description of places. The seaside, the home, and nature, do not exist without the psychological associations of the characters. Place becomes part of the character's personality. Various places such as the city of London or the seaside are all connected to points of perception (according to Mieke Bal), which are seen by characters who observe and describe them. The paper proposes a classification of places in Swift's novels, while looking at how he follows Woolf's footsteps. The classification includes: places in the real lives of characters, places that function as backdrops for the various emotional issues characters deal with, the home as a closed space seen as a place of isolation, and nature as a place associated with issues of independence and danger. Nature, which is also sometimes a place of imagination, is often, like for the Romantic poets, a place characters are strongly connected with their surroundings and with other people. In conclusion, places mirror the characters' usual dilemmas related to relationships and communication with others and with themselves. Place also contributes to the creation of the lyrical aspect in Woolf and Swift's novels.*

**Keywords:** *Romanticism, lyricism, Bal, emotions, relationships*

Since Woolf's and Swift's novels focus on inner perception, most of the places will be seen from the characters' perspective. However, some realistic description will be needed at times. We may speak about scenes where the place is brought into the foreground. The focus of the characters' reflections is on the particular place. Through their reflections, they describe their setting. Their emotional state is influenced by the place; during such moments, place becomes highly significant as it is connected with the characters' emotional state. For instance, in the scene where Clarissa Dalloway walks through London at the beginning of the novel, her view of the city is influenced by the way she feels at that moment.

This simultaneity may be found in *The Waves* where the characters' emotions follow the rhythm of the waves. Mulas (2002-2005: 76) believes that the rhythm of Bernard's states of mind echo those of the waves (the setting): "despair (the crash), renewal of strength (calm), desire for confrontation (the re-formation)". Bernard may be at times more anxious, more agitated or more calm. He expresses these states of mind not only in his reflections but also at the level of the novel's style. At this level, the use of rhythm reflects emotional experience. Moreover, we can speak about a gradation of Bernard's experience including the previously mentioned states of mind. Bernard goes from states of mind such as despair, anxiety, agitation to calm. Also, in *The Waves*, the story's presentation begins with a description of the sea at various times of the day (which echoes characters' phases of life: their going through various ages, from childhood, teenage years, adulthood) before each new section and before the inner monologues. The story's presentation resembles that of a play. The dramatic mode brings the place towards the beginning of every set of lyrical monologues. Here the place serves as an explanation, so that the reader can situate the characters. However, it is not only the place as a physical space which is suggested here, but also a poetic mood. The space is presented through the emotional states of the characters.

Even if the descriptions which are situated at the beginning of the story's presentation are regarded as written in a style close to the traditional narrative, the exposition is, according to Sternberg, just the beginning of the fabula. It may or may not also be the beginning of

siuzhet (or story). (Onega 1996: 103) In other words, the descriptions before the lyrical monologues found in *The Waves* are not necessarily the beginning of the fabula. They just serve as a place and time reference. Yet the sea is not always present in the characters' story as an external place. It is there to highlight the moods of characters, such as Bernard. For instance, in the part about the characters' childhood, Bernard uses his lyrical monologue with images connected to the sea when he shows his enthusiasm in his friendship with Susan:

Now,' said Bernard, 'let us explore. There is the white house lying among the trees. It lies down there ever so far beneath us. We shall sink like swimmers just touching the ground with the tips of their toes. We shall sink through the green air of the leaves, Susan. We sink as we run. The waves close over us, the beech leaves meet above our heads. There is the stable clock with its gilt hands shining. Those are the flats and heights of the roofs of the great house. There is the stable-boy clattering in the yard in rubber boots. That is Elvedon.

He is very young, playful and full of life. After some more games, when he feels relaxed, and perhaps a bit tired, once again he uses images related to the sea to convey his mood:

'Now we are safe. Now we can stand upright again. Now we can stretch our arms in this high canopy, in this vast wood. I hear nothing. That is only the murmur of the waves in the air. That is a wood-pigeon breaking cover in the tops of the beech trees. The pigeon beats the air; the pigeon beats the air with wooden wings.'

Even other characters recognize this characteristic of Bernard's, of his mood's associations with images related to the sea. During the same time of the characters' childhood, Neville judges Bernard as follows:

'Where is Bernard?' said Neville. 'He has my knife. We were in the tool-shed making boats, and Susan came past the door. And Bernard dropped his boat and went after her taking my knife, the sharp one that cuts the keel. He is like a dangling wire, a broken bell-pull, always twangling. He is like the seaweed hung outside the window, damp now, now dry. He leaves me in the lurch; he follows Susan; and if Susan cries he will take my knife and tell her stories. [...].'

