

Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

How does Virginia Woolf use interior consciousness in "The Mark On The Wall" to express feminist critique of social expectations placed on women?

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Abstract

This study examines how Virginia Woolf employs interior consciousness in *The Mark on the Wall* to construct a feminist critique of the social expectations imposed on women. Using a qualitative literary approach, the research focuses on the narrator's stream of consciousness as a form of intellectual freedom that allows her to think beyond societal constraints. Through close reading and engagement with relevant scholarly sources, the study demonstrates that Woolf's narrative technique creates a private mental space in which the female voice can exist independently. However, the abrupt male interruption at the end of the story reveals the fragility of this autonomy. The findings suggest that Woolf's use of narrative voice functions not only as a stylistic innovation but also as a subtle critique of patriarchal authority.

Keywords: interior consciousness, feminist critique, narrative voice, stream of consciousness, domestic space, male interruption

Introduction:

"The Mark on the Wall" by Virginia Woolf is a short story that highlights Woolf's feminist positions by focusing on time, space, gender and narrative (Al-Ali, 2012; Hai-Ying, 2018; Siyuan, 2024). The story might appear simple and straightforward at first, but it holds a deeper meaning (Hai-Ying, 2018). The story starts with the woman sitting in her living room smoking a cigarette in the middle of January, when she looks up and for the first time she notices a mark on her wall, and then she starts to think about what caused

Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

"The Mark on the Wall" (Woolf, 1919). Instead of following a traditional plot with a clear structure, Woolf focuses on the narrator's inner world and on her thoughts as they occur freely (Hai-Ying, 2018; Siyuan, 2024). Her thoughts move from the mark itself to deeper and wider observations on topics such as history, knowledge, authority, and social norms (Woolf, 1919; Hai-Ying, 2018). Every rumination circles back to the mark only to drift again into a reverie, as each of her seemingly meandering thoughts builds upon one another to create an intricate discourse on the nature of reality and truth (Hai-Ying, 2018). Woolf presented a female narrator who thinks, imagines, and questions everything (Woolf, 1919; Siyuan, 2024). This challenges the expectation that women's interior lives should be ignored, because it gives value to a woman's inner voice in a time where women were expected to not have any original ideas and explanations (Al-Ali, 2012; Siyuan, 2024). Therefore, this essay will build upon previous research and explain how Virginia Woolf used interior consciousness in "The Mark on the Wall" to express feminist critique of social expectations placed on women (Al-Ali, 2012; Hai-Ying, 2018; Siyuan, 2024).

Literature review:

Looking at previous research really helps to understand how Virginia Woolf uses interior consciousness as a feminist critique. I used the original text and 3 other research papers to support my paper. "The mark on the wall" (Woolf, 1919) is the foundation of this analysis. Woolf used themes such as the interior consciousness, gender roles, and domestic space to express feminist critique and challenge the social expectations for women.

Al-Ali examines how Virginia uses the domestic space in her story to express her feminist ideas. Especially, in the living room-a place where women are expected to take care of domestic duties in-becomes a place where the narrator-a women- search for a meaning for life, and questions traditional gender roles and male authorities. In Al-Ali's words "he traditionally female gendered space of the living room becomes a text entirely composed of objects that are culturally and ideologically charged, which

Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

work therefore as signs and codes that the narrator reinterprets and reformulates in a subversive aesthetics of resistance" (Al-Ali, 2012, p.62).

Hai-ying focused on subjective and objective realities, how Virginia rejected the traditional plot structure and realism, and centered the reality in the narrator's mind. Hai-ying mentioned in his research "This is the voice of the objective reality, which stops the narrator from going further with her searching for the meaning of life" (2018, p387). Which describes the male voice as the subjective reality that shuts down women's voices and freedom. Wang also explained how Virginia prioritized the interior consciousness and treated it as something that is more real than the physical fact. He wrote: "reality only exists in the character's narration." (Hai-Ying, 2018, p387). Which validates women's inner voice.

