

**The City, the Self and the Essayistic:  
Essayistic Configuration of Urban Experience in Eileen Chang's  
and Virginia Woolf's Writing**

**D i s s e r t a t i o n**

**zur**

**Erlangung des akademischen Grades**

**Doktor der Philosophie**

**in der Philosophischen Fakultät**

**der Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen**

**vorgelegt von**

**Aohan Yang**

**aus**

**Yunnan (China)**

**2024**

**Gedruckt mit Genehmigung der Philosophischen Fakultät  
der Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen**

**Dekanin: Prof. Dr. Angelika Zirker**

**Hauptberichterstatter: Prof. Dr. Christoph Reinfandt**

**Mitberichterstatterin: Prof. Dr. Ingrid Hotz-Davies**

**Tag der mündlichen Prüfung: 19.12.2023**

**Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen, TOBIAS-lib**

## Acknowledgments

I extend my deepest gratitude to my first supervisor, Prof. Dr. Christoph Reinfandt. His tremendous perspicacity and scholarly sagacity have been the North Star that illuminated my path to the realization of this thesis. With unwearied patience and meticulous attention, he bestowed upon me invaluable feedback and astute suggestions, shaping and refining the very essence of my research.

I am equally indebted to my second supervisor, Prof. Dr. Ingrid Hotz-Davies, whose intellectual mentorship elevated my work to new heights of excellence. Her keen observations and thoughtful suggestions have led to a more rigorous and sophisticated study, enriching the depth and quality of my research.

Gratitude also extends to my colleagues in our colloquium, whose camaraderie and insightful discourse enriched the fabric of my research. Their constructive feedback and thoughtful comments have been the catalysts that forged a tapestry of ideas, rendering my journey in academia all the more profound and rewarding.

Throughout my academic voyage, I stand indebted to the unconditional love and unwavering support bestowed upon me by my parents. Their steadfast belief in my capabilities have been the bedrock upon which I could embark on this journey of academic pursuit.

I want to express my deepest thanks to my beloved, my confidant, my soulmate, Björn Rudzewitz. Amidst the shadows cast by the pandemic, his support and companionship shone like a beacon of hope, illuminating my path through the darkest of hours. The countless moments of encouragement, the reassuring whispers of faith, and the boundless love he showered upon me have become a sanctuary, where I found solace and strength to navigate the unpredictable seas of life. I would also like to extend special thanks to our adorable little bear, Big B, and to all the sweet buddies residing in our love-filled Bearland, whose heartwarming hugs and cuddles, cuteness and companionship have been a source of immense comfort and joy.

In this moment of reflection, I express my deepest appreciation to all those whose support, guidance, mentorship, and companionship have graced the narrative of my academic expedition, making it an unforgettable odyssey of growth and intellectual fulfillment.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation delves into the exploration of the literary representation of reality, the city, and the self in the works of Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf. By delving into various forms of writing such as essays, short stories, novellas, and novels, I aim to explore Eileen Chang's and Virginia Woolf's innovative ways of imagining the city and conceptualizing the self. At the core of my investigation lies an understanding of how literary modernism challenges traditional notions of reality and selfhood. I view literary modernism as a transformative movement that critically interrogates established ideas of reality and self; it offers a new and insightful outlook that acknowledges the profound impact and inherent intricacies brought forth by the modern city on our comprehension of reality and selfhood. Within this framework, I consider the essayistic mode of expression to be an integral part of the modernist paradigm. The essayistic is characterized by a critical examination of the comprehensibility of reality, the narratability of the modern experience, as well as the inherent intricacy and open-endedness of that experience.

In this study, I consider the essayistic form as ontologically urban, as uniquely expressive of modern urban experience. The modern city, with its complexity and heterogeneity, becomes increasingly resistant to narrativization within the constraints of linear, teleological storytelling, and attains its fullest expression in the essayistic form. Recognizing the limitations of conventional narrative forms, Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf embrace the essayistic mode of expression, which allows nuanced and multilayered portraits of the city and the self. In Eileen Chang's and Virginia Woolf's writing, the city transcends its mere physicality and becomes a state of the mind, a projection of the self, and a manifestation of cultural and historical forces; the city is imagined as a site of complexity and ambiguity, where the lives of individual intersect and overlap in unexpected ways, and the seemingly mundane details of everyday life take on new meaning and significance. By bringing together these two renowned writers from distinct cultural backgrounds and focusing on their essayistic configuration of the city and the self, my dissertation opens up new perspectives and avenues for understanding the complex relationship between literature, urban experience, and self-expression.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
The Essay as Form and the City as Essay .....	1
Imagining the City in Literature .....	15
Modernism(s) in a Global Context: Comparing Chinese Modernism to British Modernism .....	28
<b>Part One The Art of the Essay</b>	
<b>Chapter One The Performance of the Essayistic in Eileen Chang’s Essay Collection <i>Written on Water</i></b> .....	<b>47</b>
1.1 Shanghai and Hong Kong in Eileen Chang’s Life and Work.....	47
1.2 Eileen Chang’s Essay Collection: <i>Writing on Water</i> .....	56
1.3 The Impossibility of Storytelling in the Era of Modernity and Chang’s Choice of the Essayistic.... .....	63
1.4 Urban Memories: Montage and Dramatization of the Details .....	70
1.5 Seeing with the Streets and Living in a Modern Apartment .....	83
1.6 “Days and Nights of China”: the Aesthetics of the Everyday .....	90
<b>Chapter Two The Performance of the Essayistic in Virginia Woolf’s Essays--- “A Room of One’s Own” and “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”</b> .....	<b>103</b>
2.1 A Walk of One’s Own: Walking in Woolf’s London .....	103
2.2 Tracing of the Wondering Mind: Walking as a Trope of Woolf’s Digressive Text in “A Room of One’s Own” .....	110
2.3 The Journey into the Unknown--- the Art of Metaphor .....	126
2.4 The Adventure of the Self in the City: “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” .....	135
2.4.1 A Meditational Adventure—the Search for a New Pencil .....	135
2.4.2 A Visual Adventure—The I, or the Eye .....	141
2.4.3 The Adventure in the Mind and Consciousness—the Art of Metaphor and Digression..... .....	151
<b>Part Two Unveiling the Essayistic Nature of Eileen Chang’s and Virginia Woolf’s Short Stories</b>	
<b>Chapter Three Imagining the City as Dreamscape:</b> .....	<b>160</b>
Allegory and Deconstruction of Language and Meaning in “Sealed Off” .....	160
3.1 A Urban Romance in a Tramcar .....	160
3.2 Allegory and Deconstruction of Language and Meaning .....	171
3.3 Imagining the City as a Dreamscape: the Work of the Dream .....	179
<b>Chapter Four Imagining the City as a Site of Chance Encounter:</b> .....	<b>190</b>
Urban Experience and the Modernist Short Story .....	190
4.1 The Modernist Short Story as a Form .....	190
4.2 Characterizing Mrs. Brown and Releasing Narrative from the “Tyranny of Plot” .....	199
4.3 The Metaphor of Railway Journey in Modernist Writing .....	209
4.4 “An Unwritten Novel”: Metafiction and the Modernist Short Story .....	214

<b>Part Three</b>	<b>Essayistic Narrative in Eileen Chang’s Novellas and Virginia Woolf’s Novels</b>	
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>Essayistic moments in Eileen Chang’s Novellas “Love in A Fallen City” and “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”</b>	<b>222</b>
5.1	Essayistic moments in “Love in A Fallen City”	222
5.1.1	Transcending the Linear Time	222
5.1.2	Essayistic Moments Actualized through the Employment of Poetic Imagery: Organic Combination of “Feeling” and “Scene”	234
5.1.3	The Past in the Present: Modern Reenactments of History	241
5.2	Essayistic moments in “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”	247
5.2.1	Essayistic moments: Examining the Non-Narrative, Descriptive Details	247
5.2.2	The Politics of Seeing: Hong Kong under Double Gaze	260
<b>Chapter Six</b>	<b>Imagining the City as Essayistic Space in <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i></b>	<b>267</b>
6.1	Nothingness and the Void of the Self	267
6.2	The Self Constituted by Urban Experience	280
6.3	The Dynamic Interplay between the City and the Self	290
6.4	The City as an Organic Whole	295
<b>Conclusion</b>		<b>302</b>
The Essayistic and Modernity		302
The City and the Essay		306
<b>Bibliography</b>		<b>315</b>

## **Introduction**

### **The Essay as Form and the City as Essay**

Although Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Eileen Chang (1920-1995) are often situated in different literary contexts, they share similar concerns of writing about modernity, which characterize them as representative modernist writers of their own cultures. Both Woolf and Chang reject conventional literary forms, and oppose fixed and limiting rules for the representation of character and reality. Their writings demonstrate radical skepticism against dogmatic realism, which claims to be capable of providing a direct imitation of life, a valid representation of objective reality. Woolf wages war against the strictly realist dogma of Edwardian writers, whereas Chang battles with the patriotism and elitism of the May Fourth literature in China. Both Woolf and Chang strive to invent ‘new’ forms of writing—which could render the elusive and fluid nature of modernity, and call attention to the limits of the language and artifice of the literary form. In this thesis, I will identify these new forms of expression as the essayistic mode of expression—what I mean by the essayistic is not just anti-dogmatism, but also openness, a process without closure that constantly reminds us of the presence of the Other; not merely the practice of the form, but also its philosophical concerns—its spirit of freedom and adventure, as well as its unfinished nature.

In order to better illustrate the unique nature of the essayistic and its conceptualization of reality, I will first elaborate on what narrative is. In this study, I identify narrative as a way which imposes upon the experience “a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole” (H. White 9). Narrative grants continuity to storytelling, and displays

“the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life” (23). Narrative imposes the form we normally associate with storytelling:

*A narration involves a selection of events for the telling. They must offer sufficient continuity of subject matter to make their chronological sequence significant, and they must be presented as having happened already. When the telling provides this sequence with a certain kind of shape and a certain level of human interest, we are in the presence not merely of narrative but of story. A story is a narrative with a certain very specific syntactic shape (beginning-middle-end or situation-transformation-situation) and with a subject matter which allows for or encourages the projection of human values upon this material. (Scholes 206, my emphasis)*

Essentially, narrative is a strategy of the teleological ordering of time and human experience. As an “expression of an order” (Barthes, “Writing Degree Zero” 26), narrative alerts to the “danger of lapsing into incoherence or meaninglessness,” and strives to rationalize experience with a teleological ordering of time (Meretoja 93). “To follow a story”, as a matter of fact, is “to understand the successive actions, thoughts, and feelings in the story inasmuch as they present a particular ‘directedness’” (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 150). An Aristotelian account of human action is teleologically driven, namely, “to order action by narrative is (in part) to say what it is for, where it is leading” (Sartwell 42). This sense of “directedness” is what Ricoeur terms “emplotment,” which refers to “the rendering of action or experience into a coherent form, a form that displays character, telos, and topic” (42). Through a teleological organization of experience, narrative reduces the “exploded reality to a slim and pure logos,” and places “the narrator in the position of a ‘demiurge, a God or a reciter’” by imposing a coherent and continuous universe (Barthes, “Writing Degree Zero” 26).

While narrative strives to present a narratively well-organized world, the essayistic mode of writing resists the urge to simplify the complexities of reality into a



coherent narrative and instead embraces the fragmentation and uncertainty that is often inherent in lived experience. In direct contrast to a narrative view of reality, the essayistic sees reality as a flux—"an endless becoming" that lacks systematic meaning or coherent order (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 18). Both Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang embrace the power of digression, and employ a fragmented, non-linear style to capture the complexity and multiplicity of experience. Both Woolf and Chang see conventional way of narration as "a convention that masks the way in which reality is in a state of constant transformation" (Meretoja 94), although their conceptions are rooted in different cultural traditions: Woolf's thinking is linked to the thought of Montaigne, Nietzsche, Bergson, Deleuze, as well as the modernist European essay tradition of Lukacs, Benjamin, Musil, and Adorno, whereas Chang's is more related to the philosophical concerns of ancient Chinese philosophy—Taoism. Instead of the conventional narrative view of reality which displays formal continuity and coherence, both Woolf and Chang embrace the more 'open' form of the essayistic—one that caters to the fragmented, discontinuous, and incoherent experience of reality. As Woolf writes:

What is meant by 'reality'? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some causal saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. ("A Room of One's Own" 106)

For Virginia Woolf, the "erratic" and protean nature of reality allows us only to capture moments and impressions of it—"in a dusty road", "in a scrap of newspaper in the street", through "a daffodil in the sun". What is real and permanent is nothing but the flux of reality

and consciousness, as the mind “receives a myriad impressions”, “disconnected and incoherent” (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 9); “myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one’s head” (“Character in Fiction” 41), “without any principle of order or coherence” (Bowley 6). As Woolf puts it, “[I]n one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided and disappeared in astonishing *disorder*” (“Character in Fiction” 53, my emphasis). The ‘erratic’ nature of reality and the explosion of the ideas, emotions thus demands an equally ‘erratic’ form of writing to approach them. In the same spirit, Eileen Chang writes:

This thing we call reality is *unsystematic*, like seven or eight talking machines playing all at once in a chaos of sound, each singing its own song. From within that *incomprehensible* cacophony, however, there sometimes happens to emerge a moment of sad and luminous clarity, when the musicality of a melody can be heard, just before it is engulfed once more by layer after layer of darkness, snuffing out this unexpected moment of lucidity. Painters, writers, and composers string together these *random* and *accidentally discovered* moments of harmony in order to create artistic coherence. When history insists on the same sort of coherence, it becomes fiction. (*Written on the Water* 39-40, my emphasis)

Making an analogy between reality and “talking machines playing all at once in a chaos of sound”, Chang describes reality as “unsystematic”, “incomprehensible”, with only “random and accidentally” moments remaining to be discovered. In Chang’s epistemology, writing that is too clear, too logical, represents a lower level of reality. In order to pursue meaning beyond the linearity of language and thought, she allows her ideas to ramify in many disparate directions. Instead of the illusionistic pursuit of a coherent “melody” of reality, she discovers only “moments of harmony” in “a chaos of sound,” which offers her a chance to grasp and render the most complicated combination of nuances. Thus Chang shifts the focus from a diminished and artificial account of external reality to a kind of experiential ‘realism’ that

takes into consideration the incoherent and discontinuous experiences of reality. Chang employs traditional Chinese storytelling techniques in her writing, while also imbuing it with the modernistic spirit; her works thus defy easy categorization and are valued for the unique blend of modernist and realist elements. Although Chang never applies the technique of stream of consciousness in her writings, “the effect achieved by her prose style is comparable” (Lee 290). Through her essayistic configuration of reality, she aims to recuperate “the most aleatory references, coincidental events, or irrelevant details” (Gold 63). In this way, she achieves a reflection or depiction not of outward reality but of consciousness itself—and in particular, not Virginia Woolf’s internal monologue we conventionally associate with the term “stream of consciousness,” but rather the sense of consciousness in the discontinuous act of apprehending reality.

From both Woolf’s and Chang’s conceptualizations of reality, we can discern an ontological view that recognizes the multiplicity of human experience and the constant flux of reality. Chang writes in her essay “Writing of One’s Own”: “All of us must live within a certain historical era, but this era sinks away from us like a shadow, and we feel we have been abandoned. In order to confirm our own existence, we need to take hold of something *real*, of something most *fundamental*” (*Written on Water* 16, my emphasis). This profound uncertainty of our apprehension of reality pervades both Woolf’s and Chang’s writings, where there is always a underlying tension between the infinite data of experiences we encounter at every moment and the necessarily falsification and simplification of reality. Famously, Woolf provides insights into the inescapable arbitrariness of representing historical change:

On or around December 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered,

or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless, and since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910. (“Character in Fiction” 38)

Here Woolf questions “the possibility of anything like the confident ordering, listing and chronicling”, and turns the “chronological precision” into “a caricature” (Bowley 4). Woolf suggests that one must be arbitrary, when one approaches historical reality. In a sense, Woolf’s notion of arbitrariness refers to the hierarchical ordering of narrative in historiography. The arbitrary narrative of the realistic novel and historiography is driven by human agency, whereas the more open form of the essayistic recognizes the forces of disorder and incoherence. The difference between the two forms is whether “agents” or “qualities” govern the form—namely, in narratives, “people do things”, whereas “things happen to people” in essayistic mode of expression (H. White 10). In essayistic mode of expression, history is a site of contingency, and there is no “grand narrative” which can “effectively serve as a universal point of reference implicitly orienting all of cultural life” (53), as Musil’s protagonist realizes in the novel *The Man Without Qualities*:

The course of history was therefore not that of a billiard-ball, which, once it has been hit, ran along a *definite course*; on the contrary, it was *like the passage of clouds, like the way a man sauntering through the streets*—diverted here by a shadow, there by a little crowd of people, or by an unusual way one building jutted out and the next stood back from the street—finally arriving at a *place that he had neither known of nor meant to reach*. (II: 70)

History proceeds, not in an orderly and predicable linear way, but like an idler wandering through the streets, diverting from his intended path due to various distractions and arriving at an unexpected destination. Rather than seeking to present a linear, organized account of events, Musil regards the course history as a meandering and wandering process, shaped by chance encounters and unexpected developments. In the same spirit, Woolf and Chang

recognize the artificial imposition of a narrative/form upon the flux of reality, and the danger of lapsing into a continuous and coherent narrative (which is to say, too arbitrary). It is not surprising, therefore, that in their attempts to represent a kind of reality that is properly “real” and “fundamental”, the pursuit of the essayistic (instead of well-organized narrative) plays a significant role. The essay, first and foremost, serves as a “personality-driven” and “opinionated” embodiment of an intrinsically informal genre (Hull x), as Virginia Woolf writes:

The peculiar form of an essay implies a peculiar substance; you can say in this shape what you cannot with equal fitness say in any other . . . Almost all essays begin with a capital I—‘I think’, ‘I feel’—and when you have said that, it is clear that you are not writing history or philosophy or biography or anything but an essay, which may be brilliant or profound, which may deal with the immortality of the soul, or the rheumatism in your left shoulder, but is primarily *an expression of personal opinion*. (“The Decay of Essay-Writing” 4, my emphasis)

The essay—the term coined from the French “*essai*”—means an effort, an attempt, a trial, an attempt, to draw meaning from the personal experience. In *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth*, Atkins associate the essay with “egotism” and “self-centeredness” (49): Montaigne, the pioneer of the essay, makes it clear that when he was writing, he only made himself the “object” of his thoughts, and he portrays chiefly his own “cogitations” (Montaigne 273-4, qtd. in Atkins 49); in a similar way, Thoreau acknowledged on the opening page of *Walden* that he would be focusing on himself: “In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking” (Thoreau 18, qtd. in Atkins 49). The essay foregrounds what in other forms is only implicit or remains hidden: the “singular first person” speaks to readers directly in essays; “his nerves,

his judgment are the crucible in which experience is tried and tested, balanced and weighed” (50-51). During the process of self-revelation and self-exploration, in the meanwhile, the essay allows for “an intimacy of communication” between the essayist and the reader (Saloman 16). The essay, either explicitly or implicitly, acknowledges the presence of subjectivity, thus presenting itself as a form of self-awareness and self-knowledge.

The essay values subjectivity, but it is by no means egotistic. Although in the essay “the subject seems to be always ‘I’, but the ‘I’ can be present in a broad spectrum of possibilities” (Aktins 50). As matter of fact, instead of being self-centered, the essay moves outward, and connects with the world, with otherness. The essay has existed somewhere between “the two sturdy poles of inner and outer, experience and meaning, ‘I’ and ‘the world’” (56). Perhaps the nature of the essay is best described by Aldous Huxley as moving among three poles:

There is the pole of the *personal* and the *autobiographical*; there is the pole of the *objective*, the *factual*, the *concrete-particular*; and there is the pole of the *abstract-universal*... *the most richly satisfying essays* are those which make the best of not of one, not of two, but of *all the three worlds* in which it is possible for the essay to exist. (83-5, my emphasis)

Timothy Corrigan regards Huxley’s three poles as not separable, but as interactive and intersecting registers. While one or the other these three dimensions may be more discernible in any given essay, “the most richly satisfying essays” are those where all the three spheres overlap and interact—*personal expression* (“I” observing the world), *public experience* (“the *essayistic* describes the many-layered activities of a personal point of view as a public experience”, and the process of *thinking/essaying* (“the constant changes and adjustments of the self as it defers to experience”) (*The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* 13-4,

my emphasis). In its unique way, the essayistic blends the personal and subjective with the objective and universal to create a unique mode of expression that challenges traditional notions of self, reality, and experience.

The history of the essay shows that the essayistic is most interesting “not so much in how it privileges personal expression and subjectivity but rather in how it troubles and complicates that very notion of expressivity and its relation to experience, the second cornerstone of the essayistic” (Corrigan 15, my emphasis). For instance, the practitioner of the personal essay—Montaigne—set a foundation for the essay form by linking his personal life with public events in sixteenth-century France and testifying “not only to the constant changes and adjustments of a mind as it defers to experience but also to the transformation of the essayistic self as part of that process” (13). Montaigne’s use of the vernacular language as well as his focus on the personal life in the French vernacular of the streets challenged the traditional Latinate discourse of the academy, redefined the relationship between the personal and public spheres, and paved the way for a new mode of literary expression.

On the foundation of Montaigne, essay writings in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries begin to “take a more distinctive shape as a public dialogue”—often, the dialogue between the self and the urban world—where “the notion of individual becomes reconfigured in the significantly broader commercial terms of social observation, communication, and interactivity” (18). And the essayistic has evolved into a dynamic dialogue between the self and the city. Addison and Steele’s *The Spectator*, most famously, employed the essay form to explore and define the dynamics of the urban world. Through the use of fictional characters, their essays chart the rhythms and geographies of 18th- and early

19th-century London, capturing the social variety and bustling daily life of the city. Their essays present a “self-effacing perspective” of the “looker-on”, focusing and dispersing across different social types, such as a country squire or military man (18). The development of the modern city has played an essential role in shaping the essay form, and the essayistic form evolved into a mode of expression to express the changing dynamic between the self and the city, incorporating elements of personal expression, subjectivity, and social observation.

In nineteenth century, Baudelaire elevated the dialogue between the city and the self to new heights: observations of the city are no longer based on the physical form of the city, but on its fleeting nature as experienced by the onlooker, who emerged as the *flâneur*—an artist and observer of the modern city life. In his essay “The Painter of Modern Life”, Baudelaire gave his definition of modernity (*la modernité*) before modernism as an art movement came into being: for him, modernity means the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent (Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques* 131). Baudelaire’s *flâneur* was able to picture the experiences of modernity with an emphasis on its novelty and ephemerality, and derive “the eternal from transitory” and see “the poetic in the historic” (Butler 133). As we see in Baudelaire’s street poems and urban essays, the city streets presents itself as a site of fleetingness—an ever-evolving entity, shaped by the *flâneur* thoughts and emotions as he wanders the streets of Paris. By shifting the focus from physical descriptions of the city to the corresponding thoughts, emotions and impressions, Baudelaire creates a sense of urban disorder and disorientation that features a new urban sensibility and reflects the transient nature of the modernity. His city is not defined by its physical structures or established



institutions and significant landmarks, but rather by the individual and personal engagement of the urban space—the memories and experiences that are internalized by individuals as they navigate its streets. This concept of the city without a coherent form—which is seen as a result of the increasing fragmentation of subjectivity and the growing alienation and disorder of the modern city—has become a hallmark of modernist literature.

The idea of urban disorientation and loss of coherence became particularly prevalent in the twentieth century. By the twentieth century, the city, in its complexity and heterogeneity, has become a symbol of the essay form itself, and attains its fullest expression in the essayistic form. In the same way that the essay invites the reader to wander through a labyrinth of ideas and experiences, the city invites the inhabitant to wander through its streets and encounter a multitude of perspectives and realities. One of the most famous practitioners of the essay for its expressivity to portray the urban experience is Walter Benjamin, who portrays the confrontation of the city and the self in an essayistic manner. Benjamin regards the city as a kind of organization which “suspends plans and directions” and produces “new kinds of unanticipated and shocking perceptual pleasures” (Lewis 178). For him, the city could only be perceived by “wandering or by browsing, a spatial order in contrast to the tidily linear temporal order of narratives and chronologies” (Solnit 663). Benjamin distinguishes his writing of city life from the autobiographical writing: “For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of space of moments and discontinuities” (“A Berlin Chronicle” 28). Unlike the autobiography which represents the self along chronological or narrative sequences, in Benjamin’s urban writing the self becomes “spatialized”—“it undergoes a kind of diasporic movement outward,

discovering emergent ways of being in and through its urban wanderings” (Lewis 178). Like his urban walks, his writing presents a *meandering* exploratory journey; shaped like a randomized walk, his urban writing mimics in its very form the experience of “a scattered and only loosely connected self” (Gualtieri 5).

If a narrative is a single continuous path, Benjamin’s writing presents a labyrinth—“a warren of street and alleys” (Solnit 663). Instead of “the traditional autobiographical emphasis on time and sequence of events that collectively form the ‘flow of life’”, what Benjamin finds in the city is “a life of discontinuous moments and spatial dislocations that cannot be cobbled together into a narrative story” (Lewis 178). In *Moscow Diary*, he “mixed his own life into an account of that city”, and he wrote a book in its very form mimicking a city—“*One-Way Street*, a subversive confection of short passages titled as though they were city sites and signs—Gas Station, Construction Site, Mexican Embassy, Manorically Furnished Ten-Room Apartment, Chinese Curios” (Solnit 663). Benjamin’s urban writing presents “a denarrativized city”, which is often at odds with “the discourse structures imposed by history and rationality” (Rossiter and Gibson 440). Opposing to the linear, teleological view of history and reality, he celebrates “distracted thought and absent-minded strolling, straying, hovering, daydreaming, and idling as bodily/intellectual practices which are *counter* and *subversive* to the notion of productivity” (440). In Benjamin’s urban writing, “the walker becomes lost, allows the city—street signs, bars, cafes, billboards, passers-by—to “speak” to her as does a bird call in the wild or a twig cracking under foot in forest” (440):

Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to *lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in*

*a forest*—that calls for quite a different schooling. Then signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me *this art of straying*. (*One-Way Street* 298, my emphasis)

Lewis argues that Benjamin represents the city not only as the site of “negative forms of distraction (as mere diversions)”, but also as the place for “cultivating productive distraction in the form of an open and alert attunement to new ways of experiencing and perceiving the relationship between world and self” (Lewis 169). For Benjamin, to become “lost in the city” is to “generate an unusually acute or heightened perception of the surrounding environment”, for “losing one’s way requires practice, dedication, and active decision to break with established paths in order to immerse oneself in the unfamiliar, but potentially revelatory, landscapes of the modern city” (Alexander 89). Thus, “the freshly apprehended city can reveal itself in new forms, forms that might themselves be translated into labyrinths of print” (89). So not surprisingly, walking plays a significant role in elaborating such new forms of narrative, where “[W]alking is a means of getting lost and thus achieving a state of pleasurable spatial disorientation, whereas memory provides an equally valuable and pleasurable means of *reorientation* and *re-composition*” (88, my emphasis). The act of walking “create stories, invent space, and open up to the city through its capacities to produce ‘anti-texts’ within the text” (Rossiter and Gibson 440); When one walks, one’s existence in space is dynamic and uncertain, thus “the ambulatory occupation of urban space permits a myriad of unrealized possibilities to surface, triggering emotions and feelings that may lie dormant in many people” (440). In a large sense, the simple act of walking is the linguistic metaphor for Benjamin’s *digressive* and *wandering* narrative, and his writing registers an

aesthetics of the essayistic. In Benjamin's urban writing, the city can be seen as an essay, reflecting and embodying the complexities and contradictions of modern life; in a sense, the essay can be seen as a metaphor for the city, allowing for a digressive and non-linear expression of urban experience.

Another preeminent proponent of the essayistic expression of urban experience is Roland Barthes, who claims in his "Inaugural Lecture, College of France" that "I have produced only essays, an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing" (457). Barthes regards the essay as a form of discourse, which differs from "the orders of art or science": in science, "knowledge is a statement", whereas in writing essays, "knowledge is formulated as an expressive event" (Busch 191). In his dedication to the essay, Barthes attempts to "dissolve the discourse, to fray knowledge, subvert truths—meaning, to fragment (instead of systematizing) in writing and to digress in one's elucidation (instead of arguing in straight line) (Busch 191)." In an essayistic manner, Barthes's readings of the city digress from "authoritative and systematic representations of a perceived coherence of the urban as embodied in the map, guide, telephone book" (Rossiter and Gibson 439). For Barthes, "rational is merely one system among others" of knowing a place" (*Empire of Signs* 33):

The city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic thinking: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing. (33-36)

Like Benjamin, Barthes introduces the body "as a sensual being—smelling, remembering, rhythmically moving—jostling with other bodies and in the process constituting active, perhaps multiple, urban subjectivities" (Rossiter and Gibson 440). But it is not simply "a

question of opening up to the other senses”, but rather “being open to the possibility of some revelatory moment in which some deeper underlying truth might be revealed” (Leach 2). Roland Barthes regards the city as a discourse: “The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it” (“Semiology and the Urban” 168). The city is a language that must be “lived” rather than “decoded” in any literal way, and “[A] city—any city—is always open to a variety of interpretations. Meaning must always remain plural and contested” (Leach 3). Thus Barthes advocates an open-ended reading of the city, as the meanings in the city must stay open to multiple interpretations: “we should try to understand the play of signs, to understand that any city is a structure, but that we must never try and we must never want to fill in this structure” (“Semiology and the Urban” 171). Instead of “attempting to present any totalizing and over-determined account of the meanings of a city,” we must be alert to the fact that the signified “are always extremely vague, dubious, and unmanageable” (Leach 4). The meanings of the city should not be reduced to a single, authoritative and systematic interpretation, but should be plural and open to contestation.

### **Imagining the City in Literature**

For Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang, the city itself is a site of complexity that is always open to new interpretations. Woolf’s London is caught between the First and Second World Wars—a time of great social, political, and cultural upheaval in British society. The First World War had shattered the traditional social order and challenged traditional values and

beliefs. This was a time of great social, political, and cultural upheaval, which had a profound impact on people's lives and the way they perceived the world. This period saw the emergence of new social norms and gender roles, with women playing a more active role in society and demanding greater political and social rights; at the same time, the city of London was also a center of cultural and artistic activity, with the rise of high modernism and avant-garde art movements. Writers and artists were experimenting with new forms and styles, rejecting traditional conventions and exploring new ways of representing the urban reality.

Uncannily, around two decades later, Chang's Shanghai was situated in a flux of different cultures and political powers, with various forces vying for power and influence in the city. Shanghai's complex history began in the mid-nineteenth century during the Qing Dynasty. After the First Opium War (1839-42), the arrival of foreign powers transformed the city into a thriving port city for several several decades. The city had been divided into foreign concessions<sup>1</sup>, which were controlled by different foreign powers, including the British, French, and Americans. By the early 1930s, the Japanese had established a significant presence in many major Chinese cities and Japan had replaced Britain as the most dominant foreign power in Shanghai. By 1940s, Shanghai was in turmoil, as different political and social forces vied for power and influence (including Chinese Nationalists, Japanese imperialists, and communist revolutionaries). It was such a time of political turmoil, social

---

<sup>1</sup> In the context of colonial China, a concession refers to a piece of land within a city that is leased by a foreign country for exclusive use by its citizens or companies. In Shanghai, there were a number of concessions established by various foreign powers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which were administered under their own laws and outside the jurisdiction of the Chinese government.

upheaval, and cultural transformation that Eileen Chang and her contemporaries began writing and striving for self-expression. 1940s Shanghai was a complex mix of influences, with traditional Chinese culture, modern Western culture coexisting in a dynamic and often tense relationship. The city of Shanghai was an enigma, a labyrinth that Chang and her contemporaries tried to navigate in their writings (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 2-3).

In their essays, short stories, novels, and novellas, Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang revisit their beloved cities again and again—each time attempting to capture a glimpse of the city. Just as Monet’s paintings of Rouen Cathedral showcase twenty-six different cathedrals, Woolf and Chang’s writings of the city can never be generalized to any totalizing representation of London and Shanghai. Rather, their writings provide a constellation of interpretations and experiences of London and Shanghai. In the same way that the city “itself does not exist, and can only be understood through its various manifestations” (Leach 5), in the writing of Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang, there is no London or Shanghai, but many Londons and Shanghais—with a London and a Shanghai being a city of individual traces, memories and meanings.

While Woolf and Chang may not have had direct contact with each other, their writings serve as textual exchanges, forming a literary dialogue that spans both time and space. Both writers were keen observers of urban life and shared a strong passion for capturing the social and cultural dynamics of the modern city. This shared concerns about urban modernity reflect a broader cultural moment in which they were writing. It is worth noting, however, that Woolf’s and Chang’s urban imagination are quite distinctive from that

of their contemporaries. In the wider European as well as the American context, the modern city has in many respects taken its canonical shape as strange and alienating. The city, as James Donald puts it, is associated to the “psychic and spatial diseases of modernity” (*Imagining the Modern City* 193). In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams traces this evolving negative response to the city in British writing—from the Romantics (William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Blake) to Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Gissing, and confirms that the city is increasingly marked by the “oppressive and utilitarian uniformity” of its masses (223); by “an absence of common feeling, an excessive subjectivity” (215). Desmond Harding also observes that, throughout the course of modernist art history, there emerged a consensus, “which is more often than not epitomized by the sense of the city as a menacing force beyond the capacity of human experience to control or even sometimes comprehend” (13). Of course there are also less pessimistic responses to the city: “F. T. Marinetti’s exuberant, if considerably troubling, affirmation of urban dynamism; Claude Monet’s evocative depiction of metropolitan vitality; Walt Whitman’s exhilarated celebration of the democratic potential inherent to the masses” (Byrne 3). But overwhelmingly the city evokes an enormous amount of negativity.

But Woolf’s London does not correspond to the description of London as one of the dullest capital cities: “one with no real artistic community, no true centers, no coteries, no cafes, a metropolis given to commerce and an insular middle-class life-style either indifferent or implacably hostile to the new arts” (Bradbury 172). Instead, Woolf’s attitude towards the city is not hostile, as Michael Whitworth suggests, through Woolf’s work the city is



associated with life and love (153). Unlike T.S. Eliot, who finds the city has become unreal in *The Waste land*, where London's fog and river and anonymous crowds are still there as they had been in the opening of the opening of Bleak House seventy years earlier (Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* 3), Woolf's "focalisers do not dwell on sordidness, and they present beauty not as something existing in spite of urban life, but as emerging from its energy and motion" (Whitworth 153-4). Robert Alter supplements that, Woolf's city is a place of "excitement and enlivening energy that can elicit a sense of exuberance in the urbanite", unlike other modern metropolises which seem to earn "a triple-A rating for *angst*, *alienation*, and *anomie*, with a certain appropriateness in the trilingualism of the alliterative triplet if one thinks of the pan-European scope of these urban pathologies" (103-4).

Eileen Chang too, responds to the city in her distinct way, which largely differs from that of her contemporaries. Shanghai, where the 'old' traditional culture is forced to confront the 'new' western cultures, was imagined in distinguished ways: Chinese neo-sensationalist writers, Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiying celebrate urban dynamism, depict metropolitan vitality, and portray erotic female body; the city is viewed as the site of exoticism, "the center of modern civilization", which provides a way to achieve modernity, as well as "a partial solution to the paradox that arises between nationalism (a new cultural identity) and imperialism" (Lee L. 203). In the meanwhile, leftist writers and latter-day communist scholars regards the city as "a bastion of decadence and evil" and as a place which became "a constant reminder of a history of national humiliation" (xi). In Chinese literary imagination, the urban and the rural have long been placed in a position of incompatible dichotomy. In wide context of Chinese literature from the classical to the

modern period, the city has long been cast in negative light, often imagined as a site of guile, corruption, intrigue and false values, whereas the countryside is the embodiment of the positive, natural, innocent, serene and idyllic values. To escape from the city and return to nature, living far from courts and the ruling class is to pursue a kind of authenticity and spirituality that can only be achieved in natural world and pastoral life. Most famously, Tao Yuanming (365-427)'s classic prose, "Peach Blossom Spring" (*Tiaohua yuan ji*)<sup>2</sup>, utopianizes the beauty and vitality of simple, agrarian life. This hermit thought of tradition is rooted in Daoism, and remains influential throughout the course of Chinese literary history. So not surprisingly, the city has been positioned as a counterpart against natural world and idyllic life. In modern Chinese literature, the relationship between the rural and urban is further complicated, when the issues of imperialism and nationalism arise. The city, then, is overwhelmingly represented as a site of social hierarchy, class stratification, physical degradation, as well as ideological manipulation. But Chang's imagination of Shanghai generates less extreme reactions: instead of the uncanny and urban fantasy, Chang are more attracted to the mundane, the unnoticed, the 'invisible' part of the everyday city life. Instead of heroic figures found in grand narratives of national salvation and revolution, Chang portrays the everyday life on Shanghai streets—the most repeated actions, the most travelled journeys, the most inhabited spaces that hundreds of thousands, millions of Chinese make

---

<sup>2</sup> "Peach Blossom Spring" depicts the utopian story of a fisherman who lost his way while fishing along a stream, and suddenly discovered a hidden land where he received unexpected hospitality by the locals and learned the intriguing history of the unusual villagers. Their ancestors escaped from the tyranny of the first Chinese empire Qin (221-206) and settled there; ever since, they have been completely cut off from the outside world, and lived happily with self-sufficiency. On his way back, the fisherman carefully remarked the route and reported to the local magistrate. The magistrate sent his staff to track down the marked road, yet the hidden land can not be found again.

their home.

In Woolf's and Chang's writing, the city is imagined as a site of complexity and ambiguity, where the lives of individual intersect and overlap in unexpected ways, and where the seemingly mundane details of everyday life take on new meaning and significance. This focus on the everyday allows Woolf and Chang to explore the subtle relationships between people and their city, and to reveal the rich tapestry of life that lies just beneath the surface of the city. Their writings of the city evoke an unique urban discourse, where historical reality retreats into the background and the everyday city life is foregrounded as the center. In this thesis, I will employ the essayistic to approach the city and modernity, as the unique capacity of the essayistic lies in its ability to create connections and tensions and to probe the dynamic interplay between external and internal reality, subject and object, individual and collective, as well as whole and fragment. The essayistic mode of expression allows nuanced and multilayered portraits of the city and the self—one that acknowledges the multiplicity of human experience and the constant flux of urban reality.

In their writings, the city is depicted as not just a physical space, but also as a construction of the mind, a projection of the self, and an embodiment of cultural and historical forces; the city is not only as a material and social site, but also a metaphorical and personalized space, where the emotion, psyche, memory and fantasy are projected. Whether in their essays or novels and short stories, the city we "see" is re-constructed through the filter of the writer's imagination, thus highly subjective and "always colored by emotions and values" (Bakhtin 243). Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang, re-creating the world from a colored point of view, produce very particular and idiosyncratic ways of seeing, as Marco

Polo admits to Kublai Khan in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice." In addition, the essential elements of "cityness" are "manifested only through feelings: the experience of the environment is always a fusion of the external physical realm and the human being's internal capacities" (Karjalainen and Paasi 62-3). In their writings of the city, there is a dynamic interplay between empirical description and imaginative experience, between the physical or the psychic city, or between the "real" and imagined city. Woolf and Chang demonstrate how the city is constantly shaping and being shaped by individual subjectivity. This interplay between the city and the self highlights the mutability and fluidity of both urban reality and human identity, and reveals the complex ways in which they are intertwined.

The development of the city has played a significant role in shaping the literary landscape, and it is no accident that the rise of the city and the rise of the novel coincided. As the city emerging as the principal theater of bourgeois life and also the form of collective existence (Alter ix), the realist novel showed itself to be a suitable vehicle for addressing the full range of contemporary issues, personal and political, local and national (Preston and Simpson-Housley 6), whereas naturalist writers go beyond a realist representation of everyday life, and recognizes gigantic social forces in the city—social Darwinism, or pessimistic determinism, or voracious capitalism—that not only shape existence, but also in fact create it. As the city develops into a new stage, modernist writers find themselves facing a crisis of representation—the old representational conventions are no longer adequate to make sense of the new realities of the city. The realist narrative modes are "outstripped by the new rhythms and routines instituted by new modes of transport (the train and the automobile),

the appearance of artificial lighting, new forms of communication, the rebuilding of many great city centers, and many of the phenomena analyzed by Walter Benjamin—advertising, expositions, department stores, and so forth” (Donald, “The Immaterial City: Representation, Imagination, and Media Technologies” 49). As the modern city became more and more complex and illegible, “the ability to see the city objectively became paradoxically more difficult, and an intensity of personal feeling often was accompanied by a more opaque sense of one’s surroundings” (Lehan 78-79). Modernists had to turn the aesthetic vision inward, leading to the fact that the urban imaginary moves “from an objective to a subjective realm, as well as from a shared to a private reality” (89). Within this subjective realm, there were born “cubism in painting, stream of consciousness in literature, and movements like constructivism and surrealism” (Donald, “The Immaterial City: Representation, Imagination, and Media Technologies” 49); they questioned “whether ‘the city’ was itself sustainable as a coherent concept or as a category of experience” (49).

In sharp contrast to the realist organization of time and space (where the omnipotent, panoptic narrator subjugates the urban heterogeneity into a coherent narrative, and the city a mappable space), the modernist chronotope is portrayed as a realm of unknowability and uncertainty, “characterized by indeterminacy and postponed consolidation of spatial and temporal indicators” (Bahun 53). Instead of “a knowing subject making his way progressively through mappable space in a continuous public time to realize the liberal ideals of liberty and equality”, modernist novels craft “a process of unknowing that was the bankruptcy of plot” (Kern 74). “Rather than tweak that familiar plot of knowing and mastery, modernist practice liberates narrative from the blandishments of plot”, where characters

struggle through “unmastered space, discontinuous time, and unfamiliar objects” (Weinstein 99). In a certain sense, “the modernist city becomes the hero only in relation to the modernist observing subject, just as the modernist character derives his/her identity only through the streets he/she is meandering” (Bahun 51). The subject observes the city and thus is “shaped or contextualized by the chronotope”; in the meanwhile, the space of subjectivity extends into “the narrative time-space”, so the city finds itself “invaded by the subject and its purported reality and coherence threatened” (53). As a consequence, the subject is embedded into “the fabric of temporal and spatial relations with others” (50), and the city presents itself as “an exteriorization of the private and the subject” (43). The city becomes “unreal”, “absorbed into the mental landscape of the observer” (Donald, “The Immaterial City: Representation, Imagination, and Media Technologies” 48). “The forces of the action have become internal”, as Raymond Williams puts it, “in a way there is no longer a city, there is only a man walking through it” (243); and “[T]he substantial reality, the living variety of the city, is in the walker’s mind” (245). Consequently, the city, as urban sociologist Robert Parks has pointed out in 1925, cannot be grasped by its pure material facts—it rather is:

a state of mind, body of customs and traditions, and of organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital process of the people who compose it, it is a product of nature and particularly of human nature. (25)

The city is an active organism—it is the people who give life to the city, and it is in the mind of its inhabitants that the city comes to life. As Shakespeare writes, “What is the Citie, but the People? True, the People are the Citie” (Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, Act 3, Scene 1). Park’s assertion—“the city is a state of mind”—implies the city is a highly dynamic space, which is

influenced by social processes, social relations or perspective-taking; thus, is constantly re-defined (Löffler 25). The city in literature is an “in-between” space, where reality and its subjective literary representation come together and form a new space (Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* 35). Instead of a representation, it would be more accurate to regard the city as an *imagined environment*, which “embraces not just the cities created by the ‘wagging tongue’ of architects, planners and builders, sociologists and novelists, poets and politicians, but also the translation of the places they have made into the imaginary reality of our mental life” (8). Therefore, the city we confront in Woolf’s and Chang’s writing is neither purely “real” nor ‘imaginary’, but rather the complex mental constructs. The imagined city Woolf and Chang construct in their works is an ever-unfolding space, where external reality and its subjective, literary representation come together. But how does Woolf and Chang translate the dynamic interplay—between the physical and the psychic city, or between the “real” and imagined city, between the city and the self—in the linearity of logic and language?

My argument is that Woolf and Chang employs an essayistic mode of expression—a form of openness and constant unfolding. I argue that Woolf and Chang’s urban writings (whether their essays or their narratives) stand for representations of the power of the essayistic. Their essayistic configuration of urban experience defies assumptions about narrative epistemology, and sheds new light on the issues of the modernity and the city.

Enabling a dialogue between the city and self, Woolf and Chang translate the outside of the metropolis into the inside of mental life; and turn the city into a state of mind—a projection of one’s subjectivity—the city is something what the mind actively makes of it, or even transform it. In the era of modernity, what Woolf and Chang encounter is

a sort of “unmappable”—or “un-narratable place” in traditional ways of narration, for the city in its discontinuity and complexity is impossible to be narrated in the conventional form (Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* 128). Woolf and Chang’s challenge is thus, to find a new literary form that would stimulate and excite by revealing “a different kind of realism [...] a realism of emotion, rather than surface, what it feels like from the inside of the mind” (Bartkuvienė 7), when one is being in the city. In other words, they strive for revealing on the page how does it feel like “to walk the city streets, to enter into the urban crowds, to be exposed to the exponential increase of noise and bustle, to inhabit an apartment building or a tenement in the new demographic density of the city” (Alter xi). Instead of a “representation” of the city—or at least certain selected bits and pieces of it, what Woolf and Chang offer is an anti-representation, a non-representation, where both the city and the self are dispersed and transformed the moment they encounter. Both Woolf and Chang recognize the language and well-arranged narrative as human impositions upon the flux of urban experience, so they resort to the fragmentary, discontinuous essayistic discourse, in their attempts to engage readers in the process of writing and re-writing of the city. The city might be “read”, with “its forms deciphered and its meanings understood”, but what Woolf and Chang reveal in their urban writings is that the “meanings”—“plural and contested”—are never fixed, and “always open to a variety of interpretations” (Leach 3). As Lefebvre reminds us, there are multiple inter-meshing discourses in the city, and “the taking into consideration the levels of [urban] reality” forbids the attempt of “systematization”—the city resist “a signifying system, determined and closed as a system” and will remain unpredictable, multilayered, and never fully graspable (“Continuities and Discontinuities” 108). Instead of a text, the city is more



close to the conjunction of “texts”, a galaxy of “signifier;” a constellation of “signs”. Therefore, the complexity and heterogeneity of the city could only be represented through the essayistic form, as the city is inherently unnarratable and its nature cannot be reduced to “an encompassing narrative”, or “a coherent concept” (Donald, “The Immaterial City: Representation, Imagination, and Media Technologies” 49), as Schwab puts it:

The essay neglects formal conventions and its invitation to digression permits a circulation without restraint between the different realms and scales a city encompasses.... To do justice to a city’s complexity, its signs have to be examined carefully; they have to be rubbed against each other in different constellations in order to light up each other and to lead into a higher level of understanding. The essayist is not very distant from that idea. Despite shrinking back from general ideas, he does not reject the existence of over - arching concepts. Yet his method to reach them does not follow a strict thread but rather a “ groping intuition ” : “The essay must let the totality light up in one of its chosen or haphazard features but without asserting that the whole is present” (Adorno 164). Its inductive modesty, its digressive structure, and its awareness of unfinishedness designate the essay to be an appropriate form to represent a city’s character. With our linear language, we will never be able to grasp cities in totality. All we can do is to approximate them in more and more contracting circles and give way to catch a glimpse of their character. (447)

The essay is a form of writing that is well suited to capturing the heterogeneity and fragmentation of the urban experience. In the present study, I consider the essayistic form as ontologically urban, as uniquely expressive of urban experience. With its non-linear and open-ended structure, the essayistic mode of expression allows for representing the multiplicity of human experience and the constant flux of urban reality. Significantly, the essayistic allows Woolf and Chang to capture the complexities and contradictions of modern urban life (the relativity and multiplicity of the self in its confrontation with the city). Like Benjamin’s writings, Woolf’s and Chang’s *wandering/digressive* narratives are neither incidental nor merely rhetorical, but the manifestations and representations of the modern

urban experience—they translate the modern urban consciousness into an unique style of writing: the essayistic mode of expression, which takes its shape in the flux and phantasmagoria of the modern city, constantly resists the cohesive vision, totalizing mapping, and unified narrative. The constellation of the city and the essay is, by no means, coincident, but part and parcel of historical conditions, as the multi-layered experience in the metropolis is no longer possible to be presented in the teleological/linear narrative.

## **Modernism(s) in a Global Context: Comparing Chinese Modernism to British Modernism**

The landscape of modernist studies underwent a substantial transformation in the late 1990s as scholars embarked on a quest for a more nuanced and expansive understanding of modernism within a global context. This new trend, often referred to as the ‘New Modernist Studies’, characterized by a shift away from understanding modernism “primarily in formalist terms as a loose affiliation of movements coalescing around certain aesthetic rebellions, styles, and philosophical principles” towards an exploration of the “specific conditions of modernity” (Friedman 474). The ‘New Modernist Studies’ opened up “a domain of creative expressivity within modernity’s dynamic of rapid change” (Jaillant and Martin 2). It encourages scholars to delve into the intricate engagements of modernist writers with profound themes such as imperialism, colonialism, and globalization. This approach not only emphasizes the transnational dimensions of modernism but also highlights the distinctly national characteristics present in various literary modernist movements. Scholars now aim to

uncover “modernism’s changing forms and configurations” across different regions of the world, shedding light on its multifaceted manifestations and evolutions (3).

