

From Voice to Unconscious: An Analysis of “Empty Centre” in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction

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Introduction

Around the 1930s, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), one of the representative English modernist writers, began to get interested in not only the conscious part but also the subconscious or unconscious part of the human minds. The represented consciousnesses in fiction are either originally verbalized or non-verbalized, and generally each consciousness is supposed to be attributed to subject (usually thinker). However, there are unusual phenomena in some texts (e.g. modernist texts), in which the expressive elements or subjectivities are detected but their subjects cannot be identified. In order to present the subconscious or the unconscious in fiction, Woolf seems to have exploited such unusual texts that have the centre of consciousness defined as “empty”. By stylistically examining some texts with ‘empty centre’ phenomena, I shall try to shed a new light on the texts of Woolf’s fiction, and consider the correlation between empty centre and the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung’s idea, ‘collective unconscious’.

1. The definition of empty centre

Banfield argues that although the use of deixis evokes subjectivity, we cannot identify its subject (SELF) which perceives it in some texts. Her examples are chosen from Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931). The linguistic features Banfield focuses upon as expressive words are deictic devices such as *now* and *here*. Deixis usually functions when a certain subject exists who perceives time or place when/where it is articulated and, then, it evokes a ‘SELF’. However, in the ‘Interludes’ in *The Waves*, which are the italicized sections of natural scenic descriptions, no characters appear and it seems impossible to identify any SELF to whom the subjectivities in deictic words are attributed. Banfield defines this type of narrative or focalizing style as ‘empty deictic centre’. For some phenomena, she also uses the term ‘empty centre’, which would be more suitable because subjectivity is evoked by not only deictic words but other subjective words.

Supporting Banfield’s discussion, Fludernik (1996: 193) adds several linguistic features which

evoke subjectivity to the category originally defined by Banfield. I quote a passage from *The Waves*, which Fludernik uses to show her examples.

Now, too, the rising sun came in at the window, touching the red-edged curtain and began to bring out circles and lines. Now in the growing light its whiteness settled in the plate; the blade condensed its gleam. Chairs and cupboards loomed behind so that though each was separate they seemed inextricably involved. The looking-glass whitened its pool upon the wall. The real flower on the window-sill was attended by a phantom flower. Yet the phantom was part of the flower for when a bud broke free, the paler flower in the glass opened a bud too.

(*The Waves*: 55)

In addition to deictic words such as *now*, Fludernik points out familiarizing articles (*the*), expressive syntax (*red-edged curtain*), spatial deixis (*behind*) or references to cognitive orientation (*seemed*). She also pays attention to past perfect tense (*had sung*) as linguistic features which evoke a perceiving consciousness. This is because the form of pluperfect shows an event anterior to an ongoing process, which implies the presence of subjectivity perceiving the time passing. In this way, the linguistic signal of subjectivity is not restricted to the deictic words. Hence, empty centre phenomena could occur within an ordinary text, even though the text is not so "experimented" as the 'Interludes' in *The Waves* where the description of nature is offered without characters.

2. Focalization and subjectivity in the 'Interludes'

The notion of focalization seems to be useful in examining the texts with empty centre phenomena, because the discussion of focalization enables us to deal with a broader range of text beyond a sentence. The concept of focalization is introduced first by Genette in order to distinguish between *seeing* (focalization) and *speaking* (voice), which had been confused under the term of 'point of view'. Developing this concept of focalization, Bal (104) defines the relationship between 'the focalizer', the subject that sees, and 'the focalized'.

Empty centre is considered as the phenomenon where subjectivity evoked in the text cannot be connected to any specified character. It can be simply defined as the phenomenon where a source of subjectivity is unclear. This means that study of empty centre is closely related to the issue of focalization, because identifying 'SELF' or subjectivity seems to be identical with distinguishing who focalizes (who sees, thinks, etc.) the text. We can presume that in the text with empty centre, to

identify the focalizer is difficult because the absence of SELF means that we cannot detect any focalizer.

By applying the focalization theory to the text with empty centre phenomena, it becomes possible to read the texts with empty centre at the deeper level of interpretation. Generally, focalizer in fiction has two types: an internal focalizer, who exists inside the story world, and an external focalizer, who exists outside the story world. The Interludes in *The Waves*, which Banfield discusses as the example of empty centre, do not apparently include any characters on stage. Technically speaking, therefore, their focalizer should be external, which means that it is a third person narrator. However, the expressive features, such as *here* and *now*, suggest subjective points of view and thus imply the presence of the internal focalizer. Although Banfield argues that there is no focalizing subject in the empty centre phenomena, it seems possible to understand that any characters are not seen but something or someone actually exists inside the story world.

