



Dialogic Reflection and Discursive Layers: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* through Fairclough and Bakhtin

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the short story *The Mark on the Wall* by Virginia Woolf by applying Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of textual analysis that serves as methodological tool to dissect ideological and linguistic structures embedded in the story, and through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism including the concept of heteroglossia and polyphony, that analyzes the multiple voices and perspectives in the language. Despite extensive research on Woolf's modernist techniques, there remains a gap in understanding how the coexistence of multiple voices and perspectives within the text challenges traditional narrative structures and reflect social critique, particularly concerning gender roles and authority. Many scholars have examined Woolf's narrative style and technique of stream of consciousness through feminist perspective; limited studies have focused on the dialogism and heteroglossia in her work through the help of critical discourse framework. By analyzing multiple voices, perspectives and ideologies within the text this study aims to reveal deeper layers of meaning that are often overlooked in traditional literary analysis. The study reveals that *The Mark on the Wall* is a negotiation of social ideologies concerning gender, knowledge and perception.

1. Introduction

The concept of dialogism, as articulated by Bakhtin, highlights how individual speech emerges through ongoing interactions with others' utterances and the assimilation of external expressions. Within a single language, a multitude of variations dialects, registers, and sociolect engage in a continuous dialogue. Bakhtin terms this phenomenon the "primordial dialogism of discourse," emphasizing that every linguistic expression inherently contains a dialogic orientation (DI, 275). In his 1918 writings, Bakhtin asserts that a word is inherently shared, only becoming truly one's own when used in a manner that aligns with personal intention, thereby integrating it into one's semantic and expressive repertoire (p. 239). Bakhtin's theory of dialogism refers to the fact that an individual's speech is shaped through continuous interactions with other's "utterances" and experience of incorporating other's words. Within single language there are multiple varieties including dialects, registers, sociolect, that are in dialogue with one another Bakhtin refers this as "the primordial dialogism of discourse" where all discourses have dialogic orientation (DI,275). Dialogism proposes that the language is dialogic. Bakhtin (1981) explains, in the language the word is half someone else it became one's "own" when the speaker uses it according to his desire, accent and

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adapts the word into his own semantic and expressive intention” (p.239). Heteroglossia refers to the presence of multiple voices and points of view that are active together in one discourse. According to Bakhtin (1981) heteroglossia refers to the presence of rich and diverse cultural, social and professional layers in the language.

Bakhtin further explains the heteroglossia as language is unified or monolithic, he further adds that “any single language into social dialects, professional jargon, language of different generations and age groups and language of various circles and authorities, each day has its own slogans, its own vocabulary and its own emphases. Bakhtin says, “It is this heteroglossia, which is ‘the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as genre’ (DI,263). Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony, initially developed in his analysis of Dostoevsky’s novels, refers to the coexistence of multiple independent and emerged voices within a narrative. Unlike mono logic texts, where a single authoritative voice prevails, polyphonic texts allow characters to express their perspectives without being subordinated to an authorial ideology. This multiplicity of voices reflects a dynamic and dialogic structure, where each voice retains its ideological autonomy (Bakhtin, 1984). Polyphony challenges traditional hierarchical structures within texts, emphasizing a diversity of perspectives that coexist in constant interaction and conflict (Morson & Emerson, 1990). According to Fairclough (2015) critical discourse analysis, discourse is a part of social change and social practice, it influences social structures. It also being determined by social structures contributes to social change and continuity (p.51). Fairclough’s (2015) three-dimensional model is a philosophical approach for justifying dimensions of social practices in the text, according to the model there is a relationship between text, contexts and interactions.