On the other hand, Siyuan focused on how Virginia used stream-of-consciousness to represent freedom in a time where women had almost no time for their own to express their ideas and think, as he stated "In the 20th century when Woolf lived, women were greatly constrained, and they had almost no time of their own." (Siyuan, 2024, p.120). Siyuan also pointed out that she purposely minimalised the male presentation to give more importance to women's interior consciousness.

Methodology:

This paper uses qualitative analysis to examine how Virginia Woolf used the interior consciousness in "The Mark On The Wall" as a feminist critique of social expectations that are placed on women. The analysis is based on close reading and feminist literary analysis for the text, while focusing on the narrator's thoughts rather than her actions.

The feminist approach is employed to analyze interior consciousness, narrative voice, domestic space, and male authorities. The main text that is used in the analysis is

Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall", and it is supported with secondary academic sources. The reason why the method is suitable is because the meaning of the story is derived from words and internal thoughts rather than narrative actions.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on literary analysis. It focuses on interpreting textual meaning rather than collecting numerical data.

Sample

The primary material for analysis is The Mark on the Wall by Virginia Woolf. Secondary sources include selected scholarly articles that discuss narrative technique and feminist theory. No human participants are involved in this study.

Instruments

The research employs the following tools:

- Close reading of the primary text
- Application of feminist theoretical perspectives
- Analysis of relevant scholarly literature
- Thematic identification of recurring concepts such as freedom, space, and interruption

Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, the text was closely examined to identify patterns in the narrator's thoughts and narrative structure. Second, these observations were interpreted through a feminist framework and supported by existing scholarship. Finally, the findings were organized into key themes, including interior freedom, gendered space, and patriarchal interruption.

Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

Discussion:

1. Interior consciousness as freedom

"The Mark On The Wall" is considered the first sign of modern fiction, since you can't find the usual elements in traditional writing such lively characters, settings, or interesting plots, instead Woolf centers the story on the narrator's inner voice and dives deep into her mind without any limits. Hai-Ying states "what can be counted as a plot is the narrator's free association of the mark only, no conflict, no ups and downs." (2018, p.385), this focuses on how the interior consciousness gave the narrator freedom and space to think in a time where women had almost no time for their own, and weren't allowed to express their own ideas. The mark that caused this loop of thinking is insignificant, but yet it still triggered the narrator's reflections, and pulled her into her interior space, where thoughts become more important than actions. Woolf describes "How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object" (Woolf, 1919). The narrator is not looking for answers, solutions or conclusions, instead she just lets her mind wonder, think and create different situations. The lack of purpose is very important from a feminist perspective, because during that time, women were expected to explain their time through productivity. And Virginia challenged these expectations by valuing thinking, and centering a woman's inner voice.

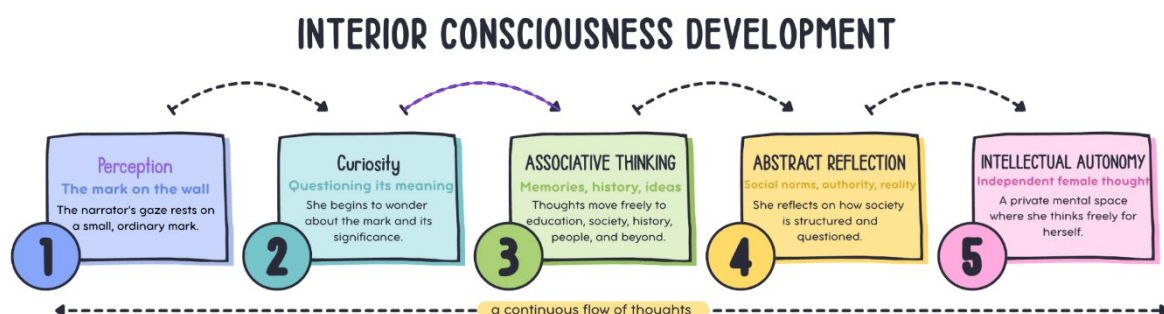


Figure 1: Interior Consciousness Development

Figure 1 shows how the narrator's thinking moves from a simple observation of the mark to wider reflections about society, reality, and intellectual freedom. This supports

Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

the idea that Woolf presents interior consciousness as a space where the female narrator can think freely outside social expectations.

