

“To the lighthouse”

~Virginia Woolf.

Poetry or Prose?

Poetry (from the Greek "ποίησις", poiesis, a "making" or "creating") is a form of art in which language is used for its aesthetic and evocative qualities in addition to, or in lieu of, its ostensible meaning. Poetry may be written independently, as discrete poems, or may occur in conjunction with other arts, as in poetic drama, hymns or lyrics.

Prose is text which does not have the rhythmic qualities of poetry and which tends to be less concentrated in language or ideas and more on the content.

Poetic qualities are commonplace in Modernist works of prose and prose like properties in Modernist poems. It is fairly correct to assume that the distinction between poems and prose is likely to take a back seat and what will emerge is a composite work of art, and arguably the greatest example of the same is Woolf's celebrated novel, “To the lighthouse”. However, there always does exist a threat that blind granting of the fact that the distinction is blurry makes one falsely conclude that there is no distinction at all. Hence, it is important to see and keep in mind how the blur came into existence.

The blur from the poetry side came over a span of nearly a century, with the departure from metric verses of the Victorian times and the invention of new genres like *free verse*, *spoken word*, etc. The changes were, nevertheless, subtly syntactical and in the end, “what after all was poetry?” became, rather suddenly, a very open question having to do with the “aboutness” of the text defining it rather than its form. The story on prose's side was also not rosy, as prose, starting with the truly prosaic essay form of Francis Bacon, had traversed a variegated path and come to amalgamate itself with poetry again in the Modernist times. In the path it had seen the realist form of Dickens, the lyrical touch of the Romantics, the austere strictness of the Victorians and much more, but with the Modernists, again the question of its identity stood up. Both these forms of literature had been previously spared scrutiny

somehow but as it was the Modernists' credo "Challenge everything", the definitions of both finally was twisted, turned and finally reduced to absurdity. As to how this was achieved can be easily seen in the novel. The mere fact that this work of literature qualified as a "novel" puts it in the category of prose, but being seasoned readers of Modernist texts, we shall not be so hasty and would first try and analyse why indeed it deserves to be in one category more than the other.

First and foremost, the defining criterion for a novel is its storyline. The "aboutness" of a novel is generally something concrete, a story that could happen in one of the possible worlds conceivable by man which has something that would startle our mind, ignite our imagination, make us twitch in horror, or perhaps might amuse us by its happenstance. "To the lighthouse", however, has none. It has no plot to speak of. It has been called an autobiographical novel, but the novel is itself not about anything, not even about a life, i.e., the author's. It is about something that is "*beyond analysis*". Rather than attempting to present a slice of life for the readers, the novel just revolves around the characters. It not only makes the plot secondary to the philosophical discussions, it almost eliminates the plot itself. A paraphraser who is not blessed with the same imagination and eloquence as of the author may be tempted to write "Nothing happened" as an apt description of the novel, and he will not be entirely wrong. The content of the novel is indeed very open and even the authorial intention is not clear. In this sense, it is very different even from the contemporary modernist novels. In the other modernist novels it was very tempting to confuse action with progress and as each action took place, to believe that a certain plot was building. There was some movement to tether attention to while appreciating techniques like "Streams of consciousness" and thick metaphors being mixed. In Joyce's "A portrait of an artist as a young man", we see that the development of the young man into the artist was something that the readers beheld while they were led through maze like thoughts of Stephen. Also, the events mentioned in the text had a fairly direct influence on Stephen, as the major events mentioned were those that proved to be of life defining importance for Stephen – they were epiphanies of considerable magnitude. Similarly, in D. H. Lawrence's novel "Women in love", readers can hope to see to the end the relationship between the sisters and their lovers, because the relationship itself is the prime content of the novel. In Faulkner's novel "The sound and the fury", we have the Compson family's future to wait for though that comes into picture a little late in the novel. However, in Woolf's novel, even this action and purpose is sparse and missing.

"To the lighthouse" is not about any event or happening that can be pointed out and written down. The novel is "*About life, about death: about Mrs. Ramsay*" but, alas, "*– no, she (Lily Briscoe)*"

thought, one could say nothing to nobody". *"Its (the theme) impossible to label"*, in Woolf's own words. This, in my opinion, is the premise that takes the novel away from the prose category, almost completely. The vestige of prose, the intermittent *happenings* that occur are as much part of prose as of a hypothetical narrative poetry that could replace the text. Also, the happenings are seldom connected to each other causally. There are visible attempts in the novel of making the timeline fairly non-linear with short chapters mixed in the normal text, like Chapter XV in part 1, which is a single line chapter, and Chapter VII in part 2:

Chapter XV, Part I

"Yes", said Prue, in her considering way, answering her mother's question, "I think Nancy did go with them."

Chapter VII, Part III

[Macalister's boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea.]

The intention of the author is clearly to showcase the parallelism in the events. However, it also somehow makes the events themselves a less significant. The events are important only to the extent that they make an impression on the minds of the on-lookers. The first and the third parts of the novels share not even a negligible physical causal connection and it is clear that all that survives the transience is the object being transformed, i.e., the thoughts and the people who live through it. The events themselves die out and result to very little, it is the impression on the mind of the people that is of any consequence later. Hence, rightly so, the novel has very few events. It was more concerned with the effect of the events on the people and those events were not necessarily macro level on the physical scale. Hence, otherwise insignificant events found a mention in the novel like how Cam would not *"give a flower to the gentleman"* and how Mrs. Ramsay would look for support in the rhythmic beating sounds *"murmured by nature, 'I am guarding you – I am your support."* This is as far from the traits of prose at a novel can possibly be stretched. This novel makes use of no props like the other novels to approach its purpose. Hence, it is clear that this novel is, at best at the verge of the category of prose.

