



Mrs. McNab's Time Passes: Working Women Outside the Brackets in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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ABSTRACT

This creative critical piece considers the changing economic status of women and related changes in prose forms between the 1920s and the 2020s. We explore the character of Mrs. McNab, a housekeeper, in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), using sentences from the novel interspersed with creative-criticism in brackets (just as the action of the plot is bracketed in the novel). We argue that while upper class women are bracketed and domestic staff kept outside the brackets in Woolf's novel, the daughters of educated men she identified with trouble the brackets today, while the Mrs. McNabs are still outside the brackets.

KEYWORDS: Woolf; Modernism; Prose; Precarity.

O Tempo da Sra. McNab Passa: Mulheres trabalhadoras fora dos colchetes em *Ao farol*, de Virginia Woolf

RESUMO

Este ensaio de crítica criativa considera a mudança do status econômico das mulheres e mudanças análogas a ela nas formas da prosa entre as décadas de 1920 e 2020. Exploramos a personagem da Sra. McNab, uma criada em *To the Lighthouse* (1927), de Virginia Woolf, usando frases do romance intercaladas com críticas criativas entre colchetes (assim como a ação do enredo está entre colchetes no romance). Argumentamos que, enquanto as mulheres da classe alta estão entre colchetes e as criadas fora dos colchetes no romance de Woolf, as filhas de homens instruídos, como Woolf se identificou, hoje tensionam os colchetes, enquanto a Sra. McNabs ainda está fora dos colchetes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Woolf; Modernismo; Prosa; Precariedade.

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1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf wrote the “Time Passes” section of her modernist novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) during the general strike of May 1926, “when the country seemed to be on the point of degenerating into violence and class strife” (Bradshaw, 2006, p. xxxvii). It is fitting then, as Woolf scholar David Bradshaw argues, that Woolf places two working women, the housekeepers Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast, at “the centre of her novel and makes them integral to her notion of civilisation, not just two of its nameless and faceless facilitators” (2006, p. xxxvi). Their central role, he says, “undermines” Woolf’s brother-in-law Clive Bell’s ‘lofty master-slave rhetoric’ in his (then forthcoming) *Civilisation* (1928). This undeniable centrality (“Time Passes” is the middle section of the novel) is not completely levelling though. There is, shall we say, a mistress-servant binary, which is maintained by brackets throughout this section of the novel, and which echoes Woolf’s own position as a mistress with servants, something Alison Light discusses in *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* (2007). While most of the human action in “Time Passes” (character deaths and so on) occurs within square brackets, McNab and Bast only appear to have agency outside the brackets, where nonhuman forces – the weather, the sea, plants, animals, ageing objects, decay – dominate. The brackets, then, separate the Mrs. McNabs and Mrs. Basts (aligned with the nonhuman) from the aristocratic Mrs. Ramsays of the novel. Today, the “daughters of educated men,” as Woolf called them in her feminist polemic *Three Guineas* (1938), trouble these brackets, being themselves neither servants nor mistresses (WOOLF, 1998, p. 155).

This creative-critical piece develops a dialogue with “Time Passes,” opening it up to a contemporary reading of the Mrs. McNabs and Mrs. Ramsays of the twenty-first century, whilst also considering the changing role of “the daughters of educated men” (WOOLF, 1998, p. 155) in a state of precarity. In doing so, we layer Woolf’s passages – using only the sentences from the novel which name Mrs. McNab – with contemporary ideas and contexts, building a narrative within (or outside the brackets of) the novel’s narrative. We are particularly interested in questions of modernist prose in contemporaneity and what modernist prose feminisms can tell us about the shifting literary form and economic status of women between the 1920s and the 2020s. We argue that while upper class women are bracketed, and domestic staff kept outside the brackets in Woolf’s novel, the daughters of educated men ride the brackets today, while the Mrs. McNabs remain trapped outside.

2. Mrs. McNab's Time Passes

Then again peace descended; and the shadow wavered; light bent to its own image in adoration on the bedroom wall; when Mrs. McNab, tearing the veil of silence with hands that had stood in the wash-tub, grinding it with boots that had crunched the shingle, came as directed to open all windows and dust the bedrooms.

[Mrs. McNab, a housekeeper, is one of the only human characters in the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In this section, she stands outside the brackets which contain the action of the plot.]

But Mrs. McNab continued to drink and gossip as before.

[What do we learn about this woman who works outside the brackets when we read only the lines in the book that name her?]