Such interpretation can be supported by closely analyzing the text. Each part of the Interludes begins with describing a distant object such as the horizon and the waves, and then moves toward the space of human life such as the garden and the house. Considering such shifts of the focalized objects, we can assume that the focalizer is set inside the house and he or she is viewing the seaside view from the inside of the house. The following example is the first section of the Interludes quoted from *the Waves*.

THE sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.

As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously. Gradually the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk and left the glass green. Behind it, too, the sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow, spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. Then she raised her lamp higher and the air seemed to become fibrous and to tear away from the green surface flickering and flaming in red and yellow fibres like the smoky fire that roars from a bonfire. Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire were fused into one haze, one incandescence which lifted the weight of the woollen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue. The surface of the sea

slowly became transparent and lay rippling and sparkling until the dark stripes were almost rubbed out. Slowly the arm that held the lamp raised it higher and then higher until a broad flame became visible; an arc of fire burnt on the rim of the horizon, and all round it the sea blazed gold.

The light struck upon the trees in the garden, making one leaf transparent and then another. One bird chirped high up; there was a pause; another chirped lower down. The sun sharpened the walls of the house, and rested like the tip of a fan upon a white blind and made a blue fingerprint of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom window. The blind stirred slightly, but all within was dim and unsubstantial. The birds sang their blank melody outside.

(*The Waves*: 3-4, the underline is mine.)

Since the passage is narrated by the third person narrator and there are no characters at the scene, the focalizer seems to be external in the beginning. At the end of the passage, however, readers are encouraged to think that the focalizer is placed inside the room. The inside of the room is referred to as 'all within', while the birds singing their melody are described as 'outside'. This suggests that the focalizer is not seen but exists inside the room. It can be said that, in the case of the Interludes in *The Waves*, the empty centre phenomenon which Banfield points out as impersonal subjectivity do not necessarily mark the absence of the SELF, but actually serve to emphasize that someone, though invisible, should exist inside the story world.

Furthermore, as the overall interpretation of the work, we can interpret the implied focalizer in the scenic description as finally connected to the characters delivering the soliloquy which appears after the abovementioned passage. The implication at the end of the Interlude that the focalizer resides inside the room concerns our interpretation of the next section, in which each character starts to speak about the rising sun. Although the parts of the scenic description are independent of the 'dramatic soliloquy' which consists of a series of the characters' speeches, they can be linked together in its context. While the empty centre phenomena in the Interludes may be interpreted as presenting 'consciousnessless' subjectivity, it is possible to attribute the subjectivity to the characters in the dramatic soliloquy from a cognitive stylistic and narratological point of view. Such relation between the subjectivity detected in the Interludes and the characters in the dramatic soliloquy greatly influences the interpretation of the whole fictional world in *The Waves*.

3. Group psychology

As I have argued, the insight of empty centre gained in connection with focalization contributes to

the deeper interpretation of the text of the Interludes and the whole text of *The Waves*. Discussion of focalization also gives a significant insight to the interpretation of the empty centre phenomena in other passages from Woolf's works which can be read as focalized by a group of members. Different from the effect of 'someone existing' seen in empty centre, the text of empty centre extracted here is considered as involving subjectivity of a group of members, which is called 'group psychology'. I would like to first extract a text from Katherine Mansfield to explain the type of empty centre presenting 'group psychology' before moving on to discussion of Woolf's text.

The following passage is from Mansfield's short story, 'Garden Party', where we can recognize the empty centre phenomena in which both Fludernik (1996: 179-182) and Stanzel (1981: 12) pay attention to. Laura, the heroine of this story, thinks that the garden party of her family should be called off because she had the news that a man dies in her neighborhood. In this scene, Laura is talking to her sister, Jose, about the party.

'But we can't possibly have a garden party with a man dead just outside the front gate.'

That really was extravagant, for the little cottages were in a lane to themselves at the very bottom of a steep rise that led up to the house. A broad road ran between. True, they were far too near. They were the greatest possible eyesore, and they had no right to be in that neighborhood at all. They were little mean dwellings painted a chocolate brown. In the garden patches there was nothing but cabbage stalks, sick hens and tomato cans. The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridans' chimneys. Washerwomen lived in the lane and sweeps and a cobbler, and a man whose house-front was studded all over with minute bird-cages. Children swarmed. When the Sheridans were little they were forbidden to set foot there because of the revolting language and of what they might catch. But since they were grown up, Laura and Laurie on their prowls sometimes walked through. It was disgusting and sordid. They came out with a shudder. But still one must go everywhere; one must see everything. So through they went.