In alignment with this perspective of ‘New Modernist Studies’, my research endeavors to contribute to the exploration of global Modernisms. Although both Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang fall under the category of modernist writers, my investigation demonstrates the distinctive traits and characteristics that set them apart. British modernism and Chinese modernism each possess distinct characteristics, and a comparative study of Woolf and Chang will enrich our understanding of the diverse expressions within the broader framework of modernist literature.

Modernism, within a broader context, is often associated with key themes such as industrialization, capitalism, urbanization (Giddens 15). The modernity in Western context often refers to the fact that “a society industrializes and urbanizes itself through the capitalist system of commodity production and consumption” (L. Chen175). The rapid industrial advancements during this period not only revolutionized modes of production but also ushered in profound societal shifts. Capitalism, as a driving force, not only fueled economic structures but also permeated the fabric of daily life. The commodification of goods and services, as a hallmark of capitalist systems, played a significant role in shaping the artistic expressions and cultural ethos of western modernism. In the meanwhile, urbanization, with its concentration of diverse populations and cultural influences, served as a fertile ground for the collision and fusion of ideas. Cities became crucibles of creativity, where the dynamic interplay and occasional conflicts between tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban, the self and the collective, contributed to the multifaceted nature of modernist endeavors. In

the context of British modernism, the intertwining forces of industrialization, capitalism, and urbanization become pivotal elements shaping the artistic and cultural landscape.

Furthermore, British modernism was profoundly marked by the looming specter of two World Wars. This era was defined by an overwhelming sense of disintegration and decay. The aftermath of the war left an indomitable mark on the collective consciousness, fostering an atmosphere of disillusionment and upheaval. Aligned with the evident upheaval, British modernism embarked on a profound reexamination of conventional values. The contemporary predicament has confronted individuals with a modern dilemma—the rational, programmatic progress as promised by the Enlightenment can no longer offer guidance and assurance for individuals, and may even conflict with the idiosyncrasy of human feelings, consciousness, emotions, and sensations. This era witnessed a collective loss of faith and a fundamental reassessment of the established moral and philosophical frameworks that had long shaped societal norms.

This prevailing pessimistic mindset was further reinforced by Karl Marx's critique of the commodification of labor and the resulting devaluation of the individual. In a system driven by profit motives, labor is treated as a commodity—a factor of production bought and sold in the marketplace. This commodification, as Marx argued, leads to the detachment of the worker from the product of their labor, a sense of estrangement from the creative process, and a reduction of personal identity to a mere unit of economic exchange. The assembly line, the epitome of industrial efficiency, also became a symbol of the mechanization that threatened to strip away the intrinsic humanity of workers. Marx's identification of the alienation and the dehumanizing aspects of modern industrial society

added a layer of intellectual depth to the prevailing sense of skepticism and disenchantment within the modern society. The Marxian critique of ideology—with its “perception of superordinated powers as conspiratorial forces that sustain themselves by generating a web of illusions”—anticipates “the modernist skepticism concerning the permanence of any political or social order” (Dowden 14). The Marxian spirit of skepticism constitutes a fundamental element in the modernist approach to reading and portraying the complexities of the modern world.

The Freudian psychoanalysis shares a similar gesture with Marxian critique, both aimed at uncovering the veiled illusions and false appearances that dominate human perception. According to Freud, a substantial portion of mental activities—encompassing thoughts, emotions, desires, memories, and urges—takes place at the unconscious level. Essentially, the unconscious wields a pivotal influence in shaping social behavior and dynamics, even when individuals are not fully conscious of its impact. In the same spirit of Marx, Freud intended to draw our attention to the unfathomable depths of the unconscious and “demystify the fictions that constitute the surface of an illusory reality”: “A slip of the tongue, a joke, or a dream are not simply what they seem, but are actually mechanisms of repression, distorted masks that we use to conceal the terrible truth about ourselves from our conscious minds” (14). Marx and Freud, each in their own field, revealed the deceptive nature of what seemed like undeniable truths, and exposed that the esteemed institutions and beliefs of enlightened culture were, in fact, products of historical constructs.

Just as Marx and Freud exposed the deceptive nature of apparent truths, Einstein’s theory of relativity, introduced in 1905, delivered a significant blow to

conventional beliefs about the nature of reality (14). Newtonian physics had long held that linear time and three-dimensional space were immutable aspects of material existence. However, Einstein's groundbreaking theory shattered this notion by demonstrating the relativity of time and space—they are not absolute but rather contingent upon the observer's position and state of motion. According to relativity, only the speed of light remains constant across all frames of reference. This revolutionary idea challenged entrenched beliefs about the universality of reality's fundamental categories, fundamentally altering scientific and popular perceptions of time and space. It is within this spirit of uncertainty and inquiry that modernist writers embarked on a reevaluation of language as a medium for portraying reality. As external reality appeared increasingly elusive, modernists turned inward to explore a more tangible sense of the real. Virginia Woolf, along with other modernist writers, endeavored to transcend the limitations of traditional storytelling and provide deeper insights into the elusive nature of subjective experience.

The comparison between western modernism and Chinese modernism unveils a stark contrast in their engagements with modernity. While British modernism engages in a discerning critique of modernity and modern life, the relationship between Chinese modernism and modernity is much more complicated. In the context of Chinese modernism, modernity is more associated with modern "spirit/subjectivity" and "modern aesthetics and philosophy" (L. Chen 177). Rarely does the term "modernity" in the context of China imply a material reality of accomplished modernization within society, as China predominantly remained rural during the first half of the twentieth century and did not experience a successful material transformation towards modernity. Instead, the term "modernity" held the

aspirations and ideological desire of Chinese intellectuals to modernize China. Chinese modernity is more “an existential category, a state of mind, and a new self-awareness”, and more related to “the individual’s embrace of modern (viz. Western) ideologies, personal aspirations, and individualism” (177). Therefore, Chinese modernism is, in essence, a manifestation of the absence of modernity rather than its embodiment. The dearth of a general modern material culture and a weak urban culture shapes the contours of Chinese literary modernism.

In his famous epilogue to *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* “Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature,” C. T. Hsia<sup>3</sup> draws a distinction between Chinese literary modernism and its European counterpart by underscoring the apparent absence of the characteristic ambivalence that defines European modernism within Chinese modernist literature (Hsia 535-537). Chinese modernism is characterized by its “unbridled and un-ironic enthusiasm for the technological and economic trappings of modernization”, encompassing many facets of modernity (technological advancement, wealth accumulation, and the rise of the individual power) (Laughlin 4). In Chinese historical context, the term ‘modernity’, or ‘modern’, seemed imbued with a distinct ‘social mission’ or ‘moral burden’:

In the widely accepted narrative of modern Chinese cultural history, the

---

<sup>3</sup> Chih-tsing Hsia [C.T. Hsia] (1921-2013) stands as a distinguished scholar, celebrated for his efforts in introducing Chinese literature to the West during the information void that defined the Cold War era (1947-1991), and establishing a literary canon that remains influential to this day. In navigating the ideological struggles of the time, Hsia brought attention to several Chinese writers who had been overlooked. Eileen Chang, in particular, emerged prominently in his discourse. Hsia goes so far as to designate Eileen Chang as one of “the most gifted Chinese writers of the 1940s (*A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 398)”, drawing favorable comparisons to renowned Western literary figures such as Katherine Mansfield and Franz Kafka.

principal driving force of modern Chinese culture is the call for a socially or historically redemptive literature that would fundamentally change Chinese social relations and usher in an unprecedented era of freedom and prosperity (4).

Chinese modernism assumed the role of catalyzing societal awakening, advocating for social transformation and the modernization of entrenched systems and institutions. Given this sense of purpose, it is understandable that Chinese modernist literature tends to lack the ambivalence often associated with European modernism. Writers who align more closely with European modernists, particularly in their emphasis on urban life, explorations of themes such as alienation, disillusionment, the passage of time and psychoanalytic preoccupations, were relatively scarce and held marginal literary influence, at least during the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century (4).

The emergence of the 'New Modernist Studies', however, brought forth a strong critique of Hsia's perspective, challenging its Euro-centric stance. Exploration of Chinese modernism, as many scholars advocate, requires a close examination of its distinct historical contexts. Chinese modernism is intricately interwoven with the profound challenges posed by the complex colonial history of external interventions and territorial encroachments. The mid-19th century witnessed a series of treaties, such as the infamous Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, which concluded the First Opium War and marked the beginning of China's subjugation to foreign powers. This period of humiliation continued with subsequent treaties, each further fragmenting China and subjecting it to imperial dominance. Hong Kong, Taiwan and other territories were ceded to foreign powers. By the beginning of the 20th century, China found itself dominated by foreign-controlled concessions, unequal treaties, and the carving up of spheres of influence. The once mighty empire now faced not only territorial



fragmentation, but also a deep sense of national humiliation.

Within the crisis enveloping national fate and identity, Chinese intellectuals perceive the attainment of modernity and a modernized society as a means to liberate China from imperial incursions. May Fourth<sup>4</sup> intellectuals actively celebrated the progressive spirit inherent in modernity, advocating for a radical departure from the established norms of old Chinese traditions. In their pursuit, these intellectuals viewed modernity not only as a solution to contemporary challenges but also as a transformative force that could reshape the nation's destiny and identity. In many ways, the pursuit of a modern Chinese identity, both on a national and cultural level, becomes synonymous with the quest for modernity itself. The writings of May Fourth authors such as Lu Xun and Yu Dafu depict modernity as “a modern self identity which the male protagonist seeks, who almost always ends up in a serious identity crisis” (L. Chen 179). In a sense, “the entire Chinese modernist discourse is but a longing for and an imagination of an ideal future that is ‘modern’” (179), and Chinese modernism, in a sense, could be regarded as “a cultural strategy of reflecting China's quasi-colonial existence and a proposal for modernizing Chinese society” (178).

The May Fourth movement and “the cultural revolution that clusters around its

---

<sup>4</sup> The May Fourth Movement refers to a significant period in early twentieth-century China, beginning with student protests in Beijing in 1919 against the government's “self-compromising” policies towards Japan. This movement evolved into a broader cultural and intellectual awakening characterized by a desire to “reevaluate tradition in the light of science and democracy and to build a ‘new’ nation” (Chow 34). In literature, the May Fourth Movement called for “a reformed practice of writing” based on vernacular Chinese (baihua). Intellectuals such as Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Zheng Zhenduo, and Mao Dun debated the need for an “‘improved’ people's language and literature”. Writers of this period experimented with novel forms inspired by Western romanticism, naturalism, realism, and pragmatism. “Hence the process of cultural purification, which was ostensibly iconoclastic, was instigated with the ‘West’ as ‘theory’ and ‘technology’. Chinese culture itself, meanwhile, increasingly turned into some kind of primitive raw material that, being ‘decadent’ and ‘cannibalistic’, was urgently awaiting enlightenment” (34).

memory” have long dominated the study and discussion of Chinese modern literature (Chow 34). Yet, scholars such as Rey Chow advocate for a more inclusive perspective, urging a reevaluation of various literary forms from the early 20th century. Chow emphasizes that “the culturally monumental status of May Fourth literature as representative of ‘modern’ Chinese literature must be resituated in a historical context of multiple forms of writings” (36). In her book *Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East*, Chow specifically reevaluates the marginalized school of ‘Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies’ literature<sup>5</sup>, shedding light on its significance and contributions to the broader landscape of Chinese literary expression.

In examining Chinese modernism, it becomes evident that it possesses unique traits and characteristics that establish it as a distinctive counterpart to British modernism in numerous facets. As we navigate the fascinating intersection of these two literary worlds, therefore, it is essential to recognize not only the shared thematic ground but also the divergent influences that molded their narratives. The interplay between cultural parallels and contextual disparities provides valuable insights into the complexities inherent in modernism and the broader concept of modernity. Through my research, I aim to illustrate how Chinese modernism emerged as a distinct and nuanced literary phenomenon, offering a perspective that enriches our understanding of modernist movements worldwide. This unique perspective complements the more extensively studied British modernism, shedding light on different facets of the modernist experience and revealing the diverse ways in which modernity was conceptualized across cultures and contexts.

---

<sup>5</sup> I will elaborate on ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly’ literature later on the next page (p. 37).

Virginia Woolf was a central figure of Bloomsbury Group and an iconic figure of the avant-garde modernist movement in Britain. By the late 1920s, Woolf had become one of the most successful and internationally recognized writers. Meanwhile, approximately two decades later and on the other side of the globe, Eileen Chang emerged onto the literary stage in China. Chang was initially associated with the ‘Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies’ school (or ‘Yuanyang Hudie Pai’ in Chinese)<sup>6</sup>—a literary genre that emerged during the late Qing era and continued to flourish throughout the first half of the 20th century. From May to July 1943, Eileen Chang made her literary debut in the second to fourth issues of *Violet* (*Ziluolan* in Chinese)—a leading journal of ‘Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies’ school. Within a short span of two years (1943-1944), she published more than a dozen short stories and numerous essays in various popular magazines. Her works garnered acclaim, propelling Eileen Chang to instant celebrity status in Shanghai’s literary circles (Lee 268). Unlike the May Fourth writers who adopted a highly Westernized prose style, Chang and her contemporaries still retained elements of traditional Chinese narrative and rhetorical forms in their works, reflecting a unique blend of East and West.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The hilarious name ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly’ was initially coined to describe Xū Zhenya’s *Yü li hun* [Jade Pear Spirit], a bestselling novel published in 1912. “Written skillfully in classical parallel prose, which consists of rigidly stylized parallel sentences made up of either six or four characters, Xū’s novel is strewn with sentimental poems in which lovers are compared to mandarin ducks and butterflies” (Chow 36). This term emerged from a series of jests and rumors circulating among some writers of the period, eventually evolving into a derogatory label for authors of such sentimental love stories (36). ‘Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies’ literature was known for its serialized publications in newspapers and magazines. The genre primarily targeted ordinary urban readers, with romance being its predominant element. “Essentially, ‘Butterfly’ literature was the indigenous fiction of the 1910s and 1920s, as opposed to the ‘New Literature’ inspired by foreign models. In it, trends of the late Qing period were continued and transformed” (Pollard 524).

<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly’ literature was strongly criticized by intellectuals of May Fourth for its perceived lack of social responsibility and its failure to contribute to China’s modernization

While there are notable similarities between Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang, their literary visions and approaches exhibit significant divergence. Woolf's narrative style is distinguished by a profound exploration of characters' minds, employing techniques that intricately blur the lines between narrator and character voices. Her narrators often assume an elusive position, making it challenging to discern whether the voice belongs to the narrator or the character. The ambiguity in Woolf's narrative situation draws attention to the impenetrability of the mind, emphasizing the fact that a well-crafted narrative is only a radical simplification of experience and consciousness. For Woolf, narrative is fundamentally an edited and reduced rendition of the experienced consciousness—an organized construct emerging from the elusive chaos of the mind. She contends that the true stream of consciousness comprises disjointed and haphazard impressions and sensations that defy neat verbal expression. In Woolf's literary philosophy, the narrative is a nuanced and intricate dance between the structured form and the chaotic, elusive nature of the human mind.

While Eileen Chang shares a profound interest in the complexities of the human mind and emotions with Virginia Woolf, she is more concerned with portraying China in an era of transitions and depicting the tension between tradition and modernity, and the clash between the Old and the New. In contrast to Virginia Woolf's elusive narrators, Eileen Chang's narrators often abruptly emerge from the characters' consciousness, establishing a distinctly defined boundary from the unfolding story. This narrative choice empowers the narrator to offer cold and sarcastic commentary on the characters or the unfolding plot. Chang's writing is characterized by her aesthetics of *desolation*. For Chang, the rapid and

---

or reform. Critics labeled it as escapist, offering mere pleasure while sidestepping crucial social and political issues..

relentless march of modernity is not a blessed, triumphant ascent, but rather a precarious journey overshadowed by imminent threats of destruction. Chang's aesthetics of *desolation* extends beyond a mere critique of modernity; it serves as a lens through which she examines profound themes of the existential void, the fragility of human existence, and the quest for identity and meaning in a modern world fraught with uncertainty.

As my study unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that the pervasive sense of “nothingness”, emptiness, and disillusionment saturating the human experience in modern society resonates not only within Chang's works but also reverberates through the literary landscape of Virginia Woolf's works. The turbulent wartime serves as a crucible, intensifying the challenges and shaping their narrative landscape with elements of chaos, despair, and existential uncertainty. One might ponder: if Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang had the opportunity to meet, perhaps strolling together through the vibrant streets of London or sharing a conversation aboard a tramcar amid the bustling cityscape of Shanghai, what topics might have animated their exchanges? While the two writers never crossed paths in person, their literary works unfold a captivating dialogue, revealing both intriguing parallels and divergences in their engagements on the city, the self, and modernity. Through their writings, Chang and Woolf invite us into a journey, which transcends temporal and cultural boundaries, and invite us to ponder the enduring questions that define our shared humanity in the face of an ever-evolving and often disquieting modern world.

\*\*\*

In the first two chapters, I will focus on Woolf's and Chang's essays and explore how the essayistic is conceptualized in their essay-writings. The essay—the “attempt” to try out

personal opinions, or in Woolf's own words, "an attempt to communicate a soul" (*The Common Reader* 63)—is inherently tentative and provisional, as Montaigne (the practitioner of the essay) puts it: "I marvel at the assurance and confidence everyone has about himself, whereas there is virtually nothing that I know that I know and which I would dare to guarantee to be able to perform" (721). Montaigne sees the world as a state of constant flux:

The world is but perennial movement. All things in it are in constant motion... I cannot keep my subject still... I do not portray his being; I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another... but from day to day, from minute to minute... If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial. (610-11)

For Montaigne, the world does not have "a logical intent" (Friedrich 153), so he maintains that "I do not see the whole of anything," and "nor do those who promise to show it to us" (219). It is the "change" which puts order into Montaigne's writings (Marcus L., "Virginia Woolf and Digression: Adventures in Consciousness" 126), as he puts it: "As my thoughts come into my head, so I pile them up... Even if I have strayed from the road I would have everyone see my natural and ordinary pace. I let myself go forward as I am" (Montaigne 160). Woolf's admiration for Montaigne as an essayist is to be found in her essay "The Decay of Essay-Writing", where she regards him as "the very first modern" (3); in her essay collection *The Common Reader*, Woolf dedicates a whole chapter to Montaigne and draws attention to the exceptional nature of his "self-portraiture", "the complexities", and "the self-contradictions" (Marcus L. "Virginia Woolf and Digression: Adventures in Consciousness" 126). Woolf spotlights Montaigne's concerns of the sense of uncertainty: "'Perhaps' is one of his favourite expressions; 'perhaps' and 'I think' and all those words which qualify the rash assumptions of human ignorance" (*The Common Reader* 63). Woolf

also discovers with fascination Montaigne's joys of digression and freedom from an imposed order—in her own words, “the soul's freedom to explore and experiment (63).” As Montaigne himself asserts that “I like ... my formless way of speaking, free from rules and in the popular idiom, proceeding without definitions, subdivisions and conclusions (724-5)”. Woolf herself too, endeavors to free the words from constraints, and in that freedom, ‘there is also a sense in the use of ‘essayier,’ of risk and inconclusiveness, a feeling of venturing outside the paths of conventional methods’” (Good 28-9), as Woolf writes:

Movement and change are the essence of our being; rigidity is death; conformity is death; let us say what comes into our heads, repeat ourselves, contradict ourselves, fling out *the wildest nonsense*, and follow *the most fantastic fancies* without caring what the world does or thinks or says. (*The Common Reader* 63, my emphasis)

In a similar way to Woolf's conception of “the wildest nonsense” and “the most fantastic fancies”, Chang equates her writings to a the child's babbling in her autobiographical essay “Children Will Say Anything”. The essay as a form offers Woolf and Chang the flexibility to write about any thought or experience that comes to mind, free from prescribed structures. As we will see in their essays, Woolf's and Chang's digression and free-flowing approach frustrate the logic and reasoning mind, and render the fragmentation of subjectivity and the flux of urban reality. With this essayistic spirit of freedom and adventure, Woolf and Chang depart from large historical events, and instead roam over anything (that flies over the mind) without having to resolve the thoughts into a system of knowledge and ideology.

It is worth noting that what the essayistic aims at is not opposing itself to narrative. As a matter of fact, it is a basic human practice to rationalize our perceptions of reality by bestowing order onto the anarchy of experience, in order to make sense of the

world. From a hermeneutic point of view, the creation of a narrative is not “an imposition of order ‘from without’ but a creative process of reinterpretation” (Meretoja 98). As Ricoeur asserts, “[T]here is always more order in what we narrative than in what we have actually already lived; and this narrative excess (*surcroît*) of order, coherence and unity, is a prime example of the creative power of narration” (“The Creativity of Language” 468). Thus Ricoeur’s notion of “emplotment” is not a matter of imposing a order/form upon the flux of reality, but rather “a creative reorganization or reconstruction of reality, ‘grasping together’ experiences and events in a way that brings together the order and disorder—or concordance and discordance—that characterize our experiences” (Meretoja 98). What’s more, the existential act of meaning-making is not only a universal feature of human nature, but also a culture-specific practice; there are “no pure, raw, immediately given experiences”, for “cultural narratives already affect how we experience things in the first place”, and “we are always already entangled in stories, weaving our personal narratives in a dialogical relation to cultural narratives, both of which are objects of constant reinterpretation” (96). The essayistic, therefore, does not stand against narrative. Rather, the essayistic recognizes narrative as significant form which provide us with models for making sense of our lives; but in the meanwhile, the essayistic strives for moving beyond the limits of narrative, and liberating from hermeneutic way of thought. Reality, as Nietzsche puts it, is “a flux, an endless becoming that is beyond words and language—all language is metaphor, useful to us but ultimately detached from reality” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 18). Embracing “unmediated, point-like experience” (Meretoja 96), the essayistic ventures into the flux of experience and provides thus a release from “regime of signs (Sartwell 8)” —which affirms the “absolute



hegemony of language”, and reduces “everything to stories and that made stories definable in terms of *telos*” (3). Subjectivity is always mediated by the ‘long detour’ of ‘signs, symbols, and texts” (Meretoja 96); and narrative is but human construction which lacks “any self-evident natural basis” (96). Departing from conventional narrative, Woolf’s and Chang’s primary concerns are whether and to what extent the flux of reality and human experience can be organized narratively; and how to coordinate correspondingly order and disorder, coherence and incoherence through our written language.

In the chapter three and chapter four, I will switch to Woolf’s and Chang’s short stories, and investigate how the modern short story presents itself as a distinguished form. I argue that the limited span of the short story leads to its ‘intensity’ and its ‘exaggerated artifice’ and places more emphasis on rendering sensations and impressions and presenting inner experiences, thus rejecting chronological order and causality. Compared to the novel and novella with its more extensive scope of time and space, Woolf’s and Chang’s modernist short stories demonstrate an intrinsic ability to capture the episodic nature of modern urban experience. In Woolf’s and Chang’s short stories, the city is imagined as a site of curiosity and mystery, where one encounters hundreds of faceless, mysterious strangers everyday, and bumps up against numerous, unresolved events. Facing the flux of modern urban life, Woolf and Chang mobilize the essayistic in their narratives to consciously subvert the purposeful, cohesive dynamic of the plot, on which realist novels typically rely. The essayistic allows for a more fluid and flexible mode of representation for rendering the provisional experience of urban chance encounter.

In the chapter five and chapter six, I will concentrate on Woolf’s novel *Mrs.*

*Dalloway* and Chang's novellas "Love in a Fallen City" and "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier". Woolf and Chang integrate the essayistic into their novelistic narratives in order to disrupt the practices of mimesis and go beyond the intrinsic limitations of narrative. Specifically, Woolf experiments with the genre and subverts the purposeful dynamics of the master narrative which is teleologically shaped and sustained, whereas Chang disintegrates the conventional coherency of narrative agency and inserts into her novels a *metafictional* layer of narration. In their novels and novellas, both Woolf and Chang utilize the essayistic as a liberation from the tyranny of continuity style of narration to engage the problematic relation between narrative fiction and objective reality. By questioning at its heart "the existential mode" of narrative itself (Corrigan, "Essayism and Contemporary Film Narrative" 15), their essayistic narratives serves as digressive critiques "embedded within the struggle to narrate" (17)—as modes "of epistemological reflexivity on the perspectives and structures of the narratives themselves" (17). In his book titled *Essayism* (1992), Thomas Harrison investigates this mode of essayistic narrative in the novels of Joseph Conrad, Robert Musil and Luigi Pirandello. Harrison writes, "Not only does the essay give shape to a process preceding [narrative] conviction, and perhaps deferring it forever. More important, it records the hermeneutical situation in which such decisions are made. For this reason the essay ultimately requires novelistic form, which can portray the living condition in which thought is tangled" (4). Harrison thus regards the essayism as an "*immanent* critique of ... [the] norms and structures" of the narrative (10, emphasis in original), whose "hermeneutics of suspicion turns inward, toward the objectifications defining the active subject", the agent of its narrative (12). Essayistic narrative demonstrates no fidelity to the conventional sense of

reality, but rather present a self-conscious form of expression which present “strategic difference from that reality, in its service to undogmatic ideas” (Dowden 65).

Essayistic narrative departs from conventional modes of representation and creates a self-conscious form of writing, which liberates narrative from the tyrant of plot and investigates the problematic relationship between reality and representation. As Samuel Beckett asserts that “Joyce’s writing is not about something: it is that something itself” (14). By purposely drawing readers’ attention to the artifice of realistic representation, as well as the inadequacy of modes of representation, essayistic narrative achieves a sense of authenticity and demonstrates that the “real story” is as a matter of fact “the story of *interpreting* the story”, and the true mimesis concerns with “the problematical relationship between life in the real world and the representations that storytellers make of it” (Dowden 25, my emphasis). This strong “will to self-reflexivity” (Bahun 44) endows Woolf’s and Chang’s writing an enormous amount of energy of freedom and rebellion, which always looks for change and challenges the *status quo*. Woolf and Chang are often labeled as politically unconscious and socially indifferent, and their writing too feminine, and self-centered—with this point of view I disagree. While seemingly unconcern with immediate external reality and direct social impact, Woolf’s and Chang’s writing foreground a “process of derealization” which poses a uncompromising critique to the existing order and “structures—ideas, values, facts, judgments, and laws [...] that define the truth of the everyday” (Corrigan, “Essayism and Contemporary Film Narrative” 16). As Nietzsche puts it, the truth but “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms [...] a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned,

and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation” (“On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” 250). The so-called truth is only something which is long taken for granted and oppressively reinforced. For Woolf and Chang, the true mimesis is thus to recognize the arbitrariness of signs, whose mimetic relation with things is fundamentally questionable. With this pursuit for self-reference, their essayistic narrative—the mode of narrative which investigate the “very possibilities of knowledge and its worth within narrative (Corrigan, “Essayism and Contemporary Film Narrative” 17)”—bridges a gap between philosophy, narrative, and subjectivity. Milan Kundera conceptualizes the notion of the essayistic in the notion of the “unachieved”: “All great works contain something unachieved” (63), he observes, and the unachieved “can show us the need for i) a new art of *radical divestment* (which can encompass the complexity of existence in the modern world without losing architectonic clarity); ii) a new art of *novelistic counterpoint* (which can blend philosophy, narrative, and dream into one music); iii) a new art of the *specifically novelistic essay* (which does not claim to bear an apodictic message but remains hypothetical, playful or ironic)” (65, emphasis in original). Focusing this unique model of expression—essayistic narrative, whereby the essayistic inhabits narrative “in a way that generates complex reflections on the representational values embedded within their narrative organizations” (Corrigan, “Essayism and Contemporary Film Narrative” 16), I will explore in the chapter five and chapter six, how Woolf and Chang integrate the essayistic in their novels—how they go beyond the restrictions of conventional narrative, and challenge fundamentally the knowledge of teleology and the tyrant of plot.

## **Part One The Art of the Essay**

### **Chapter One The Performance of the Essayistic in Eileen Chang's Essay**

#### ***Collection Written on Water***

#### **1.1 Shanghai and Hong Kong in Eileen Chang's Life and Work**

Two cities play significant roles in Chang's life and work: Shanghai, the city of her birth and where she lived for most of her first half life; and Hong Kong, the city which serves as the repeating motif in her short stories and novels. Chang's personal history provides a glimpse into the tumultuous political landscape of China during the first half of the 20th century. Chang was born in Shanghai to "a declining late-imperial aristocratic family" in the year of 1920, a few years after the Xinhai revolution in 1911, which overthrew the Qing dynasty and ended 2,000 years of imperial rule in China (Zou 29). The Xinhai revolution paved the way for the establishment of the New Republic of China in 1912. In its attempt to modernize China, the New Republic of China introduced Western technologies and ideologies. Chang's family history sheds light on this transition from old to new China. Her paternal great-grandfather, Li Hongchang, was a controversial statesman in Chinese history, often regarded as "the equivalent of a famous and effective prime minister" in the nineteenth-century Qing dynasty (Kingsbury x). In sharp contrast, Chang's father was an indulgent aristocrat who had a number of vices, including opium addiction and keeping a concubine inside his marriage; he even abused his patriarchal power upon his own family members with domestic violence (xi). Disappointed by the marriage, Chang's mother traveled to Europe on and off, leaving the little Chang and her younger brother in the shadow of the

tyrannical father (xi). Chang was “a precocious and oversensitive child” (Lee L. 267), torn by the conflicts between “forces of tradition and modernity” (Lovell x), and the conflicts between “the self-possessed, Westward-learning mother and the self-destructive, reactionary father” (Kingsbury xi). Her parents finally divorced when she was ten, and her teenage life was split in two family worlds—“father’s dark, smoky lair; mother’s bright, modern apartment” (xi). At age of seventeen, she was brutally beaten up by her tyrant father, who even mercilessly withheld medical care and imprisoned her in her bedroom by for half a year. She finally managed to escape from her tyrant father and sought refuge with her mother—a New Woman of her time—who embraces western forms of recreation and leisure, and had Chang educated in the way of “a Westernized young lady” (x). The tensions between her father’s traditionalism and her mother’s modernity, as well as the broader societal changes occurring in China during the time, had a significant impact on her worldview and her writing.

In 1939, Chang was given the offer to study at the University of London, but the outbreak of war in Europe made it impossible. Instead of going to London, therefore, she enrolled at the University of Hong Kong to study English literature. In 1942, Japanese troops invaded Hong Kong and Chang had to abandon her studies and return to Shanghai, although she had only one semester to finish before graduation. Chang arrived at Shanghai only to find out that her beloved city had also been occupied by the Japanese (Lee L. 267-8). Shanghai under Japanese occupation is widely regarded as the most distressing period “in the collective memory of a city with a complex history of colonialism and cosmopolitanism” (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 1). It was a

turbulent wartime, where “hunger, death, scarcity, blockades, air raids, social unrest, personal tragedies, and political suppression”, all of which were experienced by the city’s inhabitants on a daily basis; those who lived in the occupied city witnessed the changing front lines of the war everyday and saw no end in sight (1). As Chang made her impressionistic sketch of the Shanghai cityscape from her private balcony at dusk:

I was alone on the dusky balcony after Su Qing left. Suddenly I noticed a tall building in the distance, on whose edge hung a great swatch of rouge-like redness. At first I thought it was the reflection of the setting sun on the windows, but on a second glance, I saw a full moon, rising crimson above the city. I murmured to myself, “so this is what they mean by turbulent times”. (qtd. in Huang 1)

This observation was made by Chang in an essay published in April 1945; her city of Shanghai was “colored a deep, saturated red as though stained by the ongoing war and turmoil”, and there was “even greater destruction lurked in the looming darkness of the night” (1). Chang was caught in a sense of despair over future destruction, yet “it was precisely under these extraordinary circumstances that Chang felt inspired to write” (Lee L. 267-268). Living in a turbulent wartime, Chang seems to feel the irresistible urge to write and publish, as she famously proposes:

Ah! Make yourself famous as early as you can! If success comes too late, the pleasure of it isn’t as intense. The first time I published a couple of pieces in the school magazine, I was deliriously happy, poring over the pages again and again, as if seeing the words for the first time. But nowadays, I’m not so easily excited. Which is why I have to push myself even harder: *Hurry! Hurry! Otherwise it will be too late! Too late!* Even if I were able to wait, the times rush impatiently forward—already in the midst of destruction, with a still-greater destruction yet to come. There will come a day when our civilization, whether sublime or frivolous, will be a thing of the past. If the word I use the most in my writing is “desolation”, that is because this troubling premonition underlines all my thinking. (*Written on Water* 199, my emphasis)

At first sight, this seems to be “a plea concerning her need for instant fame (Lee L. 287)” — “the imperative to achieve fame, derived from an urgent need to ‘occupy’ a space in a swiftly diminishing landscape and to hold onto a moment that was slipping away (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 21)”. But noticeably, Chang’s craving for the publication and popularization of her works soon turns into a panic, which foreshadows the inevitable devastation at the end of the world, and also conjures up her concept of desolation. The phantom threat of doom that keeps haunting Chang is the Second World War, the Sino-Japanese War of 1937 and the fall of the city of Shanghai. In the essay “From the Ashes”, she recorded her wartime experiences when she studied at Hong Kong University and comes to the surprising conclusion that “[S]tripping off all the superficial civilization, only two things were left: food and sex” (*Written on Water* 54). In “Days and Nights of China”, she expresses the same sentiments: “... the dust of this world is piling ever higher, to know that not only will hopes turn to ash, but anything and everything one touches will ultimately crumble to nothingness” (214). When Chang talks about the desolate state of our civilization, Lee writes, “[I]t seems that she is also referring to the hurried march of modernity—of the linear, deterministic notion of history as progress that would eventually make the present civilization a thing of the past by the force of its destruction” (Lee L. 287). Rejecting the highly politicized and utilitarian May Fourth literature of her time, Chang’s pessimistic and decadent voice “runs counter to the prevailing ethos of nationalism and revolutionary progress at the time” (269). In sharp contrast to the grand narrative, Chang’s attitudes towards politics and history are often interpreted by critics as a kind of anarchy and pessimism, mostly characterized by her aesthetics of desolation.



In the early 20th century, China was still largely rural, but Shanghai stood out as a bustling urban center that was at the forefront of China's transformation into modernity. In China's passage to modernity, Shanghai plays a leading role: the English word "modern" (along with the French *moderne*) was first introduced and translated in Shanghai; and as a matter of fact, the two words Shanghai and "modern" are often regarded as equivalents in Chinese popular culture (Lee L. 5). Before the wartime turmoil of 1940s, it should be noted that Shanghai went through a significant urban development in the 1930s—the construction of skyscrapers, department stores, cafe house, dancing hall and movie theaters. By the end of 1930, Shanghai had become one of the major international metropolises, "an international legend ("the Paris of Asia")"—it was then "the fifth largest city in the world and China's largest harbor and treaty port" (3-5). Shanghai inhabitants of that time, Despite all the "anxieties and perplexities", embraced "the arrival of modernity in its concrete 'mechanical' forms—railways (after an initial fiasco), telegraphs, tram lines, electric lights, automobiles" (312-313). Strikingly, writers of different groups reacted in distinguished ways to this new urban reality: Chinese neo-sensationalist writers were fascinated by its "novelty and magnificence" (312); leftist writers and latter-day communist scholars reacted with a great deal of "ambivalence and anxiety", seeing the city as "a bastion of evil, of wanton debauchery and rampant imperialism marked by foreign extraterritoriality, and a city of shame for all native patriots" (4). In the meanwhile, Shanghai is also a popular motif in West literature, which enhances the city's "glamour and mystery" on the one hand, and turns the name of the city into "a debased verb in the English vocabulary" on the other hand—"to shanghai' is 'to render insensible, as by drugs [read opium], and ship on a vessel wanting

hands' or 'to bring about the performance of an action by deception or force'" (4).

When Chang returns from Hong Kong in 1942 to a Shanghai under Japanese occupation, the spectacle of "an urban skyline had become part of a world that she taken for granted" (313). Chang's essays reveal a subtle combination of a passionate love for city life and a desolate weariness, where her witty and delightful tone masks a suppressed sense of sadness and desolation. There is always a "desolate threat (313)" haunting in the background. She repeats that "this is a chaotic era", and keeps wondering if all human efforts and striving for glory are "doomed to be destroyed' (*Written on Water* 39). This aesthetics of desolation sharpens her senses of smell, touch, sight, taste, and hearing. In many of her essays, she described in nuanced detail how much she enjoyed the little things of life. In "From the Mouth of Babies", she reveals her love for the taste of the sweet and soft food, the bubbles in the milk and the sweetened rice dumplings (9). In "Notes on Apartment Living", she confesses her love for the street sounds, without which she could not go to sleep: "Those who have more refined taste would rest on their pillows and listen to wind whistling in a pine grove or the roar of ocean waves. But it is the sound of a street car that I must hear in order to fall asleep" (24). In "On Music", she admits her eccentric taste for the odor: "I am fond of many odors that people dislike: the slight mustiness of fog, the smell of dust after rain, leeks, garlic, cheap perfume..." (207). She also highlights her sensibilities for the color: "There was a pile of neatly-folded old pajamas on the alpine rush mat: greenish-blue tops in a summer cloth (summer materials), greet pants in silk. The blue and greet together created a rich and delicate beauty. Just an incidental glance as them as I was sitting nearby made me feel happy for a while" (210). She characterizes herself as "sensitive to colors, musical notes, and

diction”: “When I play the piano, I imagine that the eight notes have different personalities, dancing together hand in hand in colorful clothes and hats. When I began to write, I liked to use colorful and sonorous words like ‘pearl gray’, ‘dusk’, ‘subtle’, ‘splendor’, and ‘melancholy’” (211). The challenging conditions of wartime in Shanghai heightened Chang’s sensitivity and cultivated her appreciation for the small pleasures of life.

Chang openly acknowledges her “money consciousness”, as well as her passion for clothes, cinema and cosmetics, and happily identifies herself as a “self-supporting petite bourgeois” and a “money worshipper” (*Written on Water* 3). She writes, “[A]s soon as I learned the word ‘materialism,’ I insisted on calling myself a materialist” (2); and “[W]henver I see the term ‘petite bourgeoisie,’ I am promptly reminded of myself, as if I had a red silk placard hanging from my chest imprinted with these very words” (3). Although Chang uses the term “petite bourgeoisie” with a touch of irony, she is often “synonymous with Chinese petty bourgeois”, which is not about social class conceptualized in Marx’s theory, but rather “a lifestyle, a standard of taste, a way of experiencing oneself, the world of petty desires, and its materiality that emphasizes both an ability to dwell in a world of triviality and the superior spiritual quality of this experience” (Zou 31). In Chang’s writings, one finds “calculating Shanghai urbanites and their petty desires” (31), as well as an aesthetics of details and fragmentation, which provides a “revelation” of reality that transcends it (I will elaborate on this point later in this chapter).

According to Huang, Chang belongs to one of the most popular female writers of 1940s Shanghai, along with Su Qing and Shi Jimei. These women writers were active in the print media, where they openly discuss personal life, family and marriage, promoted their

own images in roundtable talks and dialogues, thereby redefining and transferring the structure of modern knowledge of print culture, and attracting immense middlebrow readers. By using the essay as a tool of self-expression, these women writers fashioned themselves as cultural commentators and public intellectuals. Writing in popular journals of that period, such as *The Miscellany Monthly* and *Women's Voices*, they bring together “war and domesticity, two seemingly exclusive categories of human experience” (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 71): “War, the bombarding presence, is dissected into fragments, channeled into the everyday”; in the meanwhile, “the experience of the domestic and the everyday is intensified precisely due to the threatening intrusion of the war” (71). Together with other female writers of her time, Chang responds to the destruction and ruins of the war by constantly experimenting within the form of essay, where she weaves “a complex inner life together with a mounting public persona” (128), and paints “a portrait of the author as a public intellectual whose private, everyday experiences and philosophical reflections are made more immediately accessible [than her voice in the novels] to readers” (Cheung 75). In “Children Will Say Anything”, she writes that she likes her profession as a writer very much, despite the fact that “the work can be grueling” (*Written on Water* 4). She regards the magazine-reading masses as her “master”, but “a most lovable sort of boss”:

I am delighted that the guardians of my living are neither emperors nor kings but the magazine-reading masses... the masses are a most lovable sort of boss. They are not nearly as fickle as the aristocracy (‘heavenly power is inscrutable’ as the saying goes), they do not put on airs, they will give you their sincere support, and, in return for a good turn or two, they will remember you for five, or even ten, years. Most important, the masses are abstract. If you must have a master, in stands to reason that an abstract one is much to be preferred. (4)

In her essay “Shanghai After All”, Chang overtly admits that “I like Shanghai people; I hope the Shanghai people will like my books” (55). Chang characterizes the Shanghai people as “clever, sophisticated, good at flattery and chicanery but not to excess” (Lee L. 269). Chang regards the Shanghai mentality as shaped by the high pressures of modern life and characterized by the incorporation of both modern and traditional cultural elements: “Shanghai people are traditional Chinese people tempered by the high pressure of modern life. The misshapen products of this fusion of old and new culture may not be entirely healthy, but they do embody a strange and distinctive sort of wisdom” (*Written on Water* 54). Written at the very moment when Chang’s literary career began to rise, this blatant statement could be seen as her “unambiguous effort to further court her already-fascinated local audience” (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 65). Chang’s observation may seem like an attempt to appeal to her local readers, but it undoubtedly reveals her insight into the complex cultural dynamics and tensions of Shanghai during her time, and her efforts to define a collective identity specific to that geographic location.

Although Chang’s definition of the collective identity is “geographically specific”, one can easily discern that “the so-called Shanghai identity is a tailored construction”, so “anyone can assume this identity by simply cultivating oneself and attaining a new body of knowledge” (65). Shanghai wisdom is further elaborated in Chang’s another essay “Seeing with the Streets”, where she employs the one-syllable word *tong* to describe a type of expertise that comes from living in Shanghai, which involves practical skills, refined manners, and everyday wisdom gained through human interaction and popular

media. A *tong* person, in Chang's point of view, is "a connoisseur of life"—who possesses "a global vision", and is capable to incorporate a few English words into daily conversations (65). During wartime occupied Shanghai, the pursuit of *tong* as described by Chang was linked to the imperative need for daily survival: popular journals of the time provided practical advice on personal hygiene, stabilizing the family structure, and ways to save money and energy for efficient household management (65). This alternative standard knowledge sets the Shanghai middlebrow publishing culture of the 1940s apart from that of the earlier decades. Along with other female writers, Chang addresses modern issues in her essays and offers a unique perspective on middle-class city life in Shanghai.

## 1.2 Eileen Chang's Essay Collection: *Writing on Water*

Overshadowed by novelistic writings, Chang's essays often serve only as secondary sources for interpreting her novels. In *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular of the 1940s*, Nicole Huang recognizes the significance of the essay as a form, and explores the artistry of Chang's essays, along the essays of other women writers of 1940s Shanghai. With its distinct style and language (which runs against the dominant discourse of the literary scene at that time), Chang's essay collection was firstly published in 1945, under the title *Liuyan*. Huang draws attention to the naming of the title: the term "Liuyan" can be translated to "written on water" in English, which conveys Chang's intention that her words would be like "written on water", or "flowing words" (123). In the meanwhile, "Liuyan" in Chinese also contains the meaning of "gossip", or "rumor", which implies Chang's hope that her works

could flow “freely and swiftly in order to reach the widest possible audience” (123). Huang also suggests two further possible implications of the watery metaphor: for some educated Chinese readers, the title might immediately call to the mind the Song Dynasty poet, essayist Su Shi’s definition of prose writing: “[Prose] mostly resembles traveling clouds and flowing water;” and also, other readers may associate Chang’s title to the famous line of the English Romantic poet John Keats: “Here lies one whose name was writ in water” (124).

By the same token, the titles of Chang’s essays encompass a multitude of implications, and weave a rich texture of sociopolitical, literary-historical, and philosophical meanings. Time and again in her essays, she deviates from the conventional connotations of the well-known Chinese idioms, thus evoking a strong sense of ambiguity and uncertainty, and adding new layers of meanings. For instance, the title of the essay “Tongyiwuji (Children Will Say Anything)” hinges on ambiguous meanings. The literal translation of the title would be “children’s words carry no harm”, or, “children’s speech has no prohibitions”. In the essay, however, Chang turns “the familiar idiom into a cunning comment on her autobiographical writing, one specifically tailored for the accounts of her often tormented childhood” (Huang 145). And also, the connotation of the idiom “Daoluyimu (Seeing with the Streets)” originates from a story from ancient China (in Zhou dynasty), implying that people are deprived from the freedom of speech under tyranny, and can only communicate with each other through eye contact. In her essay “Daoluyimu (Seeing with the Streets)”, however, Chang directly employs its literary meaning—“seeing and observing the streets”, and depicts the street scenes of the commercialized Shanghai in 1940s. In a similar manner, while “Siyu (Whispers)” implies a secret or slight utterance in Chinese, in the essay “Siyu (Whispers)”,

Chang transforms the meaning of it into the way that “the narrative voice in the essay whispers, murmurs, and gossips”, mimicking “the lowered voice and fragmented syntax used when speaking of the most intimate moments of one’s private life” (140). By defamiliarizing well-known Chinese idioms and recontextualizing them in modern city life, Chang offers a fresh and innovative perspective on the traditional Chinese culture.

If one defines a genre as a particular literary form characterized by distinctive features and is guided by established conventions and practices, the term “essay” is problematic in the context of Chinese literature, for it has been defined differently in various sub-contexts in the context of twentieth China (Laughlin 14). The modern ‘informal essay’ (*xiao pinwen*)<sup>8</sup>—which is characterized by “a light and relaxing tone”, “political disengagement”, and “a highly aestheticized and personal vision of dream and reality;” the ‘miscellaneous essay’ (*zawen*)<sup>9</sup>—which emphasizes “intellectual sharpness”, “rhetorical eloquence”, and “active engagement with society”; and the ‘refined essay’ (*meiwen*)<sup>10</sup>—which promotes “linguistic experimentation”, and “highly aesthetic and sensual qualities” (Huang 128-129). According to Charles A. Laughlin, one could also roughly divide the modern Chinese prose into two groups—one issuing from Lu Xun (who was devoted to “the radical transformation of society”), the other from Zhou Zuoren (who advocated “the expression of personality”) (17). In those two categories of sensibilities, Laughlin locates Chang’s essays in the legacy of modern Chinese *xiaopin wen* (represented by Zhou Zuoren): Chang’s essays are “arguably as much the artistic culmination of the peculiar practices, strategies, and themes of the modern Chinese *xiaopin wen* essay” (177). Specifically, Chang’s

---

<sup>8</sup> exemplified by Zhou Zuoren and Liu Yutang.

<sup>9</sup> personified by Lu Xun and his entourage of young followers.

<sup>10</sup> practiced by Zhou Zuoren, Zhu Ziqing and many other writers.



“associative structuring of ideas (wandering, dreaming)”, her “serious moral exploration of everyday material existence (wandering, learning)”, “the elaborating of pleasures and the art of living (enjoying)”, all relate back to the various themes in premodern *xiaopin wen* (172-173). The importance of *xiaopin wen* as a genre rests in its capacity to focus on the specific emotional encounters of everyday life, encompassing both the joys and sorrows of daily existence; at the same time, *xiaopin wen* also serves as a very suitable vehicle for “an artistic critique of social life from a woman’s perspective” (173).