Here place becomes part of the character's personality. Neville compares Bernard to something that is part of the sea, to the seaweed, "damp now, now dry". By this, Neville tries to say that Bernard seems to be changing. This is a reference to the kind of changing identity, witnessed in its process of development, which is found in lyric poetry. The sea which is described before the lyrical monologues begin in *The Waves* is not just a simple place, but a place which is relevant to the characters' personality. The choice of the sea as a place is not haphazard. The characters' states of mind and their personalities are compared to the way the sea behaves or to things related to the sea, such as the waves or the seaweed. Setting is not limited to a certain place where the story occurs. This has been illustrated by both Davies and Mulas in their focus on the waves and their connection with the rhythm of the characters' moods. The way the characters reflect on space brings to mind the way the Romantic poets believed that imagination shapes reality. For instance, Clarissa, in her walk in London at the beginning of the novel, is very enthusiastic and this causes her to perceive the city in a very

bright light at the respective moment. Her vitality is transferred to her description of the already crowded city. For Lucrezia, London is full of strangers. The nature in the city's parks is not as beautiful as the gardens in her town in Italy, and she feels isolated there. The characters are like the Romantic poets who perceive reality in an active way and shape it in a creative, imaginative way. The characters add something of themselves to their vision on the place. In that way, characters create their own construction of space as in *Waterland*, where the Fens are a place of fairy-tales for the young characters in the novel.

There are various places in Woolf's novels. These places range from the city of London, to Jacob's room in the novel with the same title, to the open sea space in *The Voyage Out* to Bourton in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and others. Places can be either physical or imaginary. The latter tend to be more like atmosphere, accompanied by certain feelings characters experience when their memories take them back to a certain place or when their reflections create for the reader a certain setting. Readers learn something about the characters who describe these places, about their present state of mind.

There are several kinds of places in Swift's novels. First, there are places in the real lives of characters. These places may be represented by the city of London and by nature, etc. Characters have various reactions to these places. As a result, these places are presented through a projection of their emotional states. By looking at the descriptions of these places, readers find out about the characters' states of mind. Once the characters who reflect are found in a certain place, readers are suggested a certain atmosphere for these reflections. Places will always come with a certain association for Swift's readers: houses will be associated with isolation and misunderstandings, and the workplace with a refuge from family problems, with a process of finding oneself and with a need and possibility of solving one's dilemmas. Nature involves a need to connect with other people and with nature itself. When they are in a certain place, the characters find themselves either isolated, connected to others or attempting to connect to others. Places function as backdrops for the various emotional issues characters deal with. Real-life places are never described as removed from the present state of mind of the reflective characters, so that characters experience closeness to these places or feel isolated from them. The state of isolation will be expressed by showing the characters in their homes where they deal with family problems. Several characters feel isolated in their own homes, due to the misunderstandings in their families. Prentis, George Webb, the characters in *Ever After*, William in *The Sweetshop Owner*, who dies alone in his own home waiting for his daughter, are such examples. Prentis feels isolated in his own house since communication with his family is strained. He is preoccupied with reading his father's war memoir and its validity. Meanwhile, his son is in conflict with him. For Prentis, the house is a place of inner retreat, a place of his solitary reflections and dilemmas. It is also a place for conflictual family relationships. On the one hand, he manages to reflect in peace at times, while on the other hand he is not understood in his search for truth by his family. In his home, Prentis cannot reconcile his own private dilemmas with his life within the family. The connections with his family are broken. He finds a place of refuge in his office, where he communicates with his boss on the subject that concerns him the most, on the truth about his father. George Webb ends up in conflict with his wife who leaves him and the relationship with his daughter is not too good for some years. The home is a place of not being understood, for violent conflicts, for break-ups in *The Light of Day*. This holds for him as well as for Sarah. Characters fail to connect or to form honest relationships in their homes. Bob and Kristina establish a temporary connection in a place which is not a home; it is just an apartment, a temporary home where they find refuge from the eyes of the others. For the characters in *Last Orders*, various places where they travel to are an occasion to feel