'And just think of what the band would sound like to that poor woman', said Laura.

(Mansfield: 76-77)

The narration in this story can be described as a reflector-mode in which the internal world of the characters is represented: most parts of the story are focalized by the characters. However, this passage is distinct in the sense that it is not clear who focalizes the comment appearing between

Laura's speeches, which is about the way of living of poor people in the Sheridan's neighborhood. Laura, one of the two characters here, can hardly be considered as making this contemptuous comment, because she sympathizes with the poor neighbors. It is hardly possible either to think that Jose is making this comment, because she could not remember how Laura and Laurie sometimes walked through the cottage. Since Jose's consciousness has not been fully revealed in the whole story, we are discouraged from interpreting the comment as reflecting Jose's consciousness. Stanzel (1984: 172) explains that these reflect 'the collective voice of the members of the Sheridans family other than Laura', and argues that this narrative mode produces the ironical effect caused by the discrepancy between the narrator's opinions presented in other parts of the story and the opinions announced by the collective voice of the Sheridans. Fludernik also regards this as 'the narrator's ironic mimicry of typicalised story-internal opinions'. Both critics agree that the passage projects group psychology, producing the ironical effect.

Here is another example of projecting group psychology detected in Woolf's other work, *To the Lighthouse* (1927). This scene describes a night when Mrs Ramsay tells her son James that they can visit the lighthouse on the following day, if the weather is fine. She makes her son stand still and measures the stocking for the lighthouse keeper's son.

'Stand still. Don't be tiresome,' so that he knew instantly that her severity was real, and straightened his leg and her measured it.

The stocking was too short by half an inch at least, making allowance for the fact that Sorley's little boy would be less well grown than James.

'It's too short,' she said, 'ever so much too short.'

Never did anybody look so sad. Bitter and black, half-way down, in the darkness, in the shaft which ran from the sunlight to the depths, perhaps a tear formed; a tear fell; the waters swayed this way and that, received it, and were at rest. Never did anybody look so sad.

But was it nothing but looks? People said what was there behind it — her beauty, her splendour? Had he blown his brains out they asked, had he died the week before they were married — some other, earlier lover, of whom rumours reached one?...

(*To the Lighthouse*: 33-34, the underline is mine.)

Most part of the passage describes what is in Mrs Ramsay's consciousness. However, the underlined part, expressing the great admiration of Mrs Ramsay's beauty, belongs to neither her consciousness nor the other characters'. As for the same passage, Auerbach (532) points out that it is not clear where

this comment on Mrs Ramsay's look comes from, and that they are not 'objective utterances on the part of the author in respect to one of the characters' but 'the spirits between heaven and earth, nameless spirits capable of penetrating the depths of the human soul'. He also claims that such unusual narration contributes to present the elusiveness of reality of human minds. It seems, however, that his comment makes a little leap, because, as I have attempted to clarify, the comments are actually a common view among unspecific members surrounding Mrs Ramsay. This passage epitomizes the way Woolf represents group psychology in her fiction in the 1920s. Although the text of empty centre phenomena is seen in Woolf's works before 1930, they present "collective voice" arising from the conscious part of human minds.

As seen in the critical comments by Auerbach, the text with empty centre phenomena is controversial and worth examining in detail. In the next section I would like to make a step forward by examining the effect of empty centre in *Between the Acts* (1941) and showing my interpretation of the text with empty centre phenomena where the unconscious part of human minds is represented.

4. Impersonal subconsciousness

In addition to the representation of group psychology, some other effects have been suggested regarding empty centre by literary critics and linguists. As I have argued before, Banfield (276) claims that empty centre means the absence of consciousness, and the text presents 'impersonal subjectivity'. On the other hand, Stanzel (1984) argues that empty centre phenomenon is 'the strange behavior of the omniscient authorial narrator'. Dealing with the texts with diverse types of subjectivities, Fludernik (1996: 192) calls empty centre phenomena 'figuralization.' She declares that 'this technique evokes a text-internal perceiving consciousness: and it has the effect of "readerly empathy", which involves the readers into the story' (1993: 391). She also implies its possibility of presenting 'the voice from impersonal subconsciousness'.

In relation to Fludernik's implication of 'impersonal subconsciousness', the next passage in Woolf's *Between the Acts* is worth discussing. On the day of the pageant, two visitors, Mrs Manresa and William Dodge, come to Points Hall. The dining room is described just before the visitors come in.

