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Virginia Woolf's Realistic Art in *Between the Acts*

弗吉尼亚·伍尔夫《幕间》中的现实性艺术

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Synopsis

Mrs. Virginia Woolf, always under the focus of many critics, is generally acknowledged as a prolific modernist female writer in the history of British literature. All her life Woolf has subsequently dedicated to her readers a good number of novels, short stories, essays and literary criticism, all containing her distinguished and creative thoughts, which contribute a lot to the spiritual promotion of human beings. Devoting all her body and soul to art, Woolf is always in the process of perfecting her artistic creations. Woolf writes along with other modernist representatives at her time such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, Marcel Proust and T.S. Eliot, and to some extent, she is even more influential than her contemporary male writers. Among Woolf's novels, *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves* undoubtedly enjoy the most popularity, whereas *Between the Acts*, her last masterpiece, also creatively and wittily written, is unexpectedly underestimated. This paper aims to restate the significance of *Between the Acts*, as well as its historical and literary value. By analyzing the novel and connecting it to the historical background, Woolf's change in her art and her concern about social reality will be stressed. The survival of Woolf's art in wartime, reflected in this novel as the coexistence between harmony and discord and the survival of harmony in discord, has added complexity to Woolf's last novel and even makes it surpass all the previous ones in terms of Woolf's searching for a way out for her art.

This paper includes six parts. The introduction generalizes Woolf's life and her great contributions to the world literary circle. It also clarifies the purpose of writing this paper and the significance of this research.

Chapter One devotes itself to a brief review of the modernist time—the historical background concerning *Between the Acts*. Besides, the famous literary circle Bloomsbury is introduced, while its influence upon Woolf and her art is also revealed. It is worth mentioning that in her creation, Woolf's concern with form is as significant as her concern with content.

Chapter Two includes a detailed textual analysis on this novel. It focuses on how

art keeps its continuity in the discontinuous and fragmented life, revealing that it is the last time for Woolf, as a modernist writer, to struggle for keeping her modernist ideal.

Chapter Three discusses Woolf's "realistic art" through her innovation of form and artistic experimentation in *Between the Acts*, including the cubist structure of the novel, narrative techniques as well as carnivalesque phenomenon in it.

Chapter Four deals with the postmodernist elements in *Between the Acts*. The novel was written in the transitional period when modernism became faded and postmodernism was in its shaping. Woolf reluctantly admits the unavoidable invasion of social reality into her art, which, on the contrary, is quite easily accepted by the postmodernists, who have already embraced the reality for what it is.

The conclusion describes Woolf's physical and spiritual situation when writing *Between the Acts*. This part also analyzes the cause of Woolf's suicide and affirms the historical, social and artistic value of the novel.

Key Words: *Between the Acts* ; art; reality; discord; harmony

摘要

弗吉尼亚·伍尔夫（1882-1941）是英国文学史上一个杰出的现代主义多产女作家，历来受到评论家的极大关注。她毕生笔耕不辍，向她的读者奉献了大量的小说、短篇、散文随笔和文艺批评，每部作品无不闪烁着这位女作家思想的精髓和光辉。她的独特、伟大、富有创造性的思想，对净化人们的精神世界做出了巨大的贡献。伍尔夫将文学艺术的创新视为一生为之努力的事业，力图使自己的作品在艺术上达到尽善尽美。伍尔夫与她同时代的现代主义代表乔伊斯、福克纳、普鲁斯特、艾略特等人齐名，并从某种程度上来说比这些男作家更有影响力。在她的诸多长篇小说当中，《到灯塔去》、《达罗卫夫人》、《海浪》等无疑已成为意识流名篇，成为众多批评家研究的范本，然而，她的最后一部同样富有创造性的小说《幕间》却没有受到应有的关注。本文的目的在于重申《幕间》在伍尔夫的众多小说中的地位，同时强调《幕间》的历史意义和文学价值。通过对小说本身的细读和分析，并结合小说成书时，即二战时期的时代背景，揭示伍尔夫在此书中艺术表现手法的转变以及对社会现实的关注和担忧。伍尔夫本人在残酷的战争环境中深切地感受到艺术发展的艰难，这明显体现在《幕间》当中，展示了和谐与冲突同在、并在冲突中求生存的场景。因此，从这个意义上来说，《幕间》是一部复杂的小说，它超越了伍尔夫以往的所有小说作品，反映了伍尔夫为艺术寻求出路的决心。

本论文共分为六部分。绪论部分简单介绍了伍尔夫的生平及其对世界文坛的巨大贡献，并阐明本论文的写作目的和研究价值。

第一章回顾了英国现代主义小说的兴起，同时还介绍了当时著名的上流社会学术集团——布鲁姆斯伯里集团及其对伍尔夫艺术创作的影响。特别提到的是，在艺术创作中，伍尔夫对小说的形式与内容给予同样的关注。

