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The Mark on the Wall

Virginia Woolf was a novelist and essayist. She grew up in a literary atmosphere and was educated in her father's extensive library. The famous group of intellectuals which came to be known as the Bloomsbury Group originated in gatherings of Cambridge University graduates and their friends in Virginia's home. Along with her husband, Virginia started the Hogarth Press which became a successful publishing house.

In her novels, Mrs Dalloway *and* To the Lighthouse, *she experimented with new techniques, particularly new ways of capturing the flow of time. She believed that much imaginative literature is false to life because it relates episodes in a straight line, whereas our experiences actually flow together like a stream.*

This essay records fleeting impressions and delicate shades of mental experience.



Virginia Woolf
1882-1941

Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw. So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece. Yes, it must have been the winter time, and we had just finished our tea, for I remember that I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time. I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red

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knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece.

How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it... If that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture; it must have been for a miniature—the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations. A fraud of course, for the people who had this house before us would have chosen pictures in that way—an old picture for an old room. That is the sort of people they were—very interesting people, and I think of them so often, in such queer places, because one will never see them again, never know what happened next. They wanted to leave this house because they wanted to change their style of furniture, so he said, and he was in process of saying that in his opinion art should have ideas behind it when we were torn asunder, as one is torn from the old lady about to pour out tea and the young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa as one rushes past in the train.

But for that mark, I'm not sure about it; I don't believe it was made by a nail after all; it's too big, too round, for that. I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened. Oh! dear me, the mystery of life; the inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have—what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization—let me just count over a few of the things lost in one lifetime, beginning, for that seems always the most mysterious of losses—what cat would gnaw, what rat would nibble—three pale blue canisters of book-binding tools? Then there were the bird cages, the iron hoops, the steel skates, the Queen Anne coal-scuttle, the bagatelle board, the hand organ—all gone, and jewels, too. Opals and emeralds, they lie about the

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roots of turnips. What a scraping paring affair it is to be sure! The wonder is that I've any clothes on my back, that I sit surrounded by solid furniture at this moment. Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked! Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadows like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office! With one's hair flying back like the tail of a race-horse. Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard...

But after life. The slow pulling down of thick green stalks so that the cup of the flower, as it turns over, deluges one with purple and red light. Why, after all, should one not be born there as one is born here, helpless, speechless, unable to focus one's eyesight, groping at the roots of the grass, at the toes of the Giants? As for saying which are trees and which are men and women, or whether there are such things, that one won't be in a condition to do for fifty years or so. There will be nothing but spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks, and rather higher up perhaps, rose-shaped blots of an indistinct colour—dim pinks and blues—which will, as time goes on, become more definite, become—I don't know what...

And yet that mark on the wall is not a hole at all. It may even be caused by some round black substance, such as a small rose leaf, left over from the summer, and I, not being a very vigilant housekeeper—look at the dust on the mantelpiece, for example, the dust which, so they say, buried Troy three times over, only fragments of pots utterly refusing annihilation, as one can believe.

The tree outside the window taps very gently on the pane... I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciously, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts. To steady myself, let me catch hold of the first idea that

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passes... Shakespeare... Well, he will do as well as another. A man who sat himself solidly in an armchair, and looked into the fire, so—a shower of ideas fell perpetually from some very high Heaven down through his mind. He leant his forehead on his hand, and people, looking in through the open door—for this scene is supposed to take place on a summer's evening—but how dull this is, this historical fiction! It doesn't interest me at all. I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a track indirectly reflecting credit upon myself, for those are the pleasantest thoughts, and very frequent even in the minds of modest mouse-coloured people, who believe genuinely that they dislike to hear their own praises. They are not thoughts directly praising oneself; that is the beauty of them; they are thoughts like this:

'And then I came into the room. They were discussing botany. I said how I'd seen a flower growing on a dust heap on the site of an old house in Kingsway. The seed, I said, must have been sown in the reign of Charles the First. What flowers grew in the reign of Charles the First? I asked—(but I don't remember the answer). Tall flowers with purple tassels to them perhaps. And so it goes on. All the time I'm dressing up the figure of myself in my own mind, lovingly, stealthily, not openly adoring it, for if I did that, I should catch myself out, and stretch my hand at once for a book in self-protection. Indeed, it is curious how instinctively one protects the image of oneself from idolatry or any other handling that could make it ridiculous, or too unlike the original to be believed in any longer. Or is it not so very curious after all? It is a matter of great importance. Suppose the looking glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people—what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. And the novelists in future will realise more and more the

