SWIMMING BACKWARDS
A Look at Technique in Virginia Woolf

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Introduction

*The mind swims backward and the readers want to go forward.*

—Jerome Stern

In 1997, I participated in Natalie Goldberg’s writing workshop at the Luhan Mabel House in Taos, New Mexico. In a beginning writing exercise, Goldberg had us note in our journals the details of a black and white photograph. The exercise was meant to help us learn to write concrete details: clothing, hair style, expression, and the particulars of setting. When some of us read aloud what we’d written, she noted that we had theorized about what the character was doing or feeling, rather than just noting the angle of a curtain or a person’s misbuttoned shirt. Each time a writer moved away from detail into speculation or likes and dislikes, Goldberg pointed out how the author’s assertion “popped” her from the story. In other words, when movement from point A to point B was interrupted, the reader became disengaged. She asked us to try the exercise again, insisting we only note detail, without opinion or speculation. Once we had the character well grounded in place, then the scene could be animated in time. However,
without the details of place, a character would be speaking without the reader knowing where he was or what his actions were; he would become nothing more than a talking head.

The author decides how much time will take place in a story: a day, a week, a month, a year or several years. This timeframe is called narrative time and is most commonly chosen at the beginning of the project. Scene and summary, the basic fiction elements necessary to construct a novel or short story, move the story forward. Within the scene we find characters concealing and revealing through dialogue and interior monologue, and crises building and resolving when what is known or speculated by one character becomes known to another, thus building narrative tension and the story’s pace.

In *Writing Fiction*, Janet Burroway speaks about time as a necessary fictional element. Large blocks of time can be covered through summary, and shorter sequences can be rendered through scene. Burroway says, “Frequently, the function of summary is precisely to heighten scene. It is in the scene, the ‘present’ of the story that the drama, the discovery, the decision, the potential for change, engage our attention” (181). Other ways of handling time such as stream-of-consciousness writing, interior monologue, and soliloquy (interior thoughts spoken aloud) can serve to heighten scene through contrast—the interior ramblings slowing the reader’s experience of story before pace is heightened again with action and forward movement.

A correct balance of prose elements is needed so that dramatic tension can build and plot can move forward at a pace that doesn’t under- or overwhelm the reader. Overly long sections of stream of consciousness or interior monologue may lose a reader due to the dreamy interior nature of the mind’s meanderings during the flash back or flash
forward, but too many fast-paced scenes may also distance a reader. Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is an example of a fast-paced novel that flies from one cliff-hanger to the next. Some readers hated the book’s hectic pace, while others loved the suspense created by the action-structured page-turner, announcing that they couldn’t put it down and had read the book in one sitting.

Since people read for different reasons: excitement, relaxation, or to broaden or enrich their experience, a range of story tempos appeal to different readers. A fast-paced book like Brown’s actually stimulates the production of adrenaline and quickens the pulse. A book like his might be read purely for entertainment’s sake. A slower paced novel may soothe a reader; a few pages read for relaxation before bed, perhaps an image carrying over into a dream, a symbol to work on in the subconscious to later influence the reader’s daily life.

In E.M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*, story is defined as “…a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence—dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death, and so on” (27). Complex stories, such as Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931), ask the reader to slow down and read for understanding, both of the story and author, and for philosophical enrichment. As the reader moves through one day or a lifetime, Woolf varies the pace of the story by experimenting with fiction techniques. In each of these novels, long stretches of stream of consciousness and interior monologue break the “and then, and then” story line and slow the pace of the writing, whereas the quickening pace of the action scene engages the reader’s attention with the immediacy of the story unfolding in a short period of time.
In each of her novels, Woolf marks the passing of time with the toll of a clock, the flash of the lighthouse beam, changing seasons, lapping waves, or the sun rising and setting, reminders of real time passing as the reader continues heading for point B. In this paper I will focus on how narrative time can be manipulated with fiction writing elements, and how the pacing of the story affects the reader’s experience.
In the early short novel *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf is clearly experimenting with fiction techniques for handling time. She skips large chunks of time, covering the entirety of Jacob’s life through narration, summary, interior monologue, and minimal scene. Much of Jacob’s character is developed through other characters’ viewpoints, as well as from the viewpoint of the peripheral narrator (an unidentifiable narrator who observes from a distance). In this way, the reader learns what is happening outside on the street while Jacob sits in his room reading and smoking his pipe; or in Scarborough, as we eavesdrop on his mother thinking about Jacob after she has read a letter sent from Paris; or to Clara Durrant writing in her diary, “I like Jacob Flanders.” Here and there, the narrator sets up her scenes as though gossiping:

Then here is another scrap of conversation; the time about eleven in the morning; the scene a studio; and the day Sunday.