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) known for her innovative narrative techniques, such as interior monologue and stream of consciousness, was an influential English writer and a well-known figure of the modernist literary movement. In her works Woolf explored themes of consciousness, identity, and the nature of reality. She challenged traditional storytelling through her works including *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), by focusing on the inner experiences of her characters. Woolf’s modernist approach is significant through one of her short stories, *The Mark on the Wall* (1917). The story revolves around a seemingly trivial incident that is a mark on the wall, yet elaborates profound meditation on perception, reality and the passage of time. As the narrator contemplates the mark, her thoughts ramble through reflections on history, life, and human consciousness, illustrating Woolf’s fascination with relative perception and fluidity of thoughts. This story encapsulates Woolf’s innovative narrative style and thematic depth with its philosophical undertones and with its stream-of-consciousness technique (Bishop, 1991).

This study aims to analyze *The Mark on the Wall* and multiple voices, perspectives and ideologies, through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s Dialogism including Heteroglossia and Polyphony. Furthermore, this study aims to reveal deeper layers of meaning that are often overlooked in traditional literary analysis through Fairclough’s three-dimensional textual analysis. *The Mark on the Wall* by Virginia Woolf is a meditative short story that elucidates the narrator’s stream of thoughts provoked by a simple mark on the wall, exploring themes of perception, reality, and the fluidity of human consciousness. The study reveals that the story is about negotiation of social ideologies concerning knowledge, gender and perception. It illustrates the intricate interplay of critical discourse and heteroglossia, polyphony, by Fairclough and Bakhtin. The use of stream-of-consciousness in the story allows multiple perspectives and voices to coexist, reflecting Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia, where diverse social ideologies and languages are interwoven.

Bakhtin’s polyphony also aligns with this narrative structure, as the author doesn’t present a single authoritative perspective, instead it allows the external interpretations of the narrator to coexist without hierarchical resolution. Furthermore, applying Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis reveals the complexity of the text. At the textual level, Woolf’s fragmented formulation mirrors the fluidity of human thought, discursively, narrator challenges the patriarchal norms in the story by juxtaposing societal expectations with personal reflections. Socially, it critiques unyielding gender roles, advocating for the acknowledgment of women’s subjective realities and voices. Being a blend of social critique and narrative innovation *The Mark on the Wall* emerges as a powerful modernist exploration of consciousness and identity.

1.1. Problem Statement

Despite the extensive critical analysis on Virginia Woolf’s *The Mark on the Wall*, especially from feminist and modernist perspectives, there remains a notable gap in research that applies Bakhtin’s theoretical concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony within the framework of Fairclough’s three-dimensional critical discourse analysis. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how Woolf’s employment of stream-of consciousness techniques negotiates social ideologies concerning gender, knowledge, and perception through the cohabitation of multiple voices and perspectives within the narrative.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does the integration of Fairclough's three-dimensional model and heteroglossia and dialogism reveal deeper ideological tensions in the text?
2. How does the narrative in the story *The Mark on the Wall* exhibit heteroglossia and polyphony?

1.3. Research Objectives

- To study Woolf's narrative of space and ideological resistance in the story *The Mark on the Wall*.
- To interpret the multiplicity of social voices and consciousness through Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia and dialogism.

2. Literature Review

Ajmal and Zainab (2024) applied Fairclough's model to John Donne's poem *Go and Catch a Falling Star* to investigate gender representation. The study identified metaphors and irony as discursive practices that subtly perpetuate misogynistic ideologies. Furthermore, literary texts are not neutral but rather vehicles for conveying and maintaining social norms. (Umer Ajmal & Tayyaba Zainab 2024). A study by Alasiri (2024) employs Fairclough's model to analyze Denzel Washington's commencement speech, emphasizes on the fact that lexical choices and metaphorical language reflect motivational themes and societal values. He further adds that discursive practice within a public address can shape audience perceptions through repetition and rhetorical devices. Xing (2024) explains that Fairclough's model helps identify power dynamics and ideological influences in textbooks and classroom communication. This study examined the function of language policies in schools that reproduce social hierarchies through curriculum design and pedagogical practices. The research illustrated that the textual elements including language structure intersect with institutional practices to shape students' social identities (Yuhe Xing, 2024).