connected to one another. William Chapman is isolated in his home from both wife and daughter for years. The house remains for him a place of isolated reflections and a place where he is alone until his death. He views his house in terms of objects, of things which his wife invests in. By focusing on this aspect, William projects his feelings about love and marriage as a bargain: his attention is drawn to the materialism of his wife when he is in the house. His place of refuge is his sweetshop, which was in fact a gift from his wife. There William feels at ease; it is a place where he works, yet he feels there more at home than in his own house. Usually the home as a closed space is a place of isolation for Swift's characters. Such places harken back to Jacob's room from the novel with the same title by Woolf. The living characters remember Jacob, who died during the war, when they see his empty room. The idea of isolation as connected to houses, or rooms, is underlined. There is no possible communication among Jacob and the characters who look for his memory in his room. In *Ever After*, for Bill Unwin, the interior space is a space of reflections. As he sees it, interior space is not significant, as his reflections take him into other literary texts. At other times, in his memories, the closed space is that of the theatre where his wife's shows happened. Such space, though closed and artificial, prompts one to imagine something more than is there. Closed spaces show how characters feel disconnected from others, from public life. Houses and other closed spaces are places of dilemmas, of searches for answers, of trying to understand one's past, of dealing with one's memories. In *Tomorrow*, Paula escapes from a closed space where she thinks about the following day into places in her memories, into outside places such as the seaside. She does have a strong connection with her family, yet at the present time she is alone with her dilemmas regarding what and how to talk to her children the following day. Closed places show a distinctive trait of Swift's characters: their solitude, which is either a preference or something they just have to deal with due to the difficult times in their lives. For Paula, the closed space reveals a momentary wish to be with her own thoughts in order to reflect on what to tell her twins the following day. For William Chapman, the closed space shows a problem he has had throughout his life: his loneliness and lack of real communication with his family. Nature is a place associated with both issues of independence and danger. In *Waterland*, it is in nature that love stories begin, that murders occur, that abortions happen. In *Tomorrow*, at the seaside, Paula recalls how she felt that her children were growing and about to become independent. In *Learning to Swim*, a short story, the young boy of a couple who are always quarrelling comes to feel independent when he learns to swim, feeling that he can swim away from his parents. The seaside is also seen as a place of happy memories and understanding among characters. In *Last Orders*, the seaside is seen as a place for friendship, for being together, as Jack's memory gathers the group of friends there. In the past, for Jack's family, the seaside had been a place where they wished they felt together, but instead there were lots of misunderstandings. Jack's wife does not wish to see Margate, as she remembers mostly the bad parts. In *Shuttlecock*, it is the place where Prentis becomes reconciled with his family. The seaside is a place where characters wish they were together: this is the case of Jack and Ellie in *Wish You Were Here*. The couple remember the time when Jack was at the seaside and he sent a postcard to Ellie with the words in the title of the novel. The seaside is also a place for reconciliation in *Wish You Were Here* and *Shuttlecock*. The London suburbs are a place where characters feel isolated, where they walk trying to find answers to their dilemmas. George Webb and Prentis walk about the London suburbs in this way. George walks throughout the suburbs trying to follow the characters in his detective case. The walk is for him an occasion to try to understand the dilemmas of Bob and Kristina, but also of Sarah's and of his own. Second, there are places which make up characters' imagined scenes about other characters. For instance, George Webb imagines a

scene where Kristina and Bob are together, in nature. By choosing this place, George Webb uses nature in order to show the two characters feeling very close to each other. In nature, they are free to be themselves, away from the others. Prentis starts imagining very vivid scenes from his father's war memoir. He finds that his father describes very vividly those scenes of his escape, from the time when he runs away in a forest, and when he feels a very strong connection with nature. Nature remains, even as a place of imagination, a place where characters are strongly connected with their surroundings and with other people. The Romantic idea of agony and of reconciling private and public life through the connection with another are visible here. Third, there is lyrical atmosphere, which is created by characters' projections of their moods but also by means of intertextual references. The reader will apply her knowledge of past literary works to those moments and she will experience the atmosphere as more intensely poetic if the intertextual references are to poems by Romantic poets, such as Keats. In *The Sweetshop Owner*, in William's reflections on his past are linked to the idea that it is things that remain. He is alone, with no possibility of communication with his wife and daughter. William reflects about this in his own home. The place becomes less significant as an external reality. The fact where the character is situated at such times is less important than the atmosphere of his reflections. In *Ever After*, Bill Unwin's place of reflections loses its external reality. Readers are no longer interested in where Unwin is when he reflects on his life by using plays such as *Hamlet*. The place he is in looks like the place of theatre, literature, poetry. It is imaginary, not real. Fourth, there are places presented in a realistic manner, such as the streets of London, with precise directions. However, even these instances may be considered to belong in fact to the first category of places. Realistic descriptions of London streets may be interpreted emotionally by the characters. In fact, this is the case with George Webb in the novel *The Light of Day*. He gives a very detailed description of the suburbs, yet he does this since he is a detective, concerned with details at all times. Through his description of the suburbs, he shows us this side of his personality. He always pays attention to details: to the details about the persons in his cases. His view of the outside world makes no exception.

