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ENGL 119
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Short Writing Assignment #1

In “The Mark on the Wall,” Virginia Woolf takes the reader on a meandering stream of consciousness. In the first sentence, readers start on “Perhaps” (77), thus being immediately invited into the narrator’s mind. Instead of declaring absolutes (such as, “It *was* the middle of January”) and taking direct action, the narrator ponders, unsure, from her seat. In addition, the narrator remains nameless--after all, why would the narrator need to remind herself of her name, if she’s only thinking to herself? The usage of the present tense (for example, “...for I remember...”) draws the reader even closer to the narrator; it feels like the reader is eavesdropping on an inner conversation that is happening in the present. In the meantime, Woolf continues to direct the metaphorical boat; phrases like “so now I think of the fire” follow the changing tides of the stream, pushing and pulling the narrator’s thought process. It is made even clearer that Woolf is writing a meandering stream of consciousness when the narrator mentally floats down a detour (“...I thought of the cavalcade...”) before returning to the mark at the end of the first paragraph. Woolf might have wanted to let the reader inhabit another being, feeling every emotion and little thought. Otherwise, Woolf could have finished “The Mark on the Wall” in two sentences: one that describes the narrator looking at the mark, and another that reveals what it actually is.

If we take this analysis to the second paragraph, the stream of consciousness continues. In a moment of clarity, the narrator remarks, “How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object...” before returning to her ponderings on the origins of the mark. If the narrator is so self-aware, then continuing to think in such a manner suggests that the primary focus of this

piece is to illustrate how this remark plays out in practice. Em dashes and ellipses decorate the second paragraph, implying breaks from the beginning thought (or, if we continue the analogy, brief detours from the original stream). Full stops are sparse; instead, commas introduce phrase after phrase. After all, thoughts seldom stop completely. For example, Woolf writes, “If that mark was made by a nail, it can’t have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature...” These three thoughts flow into each other, without room for breath (as pauses for breath are not needed while thinking). The used punctuation perfectly suits the stream of consciousness.

Not much occurs in these two paragraphs; if the reader stops on the first page, then the only thing they can say is that the narrator is wondering about the mark on the wall. However, in spending so much time on the thought process, the reader learns much about the narrator. For example, the reader learns that the narrator likes to read in front of the fire, that the narrator has a taste for beauty (“the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl”), and that the narrator is curious (in thinking about the former house-owners often). In essence, the reader gets to slip into another’s mind for a few moments; perhaps that was what Woolf had intended. The goal of “The Mark on the Wall” may not be following an external plot, but following the inner workings of one human being.