Michael Holquist delves into Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, highlighting its critical role in novels as a cultural form. Holquist argues that dialogism enables a narrative to embody a spectrum of voices and perspectives, thereby fostering a complex interaction between the author, the characters, and the reader. (Holquist (1977, pp. 455-471). Warner applies Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and polyphony to analyze "*The Federalist Papers*," illustrating how multiple voices and discourses coexist and interact within the text. The study underscores the relevance of Bakhtin's ideas beyond literary texts, extending them into the analysis of historical and political documents. (Michael Warner, 1988, pp. 101-126). Carey (2001) discusses the application of Bakhtin's discourse theory and heteroglossia within medieval studies, through his paper he highlights the that how these concepts can be used to analyze the multiplicity of perspectives and voices in medieval texts for comprehensive understanding. According to the study, medieval texts are not monolithic or dominated by a unified, single perspective. Instead, they are often interwoven together as variety of voices, including those of different cultures, ideologies and social classes (Stephen M. Carey 2011, pp. 131-137). Hermans (2001) explores Bakhtin's concept of dialogism in the field of psychology, he proposes the idea of the "dialogic self" a self that is composed of a multiplicity of positions and voices. This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates the broader applicability of Bakhtin's theories. He emphasizes that this approach moves Bakhtin's ideas beyond the realm of literary theory into the field of psychology, illustrating their interdisciplinary potential (Hubert J. M. Hermans, 2001, pp, 147-160)

Susan Sniader Lanser (1992) in her book *The Fictions of Authority* explains "Virginia Woolf gives a different shape to authorial imperatives rather than refusing them, she thereby writes in a line of continuity with George Eliot and Jane Austen. But if Eliot was shored by a male pseudism and cultural discourses of Western "man" and Austen's authority has been marked by anonymity and indirection, Woolf bears her author's own name and represents herself as a feminist (Susan. S. L, 1992). Ahmed Ben Amara (2023) highlights Woolf *The Mark on the Wall* by Virginia Woolf explored her therapeutic dimension of experimental writing, a feature that has been explored thoroughly in her novels. The story presents an oblique witness to the experiences of illness, the tone of the story would set for other stories and essays on illness as well, in term of exploration of power of art to organize the lived experiences and the chaos in their lives. it also provides valuable insights that could possibly be reached during illness. Woolf writes in her letter to Ethyl Smith "I shall never forget the day I wrote *The Mark on the Wall*" (Letters 4:231).

Christine Reynier states Woolf defines short stories brief and honestly, she defines her aiming ideal and a moment of cross fertilization between prose, poetry, drama, form and emotion. Her stories are placed at the very center of her own aesthetic quest, representing neither simple entertainment nor any hierarchical relation with other genre, participating fully in the creative process. Woolf's own short stories that are failed to be described accurately by existing theories, are best defined by her own essays called as "short honest fiction" (Reynier, 2003). Hai-Ying examined the era and narrative technique Written in 1917, during the rise of modernism, *The Mark on the Wall* exemplifies the stream-of-consciousness technique. Departing from

traditional narratives, it lacks vibrant characters, a detailed setting, and a compelling plot. Instead of using zero focalization, the narrator adopts a fixed internal socialization with a first-person perspective. By weakening physical time and space, the story highlights subjective reality, emphasizing moments of personal significance (Hai-Ying, N. W. (2018). Teresa Prudent (2008) in Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* notes the story's departure from conventional plot, employing a stream-of-consciousness style triggered by observing a mark on the wall. This approach reflects Woolf's vision of the mind as fluid and dynamic. The work is seen as a foundational text, foreshadowing her later innovations in narrative form and psychological depth (Prudent, 2008).