(1)Candish paused in the dining-room to move a yellow rose. (2)Yellow, white, carnation red - he placed them. (3)He loved flowers, and arranging them, placing the green sword or heart shaped leaf that came, fitly, between them. (4)Queerly, he loved them, considering his gambling and drinking. (5)The yellow rose went there. (6)Now all was ready - silver and white, forks

and napkins, and in the middle the splashed bowl of variegated roses. (7) So, with one last look, he left the dining -room.

(8) Two pictures hung opposite the window. (9) In real life they had never met, the long lady and the man holding his horse by rein. (10) The lady was a picture, bought by Oliver because he liked the picture; the man was an ancestor. (11) He had a name. (12) He held the rein in his hand. (13) He had said to the painter:

'If you want my likeness, dang it sir, take it when the leaves are on the trees.' (14) There were leaves on the trees. (15) He had said: 'Ain't there room for Colin as well as Buster?' (16) Colin was his famous hound. (17) But there was only room for Buster. (18) It was, he seemed to say, addressing the company not the painter, a damned shame to leave out Colin whom he wished buried at his feet, in the same grave, about 1750; but that skunk the Reverend Whatshisname wouldn't allow it.

(19) He was a talk producer, that ancestor. (20) But the lady was a picture. (21) In her yellow robe, leaning, with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence. (22) The room was empty.

(23) Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. (24) The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence.

(*Between the Acts*: 32-34, the sentences are numbered for the sake of convenience.)

The servant, Candish, has prepared for lunch, arranged the flower and then left the dining room. After the character disappeared in (7), the description of two pictures on the wall of the dining room begins with (8). The question is who is observing the pictures here. From sentence (1) to (7), the focalizer is mainly Candish, and thus the readers are likely to keep on reading the story world mainly through this character's focalization. However, after the character has left the scene in sentence (7), Candish's 'perceiving frame' breaks: Candish is no longer looking at the dining room. Contextually it is clear that there is no one inside the dining room after sentence (8); therefore, the readers lose the anchorage of focalization. From sentence (8) to (24), where the focus is on the two pictures, the readers might have a feeling of being left alone, or someone else still existing there.

It would be possible to understand that the narrator is looking at the picture, if the readers start to read the passage from sentence (8). However, even though the readers regard the narrator as focalizer, it will become difficult to retain this interpretation when they read forward. This is because

the manner of talking is not like that of the objective narrator. The narrative tone in (13) or (14) implies that the focalizer is actually standing in front of the pictures. Judging from the way the past conversation is described, it seems that the focalizer has actually met the gentleman portrayed in painting. So the readers assume the focalizer to be within the fictional world. This interpretation is also supported by the language features, such as the demonstrative nouns, 'that skunk the Reverend Whatshisname' in (18) and 'that ancestor' in (19). Accordingly, the readers will be encouraged to attribute these stylistic features to someone else except the narrator. As the reading proceeds, the readers come to doubt more strongly that the focalizer is the narrator. In sentence (21) and (22), the focalizer is led to 'silence' by the portrait of a lady. The focalizer is impressed by 'the emptiness' of the dining room. The subjectivity seen in this narrative becomes more distinctive after sentence (23), where expressive elements, usually seen in the character's words, appear successively. The focalizer uses the poetic phrases, 'empty, empty empty; silent, silent, silent' in (23), for instance. In (24), the focalizer displays his/her great imaginative power and likens the dining room to 'a shell' or 'a vase'. Such admiration produced by the 'emptiness and silence' shows that the focalizer also has a thinking and feeling function. Therefore, we can hardly interpret such behavior as belonging to the objective third-person narrator.

As I have argued, the empty centre in the dining room scene has a unique function. The part from (8) appears to be the strange behavior of the characterized narrator at first sight. However, the readers must give up this interpretation as soon as the passage ceases to be objective: from around (13) and (14) the narration can be interpreted as arising from someone else but the narrator. Since no characters obviously exist on stage, the readers may recognize something unseen is in the dining room. It might be possible to think that the subjectivity arises from a perceiving subject without bodies. Fludernik (1993: 393) calls this type of subjectivity 'a text-internal perceiving consciousness', through which the readers are led into the story world so that they may perceive the world by themselves. In sentence (23) and (24), the readers may be encouraged to experience the 'emptiness or silence' of the dining room. This can be considered as the effect of what Fludernik called 'readerly empathy'. Owing to such a skillful and poetical style of the sentences, the readers may feel as if the readers themselves were staying in the dining room and actually experiencing what such mysterious focalizer is describing.