“I tell you, Flanders,” said Cruttendon, “I’d as soon have one of Mallinson’s little pictures as a Chardin. […] He sells ‘em to pay his dinner now. But wait till the dealers get hold of him…”

“It’s an awfully pleasant life,” said Jacob… (127)

The author circles Jacob, observing him from different viewpoints and different locations. His character develops as Woolf jumps from place to place, giving impressions of Jacob’s looks or someone’s feelings of longing for him while he’s away traveling in Paris or Greece. Even thought the focus revolves around Jacob, jumping
from scene to scene and narrator to character and back again, interrupts the continuity of story. An example of this can be seen when Jacob and Timmy Durrant sail off the coast of Cornwall to the Scilly Isles and the narrator breaks in to interpret Jacob’s gloom as he sits naked in the boat after a swim:

    It is brewed by the earth itself. It comes from the houses on the coast. We start transparent, and then the cloud thickens. All history backs our pane of glass. To escape is vain.

    But whether this is the right interpretation of Jacob’s gloom as he sat naked, in the sun, looking at the Land’s End, it is impossible to say: for he never spoke a word. (49)

This poetic observation of the character’s sorrow makes me think the peripheral narrator is Woolf herself. I can picture her curled in an armchair in her writing den on a rainy English day, pondering her own gloom, and then continuing on with her observations of Jacob in her notebook. The narrator herself becomes one of the many observers of Jacob’s character.

The narrator’s observations are interesting, but the philosophical ruminations interrupt the sailing scene, disrupting the trajectory of the young men’s adventure. After the narrator’s comments, Woolf transitions back to scene, but it isn’t long before the flow of the story is interrupted once again with more commentary. Breaking the story line not only deflates the building tension and forward movement of the story, it also robs the reader of a continuance of Woolf’s beautiful imagery: “Gulls rode gently swaying in little companies of two or three quite near the boat; the cormorant, as if flowing his long strained neck in eternal pursuit, skimmed an inch above the water to the next rock” (51).
In *Steering the Craft*, Ursula K. LeGuin speaks of the techniques crowding and leaping. “What you leap over is what you leave out. And what you leave out is infinitely more than what you leave in” (142). Woolf tells the story of Jacob’s lifetime, and of course it would be impossible and exceedingly dull to tell us everything. LeGuin suggests Woolf’s storytelling skill is amazing, for she has told a long story quickly. Woolf leaps, and in increments, periodically returns the reader to Jacob’s room, a still place to rest while the events of his life unfold. Leaping works to move the reader through days, weeks, months, or years as the waves continually mark time. By the end of the story, discovering Jacob has lost his life in the war comes as a surprise. In the final scene, his mother bursts from his room with a pair of his shoes in her hand, saying, “What am I do with these, Mr. Bonamy?” (176). Woolf uses Jacob’s shoes, physical objects which have transported him from place to place, as an astute symbol representing the time Mrs. Flanders’s son walked the earth.

When an author plays with the balance between scene, summary, stream of consciousness, and interior monologue, the story can be paced according to its needs, speeding up or slowing down the illusion of time at will. Although *Jacob’s Room* is a quick sketch of a character’s life, the pace of the writing is not always quick. When Woolf details place, rendering sounds and actions on the street, such as the clomping of a runaway horse, the pace quickens; however, Woolf misses many opportunities to build narrative tension through action scenes, resulting in a novel frequently disrupted of sequential order, or “…a narrative of events arranged in a time sequence,” as Forster defines story. Woolf’s experimentation may, in fact, have caused the reader confusion;
however, we see her beginning to use techniques that she developed fully in her later novels.
Stream of Consciousness

Mrs. Dalloway

The novel *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place on one day in June—beginning cheerily with Clarissa Dalloway setting off to London to buy flowers for the party she will give that evening. The environment she observes, with its people, motorcars, aeroplanes, and other objects, creates a detailed setting, enlivened not only by her observations, but by each of the other characters’ thoughts and memories, some reflecting on their relationship with her and some not. The reader gets an overview of her relationship with the society she lives in, both historical and cultural, as well as her hopes and fears, desires and losses. By the end of the book, several of the peripheral characters the author has introduced gather at her party, and a clear picture of Clarissa’s place in all of it is drawn.