3. Research Methodology

This research uses qualitative and interpretive research design within the fields of literary criticism and critical discourse analysis (CDA). This research aims to investigate linguistic, conversational and ideological dimensions of Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* (1917), applying using Norman Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional CDA model (2015) and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. This method allows for a comprehensive examination of the text's narrative voice, linguistic structure, narrative structure and socio-cultural context reflecting Woolf's larger modernist vision. The theoretical framework incorporates two central models:

First, Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA allows for systematic examination of discourse at three related levels. The first one is textual analysis (description) which examines linguistic elements including vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion. Second is discursive practice (interpretation) investigating text production and interpretation. Third social practice (explanation) investigates the broader ideological and social frameworks that are reproduced by discourse (Fairclough, 2015). Second, theory of dialogism, through the concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia, theory offers the lens to analyze diversity of voices, perspectives, and ideological conflicts within the narrative. Polyphony refers to the presence of multiple, often conflicting, voices in a text, while heteroglossia emphasizes the coexistence of diverse social speech types and perspectives (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984).

This analysis is carried out in the following four steps:

The first step involves performing a textual analysis to identify key linguistic features including modality, pronouns, and sentence structures that reveal subjectivity and dialogic interaction. Additionally, figurative expressions and word choices are analyzed for their underlying ideological meanings. The second step positions the text within the socio-cultural and literary framework of early 20th-century Britain, highlighting the ideological conflicts characteristic of the post-Edwardian period. The analysis also examines how the use of free indirect discourse and stream-of-consciousness influences the construction of meaning and readers engagement.

In the third stage, the social practice dimension explores how Woolf's narrative challenges dominant discourses related to knowledge, authority, and gender. Lastly, the text is analyzed using Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia highlighting the interplay of internal monologue, social voices, and cultural discourses that create a layered, dialogic narrative. This research is based on theoretical analysis and interpretive close reading. Therefore, the study's credibility is ensured through existing academic research, textual evidence and theoretical perspectives. The study aims to demonstrate how Woolf's narrative represents discursive resistance and critique dominant ideologies through methodological approach, highlighting the importance of dialogic theory and CDA in literary analysis.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Fairclough's (2015) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, specifically his concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia. This theoretical framework provides an extensive method for exploring how Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* operates ideologically, socially and linguistically it allows for an in-depth analysis of the construction of perception, epistemology and subjectivity are constructed and contested in the text.

Fairclough's three-dimensional model as a layered process of discourse consists of:

1. Textual analysis (the formal properties of language),
2. Discursive practice (the processes of production and interpretation),
3. Social practice (the wider sociocultural and ideological contexts that shape and are shaped by discourse).

Woolf's narrative style is marked by non-linear structure, syntactic fragmentation and stream-of-consciousness at textual level that resist traditional narrative unity. For instance, the narrator reflects upon realizing that it was not a mark on the wall, "I don't see why we should have a snail on the wall." Here, the syntax is casual, reflective, and internalized, inviting the reader directly into the speaker's thought process. The grammatical looseness of the narration, marked by dashes, ellipses, and unstructured clauses, mirrors the flux of human consciousness and suggests that meaning is not fixed but constantly deferred.

In terms of discursive practice, *The Mark on the Wall* blurs the lines between fiction and philosophical essay, producing a hybrid discourse. The mark itself becomes a point of departure for meditation on religion, history, war, gender roles, and the fragility of knowledge. When the narrator ponders, "How we must grope and press day after day, half blind, half deaf, stumbling, to the top of the hill," Woolf is not simply describing personal disorientation, but referencing a broader post-World War I disillusionment with rationalist structures and linear history, a discourse commonly circulating in the modernist period.

At the level of social practice, Woolf's text challenges patriarchal and empirical ways of knowing. The narrator resists the masculine tendency to name and categorize, asking instead: "Why not let it alone?" This hesitation to "identify" the mark symbolizes a rejection of the scientific and imperialist drive to dominate through knowledge. Fairclough's model thus helps us see how Woolf's narrative techniques enact resistance to dominant social ideologies, particularly those privileging certainty, hierarchy, and rationalism.