According to Bal, places are linked to certain points of perception. A point of perception may be a character, who is situated in a space, observes it, and reacts to it. For instance, in *Last Orders*, Jack's friends and family reflect on memories of their holidays at the seaside, in Margate. Margate becomes a place of memories, of reproaches, of reflections. Characters in Woolf and Swift offer their own perception on the space of action, as they feel isolated in their home, on the city streets or when they attempt to connect with the others in nature. They always offer a reaction to places. An anonymous point of perception can also dominate the presentation of certain places. (Bal 1997: 133) This is not usually the case in Woolf and Swift's novels. It is only in *The Waves* that the description of places is found before the lyrical monologues begin. Those descriptions are not attributed by the writer to a character specifically. Readers, however, can infer that those descriptions could belong to any of the characters or to all the characters as a group since information on the characters' age is given. In the other novels, however, the descriptions are given as a result of the way they are experienced by characters. Bal mentions the important role of characters' senses (sight, hearing, touch) in "the perceptual representation of space" (1997: 133). Readers will experience the descriptions of places and spaces through the eyes of the characters. For the characters, certain places are linked to certain memories and to certain psychological issues they deal with.

Bal's explanations and definitions for space also hold for the use of place in Swift's novels. Places in Swift's novels are the result of the characters' perception, as they add their

own emotional states to the description of places. The places in Swift's novels, such as the seaside, the home, and nature, do not exist without the psychological associations of the characters. Various places such as the city of London or the seaside are all connected to points of perception, which are seen by characters who observe and describe them. The reader visualizes the place and sees characters delivering their lyrical monologues in these places. The places are not just external descriptions. They will be associated by readers just like by characters with certain happenings, with certain memories of the characters. The characters' descriptions of the places include the Romantic use of imagination, as well as elements of confession. The focus of the narrative is on the characters' reflections on their memories, and the other element which is included is a place which is significant for these memories. For instance, memories of Margate in the lyrical monologues of the characters' in *Last Orders* remain very strongly connected to the seaside. No other details occupy the attention of the writer in the narrative at such points. Poetic atmosphere is connected to places due to their associations with Romantic tropes. Water and nature are Romantic tropes in lyric poetry.

Spaces, in Bal's terms, can be a frame of action, they can remain in the background or they may become an object of a presentation:

Spaces function in a story in different ways. On the one hand, they are 'only' a frame, a place of action. In this capacity a more or less detailed presentation will lead to a more or less concrete picture of that space. The space can also remain entirely in the background. In many cases, however, space is 'thematized': it becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes an 'acting place' rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula, and the fabula becomes subordinate to the presentation of space. (Bal 1997: 136)

The suburbs of London, the seaside, and nature itself become a frame of action in Swift's novels. George Webb and Prentis walk about the city as they feel isolated in their own dilemmas, trying to find answers to their questions. The seaside is a frame of action for characters' reflections on issues of independence and in their attempt to connect to other characters. Nature is a frame for trying to achieve unity with one's surroundings and for trying to establish a connection to another character, to form a close relationship. Spaces such as one's home remain in the background at the time of reflecting on the past. This is the case with Paula, William Chapman, Bill Unwin, and Prentis. When inner reality takes over, the place where they reflect is no longer significant.

Places are always presented through the perspective of the characters who share their lyrical monologues. They are not only frames for action. They will always be associated with a character's experience. Sometimes space remains in the background because the reader's attention is drawn to the emotional states a character's experiences, to the language he uses, to the narrative he presents, to the relationships between characters and so on. This is the case with the reflections of Paula, William Chapman, Bill Unwin. These characters are sometimes so absorbed in their inner reality that the place where they are when they reflect is no longer important. Otherwise, the place is presented like a kind of projection of the characters' emotional states, whether the place is in the real world or merely imagined.