In the early passages, activity is quick-paced and both punctuation and word choices pattern the busy London setting:

In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (4)

Through precise details, we hear the noise of the city, the aeroplane writing “toffee” in the sky; the music of brass bands and barrel organs, and perhaps we even take in the scent of the sunny city day. The details keep us alert, quickening the pace and moving the reader along toward Clarissa’s goal—the party. But then the story backtracks with
interior monologue; perhaps Peter Walsh is reminiscing about his missed love opportunity with Clarissa, or the ex-soldier, Septimus, is experiencing mental confusion, hallucinating a dog-man coming toward him as he sits on the park bench. Finally Big Ben strikes, calling our attention back from the multi-textured interior world of the characters’ thoughts, memories, and associations, to the actual physical time passing in the exterior world.

After the writer establishes a time frame, how important is it for him or her to consider the novel or short story’s pacing? Woolf felt that there shouldn’t be any controls put on a story. In “The Art of Fiction” she says about the novelist “…he might cut adrift from […] the plausible and preposterous formulas which are supposed to represent the whole of human adventure. But then the story might wobble; the plot might crumble; ruin might seize upon the characters. The novel, in short, might become a work of art” (112). And her art meanders here and there through associative and stream-of-consciousness writing, moving from character to character, and even to the narrator for distant observations.

In a way, Goldberg’s writing theory is similar to Woolf’s. In Wild Mind: Living the Writer’s Life, Natalie Goldberg says, “The mind is raw, full of energy, alive and hungry. It does not think in the way we were brought up to think—well-mannered, congenial” (xiii). Goldberg suggests that during the initial writing stage, the writer needs to only impose upon herself the time she commits each day to sitting down with pen and paper—say twenty minutes of stream-of-consciousness writing or free association at nine-thirty each morning. She says, “We usually live in the realm of second or third
thoughts, thoughts on thoughts, rather than in the realm of first thoughts, the real way we flash on something” (3).

When the only structure containing “wild mind” is the clock, we are free to go anywhere and everywhere. Like in the rearing of a child, the fewer imposed structures, the more freedom he or she has to develop naturally. But as any parent or caretaker knows, children living without enforced structures can turn into out-of-control monsters. This is also true for fiction; without imposed order, stream-of-consciousness and associative writing may become so chaotic that it is unreadable.

Since the mind isn’t ordered, Woolf takes the chaos of the mind and inserts enough organization so that sense is made of thoughts, memories, and associations. The organization of chaotic thoughts turns randomness into story. The inclusion of stream-of-consciousness writing develops the characters in ways that no other fiction element can. It is the closest the reader comes to being inside the character’s mind; his or her mental and emotional responses are experienced by the reader as immediate, almost as if they are the reader’s own response to the events happening in the environment. For example, while Woolf is using this method to examine time, time itself seems to stop:

All the same, that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park; meet Hugh Whitbread; then suddenly in came Peter; then these roses; it was enough. After that, how unbelievable death was!—that it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; (122)
If pacing is slowed by stream-of-consciousness writing and interior monologue, then it is also quickened by summary and scene. In the following example we see how Mrs. Dalloway’s conversation with Hugh Whitbread skips dialogue and assumes meaning through body language, while the narration simultaneously reminds the reader of actual time passing as references are made to the time of day or to an anticipated future:

Evelyn was a good deal out of sorts, said Hugh, intimating by a kind of pout or swell of his [...] body that his wife had some internal ailment, nothing serious, which, as an old friend, Clarissa Dalloway would quite understand without requiring him to specify. Ah yes, she did of course; what a nuisance; and felt very sisterly and oddly conscious at the same time of her hat. Not the right hat for the early morning, was that it? For Hugh always made her feel, as he bustled on, raising his hat, rather extravagantly and assuring her that she might be a girl of eighteen, and of course he was coming to her party to-night…(6)

We can see from this example that the suggestion of dialogue, or summary dialogue, quickens the pace of the story. In this scene, there is a sense of hurrying, accomplished both by suggesting dialogue and by the wording: “as he bustled on.” In contrast, Woolf’s long sections of stream of consciousness sometimes create a feeling of claustrophobia. In the next section, Woolf takes us into the past with stream-of-consciousness writing that begins with the sentence, “She could remember scene after scene at Bourton—Peter furious; Hugh not…” (6). Now the story slows with the character’s interior reflections, then jumps back to the immediacy of the June day when “Arlington Street and Piccadilly
seemed to chafe the very air in the Park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly…”(7). And then, once again, the reader meanders dreamily through the mind’s interior.