Laughlin maintains that, at the beginning of twentieth century, Chinese writers adopted grammatical structures and terminology from Western languages, allowing for “the expression of ideas through linear articulation to supplement the vertical implication or suggestion inherent to traditional Chinese prose” (47). If poetry relies largely on “ambiguity, parataxis, and structures of imagery”, prose is indispensable from “the unfolding of and wandering through ideas” (47). In this sense, Eileen Chang’s title “Writing on Water” could also be understood as a linguistic metaphor for the flowing “impressions” of reality across the mind, which take shape not from prefabricated structures but from ideas and experiences contingently arising on the spot. Within the form of essay, Chang creates a formless form—a structure of both containment and openness: “[T]here is containment in the sense that the prose language captures the instantaneous thoughts and feelings of a particular moment and there is openness in that it lacks definite meaning or substance” (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 125). In his essay “Qinghe Lane”, Yu Pingdo elaborates on his approach to describing a favorite street in Hangzhou and explains how the prose lyrically pursues “a feeling without exactly capturing it

(Laughlin 46)”:

I will certainly not describe the narrow streets and shops of Hangzhou, I have not the time for that kind of fine grinding and polishing, nor do I have the ability to gather scattered and broken threads and weave them into a seamless, heavenly garment. I have no choice but to conceal my incompetence. What I earnestly wish to show is a feeling of attachment to the place, *a feeling as mild as water*, an indistinct sense of clinging yet with no moorings, a clinging one feels within the rays of the setting sun and beside the glow of the streetlamp. *This kind of feeling, at once delicate, yet which penetrates into the bones, can only be fermented through the accumulation of countless dreams and mundane experiences.* It gives you nothing remarkable to point to, and credit for it cannot be given to a single morning or night. I really do not know where to begin, but feel I must express it. (qtd. in Laughlin 46, my emphasis)

The essay produces the fragmented moments and constellations of senses, without imposing a narrative upon the flux of experience and embrace the discontinuous and incoherent elements of reality. Through Chang’s artistry, the modern Chinese essay becomes a structure of fluidity and flexibility, where she combines essay writing with other literary and cultural genres. Eileen Chang’s essay—instead of a straight narration, often rambling, random, analytical, disjointed, gossipy, chatty—presents itself as a hybrid composed of diverse genres. In her essays, literary and art criticism, autobiographical fiction, gossip, conjecture, anecdotes, history, philosophy are all rolled into one. The essays collected in *Written on Water* range from personal memoirs (“Whispers”, “Children Will Say Anything”) to Chinese cultural history (“Chronicle of Changing Clothes”, “The Religion of the Chinese”), to insightful observations on modern urban life (“Notes on Apartment Life”, “Seeing with the Streets”) and feminist critiques of a patriarchal society (“Speaking of Women”) (Laughlin 173). Some essays describe the city life at the street-level; some other present “vibrant cinematic cultures” of 1940s Shanghai (Huang 144). Some introduce Peking Opera to westerners; some other offer a gallery tour of European modernist paintings to Chinese readers. Some look into the

history of Chinese fashion, or provide “nostalgic rambling through classical Chinese literature” (144); some other elucidate her philosophy of *desolation*, where “somber reflections” and “unexpected epiphanies” are woven into the tapestry of everyday city life (Laughlin 173).

At the highest level of ideology, the sense of fluidity and flow evoked by Chang’s watery title might also imply Daoist notion of cosmic “oneness”, for the water is the most important metaphor in the Chinese ancient philosophy—Daoism. Lao Tzu states that “Water is the most softest and most yielding substance. Yet nothing is better than water, for overcoming the hard and rigid, because nothing can compete with it” (Tao Te Ching, Chapter 78). Lao Tzu regards the water as “the supreme good”, for with its extremely resilience to change, it overcomes the rigid and hard<sup>11</sup>. Daoism, in its essence, worships the force of nature. The *Tao*, namely the *Way* of nature, is nameless and formless, thus cannot be defined. “The great Tao flows everywhere (78)”, as the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu puts it. Seeing the world as being in a continuous state of flux, Taoism rejects any form of authority and order. In sharp contrast to the conventional analytic perception of discrete “things,” Daoism renounces the very idea of categorizing and dissecting, and promotes instead an anarchist sensibility—a holistic view of reality whereby everything flows into everything. Such fusion of what we normally regard as separate is aptly captured in the way Daoism have traditionally depicted the *yin* (the feminine) and *yang* (the masculine) aspects of the universe as interpenetrating elements. The dynamics between the two opposites is the fundamental

---

<sup>11</sup> Water is extremely resilient to change, as water is able to take all kinds of different forms. For example, we can pour water in a glass and it becomes the glass; when it’s part of the ocean it waves. Its behavior varies in response to external conditions; when it’s cooked it evaporates, and when it’s frozen it becomes solid. Through its adaptive nature, water endures and thrives amidst a multitude of circumstances.

principle of how the universe works. *Yin* is seen wherever there is fluidity, softness, openness, receiving, emptiness, or darkness (for example, water, cloud and mist). *Yang* is at work in hardness, assertiveness, force, and light (for example, sun, mountain, stone). Everything is a blending of the *Yin* and *Yang* polarities, and the dynamism and flux of reality is based on the tendency of *Yin* and *Yang* to advance and retreat, the tendency of one to become the other, just as summer changes into winter, and day changes into night. Thus, Taoism promotes androgyny and defies the conventional distinction between masculinity and femininity. To achieve wholeness, a man must embrace the qualities traditionally associated with femininity, such as receptiveness and openness. In a similar spirit, Chang talks about the force of the feminine, the invisible power of the women as well as their unrecognized status in reality in her essay “On Women”, where she also makes fun of Nietzsche and men on the behalf of women:

Ever since it was invented by Nietzsche, the term “Superman” has been cited quite often. Before Nietzsche, we can find similar ideals in ancient legends. It’s funny that our idealized Superman is always a man. Why? Probably because the civilization of Superman is more advanced in achievement than our civilization, which is merely men’s civilization. Moreover, the Superman is a crystallization of pure ideal, but it’s not hard to find a “Superwoman” in practical life. In any stage of culture, women are always women. Whereas men tend to develop in some special areas; *women are the most universal and fundamental, and they embody the cycle of seasons, the land, [the human life cycle of] birth, aging, illness, and death, as well as eating, drinking, and procreation.* Women have fastened all the wisdom required of flying to outer space to the pole grounded in reality. (*Written on Water* 84)

Chang suggests that the Superman is only a fantasy, but the Superwoman is vividly present in reality. Superwoman—cherishing the principle of emptiness (*Yin*)—is wise and humble, but easily neglected. The female power/principle of emptiness, however, has a priority over the male power (*Yang*) in that there must be an empty space before any concrete thing comes to

occupy the space. Like water, *Superwomen* is soft and flexible, which endows her the enormous power to ‘erode’ the hard and rigid ‘rock’ and ‘metal’ of patriarchy. Thus, Superwoman (*Yin*)—in its graceful humbleness and fluid receptivity—presents itself as the essence of humanity. It is the figure of superwoman who carries the burden of humanity, and serving as a firm ground for the flourishing and prospering of human civilization.

Chang’s essays are characterized by a natural and fluid writing style that is often compared to the smooth flow of water. In contrast to the grand and formal prose that was dominant in her time, Chang’s essays utilize “vernacular, local and colloquial” language to convey a sense of everyday life; her essays focus on the small, often overlooked details of daily existence, highlighting the charming and meaningful aspects of day-to-day life that are often ignored in more serious literary works (Laughlin 14). Through this unique perspective, Chang challenges traditional notions of what constitutes ‘serious’ literature, suggesting that the exploration of everyday life is just as valuable and worthy of attention. As such, her essays provide a fresh perspective to study the culture and society of Shanghai in the 1940s, while also providing an opportunity to explore how the traditional Chinese essay *xiaopin wen* transforms into a reinvented style of prose in the new historical conditions of modern China.

### **1.3 The Impossibility of Storytelling in the Era of Modernity and Chang’s Choice of the Essayistic**

In a general context, the term “essay” is commonly translated as “Sanwen” in Chinese, which incorporates the character (San) meaning “scattered,” or “dispersed”; so, in a sense, the

overall style of Chinese prose permits a greater sense of wandering or meandering compared to the English version of the genre (Klein, *Written on Water*). Zhou Zuoren's famous essay "Guxiang de yecai" (Herbs of my hometown), for example, meanders from explorations of regional identity, to various herbs and their culinary applications, to seasonal customs surrounding herb gathering, and ultimately to allusions to them in Japanese poetry and folklore (Laughlin 49). As Laughlin observes, the herbs provides "the connection between these topics, but it is more associative than logical, analytical, or causal" (49). This kind of "fragmentary and all-inclusive qualities (san) of modern prose style (sanwen)" are also elaborated by Chang, who pushes the limits of modern Chinese prose to "the most eccentric, unrestrained, and far-ranging extremes" (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 137). Not surprisingly, some of Chang's most notable moments occur when she deviates from the given topic (Klein, *Written on Water*): for example, she makes comments on Japanese children in an essay "On Dance;" or she speaks of Chinese attitudes toward the rule and law while ostensibly writing about "Peking Opera Through Foreign Eyes". A good example of Chang's employment of digression can also be found in "On Music", where she talks about her tastes of music and instruments in a casual tone, but surprisingly attacks the May Fourth literature for its reckless patriotism and elitism, as she compares the symphony to the

vast and mighty May Fourth movement that rushes forward, and makes everybody's voice its own. As soon as one opens one's mouth, one is startled by the depth and greatness of one's own voice, which comes roaring out from all directions, including the front, the back, the left, and the right. It is like hearing someone talk to you when you first wake up, you are not sure if it is you talking or if it is someone else, and feel a sense of blurred horror. (*Written on Water* 196)

Chang's essays demonstrate a great deal of autonomy; following no pre-determined paths, her essays proceed freely in disparate directions. In fact, if "narratives emulate models of authority, digression represents a challenge to that authority" (Gold 65). In the context of Chinese modern literature, the digressiveness displayed in Chang's works demonstrates a potent means of resistance to the regime of redemptive literature, where the novel in the epic, realist mode had been the dominant form of literature and a pivotal ideological apparatus. In *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*, Ban Wang identifies the Chinese novel of revolutionary realism in the first half of twentieth century as a medium of "envisioning the totality of social life" and a reflection of Fredric Jameson's concept of national allegory ("in which the individual's fate tells a larger story of collective destiny") (165):

the novel of socialist realism is both epic and historical. Its epic characteristics lie in the historical scope and teleology, the engagement with social and political issues, the intertwining of the individual's fate with collective projects, the aesthetics of the exemplary hero, and the striving for transcendence within everyday immanence. It depicts a universe in which the world and the self: never become permanent strangers to one another and the individual's growth is of one piece with communal destiny. (165)

According to Wang, the unity of revolutionary ideals and social reality, as well as of theory and practice is "a prominent tenet in the utopian legacy of Marxism and is probably the strongest antidote against the dissolution of history into simulacra"; as a literary medium that strives for this unity, the Chinese realist novel features "a mythical and epic structure" which intertwines the individual and collective, dream and history, and ultimately represents the harmony of utopian ideals and social reality (165). This form of revolutionary realism literature is largely "ideological, educational, edifying"—characterized by an epic and

historical scope, exemplary heroes, and a striving for transcendence within everyday life; Its objective is to incite the public to mobilize themselves and congregate with like-minded individuals to “change the status quo and make history” (165-6).

In sharp contrast to the discourse of redemptive literature, Chang emphasizes the eclectic and fragmentary nature of language, contests conventional narrative expectations, and undermines the coherence of narrative structure. For instance, she records a brief scene of police brutality she witnessed on the street in her short essay “Beating People,” where her seemingly aloof tone masks a deep sense of melancholy. Chang’s heart was filled with contempt and anger as she witnessed the abuse of power by a police officer who mercilessly beat an innocent teenager boy. In the same essay, she mocks and criticizes Left-wing writers as “naive”:

Perhaps because my thinking hasn’t been properly trained, at this moment I thought nothing at all of the class revolution, in my anger, I just wished I was an official, or the Chairman’s wife, and could walk over and give that policeman two slaps in the face.

If this was an early Republic of China-era novel by Li Hanqiu, this is when a righteous western missionary, or the Chief of Police’s concubine (the female protagonist’s best friend, the male protagonist’s old lover) would jump out onto the scene and save the day. Though occasional forays into such *naive* thinking are no cause of concern, continual *systematic naivety* is no good at all. (*Written on Water* 135, my emphasis)

In a sarcastic tone, Chang attacks the novel of leftist writers (which advocates revolutionary spirit) as *systematically* naive—naively pursuing epic pretensions or visions of grandeur, thus neglecting the authenticity of emotion and experience. Her implicit commentary on the realist novel of redemptive literature reveals her preference of an open-ended mode of expression—one that caters for the fragmented feelings, and genuine sentiments, and



incoherent experience of reality.

Chang's choice of essayistic mode of expression can be contextualized within Walter Benjamin's critique of the modern novel, and his reevaluation of the communal storyteller. In his essay "The Storyteller", Benjamin traces the historical developments that led to the rise of the novel and the atrophy of storytelling, and portrays them as antithetical. Benjamin provides a definition for the storyteller as follows: "His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the incomparable aura about the storyteller" (*Illuminations* 108-9). Storytelling, first and foremost, is "a type of wisdom that does not depend on abstractly verifiable truths or explanations, but rather grows out of an exemplary knowledge of life rooted in the shared experience of a community" (McBride 43). In *The Narrative Restitution of Experience: Walter Benjamin's Storytelling*, McBride regards the narratives of storytelling as "open-ended and continuously unfolded by those who engage in the practice" (44). The novel, by contrast, "reflects the loneliness of the modern individual who is confronted with an experience deprived of meaningful collective bonds" (44). Storytelling is embedded in collective, whereas the novel "caters to the individual's existential forsakenness by staging an abstract quest for life's meaning, for which it disingenuously substitutes the artificial sense of closure conjured by the finality of the protagonist's life" (44).

For Benjamin, the story-tellers is "a figure of the past, since the capacity to remember one's tale and the ability to narrate it unproblematically have vanished in the modern epoch" (Gilloch 69). The greatest strength of the story-teller lies in the ability of

“conscious recollection, the bringing back of past experiences at will (the *mémoire volontaire*)” (69). The storyteller plays “the culturally cohesive role” in village community, where where social relations are predominantly based on family ties or clan membership and human contact are primarily face-to-face (Wang 170). Benjamin imagines “a premodern community”—“a community of equals”, where “virtually anyone has the right to engage in the vital practice of storytelling as the weaving and handing down of tradition” (McBride 63). The stories, shaped by traditional values and customs, are passed on through generations for cultural continuity. In this way, temporal and spatial perceptions embedded in the sharable stories become part of the collective memory, passed down to next generations over time and preserved in new stories (Wang 170). In the era pf modernity, however, the individual becomes isolated and detached from their social bonds of family, community, lineage, and history. In the market-oriented, amorphous urban environment, “isolated from each other in the compartmentalized life spheres and specialized work, urban dwellers only have their own vastly different and incompatible stories to tell, stories that are narrowly biographical and not readily meaningful to other”—the proliferation of these stories suggests a lack of a shared narrative (171). Consequently, in the flux of modern urban life, the kind of “conscious recollection” becomes impossible; and meanwhile, “the shocks and multiple stimuli encountered in the city cannot be assimilated by the individual, and are redirected into the sphere of the unconscious” (Gilloch 69). This “fragmentary, disparate data of the *mémoire involontaire* (69)” eventually leads to the “disjointed, fragmentary, anecdotal, performance-driven form of writing (Wang 171)”, whose typical form is the essay.

In the context of the first half of twentieth century China, Wang maintains that

Chang essayistic sensibility indicates “the epic coherence of ideals and experience” are given ways to “dispersed and fragmented sensual pleasures and sheer appreciation of images or anecdotes” (163); and “enjoyment and display of private and random memory replaces coherent history writing” (175). The essay’s retreat from historical consciousness signifies it as the “locus of freedom from the occupation and preoccupation of public life”, as well as the “locus of resistance to the impending totalization of consciousness by capitalism” (Gualtieri 9); as such, the essay is able to wander freely over any subject “without having to resolve its thoughts into a system” (9). In the meanwhile, Wang also associates the essay, or rather the “essayistic structure of feeling,” with the advent of consumer mentality and urban culture: according to Wang, the essay caters for “the consumer’s need for entertainment and even pander to his or her modest, if not philistine, literary sensibility, providing small measure of satisfaction to demands of the urbanites for a little self-image and self-recognition” (170); additionally, the essay satisfies “the modest needs of the urban consumer whose sensibility is becoming ‘essayistic’ and everyday, preoccupied with the most immediate, intimate, and quotidian matters” (164). Following Wang’s argument, in the next part of the chapter I will explore how this essayistic spirit endows Chang’s writing the uncompromising disruptive power to shatter the illusive totality of the redemptive literature in the first half of the twentieth century; and how her essayistic structure of feelings conceptualizes the urban aesthetics of 1940s Shanghai.

#### 1.4 Urban Memories: Montage and Dramatization of the Details

Chang's essay "Children Will Say Anything" bears an uncanny resemblance to Benjamin's "Berlin Childhood" essays (as a child in the "Childhood" and a youth in the "Chronicle"). Noticeably, both Chang's and Benjamin's essays are "short, autobiographical prose pieces", in which they present "a series of images and impressions" of life as a child growing up in the city (Gilloch 58). At first glance, their 'childhood' essays represent themselves as an autobiographical form of writing, which enables "a more direct apprehension of the past", while also introducing urban modernity as "a new condition that is marked by a focus on subjectivity as the new universal trait" (Gualtieri 53). However, instead of the conventional narratives found in the autobiography, their essays draw only "the sketch rather than the full-blown picture, an unresolved collection of 'moments of being' that belong to the pre-history of narrative" (53). Benjamin's and Chang's childhood essays depart from the traditional autobiographical narrative and instead present a self that is dispersed and "only loosely connected" (5) and thus cannot be organized into a coherent narrative.

In her 'autobiographical' essay "From the Mouths of Babies", Chang denies her essay as a well-organized narrative found in the best-selling autobiography; instead, she equates her essay to "the chatty, whimsical, and willful airing of pent-up feelings whenever and wherever she can, like an unrestrained child" (Wang 168). Writers like her, she confesses, should drop the "hope of becoming a celebrated public figure worthy of a best-selling autobiography" (*Written on Water* 1-2). Rather than delving into weighty and serious topics, she prefers to write only "a little about" herself in a casual and lighthearted manner—in her own words, to "let off some steam" (2). Instead of the grand narrative, Chang writes only

odds and ends about herself—money, food, fashion, family relation and friendship, moments of childhood memory, uncanny feelings of everyday life. With a touch of humor, Chang confesses her “self-interest” and “navel-gazing”:

Still, the kind of familiar writing that’s full of “me me me” from start to finish ought to be taken to task [to be criticized]. I recently came across a couple of lines in an English book that might serve as a rather fitting jibe at authors excessively interested in themselves: “They not only spend a lifetime gazing at their own navels but also go in search of other people who might be interested in gazing along with them.” Unsure as to whether what follows constitutes a navel exhibition, I have chosen to write it all the same. (2)

In a sense, this could be read as Chang’s literary manifesto regarding the essay form. For Chang, the very nature of the essay seems to “lie in its irrelevance to history as a literary principle” (Wang 169): “I have no desire to write history, nor am I qualified to make judgement on the historian’s perceptions. But privately I hope they would say more things that are *irrelevant*” (*Written on Water* 39, my emphasis). The essay as a form provides Chang the literary space to write about almost everything that “flickers through the mind, passes into view, appeals to the senses—any stereotypical or routine scenes or acts in the urban setting” (Wang 168). For Chang, the greatest charm of the essay lies in its retreat from public world of politics and history, “its withdrawal from and rejection of historical discourse” and “its all-consuming absorption in the mundane, fragmented, individualized urban scenes” (169). As a genre, the essay digresses from “the main course of history” (Gualtieri 12), and “endows the personal or private sphere with the kind of autonomy from history” (11). Benjamin’s and Chang’s ‘childhood’ essays offer more than just autobiography, as Benjamin himself explicitly denies that his ‘Childhood’ essays are purely autobiographical:

Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively

concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what make up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moment and *discontinuities*. (*One-Way Street* 316)

Benjamin's and Chang's childhood essays are thus less autobiographical sketches than "explorations of the interplay between memory and setting, time and place" (Gilloch 58), and "recollections of particular locations and specific times, memories of the city and of the recent past" (59). They present the sketch of the past and the impressions of the life of "a certain class at a particular moment as experienced by a child and as subsequently filtered through the memory of an adult" (59). The image of the city was constructed by the perspective of the child, filtered by the experience of the adult. In Benjamin's and Chang's reconstruction of childhood experience, the childhood memory of the individual is entangled with the collective history of the city: the city transforms the memory, and the memory gives form to the urban complex (59-60).

Rather than presenting pure autobiography, Benjamin's and Chang's childhood essays depict a delicate network of childhood memories, akin to those found in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and best exemplified through the concept of *mémoire involontaire*—"sudden, spontaneous recollection" (59). Such recollections are not the result of a deliberate and directed mental effort, but rather an elusive moment of illumination in which a present sensation suddenly and fleetingly evokes a past, forgotten experience with its associated thoughts and impressions, only to fade away again: For Proust, "the smell and taste of madeleines dipped in tea, the scent of various flowers" stimulate "long-dormant memories of childhood encounters, loves and sorrows" (59); for Benjamin, "Tiergarten, Kaiserpanorama, Siegessäule, Pfaueninsel, Blumeshof" awaken "not only the forgotten times

of childhood but also the hidden crevices of the metropolis” (59). For Chang, “cloud-layer cakes” triggers her repeating dream, where “the thin wafers” “seemed to turn to paper” in her mouth, and “even worse than the astringent flavor was the melancholy sense of disillusionment” (*Written on Water* 9). The “foamed milk” is the flavour of the past, reminding her the way how she had always managed “to gulp down the little white beads on the edge of the bowl before touching any of the rest” (9), whereas the “new foreign-style suit” ignites “a deep sadness”:

the long days of childhood coursed sluggishly onward, like a warm sun shining on the thick, pink lining of an old cotton-padded shoe. But there were also occasions when I resented the days for going by too fast, like the time when I grew so much and so suddenly that I never got to wear my new foreign-style suit of scallion-green brocade, not even once. Whenever I thought about that outfit later, I felt a deep sadness and saw its loss as one of the greatest regrets of my life. (*Written on Water* 6)

As we can see from the quoted passage, moments of Chang’s childhood memories are tied to strong emotions and the seemingly small events surprisingly leave a profound impact. Likewise, the “certain dun-red, thinly quilted gown”, which she got from her stepmother, made her so ashamed of her own appearance in her unhappy schooldays: “It was the color of chopped beef, and I wore it for that seemed like forever, looking as if my whole body was covered with chilblains, and even when winter had passed, the scars from the sores still remained—the gown was that hateful, that shameful” (6). Trivial events and insignificant items appear to hold enormous emotional significance, particularly during vulnerable times such as childhood: here the prolonged and repetitive words mimic Chang’s chronic resentment; and the suit and gown are objectified as her traumatic feelings and emotions.

These childhood traumatic memories, which haunts her whole life, explains her

obsession and fetish of clothes and fashion: later in college when she finally became financially independent, she indulged herself “by having a few outfits made precisely to” her specifications; and “ever since then”, she has “been immersed in clothes and fashions” (6). In her early twenties, she began her literary career in Shanghai, and impressed the public as talented star not only with her writings, but also with her special tastes of clothing and fashion. In Chang’s opinion, clothes assert our identity on the one hand; but on the other hand, however, clothes, like the “case” in Anton Chekhov’s novel *The Man in a Case* (Chang’s own analogy), insulates us from the outside world: “For people who are unable to speak, clothes are a kind of language, a ‘pocket drama’ they can carry wherever they go. Surrounded by this dramatic ambience of our own making, do we become ‘people in cases?’” (8). Here Chang seems to refer to the indifference of the modern city, where the individuals retreat into their shells and cases, disconnected to others and the world. As she continues:

The transformation of life into drama is unhealthy. People who have grown up in the culture of the city always see pictures of the sea before they see the sea; they read of love in romance novels and only later do they know love. Our experience is quite often *second-hand*, borrowed from *artificial theatricals*, and as a result the line between life and its dramatization becomes difficult to draw. (8, my emphasis)

During the time of urbanization and industrialization, society is caught in a ceaseless loop of producing and consuming, inundating the world with mass-produced goods and disregarding the genuine inner needs and wants of individuals. In sharp contrast to this “second-hand”, manufactured (“artificial”), staged (“dramatic”) experience of the city, Chang characterizes the childhood and youth as authentic, “filled with laughter, clamour, sincerity, and anguish” (12); children possess a valuable authenticity that disappears as they enter into the adulthood and become a part of city life.



At first sight, the child's perspective/gaze is used by Benjamin and Chang to create "a sense of distance", for the "naive misperception" of the child serves as a way of "defamiliarization (Gilloch 61)", in the similar way to the gaze of a foreigner looking at the Peking Opera conceptualized in Chang's essay "Peking Opera through Foreign Eyes". However, one should not equate the distance in time with that of in space, as Benjamin puts it, "in the optic of history—opposite in this to that of space—movement in the distance means enlargement" (*One-Way Street* 207). As the experience and objects retreat into the past, they become enlarged rather than diminished in our memory, as Benjamin writes: "remembrance advances from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier" (*One-Way Street* 296). The child "has a particularly intimate connection with things", for the child in play "does not stand back from and contemplate the object, but takes hold of it and, mimetically, becomes part of it" (Gilloch 61). This allows childhood essays to recapture a time when things were most familiar: by inviting us into their childhood memories, the authors do not create distance, but instead recapture the closeness to things in readers' own childhood memories. Not surprisingly, therefore, Chang writes that the distance in time enhances the details of the memories: "[T]he old we get, the farther we are separated from our childhood, and yet the memories of it and its many trivial detail have gradually become more sweet and vivid" (*Written on Water* 26). Chang hints that the distance in time enhances the detail of childhood memory; so when she steps back into her memories, Chang does not "create distance to make the world 'smaller' and easier to perceive and describe as a whole" (Gilloch 61); rather, she makes herself 'small' and her surroundings thereby 'larger' (61). It is "a process of

enlargement” (in Benjamin’s words)—through which Chang achieves the particular intimacy with the things by traveling back into the distance of time (62); in the meanwhile, revisiting the past also implies that the world becomes more intricate and obscure, making it impossible to comprehend as a unified whole.

“From the Mouths of Babies” is a montage of “fragments of the past” and “moments of free association”, with its subtitles suggesting the juxtaposition of disparate elements of childhood memories—“Money”, “Fashion”, “Food”, “Men Above”, and “Brother”—between any of which there is no immediate connection (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 138). Many times in “Children Will Say Anything”, descriptive details of a transient moment shape a performative scene, and form a narrative structure on its own, like the closed-ups found in filmmaking (138). As in the section subtitled “Brother”, Chang recalls a childhood incident where her father slapped her brother at the dinner table, which made her very furious and determined to seek vengeance someday.:

I stood in front of the mirror and watched my trembling face, with tears falling down in streams. My face looked like *a close-up in a movie*. I told myself, grinding my teeth: “I want revenge”. (*Written on Water* 12)

Strikingly, here Chang compares her close-up reflection in the mirror to a close-up shot in a movie, highlighting the emotional intensity of the moment. Through the cinematic technique, Chang transports the reader into her memories and transforms her childhood memory into a powerful and enduring image. In other essays, Chang employs the cinematic techniques to achieve a kind of visual fragmentation—a cinematic structure of visibility. In “Days and Nights of China”, for instance, people enter in Chang’s scenes as cinematic characters, who

are brought to the foreground in a painstaking depiction of features and scrupulous attention of the movements:

The hands of the apprentice in the butcher shop are swollen with cold. If your glance darts toward him as he noisily minces meat with a cleaver, it looks like he's chopping his own red, swollen fingers. A woman stands outside the counter, a prostitute who's no longer young, perhaps a madam in her own right or just doing business with a few other ladies of the same type. She still perms the hair, which sweeps behind her ears in a puffy cloud. Her face bears the traces of her former beauty, without scar or blemish, but still looks somehow pitted and uneven, and a little hesitant. She has a gold tooth, a black silk gown with rolled-up sleeves, and the loose threads of the worn sheepskin on the sleeves cling together in little petals of cloth, like white "maiden crab" chrysanthemums. She asks for a half pound of pork, but the apprentice busies himself with his mincing, and it is unclear whether he simply didn't hear what she said or is deliberately ignoring her. An uncertain smile moves across her face, and she stands outside the entrance, lifting her hands to straighten the tassels on her sleeves, revealing two golden rings and the bright red polish on her nails. (*Written on Water* 216)

It is surprising how Chang relates the woman to prostitute without elaboration. Along with the woman's "gestures of uncertainty and self-consciousness", a slight sense of awkwardness rises, as well as a kind of "vague sympathy" (Cannella 239). While Chang maintains a safe observational distance, her narrative eye zooms in on details—which engenders a feeling of intimacy and leaves the reader curious about the enigmatic woman—yet Chang has moved on (239). In a sense, this sense of uncanniness and peculiarity could also be understood as an essayistic structure of feeling—a way of thinking and interacting with the world, marked by the insatiable curiosity and the impossibility to grasp the wholeness of reality, as well as an indefinite openness to the Other and difference. In this way, Chang's aesthetics of "details" and her constant tendency of textual digression echo Michel de Certeau's "repertory of oppositional practices of everyday life": "A tactic of the weak, digression claims no special medium of its own but rather expresses itself in the language of the other" (Gold 65). Thus

Chang's strategic focalization of the detail presents itself as a subverting discourse against the coherent grand narratives of her time, and undermines their established rules and predictable values.

Like Benjamin, Chang is fascinated by the cinematic language of the era of modernity, particularly the montage technique. As mentioned earlier, Benjamin characterizes the storytelling—the work of *cohesive collective*—as a premodern practice; and in age of modern city life, the “continuous, self-contained quality of tradition” gives way to the “disjointedness and sensory overload of modern life” (McBride 63). As a consequence, storytelling is replaced by montage. As it happens, montage constantly orients toward “an outside that does not hinge on an analogical relation between narrative and experience”, and hints at “a far-reaching reconceptualization of narrative as a mimetic practice that is not primarily centered on meaning” (63-4). This notion of orienting outside to a non-narrative world is illustrated fully by the following example in “From the Mouths of Babies”, where Chang focalize an ordinary object and painstakingly depicts its detail, moving the narrative as far as possible:

Japanese printed fabrics. Each bolt is a work of art. Each time I bring one home, before handing it over to a tailor, I repeatedly unroll it and bask in the image. A small Burmese temple is half shielded by the leaves of a palm tree; rain is falling incessantly through the reddish brown haze of the tropics. A pond in early summer, the water coated with a layer of green scum, above which float duckweed and fallen lilac petals, purple and white. Seemingly a fitting scene for a song lyric set to the tune “Laments of the South of the Yang-tze”... (*Written on Water* 7).

As one can see, the juxtaposition of “irrelevant details”—details of the Japanese fabrics—“empties the descriptions of any sense of human ‘virtue’” (Chow 114). This kind of dramatization—expanding on details in a dramatic cinematic way—is a form of destruction:

“what is destroyed is the centrality of humanity that the rhetoric of Chinese modernity often naively adopts as an ideal and a moral principle” (114). In the meanwhile, Chang takes “the process of aestheticization” as far as possible, “until the point that there appears to be no connection to the utilitarian discourse of modern prose” (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 139). The sense of “uselessness” displayed in Chang’s essay radically challenges “the presumption that prose always serves some political or didactic function” (139). In this way, Chang’s essay is largely at odds with Lu Xun’s *zawen*—which typically features a polemical, militant, and socially and politically engaged tone, and thus is found to be “in a close lineage with the didactic tradition of May Fourth literature aimed at raising readers’ consciousness or jolting them out of the half-sleep of tradition and convention” (Wang 169). Refusing the dominant political ideology of her time, Chang’s essays, however, were marginalized and only presented in the leisurely tone of the *feuilleton* or literary supplement section (*Fukan*) of newspapers and magazines (170).

In the meanwhile, Chang’s fascination with the detail and the irrelevant is associated not only with “the prosaic, the mundane, and the ornamental *per se*” (Chow 86), but also with a past and tradition they connote, as Chang herself offers insights on the *details* abundant in the history of Chinese fashions:

The *details* of old Chinese clothes. [...] were astonishingly pointless. [...] No artist could, for instance, have hoped for anyone to notice his intricate design on the soles of women’s shoes, except indirectly by the imprints left in the dust. [...]

This tremendous amassing of bits and bits of interest, this *continual digression and reckless irrelevancy*, this dissipation of energy in this which do not matter, marked the attitude towards life of the leisurely class of the most leisurely country in the world. [...]

The history of Chinese fashions consists almost exclusively of the steady elimination of those details. (*Written on Water* 66, my emphasis)

As one can see from the quoted passage, Chang regards the “details” as “‘signs’ of the decadent ‘Chines’ tradition, signs of a proclaimed ‘past’” (Chow 87). Chang draws the conclude in this essay that “Chinese Life and Fashions” that “the proliferation of details is a sign of social stagnation” (87):

Quick alternations in style do not necessarily denote mental fluidity or readiness to adopt new ideas. Quite the contrary. It may show general inactivity, frustrations in other fields of action so that all the intellectual and artistic energy is forced to flow into the channel of clothes. (*Written on Water* 66)

In Chang’s fascination with the detail and irrelevant, then, Chow writes, “a deep ambivalence arises and a moralism of the ‘proper’ purposiveness of social activity comes clearly to the fore” (85). In her alternative approach to modernity and history, Chang release “sensual details”, whose “emotional backdrop is often that of entrapment, destruction, and desolation” (85). Thus, Chang’s conceptualizes the “details” as “the figures of destruction” (115)—“the sensuous, trivial, and superfluous textual presences that exist in an ambiguous relation with some larger vision such as reform and revolution” (85). Chang’s “world of detail,” Chow writes, “is a part that is always already broken from a presumed ‘whole.’ It is this sense of wholeness—as that which is itself cut off, incomplete, and desolate, but which is at the same time sensuously local and immediate—rather than the wholeness of idealist notions like ‘Man,’ ‘Self, or ‘China’ that characterizes Chang’s approach to modernity” (114). In so doing, instead of envisioning an illusionistic and wishful totality of social life and reality, Chang’s literary world presents “the world of details,” where details tend to become increasingly autonomous in their relation with wholes, and that fragments tend to emphasize their breaking away from the whole, with no sign of any desire to recombine; and such fragments are “traceable only in incomplete forms, as deep and ideological ‘leftovers’ embedded in

narratives” (85). As one can see, Chang’s fascination and conceptualization of the detail differs significantly from mimetic narrative of the novel, which Benjamin sees “as bent on exploiting the similarity between narrative and experience in order to claim for itself a measure of self-sufficiency and closure” (McBride 50). If the modern novel suffered from “a self-inflicted form of navel-gazing (50)”, then the montage offers a solution to this crisis of narrative, as Benjamin maintains:

The montage explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits both *stylistically and structurally*, and clears the way for new, epic possibilities. *Formally*, above all. The material of the montage is *anything but arbitrary*. Authentic montage is based on the *document*. In its fanatical struggle with the work of art, Dadaism used montage to *turn daily life into its ally*. It was the first to proclaim, somewhat uncertainly, the autocracy of the *authentic*. The film at its best moments made as if to accustom us to montage. Here, for the first time, it has been placed at the service of narrative. Biblical verses, statistics, and texts from hit songs are what Döblin uses to confer *authenticity* on the narrative. They correspond to the formulaic verse forms of the traditional epic. (*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol 2, 301, my emphasis*)

Montage resorts to the everyday and recognizes and the significance of the “unsublimated linguistic material” (McBride 51). Strategically, montage employs a “indexical mode”, where the linguistic material document, rather than signify. In so doing, Montages offers a tool for “bypassing the mediation of representation and present objects in their semiotically mute materiality” (51). Thus the technique of montage, along with the dramatization of the irrelevant detail, hampers “the process that turns the recalcitrant elements of experience into fungible signs”, and endows Chang’s writing an enormous degree of “disruptive force” (51).

Strikingly, apart from montage, Chang also employs free association, transgression, as well as fragmentation, to achieve the kind of open-ended discourse and defamiliarization of the quotidian. Chang associates the senses—combining smell, sight,

hearing and touch—to portray the rich texture of sensual experiences in modern Shanghai of 1940s. One such example is to be found in her essay “Notes on Apartment life,” where the spinach leaves—which are stuck to the bamboo basket after washing—calls the mind to snow pea flowers on a trellis, which is a conventional imagery often found in the Chinese traditional poems (Laughlin 173):

Every time one washes spinach and drops it into the work, there are always one or two broken leaves stuck to the bottom of the bamboo basket, and no matter how hard you shake, they refuse to budge. In the light, the fresh emerald leaves displayed against the rectangular weave of the basket call to mind snow pea flowers on a trellis. And why must we call other things to mind at all? Isn't the beauty of the basket itself sufficient? None of this is intended as a display of my fealty to the National Socialist Party and its efforts to coax women back in the kitchen. There is so little point in coaxing, and if one must coax, it would only be right to urge men into the kitchen for a visit as well. (*Written on Water* 27)

Strikingly in the quoted passage, Chang's mind jumps from the most basic daily activity (vegetable-washing in the kitchen) firstly to the poetic image, then to the sphere of political ideology, and finally to the issue of gender conflicts. Through her remarkable employment of free association, Chang is able to shift freely in her essays between the most concrete-particular to the abstract-universal level (from the level of day-to-day activity to the level of ideology and philosophy). As such, Chang incorporates the seemingly random references and irrelevant details into her writing, and undercuts the analogical mechanism of mimesis of the conventional narrative, thus opening her narrative to the most mundane and humble of everyday life.



## 1.5 Seeing with the Streets and Living in a Modern Apartment

Chang's essays in *Written on Water* strikes the reader as distinctly modern in their depictions of the intersections of public and private spaces. Like Woolf, she is a passionate walker in the city streets, and the practice of walking is integral to her artistic practice. Immersing herself in the streets of Shanghai, Chang derives her inspiration from the most immediate historical milieu and everyday experiences in urban China. In "From the Mouths of Babes," she elaborates on the experience of "ventur[ing] into the streets" to buy groceries (*Written on Water* 3)—a routine which provides her the opportunity to wander about and explore the streets. The essay "Seeing with the Streets" showcases a montage of street scenes, displaying the perceptive eye of the author as she freely associates within an urban neighborhood. Her another essay "Days and Nights of China", too, delineates a series of views alongside the street: she writes about the people she encounters, the sounds and smells of the city, and the various shops and stalls that line the streets. The lively and bustling city streets offer a glimpse into the larger societal context of Shanghai and China under Japanese occupation in the 1940s. Like Woolf, as Chang wanders the city streets, the various characters and scenes she encounters provide the raw material for her essay-writing; and her essays are generically shaped by her experiences of walking.

Instead of the main thoroughfares, Chang is more drawn to the alleys and side streets, where the noises, the crowds of Shanghai, and the city itself are the sources of her inspiration and creation. She observes the city with fresh and sharp eyes, uncovering the traces of hidden meanings embedded in the layered fabric of the city, as she herself writes in "Seeing with the Streets":

[I]f each time we walk down that streets as if it were the first time we had ever seen it, if we see afresh and with new eyes, without succumbing to the blindness of familiarity, we will have done something like walking ten thousand miles, without even sailing the four seas. [...] Little restaurants will often cook pumpkins just outside the front door, and while you couldn't really say that it's a nice smell, the hot pumpkin steam and their "eye-brightening" red imparts a sense "warmth for the old and comfort for the humble" to those who pass by. On cold mornings, there are usually people squatting on the sidewalk lightening little braziers, sending forth billows of white smoke as they fan the flames to life. I like to walk through that smoke. There is similarly sweet, warm, and overpowering smell just outside the gates of the yards where they store coal briquettes for delivery and in front of garages. (*Written on Water* 58)

By approaching each walk with fresh eyes, one can discover new details and experiences, as if they had sailed "the four seas". Strikingly, Chang defamiliarizes the everyday encounters—the color and scent of pumpkins and the smoke rising from braziers; Through her vivid descriptions of these sensory experiences, she evokes a feeling of coziness and communal belonging. Through sentimentalizing everyday street scenes, she is able to extract the poetic sentiment of life from the most mundane daily activities. In Chang's novels, a strong sense of desolation and the pessimistic configuration of human nature and civilization are often to be found. Chang's essays, however, present a much more complicated picture. Unlike her ironic and sarcastic narrator in the novels, where "there is always an authorial stance at the distance from her female characters that are subordinated to oppressive tradition and patriarchy"<sup>12</sup> (Cheung 75), the persona in her essays is often compassionate, sympathetic, and sensitive. In a rare moment in "From the Mouths of Babes", for instance, Chang describes the story of a brief exchange of human touch in a sales transaction:

. . . I venture into the streets to buy groceries, perhaps with something of the romantic pathos of an aristocratic gentleman fallen on hard times. But recently,

---

<sup>12</sup> The dualistic consciousness produced by the aesthetic distance between the narrative voice and her female characters is often regarded as Chang's style of "feminine writing" (Cheung 75).

as an old vegetable vendor weighed my purchases and helped pack them for me, he held onto the handle of my mesh bag with his mouth to keep it open. As I lifted the now-dampened handle to carry my purchases away, I felt nothing out of the ordinary. And having discovered that something within me was different from before, I was happy: some real progress had been made, although I could not tell how or why (*Written on Water* 6).

The old vegetable vendor held onto the handle of Chang's "mesh bag with his mouth to keep it open"; and when she raise her hand to accept the "now-dampened handle", an sudden intimacy of touch creates "a momentary human bond" (Cannella 242)—which made her feel slightly and strangely "happy," and transformed her from the cold and isolated observer into the passionate and sentimental participator of the scene. In a similarly sympathetic manner, Chang observes the scene of a bike rider and his unusual passenger in the essay "Seeing with the Street":

Most people who ride on the back of someone else's bicycle are attractive young woman or, barring that, small children. But the other day, I saw a postman in his green uniform riding a bicycle with a little old lady on the back, who must have been his mother. A deeply affecting sight. And yet the era in which a Li Kui would carry his old mother on his back has passed us by. The mother, unaccustomed to such lavish favors, looked somewhat ill at ease. Her feet dangled in the air as she sat cautiously and conscientiously, her face reflecting her diffidence... as she rode into the wind, smiling... (*Written on Water* 59)

By assuming the mother-son relationship of the observed, Chang attaches emotions to the scene immediately; in the meanwhile, the "affecting sight" calls to mind the Ming Dynasty novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* (where the well-known character, Li Kui, is recognized as "a tragicomic hero" for his devotion to his mother), adding to the scene another layer of historical meaning (Cannella 228-9). Slowing down the flow of time, Chang captures the nuanced details of the unusual passenger on the bike: from the comic dangling of her feet in the air, to her unnaturally stiff body braced against the wind, and her smiling face with a

touch of diffidence (229). This loving and sympathetic sight is sharply contrasted with the surprising scene of street violence in an short essay entitled “Qi duan qing chang” (Short on Dignity, Long on Emotion):

Whenever she had time, my friend’s mother would put on her glasses, stand in front of the window, and look out onto the streets. There used to be a column called “Window to Life” in the English language *Shanghai Evening Post and Mercury*, filled with trivial details from everyday life. This was a very interesting column, and quite indicative of the urban milieu of the time. My friend’s mother would write one paragraph per day for such a column. There was one day she saw a man on the street, dressed respectably, like someone from the educated class. He was beating a woman. Many bystanders felt sorry for the woman and instructed her: “Send him to the police station!” The woman cried: “I don’t want him to go to the police station, I want him home!” She then pleaded to the man: “Please come home with me—you can beat me there!”<sup>13</sup> (qtd. in Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 51)

Here Chang registers the street life from a perspective that is theatrically “watchful”; and the reference to the newspaper conjures up the “texture and rhythm” of everyday city life (52). As Huang suggests, “Read carefully, the essay speaks more about the framing of the episode than about the actual event itself. Observed from a distance—that is, through the inquisitive eyes of ‘my friend’s mother’—the event is enveloped by several layers of perspective” (52). Consequently, it is largely ambiguous what the observer feels towards the observed scene. Chang pulls her narrative back to one degree into depictions more generalized, more detached from place, history, and person. Instead of emphasizing its shock value for social criticism, Chang presents the scene as one of the many unimportant episodes in city life, thus evokes deeper sense of alienation and melancholy in the darkness of wartime.

In Chang’s writings, the woman standing at the window observing street life

---

<sup>13</sup> First published in *Xiao tiandi* 小天地 (Small World Monthly) 4 (January 1945); reprinted in *A Complete Collection of Essays by Eileen Chang*, 229-34.

assumes a symbolic role. In many of her essays, the urban life is portrayed “like a picture frame, encircling the nights and days of an urban dweller who constantly watches the world from her windows” (148). Chang herself too, finds pleasure in observing “the kaleidoscopic world of metropolitan Shanghai (148)” through her window, detached from the hustle and bustle of the city yet fully engaged in observing the street life. Strikingly, Chang’s conceptualization of urban aesthetics is notably influenced by “the spatial specificities” of a modern apartment , and her city life revolves around routines both inside and outside of the apartment, as emphasized by Huang (147). Modern apartments, with their private and self-contained spaces, afford inhabitants a precious sense of privacy, unlike large traditional houses where privacy is compromised due to the sharing of common spaces with servants and family members. Chang regards the modern apartment as a retreat and a sanctuary, where one can enjoy a measure of solitude and tranquility amidst the chaos of city life. Furthermore, Chang also sees the modern apartment as providing a newfound freedom for women, for it reduces their household work and allows them more free time and energy to appreciate life and explore their selves. In her essay “Notes on Apartment Life”, she writes that it seems as though only women can fully comprehend the advantages of living in an apartment: compared to large traditional houses where generations live under one roof, smaller modern apartments significantly reduce the amount of household work; by freeing them from domestic drudgery, the modern apartment thus affords women the opportunity to pursue their own interests and passions, and to engage more fully with the world outside their homes (*Written on Water* 27). This newfound freedom is significant because it challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, allowing women to redefine their place in society. Chang sees

the modern apartment as a window into modern city life—“a locus point from which one can enter into various aspects of urban culture” (Huang 147). As demonstrated in the following passage, Chang draws a parallel between the routine of apartment life and the war, and depicts “a spatial construction that serves as the backdrop of the formation of *a new urban persona*” (146):

“I would ride the wind, returning up there,  
but fear those marble domes and jade galleries  
the place so high, the cold is unbearable...”

On reading these lines, residents who live on top floors of apartment buildings will more or less shiver with fear. The higher the apartment, the colder. Ever since the price of coal soared, radiators in apartments have become purely decorative. The letter H on the hot water faucet is indispensable in order to perfect the bathroom design; but if you turn on the hot water tap by mistake, a hollow but grievous rumble will burst out from the ‘Nine Springs’ down below. It sounds like the very complicated and very capricious hot water pipe system in the apartment building has lost its temper. Even if we do not provoke it, the God of thunder still makes its power felt at any moment. Out of nowhere, it can set off a long and evil buzz followed by two blasting sounds, as if an airplane was circling above for a while and then dropping two bombs. Having been terror-stricken in wartime Hong Kong, this kind of noise would always make me panic when I first returned to Shanghai. At first the pipe was still working conscientiously; with much difficulty, it would carry some hot water all the way to the sixth floor, accompanied by a gurgling sound. That was still acceptable, but now it is like deafening thunder followed only by drizzle, and worse yet, all we get are just two droplets of yellow rusty mud. But I dare not complain any more; the unemployed can easily fly into a rage. (*Written on Water* 25)

This lengthy passage illustrates how Eileen Chang uses war as a metaphor to portray the unsettling rhythms of apartment life in 1940s Japanese-occupied Shanghai. Through Chang’s metaphorical language, the everyday apartment life is strikingly associated with various war themes, such as death, scarcity, and the threat of air-raids. In her humorous portrayal of personified objects, Chang also tackles themes of unemployment, social unrest, and economic

instability in wartime Shanghai, where external forces constantly intrude upon the private space; “Chang’s essay gives textual testimony to the two most important categories of life in occupied Shanghai: urbanity and combat. These two categories converge precisely within the space of a modern apartment” ((Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 147). The sanctity of an apartment as a self-contained, private oasis, shielding urbanites from the chaotic humdrum of life outside, is compromised during wartime Shanghai as the very structure of these living spaces teeters on the edge of collapse.

Chang presents the apartment as a microcosm of the city, providing a glimpse into the various aspects of urban culture in wartime Shanghai. Through the portrayal of the daily routines and struggles of apartment dwellers, Chang offers a glimpse into the complex web of relationships, power dynamics, and social hierarchies that characterize urban society. The modern apartment functions as a lens that enables the reader to glimpse the multilayered tapestry of urban existence, encompassing both the intricacies of personal relationships and the overarching economic and political dynamics that fashion the metropolis. Simultaneously, the city exerts a potent influence on our thoughts and consciousness, molding them in ways that often remain unacknowledged, as Chang herself writes:

*The thoughts of a city dweller are set against a curtain of striped pattern; the light-colored stripes are running streetcars. Like neatly paralleled currents of sound, they continuously flow into our subconscious. (Written on Water 26)*

Chang’s urban world is site of fluid dynamics: the city, like a train station, “serves as an initial starting point” and transports “one’s sense in many different directions” (Huang, *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* 149).

Chang sees the modern city as a site of constant multisensory stimuli—one’s sense of reality

is sharpened and articulated when one walks in the streets of Shanghai or lives in a modern department; but Chang also extends the notion of modernity from “a modernist high culture to a culture of wartime quotidian life (151)”, and troubles the street-centrist grounds of values, which are often found in the Chinese neo-sensationalist writings of 1930s Shanghai. In her attempt to register the sense of fluidity and liminality, Chang blurs the boundaries between the inside and outside, the private and public, home and street. It is through the depiction of modern apartment life and the street life of 1940s Shanghai that Chang forms “a new metaphysics of the everyday (Huang 148)”, and weaves “a tapestry of ‘the general’ and ‘the particular’ within a quotidian space of color, pattern, and sensation (Cheung 90)”. This tapestry of sensory experiences evoke a heightened awareness of the everyday, and elevate the mundane and ordinary aspects of life to a higher level of significance and meaning.

