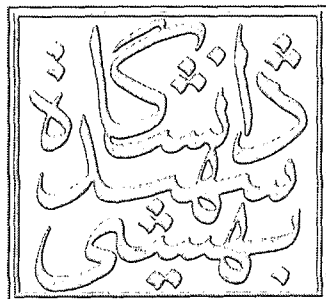


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In the Name of God



**SHAHID BEHESHTY UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND HUMANITIES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**A COMPARATIVE IMPRESSIONIST STUDY
OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S THE WAVES
AND SELECTED PAINTINGS OF CLAUDE MONET**

By

Mariam Mohammadi

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Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Nojournian

Thesis Reader: Dr. Ilkhani

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ABSTRACT

This study has its roots in the fact that although various branches of art are born through dissimilar media, similar mentalities bring them together, irrespective of apparent difference. Thus, the world of painting, created through shapes, lights and colors, may have the same ambiance as that of novel which comes to life through letters and words. Claude Monet, the French Impressionist painter, has certain affinities with Virginia Woolf, the English novelist, whose sensitivity to the visual arts makes itself manifest in her literary techniques. The shared world of Woolf and Monet comes to live through similar points of view. The personal optical sensations of Monet, portraying reality, parallels Woolf's subjective presentation of it. Hence, a fluid, many-sided, and evanescent reality appears in their works of art. Over and above to Woolf, presenting the atmosphere of mind is of primary importance. Likewise Monet is chiefly concerned with rendering the atmosphere of his subject matter rather than presenting it in a photographic manner. More so, the use of light and color in characterization as well in establishing atmosphere is another painterly technique in Woolf's novels. Finally, their particular attitudes towards the concept of time, mainly the significance of the moment and duration complete the shared world of these two artists.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning there was darkness. Then came the colors. Then came the words. And it was light. The unsaid was shaped into colors, the invisible into words. And the most hidden domain of man's soul was illuminated through art. No matter how the white emptiness of pages is covered, no matter if it is paint or word, the root is one.

General background

Jeffrey Meyers begins his book *Painting and Novel* with a quotation from Baudelaire: "A characteristic symptom of the spiritual condition of our century is that all the arts tend, if

not to act as a substitute for each other, at least to supplement each other by lending each other new strength and new resources" (Watt 87).

That statement might be clarified by stipulating that it deals with artists rather than with art consumers, for the latter have enjoyed the enjoyment for another. Painting according to Meyers is "mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture" (Watt 87).

It was left out to German aesthetics to tease out the implications of these fragments, and particularly the meaning and import of that elusive middle term, speech or silence. In 1766 Lessing's *Laocoon* took up the matter, beginning, "The first who likened painting and poetry to each other must have been a man of delicate perception...." Lessing observes that in some senses the perceiver of a poem may receive the impression not of a succession of actions but of a whole; but he goes on to elucidate the real differences in form between painting and poetry. His example is the shield of Achilles, which, although it is essentially a painting, becomes in Homer's hand "a thing in process... turning the coexisting of his design into a consecutive" (Gardner 696). Literature, Lessing implies, is experienced in a temporal dimension as fine art is not. Schiller, in his letters on the aesthetic education of man elucidates Horace's aphorism in terms of observer, suggesting that the idea of kinship of the arts has to do not with form (which Lessing showed to be a false idea anyway) but with the final aesthetic effect of great art on the consumer:

It is an inevitable and natural consequence of their approach to perfection that the various arts, without any displacement of their objective frontiers, tend to become ever more like each other in their effect upon the psyche.... poetry, when most fully developed must grip us powerfully as music does, but at the same time, like the plastic arts, surrounded us with a serene clarity. This, precisely, is the mark of a perfect style in each and every art: that it is able to remove the specific limitations of the art in

question without thereby destroying its specific qualities, and through a wise use of its individual peculiarities, is able to confer upon it a more general character. (Watt 543)

Schiller's is an extremely sophisticated argument, carrying with it as it does the difficult ideas of form and experience. Here poetry is capable of moving us with the rhythmic, temporal development of music, and at the same time pleases us by its sense of spatial shape.