Bakhtin's dialogism deepens this analysis by emphasizing the fundamentally relational nature of language, where meaning emerges not in isolation but in relation to other voices, ideologies, and contexts. Story is narrated as a constant dialogue between internal monologue and external discourses including the topics of religion to domestic routine to natural science. The narrator muses: "*Indeed, one likes to think that the mind is a cavernous space, somewhere far deeper than those bright-arched caverns of wood and stone...*" this sentence evokes the architectural and philosophical imagery, including multitude of voices: the poetic, spiritual and historical. It is not the voice of unified, single subject, but rather a unification of cultural references and echoes.

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia refers to the coexistence of multiple social voices and elaborates Woolf's different ideological positions within the narrator's stream of consciousness. For example, in the story narrator reflects on British history and architecture of the Church including everyday musings about tobacco jars, fireplaces and snails. These juxtapositions invite the readers to navigate the discourses through readers' authority. The constant oscillation of narrator between skepticism and awe shows the fact that no ideology is complete or stable within the text. The narrator's oscillation between awe and skepticism about these institutions shows how no single ideology is stable or complete within the text.

The polyphony in the text is equally significant in the text. Apparently, *The Mark on the Wall* appears to have a single narrator, but the voice is internally fractured. The narrator often interrupts, questions her own assumptions, and shifts perspective mid-thought creating ambiguity. For instance, she says: "*It is not knowledge, but unity that matters. Unity, not conventional form.*" She rejects the rationalist pursuit of certainty and favors a more fluid and emotional sense of understanding.

Fairclough's model and Bakhtin's dialogic theory together allows readers to understand *The Mark on the Wall* as a discursive space where multiple meanings coexist and contend. Woolf's text subverts the tradition where narrator holds authority invites readers to engage with language as a site of ideological ambiguity and struggle. Meaning in the story emerges through contradictions and silences it is never fixed; it aligns both with Bakhtin's dialogism and Fairclough's critical discourse framework. In sum, the theoretical fusion of Fairclough and Bakhtin provides the tools to interpret Woolf's story not merely as a stream-of-consciousness reflection, but as a rich, multi-voiced commentary on how language mediates our experience of reality, identity, and truth.

4. Critical Discussion and Findings

Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* is a standard example of modernist narratives that destabilize traditional structures of meanings through stream-of-consciousness narration, subjectivity and fragmentation. The text of the story revolves around an unnamed narrator's introspection of a mark on the wall, that continued a series of reflections on knowledge, reality, gender, personal identity and history. While using Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional CDA model, this analysis first examines the textual structure and linguistic features, followed by the discursive practice embedded within Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique, and finally ideological dimensions present within the social practice. Furthermore, findings are enhanced by Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia, which reveal the layered multiplicity of voices within the narrative.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Fairclough's model consists of three dimensions: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. From a textual or descriptive perspective, Woolf's narrative in the story is marked by lack of conventional plot structure and syntactic clarity, instead of using long, extended sentences, modal verbs to convey the narrator's inner thought processes expressions like "perhaps," "I think," and "it may be" (Woolf, 1917) are dominant in the text, highlighting a sense of uncertainty and subjective perspective. These linguistic features are merely stylistic signaling away from absolute truth towards an introspective and relativistic worldview. Additionally, repeated use of first-person pronouns "I" emphasizes on narrator's personal experience of isolation. However, this "I" is fluid, frequently shifting into abstract reflections and rhetorical questions that blur the boundaries between self and society. In *The Mark on the Wall*, Woolf's use of stream-of-consciousness exemplifies the textual dimension, characterized by fluid thought processes and the interplay between reality and imagination. The narrator's contemplation of the mark *If that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture* illustrates how Woolf blurs concrete observation with speculative thought, reflecting the human mind's tendency to drift from certainty to ambiguity (Woolf, 1917).