These changes in pacing might be likened to music. A passage played in slow time, *adagio*, is relaxing, romantic, or perhaps even moody; where *allegro*, a brisk speed, is felt as passionate or lively. Repetition in music makes for familiarity and also gives the listener a resting place between fast and slow pacing. Woolf slows and speeds the story, creating changes in mood, and at one point even overlaps time, repeating the same incident from two different viewpoints. A child runs into a lady in Regent’s Park, the activity viewed by Peter Walsh as he sleepily sits on a park bench. “Elise Mitchell […] scudded off again full tilt into a lady’s legs. Peter Walsh laughed out” (65).

Then Septimus’s wife ponders the terrible mental problems her husband is having as she walks down the path toward the park bench, and “the child ran full tilt into her, fell flat, and burst out crying” (65). Two observations of the same event, both happening simultaneously, but recorded sequentially, shift the reader away from the immediacy of the story, forcing her to adjust to Woolf’s manipulation of time. In this way, time becomes outwardly observable to the reader. Even though this is an action scene taking place during a short amount of real time, the interruption of the timeline calls attention to itself and disrupts the story’s pace, and the reader is pulled from the immediacy of the story to notice what the writer has done.

By the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, we’ve gotten to know Clarissa through many different sets of eyes and memories as well as her own thoughts and associations about society and her friends and family members. We can see that her sense of self has been influenced by her husband, daughter, Sally, Peter, and many others. In a way, Woolf has
swirled us around through a maze of thoughts and images, allowing the story to fill in piece by piece, the novel becoming more and more textured with back-story, all within the time-frame of one day. The cumulative effect forces the reader to examine life’s meanings, to find its significance as E. M. Forster suggests: “And what the story does is to narrate the life in time. And what the entire novel does—if it is a good novel—is to include the life by values as well” (29).

The book ends with Clarissa giving the party, an accumulation of activity that has Clarissa herself “bustling” about, enlivened with all the people and noise and friends she hasn’t seen in a long time, people we’ve heard about as the story unfolds. As the party advances, the timeframe fades and we arrive at point B.
To the Lighthouse

Woolf’s experiments in stream-of-consciousness writing result in a successful story written about the Ramseys and their guests gathering at the seaside summer home. As the days unfold, the characters linger in feelings, impressions, conflicts, and anticipations as Woolf weaves the reader through their interior worlds. In contrast to the swimming nature of stream of consciousness, “Time” is concretely marked by the lighthouse’s beacon flashing, a rhythm that accompanies the conflicts arising between the Ramseys, including their aborted plans for a trip to the lighthouse. Even the reader’s anticipation of the trip is interrupted when the book’s mid-section, “Time Passes,” stops the story’s forward movement. The reader is left to engage with the empty house instead, witnessing its deterioration as time goes by. Ten years later the story resumes when the family and their guests return; Lily paints as the boat sails to the lighthouse—the final goal is reached at last.

Although the pace of this novel rarely clips along, it does meander through the emotions and interior ponderings of its characters, capturing, as the book’s back cover says, “the characters’ moment-by-moment reactions to the passing of time.” In the section “Time Passes,” the author summarizes the years the family is away, keeping the point of view with the empty house and its deterioration, the only witnesses to its
downfall being the lighthouse’s beacon and an old caretaker’s occasional visits. “The swallows nested in the drawing-room; the floor was strewn with straw; plaster fell in shovelfuls; rafters were laid bare; rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind the wainscots” (137).

While the house sits idle, the immediacy of Mother Nature blossoming in current time is also interrupted. Bracketed newsy summaries note several deaths in the Ramsey family and “pop” the reader from the immediacy of nature’s unfurling, as can be seen in the following paragraph:

…the spring with her bees humming and gnats dancing threw her cloak about her, veiled her eyes, averted her head, and among passing shadows and flights of small rain seemed to have taken upon her a knowledge of the sorrows of mankind.

[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth…] (132)

Woolf’s use of detail shows nature’s fecundity, its immediacy being almost palpable, buoying the reader as the environment sprouts, grows, and dies. Then Woolf contrasts life and death—the details of the deteriorating house with the season changes—interrupting the natural progression of time. Though “Time Passes” is an effective way to transition from one period of time to another, this original and creative summary interrupts the forward movement and the reader is jolted from the spell of the story.