The fine art of the Modern period – the art which Bloomsbury followed, popularized and contributed to – had often little to do with “serene clarity”. For Picasso, the nail was the undoer of painting: “his canvases had a life of their own sustained by contact with viewers, not an abstract form to be put away and admired from time to time,” says Heinrich (241). Expressionist or Impressionist, what painting of the Modern period has in common (to simplify rather crudely) is a sense of the living canvas, implying a sense of the living viewer with the painting. This development thus brought painting closer to the temporal world of literature in a way undreamt of by Horace or indeed Lessing.

It is instructive to see how the greatest contemporary aestheticians, deal with modern art. Both critics begin from a phenomenological study of perception, since that element has become crucial in the creation and consumption of modern art. Arnheim talks about “the activity of perceptual forces” and, from a consideration of seeing as an active process of reading the message before one, infers that “seeing is the perception of action” (Heinrich 102). From this angle he can give a purely aesthetic account of such challenging formal works of art as Cubist painting or film montages, for here the individual units “must refute one another's solidity... only a delicate balancing of the innumerable forces meeting one another at innumerable angles can provide a semblance of unity” (Gardner 671).

Arnheim is able to incorporate with ease into his aesthetic the temporal literary notion of narrative, treating what he calls the "path of disclosure" as simply a formal element, and equating literature and painting as the spatialisation of intelligible facts into a harmonious balance.

Another aesthetic like Escher reminds us that the willingness of the eye to arrange and order a painting in recognizable dimensions of space and time is precisely what limits our aesthetic development. Modern artists deliberately challenge those habitual patterns of appreciation in order to free us for pure aesthetic contemplation:

At all times, of course, the aesthetics of picture-making had more to do with composition than with illusion. Artists have always been poets, striving to achieve a fine balance of shapes and colors and to devise a beautiful pattern to fill the painting surface in a pleasing way. But these efforts could easily be destroyed by the reading mind that rearranged these shapes in an imaginary depth. (Miller 21)

Although Lessing stresses the aesthetic element of painting, he is able because of his emphasis on perception to make the leap to metaphysics more easily than Arnheim:

The true miracle of the language of art is not that it enables the artist to create the illusion of reality. It is that under the hands of great master the image becomes translucent. In teaching us to see the visible world afresh, he gives the illusion of looking into the visible realms of the mind. (Miller 21)

When painting reached such a sophisticated point of concentration on the painter's own processes of perception and those of his audience, art could really no longer be discussed in such crude terms as windowpane and garden, terms which assumed a distinction between observed and observer which was no longer valid. The possibilities for

aesthetic creation were boundless. Kandinsky, for all his talk of art being like religion, “showing new perspective in a blinding light” (Miller 34), suggested this limitless freedom for self-expression independent of the shared physical world when he wrote, “painting is a thunderous collision of different worlds, intended to create a new world in, and from, the struggle with one another, a new world which is the work of art” (Miller 34).

There was an assumption that painting is an immediate experience; but the attempt in modern art to render the life of the world or the life of the artist in the canvas itself has challenged that assumption. Gauguin in 1890 wrote, “Like literature, the art of painting tells us whatever it wants, with the advantage of letting the reader immediately know the prelude, the direction, and the denouement. Literature and music ask for an effort of memory to appreciate the whole” (Gardner 672). In the painting of Cézanne for instance, the element of time does come in. The objects themselves “move” between the worlds of windowpane and garden, and the observer’s pleasure comes from experiencing both dimensions in the same canvas, remembering one while experiencing the other. Fry puts it this way: “objects retain their abstract intelligibility, their amenity to the human mind, and regain that reality of actual things which is absent from all abstractions” (Gauguin 163). And the idea of the possible temporality of painting is more exhaustively put by the philosopher Merleau Ponty, talking about Cézanne:

Lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one... It is Cézanne’s genius that when the overall composition of the picture is seen globally, perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right, but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our very eyes. (Gauguin 163)

Here the idea of life in paintings is applied in a complex way, not to the interaction of elements on the canvas, or their referents, but to the interaction of canvas and viewer; it is the most sophisticated development of the emphasis on perception in aesthetics.

Painting can appear in the temporal form of the novel, in the obvious sense of a reference to a painting as part of the narrative. We shall find many instances of this in the novel of Woolf, and most often the writer's point is to tell us something about the viewer's state of mind. These references to paintings are in time and refer to development of character in time. These references to paintings are in time and refer to development of character in time. There is another sense in which a fiction can be related to a painting, in the sense of a piece of abstract art. This has been mainly a recent development, post-Joycean, such as in the works of Donald Barthelme where the literary object is a new creation to be added to the objects already in the world. But as a critic, Barthelme observes, the idea of the art object as object "has never really caught on in fiction-writing," (Wellek 311) because the medium of words always points elsewhere, to a real world outside the object. Sound and pigment can more easily be divorced from the ordinary world than can words.