## **1.6 “Days and Nights of China”: the Aesthetics of the Everyday**

Written in a turbulent wartime, the essay “Days and Nights of China” nevertheless demonstrates no direct reference to war or destruction. Instead, Chang portrays the everyday life on Shanghai streets—the most repeated actions, the most travelled journeys, the most inhabited spaces that make up her perception of “China”. This is the landscape closest to her “people”, the world most immediately met:

It is interesting to note that Chang depicts everyday life as both “phenomenologically familiar” and “sociologically residual,” to borrow from Peter Osborne’s articulation of the history of everyday life. In “Days and Nights of China,” the morning chores are repetitive and routine; the smell from the laundry on the bamboo pole is familiar; the colors and patterns of the padded cotton gowns of two children are similar. Chang meets an array of the most



unrecognizable and least impressive inhabitants. Their activities are most mundane and ordinary—selling, begging, shopping, passing by, and so on. (Cheung 84)

Throughout “Days and Nights of China”, there is always a deep layer of meaning to be found—her portrayal and configuration of the everyday as value and quality—*everydayness*. Here the most travelled journey can become the journey to the inner reality, the most inhabited space a dream-like place, the most repeated action a form of human existence. As the title “Days and Nights of China” evokes immediately the sense of the flow of time—the temporal fluidity. Additionally, the “day” and “night” could be argued “the most natural measure of time”: the day is a naturally occurring and observable temporal unit that remains unchanged by technology and human innovation, unlike the relatively artificial divisions of the hour or the week (Randall 1). Despite the profound technological advancements of modern times, the natural cycle of day and night remains a constant and unalterable feature of our existence. In a sense, the recurring pattern of light and darkness that defines a day is a fundamental aspect of our reality that cannot “be questioned, undermined, deconstructed”; as a matter of fact, one may even boldly claim that this regular cycle of day and night, along with the inevitability of death, are the only certainties in life (1).

Chang’s essayistic narrative is devoted to the most mundane aspects of life, where she attends to the ordinary people in the everyday life as the writers of redemptive literature approaches the military heroes in the battlefield. Instead of dedicating to the grand and abstract discourses of liberation and national salvation, Chang’s narrative responds to the most immediate reality—the everyday life as a site of resistance to the war and destruction—where the ordinary Chinese go on living and resume the daily activities against

the backdrop of turmoil and ruins. In the essay “Writing of One’s Own”, Chang writes:

All of us must live within a certain historical era, but this era sinks away from us like a shadow, and we feel we have been abandoned. In order to confirm our own existence, we need to take hold of *something real*, of something *most fundamental*, and to that end we seek the help of an ancient memory, the memory of a humanity that has lived through every era, a memory clearer and closer to our hearts than anything we might see gazing far into the future. (*Written on Water* 16)

As individuals living in a particular historical era, we may feel disconnected or even abandoned by the fleeting nature of time; in order to find meaning and purpose in our existence, we need to anchor ourselves to something “real” and “fundamental”. My argument is that Chang’s conception of “real” and “fundamental” is closely linked to her aesthetics of *everydayness*. Chang highlights the richness and depth of everyday experiences and portrays them as a source of profound insight and wisdom. In the same essay, Chang articulates that she is interested in “nothing except the trivial matters between a man and a woman”, and her aim is to uncover the “placid and static” aspects of life, which she believes have “eternal significance”; she writes that it is precisely the average people “who can better represent, more so than heroes, the sum total of this age”; Chang identifies harmony as the ultimate goal: “In reality, people only engage in struggle in order to attain *harmony*”(16). Read along with Chang’s novels, her conception of “harmony” could imply different meanings in different contexts, for instances, the harmony between—man and woman, the individual and the collective; man and the self, and and the society; fantasy and reality, body and soul, or more. Chang’s emphasis on the quotidian underscores her conviction that it is through the mundane, ostensibly trivial occurrences of life that we can cultivate a sense of coherence and belonging. Fundamentally, Chang’s vision of history and reality is expressed in her pursuit of the

grounding forces of life (Cannella 235):

Very few works in the history of literature plainly sing in praise of the placid, while many emphasize the dynamic and uplifting aspects of human life. But in the best of these works, the uplifting aspects of human life are still portrayed against the background of its inherent placidity. Without this ground, uplift is like so much froth. Many works are forceful enough to provide excitement but unable to offer any real revelation, and this failure results from not having grasped this notion of grounding. (*Written on Water* 16)

For Chang, this grounding is “of utmost importance because it is an open-ended space of revelation” (Cheung 86); time and again in her essay, Chang repeatedly circles back to this notion of grounding—life is grounded in the organic, messy, routine, and base activities of daily life. Recognizing the most quotidian aspects of life, Chang also associates the essence of humanity to that of femininity. It is the figure of woman who keeps humanity grounded in the reality, a firm grounding which makes possible further flourishing and prospering of human civilization, as she writes in the essay “On Women”: “women are the most universal and fundamental, and they embody the cycle of seasons, the land, [the human life cycle of] birth, aging, illness, and death, as well as eating, drinking, and procreation” (*Written on Water* 84). In Chang’s writings, women occupy “center stage in Chang’s fictional universe”: “Precisely because they are so well grounded in real life, they are given all the agony and pathos of life in their pursuits of happiness” (Lee L. 280). Chang’s notion of the “grounding”, as well as her taste for the “placid and static” aspects of life, demonstrate her aesthetics of the ordinary and everyday. Chang’s world is a space filled with the most mundane activities of ordinary Chinese, as Lee perfectly depicts in an impressionistic manner:

street vendors, children, maids, a Taoist priest; an apprentice in a butcher’s shop cuts and sells meat to an aging prostitute as the butcher’s wife complains about her husband’s sister in a melodious Shanghai dialect, while a radio in another shop is blasting away with the singing of the local *kunqu* opera, as the sound

rises over the red walls of an elementary school. This is Eileen Chang's urban China—'a country of patchwork' like the patchy blue clothes its people wear. (Lee L. 270)

Not surprisingly, "Days and Nights of China" presents itself as a writing of "patchwork"—a essay which includes two poems. The first poem "The Love of a Falling Leaf" captures the serene beauty of a moment when a yellow leaf falls from a tree and lands on the ground, eventually reuniting with its own shadow. Through her poetic language, Chang turns the modern city into a "dreamscape" (Cheung 82):

The big yellow leaf tumbles down  
slowly, passing by the breeze  
by the pale green sky  
by the knifelike rays of the sun  
and the dusty dreams of yellow-gray apartment buildings.  
As it falls toward the middle of the road  
you can see that it means to kiss  
its own shadow.  
[...]  
In the autumn sun  
on the cement ground  
they sleep quietly together  
the leaf and its love.

The falling leaf travels all the way from the sky, the sun's rays, and the dream of concrete buildings, in order to kiss and reunite with its shadow. The natural, organic cycle, however, was interrupted by the "urban", as the leaf didn't reunite with the land ultimately, but lands on the impenetrable cement ground of the city (Cheung 82). This sense of unrootedness contrasts with the Chinese idiom—*Luoyeguigen*, "A falling leaf finds its way to its roots (the

soil),” which means “to revert to one’s origin”. In a certain discourse, roots or *gen* always means the soil, the ground, or the earth—the antithesis of translocality. Thus in this poem, the interruption of the cement ground, which makes the leaf impossible to return to its root, may imply a sense of cosmopolitanness. In the meanwhile, “the cement ground” is sharply contrasted with “the muddy ground of China”, which appears later at the end of the essay:

I am happy to be walking under the sunshine of China I am also happy that my hands and feet are young and energetic. And these are all somehow *connected* I don’t know why, but when I am happy I feel as if I had *a part* in the radio sound and the street colors. Even when I have a sinking feeling of melancholy, I sink onto *the muddy ground* of China. After all, this is China. (*Written on Water* 392-393)

Chang’s association of China with “the muddy ground” reflects the predominantly rural nature of China during her time, where life was challenging and resources were scarce. In rural areas, the roads were often primitive and “muddy”. On the other hand, “the muddy ground”—serving as a symbol of the earth—represents a connection to the natural and the organic, which endows her with immense strength. When she walks on the Shanghai street, she is overwhelmed by enlivening energy; She immerses herself in the city, and becomes “a part” of it.

The act of walking, however is not just a personal experience but also carries significant historical significance. As Joseph Amato writes in *In On Foot: A History of Walking* that “the act of walking on foot is joined to a time, condition, society, and culture” (2). Taking into consideration of historical context of the first half of twentieth China, one should not “take woman’s mobility in public spaces for granted or overlook the radical nature of the mobile female writer’s as modes of self-expression” (Cannella 236). It is worth noting that foot-binding, an ancient Chinese custom of forcibly compressing the feet of young girls

to a required shape and size, was only abolished shortly before Chang's birth. Even Chang's mother, who is often regarded as a representative figure of the New Women movement, had bound feet, as historical resources reveal<sup>14</sup>. For hundred of years, the Confucian ideals of hierarchy, order, and morality dictated that women must remain indoors and fulfill their duties as wives and mothers. So in Chang's time, the act of walking on the streets can be seen as a triumph over traditional dogma, a form of resistance against the long-standing patriarchal norms of Chinese society and a means of reclaiming agency and autonomy for women. What's more, as mentioned earlier, the act of walking not only provides the material for Chang's writing, but also plays an indispensable role in her artistic expression. In many ways, walking intensifies her subjectivity, sensibility and existence. The simple act of walking stimulates her creative faculties, not only by providing the raw materials of writing, but by enabling a specifically sensuous experience of time and space and fostering meditative qualities essential for a modern writer. It is the "active engagement of the body in the world, not merely a way of passive spectatorship (Baugh 88)", but rather a way of "knowing the world through the body and the body through the world (Solnit 29)". In addition, walking "unfolds and reveals space at a different pace and with a different rhythm" from other modes of transport; there is neither "barriers between the walker and the surrounding world", nor "elaborate technique to be mindful of as the walker places one foot in front of another", thus the body and the senses of the walker entering into "an intimate proximity with the environment not achievable through other modes of transport" (Baugh 87-88). Chang's

---

<sup>14</sup> Foot-binding is an ancient Chinese custom of forcibly compressing the feet of young girls to a required shape and size, usually around the age of six. The practice was considered a symbol of status and a mark of beauty, as small feet were considered feminine and attractive. The process of foot-binding was extremely painful and often led to lifelong disabilities for women. It was finally abolished in China in 1912, after the end of the Qing Dynasty.

choice of walking, instead of other modes of movement, demonstrates her willingness to expose herself to her people and places, although it may cause vulnerability at some moments. Walking allows her to notice the small gestures of people on the streets and examine the nuanced details that otherwise would escape the glance of a car-rider, or the tram-rider. For example in the following passage, Chang presents a vivid portrait of the street scene, on her way for groceries:

I went to the vegetable market when it was already winter time. The sun was dazzlingly bright, but there was a damp, clean smell in the air like freshly washed laundry hanging in a neat array from a bamboo pole. The colors and patterns of the padded cotton gowns of two children wobbling somewhere around my feet had a certain similarity: one was the color of salted vegetables, the other of soy pickles, and both were covered with a deep, dark oily stain formed of innumerable smaller stains across the front, resembling the proverbial embroidered sack in which *Guan Gong*, the god of war, keeps his beard below his chin. (*Written on Water* 214)

Strikingly, the smell of the air triggers the image of “freshly washed laundry hanging in a neat array from a bamboo pole”. Through the strategy of synaesthesia (associations of senses), Chang vividly portray the moistness and freshness of the air. The colors of the two children’s cotton gowns activates the images of “salted vegetables” and “soy pickles,” the most ordinary objects in everyday life. By blending the sensations of smell and vision, Chang transforms these sensory experiences into their concrete analogies of the everyday. In a similarly metaphorical language, Chang portrays the food in a personified manner:

The shopping basket of a servant woman coming back from market is full of coils of silver vermicelli noodles, like the unkempt hair of an old woman. There is another woman contentedly holding a crimson-lacquered tray piled with “longevity noodles” that are ingeniously folded into different layers, each suspended above the other. The bundle of noodles at the top is of a little girl’s ponytail. The pale rice-colored tresses dangle below, each strand as thick as a little snake. (*Written on Water* 216)

Vividly, the “silver vermicelli noodles” mimics the image of “the unkempt hair of an old woman,” and the bundle of noodles resembles “a little girl’s ponytail,” each strand of tresses dangling below which imitates “a little snake.” The association of noodles to the hair of women and snake evokes a sense of temptation, as both the woman and the serpent were responsible for bringing sin into the Garden of Eden. However, unlike the sarcastic tone often found in her novels, Chang here reframes the ever-insatiable appetite for food—usually stigmatized as the primitive nature of the uncultivated mind—as a source of pure pleasure and enjoyment in life. Noticeably, it is in the city that enables Chang to establish unforeseen connections between different aspects of life, and constitute an artistic protocol to prompt unexpected associations of ideas. Guided by the often surprising details and events captured during the walking, Chang literally create a space for the city to unravel itself; through her attention to such details, Chang thus creates a rich and dynamic portrait of the city, one that is grounded in the everyday experiences of its inhabitants. For instance, while walking on a side street in Shanghai, Chang’s ears capture the sounds of Shanghainese *shenqu* songs pouring volubly from a nearby radio:

At the next door, Shanghainese *shenqu* songs pour volubly from the wireless, also deliberating endlessly on the long and short of various family affairs... I love to listen, my ears like fish in water, swimming in the music of his words. Turning the corner, the street suddenly becomes bleak... The radio is still playing *shenqu*, but the lyrics are no longer audible. I remember the lyrics from the beginning of a song cycle that I once read in a songbook: “With the first drum beat from the watchtower, the world falls quiet... The tower is dark when the second watch sounds. [...] At the third watch, the tower is even more desolate...” The tone of the first line is imposingly grand, and I am very fond of the majestic images it calls to mind: of the China that has come down to us from the empires of the Han and Tang, of cities lit by a multitude of lamps slowly falling quiet with the sound of a drum. (*Written on Water* 217)

Through creating a vivid and immersive sonic environment, Chang portrays everyday



Shanghai as a vivid soundscape. The Shanghainese *shenqu* songs intertwined with discussions of various family affairs suddenly become so pleasant to the ear—the ear is swimming like fish, in the music of domestic gossip; but soon after turning the corner, the melody fade away in a desolate street, and the world turns into a state of bleakness, against which Chang was pulled back to the reality by recalling of the lyrics from a song envisioning the majestic Han and Tang dynasties. As such, through her use of richly textured language and her attention to the sensory details of urban life, Chang brings to life an evocative soundscape of Shanghai that vividly captures the experiences of everyday people on the page.

The 1940s Shanghai portrayed in Chang’s essays is “sensuously local and immediate”; in this localized world the rhythm of life seems to “beat to a different time scale”, and the people in it seem to have too much time to spare (Lee L. 271). Unlike the standardization of time in modern society, in “Days and Nights of China,” the writer’s time is indefinite and subjective, almost acquiring a certain mythic and transcendental quality (Cheung 82). The Daoist monk’s presence in the modern metropolis recalls “an ancient memory” (*Written on Water* 17), and sparks ontological reflections on the meaning of life and the destiny of human civilization:

This Taoist monk has brought their worthless spare time into the high-speed bustle of the metropolis. Around him is a riotous profusion of advertisements, store fronts, the honking of automobile horns. He is the fabled dreamer of the dream of yellow millet, but he has awoken from his nap without actually having the dream—and feels *an altogether different kind of emptiness*. The Taoist walks over to the door of a hardware store and prostrates himself, but naturally they have nothing to give him, so he merely makes a kowtow to no one in particular. Having clambered back up to his feet, the “tock.. .tock.. .tock” resumes, and he crosses over to the cigarette stand next door and once again “makes obeisance to the earthy dust,” kowtowing crookedly, his movements like the slow ooze of black water or the lazy bloom of a black chrysanthemum flower. To watch him is to feel that the dust of this world is piling ever higher, to know that not only

will hopes turn to ash but anything and *everything one touches will ultimately crumble to nothingness*. (*Written on Water* 215-16, my emphasis)

The Taoist monk, the fabled dreamer, is an “anachronistic figure (Lee L. 341)”, transforming the vibrant metropolitan city once again into a dreamscape—“everything one touches will ultimately crumble to nothingness”. With the “tock” sounds of his bamboo clock that sprawl all over, “the dust of this world” soon shadows the glittering metropolis. The Taoist monk calls to the mind an ancient time in the distant past; the urban city is enshrouded by the bleakness of “a lonely and ancient temple in the mountains”; the naive belief of human civilization conquering the nature is “merely a dream”. The Taoist’s seemingly odd presence in the metropolis Shanghai reveal Chang’s philosophical concerns about Taoism. Cheung associates Chang’s aesthetics of the everyday to Zhuangzi’s notion of “the equality of things” (*qi wu*)—“[E]vents and thoughts on the national and universal levels coexist with the ordinary and the everyday” (85). Zhuangzi’s notion of *qi wu*<sup>15</sup>, as a central concept in Daoism, refers to the idea that everything in the world is equal and interconnected, and that there is no hierarchy between different beings or things. Cheung also compares Chang’s equal treatment of the mundane and monumental to Kafka’s diary entry on August 2, 1914: “Germany has declared war on Russia—Swimming in the afternoon” (qtd in Cheung 85). As one can see, in “Days and Nights of China”, there is “no distinct boundary between high and low, sublime and frivolous; nor is there a hierarchy between male and female” (85). Chang regards the everyday and the ordinary as equally important and valuable as the grand and monumental.

---

<sup>15</sup> In Zhuangzi’s philosophy, everything is viewed as an integral part of a greater whole, with each entity possessing its own distinct essence and value. This encompassing perspective extends beyond living beings to encompass non-living entities like rocks and trees. According to the principle of “the equality of things”, there is no absolute criterion for determining what is deemed good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Rather, human judgments are subjective and contingent upon the observer’s viewpoint. Zhuangzi’s notion of *qi wu* highlights the significance of accepting things as they are, without imposing judgments or preferences.

While wandering through the streets of Shanghai and immersing herself in the urban surroundings, Chang embraces the boundless possibilities of everyday life without any prejudices or preconceptions, directing our admiration for the most ordinary people in their lived spaces. As she becomes absorbed in the urban environment, she also connects with the city on a personal level—a side of her that is empathetic and compassionate, a stark contrast to the sarcastic and aloof persona displayed in her novelistic writings. So in a way, the city has the unique ability to evoke the purest and most genuine emotions from the depths of her heart; and the essay as a form possesses the singular ability to articulate that self.

Chang's world is a space filled with the most daily activities of ordinary Chinese, who in Chang's opinion deserve prolonged contemplation and admiration. Through her painstakingly skillful depictions of the details in "Days and Nights of China", Chang paints the ordinary people (the children playing in the streets, the young girl and housemaid in the market, the apprentice and the aging prostitute in the butcher shop, and to the tall, gaunt Taoist monk in the streets) with the unusual devotion and care that would be given to a military hero or a great political leader in the redemptive literature. If the individual in the novels of revolutionary realism is often regarded to represent the totality life of the class/group (to which they belong), the ordinary people sketched in Chang's essayistic writings are fundamentally themselves, whose selves cannot be categorized in any clear-cut manner (whether class, gender, nationality, religion, or other ways of differentiating). They are seemingly ordinary; yet, they are not in the least ordinary, for they are uniquely, profoundly, and mysteriously, themselves in distinguished ways. Depicting the ordinary people in the everyday life of a wartime as they are historic, heroic figures, Chang

defamiliarizes and dramatizes the everyday life and turns the spotlight of glamour to the most humble, and fundamental aspects of life in 1940s Shanghai.

## **Chapter Two The Performance of the Essayistic in Virginia Woolf's Essays--- "A Room of One's Own" and "Street Haunting: A London Adventure"**

### **2.1 A Walk of One's Own: Walking in Woolf's London**

Virginia Woolf had a deep and abiding love for London, the city where she was born, raised, and spent most of her life. As Hermione Lee, Woolf's biographer, writes that "London was a centre for emotions and memories, a site of social satire, and a celebration of 'life itself'" (552-3). The streets, the noises, the crowds of London, and the city itself as a collective human living conditions and the form of human existence are the sources of her inspiration and creation: "How to read the polyvalent city was always a test case for her. London was her own past, which she traced and retraced, meeting her precious selves as she went. It was her key to the culture. Its unsettled identity, turned her from a writer, a wife, sister, aunt, friend, woman, into an unobserved observer. And it was a challenge to the writer" (553). To Woolf, London was more than just a physical space—it was a living, breathing organism that encapsulated the essence of modernity. In her essays, short stories, novels, and diaries, she write and rewrite London again and again: "London itself perpetually attracts, stimulates, gives me a play & a story & a poem, without any trouble, save that of moving my legs through the streets" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3* 186). For Woolf, the city is a wellspring of creativity and inspiration. She investigated the city and recorded her urban experience in her own voice, which is embodied in "a new mode of aesthetic sensibility and representation" (Parson 224). When she walks in the city, the life of street translated itself

into a vivid language, one that she strives to record and replicate in her work. With her urban writings formally mimic the characteristics of the modern urban experience, she creates new forms of writing by transforming the urban consciousness into an unique style of writing.

Walking is a recurring theme in Woolf's writing and Chang's works features both brief strolls, such as the one taken by Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose in her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, and extended walks, such as Jacob's a triumphant early morning walk from Hammersmith to Holborn in her breakthrough work, *Jacob's Room* (Larsson 1). In the context of feminist theory, the act of walking plays a crucial role in "A Room of One's Own", as her fictional alter ego takes a walk from the men's college in the heart of the fictional university town of Oxbridge to the suburbs, where the women's college is located. This walk symbolizes the journey women must take to access education and intellectual spaces that have traditionally been dominated by men; and the act of walking itself becomes a symbol of agency and freedom for women, as they are able to physically move through and challenge the gendered structures of society. Despite the abundance of walking scenes in Woolf's novels, one of the most famous ones is undoubtedly the walk of Mrs. Dalloway through Westminster and Mayfair to buy flowers in Bond Street at the beginning of the novel that bears her name. "I love walking in London," as Mrs Dalloway famously claims, "[R]eally, it's better than walking in the country" (*Mrs Dalloway* 5). This statement conveys Woolf's own deep fondness for walking in the city.

Woolf herself, too, walked a lot—often several hours a day—either alone or in company of others, frequently her husband (Larsson 1). As she herself puts in her essay "Street Haunting: A London Adventure," she would go for long afternoon strolls in pursuit of

an idea, “walking half across London between tea and dinner,” using the excuse of a small errand such as a pencil to go “street rambling” (Woolf, *Selected Essays* 177). The simple act of walking is the means by which Woolf accesses and harnesses the enormous energy and inspiration that London provides. For Woolf, walking seems to be not just a physical movement, but a spiritual journey, which cuts her mind off from everyday concerns, and at the same time facilitates self-absorption and inner harmony. As Rousseau asserts, “[T]here is something in walking that stimulates and enlivens my ideas. I can hardly think at all if I stay still. My body has to be on the move to set my mind going” (167). Rousseau, too, is deeply fascinated by walking. In his *Confessions*, he muses:

Never did I think so much, exist so vividly, and experience so much, never have I been so much myself—if I may use that expression—as in the journeys I have taken alone and on foot [...] I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs. (382)

For Rousseau, walking plays an indispensable role in his thinking and contemplation: walking inspires him with ever-changing surroundings; walking enables him to live in thought and reverie; walking intensifies his subjectivity and imagination (382). Similarly, in many ways, walking sharpens Woolf’s existence, sensibility and writing. The self-absorption-in-motion greatly stimulates her creative faculties, not only by providing the raw materials of writing, but by enabling a specifically sensuous experience of time and space, that shapes a particular sensibility and fosters meditative qualities essential for a modernist writer.

Walking leads to contemplation and stimulates creativity. It is while walking in Tavistock Square one afternoon that she was inspired to write *To the Lighthouse*. In a letter to

Ethel Smyth (her suitor) in August 15, 1930, she wrote: “I cannot get my sense of unity and coherency and all that makes me wish to write the Lighthouse etc. unless I am perpetually stimulated” (Woolf *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol.4* 200) (qtd. Lamos 337). Her inspiration comes from engaging with the world, from “plung[ing] into London, between tea and dinner, and *walk[ing]* and *walk[ing]*, reviving my fires, in the city, in some wretched slum, where I peep in at the doors of public houses” (Woolf *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol.4* 200). The city streets served as a site of exploration for Woolf: what she saw and experienced there prompted her to observe all walks of life, ponder over their lives and dive into their minds; the attempt of capturing what it feels like to be in a city pushed her forward in her literary project—how to “comes to the truth”—how to represent “life itself” on the page (200).

In truth, there are many similarities between the acts of walking and writing. Words “inscribe a text in the same way that a walk inscribes space” (Nicholson 27). The simple act of walking is integral to the accomplishment of writing, in the sense that “writing runs a direct parallel by allowing internal human experience (thought, sensation, imagination) to the extension that walking allows the external, the physical” (Swensen 95). Writing is a way of “making the world our own” (Nicholson 27), and walking is another, as the poet Wallace Stevens claims: “I was the world in which I walked” (qtd. Macauley 113). The convergence of walking and writing—“the walking writer writing on walking”—enables a breakdown of the internal and external boundaries, allowing the self to fully engage with the world beyond (Swensen 95). Furthermore, both walking and writing are rooted in rhythm, which incorporates time as a spatial element and makes “repetition a body in its own right”



(95). Walking is not just a means of getting from one place to another, but a form of expression and a way of engaging with the world in a meaningful way; and walking has its own “rhetoric”, as Michel De Certeau suggests in his seminal book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (98). Walking and writing share a fundamental connection: just as a walker can leave behind footprints, a writer leaves traces of the mind on the page; writing can be thought of as a journey through the landscape of the imagination, with each sentence and paragraph marking out a path through this terrain.

In the novels, the act of walking often functions as a significant medium of mapping and characterization, allowing all manner of “conjunctions, affinities, and juxtapositions” (Alexander 86). Walking offers a natural approach for delving into psychological terrain of characters and charting the surrounding environment. Most famously, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is “a paradigmatic invocation of a walk through an urban environment”—namely, the construction of Dublin is intricately woven into the extended walks of the main characters, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom (Macauley 113). Through precise descriptions of streets and buildings, parks and monuments, Joyce maps a city with such a great degree of verisimilitude that the city comes alive on the pages. As he himself once remarked that, “I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book” (qtd. Budgen 69). In a similar manner, walking, for Woolf, is a significant device for scene-managing, as Woolf writes herself in a diary entry: “I keep thinking of different ways to manage my scenes; conceiving endless possibilities; seeing life, as I walk about the streets, an immense opaque block of material to be conveyed by me into its equivalent of language” (*The Diary of*

*Virginia Woolf* 214). Laura Marcus observes that “‘Scene-making’ was central to Woolf’s art, her ‘natural way of marking the past’, a mode of perception and organization of her material far more sympathetic to her than plot” (*Virginia Woolf* 63). As one can see in Woolf’s diary entry, Woolf links this art of “scene-making” to the city and her walking about the street, which functions for her as a strategy of “making up stories (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 270)”. While walking through the city, Woolf’s characters project their subjective experiences into the space of city; and at the same time, they are shaped by their urban encounters. For instance, consideration of *Mrs Dalloway*’s three focal street scenes—Clarissa’s opening walk up Bond Street to buy flowers for her party, Peter’s stroll from Clarissa’s home in Westminster to Regent’s Park, and Septimus’s hallucinatory ramble down Bond Street to Regent’s park—reveals that “all three characters (Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and Septimus Smith) are defined by the streets through which they pass” (Squier 94). Woolf’s use of walking in her writing demonstrates how the act of walking can function as a way to explore and depict the psychological landscapes of characters and their interactions with urban environments. By immersing herself and her characters in the city, Woolf is able to create a vivid and compelling portrayal of urban life.

As one can see, walking plays a structural role in Woolf’s novels, for the benefits of characterization, “scene-making”, as well as the development of the story. In Woolf’s essays, however, walking often serves as a trope of her *meandering, wandering, digressive* narratives. In her examination of Woolf’s essays, Anne Fernald associates the act of walking to the process of thinking and writing:

The essay is about the process of making sense of experience. A walk is shaped—one leaves in the morning and stops in the evening and attends more to

the journey itself than the destination. Even the walks of Petrarch and Wordsworth, which might seem more goal-oriented than the essay would admit, are in the end characterized by a sense of anticlimax. The view is disappointing, the summit lies behind them, and the account must reshape itself in response to the experience. These same qualities characterize many of the best essays. The essay takes shape most in retrospect. Only after a day of wandering, when the inn is reached, the meal served, the book opened on the table, can we look back and tract the path that led us to this inn in particular. An essayist's control consists largely in her trust that there are connections among her observations, and in her ability to show some of them to her reader. (qtd. Saloman 26)

Like walking, essay writing is “anticlimax”—the journey is often more important than the destination; and the best essays are shaped in retrospect, after the essayist has had enough time to revisit in his mind the path taken. The essayist's control lies in making connections between their observations and displaying them to the reader.

The essay and the novel differ greatly in their approaches to engaging with experience: in a sense, the novel suffers from the burden of mimesis and filters the experience into certain structures and patterns; the essay, however, takes its shape in the in the flux of experience that there are only loose and scattered connections to be made among the randomness (Saloman 26). While the novel has become “the locus of schemas and formulas to which experience is made to conform”, the essay “lets experience itself shape the text” (Gualtieri 6). Unlike the novel, which often relies on established patterns and structures to create a coherent narrative, the essay allows the experience to shape the text, and seeks to capture the richness and complexity of lived experience as it unfolds. In a sense, “[T]he novelist has failed if the events she describes do not come together of their own accord. The essayist's job, on the other hand, is to create harmony from entirely random incidents and events—from a collection of pieces that do not, on their objective merits, form a logical whole (Saloman 27).” Rather than imposing a preconceived framework on experience, the

essay foregrounds the spontaneity and contingency of experience, as it strives to reject systems, or any systematizing of thinking. The subsequent section of this chapter will delve into Woolf's adept usage of walking as a trope for deviating from the narrative organization of experience, and how she ingeniously challenges systematizing and totalizing modes of thought by drawing parallels between walking, thinking, and writing.

## **2.2 Tracing of the Wondering Mind: Walking as a Trope of Woolf's Digressive Text in "A Room of One's Own"**

the open form of the *Essais* resembles a stroll... for the  
thinking itself is taking a stroll.

My style and my mind alike go roaming.  
—Montaigne, *Essais*

Woolf's essays, much like her aimless walks, proceed without a readily recognizable plan, evoking a strong sense of indirection. Woolf's walks and essays are characterized by their unconstrained and liberating nature; she strays from conventional paths and norms, and finds a way out of dogmas and doctrines. In her essays, as well as in her walks, it is the journey the destination. Instead of simply "a blinkered move from 'A' to 'B'", both Woolf's walks and essays split to "become multiple, consisting of many foci, intensities, and heterogeneous singularities" (Goodman 141). In "A Room of One's Own", Woolf (or her narrator) walks from place to place, pondering on the issues about "women and fiction". The mobility of the text mimics the very nature of the walking experience, and Woolf creates dynamic interplay between the physical wandering and her textual meandering/digression: Woolf establishes

connections between walking and various cognitive processes such as writing, thinking, and reading; she also conceptualizes “trespassing” as “a physical crossing of an imposed boundary and an assertion of mental freedom” (Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* 46). Her digressive text “blows up” linearity and replaces “a simplifying sense of order” with a “dehierarchizing disorder” (Chambers 118-119) (qtd. Topping 107); this approach emulates the process of thinking via the linearity of written expression, while also challenging the adequacy of linear narratives in encompassing the intricacy and complexity of our thoughts.

Noticeably, “A Room of One’s Own” begins with “but”, anticipating possible doubts and skepticism of her readers about the connection between her title and the topic of the essay: “But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one’s own? I will *try* to explain” (“A Room of One’s Own” 3). Woolf’s strategy is intentionally tentative and exploratory, for the process of writing an essay is akin to the process of “assaying”, which involves “trying, testing, weighing”, and “sifting for gold” among a pile of pyrite (Atkins 70). The two open questions—“woman and fiction”—could “lead anywhere or nowhere” (Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* 44). Woolf’s approach involves experimenting with various ideas and exploring where they take her, while also demonstrating to the reader how she arrived at her final argument:

All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved. I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions—women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems. But in order to make some amends I am going to do what I can to show you how I *arrived at* this opinion about the room and the money. (“A Room of One’s Own” 4, my emphasis)

Instead of focusing on presenting a final argument or conclusion, Woolf is more concerned

with tracing “the train of thought” that led her to form the opinion that a woman must have financial independence and a private space to write fiction effectively (4). Her aim is to discover a type of knowledge that is distinct from mere ‘facts’; this knowledge is grounded in the body, instinct, and senses, rather than in rational, logical thinking. Woolf seeks to explore and articulate a deeply introspective and reflective exploration of human experience that goes beyond mere intellectual reasoning. Woolf’s approach to writing and argumentation does not rely solely on deductive or inductive modes of thinking; instead, she places a strong emphasis on her own lived experience and uses this as a starting point for exploring deeper, unconscious thoughts and emotions:

At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—*one cannot hope to tell the truth*. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming, here—how, bowed down by the weight of the subject which you have laid upon my shoulders, I pondered it, and made it work *in and out of my daily life*. I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; ‘I’ is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them. (4, my emphasis)

Woolf recognizes the limitations of conveying complex ideas through simple facts and logical arguments. Therefore, she chooses to avoid a strictly analytical or logical approach and instead incorporates personal references and anecdotes to explore the meaning that can be found in the ordinary experiences of daily life (Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* 45). Arriving at the truth requires a process of filtering out personal and incidental elements from one’s observations and experiences. As Woolf herself writes, “[O]ne must strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach *the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth*” (“A Room of One’s Own” 25). Woolf’s metaphor of refinement and purification

suggests that truth is not readily apparent or easily accessible, but rather requires meticulous and intentional efforts to extract from the clutter of impressions and information, as well as the noise and confusion of everyday life.

In her essay “Montaigne”, Woolf recognizes how difficult it is “to tell the truth about oneself (*The Common Reader* 87)”, and references Montaigne’s words that “it’s a rugged road, more so than it seems, to follow a pace so rambling and uncertain, as that of the soul” (Montaigne 59). Instead of handing over “a nugget of pure truth” in “A Room of One’s Own”, therefore, Woolf traces “the trajectory of an argument and a map of errors”, for in Woolf’s opinion, “truth is only to be had by laying together many varieties of error” (“A Room of One’s Own” 102):

For truth... those dot mark the spot where, in search of truth, I missed the turning up to Fernham I spare you the twists and turns of my cogitations, for no conclusion was found on the road to Headingley, and I ask you to suppose that I soon found out my mistake about the turning and retracted my steps to Fernham’ (“A Room of One’s Own” 15).

Woolf seems to suggest that, on the way to investigate the truth about “woman and fiction”, one might lose one’s way; but “many varieties of error” might produce “a better sense of direction” (Seeley, “Flights of Fancy: Spatial Digression and Storytelling in A Room of One’s Own” 31). Instead of reducing the complexity of the issues about “women and fiction” and offering simplistic linear progression of argument, Woolf’s narrator carefully charts the prejudices of “the deep-seated psychological motives underlying masculine authoritarianism” (Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* 42). Woolf is fully cognizant of the challenges inherent in tackling a controversial subject, as evidenced by her statement in a manuscript version of “A Room of One’s Own”, “Women & Fiction”: “The words hang like a collar round my neck. It is not

only that to write of women & fiction would require many many volumes; one can see, even from a distance, that the subject is dangerous” (qtd. Rosenbaum 3). Anticipating the response of aggressive and hostile readers, therefore, Woolf employs a range of rhetorical devices and techniques, including richly woven narratives, in an effort to engage readers in the process of her thinking and reasoning and dispel their propositions and prejudices.

Strikingly, in “A Room of One’s Own”, the obvious subject “women and fiction” is dispersed into a series of fictional stories and fragments of daily life. Woolf states in her essay “The Leaning Tower” that it is impossible to fix her subjects, to keep the reader “steady on path”, and “keep his eye fixed, as intently as he can, upon a certain object”, for the reality is in a state of continuous change (*Collected Essay* 162). Instead of attempting to anchoring the subject, the writer should strive for capturing the movement of life: the “writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, that changes, upon an object that is not one object but innumerable objects” (162). Nietzsche characterizes the nature of the world as an “eternity chaos”, “a lack of order, arrangement, form”, and identifies two types of individuals based on their spiritual power for coping with the flux of reality: the ones who resort to order and stability are deemed the weak; and the ones who recognize the flux of reality are regarded as the strong (*The Gay Science* 109). The epistemology of certainty reassures us “order and stability” (Glenn 577); logic, for instance, satisfies our need for a “predictable and orderly (577)” world, as in Nietzsche’s own words: “logic calms and gives confidence” (*The Gay Science* 370). But the strong, who are “truthful in that they acknowledge the fluctuating character of the world (Glenn 579)”, can survive in a world of disorder and uncertainty and find pleasure and power in “self-determination”: “one could conceive of such a pleasure and



power of self-determination, such a freedom of the will that the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty, being practiced in maintaining himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities and dancing even near abysses. Such a spirit would be the free spirit par excellence” (*The Gay Science* 347). Rather than being weighed down by the desire for certainty and security, the strong are able to cope with the unpredictability and instability of life; the strong pursue liberation “from convictions of any kind, the capacity for an unconstrained view (*The Antichrist* 54)”, and in doing so, attain the “free spirit”.

Based on Nietzsche’s concept of the weak and strong, one may categorize Woolf as the strong, for she embraces illogical and unpredictable elements and reject the clear and fixed truths in “A Room of One’s Own”. Marcus regards “A Room of One’s Own” as “a satirical reworking” of Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*, where Descartes proposes to keep to “the straight road of reason and reflection” (*Virginia Woolf* 48): “those who go forward only very slowly can progress much further if they always keep to the right path, than those who run and wander off it” (Descartes 27). By the same token, in *The City of Tomorrow*, Le Corbusier compares a rational man who “walks in a straight line” toward a prescribed destination, to a loitering wander who “meanders along, meditates a little in his scatter-brained and distracted fashion” (18). Le Corbusier praises the straight road as “a positive deed, the result of self-mastery” (and thus “sane and noble”), while condemning the winding road as “the result of happy-go-lucky heedlessness, of looseness, lack of concentration and animality” (18). Remarkably, in “A Room of One’s Own” Woolf chooses to take the winding road, diverging from the straight path proposed by Descartes and Le Corbusier; without following any logical order or conscious direction, Woolf exposes the

workings of the unconscious and unfolds unconstrained association of thoughts and impressions. Metaphorically, physically, and mentally, Woolf's narrator swerves off the path, and digresses into a world of multi-dimensionality: rejecting the logical linearity, she "traces an alternative space for women, much as a literal meandering off the path inscribes a different space within which the subject acts" (Seeley, "Flights of Fancy: Spatial Digression and Storytelling in *A Room of One's Own*" 32); refusing the conventional knowledge, she "redefines women's subjectivity as multiple and relational, establishing a collective notion of women based in the body and the material specificity of real lives" (32). Similar to Montaigne's essayistic writing, Woolf's essay proceeds by "groping, staggering, stumbling, and blundering", thereby allowing her thoughts "run on" (Montaigne 107). In the same way as her aimless walk, Woolf's essay "does not always go forward, it goes backward too" in "a drunkard's motion, staggering, dizzy, wobbling, or that of reeds that the wind stirs haphazardly as it pleases" (736).

In addition to revealing the free association of the mind, Woolf also sabotages the flowing of the thoughts and dramatizes "the ways in which the free, subliminal movement of thought is repeatedly broken into by a series of male 'censors'" (Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* 45). The frequent appearances of "but", for example, constantly interrupts "the line, path, 'train' or 'current' taken by her associations", and reminds the readers of "the 'reality principle' her 'inferior' status as a woman", for the word "but" originally has a connotation of "outside, outer, exterior" in Scottish (45-46). While straying into "the mysterious property" of the mind, Woolf's narrator also finds her body "audaciously trespassing" the 'male' territory ("A Room of One's Own" 5-6):

Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation. *Instinct rather than reason* came to my help; he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me. (“A Room of One’s Own” 6, my emphasis)

The narrator’s concentration and train of thought are disrupted by a sudden and forceful interruption, which serves as a stark reminder of the constraints placed on women’s lives and the expectation to adhere to prescribed boundaries. The route she is compelled to follow symbolizes the restrictions imposed on her, and the uncomfortable sensation of walking on gravel is a constant reminder of her societal position. This episodic experience serves as a potent metaphor for how women’s freedom of movement and thought are frequently curtailed by societal norms and expectations. When Descartes’s claims that “I think, therefore I am”, his contemporary critic Pierre Gassendi counters, “I walk, therefore I am” (*ambulo ergo sum*) (qtd. in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* 180, 182). Walking is not merely a physical act, but also a way of being—a valid proof of one’s existence, just like the act of thinking. Furthermore, walking can also serve as a kind of thinking that is distinct from the rational reasoning that Descartes championed. Walking provides a way of moving beyond the confines of our own minds and experiencing the world in a more direct, sensory way. Each step the narrator takes along the way is accompanied by a rich sensory experience, as she takes in the sights, sounds, and smells of her surroundings. In the meanwhile, walking is also a form of mindfulness—when the narrator strolls on the path, her mind is fully engaged in the present moment:

*Strolling* through those colleges past those ancient halls the roughness of the present seemed smoother away; the *body* seemed contained in a miraculous glass cabinet through which no sound could penetrate, and the *mind*, freed from

any contact with facts (unless one trespassed on the turf again), was at liberty to settle down upon whatever meditation was *in harmony with* the moment. (“A Room of One’s Own” 6, my emphasis)

As the narrator strolls through the colleges and past the ancient halls, she experiences a sense of calm and detachment from the hustle and bustle of the outside world. Walking stimulates the mind to wander; to walk is to be free. Walking, in a sense, is a deeply transformative experience that connects the mind, body, and world in a harmonious and meaningful way, as Solnit puts it: “[W]alking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord” (Solnit 5). The mind of the walker is attuned to the surroundings, and the rhythm of thinking corresponds to the pace of walking:

As chance would have it, *some stray memory* of some old essay about revisiting Oxbridge in the long vacation brought Charles Lamb to mind—Saint Charles, said Thackeray, putting a letter of Lamb’s to his forehead. Indeed, among all the deal (*I give you my thoughts as they came to me*), Lamb is one of the most congenial; one to whom one would have liked to say, Tell me then how you wrote your essays? (“A Room of One’s Own” 6-7, my emphasis)

While strolling through the ancient halls of Oxbridge, the narrator’s mind wandering from “old essay about revisiting Oxbridge in the long vacation” to Charles Lamb, whose essays contain “wild flash of imagination” (7). The narrator’s thoughts move on to about Milton’s alteration of *Lycidas*, and Thackeray’s modification of *Esmond*, and ponders “whether the alterations were for the benefit of the style or of the sense (7)”:

*But* then one would have to decide what is style and what is meaning, a question which—*but* here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way. (7, my emphasis)

Quite suddenly, “but”, again, stops the narrator’s reflections on style and meaning, as her path

to the library is barred by the guardian; her thoughts are now interrupted, and her imagination, like her “little fish (6)”, “sank (5)” into “hiding (6)”. Along with “but”, Woolf also utilizes ellipses and parentheses to interrupt and intrude the sentences, calling readers’ attention to the artificiality of language and its limitations in conveying the complexity of the mind. The interruption of the narrator’s thoughts and the barrier she faces at the library can also be seen as a metaphor for the obstacles and limitations placed on women’s intellectual and creative pursuits by a patriarchal society, thus highlighting the need for women to break free from societal constraints and assert their right to access knowledge and information, just as she does by finding another way into the library. During the narrator’s visit in British Museum, the narrator--- “in the pursuit of truth (“A Room of One’s Own” 26)”---ponders: “[I]f truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?... One went to the counter; one took a slip of paper; one opened a volume of the catalogue, and... the five dots here indicate five separate minutes of stupefaction, wonder and bewilderment (25-26).” The use of ellipses and pauses in the narrator’s musings at the British Museum creates a sense of disorientation and confusion. As the narrator questions the pursuit of truth and searches for knowledge, the dots and breaks in the text allow readers to pause and think along with the narrator.

In light of Lefebvre’s theory of “the production of space”, the patriarchy—“as a system of beliefs and practices”—exerts “its power spatially”; and in turn “space reinforces patriarchy’s dominance” (Seeley, “Flights of Fancy: Spatial Digression and Storytelling in A Room of One’s Own” 33). In “A Room of One’s Own”, Woolf endows the act of walking a subversive power that defies the imposed order of the patriarchy—walking is not simply

about physical movement but a metaphorical journey of self-discovery and liberation. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau distinguishes “a voyeur” who sees the panoramic perspective looking down from the 110 floor of the World Trade Center, from “the ordinary practitioners of the city” who live “down below” (93). The voyeur enjoys the pleasure “seeing the whole”, “totalizing the most immoderate of human texts” with their “all-seeing power”, making “the complexity of the city readable”, and immobilizing “its opaque mobility in a transparent text”, whereas the walkers experience the city blindly--- as they walk, their “bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it”, their paths “intertwining, unrecognized poems” (93). Walking in the city has “its own rhetoric”: “[T]he networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces” (93). The walkers write and rewrite the city with their bodies, subverting seemingly “the homogeneous form”, “the imposed order” with “things extra and other (details and excesses coming from elsewhere)” (107). Thus the city planners and officials’ attempt to “rationalize” and “ideologize” the city is undermined (95); and the surface of “the constructed order” is “everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order” (107). In this way, walking in the city becomes an act of resistance against the dominant power structures that seek to control and homogenize urban space.

In “A Room of One’s Own” Virginia Woolf celebrates the vitality of urban life and uses the city as a source of inspiration and a backdrop for her observations and reflections. Whether strolling through the turf, wandering the halls of Oxford, or walking the

streets of the British Museum neighborhood, Woolf reflects on issues of “women and fiction” as she observes the world around her. She kindly urges the archetypal contemporary woman writer Mary Carmichael to observe and records the “infinitely obscure lives (“A Room of One’s Own” 38)” in the streets of London. On her way home from Oxford, the narrator pondered: “I thought of the organ booming in the chapel and of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in” (23). As she makes her way to the Museum in search of truth, she passes through the streets of London, which serve as a site for her ruminations:

Thus provided, confident and enquiring, I set out in the pursuit of truth. The day, though not actually wet, was dismal, and the street in the neighbourhood of the Museum were full of open coal-holes, down which sacks were showering; four-wheeled cabs were drawing up and depositing on the pavement corded boxes containing, presumably, the entire wardrobe of some Swiss of Italian seeking fortune or refuge or some other desirable commodity which is to be found in the boarding-houses of Bloomsbury in the winter. The usual hoarse-voiced men paraded the streets with plants on barrows. Some shouted; other sang. *London was like a workshop. London was like a machine.* We were all being shot backwards and forwards on this plain foundation to make *some pattern*. (“A Room of One’s Own” 26, my emphasis)

With her vivid depiction of the street life, Woolf constructs a “world of the body (Seeley, “Flights of Fancy: Spatial Digression and Storytelling in A Room of One’s Own” 43)”, where her walkers walk and “make some pattern”—as the walker of de Certeau write and rewrite “intertwining, unrecognized poems (93)” —against the cold and rationalized London which resembles “a workshop”, “a machine”. This sharpened sense of bodily existence is contrasted with her weightless existence in the British Library, where she was transformed into a “harassed thought”—“a thought in the huge bald forehead” encircled by male writers’ names (Seeley, “Flights of Fancy: Spatial Digression and Storytelling in A Room of One’s Own” 43).

While walking in the streets, the narrator's mind is free from restrictions, with "her own body rewriting the city and inscribing its own subjectivity, her individual gaze creating space as it moves through a world of continually-shifting perspectives and scenes (43)". Walking is an act of resistance against the cold and mechanized London, allowing her to engage with the world in a way that is more embodied, more alive.

There is a sharp contrast between the experience of walking in the city and observing it from the window. Through the window of her room, the narrator in "A Room of One's Own" gazes on the scenes of the city streets—this observation turns her into "a stationary *flâneur*", compensating "with the swiftness of his eyes for what he has lost in the use of his feet" (Gleber 13). Looking out of the window, the narrator contemplates that "London was *wholly indifferent*, it appeared, to Shakespeare's plays" ("A Room of One's Own" 92). London appears to be indifferent when it is observed from the window, in stark contrast to the vibrant and dynamic city that one experiences while walking through its streets. Woolf captures this sense of indifference in her depiction of the street scene, where people are portrayed as differentiated, autonomous beings and the body of the urban walkers become "the physical embodiment of a decisive modern consciousness" (Williams 245):

There were the business-like, with their little bags; there were the drifters rattling sticks upon area railings; there were affable characters to whom the streets serve for clubroom, hailing men in carts and giving information without being asked for it. Also there were funerals to which men, thus suddenly reminded of the passing of their own bodies, lifted their hats... They all seemed separate, self-absorbed, on business of their own. ("A Room of One's Own" 92-93)

Here Woolf depicts individuals as self-absorbed and preoccupied with their own concerns, with no collective consciousness or sense of connection. Her narrator takes the perspective of



the detached observer at the upper window, observing the “indifferent” London, where the walkers’ “interaction but also their lack of connection is the tension of composition of the city itself” (Williams 245). The London observed through a window provides a distinct contrast to the London encountered while walking its vibrant streets.