2. Narrative voice as a gendered space:

The interior freedom extends beyond the narrator's inner thoughts, and into the space she occupies. The narrator was sitting in her living room, a space where women are expected to clean and serve, but she wasn't doing any of that, instead she was smoking and thinking. The narrator admits that she is a bad housekeeper, as it was stated in the story "and I, not being a very vigilant housekeeper—look at the dust on the mantelpiece, for example"(Woolf, 1919) , the dust covers the room, and there was a black mark on her wall, rather than cleaning it she decided to think about what caused it. Which shows how Woolf prioritized thinking and how she transformed a traditional feminine place of duty into a place of mental freedom, where she can think and wonder freely. In Al-Ali's words "In the Mark on the Wall, the traditionally female gendered space of the living room becomes a text entirely composed of objects that are culturally and ideologically charged, which work therefore as signs and codes that the narrator reinterprets and reformulates in a subversive aesthetics of resistance." (2012, p.62) .

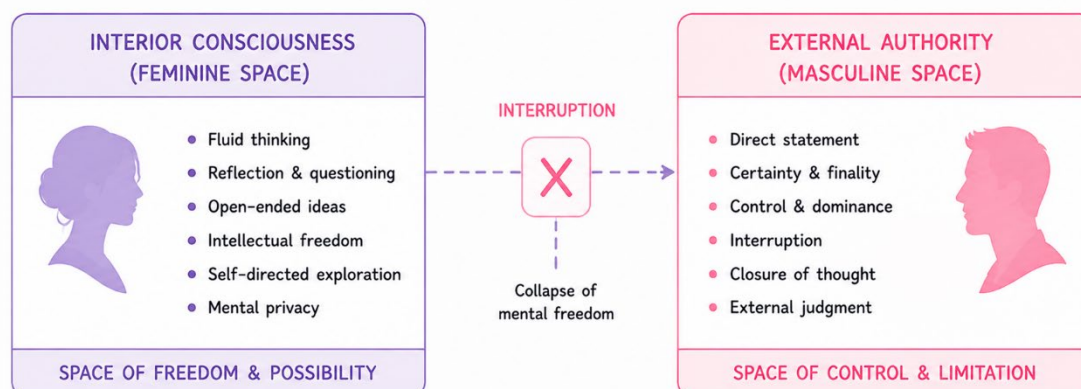


Figure 2: Interior Consciousness vs External Authority

Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

Figure 2 highlights the contrast between the narrator's interior space and the external male voice. The narrator's voice is open, reflective, and questioning, while the external authority is direct, fixed, and controlling. This contrast supports Woolf's feminist critique of how women's private thoughts are often interrupted or limited by male authority.

3. Critique of Male Authority

Woolf takes her critique even further, by showing that the narrator's freedom of thoughts leads her to question male authority that controls women's lives. The narrator asks what replaced the old traditions and answers "What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things? Men perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives which sets the standard, which established Whitaker's Table of Precedency" (Woolf, 1919). Woolf is not being subtle here, she directly says that men now govern our lives and set the standards. She also mentions and criticized "Whitaker's table of precedency", which is a British book that ranks people according to social importance, and it was governed by male authorities. Siyuan (2024) points out that "Woolf uses male pronouns only six times throughout the entire story. Most of these male pronouns are used within fantasies to emphasize the insignificance of men." (p.121), and it's not by chance, woolf is trying to minimize the male presence in the story. The narrator now is not just thinking freely, without a purpose, she's questioning the rules, traditions and the standards that were set, and who made them in the first place.

4. The male interruption and collapse feminism ideas:

The end of the story is where Woolf's feminist ideas appear the most. When the narrator's thoughts are still swimming freely in her mind, a male voice enters, and in seconds the whole thing collapses, her thoughts start to vanish, the narrator starts to feel like someone is standing over her, this shows dominance, the man's physical

Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

position shows control, and power. He is physically above her, which makes her feel smaller, and ends her freedom to think.