Nature remains the place of the Romantic idea of agony, where the characters feel in harmony with their surroundings and also with their families or loved ones. The idea of Romantic agony can be found in poetry such as Shelley's. Shelley, as a Romantic poet, wishes to become one with nature:

Like so many romantics, Shelley suffers from the tragic attempt to reconcile being with nature. Part of the “romantic agony” involves the desire of the poet to not only represent nature in a poem, but to become nature itself. Like the epic struggle with time, the struggle to unite with nature becomes doomed to failure for the human. [...] In “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley imagines himself one of the infinite leaves blowing in the west wind of autumn that precedes the winter. The leaves of autumn that fall to the ground, mixing with the frozen dormancy of winter, grow to new life in the spring. Shelley yearns for his poetry to take part of the same natural cycle of death and life, life and resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

The father of Prentis from *Shuttlecock* has a brief experience of merging with the forest during his moment of escape from being taken a war prisoner. A similar experience is shared by Septimus who feels part of nature during his moments of shell-shock, while he is walking in a London park. Such experience is felt during extreme situations, by characters whose perception is more acute than normal. Prentis also tries to form a bond with nature through the “piece of nature”, his hamster. The same suggestion of this attempt exists for the characters who start travelling: the characters in *Last Orders* or *Wish You Were Here*. They try to be in harmony with themselves, with their surroundings, especially with nature. Nature is, not without a reason, also a place of reconciliation with other characters. It offers peace of mind from all misunderstandings and dilemmas.

Lyrical atmosphere comes from the emotional states projected as an imaginary space by using poetic language or references to poetic texts. For drama, the poetic aspect is what retains the readers’ attention. For Unwin, the story of *Hamlet* has poetic implications. The poetic atmosphere is that of doubt and tragedy. Unwin tries to get over the death of his wife, while he doubts his own past and the intentions of the others. The place for his reflections is a hotel and the academic world, yet external place becomes less important once he starts living and reflecting in his own imagination.

Stereotypical combinations between space and event are called topoi (Bal). Special places are suited for a certain event and used in stereotypical combinations. Some combinations are specific to certain writers. What are the specific combinations in Swift’s novels between place and incidents? Some of these are seen in the reflections which are determined by the perception of certain places. The sea, for instance, can be an occasion to generate lyrical reflections or even epiphanies.

Time and space influence the rhythm of the narrative by means of their relationships:

The relationship between time and space is of importance for the narrative rhythm. When a space is presented extensively, an interruption of the time sequence is unavoidable, unless the perception of the space takes place gradually (in time) and can therefore be regarded as an event. (Bal 1997: 139)

In Swift’s novels, during descriptions, the time sequence is not necessarily interrupted but the focus is shifted from other aspects to the description. The description of place can be given in synchronization with, and as an effect of, the projection of the characters’ mental state. In such cases, the description of setting gains the features of an incident, as it replaces the description of an incident or becomes equivalent to the description of an incident in traditional novels. The closeness to the setting which a character may experience is thus

<sup>1</sup><http://masterworksbritlit.wordpress.com/2010/04/11/percy-shelley-and-ode-to-the-west-wind/>

highlighted by this synchronization of perception, along with its description and projection of the emotional state.

The reader visualizes the place where characters hold their lyrical monologues. This allows us to talk about the place of the present time of the story, from which the narrator goes back to reflect on various past issues. Afterwards, there are places where scenes from memories have occurred. Since an incident which is remembered is not the same as the incident which has actually occurred, the places in the memories are not exactly the same as the ones where the respective incidents or mental states have actually occurred. In this sense, a certain nostalgia for the past may be projected on the way certain characters perceive various incidents as they go back into the past and recall certain periods of time in their lives. Sometimes, it is a place which, because of its similarity with another place in the past, brings back memories of certain incidents associated with it. For instance, in *The Light of Day*, a certain day and date remind George of what happened some time ago on the same date. The place in this case is mixed with a certain atmosphere of nostalgia which triggers those memories. In this case, of course, the place in the past can be regarded as being modified by the mental state at the present time, which causes a different perception of the past, mixed with nostalgia and lyricism.

Emotional states are most frequently found in the lyrical mode. These emotional states can also be projected on the way a certain character perceives a place and then describes it. The lyrical mode present in the mental state will then be transferred to the description of the place, which is synchronized with the characters' emotional states. When characters are in a realistic state of mind, such as when they walk on the streets of London and when they follow certain directions, they perceive and describe the streets with great accuracy. This proves that Swift is concerned with both external life and with inner life. Of course, characters can be more or less realistic in the way they perceive reality. After all, reality is shown through their eyes. Sometimes, characters are concerned with aspects of inner life, of emotional states, of imagination, while other times they focus on real places and try to find their way through the streets of London.

Place serves thus as a dramatic and lyrical element for dramatic and lyric emotional states and their modes. Both incidents and emotional states may be regarded as dramatic and lyrical. Emotional states can become very intense and thus can be experienced as dynamic, even more so if they are projected on seemingly static elements such as descriptions of surroundings.

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