A third sense in which literature and painting can be related is that a novel should be appreciated in the same way as painting is. The attempt to create literature which is immediately apprehensible in the way that paintings are assumed to be is also a modern phenomenon. In 1915 a movement called "Simultanism" proclaimed, "in literature the idea is expressed by the polyphony of simultaneous voices which say different things." Of course, printing is not an adequate medium, for succession in this medium is unavoidable and a phonograph is more suitable" (Dowling 31). A more flexible analogy between

painting and writing has long been a staple of literary critics and creators; its most eloquent exponents and explorers were Henry James and Marcel Proust.

James argued that literature, while it plucked its material from the garden of life, transformed it into an intelligible shapes, "life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection"(Dowling 165). James used painterly terms such as "foreshadowing" but usually in a straightforward sense of the proportions within the work—the dominant characters, subordinate plots, and so on. Of "paramount importance" to a novel were its "felt life" and the line of its plot since "the soul of a novel is its action".

Aesthetics were predicated on human meaning:

James disapproved of the Goncourts' attempt to 'poach' on the art of painting and was always severely critical of writers merely interested in pictorial descriptions and local color. 'Picture' is not enough. Every good story is of course both a picture and an idea, and the more they are interfused the better the problem is solved. (Wellek 312)

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, for example, Isabel Archer actually becomes a portrait -- the term is simply descriptive of form of the novel. "James's use of painterly imagery in his preface did much to remind later writers that novel-writing was an art, he was limited in his own development of the implications of the analogy by his adherence to realism and to the simple unities of tone and story" (Dowling 35).

After the propagandistic nature of art, serving religion in the Middle Ages; its rendering of idealistic picture of man in the Renaissance; its extravagance of Baroque and Casualness of Rococo; its sensitiveness of Romanticism and representativeness of realism; there comes a movement that puts its emphasis merely upon the artist's impressions. Underlining the sensory impressions in the perception of the world was partly the impact of

philosophy of David Hume (1711-76) who supported the empiricist doctrine of John Locke (1632-1704), maintaining that "all or most significant knowledge is based on sense experience." Of the component parts of the mind; impressionism and ideas, Hume gave the priority to the impressions. He defined "Ideas" as "less lively perceptions" which occur when we reflect on our original sense-impressions (Watt 87). In the Idealism of George Berkeley (1635-1753), viewing the mind as the only enduring thing, was also influential. He believes that "the only things which really exist are minds and their contents. Physical objects are collections of ideas that exist only in so far as they are perceived by finite human minds or by the infinite mind, God" (89). According to Ian Watt, "from Descartes onwards the concentration of philosophical thoughts upon epistemological problems gradually focused attention on individual sensation or the only reliable source of ascertainable truth" (Watt 89).

Scientists also were in accord with the philosophers in the significance of sensations in viewing the world. According to Ernest Mach, "the sole reality is sensation. And all the laws and principles of physics are only a kind of shorthand referring to complex linking of the data of sense." Furthermore, "modern experiments of psychology begin with the measurement of sense experience". (Gardner 696) Breaking away from the French Academy of art, the Impressionists revolutionize painting "contentwise" and "formwise" (Dowling 342). They no more believe the task of the painter is to portray beauty, according to the established standards, set by the Greeks and the Romans and the Renaissance artists. To the 18th-century painter, the grandeur of a painting depends on the grandeur of its subject-matter, that is, mostly human figure: a hero or a noble man for instance. "The wish of the genuine painter is to improve mankind by the grandeur of his ideas," states Joshua

Reynolds in *The Third Discourse* (Gowans 76). Therefore, the painter still has a didactic role, leading the humanity as a prophet.

Considering the Romantic Movement, the painter begins to get involved with his personal emotions in his works of art. The importance of subject-matter is still manifest in this period. Grand canvases are overflowed with historical figures, reflecting the didactic purpose of art. As Jacques Louis David points out about a painting's subject-matter: "It must have grandeur and a moral. If effectively presented, the marks of heroism and civic virtue offered the eyes of the people will electrify its soul, and plant the seeds of glory and devotion to the fatherland" (Gardner 698).