The window, in the meantime, serves as a liminal space that allows the narrator’s thoughts to merge with the rhythm and movement of the outside world. When looking out the window, the narrator thinks and pauses with the flow of the street traffic: at one moment, “there was a complete lull and suspension of traffic. Nothing came down the street; nobody passed” (“A Room of One’s Own” 93). In “that pause and suspension”, “a single leaf detached itself from the plane tree” and fell, triggering a signal—“a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked” (93). At next moment,

it was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxi-cab; and it *brought all three together at a point beneath my window*; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off *as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere*. (“A Room of One’s Own” 93, my emphasis)

Uncannily, the mysterious force brings together the girl, the young man and the cab, which vanish at the end of the street and join the “current elsewhere”. The narrator’s mind flies with the shifting of street scenes, and the rhythm of her flowing mind corresponds with the the rhythm of the street traffic: “The sight was ordinary enough; what was strange was *the rhythmical order with which my imagination has invested it* (93, my emphasis).” Through the tempo and language of the street traffic, Woolf translates and visualizes the flow of the narrator’s consciousness. The window, as a site of both liminality and fluidity, brings together the aesthetic and the everyday, the eye and the mind, the conscious and the unconscious. The

sight of a couple stepping into a taxi-cab evokes a feeling of union and integration—“the unity of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness”

(94):

What does one mean by ‘*the unity of the mind*’? I pondered, for clearly the mind has so great a power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being. It can separate itself off from the people in the street, for example, and think of itself as apart from them, at an upper window looking down on them. Or it can think with other people spontaneously, as, for instance, in a crowd waiting to hear some piece of news read out. It can think back through its fathers or through its mothers, as I have said that a woman writing thinks back through her mothers. Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being a natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. Clearly *the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives.* (94, my emphasis)

Woolf’s observations of the street scene and her understanding of the mind are intricately connected. The mind is not a fixed entity, but rather has the power to focus intensely and adopt various perspectives. Woolf emphasizes that the mind can detach itself from the external world and become a detached observer, like someone looking down at the street from an upper window; the mind can also merge with others and become part of a collective experience, as in a crowd waiting for news. In the meanwhile, the experience of walking down Whitehall as a woman creates a paradoxical experience of both connection and alienation from civilization. As such, Woolf’s observation of the street scene serves as a powerful metaphor for her understanding of the mind; and her depiction of the mind’s fluidity and complexity challenges traditional notions of fixed identity. Woolf’s uneasy pronouns (“it”, “one”, “she”) suggests “the uneasiness of the woman’s position in a culture, a nation” (Marcus 60). The employment of impersonal pronouns “one” creates a sense of universality,

suggesting that the issues faced by women are not limited to a single individual but are experienced by the collective, while the use of “it” conveys a sense of detachment or objectification, implying the way that women’s bodies and minds are often viewed as objects to be observed or controlled by men. This uneasy and ambiguous use of pronouns reflects the difficulties that women encounter in expressing themselves in a male-dominated society. Despite this unease, Woolf’s use of the window as a metaphor suggests the possibility of fluidity and motion within the mind. If the door is an embodiment of impediment barring the entrance to the truth, the window then serves as a means to promote fluidity and motion. Drawing her head in “from the window”, Woolf’s narrator reflected “the mind is certainly a very mysterious organ”, “about which nothing whatever is known, though we depend upon it so completely” (“A Room of One’s Own” 94). The window serves as a powerful symbol for Woolf’s narrator to express her subjectivity: the window represents a threshold between the internal and external worlds, enabling the narrator to delve into her stream-of-consciousness and to observe the external world simultaneously; as she looks out of the window, she contemplates the human condition and her own sense of identity. By decontextualizing external reality and breaking it down into abstract patterns and archetypes, the mind can achieve a degree of independence and freedom from the constraints of society and culture. This, in turn, allows for the possibility of a shared experience or collective consciousness that transcends individual limitations and allows for greater creative potential. As Williams argues of Joyce’s Dublin, “[T]he history is not in this city, but in the loss of a city, the loss of relationships. The only knowable community is in the need, the desire, of the racing and separated forms of consciousness” (245). Within the stream of consciousness form, Woolf

thus imagines “a metaphysical or psychological ‘community’ (246)”—a “collective consciousness (246)”, or a “unity of the mind” in Woolf’s words.

### **2.3 The Journey into the Unknown--- the Art of Metaphor**

Within the form of essay, Woolf strives to capture the essayistic structure of feelings, which runs against the linearity of the rational and logic mind. It is worth noting that the employment of metaphor plays a crucial role in Woolf’s efforts to conceptualize the essayistic. Metaphor, as a departure from the surface-level meaning of words and phrases, implicitly subverts the fixed definition and suggests alternative interpretations. There are many metaphors identifiable throughout “A Room of One’s Own”—the “path (6)” representing the logical linearity, “the line of normality and convention” (Bowlby 164); the “gravel” symbolizing the challenges and obstacles that women encounter in a patriarchal society (“A Room of One’s Own” 6); the “turf” is depicted as the unknown world outside patriarchal morals and dogma, as well as the world beyond logic configuration (6); the “running river” as the flux of reality, as well as the deep and flowing consciousness (6); the “little fish” as the untamed and undeveloped idea, which is not yet fixed and crystallized (6); science as the “pebble” dropped upon the ground, and fiction as the “spider web” with its corner anchored in reality (41); the window as a means of free association, as well as a site of both liminality and fluidity between the inside and outside, the body and mind (92); London as a “machine” (26); the rhythm of the street traffic as the tempo of the imagination (93); and so on.

Woolf leans on her experiences instead of logic and reason, and embraces the

illogical forces of imagination and the senses. Through her metaphorical language, Woolf invents “other worlds” and probes the “unseen side of reality” (Seeley, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’ and the Art of Digressive Passage” 153). In her essay “The Poets”, Woolf writes of the two sides of every “reality”: “[I]t is as though there were two faces to every situation; one full in the light so that it can be described as accurately and examined as minutely as possible; the other half in shadow so that it can be described only in a moment of faith and vision by the use of metaphor” (qtd. In Seeley 153). Metaphor, for Woolf, is “an essential process and product of thought (Feinstein 45)”, which allows us to access and understand the hidden side of reality “in shadow”. Metaphor enables us to explore the world beyond the literal and to uncover new, deeper levels of meaning, which in turn redefines reality: “[T]he metaphoric process reorganizes and vivifies; it paradoxically condenses and expands; it synthesizes often disparate meanings. In this process, attributes of one entity are transferred to another by comparison by substitution, or as a consequence of interaction” (45). The metaphoric process synthesizes incongruous concepts and ideas by transferring attributes from one entity to another through comparison, substitution, or interaction. The power of metaphor lies in its capacity to synthesize the “high and low, sublime and trivial, comic and tragic (Topping 107)”, and its potential to produce “similarity in difference (Chambers 120)”, as Proust writes:

One can list infinitely in a description all the objects that figured in the pace described, but the truth will begin only when the writer takes two different objects, establishes their relationship, the analogue in the world of art of the unique relation created in the world of science by the laws of causality, and encloses them within the necessary armature of a beautiful style. Indeed, just as in life, it begins at the moment when, by bringing together a quality shared by *two sensations*, [the writer] draws out their common essence by *uniting them* with each other, in order to protect them from the contingencies of time, in a

metaphor. (Proust 198, my emphasis)

Metaphor functions as a way of uniting seemingly disparate elements, revealing unexpected connections, and sparking new insights—which can be characterized as “continuity-in-disjunction” (Chambers 120): “beneath the surface impression of distance and disconnection, one finds unexpected resemblance, surprising ‘crossties’” (Topping 108). In the meanwhile, metaphor requires a greater investment of creative energy from the writer, as well as a more active engagement from the reader: “[W]hile [plain statement] avails only to propel the reader’s thought along an accustomed and preferred channel, metaphor forces it to fall in with that of the writer, to trace the writer’s branching idea back to its course and then to follow its ramifications beyond the point of actual expression, to traverse a road that may be wholly new, a country hitherto unseen” (Buck 52). The plain statement takes a straight way from point to point, whereas the metaphor ventures into an unknown world. By venturing into uncharted territory and exploring hidden meanings, metaphor can open up new avenues of thought and bring fresh perspectives.

In “A Room of One’s Own”, one of the most significant metaphors is the river, whose running water symbolizes the flux of reality, and a state of becoming (instead of being). Heraclitus, the ancient Greek philosopher, famously said that “everything flows and nothing stays”, and “no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man” (246). Heraclitus’s statement emphasizes the idea that everything is constantly in flux and nothing remains static; similarly, Nietzsche also sees reality as a dynamic and ever-changing process, with change being the fundamental principle underlying all existence. Along with Heraclitus and Nietzsche, Woolf views the world as a “running river” in a

perpetual state of flux. According to Nietzsche, the constantly changing nature of reality makes all actions “incomparably personal, unique, and infinitely individual” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 354); According to Nietzsche, the very act of naming is “a falsification and simplification of reality (Glenn 576)”, as no two leaves are identical and cannot be accurately labeled with a single term like “leaf”. Nietzsche believes that concepts and ideas are artificial constructions that humans impose on the world to make communication easier, but they do not accurately reflect the constantly shifting nature of reality: “A word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases—which means, purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal” (Nietzsche, “On truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” 83). For Nietzsche, truth is nothing more than a “moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions” (84). These “truths” are actually illusions that we have forgotten are not based in objective reality; in essence, Nietzsche sees reality as a constantly shifting and unique flux that cannot be fully captured or described through language or concepts. By the same token, Woolf proposes in “A Room of One’s Own” that the seemingly true, the deeply ingrained beliefs and prejudices about women’s inferiority are merely human constructs and illusions, established solely to maintain the stability of a patriarchal society. As per Nietzsche’s philosophy, it falls upon the strong who do not succumb to accepted “truths” to adopt the concept of an androgynous mind and confront the prevalent gender stereotype.

Apart from the flux of reality, the “running river” (which appears many times in “A Room of One’s Own”) to also suggest a flowing consciousness. Woolf’s figurative language frustrates the predicable logic and reasoning mind, presenting an unfolding world—the second-by-second flow of images, words, feelings and sounds. Naturally, it is human instinct to filter the sensory data and mental emanations into narrative patterns and forms, to make sense of the world, as well as our peculiar existence. But under the surface of this well-arranged, representative ‘narrative’ we generate for the sake of convenience, there is a perpetual flux of consciousness:

Our consciousness is filled with a tangle of material that flashes by an observing eye, so fast, and in so *multi-layered and dense array*; We can generally only arrest and focus on a minuscule part of what is before us. There are *waves of sensations, fog-banks of moods, collisions of ideas and swirls of associations and impressions*. Consciousness does not just unfold on a single cinema screen of the mind either. We can think of it more like a multi, multi-plex where a dozen or more moods and emotions are projected at once in a fractured collection of images, reminiscent of a puzzling collage of *Avant Garde* videos. Most of what we have felt and have been, will disappear before it can ever be held and examined. Furthermore, little of the richness of consciousness ever makes it out into public discussion. (De Botton, “What is the Stream of Consciousness?” 00:00:25-00:01:11, my emphasis)<sup>16</sup>.

De Botton describes consciousness as a complex and multi-layered experience that flashes by very quickly, making it difficult for us to fully comprehend or focus on everything that is happening around us. Our consciousness is made up of a tangle of sensations, moods, ideas, associations, and impressions, which are projected simultaneously in a fractured collection of images, similar to a puzzling collage of *Avant Garde* videos. Most of what we experience disappears before it can be fully examined, and only a small portion of the richness of

---

<sup>16</sup> De Botton, Alain. “What is the Stream of Consciousness?” YouTube, uploaded by The School of Life, 26 May 2016, <https://youtu.be/hu9L5zQ4g0Q>.



consciousness is ever expressed or discussed in public. When we try to communicate our thoughts and feelings, we are forced to reduce the complexity of our experiences into simplified and concrete words. However, words are not fixed and rigid entities, as Virginia Woolf reminds us—words are “the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things”, for they “do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind” (Woolf, “Craftsmanship” 204-5):

Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations---naturally. They have been out and about, on people’s lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today—that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages. (203)

According to Virginia Woolf, words are not fixed or inflexible, but rather living entities that undergo changes and development over time. Words live in the mind “variously and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together” (205). But words are “much less bound by ceremony and convention than we are” (205). These lively words are “etymological hybrids (Allen 44)”, as “Royal words mate with commoners, English words marry French words, German words, Indian words, Negro words, if they have a fancy (Woolf, “Craftsmanship” 205)”. A word, by its wild and tameless nature, is “succulent bait at the end of one’s line snapped at by a particular fish (Bennett 122)”, which wags in the dark and deep water of consciousness:

Thought—to call it by a prouder name than it deserved—had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water life it and sink it until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one’s line: and the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grower fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating. (“A Room of One’s Own” 5)

In this passage, a metaphorical comparison is made between the process of crystallizing a thought in words and the act of fishing. Woolf describes how the act of thinking is like letting the fishing line down into the stream of consciousness, allowing it to sway among the reflections and weeds until an idea suddenly forms and tugs at the end of the line. The cautious hauling in of the thought is akin to carefully laying out a catch. It is a lengthy process for sometimes thoughts may appear small and insignificant when laid out, much like a small fish that a skilled fisherman would put back into the water to allow it to grow bigger and more worthwhile, so one must be patient and wait for the idea to develop and mature into something more valuable.

Words cannot be constrained to a single meaning or attitude, for “the truth they [words] try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that. Thus they mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as pikestaff to the next” (Woolf, “Craftsmanship” 206). Words that are pinned down to one meaning lose their usefulness and become lifeless: “if we pin them [words] down to one meaning, their useful meaning... they fold their wings and die” (206). Woolf employs the imagery of life and death to advocate for the freedom of words from “the constraints of convention and ceremony, from rigid definitions, from simplicity, uniformity” (Allen 45). It is the nature of word that “even the most pragmatic verbal construct can have many unintended resonances (Mieszkowski 185)”, and the “power of suggestion is one of the most mysterious properties of words (Woolf, “Craftsmanship” 203)”. Woolf takes the simple combination of the words “Passing Russell Square” as an example of “the suggestive power of words (202)” to illustrate words “combine

unconsciously together (Allen 43)” and how “far-reaching the act of reading and rereading the sign of the words can be (Mieszkowski 185)”: “Passing” suggests “the transiency of things, the passing of time and the changes of human life”; “Russell” brings to mind “the rustling of leaves and the skirt on a polished floors”; and also “the ducal house of Bedford and half the history of England”; “Square” envisages “the sight, the shape of an actual square combined with some visual suggestion of the stark angularity of stucco (Woolf, “Craftsmanship” 202).” In this way, Woolf demonstrates that even the combination of the words at the simplest level could evoke a multitude of responses from the reader—“the imagination, the memory, the eye, and the ear—all combine in reading it” (202); and “the various denotations and connotations of the three words making up an ostensibly banal participial phrase, have the power to lead the casual reader into a dense sociopolitical, literary-historical, and philosophical forest that may prove to be even more labyrinthine than London Tube map” (Mieszkowski 185-186). As such, readers should not become fixated on finding hidden meanings or decoding every word and phrase in a text: instead of being “word mongers, or phrase finders”, “we have to allow the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated; lapsing and flowing into each other like reeds on the bed of a river” (Woolf, “Craftsmanship” 202). Readers should allow themselves to experience the text in a more fluid way, with meanings ebbing and flowing like reeds on a riverbed; the true power of language lies in its ability to suggest multiple meanings and associations, and it is up to the reader to allow these meanings to surface and resonate in their own way.

The exchange between writer and reader incorporates the act of walking as a key element, as walking symbolizes the processes of thinking, writing, and reading, all of which

entail meandering through the unknown territory. “[T]o write is to crave a new path through the terrain of the imagination, or to point out new features on a familiar route. To read is to travel through that terrain with the author as guide—a guide one may not always agree with or trust, but who can at least be counted upon to take one somewhere” (Solnit 72). In addition to the parallel between walking and essay-writing, another parallel can be drawn between walking and essay-reading. Both walking and reading involve a certain level of vulnerability and exposure: when walking, one opens oneself up to “unpredictable occurrences and impingements”, through which one can “modulate the immediacy of random intrusions for the sake of encouraging, unimpeded, the ‘inner life’” (Robinson 4-5). Reading too, is an vulnerable and ‘dangerous’ act, for reading means “the prolonged (or intense) exposure of one mind to another that is involved in it”; the words the readers “encounter dredge up unconscious scenarios, produce physiological response, and provoke many feelings that simply defy anticipation or control” (Allen 17). Both walking and reading offer complex and transformative experiences: just as every walk is an adventure into the unknown, reading is like drifting into a world of novelty and uncertainty; it requires suspending one’s preconceived notions and biases for a moment, trusting the writer’s guide, and following their footsteps into uncharted territories.

In “A Room of One’s Own”, the act of walking serves a powerful metaphor for the elusive and meandering nature of consciousness and the non-linear process of essay-writing and essay-reading; the metaphor of walking is employed to represent how both essay-writing and essay-reading involve wandering through unknown territories and being guided by the unpredictable. Woolf’s essayistic writing, as such, acknowledges the

idiosyncratic nature of the mind and the singularity of personal experience, and challenges the norm of simplifying them into established patterns or schema.

## **2.4 The Adventure of the Self in the City: “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”**

### **2.4.1 A Meditational Adventure—the Search for a New Pencil**

Walking and the thoughts that Woolf encounters while walking play a significant role in her artistic and aesthetic practice. During her walk, “the curious characters and scenes she encounters serve as metaphors for, and commentaries upon, her essay-writing” (Saloman 23).

Woolf’s street-walking experience provides her the material for writing; but more importantly, her essays are generically shaped by her walk. Her wandering journey on foot through the city unlocks her unconscious mind, and her essay captures the meandering of her thoughts on paper. In Woolf’s walks, as well as in her essays, it is the journey that matters, not the destination (Seeley, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’ and the Art of Digressive Passage” 152). Her walks and essays do not necessarily have a specific itinerary but wanders around in a space of surprise and spontaneity. The leisurely and non-directed nature of Woolf’s writing highlights that “it is not the subject matter or ‘purpose’ of the essay that renders it meaningful or defines it as a literary form, but rather the journey set in notion by that purpose, which need not bear any relation to the given pretext” (Saloman 24). Woolf’s “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” is perfect good example of how her walk and essay emerge from a desire for wandering, rather than any straightforward purpose. Along with

Woolf, “we do—after setting out, walking alongside other trampers, peeking in house windows, peering in store windows, looking in a boot shop, meeting the maimed and destitute in Soho, browsing in a book shop, and musing by the Thames—buy a pencil” (Seeley, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’ and the Art of Digressive Passage” 152). But unlike Mrs Dalloway, who buys the flower for her party (which may in a sense symbolize the connection and union of the souls), the essayist’s craving for a pencil implicitly declares her longing for a new tool for self-expression:

No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner. As the foxhunter hunts in order to preserve the breed of horses, and the golfer plays in order that open spaces may be preserved from the builders, so when the desire comes upon us to go street rambling the pencil does for a pretext, and getting up we say, “Really I must buy a pencil,” as if under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in *the greatest pleasure* of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London. (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 186)

The essayist takes the reader on a walk, under the guise of searching for a pencil, but in fact she is after pleasure—“the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London”. Woolf’s emphasis on the importance of “pleasure” is no coincidence, as she also views ‘giving pleasure’ as the guiding principle of the essayist:

The principle which controls [the essay] is simply that it should give *pleasure*; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. (“The Modern Essay” 13)

In “On the Nature and Form of the Essay”, Lukács defines the essay as “a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the *process* of judging” (17-8, my emphasis). In a similar way, Adorno puts it:

“The essay becomes true in its *progress*, which drives it beyond itself, and not in a hoarding obsession with fundamentals. Its concepts receive their light from a *terminus ad quern* hidden to the essay itself, and not from an obvious *terminus a quo*” (Adorno 161). In this sense, the ‘pleasure’ the “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” gives could be interpreted as the ‘pleasure’ of following the journey of the wandering mind and tracing its trains of thought, while also drawing the reader’s attention to the interplay between the continuity and interruption of that flow of consciousness. Noticeably in “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, more than half of the paragraphs begin with the word “but,” which “in its ambiguity, functions as a connective, as a way of continuing and extending, although it also resists that continuity, cuts things off, and most importantly, negates what was said before its appearance” (Allen 58). Woolf’s frequent employment of “buts” indicates the mind’s irresistible impulse to jump from one thing to another, without necessary logic connection; in the meanwhile, “buts” also opens up the door for possibilities and calls for contradictions.

As it traces the wandering mind, the essay has a “taste for littleness” (Lopate xxvii). A fundamental aspect of the essay form is its ability to turn the spotlight of glamour on trivialities of daily life. “As it maps the territory of the self”, the essay “details the particulars of everyday life, attuned, like Wordsworth and like Dutch genre painting, to the quite mundane and quotidian: taking a walk, mowing a field, observing a moth dying, contemplating a piece of chalk” (Atkins 67). While the essay makes “the small loom large”, it simultaneously “contracts and expands the self” (Lopate xxviii); and its taste for “the miniature becomes a strong suit of the form: the ability to turn anything close at hand into a grand *meditational adventure*” (xxviii, my emphasis). Not surprisingly, during her journey of

self-revelation, Woolf fully exposes herself in the flux of the urban experience, and turns the ordinary aspect of life into grand adventure. Woolf sees in the daily life of the city something that she believes deserved prolonged contemplation and admiration.

In “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, London is imagined as a grand theater, and each room a stage, with its own drama unfolding, waiting to be discovered and shared: in the office room, “clerks sit turning with wetted forefingers the files of endless correspondences” (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 178); in the dining room, a woman is preparing the tea and waiting for guests; “in the darker places of the room behind thick green curtain”, “[L]ove-making is going on sibilantly, seductively” (182); on a terrace “lie sun-bathed, the aged Prime Minister\* recounts to Lady So-and-So with the curls and the emeralds the true history of some great crisis in the affairs of the land” (182). By presenting the city as a stage, Woolf invites readers to explore the different dramas unfolding in each room and to appreciate the significance of even the most ordinary moments.

Perhaps the difference between the novelistic and essayistic configuration of experience could be better understood through Woolf’s spatial metaphors. Woolf remarks her considerations of her character in structural terms: “I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humor, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 263). Woolf’s use of the cave metaphor suggests that she sees the novel as a constructed space that is intricately connected and layered; as a novelist, she must construct a structure that is both aesthetically pleasing and practical (Falcetta 121). Walter Benjamin further adds that novelists utilize the analogical tie to reality to construct a fictional world that



is self-reliant and formally closed (McBride 50). In sharp contrast to novelist writing, the essay rejects formal closure, challenges systematic organization of experience and knowledge, and values flexibility and spontaneity. To some extent, the novel filters the experience through a certain way/pattern “under the burden of mimetic representation”, whereas “the essay is as free to ramble as its creator” (Saloman 74). If the novelist Woolf digs out “beautiful caves” behind her characters, the essayist Woolf only glides “smoothly on the surface” (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 178):

We are in *danger* of digging deeper than the eye approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root.... let us dally a little longer, be content still with *surfaces* only... for the eye has this strange property: it rests only on *beauty*... (179)

Here Woolf compares the act of delving deeper to catching at a branch or root, which can obstruct one’s path down a smooth stream of consciousness. Through her use of metaphorical language, Woolf implies that rather than trying to extract some deeper meaning, the essayist should capture the beauty on “surfaces” and render the fleeting nature of lived experience. To achieve this, the essayist should showcase nature’s “trophies” from “obscure angles”:

[the eye] rests only on beauty; like a butterfly it seeks out color and basks in warmth. On a winter’s night like this, when nature has been at pains to polish and preen herself, it brings back the *prettiest trophies*, breaks off little lumps of emerald and coral as if the whole earth were made of precious stone. The thing it [the eye] cannot do (one is speaking of the average unprofessional eye) is to compose these trophies *in such a way as to bring out their more obscure angles and relationships*. (179, my emphasis)

The eye—like a butterfly drawn to vibrant colors and warmth—is naturally drawn to beauty; but the “average unprofessional eye” cannot compose nature’s “prettiest trophies” “in such a way as to bring out their more obscure angles and relationships”. Instead, it takes a more refined and professional eye to convey nature’s beauty in a way that truly does it justice. The

essayist is not bound by a predetermined structure or formula, but relies heavily on the artful use of language to register the stream of consciousness and the meandering thought; this requires a high level of skill and artistry, as the essayist must find a balance between the free-flowing of the mind and the necessity of a certain degree of coherence to prevent slipping into the abyss of chaos.

Although the essay rests on “surfaces”, it remains grounded in reality—like spiders’ webs, the essay attaches “lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners” (“A Room of One’s Own” 41). Despite its apparent fluidity and ethereal quality, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” is still anchored in reality—with a specific setting in London and a time frame between tea and dinner on a winter evening; and the quest for the ‘pencil’ bears the weight of reality and acts as a cohesive element that links together disjointed moments of being and fragments of experience. In “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, most of the time we drift with the currents of thought, along with the essayist; but there are also moments when the flow of thoughts come to a sudden pause—as when the ‘pencil’ reoccurs: “It is, in fact, the stroke of six; it is a winter’s evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 185)”. The reappearance of the pencil, carrying a ‘tangible’ significance, draws the essayist back from her aimless wandering and reorient herself towards the ‘purpose’: “Ah, we remember, it was a pencil. Let us go then and buy this pencil” (185). Throughout “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, the search for the ‘pencil’ serves as a unifying thread that links the disparate moments of existence during the journey and turns the essay into a “formless form (Gualtieri 53)”. At the very end of the essay, as Woolf returns her room, her wandering thoughts dissipating in the air, the only

tangible thing that remains is the pencil: “And here—let us examine it tenderly, let us touch it with reverence—is the only spoil we have retrieved from the treasures of the city, a lead pencil” (187). The pencil serves as a physical reminder of the fleeting moments and experiences the essayist had during the journey through the city, as the wandering mind fades away; the pencil is the ultimate ‘trophy’ “retrieved from the treasures of the city”.

#### **2.4.2 A Visual Adventure—The I, or the Eye**

Instead of the “I”, the walker in “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” is “one”, “we”, “us”—the collective, the “army of anonymous of trampers (177)” in the streets. These collective nouns create a sense of inclusivity, making the reader part of the walker’s journey (Seeley, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’ and the Art of Digressive Passage” 152). With “strategies of delay (152)”, the essayist first elucidates the best condition for the ramble:

The hour should be the evening and the season winter, for in winter the champagne brightness of the air and the sociability of the streets are grateful. We are not then taunted as in the summer by the longing for shade and solitude and sweet airs from the hayfields. The evening hour too, gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 177).

Describing the ideal time and season for an enjoyable stroll, the essayist builds excitement and anticipation in the reader for the potential adventures that may come with an evening winter walk. But again, she delays her walk and ponders upon how our familiar surroundings and objects “perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience” (177). The Mantuan bowl, sitting on the mantelpiece, triggers a story from the past—Italy, the windy morning, the “sinister old woman” who sold

the bowl, the innkeeper quarreling violently with his wife, “the vines laced about among the pillars and the stars white in the sky”, and the “melancholy Englishman”. “All this”, writes the essayist, “rise up in a cloud from the china bowl on the mantelpiece” (178). Our possessions “come laden with rich and evocative stories” that are a part of our personal history, but the objects and their stories “point to the necessary limitations of a fix identity”, and hence “limit imaginative or abstract freedoms (Saloman 83)”.

But as soon as we step out the room, all that limitations vanish. The streets liberates us from the confinement of the self—or in Woolf’s own words, the “oyster shell” of the self: “When the door shuts on us, all that vanishes. The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken” (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 178). As we walk in the street, the “shell-like covering” of the self is shed, and we are free to view the world with fresh eyes. Breaking from the confines of “the room”—the “perspective imposed by the mementos that surround her (Salmon 84)”, one is free of being in any environment, unconstrained by time and space: “Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one’s will with sofa, table, carpet” (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 181). The delight does not originate from possession, but from the sensation of being free: “having built and furnished the house, one is happily under no obligation to possess it; one can dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses” (182). Essentially, to street haunt is to break from any restriction of the self—to “be momentarily dispossessed”, to “feel weightless, immaterial, and unbounded” (Ventura, “Virginia Woolf’s Pencil”).

In the modern age where efficiency and productivity is highly worshiped, there appears no room for pausing, meditating, contemplating, and reflecting—for these practices means waywardness, and our way is strict, straightforward and goal-orientated. But Woolf slows down and takes her time—she walks along with the rhythm of the city, without a specific destination in mind. This sense of non-orientedness is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “art of straying”: both Woolf and Benjamin emphasize the importance of being open and attentive to the diverse experiences and possibilities that the city offers; by allowing oneself to wander aimlessly and become lost in the maze of streets and alleys, one can break away from the constraints of a linear, goal-oriented mentality and discover new perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of the city’s cultural and historical significance (Lewis 173). Benjamin proposes “to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest” (*One-Way Street* 298); by immersing oneself in the sensory experience of the city, one can awaken to new possibilities and break away from the routine and mechanized way of life that capitalism imposes on us. In “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, Woolf’s practice of walking in the city is in line with Benjamin’s concept: as she moves through the city streets without a specific destination, Woolf becomes attuned to the city’s rhythms and sensations, and in doing so, she reconnects with nature even in the midst of the hustle and bustle of urban life:

How beautiful a London street is then, with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness, and one side of it perhaps some tree sprinkled, grass-grown space where night is folding herself to sleep naturally and, as one passes the iron railing, one hears those little cracklings and stirrings of leaf and twig which seem to suppose the silence of fields all around them, an owl hooting, and far away the rattle of a train in the valley. *But this is London, we are reminded*; high among the bare trees are hung oblong frames of reddish yellow light—windows. (“Street Haunting” 178, my emphasis)

The tree, the lead, the twig, the hooting owl, the field and valley—pictures a vivid view of the nature. Even in the midst of the city, Woolf experiences of moments of connection with nature. But this beautiful moment of connecting with nature is soon disrupted, and we are reminded that “this is London”—the oblong frames of lighted windows high in the trees serve as a reminder of the artificiality and man-made structures that dominate the urban landscape. We are now forced to move back to the “now” and “here”—this moment of London. Along with the essayist, we see the clerks sit in the offices, “turning with wetted forefingers the files of endless correspondences (178)”; we see “the figure of a woman” in drawing-room, “accurately measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea which—She looks at the door as if she heard a ring downstairs and somebody asking, is she in?” (178) The essayist enjoys a kind of voyeuristic pleasure and only rests on the surface; once again, Woolf kindly reminds us: “But here we must stop peremptorily”; “[W]e are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves” (179). Unlike the novelist who paints delicate portraits of characters in the novel, the essayist only draws rough sketches that capture a moment or impression. While the novelist may dedicate several pages to delve into the intricate workings of the clerks’ minds or the backstory of the woman, the essayist presents them in a more transient manner, allowing us only a fleeting glimpse of the clerks flipping through damp pages of correspondence or the woman measuring out spoons of tea. In capturing moments or impressions, the essayist is thus able to convey a sense of immediacy and intimacy that may be lost in the more deliberate pacing of a novel.

Throughout “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, the “I” is quickly replaced by the “eye”, and “I” and “eye” are largely indistinguishable. Woolf’s London is a panorama

of sights, where “there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye” (178), and the “eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances” (181). “We are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream, resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks” (178). Instead of “a shape distinct from others”—the coherency of seeing oneself as “one thing only,” the self becomes an infinite multiplicity—a reflection of the visual plenitude of a modern city, “streaked, variegated, all of a mixture” (182). “Circumstances compel unity; for convenience’ sake a man must be a whole” (182). But this sense of unity and coherence is constantly disrupted and scattered when one is in the city, for the self is “tethered not to a single mind,” but can put “on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and mind of others” (186), and constantly renews itself in the flux of the city. The eye, unlike the brain which processes experiences through logic and reason, moves without constraint and absorbs everything in its path:

Passing, glimpsing, everything seems accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty, as if the tide of trade which deposits its burden so punctually and prosaically upon the shores of Oxford Street has this night cast up nothing but treasure. (181)

When the brain is not actively engaged in processing and interpreting what the eye sees, the eye can capture the world in a different way; the eye can observe the bizarre and absurd elements of the city, which the logical mind would otherwise filter out or rationalize. By detaching from the reasoning mind, the self is no longer confined to a single point of view and can absorb more fully the richness and variety of the city:

But that could be more absurd? It is, in fact, on the stroke of six, it is a winter’s evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil. How, then, are we also on a balcony, wearing pearls in June? What could be more absurd? Yet it is nature’s

folly, not ours. When she set about her chief masterpiece, the making of man, she should have thought of one thing only. Instead, turning her head, looking over her shoulder, into each one of us she let *creep instincts and desires* which are utterly at variance with his main being, so that we are *streaked, variegated, all of a mixture*; the colors have run. (182)

Here Woolf reflect on the fact that human beings are complex and contradictory creatures, a mixture of “creep instincts and desires”—these “instincts and desires” sometimes clash with each other, and contradict our primary goals and values. This complexity and contradiction of human nature is further emphasized by the imagery of “streaked, variegated” colors—reason and logic are mixed with feelings, instincts and desires; “all of a mixture”, and the self is not a fixed or static entity but constantly changing and evolving.

Along the way Woolf searching for a pencil, she waves in references from personal memories, anecdotes, to literature, history, and philosophy, moving fluidly between different subjects and ideas. As her essay is intrinsically propelled by the free flow of consciousness, time and again the reader may find it challenging to follow the progression of her thoughts and wonder how one get from *there* to *here*. Woolf’s meandering essay, like her aimless walk, is sometimes easy to get lost in, and there are passages where her “free association of ideas lets the narration appear almost labyrinthine to the reader” (Rummel 50). The sudden shifts in line of thoughts may cause the sense of disorientation in the reader—for example, the essayist’s sudden stop at the boot shop without further explanation by the essayist may evoke a jolt of surprise:

We halt at the door of the boot shop and make some little excuse, which has nothing to do with the real reason, for folding up the bright paraphernalia of the streets and withdrawing to some duskier chamber of the being where we may ask, as we raise our left foot obediently upon the stand, ‘What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?’ (179)



Quite unexpectedly, the female dwarf enters the scene, escorted by two normal-sized women, which look like benevolent giants beside her. The women smile at the shop girls, and inform that they ask for shoes for “this lady” (the dwarf). “This lady”—the dwarf—“wore the peevish yet apologetic expression usual on the faces of the deformed. She needed their kindness, yet she resented” (179). But when the shop girl pushes a little stand in front of her, the odd thing happens:

the dwarf stuck her foot out with an impetuosity which seemed to claim all our attention. Look at that! Look at that! She seemed to demand of us all, as she thrust her foot out, for behold it was the shapely, perfectly proportioned foot of a well-grown woman. It was arched; it was aristocratic. Her whole manner changed as she looked at it resting on the stand. She looked soothed and satisfied. Her manner became full of self-confidence. She sent for shoe after shoe; she tried on pair after pair. (179-180)

She sees nothing but her foot, and believes herself, for that very moment, beautiful. A word of compliment from the good-humoured shop girl lit her face up in an ecstasy. Shabbily dressed she is, but she is “ready to lavish any money upon her shoes” (180). It would take her forever to choose the perfect pair, but the giantesses have their own affairs to see to; so “she must make up her mind; she must decide which to choose” (180). As she walks out between her guardians, “the ecstasy faded, knowledge returned, the old peevishness, the old apology came back” (180). And again, she becomes a dwarf, as soon as she reaches the street. The essayist follows her out into the street, overwhelmed by a grotesque atmosphere of “the humped, the twisted, the deformed” (180). Just as the heterogeneous city remains elusive, there could be multiple ways to interpret the identity of the dwarf from various viewpoints: Rachel Bowlby interprets the dwarf as the “proud, surefooted femininity” (215); Catherine Lanone regards the dwarf as a victim of the lure of the commercialism: “The would-be Cinderella

emblemizes the way in which consumer society makes peevish dwarves of us all. The dwarf with her useless shoes is the ironic counterpart of the energetic narrator, the grotesque grain of sand which as is important as the pearls in window displays” (321). I regard the dwarf as the embodiment of the uncanny, transforming the city into a surreal landscape. Regardless of how one interprets the dwarf’s identity, her sudden and brief appearance in the essay undoubtedly introduces a bizarre and unexpected element in the essay.

The essayist’s sudden encounter with the dwarf situates the city as the site of the uncanny, and the dwarf provokes “a hobbling grotesque dance” (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 180): “the stout lady tightly swathed in shiny sealskin; the feeble-minded boy sucking the silver knob of his stick; the old man squatted on a doorstep as if, suddenly overcome by the absurdity of the human spectacle, he had sat down to look at it—all joined in the hobble and tap of the dwarf’s dance” (180). Seeing the “absurdity of the human spectacle”, the essayist is overwhelmed by the feeling of the uncanny; and the encounter with the dwarf creates a surreal and grotesque atmosphere where boundaries between the known and unknown, the real and the surreal, and the familiar and unfamiliar become indistinguishable. This sense of the uncanny is further strengthened later in the essay when Woolf regards the second-hand books as “wild books, *homeless* books” (183, my emphasis): “they have come together in vast flocks of variegated feather, and have a charm which the domesticated volumes of the library lack” (183). Marcus associates “homelessness” with “unhomeliness” and “unhomely”—literal translations of the German word as ‘uncanny’, Freud’s *Das Unheimliche*” (Virginia Woolf 67). Woolf’s description of second-hand books as “wild” and “homeless” emphasizes their disconnection from a fixed location or context—the

books are no longer part of the organized and domesticated library system, but instead have taken on a life of their own, gathering together in “vast flocks” with a unique charm that cannot be found in the controlled environment of a library. In the meanwhile, the sense of “homelessness” also echos the sense of disorientation and alienation experienced in urban environments, as Walter Benjamin’s association of Freud’s concept of the “uncanny” with the phantasmagoria of city life where human beings are alienated from each other, and become strangers. The sense of the uncanny is prominent throughout the essay: the title itself—with the word “haunting”—suggests a sense of unease and strangeness; the sense of the uncanny is also figured in the “‘ghostly’ encounters with split-off parts of the self, not all of whom are gathered in at dusk when the self recomposes itself for its entry into the home” (Marcus Virginia Woolf 67). ‘Haunted’ by the desire to deviate, Woolf strays from the intended path, and the journey becomes more of a great adventure than a simple errand. The city, the dwarf, and the dance—all suspend her original plan of buying a pencil, and turn herself into a “real city stroller”—who is not bound by a particular destination or purpose, but rather opens herself up to “unexpected visual adventures”, as Franz Hessel (Benjamin’s contemporary) describes in “Berlin’s Boulevard”:

The *real city stroller* is like a reader who reads a book simply to pass the time and for pleasure. *Flanerie* is a way of reading the street, in which people’s faces, displays, shop windows, cafe terraces, cars, tracks, trees turn into an entire series of *equivalent letters, which together form words, sentences, and pages of a book that is always new*. To do this properly, you *can’t* have any particular *destination* or *purpose* in mind... you can risk going for a stroll without a specific destination and open oneself up to an *unexpected visual adventures*. (40, my emphasis)

The city is a text waiting to be deciphered, with “people’s faces, displays, shop windows, cafe terraces, cars, tracks, trees” serving as “letters” that come together to form “words”,

“sentences”, and “pages” of a constantly evolving “book”. The act of *flanerie* is therefore a way of immersing oneself in the city’s rich tapestry of sights and sounds, without any specific destination or purpose in mind—it is about being open to “unexpected visual adventures” and finding pleasure in the act of wandering.

There are two kinds of walking identifiable in “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”: the commuter’s goal-oriented walking from A to B, and the active loitering and aimless strolling of the essayist. Like a *flâneuse*, Woolf takes pleasure in immersing herself in the crowd and navigating through “a landscape rich in sensory detail and mental emanations” (Seeley, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’ and the Art of Digressive Passage” 152). Woolf’s essayistic writing mirrors her aimless wandering through the city by connecting seemingly random observations and reflections in a subjective and distracted manner that reflects the unpredictability of urban life. This makes her writing a form of textual *flânerie*, where she follows the flow of her thoughts rather than structuring her work around a particular narrative or argument. Moreover, Woolf’s imaged city also serves as “a modernist *negotiation* of, and *digression* from, the spatial reality of the city”, providing “a way of reading, narrating and imagining the social space of the metropolis, its literary scene and the self” (Frisby 50). Through her essayistic portrayal of the city, Woolf departs from the conventional structured narrative of the city, allowing for a rich and complex portrait of urban life. In a sense, Woolf’s journey becomes a way of exploring not only the city, but also the inner workings of the self and the ways in which we construct our own identities in relation to the urban environment. As Woolf embarks on her journey through the city and self, the reader is invited to join as a *co-flâneur*, producing their own unique interpretation of the city

based on their personal experiences and understanding. The collaborative construction of the city—initiated by Woolf and continued by her readers—is an ongoing process with each new interpretation adding a new layer of meaning and contributing to a rich and diverse tapestry of interpretations that continue to deepen our understanding of the city.

### **2.4.3 The Adventure in the Mind and Consciousness—the Art of Metaphor and Digression**

To follow Woolf’s wandering mind and map her imagined London in “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, one has to “create a model in more than three dimensions build around that long arcing corridor of plot, its hallway opening out into room after room through passageways of tropes” (“Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’ and the Art of Digressive Passage” 151). Woolf uses tropes to take the reader on mental journeys away from this moment in London and into realms of imagination:

“Trope,” after all, means “turn.” Turn away from the literal, linear path into figure and dream. Fall through trap doors of “what if” and “seems” into marvelous antechambers and rooms within rooms. Each of them as invisible as a thought and as solid as the physical world. Each passageway in turn creates its own digressive loop, a mental journey away from the street into other less mappable realms, then back to the walker’s footsteps ringing on the pavement. (151-2)

A trope is a way of turning away from the literal and linear path and entering into the world of imagination. Each trope is a “key”, unlocking the door to a world beyond the constraints of literal meaning and linear narrative; with each key, Woolf creates a new world that can only be accessed through that particular trope—by making a new “key”, Woolf opens a new

world. As an example, in the second-hand bookshop scene, the essayist forms “sudden capricious friendship (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 183)” with an unknown poet, whose verse she comments: “[M]ild as it is and formal and sententious, [it] still sends forth a frail fluty sound *like* that of a piano organ played in some back street resignedly by an old Italian organ grinder in a corduroy jacket” (184, my emphasis). The word “like” opens our imagination and senses for the “frail fluty sound” of a piano organ played in a back street; but Woolf “pushes the simile even further”—she invents a story, “a character, a mood that hints at a longer tale, and a uniquely specifying costume” (Seeley, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’ and the Art of Digressive Passage” 153). By doing this, the essayist takes the reader on a journey of the imagination, allowing them to experience the sights, sounds, and emotions along with her. Through her use of tropes, Woolf is able to transcend the literal and linear path of language and narrative, and enter into a world of imagination and possibility. With each new trope that she creates, she opens up a new world, full of meaning and wonder, that can only be accessed through that particular ‘key’. By using tropes, Woolf anchors her journey into the realm of imagination in the material world, making it as real and solid as the pencil the essayist holds in her hand at the end of the essay; and her wandering mind is thus “so fairly printed, so finely engraved” that it becomes a concrete and palpable experience for the reader—as “the little book of poems” in bookshop (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 184).

In Woolf’s journey to the imagination, the use of metaphor holds significant importance. In “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, Woolf’s metaphors are to be found in verbs: the title “Street *Haunting*”; or “the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to

*house* themselves” (178, my emphasis); or, “we *sport* with the moment and *preen* our feathers in it lightly” (182, my emphasis). There is also metaphors in adjectives: “*wild, homeless* books”; or, metaphors in nouns, where Woolf negates the analogy between the good citizen and a nomad, a mystic, a debauchee, a soldier, and a pariah: “The good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be banker, golfer, husband, father; not a *nomad* wandering the desert, a *mystic* staring at the sky, a *debauchee* in the slums of San Francisco, a *soldier* heading a revolution, a *pariah* howling with scepticism and solitude” (183, my emphasis). The prevalence of metaphors in Woolf’s writing is not simply a matter of preference, but an integral part of her conceptual understanding of language and thought.

According to conventional views of language, the primary function of words is to convey their literal meaning, which is based on their normal usage and reference; in this view, metaphor is considered a secondary or deviant use of language because it involves a departure from literal meaning. However, cognitive linguists like Lakoff and Johnson argue metaphor is not merely “a property of language (a linguistic phenomenon)” but also “a property of thought (a cognitive phenomenon)—a mental origination of human experience (Shutova, Devereux and Korhonen 1263). Based on analogy and arsing when “one concept is viewed in terms of the properties of another”, the use of metaphor is not limited to “similarity-based meaning extensions of individual words, but rather involves re-conceptualization of a whole area of experience in terms of another” (1263). It is through metaphor that we understand and make sense of the world around us. In his seminal work *The Principles of Psychology*, William James described the world of the pre-linguistic infant as a “blooming” and “buzzing confusion (488)”. Our senses are our primary means of

understanding the world—seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling are how we know anything first. The less tangible and less immediate abstract concepts, on the other hand, are pale things compared to those first bees and blossoms. In “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, therefore, it is through the use of metaphors that Woolf evokes direct and sensory experiences, and allows the reader to feel and experience the things in a more immediate and visceral way.

Borrowing Freud’s ideas of primary and secondary process, Miller situates the metaphorical and literal language in the following pairs of oppositions: “deviant versus conventional, bold and mysterious versus cautious and knowable, art versus science, unconscious versus conscious, child versus adult, primitive versus Western rationality” (136). The “literal, proper languages” is associated with rational thought, whereas the metaphorical language is coterminous with irrational thought, which “suspends adult reality-testing and captures a novel, insightful *gestalt*”, thus releasing “the less-guarded moments of adults” (136). So in a sense, Woolf’s utilization of metaphors can be viewed as a potent means of unraveling the intricacies of the human psyche—metaphors allow her to probe into the subconscious and explore hidden aspects of the mind. Woolf’s use of spatial and orientational metaphors plays a significant role in her conceptualization of the self. When Woolf examines the nature of the self, she asks, “[A]m I *here* or am I *there*?”; the true self is tied to a particular physical location, or it is something more provisional, inconsistent, and fluctuating: “[I]s it the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June?” (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 182, my emphasis). Woolf furthers conceptualizes the self in the “language of space and wandering” (Seeley, “Virginia



Woolf's 'Street Haunting' and the Art of Digressive Passage" 43): "the true self neither this nor that, neither *here* nor *there*, but something so *varied* and *wandering* that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves?" ("Street Haunting: A London Adventure" 182, my emphasis). The true self is not a static object but rather something that is constantly changing, "wandering", and evolving. By posing these questions about the nature of the self, Woolf highlights the ongoing process of understanding and discovering the self; her questioning tone also invites readers to join in the inquiry of the self and explore different possibilities.

The encounter between the self and the city constantly take Woolf "off the straight path into the non-linear and multiple, even into the multiplicity of herself" (Seeley, "Virginia Woolf's 'Street Haunting' and the Art of Digressive Passage" 43). As Woolf herself puts it: "what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave *the straight lines* of personality and *deviate* into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men?" ("Street Haunting: A London Adventure" 187, my emphasis). The metaphor of "footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts" suggests that this exploration may be difficult and even dangerous; but it is only when we leave "the straight lines of personality" that we can explore the more unpredictable and unknown parts of ourselves and the world around us. To walk in Woolf's London is to go into an uncharted territory of the self, drifting in the perpetual flux of the urban experience. If the road is regarded as straight, mapped lines—much like its analogs, "history as teleological, narration and time as linear, biography as continuous and coherent"—the act of walking is the

persistent attempt towards digression, favoring “the non-teleological, the disjunctive, and the incoherent” (Seeley, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’ and the Art of Digressive Passage” 35). This departure from the straight and mapped lines of the city streets allows for a new perspective and exploration of the self.

Woolf’s notion of digression is rooted in the idea that the mind does not always move in a linear or logical fashion, but rather meanders and wanders, following predetermined routes; digression is thus a mode of thinking that reflects the fluidity and unpredictability of the wandering mind. Apart from metaphor, Woolf also employs unstable tenses in “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” to achieve digression. Throughout the essay, Woolf constantly alternates between the present and past tense. For instance, she reminisces about the experience of buying “that bowl on the mantelpiece” in the past tense: “We were leaving the shop when the sinister old woman plucked at our skirts and said she would find herself starving one of these days, but ‘Take it!’ she cried, and thrust the blue and white china bowl into our hands...” (“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” 177). In a similar manner, Woolf recounts the dramatic scene of the dwarf in the boot shop using the past tense: “She [the dwarf] came in escorted by two women who, being of normal size, looked like benevolent giants beside her...” (179). In sharp contrast, Woolf employs the present tense to describe what the eye ‘sees’:

How beautiful a street is in winter! It is at once revealed and obscured. (178)

[...]