Through the short summer nights and the long summer days, when the empty rooms seemed to murmur with the echoes of the fields and the hum of flies, the long streamer waved gently, swayed aimlessly; while the sun so striped and barred the rooms and filled them with yellow haze that Mrs. McNab, when she broke in and lurched about, dusting, sweeping, looked like a tropical fish oaring its way through sun-lanced waters.

[Between the brackets the Ramsays marry, die in childbirth, die suddenly, are killed in France during the First World War]

Thinking no harm, for the family would not come, never again, some said, and the house would be sold at Michaelmas perhaps, Mrs. McNab stooped and picked a bunch of flowers to take home with her.

[Thinking no harm, for no one ever comes to reclaim their lost scarves and umbrellas, so you took them home. There was a soft dark blue scarf once. Cashmere. Someone had stitched their initials into the label. JS.]

There was the old grey cloak she wore gardening (Mrs. McNab fingered it).

[The daughters of educated men write theses on Woolf. Wear soft scarves.]

'Good-evening, Mrs. McNab,' she would say.

[They wait tables and clear plates, polish cutlery and wipe down menus, refill ketchup bottles and fold napkins. Wear other people's scarves.]

'Good-evening, Mrs. McNab,' she said, and told cook to keep a plate of milk soup for her – quite thought she wanted it, carrying that heavy basket all the way up from town.

[They are not Mrs. McNab or Mrs. Ramsay. Their work is prose; their work is prosaic. Their time passes in and out of brackets.]

She could see her now, stooping over her flowers; and faint and flickering, like a yellow beam or the circle at the end of a telescope, a lady in a grey cloak, stooping over her flowers, went wandering over the bedroom wall, up the dressing-table, across the wash-stand, as Mrs. McNab hobbled and ambled, dusting, straightening.

[How would Woolf write the waiter-researcher, the daughters of educated men, in precarity? The scientist call-centre workers, the historian admin temps, the philosopher interns, the artist check-out assistants, the medical student street fundraisers, the anthropologists on zero hours, the teaching assistants paid 73p an hour (PHILLIPS, 2020, p. 1), the 77 percent of students working part-time (ROGERS, 2020, p. 1), the junior lecturers who can't afford the commute (O'HARA, 2015, p. 1), the contractual staff on jobseekers allowance (University College Union, 2015, p. 15), the classicist who sells steak pies at the football stadium in a baseball cap lined with someone else's make up?]

Mrs. McNab's dream of a lady, of a child, of a plate of milk soup?

[The Mrs. McNabs today clean hotel toilets, stock shelves; the Mrs. Ramsays garden in Kensington, do good; the daughters of educated men ride the brackets]

Mrs. McNab groaned; Mrs. Bast creaked.

[Then this happened. The brackets groan, creak]

All of a sudden, would Mrs. McNab see that the house was ready, one of the young ladies wrote: would she get this done; would she get that done; all in a hurry.

[Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole around window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here the empty chairs and tables of a restaurant, there the rows of desks and desktops with black screens, there the bright colours of the nursery walls, or the sharp edges and firm bulk of running machines, unlifted weights, or the empty storeys of car parks. Nothing stirred in the playgrounds (where the swings were removed from their frames) or abandoned construction sites, or the blank, unlit high street windows. Only through the rusty hinges, scrape of something loose on the scaffolding, the railings of the park, certain airs, detached from the body of the wind crept round corners, toying with the flap of hanging tarpaulin, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the signs on shop windows (closed until further notice) whether they would fade, and questioning (gently, for time was at their disposal), the overflowing bins, the parked cars, were they allies? Were they enemies? How long would they endure?]

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 all the Waverley novels and a tea-set one morning; in the afternoon restored to sun and air a brass fender and a set of steel fire-irons.

[Indoors, the daughters of educated men piled their books about them, turned on their laptops, lost their part-time jobs, kept their scholarships, wrote their theses. The Mrs Ramsays tended their gardens, delivered shopping to elderly neighbours, did good.]

Once more, as she felt the tea warm in her, the telescope fitted itself to Mrs. McNab's eyes, and in a ring of light she saw the old gentleman, lean as a rake, wagging his head, as she came up with the washing, talking to himself, she supposed, on the lawn.

[The Mrs McNabs stayed in the universities for weeks, cleaning empty offices; they worked in care homes without masks, gloves, without sanitiser; they travelled on the bus to work in warehouses with their scarves pulled up over their faces; they stocked shelves in supermarkets that were emptied, emptied, emptied –]

It might well be, said Mrs. McNab, wantoning on with her memories; they had friends in eastern countries; gentlemen staying there, ladies in evening dress; she had seen them once through the dining-room door all sitting at dinner.

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