第二章对小说《幕间》进行了详细的文本分析，论述了小说当中艺术怎样在现实的冲突中保持其和谐，揭示伍尔夫作为现代主义作家为维护她的艺术理念所做的最后努力。

第三章从小说形式方面实验性的改革来论证伍尔夫在《幕间》中的“现实性艺术”，分别从以下三个方面加以阐述：小说的立体主义结构、叙事技巧以及巴赫金式的“狂欢化”现象。

第四章重在发掘《幕间》中的后现代主义因素。由于这部小说完成于现代主义思潮日益衰退、后现代主义思潮逐渐兴起的过渡阶段，伍尔夫的作品也发生了转向，即在展示其艺术理念的同时，也越来越认识到社会现实因素对艺术的影响，这也是后现代主义者所坦然接受的事实。

结语部分简单介绍伍尔夫写《幕间》时的精神和身体状态，分析其自杀的原因，并肯定其遗作《幕间》在文学史上的历史、社会及艺术价值。

关键词：幕间；艺术；现实；冲突；和谐

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Introduction

As one of the most influential modernist writers of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf is generally considered as a forerunner of the Western feminist writer expert in the technique of stream of consciousness, and has won an unfailing popularity among critics. Nowadays, Woolf's works, literary commentaries, diaries and letters are still widely read and well researched. Moreover, the writer herself has also been much discussed, including her family, her marriage, her relationships with others, and even her sexual orientation, all of which have made great impact on her writings.

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 into a household which had a complicated history. Her father Leslie Stephen had married twice and Woolf was the daughter of his second wife Julia Duckworth. There were eight children in the Stephen family, including her half-brother George Duckworth, the son of Woolf's mother and her ex-husband, who once made unexpected sexual advances towards Woolf and had exerted bad influence on Woolf's adult sexual orientation. Vanessa and Thoby were both Woolf's dearest sister and brother. Vanessa was in common with Woolf in her enthusiasm on art, which made them quite intimate with each other. Woolf's elderly brother Thoby also greatly affected her in Bloomsbury Group, under the influence of which Woolf became enlightened and began to form her own idea about society as well as literary compositions. In this group, Woolf also met Leonard Woolf, who later became her husband. Unfortunately, Thoby soon died from typhoid fever following a visit to Greece, which was really a heavy blow to Woolf, and it is said that some of her works like *Jacob's Room* and *The Waves* are her mourning for her brother.

To some extent, Woolf should attribute her literary achievement to her father Leslie Stephen, for early in Woolf's childhood, her father had already communicated to her a passionate pleasure in literature, both by his habit of reading to the children and by his rich knowledge. Leslie had been a philosopher himself, who always encouraged his children freely to read everything in his library. One can see that Virginia Stephen is very much her father's daughter—"the atheism, the pride, the self-will, the ambition and the industry are all his" (Batchelor 4). Obviously Woolf loved her father and showed much closeness to him, despite the descriptions elsewhere in the memoir of

her father's tantrums.

Woolf's attitude towards her mother was really confusing. On the one hand, she lacked intimacy with her mother and considered her mother as "one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life" (Batchelor 6); on the other hand, she depicted her mother as a sacrifice for the family whose energies had been selfishly monopolized by her father, as in *To the Lighthouse*, a book faithfully memorizing her parents by creating the story of the Ramsay family. John Batchelor has indicated that:

Woolf's sensory and intuitive self is indeed connected with her mother's ghost, but that her literary intelligence, the part of her that ensured that she became a writer and thus ensured that we find ourselves in the late twentieth century reading and writing books about her, comes from her father. (7)

During her life Woolf suffered recurrent psychological collapse and made two suicide attempts, one by jumping from a window in 1904 and one by taking an overdose of veronal in 1913 (not including the occasion of her actual suicide in 1941). She experienced psychological illnesses many times from the death of her family members as well as friends, and suffered extreme stress following the publication of each of her major novels. Finally, she was plunged once more into a major psychological illness in 1940 and 1941 which claimed her life. Endowed with remarkable talent while tortured from psychological disturbances, Woolf had always been a mystery and the focus of the literary circle of London as well as the world. Without exception, those who had once met this female writer all considered her as "distinguished and graceful". The novelist and poet William Plomer once stated that Woolf was a very pleasant woman in daily life, however, when referring to literary composition, she would never surrender to the tradition and liked to stick to her own way of writing. The writer Christopher Isherwood regarded Woolf as "the writer of writers". He considered that Woolf's writing was very private and feminized, because "reading her book is like reading a letter, which is specially written for you" (Rosenbaum 158). The poet T. S. Eliot wrote in one of his article published in the magazine *Horizon* that Woolf had become, and was probably the only symbol of a pattern of culture which only existed in the aristocrat circle of Victorian age. Woolf

deserved all those honors posed on her, for she really devoted her whole life to her composition which few people could achieve. Besides, her wisdom and talent as well as her curiosity and sympathy on human beings also added to her achievement. Her husband Leonard Woolf directly called her a “genius”.