Passing, glimpsing, everything seems accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty, as if the tide of trade which deposits its burden so punctually and prosaically upon the shores of Oxford Street had this night cast up nothing but treasure. (181)

By alternating between the past and present tense, Woolf engenders a division between experience and awareness, which are the three interactive registers in the essay form (as mentioned earlier in the introduction of this thesis): the “personal and the autobiographical”, the “objective, the factual, and the concrete-particular”, and the “abstract-universal” (Huxley 83-5). The shift between the two tenses allows Woolf to generate a dynamic interplay between the past and present, between personal experience and awareness of that experience, and between “the factual and the concrete-particular” and “the abstract-universal”. In so doing, Woolf shifts the focus from the personal experience of life to the essayistic configuration of it through reflection and abstraction, thus emphasizing “a reflecting and composing consciousness, a mental state above the material plane of existence” (Warner 45-6). According to Warner, who draws upon Woolf’s own argument in “The Narrow Bridge of Art”, the significant self-awareness present in Woolf’s writing is primarily due to her highly poeticized language (45). In Woolf’s own words, poetry—catering to “beauty, purity, and transcendence”—does not tackle the mundane aspects of everyday life. On the contrary, “[P]rose has taken all the dirty work on to her own shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills, written articles, made speeches, served the needs of business—men, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants” (“The Narrow Bridge of Art” 223). As a consequence of “having dispensed with the incantation and the mystery, with rhyme and metre”, the prose cannot now “leap at one spring at the heart of its subject” as poetry does (223). However, Woolf continues that “if you free it from the beast-of-burden work which so many novelists necessarily lay upon it, of carrying loads of details, bushels of fact—prose thus treated will show itself capable of rising high from the ground” (223). Through her highly poetic language, therefore,

Woolf frees “prose from its fact-recording power”—that “novelistic beast-of-burden work”, so as to achieve the “inspired leap to the ‘essence’ of its subject”, and sustain the “intensity of such elevation” (Warner 42-43).

Digression not only conceptualizes Woolf’s wandering mind, but also serves as “an interruptive design compelling the reader to react” (Gold 55): when readers encounter digressive texts, they must “develop appropriate strategies that will enable them to reorder narrative sequences, reconstruct a plausible narrative chronology, and comprehend the often fragmentary vision of reality that such texts imply” (55). Digression “breaks up the logjams created when the text reaches moments of stasis” (63), and thus creates dynamics on many levels. In “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, the act of walking becomes a metaphor for the meandering of the mind, with the essayist’s physical movements traversing straight lines while her thoughts meander “like the ghosts of the title’s ‘haunting’”, passing “through walls into the lives and bodies of others” (Seeley, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’ and the Art of Digressive Passage” 151), whom she crosses in her ramble (the dwarf, quarreling stationers, commerce workers bound for home, lovers on the Embankment, the aged Prime Minister, and more); both Woolf’s “walk and essay become a fluid dance of mind and body in motion, the body rooted in the physical world, the mind unfettered by the bounds of time, space, and self” (151). It is through creating digression on many levels that Woolf is able to capture the wandering nature of the human mind, which often moves in unexpected and unpredictable ways that cannot be constrained by linear thinking. By using digression, Woolf creates space for the mind to meander and explore new paths, making connections and associations that might not be immediately apparent. In this way, Woolf challenges

conventional notions of structure and order, and conceptualize her vision of the fragmented, yet interconnected urban reality, where the mind is free to roam and the self is not bound to any restrictions.

## **Part Two Unveiling the Essayistic Nature of Eileen Chang's and Virginia Woolf's Short Stories**

### **Chapter Three Imagining the City as Dreamscape:**

#### **Allegory and Deconstruction of Language and Meaning in "Sealed Off"**

##### **3.1 A Urban Romance in a Tramcar**

"Sealed Off" is a short story published in 1944, depicting a brief wartime romance on a blocked tramcar during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in WWII. The halted tramcar puts an end to the loud and busy life of Shanghai, bringing two strangers together and giving rise to a tale of urban romance. A married middle-aged bank account, nudges his way to the tram car and finds a seat next to a young woman in her twenties; they strike up a conversation and fall in love. But the story comes to a sudden end with an ironic twist: when the alarm is lifted, the tramcar starts to move again on its unaltered track, and everything seems to go back to normal. Everything that happened in the sealed-off time turns out to be "a nonoccurrence", "an unreasonable dream" ("Sealed Off" 250).

"Sealed Off", as its title suggests, is a story about "demarcation and separation" (Sandberg 239). China in the early twentieth-century was, in Chang's own words, a "nation of patches" (*Written On Water* 213); and Shanghai a city of "divided territories" (Lee 5). Divided into multiple areas controlled by different colonial forces<sup>17</sup>, Shanghai presented itself as an "ostentatious visual reminder of multiple colonial presences and uneven development" (Shih 232). During the Japanese occupation in 1940s, Shanghai was further divided into

---

<sup>17</sup> Shanghai was divided into the International Settlement, the French Concession, the Chinese city, and the Japanese city of Hongkou (Shih 232).

“occupied and unoccupied zones, with “less formal but equally obvious lines of demarcation between traditional, modern local, and foreign elements of the cityscape” (Sandberg 239). Through the course of Shanghai’s history, the tram was the most essential tool of transportation, which connected the different parts of the divided city into a large network. The first tram line in Shanghai was opened in 1908, making Shanghai the second Chinese city to use tramways (after Peking). By the 1920s, trams became the most important vehicle in the city, delivering thousands of passengers everyday. Due to historical circumstances, Shanghai’s tram system was divided into three systems—the British system, the French system, and the Chinese system—which makes Shanghai’s tramway different from any other city’s: passengers crossing a border had to get off and embark again with the next company. During the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in 1942, the British and French tram systems were taken over by the Japanese, and some tram lines were even used for military purposes. The short story of “Sealed Off” unfolds when the city is sealed off by air raid. This kind of air attack interrupting the daily life was a relatively frequent event in wartime Shanghai (413). Yet, despite “its potential for drama (Sandberg 237)”, Chang foregrounds “quotidian living (Chow 160)”. Huang writes, “[T]he threat of massive destruction lurks in the background, but what is foreground is a preoccupation with the immediate present and the everyday” (“Eileen Chang and Alternative Wartime Narrative” 460). But Chang’s Shanghai in “Sealed Off” is more than a place of everyday life, it is also a site of the extraordinary and marvelous, which produces unique urban sensibilities.

The tramcar setting carries significant associations as it is an adaptation of the railway for intra-urban transportation, running on tramway tracks on public urban streets.

Historically, the railway is often regarded as the epitome of modernity, playing a pivotal role in the process of industrialization and urbanization. The introduction of the railway revolutionized conventional social, spatial, and temporal structures and fundamentally changed conceptions of time and space. The tramcar inherits and continues the legacy of the railway in shaping modern urban life. Like the railway delivering the products from the factory to the department store, the tramcar delivers its passengers from A to B, following a precise timetable and fixed routes. One of the unique features that distinguishes the tram from the train is that it travels shorter distances. Therefore the sense of rigidity is sharpened in the urban setting, where trams operate on a closely scheduled timetable, shuttling back and forth between fixed terminals. Different from walking or riding a bus in the city, riding a tram evokes an uncanny sense of losing control and agency: “[T]here is a new focus on sheer repetitive motion, punctuated by industrially metallic noise, and an accompanying tendency to reduce the space rapidly traversed to an abstraction, or at any rate to minimize any minutely concrete apprehension of it” (Alter 128). As Kafka writes in his short story “On the Tram”:

I stand on the end of the platform of the tram and am completely unsure of my footing in this world, in this town, in my family. Not even casually could I indicate any claims that I might rightly advance in any direction. I have not even any defense to offer for standing on this platform, holding on to this strap, letting myself be carried along by this tram, nor for the people who give way to the tram or walk quietly along or stand gazing into shop windows. Nobody asks me to put up a defense, indeed, but that is irrelevant. (388)

In Kafka’s literary imagination, the tram becomes a symbol of the modern city, where people experience a loss of agency and control over their own lives. The tram, with its fixed routes and predetermined stops, represents the predetermined nature of urban life, where individuals



are swept along by external forces and societal expectations. “Carried along by” a vehicle he himself cannot control and direct, Kafka feels overwhelmed by a sense of disorientation and isolation, “completely unsure of my [his] footing in this world, in this town, in my [his] family” (“On the Tram” 388; qtd. Alter 143). Just as Kafka’s tram serves as a site of existential reflection, Chang’s tramcar plays a significant role in exploring the complexities of modern urban life. In her essay “Notes on Apartment Life”, Chang expressed her fascination with trams, going as far as to claim that their sound could lull her to sleep; in the same essay, she contemplates the view of tramcars pulling into the depot:

Our apartment is near the streetcar depot, but I’ve never been able to tell exactly what time the streetcars come home. The phrase “streetcar coming home” doesn’t seem quite right: everybody knows that streetcars are soulless machines and that the words “coming home” practically overflow with sentimental associations. But have you ever actually seen the strange spectacle of streetcars going into their garage? One car after another, like small children waiting in line, noisy, squealing, hoarse bells happily sounding out: “cling, clang, cling, clang”. Amid the noise, a sense of docility born of exhaustion, like children before bedtime waiting for their mothers to help them wash up. The lights in the streetcars shine bright white. Vendors who specialize in selling to streetcar ticket collectors coming off the late shift call out as they hawk bread. Every once in a while, when all the streetcars have gone inside, a single one is left parked outside, mysteriously, as if it had been abandoned in the middle of the street. Seen from above, its exposed white belly gleams in the moonlight in the depths of the night. (*Written on Water* 24-5)

Chang’s imagination endows the streetcars with overwhelming sentiments and emotion: the streetcar pulling into garage are personified as small “children waiting in line, noisy, squealing”, docile because of “exhaustion”, “waiting for their mothers to help them wash up” before bedtime. This evocative depiction is deeply moving and emotionally healing, particularly when one takes into account that it was composed during the period of Japanese occupation in wartime Shanghai. But soon this warm scene dissolves in the deep space of

darkness of the night, and there is a touch of desolation to be discerned in this warm scene—when all other streetcars have gone inside the garage, a single one is left “abandoned” outside, standing alone “in the depths of the night”. Although both published around the same time, Eileen Chang’s essay “Notes on Apartment Life” and her short story “Sealed Off” elicit contrasting emotions and impressions with regards to trams. Diverging from the sentimental portrayal in “Notes on Apartment Life”, the tram in “Sealed Off” takes on a monstrous and grotesque quality:

The tramcar driver drove his tram. The tramcar tracks, in the blazing sun, shimmered like two shiny worms oozing out from water: *stretch, then shrink, stretch, then shrink*. Soft and slippery, long old worms, slinking on and on and on... the driver stared at the wriggling rails, and did not go mad. (237)

Chang uses the metaphor of the tramcar tracks to convey the sense of repetitiveness and monotony that characterizes the city life. The image of the tracks stretching and shrinking like worms slithering on and on highlights the relentless and cyclical nature of both urban existence and capitalism. It signifies the perpetual cycle of work and consumption, where individuals toil to produce more goods and then seek respite in order to acquire the means to consume even more; as such, humanity finds itself perpetually ensnared in the repetitive pattern of work and consumption. In the meanwhile, the driver’s fixation on the rails also suggests the hypnotic effect of the city’s repetitive rhythms. The similar urban sensibility is echoed in *Ulysses*, where James Joyce writes: “Trams passed one another, ingoing, outgoing, clanging. Useless words. Things go on same; day after day: squads of police marching out, back: tram in, out. [...] Cityful passing away, other cityful coming, passing away too: other coming on, passing on” (164). Joyce’s description of trams passing each other, police squads marching in and out, and cityfuls coming and going reinforces the cyclical and repetitive

nature of urban existence. The phrase “things go on same; day after day” offers a bleak portrayal of urban life, where the individual is trapped in a never-ending cycle of sameness and routine.

The restless stretch-and-shrink movement of tramcar at the very beginning of “Sealed Off” registers the unbearable routinization of everyday city life, and evokes a sense of prolonged idleness and boredom, which echoes modernity’s peculiar monotony and uniformity. Following the introduction of railway transportation, there arises the necessity for punctuality and precise timekeeping among the general population. “The everydayness of everyday modernity is a synchronization based on minutes and seconds. The modern spectacle of thousands of commuters converging on the metropolis by train each morning is dependent on timetables synchronized to the minute” (Highmore 5). The rise of standard time leads to the increasing regimentation of everyday city life. In an essay which explores the relationship between everyday life and boredom, Laurie Langbauer writes: “[T]he boredom of everyday city life is the boredom of the assembly line, of one thing after another, of pieces locked in an infinite series that never really progresses: the more it changes, the more it remains the same” (Langbauer 81). This rhythm of “repetition-of-the-same” characterizes the everyday experiences as “a debilitating boredom” (Highmore 6), a generalized condition that points towards “plodding”, “monotony”, “the emptiness of time” (8). As the protagonist Zongzhen expresses the mundanity of his routine in “Sealed Off”: “[I]n the morning I take the tram to work, and in the evening I take it home, but I don’t know why I’m going to work, or why I’m going home!” (“Sealed Off” 245). Zongzhen feels trapped in a monotonous existence, akin to the repetitive back and forth of the tram, without any sense of purpose or

agency. Like countless other commuters in the bustling city of Shanghai, he feels adrift in the vast sea of modernity and capitalism. When the city is sealed off, however, his routine existence is suddenly disrupted, and the emptiness of time becomes more pronounced:

[P]eople who had newspapers read newspapers; those who didn't have newspapers read receipts, or rules and regulations, or business cards. People who were stuck without a single scrap of printed matter read shop signs along the street. They simply had to fill this terrifying *emptiness*—otherwise, their brains might start working. *Thinking is painful business*. (“Sealed Off” 239, my emphasis)

The “terrifying *emptiness*” is strategically filled by “furious reading”—they read everything they can find to “keep themselves from drowning in ennui, from falling into a strange temporality, an inverted world of the antimaterial” (Zhang X. 183). Reading seems to offer them a way to be “distracted from the maddening duration of an empty time devoid of the action of the normal world” (183). The title “Sealed Off” serves as a metaphor for the collective psychological and emotional state of the city’s inhabitants, who are cut off from the familiar rhythms of daily life and caught in a maze of the uncanny and bizarre.

“Sealed Off” begins with a sun-baked, surreal urbanscape observed by the narratorial camera-eye from above (a god-perspective view)—the city of Shanghai dozes like a giant beast, and drooling and weighing down its head upon its inhabitants; the rails of tramcar like two shiny worms coming out from water. An alarm cuts through time and space and creates firstly a scene of a chaos—outside the tramcar, people running everywhere desperately. Gradually the city grows eerily quiet: “not a complete silent but voices turned blurry, like the soft rustling of a marsh-grass pillow, heard in a dream” (“Sealed Off” 237). A brave beggar breaks the “breathless, birdless quiet” and chants: “Sad, sad, sad! No money do I have!” (237). The camera-eye zooms in, approaching firstly the beggars on the streets, and

then resting on the passengers inside the tramcar. The inside scene on the tram presents itself as a situation comedy of small groups and couples of middle-class Shanghai. A wife yells at her husband for carrying the parcel of smoked fish too close to his trousers—“Careful!” “Don’t get that on your trousers!... Do you know what dry cleaning costs these days? Or what it costs to have new trousers made?” (238) A medical student takes out a sketch pad and draws a sketch of a skeleton. The other passengers think he is sketching the man dozing on the seat. They gather around the medical student, watching him “sketching from life” (242). The man with the smoked fish misunderstands the sketch as cubism and whispers to his wife: “I can’t get used to this cubism, this impressionism, that’s so popular these days!” She hisses: “Your trousers!” (242) The medical student now adds the names to “every bone, nerve, muscle, and tendon”; an office workers, whose face is half covered with a folding fan, says quietly to his colleague: “That’s the influence of Chinese painting. Nowadays, a bit of writing is often added to Western art too—clearly a case of ‘Eastern ways spreading westward’” (242). The passengers’ conversations are filled with wit and irony, touching upon the soaring costs of daily life during wartime, the spread of Western art to China, and the reactions of ordinary Chinese people to these changes. These daily conversations among the tram passengers anchor the story in the mundane moments of wartime Shanghai in the 1940s, and demonstrate the remarkable resilience of ordinary people who, despite the announcement of an air raid, quickly return to their everyday concerns.

Eileen Chang vividly sketches a picture of middle-class society in 1940s wartime Shanghai, where people appear to be “fairly calm (237)” on the tram, but underneath the surface, there are serious social problems lurking—hunger, death, inflation, supply shortages,

blockades, and political instability. The general living condition of middle class Shanghainese in the turbulent wartime is hinted at in the narrator's words: "though the tram interior was shabby, it was still quite a bit better, for most passengers, than their rooms at home" (237). In comparison to the beggars on the street, however, those on the tramcar are already in much better condition. Despite the suffering and hardships in wartime, the narrator also alludes to the dynamic and lively nature of urban life in Shanghai, which encompasses both its vibrant aspects and its darker undercurrents. While waiting for the alarm to be lifted, Wu Cuiyuan utilizes the time to grade a few papers of her class:

The first one was a male student's. It railed against the evils of the big city, full of righteous anger, the prose stiff, choppy, ungrammatical. 'Lipstick-wearing prostitutes... cruising the Cosmo... seedy bars and dance halls.' Cuiyuan paused for a moment, then pulled out her pencil and gave the paper an 'A'. Ordinarily, she would have gone right on to the next one, but now, because of all this time for thought, she couldn't help wondering why she had given his student such a high mark. [...] Suddenly she understood: it was because this student was the only man who, with perfect frankness, no qualms whatsoever, raised such topics with her. (240)

The student's paper reminds us of the portrayal of the female in the writings of neo-sensationalist writers (represented by Shi Zhecun and Liu Na'ou), who are obsessed with sensual experience of the city and focus on the new modern urban space of 1930s Shanghai—café, bars and dance halls. In comparison to these male avant-garde writers who tend to fetishize the female body as commodity and material object of male gaze and desire, Chang's "Sealed Off" is more a product of female subjectivity, as there are moments in the short story when the narrator delves into Cuiyuan's inner struggles as a woman, highlighting her perspectives and experiences in a male-dominated society. The blocked tramcar serves as a catalyst for Cuiyuan's reflections on her own life. As she waits in the tramcar, she begins to

think about how she is perceived by others, particularly her family and colleagues at the university where she teaches. Despite her academic achievements, she feels that she is not taken seriously and is undervalued because of her gender. Cuiyuan's thoughts also touch on the societal expectations placed on women in 1940s Shanghai. She recalls how her parents were once enthusiastic about her academic pursuits, but now only wish for her to marry a wealthy man—this highlights the pressure placed on women to conform to traditional gender roles and marry for financial stability. Moreover, Cuiyuan's musings reveal the tension between her desire for personal fulfillment and her obligations to her family and society; she describes herself and her family as “good people”, but recognizes that conformity to societal norms and expectations can leave her feeling unfulfilled and unhappy. Being ‘sealed off’ in the tramcar prompts Cuiyuan to ponder her life and the constraints imposed on her by society, as well as her own yearning for a purposeful and satisfying existence. Her ruminations sheds light on the wider issues faced by women in 1940s Shanghai, such as gender expectations, social pressures, and the quest for self-discovery and fulfillment.

As Cuiyuan is lost in thought, Zongzhen catches sight of his nephew Peizhi, who has designs on Zongzhen's pre-teen daughter: “Trapped in the same car with Dong Peizhi while the city was shut down—that would be unbearable!” (242). Zongzhen decides to sidle over to Cuiyuan and pretend to flirt with her as a way to avoid his nephew. To Zongzhen's relief, his scheme works and Peizhi does not approach them. In the meanwhile, the flirtation between Zongzhen and Cuiyuan begins to become real, but largely remains superficial. Zongzhen unleashes his woes: his wife is uneducated and doesn't understand him well. Cuiyuan stays alert towards his words. Outside the tramcar, two trucks full of soldier pass by,

and draw their attention: “Cuituan and Zongzhen stuck their heads out to see what was going on; to their surprise, their faces were drawn into sudden proximity. Seen near up, anyone’s face is somehow different—tension-charged like a close-up on the movie screen. (247)” Their emotions and feelings are spiced up through this sudden intensification of physical intimacy. “They were in love” (247), the narrator claims. “Being part of you, she understands everything, forgives everything” (248). They begin to consider the possibility of being together. He couldn’t get a divorce; he has her children’s happiness as responsibility. Is she willing to become a concubine? “No, no it just won’t work!” Zongzhen’s voice was in agony: “I can’t let you sacrifice your future! You’re a fine person, with such a good education... and I, I don’t have much money. I can’t ask you to bury yourself like that!” (249). Cuiyuan starts to weep at the approaching loss of her “dear” man: “In the end she’d probably marry, but her husband could never be as dear as this stranger met by chance... this man on a tram in the middle of a sealed-off city... it could never be this natural again. Never again...” (249). Zongzhen asks for her phone number to avoid making a scene in front of the crowd. A few moments later, the alarm is lifted up and the city starts up again. The tram starts “clanking its way forward” on its unaltered track. Zongzhen disappears in crowd; “[T]o her, it was as if he were dead” (250). But “[I]f he telephoned her, she wouldn’t be able to control her voice; it would be filled with emotion for him, a man who had died and come back to life again” (250). Cuiyuan is overwhelmed by the emotions. When the lights inside the tram go on, she slowly opens her eye; surprisingly, she sees him sitting in his old seat, “looking remote” (250). He didn’t get off the tram after all! Trembling with shock, Cuiyuan now realizes his meaning: “everything that had happened while the city was sealed off was a nonoccurrence. The whole



city of Shanghai had dozed off and dreamed an unreasonable dream” (251).

From the beginning to the end, various signs in “Sealed Off” indicate the dream-like quality of the love encounter. The dream starts with the “blurry” voices of the street like “the soft rustling of a marsh-grass pillow, heard in a dream” (237), and ends suddenly with the realization that “the whole of Shanghai has dozed off, had dreamed an unreasonable dream” (251). The narrator invites the readers to read the city’s dream, but the complexity and ambiguity of the text resists a complete resolution and interpretation. Undecided between dream and reality, “Sealed Off” presents itself as a puzzle, a fantasy, an unfathomable conundrum. Despite the associations of everyday life in wartime Shanghai, Chang’s imagination of Shanghai in “Sealed Off” leans towards the surreal rather than the realistic, emphasizing allegorical facet over historical actuality. In the following part, I will draw upon theories of allegory and deconstruction to explore how Chang imagines Shanghai as a surreal place.

### **3.2 Allegory and Deconstruction of Language and Meaning**

Metaphor plays an essential role in “Sealed Off”: the “wriggling rails” in “Sealed Off” metamorphose into “two shiny worms oozing out form water”; and the metropolis is transformed into a large, dozy beast—“[T]he huge, shambling city sat dozing in the sun, its head resting heavily on people’s shoulders, its droll slipping slowly down their shirts, an inconceivably enormous weight pressing down on everyone” (237-8). Through the metaphor of the giant beast, Chang’s Shanghai is imagined as an organic body—the city streets

function as veins and people as blood, flowing through the entire organism. The veins/streets take blood/energy from people to keep the body/city alive; if veins/streets are ‘sealed off’, the body/city cannot function properly. In the meanwhile, the title of “Sealed Off” could be interpreted as “a metaphor for a kind of confined time and space that is particular to the besieged city during wartime occupation” (Huang “Eileen Chang and Alternative Wartime Narrative” 460). However, the language of Chang’s “Sealed Off” is more allegorical than metaphorical, for metaphor is referential (metaphor points to something), but allegory is complete in itself. In a way, allegory can be regarded as an extended metaphor, where the metaphor is expanded into “continuous series” or narrative (Golston 15). Like the surrealist who “proceeds as if the foot of the mountain really does have a shoe (32)”, Chang seizes “the city when it is off guard, off the job, absentminded, and dreamy (Zhang X. 183)”, and sneaks into “its unconscious” and watches “its dream (183)”. Chang’s use of allegory is akin to that of a surrealist, as it operates in a “methodical and systematic” way, “projecting the metaphorical axis of substitution into the metonymical axis of contiguity” (Golston 15). Essentially, she treats the substitutions of metaphor (the city as a personified beast) literally as if it was the contiguities of metonymy (the human-like beast has a dream). Chang’s imagination of urban modernity is “representable only as its own dream world, when it is stripped from the familiar mechanico-temporal order and exiled into the wildness of allegory” (Zhang X. 183). Through the employment of allegory, Chang transforms the besieged city into a dreamscape—which represents the collective unconsciousness of the city, and provides an alternative perspective to the historical reality of 1940s Shanghai.

The dreamscape is first and foremost conceptualized by its abstract nature:

interestingly, there is no explicit mention of the historical context of the story, and one must rely on the publication date for information; additionally, unlike the carefully-structured temporal organization in some novels (for example *Mrs Dalloway*, where the chiming of Big Ben signals the passage of time and each chapter corresponds to an hour of the day), the sense of time is highly subjective in “Sealed Off” and the exact duration of the story is unclear (we don’t know exactly how long the city has been on lockdown). Chang freezes the time, and creates “a temporal abyss”—“a different dimension of temporality”, where “the empirical and ideological order by which we organize our sense of the world suddenly becomes precarious and quickly collapses into a frozen surrealist landscape” (182). By freezing the flow of time, Chang establishes the surreal atmosphere at the very beginning of the story:

If there hadn’t been an air raid, if the city hadn’t been sealed, the tram car would have gone on forever. The city was sealed. The alarm bell rang. Ding-ding-ding-ding. Every “ding” was a cold little dot, the dots all adding up to a dotted line, cutting across time and space. (“Sealed Off” 237)

The ding-ding of alarm bell turns the city into a space of signs: each “ding” becomes “a cold little dot”. Read allegorically, these “dots” cast the city into a discursive space, which is filled with signs but lacks signifieds or immediate referents. These “dots” becomes a sharp knife, “cutting across time and space”, and striking a blow at signification process. Chang’s use of allegory is further exemplified later in the story when Zongzhen experiences a bizarre feeling upon seeing the writing reversed on a bun<sup>18</sup> (which is wrapped by the newspaper):

He [Zongzhen] loosened one corner of the paper wrapping and peeked inside. Snowy white mounds, giving off soft little whiffs of sesame oil. A piece of

---

<sup>18</sup> In Chinese cuisine, a bun is known as a “baozi”. Chinese buns are steamed or baked bread rolls that are typically filled with a variety of ingredients.

newspaper had stuck to a bun, and gravely he peeled it away; the ink had transferred to the bun, and the writing was in *reverse*, as in a mirror. He pored over the words till he could make them out: “Obituaries... Positions Wanted... Stock Market Developments... Now Playing...”—all normal, useful expressions, though funny, somehow, seen on a bun. (239, my emphasis)

The characters on newspaper are “reversed” and transferred to the bun; the familiar words of modern urban life is rendered unfamiliar through the use of unexpected combinations, and the everyday elements are made new and strange. In this way, the “utilitarian announcements ‘indispensable’ to modern urban life turn into ‘a joke’, an uneasy reminder that the familiar order can be turned upside down and inside out” (Zhang X. 183-4). In traditional Chinese culture, Chinese characters are considered divine<sup>19</sup>, as evident from the myth of their origin. Chinese folklore has it that when Cangjie, the legendary figure credited with inventing the script, created Chinese script, “Millet grains rained down from heaven and the ghosts wailed at night” (Liu 116). Chinese characters are often viewed as sacred and mystical, capable of communicating with the gods and causing fear in the spirits. In “Sealed Off”, Chang undermines the divinity of Chinese characters and reduces them to mere signs of the signifier. The destruction of a specific sequence of characters results in the loss of meaning associated with it. Chinese characters have not only been associated with divinity but also regarded as symbols of power and authority. The raining of millet grains and the wailing of ghosts can be considered as one of the “very few happy events” found in ancient Chinese mythology, and sees Chinese writing as “a path to authority” (Kwang-chih Chang 81). The esteemed status of Chinese calligraphy and the prevalence of inscriptions on the gates, pillars, and walls of Chinese palaces and temples further underscore the authority and power that the Chinese

---

<sup>19</sup> The divinity of Chinese characters is certainly substantiated by the tradition of Chinese Spring Festival, where people attach Spring Couplets on doors and Chinese characters on walls to expel evil spirits and to express sincere blessings and good wishes.

script represents (Zhang L. 33). So in a sense, Chang's deconstruction of the meaning of Chinese characters can be seen as a challenge to the authority of Chinese tradition in a modern age. The "reversed" characters serves as a commentary on the fragile nature of modern urban life, highlighting the disorientation and confusion that can arise from the breakdown of familiar systems and the disintegration of traditional cultural values.

Chang's attempt to deconstruct cultural signifiers is not a coincidence and aligns with Benjamin's critical views on signs. In his *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin draws attention to Dickens's experience of reading the words painted on a glass plate backwards—the words "COFFEE ROOM" is read as "MOOR EEEFOC". Seeing the reversal of the letter order forming "a wild word", Dickens writes that "a shock goes through my blood" (*The Arcades Project* 233; qtd. Martel 581). For Benjamin, the "wild word" points towards the absence of absolute meaning, and alters us to the fact that "the letters and signs that we take for granted as conveying meaning can suddenly be read as strange and uncanny" (Martel 581). In this context, allegory also means another way of "seeing or reading": because the allegorists mistrust in the official systems of signs conveying sufficient meanings, they embraces "a failure to see the way one is supposed to, a way of missing the forest for the trees" (581). For Benjamin, the written form—which is "caught up with material objects (letters, texts)" (582)—is fundamentally linked to allegory:

The desire to guarantee the sacred character of any script—there will always be a conflict between sacred standing and profane comprehensibility—leads to complexes, to hieroglyphics (*Origin of German Tragic Drama* 175).

In speaking of hieroglyphics, Benjamin argues that the written text becomes "hieroglyphic, hijacking any intended message via its sheer physicality" (Martel 583). Similarly, Chang also

draws attention to the allegorical nature of the text in “Sealed Off”:

Life was like the Bible, translated from Hebrew to Greek, from Greek to Latin, from Latin to English, from English to Mandarin Chinese. When Cuiyuan read it, she translated the Mandarin into Shanghainese. Something did not come through. (241)

Much like the Bible, life is enigmatic and open to endless interpretation; Something seems to be lost when Cuiyuan reads it. Here Chang uses allegory to address a mourning for “the direct access to truth and reality” (Martel 583). As Benjamin writes, “allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things”, for “in the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a ruin”, albeit a “consciously constructed” one (*Origin of German Tragic Drama* 178). Allegory is an art of the ruin—the “fragmentary, untidy, and disordered” (188), in which “language is broken up so as to acquire a changed and intensified meaning in its fragments” (208). The allegorical nature of language exemplifies a state of “mourning and loss”, a condition of “desolate, sorrowful dispersal” (Martel 583). So in a sense, Chang’s fascination with allegory corresponds with her aesthetics of desolation, through which she mourns for the absence of unmediated representation of reality.

The allegorical nature of written texts is also reflected in the limits of human language: the language “can never fully or exactly describe the actual world, and in this enacts the impossibility of human control over the actual, and of human knowledge of spiritual absolutes or universal truth” (Hunter 266). Challenging naive mimetic representation and reductive knowledge of truth, therefore, allegory functions as “a mode of writing about what is impossible to know or impossible to articulate: God, Love, Truth, Destiny” (266). Through her employment of allegory, Chang draws attention to the crisis of representation and unsettles easy interpretation or signification—through revealing “the constructedness of

human meaning making” (Golston 32) and pointing at “an arbitrary relation between signifier and signified: this sign neither looks like nor is causally connected to its referent” (28). Her allegory does not point towards the reference to reality, but towards the domain of the contingent and arbitrary. Chang thus turns the paused tramcar into an allegorical space: if the tramcar moving on fixed tracks could be read as an emblem for the normal, rational, and logic, the paused tramcar creates an opportunity for the alternative, irrational, ungovernable desires and fantasy. The sealed-off time allows Zongzhen and Cuiyuan to break away from their usual social roles and explore their suppressed desires and unfulfilled dreams.

Chang challenges the teleological ideology of capitalism by using the paused tramcar as a symbol of resistance. If the tramcar or train is the emblem of the ever-lasting progress and property capitalism promises, then the paused tramcar serves as a critique of the teleological ideology which dominates the course of modernization and convinces us that we are speedily moving towards a better future. Similarly to Benjamin, Chang rejects the notion of progress and temporal movement towards a teleological completion. By freezing time in the present moment, she blasts the teleological view of history out of a linear progressive framework. The ‘sealed-off’ state of Chang’s short story (where “time and space are suspended (Lee L. 291)”), on the one hand, creates a aesthetic space, where the senses are sharpened and details are enlarged. On the other hand, this sealed-off state also creates a gendered, allegorical space which liberates the heroine from the restriction of reality: the sealed-off space serves as “a perfect metaphor for the state of Chang’s women characters as they yearn for love and romance within the confinement of their own existence, even though they remain aware of the ephemerality of love and the unreliability of men” (291). In “normal”

time and space, men—who are in charge of control and power—dominate the nation-building and modernization project of China with their “linear conception of continuous history”; by creating allegorical space, however, Chang transcends “the very historical circumstances in which her fiction was produced” and overcomes the “male-dominated chronotope” of grand narrative in Chinese literary history (291). Suspending the teleological ideology which keeps all doors shut except for the one leading to the pre-determined goal, Chang deconstructs the present systems of order and suggests keeping possibilities open. In this sense, allegory offers Chang a way to critique and challenge the dominant ideologies that shape the Chinese literary and cultural landscape of Chang’s time:

Words, devices and narrative worlds fossilize with historical accretions, which allegory chips away, often with non-referential techniques, and in doing so also chips away the accretions of the self. It allows us to see differently and with intensity the things other than ourselves that surround and place us, and which we can never fully know. (Hunter 267)

Chang utilizes allegory to step outside “man-made [sic] definitions posing as facts or truths”, thus recognizing and addressing “otherness”—the ‘other’ as unattainable truth (266). The linguistic puzzle of “Sealed Off” gives rise to complexity by “way of contradictory rhetorical strategies and semiotics codes that generate new contradictions and further possibilities” (267). In so doing, “Sealed Off” engages the reader into allegorical aspects of the text, and stresses the presence of the Other—the uncanny and uncertain, the contingent and arbitrary. As a condition of modern experience, allegory reveals the inadequacy of human language in rendering reality, thus deconstructing the illusion of representation. Through the employment of allegory, Chang unleashes the suppressed unconsciousness of the sealed-off city and turns the everyday life of 1940s Shanghai as a site of resistance and transformation.



### 3.3 Imagining the City as a Dreamscape: the Work of the Dream

It is worth noting that the initial version of “Sealed Off” differs significantly from the version that is commonly read today. “Sealed Off” was originally published in the 1943 issue of *Tiandi* magazine and was later included in Eileen Chang’s short story and novella collection, *Chuanqi*. However, for the second edition of *Chuanqi*, Chang revised the story structure and made minor adjustments to words and sentences. The most significant change was the removal of the final two paragraphs from the original version, which read as follows:

Lü Zongzhen arrived home just in time for dinner. As he ate, he perused his daughter’s recent grade report, which had just arrived. While he still recalled the events that transpired on the tram, his memory of Cuiyuan’s face had already begun to fade—there simply had not been anything memorable about that face. Although he couldn’t recall her words, he distinctly remembered his own gentle inquiry, “How—how old are you?” and his impassioned plea, “I cannot let you sacrifice your future.”

After finishing his dinner, he wiped his face with a hot towel and proceeded into the bedroom, switching on the light. There, he noticed a black bug slowly crawling across the floor, but when the light illuminated it, the bug froze in place. Was it feigning death? What was going on in its tiny mind? Crawling back and forth all day, it likely had little time for deep thoughts. Despite this, by the end of the day, its thoughts likely only revolved around suffering and pain. Overwhelmed by a sudden sense of discomfort, he switched off the light, but his hand began to sweat as he held the switch. Soon, his whole body was covered in perspiration, and he felt as though insects were crawling all over him. He turned the light back on, but the black bug had vanished. It had returned to its hiding place.<sup>20</sup> (*Chuanqi zengding ben* 382, my translation)

Although removing the final two paragraphs results in a more cohesive structure for the story, with its ending echoing the beginning and accentuating its dreamlike quality, the original conclusion provides insight into the evolution of Eileen Chang’s ideas during the creation of

---

<sup>20</sup> “Sealed Off” made its debut in the second issue of *Heaven and Earth Monthly* in 1943 and was later included in the initial edition of Eileen Chang’s short stories and novellas titled *Chuanqi*, published by *Shanghai Magazine* in 1944. In 1946, *Shanhe Tushu Gongsì* released an expanded edition of *Chuanqi*, which incorporated five new pieces and introduced certain content changes.

the story. In the revised version, the romantic plot between Lü Zongzhen and Cuiyuan is downplayed, and the focus shifts more towards the atmosphere of the city and urban life. Additionally, the omission of these two paragraphs brings Cuiyuan into sharper focus as the protagonist, emphasizing her awakening from fantasy and dream, and ultimately lending the story a more feminine perspective compared to its original version. Furthermore, the image of the bug in the removed passage may evoke parallels to Kafka's renowned novella "The Metamorphosis", in which protagonist Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning and finds himself transformed into a monstrous insect. Indeed, in numerous ways, Chang's "Sealed Off" bears resemblance to Kafka's "The Metamorphosis". In both Kafka's and Chang's writing, words and meanings appear in the form of hieroglyphs that point to unfathomable and elusive dimensions. Like Kafka, Chang juxtaposes the absurd and the grotesque with the mundane and the everyday. While they utilize different approaches and levels of intensity, both Kafka and Chang manipulate and distort the elements of actual reality in their writings, employing dream logic to explore the loss of identity and the conditions of human alienation in modern society.

Both Kafka "The Metamorphosis" and Chang's "Sealed Off" could be regarded as 'nonrepresentational'—by this I mean that their writings are not meant to generate mimetic referentiality to the actual world, but rather to create an imaginative reality. In Kafka's novella, the 'bug' is a " 'ruin' in a discourse of representations", and his protagonist Gregor is thrown into a "incomprehensible void" (Yaron and Herzog 1093-94), "a groundless-ground", where there are infinite meanings and interpretations (Michaelides 104). Similarly, Chang's use of allegory and dream logic resists a definitive interpretation, and encourages a

transcendence of language in order to reach a deeper truth. For both Kafka and Chang, the realization of truth requires a departure from traditional referentiality and a willingness to explore the unknown. To realize any kind of truth, both writer and reader must transcend language, as Mauthner puts it:

If I want to ascend in the critique of language, which at present is the most important business of thinking mankind, then I will have to annihilate the language behind me and in front of me, step by step; so must I destroy every rung of the ladder on which I am climbing. Anyone who wants to follow me secures the rungs further, but only in order to destroy them once again. (Mauthner 2; qtd. Schuman 25)

This determination for non-referentiality endows Kafka's and Chang's writing with great creativity. Kafka "The Metamorphosis" and Chang's "Sealed Off" do not obey a logic imposed from the external world (the empirical world), but rather obey an internal force. Although they borrow referential elements from external reality, their aim is not to represent reality, but to create a "counterworld" that could "compete with and constitute a superior alternative to the existing world" (Sokel "Kafka and Modernism" 39). In a way, non-representation might more properly be termed as "transformation" or "recomposition" (39), for it follows a kind of dream logic, akin to what Freud referred to as "dream work" ("Traumarbeit"). While all the elements in the dream come from the real world, the final output is a distortion and deformation of these elements, combined according to the unknown rules of the dreamer's unconsciousness (Sokel 40). The dreams operate on their own unique expressive processes, not according to the laws of actual reality. Similarly, Kafka and Chang use elements of the real world not to create a recognizable representation of it, but rather to contribute to the overall composition of their works; their stories do not adhere to external logic but instead embrace the inherent expressive process within the story itself (39).

The notion of the dream carries significant weight in the history of modern Western thought. Initially, Freud draws our attention to the incomprehensible sensations, the unfathomable depths of the unconscious, and the constraints of language. Later on, Walter Benjamin and Surrealists broaden the scope of the dream beyond the confines of psychoanalysis and its therapeutic applications. For Benjamin and Surrealist, the dream is not only meaningful for individual psychological insight, but also for the perception of collective experience in the era of industrial capitalist modernity. Walter Benjamin regards the dream as an important antidote to a teleological conception of reality and history: “For Benjamin the dream is an important historical object that allows us to see individual consciousness as a part of a wider collective process of historical experience, one that sets in play a dialectic between the repressed and unfulfilled desires of the collective and the historian’s critical role as dream interpreter” (Groth and Lusty 2). Focusing on modern urban life—“from chance encounters, dream visions, hashish trances and *flanerie* to the city dreamscapes of the arcades, museums and railway stations”—Benjamin utilizes the mechanism of the Freudian dream to “liberate history and experience from what he defined as ‘the “once upon a time” of classical historical narrative (123)”, and creates a new way of understanding history that incorporated the fragmented and subjective experiences of individuals within the wider context of modernity. In this way, the dream could be seen as a means of accessing a collective unconscious that could offer new insights into the complexities of modern life.

Benjamin asserts that dreaming plays a crucial role in comprehending history and argues that “[D]reaming has a share in history” (“Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism” 3). In line with Benjamin’s viewpoint, the Surrealists view the city as “a dream” and excavate the

“utopian desires of collective memory” embedded in the “objects and spaces of the past” (Groth and Lusty 138). In a similar vein, Chang imagines the city as dreamscape in “Sealed Off” and liberate that the collective unconscious of 1940s Shanghai from the master narrative of May Fourth literature, where realist writers strive to construct—to borrow Hayden White’s words from his seminal essay “The Burden of History”—“a ‘plot’ with heroes, villains and chorus” (128). Throughout “Sealed Off”, there is no clear and definitive narrative to be discerned, as the narrator suggests at the end of the “Sealed Off”, what had happened was only a nonoccurrence—the city of Shanghai “had dozed off and dreamed an unreasonable dream” (“Sealed Off” 251). Everything happened in the short story—like the dream itself—remains “elusive and opaque”. This sense ambiguity forces the reader (as dream interpreter) to refrain from definitive conclusion and accept a blend of vague meanings and interpretations.

In addition to analyzing Chang’s use of the dream motif through the framework of Western modernity, I would also like to explore “Sealed Off” from the perspective of the traditional Chinese understanding of dreams, particularly with reference to Zhuangzi’s “Butterfly Dream”—which I believe will further elucidate Chang’s philosophical concerns. Zhuangzi, along with Laozi, holds a crucial place in the ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism. The book *Zhuangzi* (written in the late 4<sup>th</sup>/ early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) accounts the most celebrated dream found in Chinese philosophy and literature:

Once Zhuang Zhou [Zhuangzi] dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn’t know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn’t know if he were Zhuang Zhou who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly, there must be some distinction! This is

called the Transformation of Things. (tran. Watson 49)

Zhuangzi's "Butterfly Dream" raises questions about the nature and stability of the self and identity. Cheng regards the butterfly dream as an indication of the non-existence of the self—what Cheng terms as the "no-self" position; according to Cheng's interpretation of Zhuangzi, even though some "arena" or dimension of selfhood could be grasped in language, there is no central, stable, and identifiable concept of selfhood (Cheng 588). Zhuangzi sees the self not as something fixed, but as something in a state of constant change and transformation. Rogoff associates Zhuangzi to Nietzsche, emphasizing "the creative, non-hierarchical, and playful nature" of his philosophy (7). Zhuangzi's inability to distinguish reality from dreaming points, on the one hand, to the "limitation of individual perspective on apparent reality"; and, on the other hand, to the more general Taoist notion of viewing the universe in an undifferentiated and non-hierarchical state (8).

Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream can be divided into three distinct stages: in the first stage, Zhuangzi falls asleep and transforms into a butterfly, fluttering around and unaware of his human identity; in the second stage, Zhuangzi wakes up and regains his human identity and vividly recalls his dream of transforming into a butterfly; in the third stage, the boundary between reality and dreams becomes increasingly blurred, and Zhuangzi begins to question his own identity (87). While Zhuangzi was dreaming, he was certain that he was the butterfly; however, upon waking up, he became uncertain whether he was a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuangzi or Zhuangzi dreaming of being a butterfly. So in a sense, "[D]reaming goes with (oneiric) certainty; awakening gives ignorance" (Wu 377). Zhuangzi's experience subverts common assumptions about value and hints at his key thought—the uncertainty and

awakening to self-ignorance “release the dreamer from the tyranny of obsession with the objective realism. [...] This awakened ignorance issues in a care-free meandering in the flux of ontological transformation” (379). For Zhuangzi, this relentless oscillation between dream and reality is the key to attaining the highest wisdom. Zhuangzi’s butterfly dream reveals the truth as something that is constantly changing, and the world as a flux in which subject and object merge with each other. In a way, the original ending of “Sealed Off” reflects the first stages of Zhuangzi’s Butterfly Dream, as Zongzhen recalls his dreamlike romance upon returning home. However, by deleting these two passages, the story enters the third stage of the Butterfly Dream, where it becomes uncertain whether the city is dreaming or if Zongzhen and Cuiyuan are dreaming. The distinction between the conscious subject and the dreamed object disappears, and everything seems to blend together.

Not incidentally, Chang’s deconstruction of language and meaning also echoes, to some extent, Zhuangzi’s approach to language. In the second chapter of *Zhuangzi*, Zhuangzi regards the birth of language as the birth of the world itself as “an ordered structure of things, differentiated and categorized” (Stanchina 84), for the language allows human beings to point out “a section of the primitive, undifferentiated flux of perceptions and name it, creating the different between ‘this’ and ‘that’” (84-5). Zhuang sees the meaning as something generated through the linguistic act, and the thing itself not as “a pristine, pre-linguistic fact”, but as “the product of an intentional act of focusing, differentiating, and outlining” (85). Language allow one to orient oneself in the world, but at the same time also distorts the meaning by producing arbitrariness and absolutization; thus, Zhuangzi draws our attention to the human act of giving meaning to the world through linguistic means and points

to a pre-linguistic state where subject and object are not yet distinguished. Returning to the unrestrained dreamscape free ourselves from rigid perspectives and allows us to navigate the constantly changing nature of reality. As Zhuangzi concludes in the seventh chapter of *Zhuangzi*, attempting to impose order and structure onto chaos, represented by the concept of *Hundun*, can lead to dangerous and unintended consequences. At the end of the seventh chapter of *Zhuangzi*, Zhuangzi warns of the dangers and consequences of attempting to tame chaos through the notion of *Hundun* (Chaos):

The Emperor of the South Sea is known as Change. The Emperor of the North Sea is called Dramatic. The Emperor of the Centre is called Chaos [Hundun]. Change and Dramatic met every so often in the region of Chaos. Chaos always treated them kindly and virtuously. Change and Dramatic said: “Everyone has seven orifices so they can see, hear, eat, and breathe. Chaos does not have these. Let us some holes into him.” Each day they bored a hole into Chaos... but on the seventh day Chaos died. (tran. Watson 64)

*Hundun*, referred to as the Emperor of the Centre, is characterized by its lack of form and refinement. Change and Dramatic, the emperors of the South and North Seas, seek to improve the conditions of *Hundun* by giving it “an individuality, a singularity, and a recognizable subjectivity” (Rogoff 8). However, this attempt to create form and order out of chaos ultimately results in the demise of *Hundun*. Daoism regards chaos as “a benevolent disorder (Girardot 113)” and thus the taming of chaos leads to “the destruction of virtue and the rise of differentiation and, thus, falsity, inequality, and hierarchy” (Rogoff 8). The process of imposing structure onto chaos and the individuation of things destroys the primitive harmony—a realm free of division and differentiation. Along with the demise of *Hundun*, there disappears “the harmony of chaos and the ethics and virtues of pre-creation and non-differentiation—a space that houses the breakdown of boundaries and definitions” (8-9).



This collapse of the empire of Hundun brings us back to the “Butterfly Dream”, where “the space of chaos, the center, reopens—inspiring again the recognition of the ethics of the dreamspace as the ‘transformation of things’, the instability of creation, and the ultimate artificiality and tenability of definitions and distinctions” (9). In a sense, the death of the empire of *Hundun* has political implications, as the government and authority impose rules and orders which lead to “hierarchy and ambition” and disrupt the “primordial chaos/harmony” (Zhou 255).