The literary figures, also, occupy the Romantic paintings. Each canvas tells a story. Above all, to gain an emotional response from the spectator is the main task of the artist. By the emergence of the Barbizon painters, another branch of the late Romanticism, nature is foregrounded in their paintings but not in its idealized form. They paint directly in front of nature, completing their canvases in their studios. Although they abandon the Romantics' concern with a landscape's "meaning", an unrealistic aura enwraps their paintings. However, the impact of this movement on the Impressionist painters is hardly deniable.

The Realists' reaction to the Romantic painters is to strip painting of emotionalism, putting the emphasis on the bare fact. Consequently, the portrayal of beauty gives way to the presentation of reality. Beautiful or ugly, they delineate whatever exists before their eyes, true to life in every detail. Hence, the Realist painters change the subject-matter of paintings through removing heroic, ideal and anecdotal themes from it and depicting the common, everyday life. As Baudelaire suggests: "The painter, the true painter to come, will be he who wrests from the contemporary scene its epic side and shows us through color and line, how great and poetic we are in our ties and polished boots" (Heinrich 82).

Baudelaire's statement is crystallized in Impressionist painting. The term "Impressionism" in painting was used for the first time in a disapproving sense about Claude Monet's painting entitled *Impression, Sunrise* 1873 (Fig.6) by a journalist, mocking the formlessness of Monet's work. The leading trait of Monet's painting is its retreat from likeness. The focal point is shifted towards his sensations, hence deemphasize of the subject-matter is of primary importance. In fact, the prominence of what the painter sees is turned into how he sees. Their canvases become empty of the clear, detailed forms, and it is the painter's impressions that are reflected in the paintings. Accordingly, the photographic reproduction of the *sujet* yields to a vague portrayal of it. It seems that all shapes and colors are immersed in a hazy ambiance.

Monet, moving his aisle to nature, aims at one task first of all: "to capture light." Thus doing, he establishes a sort of unity in his work by doing it in the same conditions of light. The colors also reflect light. Chiefly, the unmixed colors produce a shimmering effect. More so, Monet rejects tonal modeling, the gradation from dark to light that was used by the previous painters. Studying effects of light and color on the snow and water, he finds that no object cast a black shadow but each shadow has its own color. Therefore, he removes blacks, browns and shades of grey from palette. The last traces of total darkness are taken from his canvases. Therefore colorful shadows become another source of light. "By means of decomposition of the prism, the impressionist reconstitute light, divided color and multiplied reflected lights and graduations they substituted for varying grey as many different colors" (Frascina and Harrison 8).

Argument

In 1931 Mrs. Woolf published two revealingly diverse pieces of work -- her Introduction to *Life as We Have Known it*, a series of biographical sketches written by members of the Women's Co-operative Guild, and her novel *The Waves*. It is considered to be her most experimental novel which uses stream of consciousness to trace the lives of six characters from childhood, when they share a house together, to their reunions in later life and finally to their old age. Each character's life story is revealed incidentally, and although there is no differentiation in their speech, their individual personalities are revealed by recurring phrases and images. Italicized passages record the ascent and descent of the sun, the rise and fall of the waves, and the passing of seasons.

The novel has been conceived, not only in the mood, but in the manner of poetry. It had been designed, one feels, as an organic whole. It fulfils the conditions postulated for poetry, which seem very happily to describe this distinction. Like a poet Woolf places herself within the subject itself and works from within outwards, while the prosiest usually describes relatively, from without. *The Waves* differs from the traditional English novel. Its theme is similar to that of *The Voyage Out*, *Jacob's Room*, and *To the Lighthouse*. It concerns the preparation of the individual for life and death and the effect of death upon survivors. Its external action is slight; its "story" tenuous and its "plot" almost non-existent. Six children, Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda, are brought together to share governesses in a country house by the sea. They already display, in the first episode of their childhood, the fates which, being ingrained in their own personalities, are to pursue them through their lives.