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importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted, as the Greeks did and Shakespeare perhaps—but these generalisations are very worthless. The military sound of the word is enough. It recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers—a whole class of things indeed which, as a child, one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation. Generalisations bring back somehow Sunday in London, Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons, and also ways of speaking of the dead, clothes, and habits—like the habit of sitting all together in one room until a certain hour, although nobody liked it. There was a rule for everything. The rule for tablecloths at that particular period was that they should be made of tapestry with little yellow compartments marked upon them, such as you may see in photographs of the carpets in the corridors of the royal palaces. Tablecloths of a different kind were not real tablecloths. How shocking, and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom. 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, which has become, I suppose, since the war, half a phantom to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go, the mahogany sideboards and the Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and so forth, leaving us all with an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom—if freedom exists...

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Stop and Think

1. What is the string of varied thoughts that the mark on the wall stimulates in the author's mind?
2. What change in the depiction of reality does the author foresee for future novelists?

In certain lights that mark on the wall seems actually to project from the wall. Nor is it entirely circular. I cannot be sure, but it seems to cast a perceptible shadow, suggesting that if I ran my finger down that strip of the wall it would, at a certain point, mount and descend a small tumulus, a smooth tumulus like those barrows on the South Downs which are, they say, either tombs or camps. Of the two I should prefer them to be tombs, desiring melancholy like most English people, and finding it natural at the end of a walk to think of the bones stretched beneath the turf... There must be some book about it. Some antiquary must have dug up those bones and given them a name... What sort of a man is an antiquary, I wonder? Retired Colonels for the most part, I dare say, leading parties of aged labourers to the top here, examining clods of earth and stone, and getting into correspondence with the neighbouring clergy, which, being opened at breakfast time, gives them a feeling of importance, and the comparison of arrow-heads necessitates cross-country journeys to the county towns, an agreeable necessity both to them and to their elderly wives, who wish to make plum jam or to clean out the study, and have every reason for keeping that great question of the camp or the tomb in perpetual suspension, while the Colonel himself feels agreeably philosophic in accumulating evidence on both sides of the question. It is true that he does finally incline to believe in the camp; and, being opposed, indites a pamphlet which he is about to read at the quarterly meeting of the local society when a stroke lays him low, and his last conscious thoughts are not of wife or child, but of the camp and that arrow-head there, which is now in the case at the local museum, together with the foot of a Chinese murderess, a handful of Elizabethan nails, a great many Tudor clay pipes, a picture

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of Roman pottery, and the wineglass that Nelson drank out of—proving I really don't know what.

No, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known. And if I were to get up at this very moment and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really—what shall we say? the head of a gigantic old nail, driven in two hundred years ago, which has now, owing to the patient attrition of many generations of housemaids, revealed its head above the coat of paint, and is taking its first view of modern life in the sight of a white walled fire-lit room, what should I gain?—Knowledge? Matter for further speculation? I can think sitting still as well as standing up. And what is knowledge? What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits who crouched in caves and in woods brewing herbs, interrogating shrew-mice and writing down the language of the stars? And the less we honour them as our superstitions dwindle and our respect for beauty and health of mind increases... Yes, one could imagine a very pleasant world. A quiet, spacious world, with the flowers so red and blue in the open fields. A world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the waterlilies, hanging suspended over nests of white sea eggs... How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections—if it were not for Whitaker's Almanack*—if it were not for the Table of Precedency!

I must jump up and see for myself what that mark on the wall really is—a nail, a rose-leaf, a crack in the wood?

Here is Nature once more at her old game of self-preservation. This train of thought, she perceives, is threatening mere waste of energy, even some collision with reality, for who will ever be able to lift a finger against Whitaker's Table of Precedency? The Archbishop of Canterbury is followed by the Lord High Chancellor; the Lord High Chancellor is followed by the Archbishop of York.