Zhuangzi’s philosophy emerged during a tumultuous period in Chinese history, the mid-Warring States era, when society was rife with warfare and the seven kingdoms were vying for power. Amidst this chaos, Confucianism espoused the promotion of order and hierarchy through ritualistic indoctrination, emphasizing individual responsibility, moral obligation, and obedience to authority. In contrast, Zhuangzi advocated a more humane and anarchistic path to the Dao (the Way), which is achieved by following human instinct and impulse. It is the “emptiness” and “pure motion” of the Dao that produces life and energy, as Chen puts it, “*Dao* is... indefinable, nameless, shape of no-shape, sign of no-thing, illusive and evasive... exactly because Tao is motion, a motion that produces all things” (Chen E. 396). Zhuangzi associates the dreamspace to the central Daoist concept of the Dao: the dreamspace, ruled by chaos, is an anarchic realm in its purest form, so it has to be maintained like *Hundun*, “impenetrable, ‘whirling’, ‘flowing’—unfixed by any specific paradigm or agenda of interpretation” (Rogoff 10). The dreamspace reproduces and even retains the “central kingdom” as a space governed by benevolent or virtuous chaos, which presides over non-judgment, non-categorization, and non-domination.

By examining the concepts of dreamscape and *Hundun* in Zhuangzi's philosophy, we can uncover the political implications of Chang's "Sealed Off", despite her reputation for apolitical intentions. Like *Zhuangzi*, Chang's "Sealed Off" was created in a time of turmoil—specifically, in 1943 when Shanghai was under the control of Japanese invaders and was referred to as an "Isolated Island". The people were living in fear as the puppet regime of Wang Jingwei (controlled by the Japanese invading army) implemented strict policies of cultural domination, including controlling the press and publications and manipulating public opinion, with the goal of eradicating any anti-Japanese propaganda from all aspects of life in Shanghai. Despite facing strict censorship, Chang finds a unique way of expression and constructs an alternative wartime narrative; in contrast to grand narratives that address political upheaval and national crisis, Chang's writing focuses on the mundane and humdrum of daily life, revealing the insignificance and vulnerability of humans amidst historical transformations. Chang's apolitical attitude should not be mistaken for passivity; rather, it is a conscious and subversive response to the chaotic reality of her time. The dreamscape in "Sealed Off" provides a space that is immune to political control or censorship, and the wild disorder of the dream world reveals Chang's anarchist leanings. She resists any centralized authority that suppresses individual voices and yearns for a utopia—a society of freedom and cooperation.

While there are similarities between Kafka and Chang's works (as I argued earlier), their use of dreamlike qualities serves different purposes. In Kafka's *The Process* and "The Metamorphosis", the protagonists seem to be deprived of the ability to be astonished and awakened, resulting in a profound passivity as they accept the absurd events that unfold

without much resistance. Eileen Chang's "Sealed Off", however, employs the awakening stage of Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream as a rupture, pointing to a kind of enigmatic wholeness, as Foucault writes:

The subject of the dream, its first person, is the dream itself, in its totality. Each element in the dream says "I," even objects and animals, as well the space and the remote weird things that crowd its phantasmagory. [. . .]. The dream is the world at the dawn of its first explosion, when it is still pure existence and not the universe of objectivity (Foucault 60-61; qtd. Stanchina 90).

The dream space is a place of non-distinction and non-differentiation, where every element is the "I", and there is no distinction between subject and object. The dream frees Chang's characters from the limited perspective of their own everyday life, and allows Chang to delve into the pre-rational and unconscious dimension of the city. In dream, Chang's characters are deprived of time; nothing really happens, as Chang's narrator asserts that everything that had happened is only a "nonoccurrence" ("Sealed Off" 251). This quality of the dream generates a wholeness: without origin and continuity, every dream is an absolute whole on its own; the world of dream is oneiric, with everything running together. Through portraying the city as a dreamscape, Chang conceptualizing the cityscape as unified cosmos aligned with Taoist philosophy, where everything is interconnected and part of a greater whole.

## Chapter Four Imagining the City as a Site of Chance Encounter:

### Urban Experience and the Modernist Short Story

#### 4.1 The Modernist Short Story as a Form

The perception that the length of a literary work impacts its quality can be traced back to Aristotle: “Beauty is a matter of size and order, and therefore impossible [...] in a very minute creature [...] the longer the story, consistently with its being comprehensible as a whole, the finer it is by reason of its magnitude” (Aristotle 2322). According to this view, the length of a work affects its beauty, and the limited scale of short works undermines their wholeness and grandeur. Although Aristotle expressed skepticism about the merit of short works, Baudelaire had a different view. Baudelaire argue that the limited span of the short story does not jeopardize its integrity; on the contrary, it brings some benefits: “The short story, more compressed [than the novel], more condensed, enjoys the eternal benefits of constraints: its effect is more intense... nothing of the effect of the whole is lost” (*Œuvres complètes* 691). In Baudelaire’s view, the short story has a very distinctive capability to capture experience and present reality in a more compressed and condensed form, which is the novel incapable of. Edgar Allan Poe made a similar argument about the unique capabilities of the short story. According to Poe, “In the brief tale, [...] the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal, the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control. There are no external or extrinsic influences—resulting from weariness or interruption” (Poe 298). Poe believed that the short story’s ‘shortness’ and brevity allows for a singular, intense effect on the reader; the novel, on the other hand, was too long and

complex to achieve the same intense level of emotional impact.

The modernist short story encapsulates the distilled essence of literary modernity and exhibits the most important modernistic hallmarks: 1) preoccupation with subjectivity, 2) limitation of action and point of view, 3) rejection of chronology and causality, 4) foregrounding of the form, 5) “increasing reliance on metaphor and metonymy in the presentation of events and existents”, and 6) an associated ambiguity and uncertainty (Ferguson 15). Furthermore, the modernist short story is unique in its brevity. Friedman contends that “a story may be short because its action is intrinsically small; or because its action, being large, is reduced in length by means of the devices of selection, scale, and/or point of view” (“What Makes a Short Story Short?” 105). Therefore, the length of a work can serve as a window into an author’s approach to their material. This argument is by no means insignificant or obvious if we consider the discussion that underlines the generic capabilities of the short story as a form.

Conventionally, we tend to view the novel as encompassing an entire life, a crucial year, or even just a day (in the case of modernist novels), while short stories are typically associated with a mere sketch of life, or a single event or episode. In critical literature, there has been a longstanding “hierarchical relationship” between the novel and the short story, leading to the tendency to view the restricted action of the short story as “feeble novelistic imitation” (Head 6):

The identification of the short story form with moment of truth plot was to some degree prescribed by the prior association between the novel form and the life. The lurking associations are these: if the short story is not a ‘full-length’ narrative it cannot narrate a full-length life: it can narrate a fragment or excerpt of a life. And if from that fragment one can deduce things about the whole life, then the more novel-like, the more complete, the story is. (Pratt 183)

Pratt's argument reflects a prevalent critical prejudice that privileges the novel as a superior and more comprehensive form of fiction. Obviously, this identification of the novel as a narrative dealing with the "full-length" life is inadequate, especially when it comes to the modernist novel. In sharp comparison to the realist novel, the modernist novel tends to deal with a more limited span of time—most famously, both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses* are set in a single day. It is worth noting that *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses* were both originally regarded as short stories. This is not so surprising if we look at the fact that both novels hinge on "single significant events"—Mrs Dalloway's party and the meeting between Bloom and Stephen--- the major episodes around which the novels are structured (Head 6). *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses* exemplify a common tendency found in modernist novels—to focus on restricted actions of single episodes rather than depicting an full-length life or crucial years. This evolving tendency not only intensifies "the notion of genre as contextually variable", but also illustrates the fact that the short story, "far from being 'smaller and lesser' [than the novel] in any technical sense, actually exemplifies the strategies of modernist fiction" (6).

In order to better explore the issue of length (or the span of a work) with some degree of clarity and precision, I would like to briefly introduce Elder Olson's differentiation between scene, episode and plot (560). A speech is considered as "the continuous verbal utterance of a single character in a closed situation", often referred to as a monologue or soliloquy; the speech is the most common action in short poems (commonly called "lyric"), as in Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" (Friedman "What Makes a Short Story Short?" 105). A scene contains "the continuous chain of utterance engendered between

two or more speakers as one replies to the other (dialogue) in a closed situation”, and an episode includes “two or more such scenes centering around one main incident” (105). A plot, finally, entails “a system of two or more such episodes”, and a short story may “conceivably encompass an action of any such size” (105). According to Olson’s differentiation, a novel normally involves plots, while a short story may contain an action of scenes, episodes or plots. Despite its limited length, the short story shows great flexibility and versatility in terms of dealing with different spans of time and space. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on mainly the treatment of a single event or episode in the short story in order to explore how the short story plays an essential role in Woolf’s literary innovation and experimentation.

The modern short story distinguishes itself from the long narratives in two key elements—its brevity and immediacy, which eventually leads to its “intensity” and its “exaggerated artifice” (Head 1). According to Susan Lohafer, the short story puts “us through something--- reality warp is the shorthand for it” (103). In her book *Narrative Purpose in the Novella*, Judith Leibowitz characterizes the narrative task of the novel as “elaboration”, and that of the short story as “limitation” (12). The realistic novel strives for the totality of experience: in a realistic novel, “the story could go on and on, including digressions, extended descriptions, more developed dialogue, more development in time; things more outward in a continually enlarging circle, metonymically encompassing more and more, conceivably all of human experience.” (May 375). The realist novel endeavors to achieve unity by taming disparate and incongruous elements into the constituent parts of a totality. Due to its limited span, however, the short story allows “fewer ‘optional’ narrative elements in its structural ‘slots’” (Ferguson 15). The short story affords “no opportunity for that slow

building-up of character and situation which is common in the practice of the novelist's art" (Dawson 803). In a sense, the short story stands related to the realistic novel very much "as the vivid impressionist sketch does to the painstaking picture" (803). The realistic novel elaborates on the details and building-up of the characters like the picture is "built up by months of toil; its final harmony is result of thousands of little strikes, of much stippling and repainting"; but the short story limits its narrative elements and provides only fragments and impressions, like "the sketch is achieved with a full brush in a confident hand and conveys its impression instantly" (803). The modern short story thus represents itself as a more impressionistic form than the modernist novel, for it largely limits its span and more dramatically rejects continuous experience in order to capture "an experience"—which is cut off from the unity of experience and "marked off from the flow of life" (May 375).

The modern short story is not only shorter in length than the novel, but in many ways represents itself as a different form. The short story is largely shaped by its limited length; in other words, the short story imposes particular forms. In a certain sense, the novel relies more on process and development, whereas the short story is more oriented toward the "present and presentness" (Pasco 443). The modern short story places more emphasis on rendering sensations and impressions and presenting inner experiences, thus rejecting chronological order and causality. The modern short stories favor a reality given "at the beginning, empirically, sensorially, as a global certitude whose eventual consequences are deduced in the course of the brief reading or audition" (Zumthor 6). In effect, the short story seems to be particularly suited for what he terms as "image (or descriptive) structure"—which is "a work designed to produce not progressive understanding" (Pasco



444). The short story aims for “an instantaneous grasp, where the reader suddenly perceives the whole”, whereas the novel favors “process (or narrative) structure”, which is “based on a change from one state to another” (444). Zumthor’s conception of ‘image structure’ in a way explains why the conceptions of “moments”, “symbols”, “images”, or “epiphanies” has dominated in the field of short-story criticism and theory (444).

Compared to the novel with its more extensive scope of time and space, the modernist short story demonstrates an intrinsic ability to capture “the episodic nature of twentieth-century experience” (Head 1). Although the modernist novel strives to overcome the limits of linear, temporal development and confront the tension and interaction between reality and subjectivity, it still relies heavily on the logical arrangement of the plot. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, Woolf carefully builds up the image of London after the WWII and the character of Mrs Dalloway from different perspectives and dimensions. Although Woolf’s approach is very different from that of realist writers, she still has to find a way to introduce the reader to a world of characters, objects, complex social relationships and conceptual structures, in order to be able to render the heterogeneous impressions and consciousness of her characters and bring the complex elements of the novel together. In a sense, the novel is a form that imposes reason and causality on experience, making it graspable and temporal through its logical development. Additionally, the novel strives to capture the vastness and complexity of human experience, aiming to showcase the ‘bigness’ and grandeur of the whole man confronting the whole world. Although Woolf suggests that achieving a complete sense of totality is impossible, her *Mrs. Dalloway* is undoubtedly still a complex that explores various social roles, themes, and stages of life.

Although modernist novel allows for digressions and complex temporal elements, its narrative structure must remain somewhat coherent (at least in terms of surface structure) in order to hold the novel together as an organic whole. In contrast, the modernist short story can afford to place more emphasis on presenting sensations by dealing with a single event or an instantaneous experience; the modernist short story is thus able to focus more on sensation and inner experience and cuts more clearly from the flow of life (the continuous experience). Different from the novel, the short story depends less on the development of the plot, or the elements of narrative to hold together. So in a sense, the short story is more of a poetic form than a narrative, as Chapman observes:

Discussion of the novel usually proceeds most fruitfully by way of a detailed consideration of surface structure (which is syntagmatic and governed by temporal and causal relations); shorter fiction with greater immediacy signals deep structure (paradigmatic and based upon elements... which are not in themselves narrative). (Chapman 18)

One of the primary functions of narrative is to construct experiences through the expression of temporal and causal relations, which is based on surface structure (“syntagmatic” level). The limited action of the short story, however, triggers great ambiguity and hints at deep structure—“paradigmatic” level of the narrative. Compared to the long narrative of the novel, the short story is more formless and thus more faithful to rendering heterogeneous impressions and consciousness.

It is in the realm of plot that the modern short story shows its greatest potential to deal with the fleeting and episodic nature of modern experience. Modernist writers are concerned with exploring subjectivity and the interaction between inner and external reality, foregrounding inner activities as true ‘events’. To convey a sense of simultaneity and

fragmentation, they often disrupt the linear, chronological storytelling by diverting to heterogeneous details. This leads, in many cases, to the obscure articulation of plot, where the narrative depends less on logical development and temporal and causal relations. When reading a modernist novel, therefore, the reader needs to replenish the narrative elements deliberately omitted by the writer and supply a “hypothetical” plot—a plot that can be formulated with a clear beginning, middle, and end, akin to a conventional realistic novel; this “hypothetical” plot provides a chronological order to assist the reader in navigating through the fragmented and disorganized details, ensuring they do not lose their way while reading (Ferguson 17). During the reading process, the key storyline are restored by the reader step by step, like piecing together a puzzle in bits and pieces. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, Peter Walsh is introduced through Clarissa Dalloway’s broken thoughts, and the past romance between him and Clarissa is hinted at through fragments of Clarissa’s childhood memories. Although Woolf strategically deletes many conventional narrative elements and mixes components from different time dimensions in *Mrs Dalloway*, the reader is still able to identify the main storyline and somehow connects Septimus Warren Smith to Clarissa Dalloway, though they never actually met each other in the novel. In many modernist short stories, however, the construction of such a “hypothetical” plot appears no longer feasible, thereby placing the reader in a state of even greater uncertainty. The brevity and intensity of the short story thus confront the reader more directly with the possibility that that “we cannot know anything for certain, that the processes we follow in search of truth may yield only fictions” (16). I will elaborate on this argument later in this chapter through an analysis of Woolf’s short story “An Unwritten Novel”.

As subjectivity has become ineffable and indefinable, the very nature of knowledge and truth becomes problematic. This uncertainty also affects the concept of characterization. Motivation, in traditional dramaturgy, is regarded as “the carrier of the plot” (Sokel, “Brecht’s Concept of Character” 178). In return, motivation can be “deducted from character and its qualities, which figures as absolutes”; and qualities, as a consequence, represent the essence of the play, which drives the action and plot (178). This Aristotelian intertwining of motivation with action, however, is unraveled in modernist writings, and characters are no longer endowed with absolute qualities, but become passive agents which are driven by the design of the text. The absence of motivation leads to “the evaporation of the concept of quality and person” (178). For Woolf, it is not the quality, but the activity/experience that characterizes a modern person: “*Doing* takes place of *being* such and such as the determining factor for character”; and since “deeds may be contradictory, we find permanent changeability in place of unity and consistency of characters” (178, my emphasis). As a consequence, the character is not “a unity” but “an ensemble”; and characters are not endowed with qualities, but are “equipped with changeable, exchangeable and mutually contradictory traits”; and character is not “a unity” but “an ensemble” (177-178). Actions are not to be derived from qualities of characters; but on the contrary, character is to be derived from actions and experience.

The question of character is central to Woolf’s short stories and novels, which present a complex view of personality achieved through a complicated approach to characterization. In Woolf’s modernistic writing, the realistic convention of coherent presentation of character is disrupted by different forces, impulses and conflicts. It seems that

as inner reality transcends objective reality, so does character transcend plot; in other words, it is the character, rather than the plot, that becomes the focus and primary structural element of the narrative. The short story as a form serves for Woolf as an intuitive way of portraying the experience of modernity. When we place Woolf's short stories in the context of Woolf's major objectives as a fiction writer, we could find that her short story serves as a significant tool to investigate her innovative approaches to characterization and her insight into the limitations of realists' dealing with narrative. In this section of the dissertation, I will first examine Woolf's seminal essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" where she attacks the way realists handle character and plot; I will then investigate how the generic capacity of the short story contributes to its self-consciousness and meta-fictionality, and ultimately leads to a detachment of the author from the narrative through an analysis of her short story "An Unwritten Novel".

#### **4.2 Characterizing Mrs. Brown and Releasing Narrative from the "Tyranny of Plot"**

The essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1923) is framed as a response to Arnold Bennett's review of Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) in *Cassell's Weekly* in March 1923, in which Mr Bennett attacks modern writers' failure to create 'real' characters. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" argues that realist's approach to characterization is inadequate for capturing the complexity of human experience and calls for a new form of fiction that emphasizes the inner lives of characters and explores their subjective experiences. Woolf's argument in "Mr.

Bennett and Mrs. Brown” was further developed in several other works, including “Character in Fiction (1924)” and “Modern Fiction (1925)”. In “Character in Fiction”, Woolf challenges Mr Bennett’s notion of “reality”:

Mr. Bennett says that it is only if the character are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise, die it must. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality? (43)

Woolf challenges the realist approach to characterization that only focuses on external traits and suggests that writers should delve into the inner reality of a character’s mind. Instead of “analyzing and abstracting” (39), Woolf decides to tell “a simple story which, however pointless, has the merit of being true” (39)—an anecdote about a railway journey from Richmond to Waterloo. The story features a woman she names as Mrs Brown, along with the narrator as one of the fellow passengers in the same carriage. The scene in the railway carriage is set up to parody Mr Bennett’s approach to characterization, especially for his attempt to “hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there” (47). By creating a character like Mrs. Brown, who is only briefly encountered, Woolf highlights the limitations of Bennett’s approach to characterization and the importance of exploring the inner lives of characters to create more nuanced and complex portrayals:

Mr Bennett has never once looked at Mrs Brown in her corner. There she sits in the corner of the carriage—the carriage which is travelling, not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs Brown is eternal, Mrs Brown is human nature. (47)

For Mr Bennett, “the old lady is up for grabs, caught between opposing constructions of her likely story or background, all of which, apparently, claim to have fixed her once and for all” (Bowley 2). But he never really “looked at Mrs Brown in her corner (“Character in Fiction”

47)”, and treated her in her moving carriage. For Woolf, there is “an incongruity between character and environment (Goodheart 78)”, and realist writers have failed to “catch (“Character in Fiction” 37)” the real character, for realists evoke character only through the painstaking detailization of the external: the house, furniture, urban neighbourhoods and the family history, and so on. This conventional method of characterization has failed to “catch” the character “in itself (38)”, and the narrative form must change, if novels must capture the self rather than its external surroundings. Woolf situates her critique of the Edwardians’ commitment on character within the context of the modernity, which has dramatically altered the understanding of subjectivity and self. Referring to Roger Fry’s seminal exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* and hints at the arrival of modernism, Woolf famously claimed that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed (38)”:

All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature.  
(38)

The change in human character triggers a domino effect with profound and far-reaching consequences, fundamentally altering society and perception in numerous ways. This era of modernity, in Woolf’s view, is a age of fragmentation and uncertainty, a time of fluidity and flux. Correspondingly, therefore, the way of creating Mrs Brown in fiction must change, for

her solidity disappears; her features crumbles; the house in which she has living so long (and a very substantial house it was) topples to the ground. She becomes a will-o’-the-wisp, a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window, lighting now in freakish malice upon the nose of an archbishop, now in sudden splendour upon the mahogany of the wardrobe. The most solemn sights she turns to ridicule; the most ordinary she invests with beauty. She changes the shape, shifts the accent, of every scene in which she plays her part. And it is from the ruins and splinters of this tumbled mansion that the Georgian writer must somehow reconstruct a habitable dwelling-place; it is from the

gleams and flashes of this flying spirit that he must create solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown. (35)

Woolf believes that the traditional way of characterizing people in fiction, particularly in the Edwardian era, is no longer effective in capturing the essence of the self in modernity; this is illustrated through the character of Mrs Brown, whose solidity and permanence disappear in the modern era, becoming instead a fleeting and elusive figure. Woolf suggests that the mission of the Georgian writer is to somehow reconstruct a “habitable dwelling-place” from the “ruins and splinters of this tumbled mansion”, to create a “solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown” from the “gleams and flashes” of her “flying spirit”.

Woolf deliberately chooses the public space of the train compartment as a site of stimulating encounter between the narrator and Mrs Brown, highlighting the idea that modernity has led to increased social mobility and encounters with strangers. By limiting the narrator’s knowledge and points of view, Woolf underscores the idea that in the modern era, individuals are complex and multifaceted, and cannot be easily characterized through simple, static descriptions. Woolf uses the setting of public transportation to convey the sense of strangeness and unpredictability that characterizes modernity. The train compartment represents a space of movement, in contrast to the static, permanent dwellings that were the preoccupation of Edwardian writers. By placing her narrator in this public space with a stranger, Woolf creates a sense of chance and unpredictability that drives the narrative forward. Woolf emphasizes the absence of certainty in the era of modernity: “Mrs Brown can be treated in an infinite variety of ways, according to the age, country, and temperament of the writer” (“Character in Fiction” 43). This sense of openness and “infinite variety” is further strengthened by “the train’s ambiguous status as a form of communication between



two points, whether they be historical moments, novelistic conventions, the two sexes, the two ladies (who never speak to one another), or the writer and the readers to whom the communication of Mrs Brown is no straightforward matter” (Bowley 2). It is worth noting that trains in Woolf’s time did not have corridors, and this meant that passengers were confined to their carriage for the entirety of their journey; but as the essay unfolds, it becomes clear that the confinement of the carriage is not a limitation on the experience, but rather adds to “its curiously ambivalent suspension half-way between two states” (4). The moving train complicates the relationship between subject and object and blurs the boundary between observer and observed: there is the narrator who observes Mrs Brown inside the railway carriage; there is Mrs Brown who looks out of the window, the landscape moving like a picture; and there is the reader who observes the narrator and Mrs Brown and imagines the train moving in space and time. Through this intricate interplay of perspectives, Woolf illustrates that there is no single, authoritative perspective or ‘God’s point of view’ of truth. Instead, the world is in a constant state of flux and becoming, making it impossible to grasp a complete understanding of it. By using the railway carriage as a metaphor for the human experience, Woolf demonstrates the limitations of perception and the need to embrace the ambiguity and uncertainty that comes with it.

In her compartment with Mrs Brown, Woolf’s narrator attempts to characterize the person in modernity, and captures the impressions of urban life. Mrs Brown leaves a lasting impression on the narrator: “Mrs Brown and I were left alone together. She sat in her corner opposite, very clean, very small, rather queer, and suffering intensely. The impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring like a draught, like a smell of burning”

(“Character in Fiction” 41). The reference to smell here suggests the instinctive and sensual elements of the experience, which cannot be registered in a linear and logical way. Woolf recognizes the irrational and inexplicable elements of reality, and strives for rendering sensations as we experience them. For Woolf, reality is not a static and fixed entity, but a dynamic and evolving process that is shaped by individual perception and subjectivity. Her aim is to present reality as it appears to us through our senses and consciousness, without imposing any predetermined, ‘functional’ structures. This fluid nature of experience and consciousness is captured in her narration of Mrs Brown, in which there are “no substances and causalities” and “no center that would allow one to posit a structured whole” (Talay-Turner 100). Woolf’s departure from the realist approach is particularly evident in her rejection of the teleological structure that characterizes realist novels. Realist novels are organized with a clear beginning, middle, and end, in which one event leads to the next in a sequential and purposeful manner. This teleological form renders events meaningful not in themselves, but in that they “contribute to an end, a purpose”, thereby robbing them of their “intrinsic interest and intensity”, and excluding other events (Goodheart 82). The chance encounter between the narrator and Mrs Brown, in sharp contrast, is a non-event, which gains interest and intensity for its own sake, as it does not participate in a chain of other events. Thus, Woolf liberates the present moment and immediate sensation of everyday life—which is otherwise denied and disregarded by realist novels—from teleological hegemony:

In the course of your daily life this past week you have far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe. You have overheard scraps of talk that filled you with *amazement*. You have gone to bed at night *bewildered* by the *complexity* of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing *disorder*. (“Character in Fiction” 53, my

emphasis)

Woolf suggests that our everyday life is full of thousands of ideas and emotions that collide and disappear in disorderly fashion. By emphasizing the “complexity” and “disorder” of our everyday experiences, Woolf highlights the idea that these experiences and sensation cannot be easily organized or made sense of in a coherent order. Instead, she encourages us to embrace the chaotic nature of our lives and find beauty and meaning in the unexpected and unstructured moments. As the modern urban life becomes more and more complex and impenetrable, it is the amazement and bewilderment that ignites the imagination and fuels urban writing (Eliasova 108). Woolf writes in “Modern Fiction”: “Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small” (“Modern Fiction” 9). In her point of view, a “small” story about a brief chance encounter in a train carriage with a stranger—which triggers a sense of bewilderment and a “complexity” of emotions—is as intriguing as the heroic and “big” events found in a realistic novel.

In a realistic novel, a event (by this I mean a sequence of selected moments) is a dramatically foreshortened, edited version of millions of moments; and the act of editing involves the rejection of alternative possibilities. However, in reality, there are always numerous possibilities at any given moment. Anything could theoretically happen. The ordering and editing of a realistic narrative brings the moments towards a conclusion, which in turn suppresses other possibilities and potentialities to arrange them. Woolf, on the other hand, attempts to represent reality as it truly is, with its ungovernable heterogeneity and multiplicity. In her essayistic narrative, Woolf rejects the sequential and chronological

ordering of the moments and instead embraces a fluid and complex approach to time, which involves multiple temporalities. Woolf commits herself to the complexity of experience and liberates non-teleological impressions and sensation from teleological narratives, which undermine the individual moment's idiosyncrasy by imposing a confident dealing with the sequences of the events and moments. Instead of a well-defined plot line, Woolf liberates "alternative possibilities to create fictions of many starts and simultaneous happenings" (Goodheart 81). In a sense, therefore, her narratives have no real 'beginning', since they plunge the reader into "a flowing stream of experience with which we gradually familiarize ourselves by a process of inference and association"; they have no proper 'ending' too, for they usually leave "the reader in doubt as to the final destiny of the characters" (Lodge 481). By maintaining a high degree of uncertainty, Woolf invites the reader to participate in the imaginative process and explore the various potentialities of each moment.

The encounter between the narrator and Mrs Brown unfolds an imaginative space that refuses to be closed. Mrs Brown's enigmatic identity provokes the narrator's curiosity and imagination, leading to an image of Mrs Brown as infinitely transformable. She is viewed as "an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what" ("Character in Fiction" 54). The urban space and railway setting contribute to the element of mystery, causing the narrator's regular self to dissolve. There is nothing that the narrator "really" knows about Mrs Brown. The narrator concludes: "And I have never seen her again, and I shall never know what became of her" (42). Throughout the essay, Mrs Brown remains obscure as a phantom that cannot be captured: "I let my Mrs Brown slip though my fingers. I

have told you nothing whatever about her” (53). The pursuit of phantom ends when Mrs Brown exits the train, and “[T]he story ends without any point to it” (42). Mrs Brown’s identity remains elusive and the story concludes without any resolution. This lack of closure defies the expectations of realism and implies that the modern city is shrouded in enigma that cannot be entirely unraveled. This sense of non-closure suggests that in the ever-changing and intricate modern city. The sense of non-enclosure suggests that in the kaleidoscopic modern urban life, any full disclosure is unattainable, and the imagination would never stop to unfold.

Baudelaire regards curiosity as “the mainspring” of the *flaneur*’s “genius”, as it ignites the imagination and fuels urban writing (“The Painter of Modern Life” 7). Most famously, in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), the flaneur’s curiosity sharpens his senses, and contributes significantly to his convalescence. Baudelaire noted that “[C]uriosity had become a fatal, irresistible passion”, leading the narrator to pursue “an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has on an instant, bewitched him”, resulting in an intriguing urban narrative (7). Similarly, in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”, it is the same spirit of curiosity drives Woolf’s narrator to seek out the mysteries of Mrs Brown. Nonetheless, Woolf emphasizes the importance of maintaining these mysteries: “[A] full disclosure of some truth behind the facade would be detrimental for the *flaneuse*’s imagination because it would stop its unfolding” (Eliasova 110). This idea of preserving the mystery is further explored in Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” (1919):

As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost *infinite*

number; those are the depths they will explore those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality out of their stories... (85-6, my emphasis)

The preservation of mystery and the exploration of the “infinite” reflections of the urban world are key components of the imaginative process. Sitting in an omnibus or railway carriage with strangers can be a strange and eerie experience; one is physically intimate with one another, but mentally disconnected—one knows nothing for sure about another. To adhere to an unspoken rule of avoiding eye contact and disregarding strangers, one looks into the window—which mirrors the “vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes”—and dives into infinite reflections. The reflection of one’s own image in the window creates a sense of abstraction and distance; and one is momentarily detached from external reality and dives into infinite reflections. Instead of depicting external reality, therefore, the novelists should plunge into the depths of the mind and pursue the “phantoms” of inspiration, although these phantoms are always escaping and beyond reach, like Mrs Brown. The elusive Mrs Brown—emblematic of modernity—cannot be pinned down or fixed in one definitive form. She is a fluid and constantly evolving phantom, whose air of mystery must be preserved. The elusive nature of Mrs Brown is what makes her so captivating, just as the appeal of modern London lies in its impermanence and transience. As “[T]he charm of modern London is that it is not built to last; it is build to pass (Woolf, *The London Scene* 19)”, Mrs Brown’s charm lies in her impenetrable nature that is meant to be pursued rather than fixated.

### 4.3 The Metaphor of Railway Journey in Modernist Writing

The train carriage is used as a vehicle of reference to criticize the Edwardians in the essay “Character in Fiction”, with railway travel serving as a metaphor for the journey that English literature has taken from realism to modernism. As a matter of fact, the train has played a significant role in literature, carrying with it a diverse range of meanings and themes. In realist novels, the train often functions as a structural tool to connect storylines and serves as a setting where characters encounter each other and depart, making it a useful device for plot-development. In modernist writings, the train serves more as a metaphorical device, symbolizing a liminal space where characters are removed from their usual surroundings and placed in close proximity to strangers, providing the opportunity to shed their regular selves and take on new selves. Woolf skillfully uses the railway carriage as a enigmatic and intriguing setting in her works. In *Jacob’s Room*, the train journey to Cambridge takes on a significant role as it becomes a space of introspection for the young protagonist, Jacob Flanders. During this journey, Jacob’s thoughts and reflections offer a glimpse into the intricate workings of the mind; additionally, the character of Mrs. Norman’s struggles to understand Jacob further accentuates the inscrutability of the human psyche. In her short story “An Unwritten Novel”, Woolf’s narrative once again unfolds in a railway carriage, where the narrator fails the attempt to analyze an anonymous women. Throughout Woolf’s railway narratives, the train is utilized as a significant metaphorical vehicle that carries different levels of meaning. To better understand its significance in Woolf’s writing, it is important to consider how the railway revolutionized the human experience of time and space, and how such experience shaped modernist consciousness and narrative.

As an essential way of mobility and transportation, the railway have fundamentally transformed the human perception of time and space, self and autonomy. By investigating the effects of the railroad on nineteenth-century imaginations, Wolfgang Schivelbusch suggests the concept of evanescence:

The uniform quality of the light and the absence of light-shadow contrasts disoriented perceptual faculties used to those contrasts, just as the railroad's increased speed disoriented the traditional perception of space. The motion of the railway, proceeding uniformly and in a straight line, was experienced as *abstract, pure motion, dissociated from the space in which it occurred*. Analogously, the space of ferro-vitreous architecture appeared as pure and abstract light-space, dissociated from all customary architectural form, *a space without qualities and contrasts*. (Schivelbusch 47-48, my emphasis)

The railway had a profound impact on human perception of space: the motion of the train, which moved “uniformly and in a straight line”, felt like an “abstract” and “pure motion”, detached from the physical space it traversed; this dissociation of motion from space led to a new perception of space as “pure”, “abstract”, and without qualities or contrasts, as experienced in the ferro-vitreous architecture. As a vehicle in motion going at speeds never experienced before (as the fastest horses go ten to fifteen miles per hour, while within a short time trains were reaching speeds upwards of sixty-five miles per hour), the train created the possibility for new modern experiences. With unprecedented high speed, space shrinks; time speeds up. Meanwhile, our pulse accelerates, with nervous excitation being heightened, and sensory experience intensified. The high speed also led to a panoramic view outside the window: “[K]nowledge of the relativity of perspectives became unavoidable. Railway gave rise to panoramic vision. Unable to focus on immediate foregrounds, passengers were forced to look out at a broad sweep of scenery, which most felt they were ‘flying’ by” (Kornhisser 13). The scene viewed from the train window becomes impossible to focus, resulting in an



abstract and impressionistic scenes that further contributes to the instability and disintegration of the self during the journey.

Railway experience also dissociates human from the natural perception of time. With the advent of railway transportation, punctuality and precise timekeeping become essential for the general population. In fact, it was railway timetables that led to the widespread adoption of accurate, “mechanically measured time” and encouraged those who could afford it to carry pocket watches to track their position “in relation to an objective, minutely calibrated temporal grid” (Alter 65). Prior to the railway, people measured time by and large by the sun, thus the temporality was determined by the rhythm of the natural world. The development of the railway networks, however, prompted the introduction of the standard time—which signals “a transposition of a fundamental category of our experience from the realm of nature to that of human calculation and technology” (65). As Charles Dickens puts it: “[T]here was even railway time observed in clocks, as if the sun itself had given in” (qtd. Alter 65).

As an engine of modernizing society, the railway was inextricably intertwined with some of the most profound and far-reaching issues of modernity. From the very beginning of its appearance, the train carries with it the promise of capitalism—the ever-lasting progress and prosperity; but at the same time, it also bears the fear of destroying nature and dominating the landscape. The railway fulfills its role in capitalism by transporting resources from nature to the factory, and goods from the factory to the market, creating an efficient network for the distribution of goods. Prior to the advent of the railway, local communities produced and sold their own seasonal products, but with the mobility of the

train, goods could be transported to a wider market. As the railway became a dominant mode of transportation, personal travel became more common, turning individuals into part of a mass consumer public—consumers. Consequently, local places began to lose their aura, and the goods—delivered by the railway—are displaced and displayed on department store shelves, disconnected from their creators and regions of origin (Cresswell 5-6).

Moreover, the railway also impacts interpersonal relationships and penetrates into modern consciousness. The railway is a very modern vehicle as opposed to the traditional modes of transportation, in the sense that it allows people to encounter strangers. Richard Sennett suggests that cities are places where strangers are likely to encounter each other, unlike in villages or communities where people mainly interact with their families and neighbors, and perhaps a slightly larger group at church or market (39). The railway, as a modern mode of transportation, plays a significant role in urban life by creating an uncanny atmosphere where passengers can sit with strangers for long periods of time without exchanging a single word. The train multiplies “opportunities for chance and ephemeral encounter” between strangers, and transforms such encounters into “a primary relational mode”, which demands “a more direct, immediate, impromptu, and improvisation interpretive approach to human relations” (Bateman 186).

Contrary to a fixed place that generates a shared cultural identity, the world on the train is seen through “the lens of mobility, flow, becoming, and change” (Cresswell 55). The world on the train is a “non-place”—a place of transit, a site “marked by the ‘fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral’” (44). The world on the train is a open space governed by contingency and chance, which enables different layers of stories to coincide and coexist

(Massey111). The train brings strangers and their stories together in a confined space over a limited period of time, allowing multiple storylines to unfold simultaneously. Unlike the motor car, which offers protection from social exposure to the world of strangers, the train is a public space “saturated with unexpected but intriguing”, “fleeting intimacies disconnected from domestic, heterofamiliar life” (Bateman 187). The encounter between the narrator and Mrs Brown on a railway could be regarded as a “mis-meeting”, a “one-off chance” (Bauman 94). This incidental meeting on the train could be seen as an event without a past or future, a story without a beginning or ending, as “there is no picking up at the point where the last encounter stopped, no filling in on the interim trials and tribulations or joys and delights, no shared recollections: nothing to fall back on and to go by in the course of the present encounter” (94). The brief encounter exists in a world of openness, and the identity of Mrs Brown remain elusive and obscure throughout the essay. Woolf portrays the train as “a site of urgent, albeit usually missed, opportunities (Bateman 187)” and emphasizes the challenge faced by the modern writer—the challenge of capturing and conveying Mrs. Brown’s impressions as quickly as possible before she disappears into the crowd at the train’s destination.

The train is largely confined by its linear tracks, precise timetables, and prearranged destinations, unlike motorcar, whose movement is in comparison “flexible, individualistic, and self-destined” (Sim 122). In the story of Mrs Brown, Woolf employs the train as a metaphorical vehicle of irony and parody to satirize literary practices of realism. Instead of adhering to the paths of realism, Woolf proposes that modern novelists should unleash their imaginations and let the mind fly, free from restrictions: “the linearity of the

railroad line, like all its analogs (history as teleological, narration and time as linear, biography as continuous and coherent), is countered by the digressive ruminations of the novelist and the rapidly changing contexts within which Mrs Brown appears as the train moves” (Seeley “Flights of Fancy: Spatial Digression and Storytelling in *A Room of One’s Own*” 35). By incorporating digressions and non-linear storytelling elements, Woolf urges the realist writers to get “off the rails (Bowley 164)” of convention and embrace a more dynamic, open-ended approach to writing that can better capture the intricate nature of human experience and consciousness. As such, the train serves as a powerful metaphor that not only critiques literary conventions of realism but also invites the reader on a journey into the realm of the essayistic, where the mind is free to wander without any restrictions.

#### **4.4 “An Unwritten Novel”: Metafiction and the Modernist Short Story**

The short story “An Unwritten Novel” bears similarities to the story of Mrs Brown: the female narrator is traveling on a train from London to the south coast and becomes intrigued by an elderly female passenger, whom she refers to as “the most unhappy woman in the world” (“An Unwritten Novel” 16): “[S]uch an expression of unhappiness was enough by itself to make one’s eyes slide above the paper’s edge to the poor woman’s face—insignificant without that look, almost a symbol of human destiny with it” (14). The unhappy expression of this woman unexpectedly stirs the narrator’s empathy towards the fate of human beings; soon the narrator becomes very passionate about the woman and calls her “my poor, unfortunate woman” (14). The narrator assigns the woman the arbitrary name of

Minnie Marsh and embarks on an imaginative quest to unravel her life story. Similar to Mrs Brown's enigmatic nature, however, the woman in "An Unwritten Novel" also proves to be inscrutable; Woolf's narrator once again falls short in her attempt to unravel the mystery of a complete stranger.

The short story begins with the narrator observing her fellow passengers in the same railway carriage, all of whom seem preoccupied with various activities: "[O]ne smokes; another reads; a third checks entries in a pocket book; a fourth stares at the map of the line frame opposite" ("An Unwritten Novel" 14). But it is the fifth fellow passenger which attracts the narrator's attention: "the fifth—the terrible thing about the fifth is that she does nothing at all. She looks at life" (14). The narrator is immediately drawn by the "expression of unhappiness (14)" on the face of the "poor woman", which she believes could hold valuable insights into the nature of life and humanity. Despite the narrator's attempts to engage the woman and learn her story, the woman remains guarded and aloof: "[S]he seemed to [...] say to me: 'If only you knew!'. [...] But I do know,' I answered silently" (14). Even though the woman remains a mystery, the narrator feels a strong emotional connection with the woman, and "a silent rapport, spontaneously established between herself and the fellow passenger, which even penetrates her attempts to protect herself against it behind the newspaper she is reading" (Hühn 147):

the *Times* was no protection against such sorrow as hers. But other human beings forbade intercourse. The best thing to do against life was to fold the paper so that it made a perfect square, crisp, thick, impervious even to life. This done, I glanced up quickly, armed with a shield of my own. She pierced through my shield; she gazed into my eyes as if searching any sediment of courage at the depths of them and damping it to clay. ("An Unwritten Novel" 15)

Despite the narrator's efforts to shield herself from the emotional presence of the woman, the

woman's gaze penetrates through her shield and affects her deeply. The *Times* functions as "an obvious symbol of factual and ordered descriptive writing (Head 85)", which parodies the well-organized factual data often found in realist writings—"births, deaths, marriages, Court Circular, the habits of birds, Leonardo da Vinci, the Sandhills murder, high wages and the cost of living—oh, take what you like... it's all in the *Times*!" ("An Unwritten Novel" 15). Like the "shield" of the *Times* is easily "pierced through", the factual descriptions of external reality found in *Times* are unable to delve into Minnie's inner life, thus posing "an obstacle between the writer and human nature" (Head 85).

Therefore, the narrator resorts to imagination, diving into the "depths" of the mind to paint a fictional picture of Minnie: unmarried, childless, traveling by train to visit her sister-in-law in Eastbourne. In a highly speculative manner, the narrator discerns the woman's "sorrow" from a twitch: "Her twitch alone denied all hope, discounted all illusion" ("An Unwritten Novel" 15). To fill in "the gaps and the circumstantial details" of her invented story, the narrator furthermore employs "certain conventional frames and scripts taken from realist fiction" (Hühn 147): she names the woman Minnie Marsh, and also personages from Minnie's life (her brother John, her sister-in-law Hilda, their children Bob and Barbra, and a travelling salesman who lodges with the Marshs James Moggridge). The narrator goes on imagining "the scene of Minnie's arrival at her brother's house and the uneasy atmosphere between her and Hilda, her withdrawal into the guest room to pray to God and, later, her walk along the beach" (147). Observing Minnie's "gesture of rubbing a stain from the compartment window"—"a stain of sin" as the narrator calls it—the narrator infers that Minnie is guilty of some sort of crime ("An Unwritten Novel" 18). The narrator deduces that

Minnie was careless in taking care of her baby brother and left him unattended, leading to his death by scalding. The narrator feels content with their imaginative portrayal of Minnie's life, stating with confidence, "I read her message, deciphered her secret, reading it beneath her gaze" (18). In any case, however, the narrator's imaginative description of Minnie's life proves to be ultimately mistaken: as the train pulls into Eastbourne station, Minnie is not alone but met on the platform by a young man who appears to be her son. After all, she's not childless and probably won't move in with her sister-in-law. The fictional account of the narrator is all of sudden discredited and it becomes clear that Minnie was completely misread by the narrator.

In a realist novel, the omniscient narrator produces "the illusion of transparency by imposing a pattern on an indeterminate field of reality", thus creating transparent and 'readable' characters (Derek 9). This realist transparency, however, reduces the Other to the same. As Levinas notes, "[t]o possess, to know, to grasp are all synonyms of power"; once the Other is "possessed, seized, and known", it ceases to be truly the Other (qtd. Derrida 91). To affirm the Other is thus to "an encounter with the limits of one's powers to think and to judge, a challenge to one's capacities as a rational agent" (Derek 9). The short story "An Unwritten Novel" demonstrates how intriguing but impossible it is to penetrate the Other. Each individual is unique, making it impossible to apply a generalized schema to portray the Other. In a sense, the thoughts of other individuals are impenetrable: when the narrator encounters Minnie on the train, she can only see her external behavior, or observe her facial expressions; she cannot directly perceive her thoughts, emotions, or intentions. While Woolf appreciates the curiosity that drives imagination, she also highlights the limitations of imagination—the

attempt to read the Other is doomed to fail.

In the revelatory moment at the very end of “An Unwritten Novel”, the narrator experiences a brief loss of faith in the value of her fiction: “Well, my World’s done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That’s not Minnie. There never was Moggridge. Who am I? Life’s bare as bone” (“An Unwritten Novel” 26). Yet the narrator does not lament her mistake for long, but quickly recovers from the loss of faith. A few moments later, she starts to celebrate life again for its mystery and elusiveness, at the sight of the departing mother and son:

*Mysterious figures! Mother and son. Who are you? Why do you walk down the street? Where tonight will you sleep, and then, tomorrow? Oh, how it whirls and surges--- floats me afresh! I start after them. People drive this way and that. The white light splutters and pours. Plate-glass windows. Carnations; crysanthemus. Ivy in dark gardens. Milk carts at the door. Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. I hasten, I follow. This, I fancy, must be the sea. Grey is the landscape; dim as ashes; the water murmurs and moves. If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it’s you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it’s you I embrace, you I draw to me—*adorable* world! (26, my emphasis)*

The narrator comes to the realization that real life is much more intriguing and elusive than her creative flights of fancy. Minnie may be not fully readable and graspable in reality, but the writer do not necessarily fails in art. In fact, Woolf seems to reaffirm her belief in the power of modernist art to reveal the truth of the imagination and the human mind, despite its limitations. Modernist characterization is not contingent on “a transparently realistic portrayal of the real-life context to which it refers”; rather, its value lies in its ability to be “responsive to the human subject” and present an “encounter with the subject, even if the external facts do not appear to work in concert” (Head 86).

Modernist writers devote themselves to register consciousness—“the



subconscious and unconscious workings of the human mind” (Lodge 56). In Woolf’s modernist writings, “the structure of external ‘objective’ events is almost completely dissolved, in order to make room for introspection, analysis, reflection and reverie” (56). Realist novels, in sharp contrast, strive for organizing external “objective” events into a coherent form. When viewed through a phenomenological perspective, however, the distinction between internal and external realities is blurred. As Georg Lukacs asserts in *The Theory of the Novel* that “the discrete structure of the outside world is due, in the last analysis, to the fact that any system of ideas has only regulative power vis a vis reality. The incapacity of ideas to penetrate reality makes reality heterogeneous and discrete” (80). Lukacs suggests that the discrete nature of the outside world is not an inherent feature of reality but rather a product of human ideas attempting to comprehend it; any system of ideas, whether scientific, philosophical, or literary, can only regulate our understanding of reality and does not have the power to fully penetrate or encompass it. In other words, the human mind constructs a picture of the world that is limited by its own perceptual and cognitive capacity. Both realist writings and modernist writings, therefore, are the product of the human mind, and represent “not external reality but the mind’s relation to it” (Goodheart 75). Such a point of view recognizes both the capabilities of the human mind and the inscrutability of reality, thereby dissolving “the usual art-life dichotomy that generates futile oppositions between subjectivism and objectivism” (Goodheart 75-6). The act of narration, whether in the context of realism or modernism, represents the mind’s processing of reality. Modernism differs from realism in that it deconstructs the “inescapable and radical subjectivity of all our structurings of reality”, and shows the reader “the paradoxical necessity and provisionality and hence multiplicity of

all our structures” (81). Woolf’s short story “An Unwritten Novel” exposes the reader the vulnerability of such structures by subverting her own narrative schema, ultimately dismantling all of her narrative constructions in a radical fashion by the story’s conclusion; and the story of this woman remains—as the title of the text suggests—“unwritten”.

Throughout “An Unwritten Novel”, the narrator consistently draws attention to the process of narrative construction. The text of “An Unwritten Novel” features multiple levels of narration: “the narrator tells one (invented, fictitious) story about a real character (real in the story world) and at the same time, by doing so, performatively enacts another one—the ongoing act of narrating the invented story, an act which functions as a story in its own right, with the narrator herself as a protagonist” (Hühn 145). As the story unfolds, these two narrative levels gradually blend into each other: at the very beginning, the narrator narrates her anecdote in the past tense, as a past factual experience; but in the course of narration, the past tense slides seamlessly into the present tense, with the narrator coming in the foreground and reporting the act of storytelling directly to the reader. In this way, what “begins as a conventional retrospective narrative turns into the imagination of an on-going mental process, thus foregrounding the process of narrative invention” (146).

Discarding realist modes of narration, Woolf appeals for a new fictional form that is able to confront the tension and interaction between reality and the mind, and render “faithfully the amorphous and heterogeneous phenomenon of human consciousness” (Head 81). To achieve this, Woolf turns to the short story form in “An Unwritten Novel”. Compared to modernist novels with their more extensive scope of time and space, the modernist short story is able to capture the fleeting and episodic experience of modernity in an more intuitive

manner, while also rendering the provisional and contingent nature of modern urban life. As seen in the story, Mrs Brown and Minnie lack stable and concrete identities, they are 'phantoms' "colored by the narrator's imagination and circumscribed by the moment of the chance encounter" (Eliasova 107). The encounter between the narrator and Mrs. Brown is brief and fortuitous, but it is also deeply resonant and suggestive. Woolf employs the short story form to convey the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the chance encounter, highlighting the inadequacy of conventional narrative structures in depicting such experiences. The brevity and concision of the short story form enable Woolf to capture the enigmatic quality of these encounters and to imply the complex psychological states of urbanites, despite their anonymous existence in the urban environment. In her short story "An Unwritten Novel", Woolf imagines the city as a site of curiosity and mystery, where one encounters countless faceless and enigmatic strangers every day, and bumps up against numerous, unresolved events. In so doing, Woolf demonstrates that realist literary tools are inadequate in rendering the flux of urban reality and the impenetrability of the mind, and therefore modernist writers must develop new forms of writing to represent the provisional experience of urban chance encounters.