When years later, the caretaker Mrs. McNab and her friend put the house back in order for the family’s return, Woolf refers to time with a capital “T”: “Slowly and painfully, with broom and pail mopping, scouring, Mrs. McNab, Mrs. Bast, stayed the
corruption and the rot; rescued from the pool of Time that was fast closing over them now a basin, now a cupboard; fetched up from oblivion…” (139). When the old women begin restoring the summer house, the story’s pace accelerates again, and “…some rusty laborious birth seemed to be taking place, as the women, stooping, rising, grooming, singing, slapped and slammed, upstairs now, now down in the cellars. Oh, they said, the work!”(139).

The goal of traveling to the lighthouse resumes years later when the family returns, and the story’s forward movement picks up again. By delaying the payoff, a trip to the lighthouse, Woolf builds dramatic tension and the story’s pace speeds up as the destination becomes more likely. As can be seen in the following example, the immediacy of action moves the characters quickly through time toward their goal—the lighthouse:

They had tacked, and they were sailing swiftly, buoyantly on long rocking waves which handed them on from one to another with an extraordinary lilt and exhilaration beside the reef. On the left a row of rocks showed brown through the water which thinned and became greener and on one, a higher rock, a wave incessantly broke and spurted a little column of drops which fell down in a shower. (206)

In this example, the slow dreamy quality of the stream-of-consciousness writing is replaced with action and detailed setting and the story clips along with an energetic description of the family sailing across the water. Woolf’s choice of words, though lyrical—“sailing swiftly, buoyantly on long rocking waves,” and “extraordinary lilt and exhilaration”—serves to quicken the story’s pace through images of movement. As they
finally embark on the dangerous crossing to the lighthouse, the reader is released to the exhilaration of splashing along as the boat “handed them on from one [wave] to another.”

At the end of the novel, the now sixteen-year-old James finally receives his father’s approval; Mr. Ramsey leaps onto the rock at the lighthouse and the point of view switches to Lily, who has been painting the lighthouse from shore: “‘He must have reached it,’ said Lily Briscoe aloud, feeling suddenly completely tired out” (208). She is tired from looking at the lighthouse, which interestingly has now “…melted away in a blue haze” (208). Here at the end of the book, the timekeeper becomes hidden in the mist. Has the sentinel only been marking time, its flashing light a guide for the characters to follow, or could this be Woolf’s imaginings of life coming to an end, the flashing beacon guiding the family through the years until the end, or death, is finally reached?

Mr. Carmichael, the poet who’s been sleeping in a yard chair as Lily paints, rises to look across the water when the Ramseys arrive at the lighthouse. “He stood there as if he were spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind; she thought he was surveying, tolerantly and compassionately, their final destiny” (208). Woolf gives this character a god-like gesture which supports the idea of life’s linearity, which eventually comes to an end. In this book, time moves forward, is interrupted, and then determinedly continues on to reach its ending place—the lighthouse.
Interior Monologue

*The Waves*

*The Waves* is written in a series of soliloquies or interior monologues spoken aloud like a Shakespearian address. Six friends’ express their viewpoints, allowing the reader to participate along with their thoughts, actions, and observations, but their viewpoints are never shared with each other, nor do they physically interact. The story’s reported details result in an experience of immediacy as the characters’ observations unfold sequentially in real time; however, without interaction, the friends’ lives run parallel, resulting in a slow-paced novel that left me unable to read more than a few pages at a sitting.

In the following passage, details unfold moment-by-moment as Susan names the particulars of her surroundings while returning home from school for summer holiday:

Now we stop at station after station, rolling out milk cans. Now women kiss each other and help with baskets. Now I will let myself lean out of the window. The air rushes down my nose and throat—the cold air, the salt air with the smell of turnip fields in it. And there is my father, with his back turned, talking to a farmer. I tremble. I cry. There is my father in gaiters. There is my father. (217)
As Susan reports her experience, the setting becomes clearly observable to the reader, but her relationship to her surroundings remains inactive. Even the emotion she feels isn’t expressed, just spoken as the reader eavesdrops on her thoughts. Woolf’s experiment with interior monologue results in a story that remains fairly static.