* *Whitaker's Almanack is a reference book, published annually in the United Kingdom. It consists of articles, lists and tables on a wide range of subjects.*

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Everybody follows somebody, such is the philosophy of Whitaker; and the great thing is to know who follows whom. Whitaker knows, and let that, so Nature counsels, comfort you, instead of enraging you; and if you can't be comforted, if you must shatter this hour of peace, think of the mark on the wall.

I understand Nature's game—her prompting to take action as a way of ending any thought that threatens to excite or to pain. Hence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action—men, we assume, who don't think. Still there's no harm in putting a full stop to one's disagreeable thoughts by looking at a mark on the wall.

Indeed, now that I have fixed my eyes upon it, I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades. Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is a proof of some existence other than ours. That is what one wants to be sure of... Wood is a pleasant thing to think about. It comes from a tree; and trees grow, and we don't know how they grow. For years and years they grow, without paying any attention to us, in meadows, in forests, and by the side of rivers—all things one likes to think about. The cows swish their tails beneath them on hot afternoons; they paint rivers so green that when a moorhen dives one expects to see its feathers all green when it comes up again. I like to think of the fish balanced against the stream like flags blown out; and of water beetles slowly raising domes of mud upon the bed of the river. I like to think of the tree itself: first the close dry sensation of being wood; then the grinding of the storm; then the slow, delicious ooze of sap. I like to think of it, too, on winter's nights standing in the empty field with all leaves close-furled, nothing tender exposed to the iron bullets of the moon, a naked mast upon an earth that goes tumbling, tumbling all night long. The song of birds must sound very loud and strange in June; and how cold the

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feet of insects must feel upon it, as they make laborious progresses up the creases of the bark, or sun themselves upon the thin green awning of the leaves, and look straight in front of them with diamond-cut red eyes... One by one the fibres snap beneath the immense cold pressure of the earth, then the last storm comes and, falling, the highest branches drive deep into the ground again. Even so, life isn't done with; there are a million patient, watchful lives still for a tree, all over the world, in bedrooms, in ships, on the pavement, living rooms, where men and women sit after tea, smoking cigarettes. It is full of peaceful thoughts, happy thoughts, this tree. I should like to take each one separately—but something is getting in the way... Where was I? What has it all been about? A tree? A river? The Downs? Whitaker's Almanack? The fields of asphodel? I can't remember a thing. Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing... There is a vast upheaval of matter.

Stop and Think

1. What is the author's perception of the limitations of knowledge and learning?
2. Describe the unbroken flow of thoughts and perceptions of the narrator's mind, using the example of the colonel and the clergy.

Someone is standing over me and saying:

'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.'

Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail...

Understanding the Text

1. An account of reflections is more important than a description of reality according to the author. Why?
2. Looking back at objects and habits of a bygone era can give one a feeling of phantom-like unreality. What examples does the author give to bring out this idea?

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3. How does the imagery of (i) the fish (ii) the tree, used almost poetically by the author, emphasise the idea of stillness of living, breathing thought?

4 How does the author pin her reflections on a variety of subjects on the 'mark on the wall'? What does this tell us about the way the human mind functions?

5. Not seeing the obvious could lead a perceptive mind to reflect upon more philosophical issues. Discuss this with reference to the 'snail on the wall'.

Talking about the Text

1. 'In order to fix a date, it is necessary to remember what one saw'. Have you experienced this at any time? Describe one such incident, and the non-chronological details that helped you remember a particular date.
2. 'Tablecloths of a different kind were not real tablecloths'. Does this sentence embody the idea of blind adherence to rules and tradition? Discuss with reference to 'Understanding Freedom and Discipline' by J. Krishnamurti that you've already read.
3. According to the author, nature prompts action as a way of ending thought. Do we tacitly assume that 'men of action are men who don't think'?

Appreciation

1. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of narration: one, where the reader would remain aware of some outside voice telling him/her what's going on; two, a narration that seeks to reproduce, without the narrator's intervention, the full spectrum and continuous flow of a character's mental process. Which of these is exemplified in this essay? Illustrate.
2. This essay frequently uses the non-periodic or loose sentence structure: the component members are continuous, but so loosely joined, that the sentence could have easily been broken without damage to or break in thought. Locate a few such sentences, and discuss how they contribute to the relaxed and conversational effect of the narration.