5. Collective unconscious

In order to further examine the effect of the empty centre in the abovementioned passage, it is

instructive to refer to other parts of *Between the Acts*. The passage shows that the focalizer is led to the 'silence' by the portrait of a lady. Significantly, several characters in this novel also look at the portrait and feel a sense of 'silence' in it, consequently led to the silent world. The 'silence' and 'the portrait' seem to have a strong connection. The followings are four examples in which characters perceive the silence in the picture.

They all look at him [Dodge]. 'I was looking at the pictures.' The picture looked at nobody.
The picture drew them down the paths of silence.

(*Between the Acts*: 41-42, the underline is mine.)

He [Bartholomew] must, rather laboriously, tell them the story of the pictures at which the unknown guest had been looking when Giles came in. ...

They looked at the picture.

'I always feel', Lucy broke the silence, 'he's saying: "Paint my dog."'

(*ibid.*: 44-45)

They all looked at the lady [of the picture]. But she looked over their heads, looking at nothing. She led them down green glades into the heart of silence.

(*ibid.*: 45)

'Of course, of course I do!' she [Mrs Manresa] cried. Now she was on the rails again. Now she was a thorough good sort again. And they too were delighted; now they could follow in her wake and leave the silver and dun shades that led to the heart of silence.

(*ibid.*: 46)

The connection between the silence and the portrait repeatedly appears in the consciousness or the subconsciousness of those characters. It is not articulated by anyone but rather vaguely perceived by those who look at the picture. I would say that this connection implies some spiritual entities which are common to all human beings. It seems to be related to what are defined as 'universal spirit' or 'collective unconscious' because plural characters perceive the same, "something unperceivable" (the silence). According to Lodge (59), for instance, 'a collective unconscious' is a crucial factor for some modernist writers, who shift their interests to the representation of the subjective thought and feeling, influenced by psychologists such as Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961).

In most studies which take a psychological approach to Woolf's (or other) literary works, Freud's theory has been greatly influential. However, Jung's idea of 'collective unconscious' should not be ignored when we examine the effect of empty centre phenomena. Jung insists that unconsciousness exists under consciousness in each human mind, and in turn under individual unconsciousness collective unconsciousness exists. Collective unconscious can be defined as the pool of human experiences which have been passed from generation to generation.

Woolf's concern with such 'universal spirit' or 'collective unconscious' is seen in her essay, 'Anon' (1938-1939). It shows that, when writing *Between the Acts*, Woolf was strongly interested in anonymous consciousness and unconsciousness, rather than individual characters' minds. The author's interest in the human minds seems to lie not in an individual entity, but in a collective unity of human mind, which has existed universally as the subconscious or unconscious since primitive ages.

Various images of disembodied voices mixed together or plural spirits harmonized appear throughout *Between the Acts*. For instance, 'voices without bodies' (135) are associated with a spiritual sphere actually detached from its body. Also, 'invisible threads connecting the bodiless voices' (135) are related to the universal connection among such spiritual spheres constructed in the depth of the inner world. Although every spirit seems to be bound to each body at the conscious level of the mind, in the depth of the individual mind there exists the universal world of the human unconscious mind detached from human bodies. It may be possible that 'the silent room' in the passage symbolizes such a universal, unconscious world of spirit. The dining room without any specified focalizer is considered as the embodiment of this 'collective unconscious' of human psyches.

Conclusion

In this paper I have reconsidered characteristics of empty centre which have been examined by Banfield, Stanzel and Fludernik, and argued that empty centre phenomena are closely related to the issue of focalization. By examining empty centre phenomena from the stylistic point of view, I have demonstrated a literary interpretation of the Interludes in *The Waves* and clarified the relation between the Interludes and the dramatic soliloquy. With respect to the effect of empty centre, I have illustrated, by analyzing the passage from *To the Lighthouse*, that the empty centre projects 'group psychology' which represents the collective voice of plural human consciousness. In addition to the effect of presenting the collective voice, I have also argued that Woolf attempted to foreground the unconscious sphere within her fiction by creating 'empty centre'. To clarify this view, I have extracted one of the striking examples from Woolf's *Between the Acts* and examined the effect of the

empty centre in connection with Jung's notion of 'collective unconscious', which may be what Woolf wishes to create within her story world without any particular human subject. I would like to conclude that empty centre is the key technique Woolf employed in the works written after 1930 so that she can realize a new field of collective unconscious in her fictional world.

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