Even then, Woolf’s writing is beautiful, her scenery clearly described, and her philosophy intriguing; the snapshots of characters’ lives unfolding in time and space move the story forward—but slowly. Because of the objective reporting style, very little narrative tension builds. *The Waves* is a good example of why characters must interact, so that the confrontation, turning point, and crisis within the scene builds narrative tension and accelerates the pace of the story.

Woolf summarizes throughout this novel, leaping over events that could easily be developed into scene. In the following summary, the character tells the reader sequentially what she will do the following day, rather than showing us Susan standing on the moor as the sun rises and swallows skim the grass.

Then next morning I shall get up at dawn. I shall let myself out by the kitchen door. I shall walk on the moor. The great horses of the phantom riders will thunder behind me and stop suddenly. I shall see the swallow skim the grass….I do not want, as Jinny wants, to be admired. I do not want people, when I come in, to look up with admiration. I want to give, to be given, and solitude in which to unfold my possessions. (211)

When the character speaks personally, time shifts from the sequential summary defining the future to the concrete present of Susan’s immediate thoughts. And even though there are situations where all the characters come together in one place, conflict doesn’t
develop, nor does narrative tension build. For example, when the group of six waits for Percival to join them in the restaurant before he goes off to India, they talk as if they’re speaking to each other, but they do not physically engage:

“Now let us issue from the darkness of solitude,” said Louis.

“Now let us say, brutally and directly, what is in our minds,” said Neville. “Our isolation, our preparation, is over. The furtive days of secrecy and hiding, the revelations on staircases, moments of terror and ecstasy.”

“Old Mrs. Constable lifted her sponge and warmth poured over us,” said Bernard. “We became clothed in this changing, this feeling garment of flesh.” (261)

The characters reflect on what it means to have Percival going away, yet he never speaks; in fact, it isn’t really clear whether or not he is actually in the restaurant with the others. While they sit there, however, they philosophize about life and their time together. Even as Percival leaves, he is without substance, without action, and without a voice.

Woolf enters the characters’ minds through interior monologue and even though this lets us eavesdrop on their innermost thoughts, interior monologue alone isn’t enough to create narrative tension. According to Burroway, “Scene is always necessary to fiction, for it allows readers to see, hear and sense the story’s drama moment-to-moment” (210). Even though the reader is given information about the characters in this story, I found it frustrating to have them come close to each other, suggesting the possibility of interaction in scene, yet never achieving it. I wonder if Woolf’s characters’ ruminations are her personal ponderings on the meaning of life; perhaps she is merely exploring her
feelings of disconnection. Or perhaps the group is reflecting on what it is to be alive, yearning to connect with each other and with God, but in the end, remaining physically separate.

Interestingly, when Percival goes, the question Neville asks is how to capture and keep that which is intangible—his non-existent friend.

“Now the agony begins; now the horror has seized me with its fangs,” said Neville. “Now the cab comes: now Percival goes. What can we do to keep him? How bridge the distance between us? How fan the fire so that it blazes for ever? How signal to all time to come that we, who stand in the street, in the lamplight, loved Percival? Now Percival is gone.” (277)

Next we discover that Percival has been killed in a fall from a horse in India. Here is some real trouble that Woolf could have taken advantage of, building dramatic tension and quickening pace through scene. The drama would have escalated with the tragedy, causing the characters to change and grow with the crisis. Instead, the characters remain passive, pondering their loss and Percival’s imagined accident and the thoughts of the people in India who didn’t know him, yet tended to him. It is as if Woolf has taken the characters and rendered them as she did Mother Nature in To the Lighthouse. While their dreamy thoughts and observations unfold, tragedy happens elsewhere; almost as if they are sleeping while life continues on without them.

Even though The Waves conforms to E.M. Forster’s description of story, “…a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence….” I might add an additional thought to the quote, “including character interaction,” otherwise, as Forster also says, “…it [the
story] can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next” (27).

Experimentation isn’t a bad thing; in fact Woolf’s language is poetic and inspiring and her concepts of separateness and unity are thought-provoking. I learned from *The Waves* that a lack of scene and summary curtails action and without action and in this case, interaction, story becomes no more than a series of characters’ parallel experiences. In a way, Woolf gives the reader the sensation of tumbling through a dream where time is undetermined and characters remain blurry. Interestingly, in regards to this novel, Woolf is quoted as saying, “Odd, that they [The Times] should praise my characters when I meant to have none.” [Virginia Woolf, 5th of October, 1931]. I believe she succeeded at her intent.
Conclusion

The underlying structure of any novel or short story is its timeframe, or how much fictional time the story covers: an hour, a week, a day, a month, a year, a lifetime. Woolf’s symbols for time—the tolling of Big Ben during Mrs. Dalloway’s day, the lighthouse flashing steadily throughout the Ramseys’s lives, Jacob’s excursions into the world then back to his room as waves continuously roll onto shore, chapter introductions describing the sun rising higher and higher then setting at last in *The Waves*—ground the reader with a repeating physical beat as each story moves forward from point A to point B.