At level of discursive practice (interpretation), Woolf uses stream-of-consciousness technique as a discursive strategy that enhances the process of interpretation or meaning making over the conclusion. The discursive practice dimension is reflected in Woolf's intertextual approach, where memories and cultural references intertwine with the present. For instance, the narrator's musings on art *should have ideas behind it* echo the modernist critique of aesthetic conventions, signifying a departure from traditional Victorian ideals. The narrator's thoughts shift between interior meditation and external references without providing clear resolution or closure. This movement represents an interplay between individual and broader cultural discourses. The narrator questions the dominant narratives such as patriarchal dominance in historical knowledge "All those men in bowler hats... turning pages of the Times... what do they know?" (Woolf, 1917). Through this moment Woolf introduces a critical stance towards historical knowledge and invites the reader for an active dialogue, emphasizing that without narrative's conclusion the construction of meaning remains unresolved. Woolf positions interpretation as the central experience for both reader and narrator.

In social practice (explanation), the narrative challenges the ideas about dominant discourses of logic, authority and rational thinking that are usually linked with patriarchal and enlightenment ways of thinking. The narrator's interior monologue goes against such structures or traditional ideas suggesting that feminine or intuitive forms of knowledge could be more genuine or authentic. Social practice emerges as Woolf critiques societal norms and the rigidity of thought. The reference to *Whitaker's Table of Precedency "The Archbishop of Canterbury"* is followed by the *Lord High Chancellor* symbolizes structured social hierarchies, which the narrator's fragmented thoughts inherently question.

This idea aligns with Woolf's larger feminist goal, which critiques the exclusion of women from intellectual, historical, and literary traditions." *The Mark on the Wall* symbolizes uncertainty and ambiguity and challenges the idea of having one fixed meaning, both literally and metaphorically. According to Fairclough (2015), texts not only reflect social ideas and systems but also shape social structures and ideologies."

"Woolf's narrative, avoids traditional realism and logical order, serves as a form of discursive resistance to dominant cultural narratives."

Bakhtin's polyphony is present through the coexistence of multiple internal voices, rational, imaginative, nostalgic, each contributing to the narrative without a dominant perspective. The narrator's rationality in questioning the mark's origin juxtaposes with imaginative flights about medieval knights, indicating a dialogic interplay. Polyphony is particularly relevant to the analysis of examining Woolf's narrative voice. Although the story is told by a single narrator, the text contains multiple ideological positions and discourses. The narrator's thoughts include personal reflections as well as criticisms of social rules, religious beliefs, and historical power. These ideas are often framed through imagined perspectives or societal "voices." For instance, upon reflecting conventions of knowledge and questions by narrator there is an indirect dialogue with cultural norms of categorization and mastery. These perspectives are questioned and challenged creating a true narrative that is reflection of Bakhtin's idea of polyphony.

Through mixing different discourses and styles of speech the text exemplifies heteroglossia. The narrator's language moves between domestic observation, poetic thoughts and ironic commentary. According to Bakhtin's (1981) notion of space is where different social voices intersect and challenge meaning. As the text oscillates in the present and past heteroglossia appears. For example, the mark as a *'small round mark, black upon the white wall'* appeared to be a focal point where different interpretations and memories converge. The depiction of Woolf's shifting thought patterns highlights the instability of meaning that align with Bakhtin's philosophy that language is inherently layered and diverse. There is a conflict between different discourses even in narrator's private thoughts like following social norms versus looking inward, relying on scientific notions

or trusting intuition. The final revelation appears as an ironic situation of all prior speculation that the mark is a snail. The heteroglossia nature of text of ending highlights that it focuses on exploring ideas instead of settling on one definite answer.

5. Conclusion

Due to its systematic approach to language analysis Fairclough's three-dimensional model is an influential framework in the critical discourse analysis. Its ability to be applicable across diverse fields including political rhetoric to psychology and literary criticism demonstrates its theoretical adaptability and validity. However, the limitations of the model point to the need for more significant applications, including different discourses especially in the context where social power structures do not mirror directly. Study reveals the complex interplay of heteroglossia and polyphony by applying this model to Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall*, it highlights the narrative that challenges conventional storytelling by presenting multiple perspectives without hierarchical resolution. Therefore, Virginia Woolf's work emerges as a significant critique of patriarchal discourse, not only a modernist exploration of consciousness.

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