The streams of consciousness as used by Woolf are also very peculiar and of a nature that has perhaps not been seen in the Modernist novels before her. The novel is not written entirely in streams of consciousness, rather it is **about streams of consciousness**. It is the exploration of the thoughts of the characters by the author to arrive at a conclusion that remains elusive and clearly of a nature more

abstract than most other Modernist novels. The language of the text remains nearly the same across all characters (unlike Joyce's streams of consciousness as seen in *A portrait of an artist as a young man*, where the language of the author was modulated as the age of Stephen progressed). Hence, the presence of a singular character in form of the author (the poet) is even more pressed. The focus of the novel switches from one character to another at regular intervals, making the narration a lyrical flow of thoughts. Often, we get multiple point of views of the same scene as seen from various eyes as was the case when Mrs. Ramsay was sitting with James on the window edge when Lily was drawing her portrait. This lyrical flow of the thoughts and then the flow of attention from one speaker to another itself makes the narration poetical. Woolf's probing into the human consciousness in this novel is not so simplistic that it can be attributed to any particular narrative technique. What really distinguishes her novel is the aesthetic effect of her exploration of the minds of her characters. Only an artist of Woolf's stature can present the mental worlds of her characters with an unprecedented depth and intensity. By virtue of her depth and intensity, Woolf creates a novel both with an unconventional "plot", and an unconventional prose. In fact, the imaginative power of her language tunneling the minds of her characters translates her novel to the level of poetry. Therefore, "To the lighthouse" emerges not as a typical prosaic presentation of events. The subtle suggestiveness in the novel has the charisma of poetry. An anonymous critic writing in 1927 sees the novel from this perspective:

*"There is an elusive quality in Mrs. Woolf's work which is so different from anything else in literature as to be quite indefinable. If she must be labeled it should be rather a lyrical poet than as a novelist. Her new novel has no plot, and its free, rambling style, with none of the firmness and conclusion of prose, yet has a rhythm which makes it more akin to poetry, and particularly to modern poetry. She enters completely into her characters, one by one, and traces their thoughts and actions with free lyrical expression. Noticing the most trivial detail she invests it with significance. But it is always her significance which it assumes in the mind of the character; Mrs. Woolf never for a moment becomes the detached observer of the world which she is creating; therefore her people are entirely real without ever being tangible." (Anonymous. "Lyrical Fiction". *The Glasgow Herald*. (1927))*

Hence, it is obvious that Woolf goes further than any other Modernist writer as far as approaching poetry in her work is concerned.

The description in the novel has the poetic subjectivity like any other Modernist text. However, in the absence of a concrete plot, they seem all the more poetical. Just as is expected in a poem, the description is qualitative instead of quantitative and various figure of speech abound. Even the end of

the novel is nothing but a symbolic, and I am tempted to say 'poetic', *completion* of sorts. The estranged father and son are reunited as they are going to the lighthouse, which completes the symbolism of Mrs. Ramsay as the lighthouse and lends relevance to the title. Also, some characters are forgotten, like Tansley, and others meet (parenthetical) deaths (Andrew, Prue, and, somewhat to the surprise of the reader, Mrs. Ramsay). Finally, Lily Briscoe completes her painting of Mrs. Ramsay, and gets a glimpse of what Mrs. Ramsay had tried to tell her, albeit with fatigue. The reader is objectively still in the dark, as far as knowledge gained by him is concerned; however, he has gained in an experience which he would have got from no other source. Woolf is capable of giving depth to an otherwise bland and unerring Victorian character of Mrs. Ramsay. Only she (Woolf) could possibly have shown the reader what are the questions hidden in the bosom of the characters in our world who are like Mrs. Ramsay, and then told us that the answers are not only difficult to find, but also difficult to express. There in is the *novelty* of her novel. It is just presenting something in a new light to us that we already know. We as readers are all aware of the dark fears, innocent desires and the vacuous longing as they are the inherent traits of any human. What Woolf has done is picked an ordinary set of such people that almost make a family and shown us *what they are* at two instances of time, both at a gap of ten years and with a war interim them and what is the force of nature like working on an inanimate household in the ten years that lay in between. All she has done, with the magnificent bursts of consciousness and parenthetical deaths and every paraphernalia, is that she has given us a new look into things as they are. This purpose of the novel too is in line with Robert Frost's definition of poetry which he says is "*what makes us consider things that we always knew and look at them in a new light.*"

It is clear that Woolf knew with some intuition that the nature of the world changed in or about December 1910. Whether that is true or not, we may never be sure of. However, we can be sure of this that her novels were the final sounds of the gong that welcomed the era of Modernists. The nature of text definitely changed in the era, perhaps, more in her novels than other's. The sublime style of text that she and other Modernist writers developed was such a mix of poetry and prose that it challenged the conventions to the very base. It is clear that she did not see her novels having such a following as it does today, but the cannons set by her "*psychological poems*" (what they were called by her husband) did contribute significantly to the forthcoming era of anti-structuralism and though the question that whether this work of art is poetry or not perhaps holds no significance now, its clear that one is to benefit from seeing exactly what manner the cannons were challenged by it. Hence, this study of what makes this novel not *just another Modernist novel*, but a true work of art, an experiment never done before.