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Language Work

A. Grammar: Content Words and Function Words

A sentence has words in it. What kind of words? It has nouns:

(1a) I looked up and saw the *mark* on the *wall*.

and verbs

(1b) I *looked* up and *saw* the mark on the wall.

It may have adjectives

(2a) How readily our thoughts swarm upon a *new* object…

and adverbs

(2b) How *readily* our thoughts swarm upon a new object…

Such words have a meaning that can be readily explained; these words can be defined. They also have content. *Nouns*, *verbs*, *adjectives* and *adverbs* are *content words.* But what about the remaining words in our examples above? Take for example the word *and*. What is its 'meaning'?

(3) I looked up *and* saw the mark on the wall.

Its meaning is in its function in the sentence. It joins together two words, phrases or sentences. It is a conjunction.

A *conjunction* is a *function word*. Function words are the kind of words that we leave out when we send telegrams, when we can guess at the meaning. Look at this example

…saw mark on wall

What words have been left out in this message? Two occurrences of the word *the*. We can call *the* the definite article. What is its function? In example (1), it shows that a unique mark on a unique wall is being spoken about. Virginia Woolf isn't speaking about '*a* mark on *a* wall', that is, *any* mark on *any* wall. She's speaking about a particular, definite mark on a particular, definite wall.

(4) I looked up and saw *the* mark on *the* wall.

Definite and *indefinite articles* are *function words*. What about the words *I* and *our*?

(5a) *I* looked up and saw the mark on the wall.

(5b) How readily *our* thoughts swarm upon a new object…

These are pronouns; they occupy the place of a noun. But are they, therefore, content words, like nouns? We shall argue that they are not. (Notice that they get left out in telegraphic language.) We can make up new nouns in a language, but we

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cannot make up new pronouns. *Pronouns* are a *closed set*; *nouns* are an *open set*. So, we shall say, *pronouns* are *function words*.

The words that remain in our examples are *up*, *on*, *upon*, and *how*. The first three are *prepositions*. Are prepositions content words or function words? We can argue that prepositions have meaning, and treat them as content words. (Notice that they occur in telegraphic language.) Or we can argue that prepositions are a closed set of words like pronouns, and treat them as function words. So this question does not have a single answer.

Finally, what is the function of *how* in our example in (2)? *How*, we all know, usually asks a question; it is a *question word*. But our example in (2) is not a question. It is an exclamation. *How* occurs in the exclamation (2) in place of the intensifying word *so* in (6a)

(6a) Our thoughts swarm upon a new object *so* readily!

(6b) *How* readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object!

How occurs instead of *so* in (6b) because the emphasised word *readily* has moved to the front of the sentence.

Summing up: Content words are nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and perhaps prepositions.

Function words include conjunctions, pronouns, determiners and demonstratives, quantifiers and intensifiers, question words, and perhaps prepositions.

Task

(i) Can you say which words are content words in the examples below, and which are function words? All the examples are from the text in this unit.

(ii) Can you name the kind of word (its category as noun, pronoun, etc.?). A dictionary may help you to do this. You can work in pairs or groups, discussing the reasons for your analysis.

- Ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it.
- They wanted to leave this house because they wanted to change their style of furniture.
- I don't believe it was made by a nail after all; it's too big, too round, for that.
- There was a rule for everything.
- The tree outside the window taps very gently on the pane.

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B. Pronunciation

We have seen how the segments of spoken language, i.e. vowels and consonants, combine to produce syllables, words and sentences. When we articulate these segments, we notice that there is some variation. That is, in connected speech, we do not isolate sounds, but several things can happen to the pronunciation of their individual segments. The speed and rhythm can cause some segments to have weak forms, some to drop out, and some put in.

Words, sometimes, have both strong and weak forms, depending on whether they are pronounced with force. The word 'is', for instance, is pronounced /iz/ when said in isolation, or in emphasis as in

He *is* responsible.

[Meaning: He cannot get away from the fact that he is responsible.]

But in the utterance

He *is* a doctor

The word 'is' has no emphasis, and so it is pronounced as /s/ or /z/.

TASK

(i) Look at the following words

a and had is not

Notice the difference in pronunciation when they are said in isolation and in normal conversation.

(ii) Find out five more words which have both strong and weak forms.

Suggested Reading

The Death of the Moth by Virginia Woolf

The Moment by Virginia Woolf.

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