



The concept of time in Virginia Woolf: preliminary considerations.

To understand Woolf we need to understand the concept or trope of time.

Time tortures us to the point that all meaningful literary artefacts originate as responses to time. Shakespeare, for instance, raged against time in most of his works.



Origin of time as devourer

The Greek God Cronus , also spelt Kronos, devoured his own children in fear that they might usurp him. This may be the beginning of the idea of time as an all- devouring force which knows no distinction between class, gender and place. The word chronology possibly derives from Cronus/Kronos.

Later, in the Bible, in *Genesis* 3:19, we have the concept of time as death:

“...for dust thou art, and to dust shalt thou return.”

Therefore it is not surprising to find that St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) engages with time in his *Confessions* (written between 397 to 400 A.D.). St. Augustine was the most radical convert to Christianity after St. Paul (circa 5 – circa 67 A.D.).

“Book XI of the *Confessions* contains a long and fascinating exploration of time, and its relation to God. During the course of it Augustine raises the following conundrum: when we say that an event or interval of time is short or long, what is it that is being described as of short or long duration? It cannot be what is past, since that has ceased to be, and what is non-existent cannot presently have any properties, such as being long. But neither can it be what is present, for the present has no duration. (For the reason why the present must be regarded as durationless, see the section on the specious present, below.) In any case, while an event is still going on, its duration cannot be assessed.

Augustine's answer to this riddle is that what we are measuring, when we measure the duration of an event or interval of time, is in the memory. From this he derives the radical conclusion that past and future exist only in the mind. While not following Augustine all the way to the mind-dependence of other times, we can concede that the perception of temporal duration is crucially bound up with memory. It is some feature of our memory of the event (and perhaps specifically our memory of the beginning and end of the event) that allows us to form a belief about its duration. This process need not be described, as Augustine describes it, as a matter of measuring something wholly in the mind. Arguably, at least, we are measuring the event or interval itself, a mind-independent item, but doing so by means of some psychological process.”

Poidevin, Robin Le. “The Experience and Perception of Time.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 06 April 2015, plato.stanford.edu/entries/time-experience/.

St. Augustine is the first Western thinker to emphasise the primacy of interiority and subjectivity in experiencing time. Augustine anticipates the phenomenological turn in philosophy which characterises Modernist thought. Woolf's novels too prioritise memory and subjectivity in their use of the time-trope. Chronology is sacrificed for the sake of the Freudian (chaotic) unconscious in Woolf's novels.

the specious present and *the rough now*

- In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), the philosopher William James (1842-1910) elaborated on the specious present first discussed by the psychologist E. Robert Kelly in *The Alternative: A Study in Psychology* (1882). Kelly had discussed the specious present as the duration which constitutes *the here and the now*.

“Time is nothing other than tension,” Augustine notes, “and I would be very surprised if it is not tension of consciousness itself.” All these centuries later, scientists are still struggling to define consciousness, the self, and time. Augustine linked the three through language. You approach time only by trying to measure its passage as a sentence unfurls; there your mind is taut, present. And only in the present, in the act of attending, do you glimpse what you are. For Augustine, *now* is a spiritual experience.

James added a twist. He declared all three tenses—future, past, and present—nonexistent, and he invoked a fourth, what he called “the specious present.” (He borrowed the term from E. R. Clay, which was the pseudonym for a retired cigar magnate and amateur philosopher named E. Robert Kelly.) The true present is a dimensionless speck; the specious present, in contrast, is “the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible.”

Burdick, Alan. “The Present .” *Why Time Flies: a Mostly Scientific Investigation*, Simon & Schuster, 2017, pp. 73–186.

- Later the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) developed the concept of *the specious present* in his *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893–1917). Husserl’s *the rough now* is another name for Kelly and James’s the specious present. Husserl in this work termed the analysis of time as the most difficult task of phenomenology.

Modernist treatment(s) of time constitute the analysis of “the specious present” and “the rough now”. Woolf’s treatment of time is definitively phenomenological and an artistic explication of *the specious present* or/and *the rough now*. What we find in St. Augustine’s *Confessions* culminates in the works of Edmund Husserl. It is against this background of the analyses of time that we have to study the fiction of Virginia Woolf.