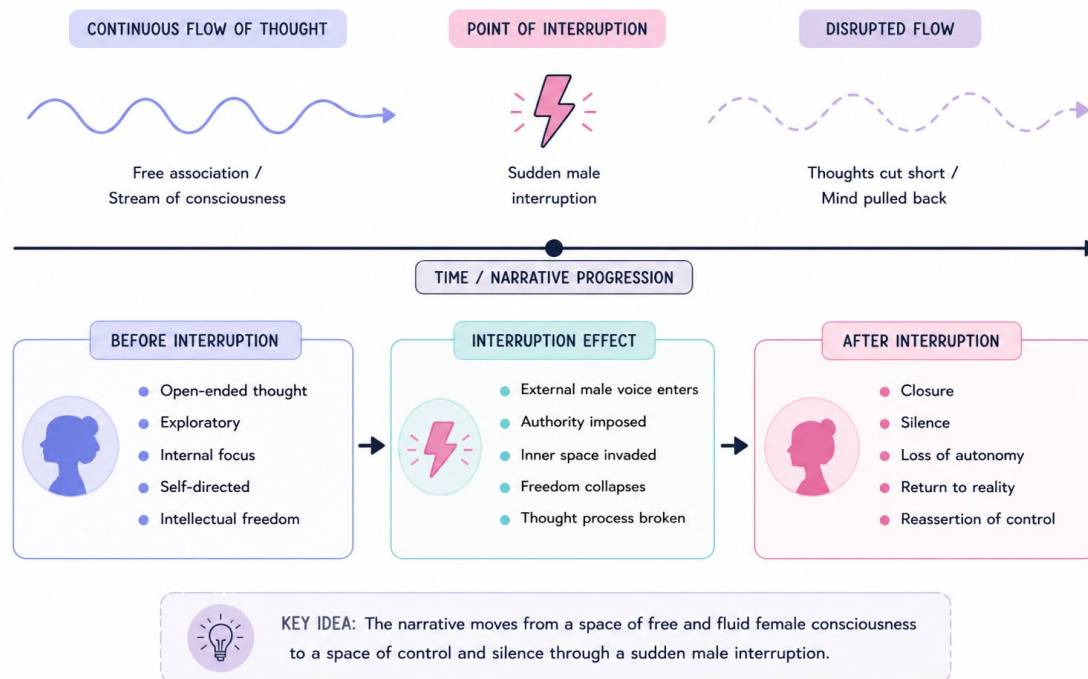


Figure 3: Male Interruption and Disrupted Thought

Figure 3 shows the movement from free thought to interruption and then to disrupted thought. It visually represents how the narrator's inner freedom collapses when the male voice enters and names the mark as a snail.

Woolf shows the shift in power through the man's voice:

" 'I'm going out to buy a newspaper.'

'Yes?'

'Though it's no good buying newspapers... Nothing ever happens. Curse this war; God damn this war!... All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall.' " (Woolf, 1919)

Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

His tone is irritated, and practical, he is complaining and cursing the war, instead of reflecting and wondering he is stating facts unlike the narrator, he is not asking questions or seeking for ideas. "I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall," he says, dismissing the narrator's entire thought process as meaningless. She spent the whole story questioning and wondering what caused the mark, she chose not to get up and check it, instead she enjoyed the mystery behind it.

The story ends with her saying "Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail..." (Woolf, 1919), this shows how his voice didn't just interpret her thought, it ended them. In Wang's words "This is the voice of the objective reality, which stops the narrator from going further with her searching for the meaning of life." (Hai-Ying, 2018, p.387). Wang refers to the male's voice as the objective reality that ends the narrator's journey in searching for meaning for life.

conclusion :

Virginia used the interior consciousness to explore and present feminist ideas, during a time where women were expected to be productive and silent, when they were not allowed to have original ideas. By making a story where the whole plot happens in-the forbidden place- a woman's mind, Virginia allowed the female narrator to think, wonder and question everything without any limits, including male authorities. Woolf openly criticized male authorities, and showed how the male interruption can easily stop women's thoughts. She also transformed a domestic place-the living room- into a place of thought.

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Interior Consciousness and Feminist critiques in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

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