Woolf’s reputation was not at all limited to her novels. As a critic, she also attained many high evaluations. Among her commentaries, the series of *The Common Reader* and the four volumes of *Collected Essays* have become the most well-known representatives of her non-fictions. The critic who first commented on her in *Scrutiny* considered her an “extraordinary fineness and delicacy of perception” (Sharma 11). When Woolf’s *The Common Reader, Second Series* was published in 1932, Stephen Spender, himself a creative writer, considered Woolf’s essays “brilliantly and sharply critical” (qtd. in Sharma 12). In the year of her death, Louis Kronenberger, in estimating Virginia Woolf as critic, granted her “a superb responsiveness”, “an extraordinary sensibility”, and “both an aesthetic and historical sense” (qtd. in Sharma 12). Meanwhile, negative opinions about her criticism also appeared. Mark Schorer, reviewing *The Death of the Moth* the same year, found her lacking in objective values. Diana Trilling, in an otherwise keenly perceptive study of Virginia Woolf’s essays, found her incapable of appreciating greatness because of “the subjective basis of her literary attitudes” (Sharma 12). Anyway, Virginia Woolf’s claim to a significant place in the making of the modern novel and criticism has never been seriously questioned. There is no doubt that “as compared with Joyce and Proust, Woolf is more influential, championing a worthy cause as best as she could, though she was somehow restricted in her subjects and her scope of experience and representation” (Chang 383).

Recently, researches on Woolf mainly cover three fields: her feminist thought, homosexual orientation and the history of her mental illness. Woolf’s feminist thought has been so frequently mentioned and quoted that for many readers and critics alike, her name is a synonym for feminism and women’s writing. For instance, the famous British novelist and critic E. M. Forster saw feminism in all of Woolf’s works. He also “approved *A Room of One’s Own* and deplored the more overtly political and uncompromising *Three Guineas*” (瞿世镜 18), in both of which he found the writer’s “anger” towards the patriarchal society which deprived women of their rights and freedom. However, the truth was, Woolf herself and her own writings defied

classification into that very category. Woolf actually insisted upon “the difference between male and female perspectives, values and standards” (Marcus 214), therefore, Alex Zwerdling has suggested that “Woolf’s particular contribution to the women’s movement was to restore a sense of the complexity of the issues” (Marcus 215). Laura Marcus also observed that “elsewhere in her writing, she (Woolf) expresses a desire for a freedom from the tyranny of sex ... any emphasis ... laid consciously upon the sex of a writer is not only irritating but superfluous” (Marcus 214). Androgyny is a very notable part of Woolf’s gender conception, which can be traced back in Plato’s description of the legendary origin of human beings, and in her famous work *Orlando*, Woolf had put this idea of androgyny into practice. In general, “the basic principle of androgyny is that every human being consists of both male and female elements, and there is something of each in the other”, in short, “interaction is the core” (吕洪灵 192). Here, Woolf’s idea conforms to Carolyn Heibrun’s, who argues that “gender roles are not pre-ordained or socially imposed but in which individuals can freely choose their models of behavior and social lives” (qtd. in 吕洪灵 194). However, it doesn’t mean that androgyny is a denial of gender difference, instead, “this freedom of choice is impossible without difference—it is by difference that androgyny becomes significant” (吕洪灵 194). To sum up, Woolf advocated the conception of androgyny not only to stress harmony and integrity, but also for its application into her literary compositions, that is, “androgyny in literature represents the communicative cooperation of different gender consciousness in the mind of the writer” (吕洪灵 192).

Woolf’s work also invites endless psychoanalytic interpretations, partly because of her over-emphasis on people’s inner world in her works. However, due to Woolf’s prejudice against, and hostility to Freud and psychoanalysis, and also the paradox that she always avoids “madness” in her works which exactly happens to her in real life, many critic thus focus their attention on the writer’s personal life to find the “psychological or metaphorical substrate of her writings” (Panken 13). Shirley Panken has generalized four aspects as follows:

1. A central refrain is Woolf’s incompleting process regarding her mother, Julia Stephen, evidenced in Woolf’s insatiable need for

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