Woolf observes that the “arts of painting and writing lay close together” (A Writer’s Diary 206). She made raids on postimpressionist painting in the experimental writing of *Kew Gardens* (1919) and *Blue & Green* (1921), where the act of looking is so intense that it dissolves content into purely visual form. In her vision she is entirely absorbed in apprehending the relation of forms and color to one another, as in *Blue & Green* and *Kew Gardens*. Woolf remarks that few writers met Fry’s formalist standards: “they lacked objectivity; they did not treat words as painters treat paint.” Her emphasis on words in relation to paint is the converse of Fry’s, Fry saw texture as subsuming details in overall design: “The texture of the whole field of vision becomes so close that the coherence of the separate patches of tone and color within each object is no stronger than the coherence with every other tone and color throughout the field” (49). This is the effect of constructing a network of human interactions from associations of tone and color. Woolf said that she emphasized texture, which she associated with language, rather than structure, which she associated with plot. Woolf strove to invent “a system that did not shut out” (Collected Essays 189) and to unify psychological and spatial, vital and formal values. As distinct from the still-life painter, the “writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, that changes” (Collected Essays 2:162). She wanted to make the novel more like a work of art, while catching the movement of life itself.

By the same token, there is something immensely moving in the image of Monet narrowing his world to the boundaries of his own garden and then, to the exclusion of anything else, endeavoring to capture its fugitive looks at different moments under different lights in different weathers, and so beneath different reflected skies; but in a sense he had prepared himself for this almost allegorical labor through the serial works of single motifs

that he executed in the 1890s, of the facade of the cathedral of Rouen, of the poplar trees at Giverny, or the muffin-shaped stacks of grain in the fields behind his house viewed, often but not always, from the same vantage point but in different atmospheres and even seasons. Characteristics of Impressionist painting include visible brushstrokes, light colors, open composition, emphasis on light in its changing qualities (often accentuating the effects of the passage of time), ordinary subject matter, and unusual visual angles. This is the very area where you can discover affinities between Impressionist painters and Woolf's writing. Therefore finding where Woolf is painting, using Monet's point of view is what this study will trace.

A novel, and a painting, each an unlike world though, are strikingly similar from certain angles of vision. Thus, Virginia Woolf's novel, being painting in words and sketching in colors, overflowing with tones of light and shadows, makes a fresh portrait of life which is comparable to the paintings of Claude Monet that through the rhythm of its colors forms a poem. The semi-abstract qualities of Monet's paintings such as: *Impression, Sunrise* 1872 (Fig.6), *Wild Poppies* 1874 (Fig.7), *London, Houses of Parliament* 1903 (Fig.2), *Houses of Parliament, Sunset* 1903(Fig.4) *Poplars on the Epte* 1891 (Fig.5), and *Rouen Cathedral* 1892-1894 (Figs. 1-3) offer ground for a comparison with Woolf's novels. The aimed followed in this study therefore, is to discover what affinities does Impressionism exert between a novel and a painting. Actually this study is an attempt to clarify how meaning is achieved through the similarities or differences spread all over *The Waves* and Monet's paintings. Since two distinct worlds are under discussion, two different systems that have their own ways of creating meaning, the world of words and world of colors, finding some codes which make analogies between these two worlds will work. In

fact this way of reading can help us to see how the two systems function and will shed light on the relationship between the two worlds. The best way to read therefore is to read through an artist's eyes, by observing the elements loaded with meaning and noticing how they are placed side by side and how they function in the overall structure of the text (the novel or the paintings) in order to create a coherent world. In other words the importance of this study simply lies in the fact that if we as readers, get to know how the meaning is produced in, or better to say derived from, a given text, what we interpret from that text will be different; that means we will read differently. Structuralists believe meaning is relational. It is perceived through the words and individual words can not make sense by themselves and they obtain their meaning in a system.

Meanwhile the following questions configuring the structure of the argument presented in the thesis, have been arisen which are answered through this study.

- What affinities does Impressionism exert between Monet's paintings and Woolf's novel?
- How temporality and spatiality depicted in writing differs from that in painting?
- What is the effect of light on Impressionistic works?
- From what angles do the two artists look at works of art?
- By what means does the writer apply colors in her writing?
- What different treatments of color is visible in *The Waves*?
- How meaning is created through reading the text?
- How should a painting be read after all?

Answering the above main questions based on the discovery of the similarities existed in Woolf's *The Waves* and Monet's paintings, and the examination of the structural elements clarifies how the text means instead of what it means. It would also help us to see how a new meaning is disclosed in the light of the other, and how one can view literature from a quite different point of view.