Within the structural timeframe of any story, pacing, or the quick and slow movement achieved through a mix of fiction elements, propels the reader along the story arc from beginning to end. In each of Woolf’s novels, time is clearly defined and marked and even periodically named, but at the same time, her experiments with stream of consciousness and interior monologue affect pacing, slowing the story as characters’ thoughts stroll into the past and quickening the story again when characters interact through scene; the overall pacing of her novels vary in tempo, much like a piece of music. Woolf comments on pacing in her essay “Reading,” describing the feeling of relaxation reading can evoke. “…the very flow and fall of the sentences lulls us asleep,
or carries us along as upon the back of a large, smooth-paced cart horse, through green pastures” (163).

In Tom Bailey’s craft book *A Short Story Writer’s Companion*, Eudora Welty is quoted as saying, “In going in the direction of meaning, time has to move through a mind…” (90). Bailey interprets Welty’s meaning as, “Fictional time can be enacted by the dramatization of events that clock together as experience…” (91). In other words, it is the scene that gives the story motion, and fictional time is experienced through the character’s perceptions of unfolding events. Bailey explains that this is the “concrete foundation upon which the straw-bricks of fictional time are laid” (91).

In regards to structure, Jessica Page Morrell says that it is up to the author to make decisions about what is necessary to the story and what is not. In her craft book *Between the Lines*, Morrell states that “Drama contains high points, low points, and in-between points. Some moments need emphasis and slowing down, while others need to be compressed or summarized” (284). Since time is an illusionary construct in fiction and the pace at which the reader moves through a story is controlled by the writer, if a story is dragging, fiction elements may be evaluated and corrected during the editing process so the reader will stay engaged.

In Goldberg’s photograph exercise, the details of the environment, including a character’s clothing and location in space, create a fixed stage around which the action of a scene commences. Once the setting is animated, the author’s goal is to create forward movement at a rate that will enhance the story. As the reader envisions a scene, the changing tempo, based on the fiction elements and syntax chosen, becomes part of the reader’s physical experience. In Woolf’s essay “Modern Fiction,” she explains that “if a
writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it” (150).

This thought aligns with Goldberg’s comment; the mind’s workings are not orderly. So even though the details are there, animating them through scene becomes not only an exercise in creating story, but also one in organization. And in both the rough draft and in the rewrite of a story, applying both Woolf and Goldberg’s theory is sound.

In spinning any new story, a writer must give the mind the freedom to bring to the page its associations, dreams, subconscious images, and idiosyncrasies, each of which will serve the story in a powerful way that linear thinking and enforced structures, relied upon at the inception of story, may not. In other words, allowing oneself to express without any constraints will produce the most powerful writing.

When an author approaches a story in this manner, shaping will eventually become necessary, both to order and make sense of the mind’s ramblings and, in some cases, to fine-tune the pacing. Woolf is inventive in her novel shaping, as we can see in *To the Lighthouse*, with its summary “Time Passes” separating the beginning and the end of the novel. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa’s streaming consciousness and those of the other characters circling her finally come together at the end when her party takes place. In *Jacob’s Room*, the narrator becomes an observer seeing Jacob from different viewpoints, leaping through his life as the sun rises and sets. And finally, in *The Waves*, she develops the characters separately, building a novel of soliloquies.
At the end of *To the Lighthouse*, the character Lily Briscoe looks at her blurred canvas “with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something” (208). And just as the author makes subtle changes to right the pacing of a story, Lily observes her painting and sees what will clarify her vision. “With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished” (209).
Works Cited


Which fish can swim backwards and why would they need to? Whether or not a fish can swim backward is probably not something that too many fish keepers have stopped to consider. After all, there are very few circumstances, especially in the wild, that one would think that a fish would need to do so. Swimming forward is definitely the direction of fish choice, with the occasional hovering thrown in. Can fish swim backwards? The vast majority of fish swim forwards but most have the ability to swim backwards as well.