## **Part Three Essayistic Narrative in Eileen Chang's Novellas and Virginia**

### **Woolf's Novels**

#### **Chapter Five Essayistic moments in Eileen Chang's Novellas**

##### **“Love in A Fallen City” and “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”**

### **5.1 Essayistic moments in “Love in A Fallen City”**

#### **5.1.1 Transcending the Linear Time**

Eileen Chang's novella “Love in a Fallen City” is set in the tumultuous period of 1930s wartime Shanghai and Hong Kong. The protagonist, Bai Liusu, is a 28-year-old divorcee who lives with her extended family. But her time at home becomes increasingly unbearable, as her family sees her divorce as a family disgrace and targets her daily with petty taunts and spiteful insults. One day, she meets Fan Liuyuan, a wealthy 32-year-old bachelor who has just returned from studying in England. Despite knowing that he is a womanizer and a playboy, Bai Liusu decides to take a chance and follow him to Hong Kong, hoping to find financial security in marriage and escape her family's taunts. Although their initial relationship was based on mutual interests rather than pure love, the fall of Hong Kong due to the war ultimately reveals the true strength of their love for each other, leading them to realize that their relationship is more serious and enduring than they had originally believed.

Both Shanghai and Hong Kong play significant roles in “Love in a Fallen City”. The Shanghai of the 1930s is a place caught between the old and the new, tradition and modernity. By 1930, Shanghai had become “a bustling cosmopolitan metropolis, the fifth largest city in the world and China's largest harbor and treaty port, a city that was already an

international legend ('the Paris of Asia')" (Lee L. 3). In Chang's "Love in a Fallen City", however, Shanghai is portrayed as a place that remains deeply entrenched in the feudal and patriarchal ideologies of old China. Even though the law permits freedom of marriage and divorce, societal attitudes remain conservative. The heroine Liusu soon realizes with despair that she has no place in this society: she has no money to live on her own, and education or expertise to pursue a profession; she has neither offspring to secure her position in the kinship hierarchy nor the youth to attract a desirable husband in the marriage market. At the beginning of the novel, Liusu cries out in desperation, "[M]y life is over already" ("Love in a Fallen City" 119). In the 1930s, Shanghai was a city filled with modern amenities such as cars, electric lights, telephones, and various forms of entertainment like cinema, coffeehouses, and dance halls. However, Eileen Chang's portrayal of Shanghai in "Love in a Fallen City" differs significantly from this modern image. Instead of portraying a large and bustling metropolis, Chang's Shanghai is portrayed as a small, "localized" world that centers around the limited domestic spaces of the Bai household, "characterized by a strange combination of sensuous, elegant timelessness and stifled individual choice" (Lee L. 271). Instead of presenting the grand skyscrapers and bustling streets of a cosmopolitan city, "Love in a Fallen City" portrays Shanghai mainly from the perspective of Liusu, whose experience of the city evokes a sense of confinement and claustrophobia, as she is trapped in the fetters of old China. It is when Liusu engages in modern activities such as dining out, dancing, and watching films, that she feels a temporary relief from the stifling confinement of Bai household. It is in cinema and dance hall that she meets Liuyuan and their relationship begins to grow. These moments of modernity bring Liusu a sense of liberation and optimism, even

though they come with a cost.

“Love in a Fallen City” is included in Eileen Chang’s collection of short stories and novellas—*Chuanqi*, along with her other tales about Shanghai and Hong Kong. *Chuanqi*, often translated as “tales of the extraordinary” or “romance”, is a genre of traditional Chinese literature that emerged during the Tang Dynasty and reached its peak during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. During the Ming and Qing periods, *Chuanqi* evolved from a primarily theatrical form to a literary form which encompassed a broader range of themes, ranging from the mysterious world of gods and ghosts, to heroic legends and the romance of everyday men and women. In her preface to *Chuanqi*, Chang emphasizes her intention to “find the ordinary in the extraordinary and also to find the extraordinary in accounts of the ordinary” (*Written on Water* 55). Instead of focusing on themes of revolution and war, Chang explores the everyday lives of people during turbulent times: “I hope that when the reader reads this book, he may also associate it with people he knows or things he has seen and heard” (55). Although they are everyday romances, Chang’s stories often highlights the bizarre and extraordinary elements; in “Love in a Fallen City”, elements from old, traditional China and the new, modern West are interwoven to create a unique atmosphere. Chang reveals in her essay “Shanghainese, After All” that she wrote *Chuanqi* with her Shanghainese readers in mind, as it is also dedicated to them (55). For her Shanghainese readers who are familiar with traditional Chinese literature, Chang employs ‘old’ genre of *Chuanqi* to write ‘new’ stories of modern Shanghai; the purpose behind this approach is to evoke a sense of defamiliarization and introduce an element of strangeness to the familiar backdrop of the city.

The novella “Love in a Fallen City” is framed like “a staged play, in the style of

the local Shanghai opera” (Lee L. 292), with the image of a *huqin* at the ending echoing that of the beginning. *Huqin*, a traditional Chinese folk instrument, serves as a significant imagery in Tang Dynasty poetry to evoke a mournful mood due to its mellow timbre. In her essay “On Music”, Chang draws a comparison between *huqin* and the violin: she likens the violin to a grand river, which carries away the subtle emotions that life clings to, whereas she characterizes the *huqin* as resembling a meandering stream that is similarly sorrowful but more melodious (*Written on Water* 203). In “Love in a Fallen City”, Chang employs *huqin* to create a melancholic ambiance; at the beginning and end of the story, the narrator chants in sync with the gloomy melody:

Shanghai’s clocks were set an hour ahead so the city could “save daylight”, but the Bai family said: “We go by the old clock”. Ten o’clock to them was eleven to everyone else. Their singing was behind the beat; they couldn’t keep up with the *huqin* of life.

When the *huqin* wails on a night of ten thousand lamps, the bow slides back and forth, drawing forth a tale too desolate for words—oh! Why go into it? (“Love in a Fallen City” 111)

[...]

When the *huqin* wails on a night of ten thousands lamps, the bow slides back and forth, drawing forth a tale too desolate for words—oh! Why go into it? (167)

The narrative opens with the Bai family’s insistence on using the “old clock” and their inability to keep up with the fast-paced modern world of Shanghai. History is moving forwards at a faster and grander pace, while the “*huqin* of life” in Bai household is lagging far behind. At the end of the story, the mournful wailing of the *huqin* resurfaces on “a night of ten thousand lamps”, bringing to a close the story that is “too desolate for words”. *Huqin* serves as a powerful imagery throughout the story, reinforcing the sense of disconnection and

desolation felt by the characters. The slow tempo of the *huqin* also serves as a symbol of the unhurried pace of life in the Bai household, which has fallen out of sync with the rapid changes of modern Shanghai. In contrast to the bustling city, time seems to pass at a slower pace within the walls of Bai family, as the narrator dramatically compares it to a “fairyland (120)” where a day feels like a thousand years outside. At this sluggish pace, the plain melodies of *huqin* in Bai household will be soon overshadowed by the overwhelming wave of modernization in Shanghai.

It is worth noting that, as opposed to the Western concept of linear time, Eastern philosophy tends to view time as cyclical. The Western notion of linear time presupposes that everything has a predetermined purpose or telos—religion envisions heaven, art strives for perfection, and science seeks truth. Eastern philosophy, however, sees life as a cyclical circle, with birth and death as the natural cycles of life, much like the changing of the seasons. This cyclical notion of time is easily identifiable in “Love in a Fallen City”, as Liusu laments the loss of her youth and the passage of time:

They’ve got youth everywhere—*children born one after another*, with their bright new eyes, their tender new mouths, their quick new wits. *Time grinds on, year after year*, and the eyes grow dull, the minds grow dull, and then another round of children is born. The older ones are sucked into that obscure haze of crimson and gold, and the tiny flecks of glinting gold are the frightened eyes of their predecessors. (121, my emphasis)

Although time seems to stand still in the Bai household, it is a ruthless and unstoppable force in the bustling metropolis of Shanghai—“children born one after another”, and “Time grinds on, year after year”. Liusu feels her youth was mercilessly engulfed by time—“Seven, eight years—they’d gone by in the blink of an eye” (121). The “youth isn’t worth much here”; the older generations are “sucked into” the abyss of time, their “frightened eyes” glinting in the



darkness of the past.

One of the most distinct and intriguing aspect of Chang's storytelling is the extensive employment of what I would like to call essayistic moments—when the pace of storytelling slows down, and the narrative becomes decentralized, and even abruptly pulled away from the development of the plot. These essayistic moments break the continuity and linearity of the narrative, while also challenging the ongoing cause/effect chain of the narrative. For instance, in the scene where Liusu kneels at her mother's bedside, crying and begging her mother to stand up for her after she was bullied by her family members, the narrative "takes on a cinematic quality and suddenly 'dissolves' to the past (Lee L. 292)":

"Mother, Mother, please help me!" Her mother's face remained blank as she smiled on without saying a word. Wrapping her arms around her mother's legs, Liusu shook her violently and cried, "Mother! Mother!"

In her daze, it was many years before: she was about ten years old, coming out of a theater, and in the middle of a torrential downpour she was separated from her family. She stood alone on the sidewalk staring at people, the people staring back at her, and beyond the dripping bus windows, on the other side of those blank glass shields, were strangers, an endless number of them, all locked inside their own worlds, against which she could slam her head till it split—and still she'd never manage to break through. It seemed that she was trapped in a nightmare. ("Love in a Fallen City" 117-118)

As a divorcee, Liusu was subjected to daily verbal attacks from her family members, and she cried out to her mother for help, only to be met with indifference and cruelty. In her anguish, Liusu's mind suddenly takes her back to a traumatic childhood memory, where she was separated from her family in a torrential downpour outside a theater. The memory is fragmentary and suffocating, like a haunted nightmare. By shifting the narrative from the present scene to Liusu's childhood memory, Chang offers a glimpse into Liusu's inner world, enabling readers to gain a more profound understanding of her feelings and emotions.

Chang's essayistic moments, however, are not limited to past memories or present psychological activities of a character. There is also essayistic moments where an arbitrary object is detailed and amplified, creating an unexpected effect. In the following passage, for example, the description of the tea leaves sticking to Liuyuan's teacup after he finishes drinking, interrupts the ongoing flirtatious exchange between Liusu and Liuyuan:

When the glass was tilted, a hatching of green tea leaves stuck to one side; held up to the light, they became a waving plantain tree, while the tangled swirl of tea leaves clumped at the bottom looked like knee-high grass and undergrowth.  
(143)

The flirtatious conversation between Liusu and Liuyuan is surprisingly halted by the interrupted description of the leaves stuck on the glass, which resemble "plantain tree", "grass" and "undergrowth", and remind Liuyuan "the forests of Malaya" (143). Seemingly unrelated to the plot, such moments are significant because they allow the reader to plunge into the character's consciousness and see the world from his/her point of view. This essayistic moment reflects Bergson's concept of 'inner time' where time is not fixed but subjective and relative to individual experiences; the pace of the 'narrative time' in novelistic writing is controlled by the author—time speeds up and slows down according to the needs of the narrative. It is not uncommon for years to elapse in just a few lines, while a single moment can be stretched out over several pages. As in Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, where a smell or sound or taste suddenly transports the character to a moment in the past, and time seems to stand still. This manipulation of time allows the author to control the pacing of the story and to emphasize the most significant moments or events, while also providing the reader with a real-time experience of the characters' inner lives.

Moreover, such an essayistic moment has transcendental function for allowing

the reader time to savor the moment in the story. By pausing the progression of the story and grasping the moment within the brief, static scene, Chang triggers a deeper Zen-like contemplation<sup>21</sup>, not just of this specific situation, but of the transience of life on a more general scale. This essayistic moment (seemingly unrelated to the storyline) challenges the reader's impulse to immediately contextualize it within the narrative, and kindly invites the reader to simply experience that fleeting moment. This non-narrative, essayistic moment conjures up an awareness of the beauty of impermanence and evokes a poignant sense of transience. In the meanwhile, the essayistic moment arouses the moods of pathos, which is reminiscent of the Japanese aesthetics of *Mono no Aware*. Roughly translated as a 'pathos of things', *Mono no Aware* symbolizes the powerful emotions and intense sensitivity that an object or a natural phenomenon can evoke within us. Similar to *Mono no Aware*, Chang's essayistic moment is associated with a sentimental feeling of ephemerality, a beautiful poignancy in the passing of moments and objects, like the passing of the seasons, the changing of the moon (I will elaborate on the imagery of the moon later in this chapter). A pivotal essayistic moment arises in "Love in a Fallen City" when the narrative is pulled away as far as possible and takes on a surreal quality, as demonstrated in the following passage:

As soon the door closed behind her, the drawing room fell into shadow. Two squares of yellow light streamed in through the glass panes in the upper part of the door, landing on the green tile floor. In spite of the gloom, one could see, on the bookshelves that lined the walls, long rows of slipcases made of purplish sandalwood into which formal-script characters had been carved, then painted green. On a plain wooden table in the middle of the room, there was a cloisonne chiming clock with a glass dome over it. *The clock was broken*; it hadn't worked in years. There were two hanging scrolls with paired verses; the crimson paper of the scrolls was embossed with gold "longevity" characters, over which the verses had been inscribed in big, black storks. In the dim light, each word

---

<sup>21</sup> Zen Buddhism places an emphasis on the practices of meditation and through it the development of a heightened but peaceful awareness, free from the clutter and distraction of thought.

seemed to *float in emptiness*, far from the paper's surface. The Bai household was a *fairyland* where *a single day, creeping slowly by, was a thousand years in the outside world*. But if you spent a thousand years here, all the days would be the same, each one as *flat and dull* as the last one. (120-121, my emphasis)

Quoting the lengthy paragraph, my purpose is to call attention to how this essayistic moment digresses from the storyline, and allows the reader time to contemplate and fully savor the moment of the story. The broken clock symbolizes the standstill of time in the Bai household, where each object in the room seems to be frozen in time. While it remains unclear whether the surreal scene is portrayed from the viewpoint of Liusu or the narrator, the description itself is notably abstract and seems to be isolated from specific historical time and space, just like the golden characters of “longevity”, floating in “emptiness”. These lifeless objects, like the old-fashioned Bai household itself, seem to be cut off from the outside world of bustling Shanghai, forgotten by the modern age, and decaying from within.

As we can see from the examples of essayistic moments given above, Chang's storytelling demonstrates a unique way of handling space and narrative logic. In the conventional paradigm of realistic novel, the system of constructing a scene has as its aim “the subordination of spatial (and temporal) structures to the logic of the narrative, especially to the cause/effect chain” (Thompson and Bordwell 42). The space is “‘used up’ by the presentation of narratively important settings, character traits (‘psychology’), or other causal agents” (42). Chang's narrative, however, differs significantly from this realist paradigm. Strikingly, Chang abandons the continuity style and interrupts the cause-effect chain again and again—sometimes for the effect of momentary disorientation, other times for the effect of sustained unease. In Chang's essayistic moments, non-narrative elements and details are attended to usually not because they are “symbolic’ of characters’ traits, other causal forces,

or narrative parallelisms (54)”, but rather for their ability to render a meta-narrative level alongside the narrative itself.

Objects too, are divorced from the instrumental function of the narrative. In Chang’s essayistic narrative, objects are often presented as “pure spatial elements, parts of still-life compositions”, and isolated from “any function in the flow of the narrative” (64). Barthes’ concept of the ‘hypersituated’ objects is particularly applicable to understanding Chang’s spatial constructions: in a sense, Chang’s object

has neither function nor substance. Or, more precisely, both are absorbed by the object’s optical nature... function is cunningly usurped by the very existence of the object: thinness, position, colour, establish... a complex space; and if the object is here the function of something, it is not the function of its natural destination... but of visual itinerary... The object is never unfamiliar, it belongs, by its obvious function, to an urban or everyday setting. But the description persists beyond--- just when we expect it to stop, having fulfilled the object’s instrumentality, it holds like an inopportune pedal point and transforms the tool into space: its function was only illusory, it is its optical circuit which is real’ (Barthes, *Critical Essays* 15-16, qtd. in Thompson and Bordwell 62).

In realistic novels, objects are often utilized as “externalization of character traits”, for they reveal something about the characters (Thompson and Bordwell 64). Objects are presented to be minimally noticeable, serving as “part of a general verisimilitude—a background for the narrative, an atmosphere of *vraisemblance*” (64, emphasis in original). Most importantly, the presentation of objects should never distract the attention from the dominant actions. Chang’s objects, however, are ‘hypersituated’ in the sense that they do not serve the conventional purpose of enhancing the narrative flow or contributing to the mission of verisimilitude; instead, they create an extra-diegetic, non-narrative level to counter the narrative. Rather than creating the illusion of reality, Chang’s work loosens the continuity of the narrative flow and interrupts the process of reader’s identification with the story, thus constantly reminding the

reader of the very fact that the novel by its very nature is a medium for rendering reality.

Chang's employment of extradiegetic, non-narrative elements brings to mind Brecht's theory of *Verfremdungseffekt* (often translated as estrangement effect, or alienation effect). In his essay "On Chinese Acting (1935)", Brecht articulates a special relationship between the actor of Peking opera and spectator:

In the Chinese theater the alienation effect is achieved in the following way. The Chinese performer does not act as if, in addition to the three walls around him there were also a fourth wall. He makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at. Thus, one of the illusions of the European stage is set aside. The audience forfeits the illusion of being unseen spectators at an event which is really taking place. (130)

In Peking opera, actors do not act as if there is a fourth wall separating them from the audience, but instead, they make it clear that they are aware of being watched. This awareness is shared with the audience, who also give up the illusion of being hidden observers. This mutual awareness of the audience and actors leads to an acknowledgement that what is happening on stage is merely a representation of reality, rather than reality itself. Interestingly, eight years after the publication of Brecht's "On Chinese Acting", Chang wrote her essay "Peking Opera Through Foreign Eyes", demonstrating a similar awareness of the collapse of the four walls in traditional Peking opera: she notes that characters in Peking opera do not hide their thoughts and often speak directly to the audience (*Written on water* 110). Although it is uncertain whether Chang was familiar with Brecht's work when she wrote her essay, the similarity between Brecht's theory and Chang's views on the alienation effect in Peking Opera is clearly noticeable. Like Brecht, Chang does not intend to fully engage the reader in the story and elicit excessive emotional identification with the characters. Both Brecht and Chang seek a powerful anti-identification effect that restrains the extent of

identification; while identification is necessary, it must be contained within certain limits. Identification can become detrimental if it becomes merely a passive illusion, leading the reader to overlook the fact that the novel is merely a medium of representing reality, not the reality itself.

It is noteworthy that Brecht and Chang have different agendas in their utilization of *Verfremdungseffekt*. Both Brecht and Chang employ the alienation effect to draw attention to the medium of representation and to oppose the passive illusion of reality; however, Brecht's motivation is primarily political, whereas Chang's is more aesthetic. Brecht employs the alienation effect to minimize subjectivity and assimilate it as much as possible into epic objectivity; by making the ordinary new and strange and elevating it to the level of a great or epic event, Brecht's epic theater utilizes live performance as a means of social and political criticism. Chang's use of the alienation effect, on the other hand, is the product of her *desolate* aesthetics and her expression of the emptiness and meaninglessness of life in times of war and turmoil. As in "Love in A Fallen City", there is an essayistic moment when Chang portrays the fallen Hong Kong as a "dead city", a surreal, deserted cityscape:

at night, in that *dead city, no lights, no human sounds, only the strong winter wind*, wailing on and on in three long tones—*oooh, aaah, eeei*. When it stopped here, it started up there, like three *gray dragons* flying side by side in a straight line, long bodies trailing on and on, tails never coming into sight. *Ooooh, aaah, eeei*—wailing until even the sky dragons had gone, and there was only a stream of *empty air*, a bridge of *emptiness* that crossed into the dark, into the *void of voids*. Here, everything had ended. There were only some broken bits of leveled wall and, stumbling and fumbling about, a civilized man who had lost his memory; he seemed to be searching for something, but there was *nothing* left. (164, my emphasis)

The fallen Hong Kong was imagined as a place of ruins, a post-apocalyptic wasteland, devoid of life. The city—built by human beings, for human beings—is now "empty" and "dead";

there are no signs of life, and even the wind seems to mourn the loss of the city's vitality. The three long tones of the wind becomes three flying "gray dragons"; the broken bits of leveled wall and the lost and confused "civilized man" stumbling about serve as reminders of what used to be a bustling and thriving metropolis, now reduced to a lifeless and empty shell. As such, Chang's surrealistic portrayal of the fallen Hong Kong evokes a powerful sense of unease and strangeness that surpasses the traditional notions of reality and rationality. The desolate cityscape is transformed into a surreal dreamscape, beyond all human limits; the "civilized man" has lost his memory, and there is "nothing left", but an unending void of hopelessness and "emptiness"—a "void of voids".

### **5.1.2 Essayistic Moments Actualized through the Employment of Poetic Imagery: Organic Combination of "Feeling" and "Scene"**

As mentioned earlier, Chang's essayistic moment resembles the concept of *Mono no Aware* in its association with a sensibility of transience; in this section of the chapter, I would argue that this distinctive aesthetic is largely achieved through deft deployment of nature imagery, which dramatizes human transience in contrast to nature's constancy. Chang's literal world is rich in nature imagery—the sun and moon, the wind and rain; Chang's metropolitan character embraces natural elements: "Red azaleas in the arms of a bus passenger; a creeping plant, placed in a pot on the sky terrace of an apartment building, trying vainly to climb upward; summer breeze fluttering like a flock of white pigeons inside the silk blouse and trousers of a rejected lover—touches like these not only enrich the narrative but also define the scene or



character under description” (Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 396). In “Love in A Fallen City”, the predominant imagery is the moon, which “looks down upon the world of live with cold detachment, hazy sympathy, or benign irony” (396). The different shapes and colors of the moon echo Chang’s characters’ different emotions, feelings and states of mind. The image of the moon firstly appears shortly after Bai Liusu arrives in Hong Kong: “She [Liusu] suddenly thought of her moonlit face. That delicate profile, the eyes, the brow—beautiful beyond reason; misty; ethereal” (“Love in A Fallen City” 140). Despite being ostracized by her brothers and sisters-in-law and disregarded by her mother, 28-year-old Liusu clings to her vanity and self-absorption, fueled by her attractive appearance. However, the bleak moon exposes her uncertainty and anxiety, and the “misty”, “ethereal” moon metaphorically suggests the elusive and inscrutable nature of her future and her relationship with Liuyuan.

The feelings between Liusu and Liuyuan intensify as the moon appears for the second time, yet Liuyuan continues to show no inclination towards marriage. It is clear that he intends to treat her only as a mistress, so Liusu has to remain on her guard every step of the way in the relationship. One night, Liyuan teases Liusu on the phone, “Liusu, from your window, can you see the moon? (150)” The moon evokes some unspeakable emotion in Liusu: “She didn’t know why, but suddenly she was sobbing. The moon shone bright and blurry through her tears, with a slightly greenish tint” (150). The moon in this context symbolizes Liuyuan’s dangerous and seductive love for her. By using the moon as a hidden message, Liuyuan lures Liusu into his embrace. Liusu’s reaction to the moon reflects her strong and overpowering emotions towards Liuyuan, despite the risks and potential harm in their

relationship. The “greenish tint” of the moon adds a sense of danger and foreboding to Liusu’s perception of their love, as the color green is often associated with negative emotions in certain Chinese context<sup>22</sup>. By describing the moon as “greenish”, Chang creates an eerie and unsettling atmosphere that mirrors the complexity and contradictions of Liusu’s emotions. Additionally, the unusual, “greenish” moon also serves to create a sense of unreality, emphasizing the dreamlike quality of Liusu’s emotional state at this moment.

The moon makes its third appearance when Fan Liuyuan sends Bai Liusu back to Shanghai on the boat: “On the ship, they had many chances to be together, but if Liuyuan could resist the moon in Repulse Bay, he could resist the moon on shipboard” (152). The moonlight here symbolizes Fan Liuyuan’s sexual desire, which he must control before Bai Liusu is willing to surrender her love to him. Later, when the moon appears for the fourth time, the nature of their relationship becomes clear—Bai Liusu agrees to become Fan Liuyuan’s mistress: “The late-November crescent moon was a mere hook of white; its pale light made the window look like a pane of ice” (154). At this point the moon is no longer blurred, but very slender, just as the relationship between the two is no longer uncertain. Liusu confirms that Fan Liuyuan loves her, but the chances of him being able to give her marital security is as slim as the moon—“a mere hook of white”, almost hopeless.

Chang’s use of the moon as a recurring image in her story serves to juxtapose the inner emotional states of Liusu and Liuyuan with the external depiction of the moon. This

---

<sup>22</sup> In traditional Chinese culture, the color green holds various symbolic meanings. It is often associated with growth, vitality, and renewal, as green represents the color of nature, plants, and spring. Nevertheless, in certain circumstances, green can carry negative implications as well. In traditional Chinese medicine, green is linked to the liver, and an overabundance of green energy or an imbalance in liver *qi* is thought to give rise to adverse emotions such as anger, jealousy, and envy. In “Love in a Fallen City”, Chang employs the association of the color green with negative emotions to underscore the sense of danger and foreboding that Liusu senses in her relationship with Liuyuan.

literary technique is reminiscent of the Chinese lyric poem tradition, which often employs the poetic device known as *xing* to evoke the interplay between “feeling” (*qing*) and “scene” (*jing*), or the emotional dimension of the character and the external dimension of the setting. Interestingly, the English word “setting”, or “scenario” in Chinese means “*qingjing*”, which literally means the combination of “feeling” and “scene”. *Xing* originates from one of the most significant and enduring fundamental concepts in Chinese culture—“a natural interconnectedness between the human realm and the realm of nature” (Sun 332). A passage from Han scholar Dong Zhongshu (c.179 - c.104 BCE) illustrates how the correspondence between man and nature was conceived as “a grand process of transformation involving heaven (*tian*, a collective term for everything in the cosmos, synonymous with the term nature) and human beings” (333):

The joy and anger of man are the transformation of the cold and heat of Heaven. The life that man receives is the transformation of the four seasons of Heaven. The feelings of joy and danger, sorrow and gladness, that man is born with, are responses to spring and autumn, winter and summer. Joy is the response to spring, anger is the response to autumn, gladness is the response to summer, and sorrow is the response to winter. Heaven has an analogue in man, and man’s nature and feelings come from heaven. (qtd. in Sun 333)

Unlike the Western mimetic tradition, which posits a clear division between the external and internal realities, *xing* views an “affective-responsive organicity” between human and natural world, between the emotional state and the external reality (334). *Xing* is characterized by its ability to capture the intuitive association between the natural and human worlds “by simply and quietly paralleling one world to the other without overtly stating their implicit correspondence” (332). *Xing*, utilizes juxtaposition as a “mode of representation” to represent “an encountering between ‘scene’ and ‘feeling’”, which involves “not simply an evoked

resonance between them but also a implicit aesthetic effect and assumption” (334). In “Love in a Fallen City”, the moon operates as an agent of *xing*, embodying the lyrical encounter between Liusu’s emotion and the external world; the various forms of the moon externalize the changing emotions and inner states of the characters.

Traditional Chinese culture sees time as something cyclical, as “all natural phenomena repeat themselves cyclically through time”; in this cyclical concept of time, everything is viewed as interconnected in some way, and the “fragments of individuals’ lives” are not viewed as isolated incidents but rather as pieces of a larger cycle of natural and societal events (Xiao 20). The cyclical concept of time views time not as a continuous flow in one direction, but as a connecting point for all occurrences; and a moment in a Chinese lyric poem, therefore, is perceived as a discontinuous element, a “concrete reality” that implies specific events and circumstances (20). Traditional Chinese lyric poetry relies heavily on natural imagery to convey meaning, demonstrating “an intersection and a negotiation between the temporality of historical linearity and of natural cyclicity” (20). In a Chinese lyric occasion, a natural phenomenon or social site is usually associated with a particular mood and state of mind: for instance,

antique relics under the moon are conventionally correlated with ironic grief over the past; the cry of the cuckoo with the mood of homesickness; a flowing river with sadness over the passage of time; a half-moon with the feeling of family disunion; the green grass in spring with the emotion of missing a dear person far away. (21)

This attachment of a natural phenomenon or social circumstance to a certain posture or emotion allows the poet the opportunity to express their emotions and feelings in an implicit way. A traditional Chinese lyric poem is, in Pauline Yu’s words, “assumed to invoke a

network of pre-existing correspondences—between poet and world and among cluster of images” (36). Over the course of three thousand years of lyrical writing, nature and the whole world have become a repository of poetry, the myriad things transforming into recurring motifs. Along with the moon and *huqin*, Eileen Chang’s “Love in a Fallen City” is teeming with recurring imagery, the most important of which are the “red tree” and the wall. As the story unfolds, one notable instance occurs after Liusu’s arrival at the Repulse Bay Hotel in Hong Kong, where Liuyuan takes her for a stroll and introduces her to the captivating red tree, a variety commonly found in southern Asia. Liuyuan affectionately refers to the red tree as the “flame of the forest”, exclaiming its vibrant redness—“Red, red, red!” (“Love in a Fallen City” 138); “In the darkness, Liusu couldn’t see the red, but she knew instinctively that it was the reddest red, red beyond belief. Great masses of little red flowers, nestled in a huge tree that reached up to the sky, a riotous welter burning all the way up, staining the indigo sky with red” (“Love in a Fallen City” 138). This flaming imagery of the “red flowers” serves as a symbolic representation of the awakened and potent sexual desires shared between Liuyuan and Liusu. Their mutual attraction and flirtation ignite a passionate longing within them; however, these desires remain suppressed and restrained by the rationality and calculations that govern their lives. In addition to the red tree, another significant imagery that warrants exploration is the wall. Immediately following the vivid depiction of the red tree, a significant shift occurs as the narrative delves into the imagery of the wall:

“Let’s walk over there a bit”, said Liuyuan.

.....

On the far side of the bridge there was a mountain slope; on the near side, a gray brick retaining wall. Liuyuan leaned against the wall, and Liusu leaned too, looking upward at its great height, the wall so high that the upper edge faded out

of sight. *The wall was cool and rough, the color of death.* Pressed against the wall, her face bloomed with the opposite hues: red lips, shining eyes—a *face of flesh and blood, alive with thought and feeling.*

“I don’t know why”, said Liuyuan, looking at her, “but this wall makes me think of the old saying about the end of the world. Someday, when human civilization has been completely destroyed, when everything is *burned, burst, utterly collapsed and ruined*, maybe this wall will still be here. If, at that time, we can meet at this wall, then maybe, Liusu, you will honestly care about me, and I will honestly care about you.” (139, my emphasis)

Chang’s portrayal of the wall conjures up the image of a barren wasteland, reminiscent of the well-known Chinese idiom *duanbi canyuan*, which literally means “crumbling fences and ruined walls” and refers to the desolate scene of lost golden times. Instead of melancholic nostalgia for the past, however, Chang utilizes the wall imagery to indicate an apocalyptic vision—the collapse of human civilization. The sense of desolation conveyed by the wall is further accentuated by the juxtaposition of vitality and decay: while the wall is portrayed as lifeless, “cool and rough”, Liusu’s face is characterized as vibrant and full of emotions—“flesh and blood, alive with thought and feeling”. The wall marks “an epiphanic moment”: as a British-educated playboy who doesn’t understand much about Chinese culture and history, Liuyuan recalls an old line from Chinese poetry—“*Dilao tianhuang buliao qing*”—which literally means “aged earth and deserted sky, and love is endless”, or in other words, love ends only with the end of the world (Lee L. 296). The wall witnesses a moment of emotional awakening for Liuyuan—for the first time, he expresses his genuine feeling. Chang subverts the original meaning of the poetic line by having Liuyuan suggest that his love commences when “the earth has grown old and heaven is deserted and ruined”, rather than implying that it ends with the world. Liuyuan seems to imply that “in the modern world love has no finality or end result, and hence there is no such thing as ‘endless love’”, and true

love only commences at the end of the world (297). It is such an essayistic moment actualized through the wall imagery that provides a glimpse of Chang's aesthetics of desolation. The wall imagery in Eileen Chang's "Love in a Fallen City" serves as a potent symbol that encapsulates her recurring themes of impermanence, decay, the fleeting nature of human existence, and the ultimate futility of human endeavors. Through Liuyuan's emotional awakening at the wall, Chang provides a glimpse into a desolate view of human civilization, one that is haunted by the specter of its own inevitable demise.

### **5.1.3 The Past in the Present: Modern Reenactments of History**

Eileen Chang's view of history differs from the linear, progressive notion embraced by Western philosophy. Instead, she subscribes to the traditional Chinese philosophy that regards time as cyclical, and history as a pattern of recurrent changes that move in a circle, just as natural phenomena repeat themselves periodically through time. In spite of the advancements ushered in by technology and science, the cyclical nature of history continues to manifest itself on a grand and cosmic scale. This perspective is reflected in the famous opening line of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*: "Empires arise from chaos and empires collapse back into chaos" (Luo 1). Compared to their Western counterparts, traditional Chinese philosophies promote a static and fixed view of society: the primary aim is to achieve "not change, or progress, but the maintenance of the uneasy balance with the potentially malevolent of the universe" (Marcus J., "Virginia Woolf and Digression: Adventures in Consciousness" 124). In this historiographical view, "the course of events was seen as a

continuing record of specific changes within a permanently set cosmic and moral frame”; thus, the purpose of a civilized society is not to pursue progress but to “try to arrest decay” (134). This cyclical understanding of time and history implies that the future is not necessarily better than the present and the past, while the present is constantly haunted by the presence of the past. Therefore, the wise should turn to history to find the wisdom needed to survive the vicissitudes.

Unlike many of her contemporaries who rejected Chinese cultural tradition in favor of Western ideology, Eileen Chang found inspiration in her native Chinese sources for “intellectual nourishment and aesthetic pleasure” (Lee L. 288). One work that particularly influenced her style and ideology was *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1792), a widely renowned Chinese literary masterpiece that focuses on the psychological struggles and inner experiences of its characters. Cao Xueqin’s “personal” and “intimate” style of writing, as described by C.T. Hsia, sets *Dream of the Red Chamber* apart from “the impersonal tradition of Chinese fiction” (*The Classic Chinese Novel* 247). Chang herself acknowledges the novel as her favorite and spent ten years writing a scholarly book about it entitled *Nightmare in the Red Chamber* (1977). “Nightmare”, she points it out, refers to the state of her mind—“a form of maddening”, an obsessive reading (*Nightmare in the Red Chamber*, 17). Through her study of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Chang developed a fragmented and elusive conception of reality and history that sets her apart from other Chinese writers of her time who embraced a more linear view of time and history; Chang’s interest and engagement with classical Chinese literature allowed her to draw from a rich cultural tradition and develop her own unique style and aesthetics.



To readers who are familiar with Chinese classical literature, “Love in a Fallen City” bears a significant resemblance to *Dream of the Red Chamber* in various aspects. Both authors, Cao Xueqin and Eileen Chang, come from declining aristocratic families, and both works are known for their subtle psychological characterization and realistic dialogue, as well as their ability to capture the complexity of human relationships and emotions. In addition, both works feature skillful use of imagery. For example, Chang’s use of wall imagery in “Love in a Fallen City” is reminiscent of a scene in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, where the protagonist Lin Daiyu is drawn into the lines from an aria from the Ming play *Mudan ting* (The peony pavilion): “Here multiflorate splendor blooms forlorn/ Midst broken fountains, mouldering walls” (Lee L. 297). Most significantly, both *Dream of the Red Chamber* and “Love in a Fallen City” present a desolate view of reality and human civilization, with a sense of impending doom and the portrayal of a culture in its last splendor before descending into darkness; in this perspective, small and vulnerable individuals are engulfed in the sweeping waves of time (297).

Chang’s “Love in a Fallen City” is a “modern reenactment” of *Dream of the Red Chamber*’s sentiment, a “re-presentation” against a totally different historical background: 1940s China versus eighteen-century China (297). In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the decline of aristocratic culture and family wealth sets the backdrop for the characters Baoyu and Daiyu, who are plagued by “self-torment and an amorphous sense of doom”; their unfulfilled emotion and desires become a “wealth of lyrical testimonials in the form of poetry and drama” (297-8). Chang’s story evokes “a similar aesthetic sentiment” but cuts it off from “its original sourced by the passage of time and changed space” (298). “Love in a Fallen City” is set in “a

society in transition”, a China split between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity; unlike the stable moral standards and feminine fashions of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the “only constants are the egoism in every bosom and the complementary flicker of love and compassion” (Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 396). Her writing, therefore, has “a strong historical awareness”, embracing not only “a wider range of elegance and sordidness”, but also implying “the persistence of the past in the present, the continuity of Chinese modes of behavior in apparently changing material circumstances” (396). Different from the characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber* who bemoans “the passing of an era”, Chang’s heroine Liusu is highly self-conscious and strives to liberate herself from it. In “Love in a Fallen City,” the past is not a motif for nostalgia but “a mythic presence to prophesy the cataclysm of modernity: the world that is doomed is not that of traditional China but the modern world of war and revolution” (Lee L. 297-298). In so doing, Chang implicitly criticizes the linear, deterministic notion of history and reality.

Despite the bleak outlook on history presented in “Love in a Fallen City”, Chang ultimately allows for a happy ending, albeit one filled with irony—the happy ending that is “a result not of the couple’s romance but of the external intervention of the war” (301). Right after their love-making, Liuyuan decides to leave for England for a week and does not show any intention to marry Liusu but to keep her as a mistress. Liusu appears to be losing the battle of flirtation at this point. However, history once again intervenes as it did in the short story “Sealed Off”, but this time, it leads to a “happy” ending (301). Liuyuan’s travel is suspended by the outbreak of war, and during the turbulent times the playboy undergoes a transformation from a playboy to a sentimental man, realizing that his love for Liusu is far

more serious than he thought. At the end of the novel, the narrator intones with a deep sense of irony:

Hong Kong's defeat had brought Liusu victory. But in this *unreasonable world*, who can *distinguish cause from effect*? Who knows which is which? Did a great city fall so that she could be vindicated? Countless thousands of people dead, countless thousands of people suffering, after that an earth-quaking revolution... Liusu didn't feel there was anything subtle about her place in history. She stood up, smiling, and kicked the pan of mosquito-repellant incense under the table.

Those legendary beauties who felled cities and kingdoms were probably all like that. ("Love in a Fallen City" 167, my emphasis)

This ending illuminates the meaning behind the title of the novel, "Love in a Fallen City", which may initially seem puzzling. But for readers familiar with traditional Chinese culture, the title recalls a poem from the Han Dynasty that recounts a legend from ancient China. Legend has it that there was once an ancient king (presumably the last king of the Shang Dynasty) who had a stunning concubine that didn't enjoy laughter. In his desire to please her, the king devised a 'small' prank. The king ordered a bonfire to be lit on the Great Wall as a way to trick his army. Upon seeing the bonfire, the soldiers believed that the king was in danger and quickly came to his aid. This trick amused the beautiful concubine, so the silly game was played a few more times. However, when a real invasion occurred and the king lit a fire as a signal for help, his army took it as a joke and did not come to his rescue. And so the kingdom fell. In "Love in a Fallen City", Chang rewrites the familiar legend in a modern setting, and imbues it with irony by celebrating Liusu's triumph—"as if a city had fallen just to complete her romance and give her story a happy ending!" (Lee L. 302). Liusu's personal victory in love is ironically linked to the larger historical context of Hong Kong's defeat. The fall of the city, which was a catastrophic event for many, is portrayed as a necessary

component of Liusu's romantic story, giving her a happy ending that she otherwise would not have had. This irony underscores the capriciousness of fate and the complexity of historical causality. The narrator's query—"in this unreasonable world, who can distinguish cause from effect?"—reveals Chang's perception of reality as contingent and unpredictable, with historical events unfolding in a seemingly haphazard and arbitrary manner. This blurred boundary between "cause" and "effect" challenges an important principle in Chinese folk religion and philosophy—*Yinguo Baoying*<sup>23</sup>, which refers to the idea of cosmic and moral reciprocity, or "cause and effect". Noticeably, Chang's original text uses the terms *Yin* and *Guo* directly, with *Yin* being translated as "cause" and *Guo* "effect". According to the concept of *Yinguo Baoying*, people exist within a moral universe where everything is connected and every action, thought, or intention is born with a cause that will ultimately lead to an effect or consequence. In Chang's "unreasonable world", however, life is full of unpredictable twists and turns, and it is no longer possible to distinguish between what is the *Yin* ("cause") and what is the *Guo* ("effect"). In the midst of constant change and flux, Liusu, the protagonist of the story, is no longer perceived as the root of evil that caused a city's downfall and condemned by history, but rather as someone who is favored by fortune and deserving of happiness, no matter how fleeting that happiness may be.

---

<sup>23</sup> The concept of *Yinguo Baoying* shares some similarities with the Indian Buddhist concept of *Karma*, but it also possesses distinct features that set it apart. *Yinguo Baoying* emphasizes the importance of moral behavior and the idea that moral retribution is not just a matter of individual responsibility, but also of collective responsibility. Consequently, *Yinguo Baoying* conveys a sense of justice and fairness, implying that every individual will ultimately receive what they deserve, whether good or bad.

## 5.2 Essayistic moments in “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”

### 5.2.1 Essayistic moments: Examining the Non-Narrative, Descriptive Details

Along with “Love in a Fallen City”, “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” is included in Eileen Chang’s collection of short stories and novellas, *Chuanqi*. Readers who are unfamiliar with traditional Chinese literature may find the narrative of “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” quite peculiar, for Chang borrows the tradition of colloquial narration, with the narrator speaking directly to the reader and urging them to light “some pungent chips of aloeswood” to create the appropriate atmosphere for listening to the story of Hong Kong:

GO AND fetch, will you please, a copper incense brazier, a family heirloom gorgeously encrusted now with moldy green, and light in it some pungent chips of aloeswood. Listen while I tell a Hong Kong tale, from before the war. When your incense has burned out, my story too will be over (7).

.....

Here is the end of this Hong Kong story. Weilong’s brazier of incense will soon go out too (76).

Chang’s narrator sets a narrative framework that leads to the “strange and exotic” events being recounted, “creating a distance from which the audience can reflect on the unfamiliar” (Ping-kwan 87). The narrator begins by giving an account of his/her omniscient position, drawing a clear line between himself/herself and the story to be told. It is worth noting that the title of the novella appears to be somewhat arbitrary, as it bears no direct connection to the story, other than the simple fact that the narrator compares Weilong’s life to an “brazier of incense” at the very end of the story.

Once a sense of detachment is established from the story unfolding, the narrator begins the ‘exotic’ story with the arrival of an ‘outsider’: “Ge Weilong, a very ordinary

Shanghai girl (“Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” 7)”, who visits her aunt’s residence seeking financial assistance to continue her education in Hong Kong. Two years ago, when war broke out in Shanghai, Weilong and her family fled to Hong Kong for refuge. However, due to inflation and soaring prices in wartime, her family could no longer afford to live in Hong Kong and plans to return to Shanghai. Lacking her own financial means, Weilong seeks assistance from her aunt, Madame Liang, who was previously the wife of a Hong Kong tycoon and now a social butterfly, operating a high-class courtesan house for the upper class of Hong Kong. As the story progresses, the narrator delves deeper into Madame Liang’s character and personality, painting her as a cunning and ruthless woman: she “had a clear head, and she was unabashedly materialistic: as a young woman, she’d ignored the opinions of others and married a sixty-year-old tycoon, waiting for him to die. He died all right but, sad to say, a bit late—Madame Liang was old now, with a hungry heart that she could not fill” (53). Madame Liang holds a grudge against Weilong’s father for having judging her on moral standards and cutting off ties with her family. Weilong only realizes later in the novel that Madame Liang has agreed to sponsor her studies only because she is calculating to please her clients at Weilong’s expense.

One striking feature of Chang’s storytelling in “Aloeswood Incense” is the ambivalent position of the narrator. In contrast to traditional storytellers of *Chuanqi* who remain omniscient and maintain a sober distance from the story, Chang’s narrator occupies an unstable and elusive position. Most of the time, the narrator remains in Weilong’s consciousness and observes the world from her perspective, but there are also moments when the narrator suddenly distances himself/herself from Weilong and makes cold and sarcastic

comments. Different from Virginia Woolf's use of free indirect discourse, in which the narrator creeps into the character's mind and reports on his/her inner activities, thus blurring the line between the narrator's and the character's voices, Eileen Chang's narrative moves in the opposite direction—the narrator suddenly jumps out of the character's consciousness and maintains a clearly defined boundary from the story being narrated. For instance, following the description of Madame Liang's garden with its striking colors, the narrator changes his/her tone quite abruptly and comments:

But these glaring color clashes were not only reason why *the viewer* felt such a *dizzying sense of unreality*. There are *contrasts* everywhere: all kinds of discordant settings and jumbled periods had been jammed together, making a strange, illusory domain. (8, my emphasis)

Here the use of the phrase “the viewer” indicates the narrator's intention to distance himself/herself from Weilong. In describing Madame Liang's garden, the narrator emphasizes its dazzling and contrasting colors. It is a house located in a “wealthy residential district in the Hong Kong hills”; its garden seems to be mismatched with its surroundings, “like a gold-lacquered serving tray lifted high amid the wild hills” (7). As she slowly walks towards the house, Weilong perceives a gradual intensification of colors, starting from “a low wall of white, swastika-shaped blocks” to “a bright shrimp-pink” of a small azalea, and all the way to “the fiery red” of wild azaleas, which appear to be “stomping through brittle grass, blazing down the mountainside” (7). The flaming red hue of the wild azaleas in the garden stands in stark contrast with the deep blue sea in the far distance, causing Weilong to feel a sense of dizziness. In describing the flaming red color of azaleas, the narrative perspective switches smoothly once again from Weilong's to the narrator's omniscient point of view, as the latter observes: “When it flashed into flame, it could leap out, scorching everything” (7). In the

context of the novel, the “fiery red” of the azalea serves as a subtle metaphor in the novel—it implies that Weilong’s materialistic desires and vanity are akin to a small spark that, once ignited, intensifies into an overwhelming force, consuming and devastating all that it encounters.

In “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, the essayistic moment occurs when the narrator indulges in details, whether they are details of clothes, objects, settings or landscapes. For instance, during Weilong’s first night at Madame Liang’s house, she becomes so excited about the new clothes her aunt has prepared for her that she spends the entire night trying them on, one after another:

silks and satins, brocade housedresses, short coats, long coats, beach wraps, nightgowns, bath wear, evening gowns, afternoon cocktail dresses, semiformal dining wear for entertaining guests at home—everything was there. What use would a schoolgirl have for all this?

...

Woolen things, thick and furry as a perturbing jazz dance; crushed-velvet things, deep and sad as an aria from a Western opera; rich, fine silks, smooth and slippery like “The Blue Danube”, coolly enveloping the whole body. (28-29)

The narrator painstakingly recounts all the different dresses, with each one serving as a nuanced metaphor that captures Weilong’s materialistic desires. Similar to goods displayed in a department store, the list of dresses highlights how Weilong is enamored by the beautiful materials. The tragedy of Weilong lies in the fact that she has several opportunities to escape, but she ‘voluntarily’ stays with her aunt and walks step by step into the abyss of helplessness and desperation. This tragedy is rooted in Weilong’s vanity and desire. Knowing Weilong’s weakness, Madame Liang kindles her desires by providing a closet full of “gleaming, gorgeous” clothes, all in Weilong’s size. Later in the story, one of Madame Liang’s key



clients, Situ Xie, entraps Wei Long with a diamond bracelet—the narrator depicts his actions as “faster than a detective pulling out handcuffs and slapping them on a criminal” (50). From then on, it appears as if Weilong has been “sold” to Madame Liang (73).

One of the most significant essayistic moments occurs at the very beginning of the story when the narrator elaborates on the specifics of Madame Liang’s white house located on the mountainside. Madame Liang’s house is an unusual combination of elements and styles, with a streamlined geometric structure resembling the most modern movie theater:

The white house in the dip of the hills was smooth and streamlined—geometric like *an ultramodern movie theater*. The roof, however, was covered with *the traditional* glazed tiles of emerald green. The windowpanes were also green, their chicken-fat yellow frames trimmed with red; the window grates, with their fancy ironwork, had been sprayed the same chicken-fat yellow. A wide, red brick veranda circled the house, with monumental white stone columns that were nearly thirty feet tall—this went back to *the American Old South* (8; my emphasis).

Madame Liang’s house is a flamboyant and daring design; but the combination of diverse elements and styles are nothing like what we now call post-modern patchwork, as the various cultural elements are not given equal weight. Rather, its eye-catching mixture of Chinese and Western elements alludes to the unsettled cultural identity of colonized Hong Kong. Moreover, its use of vibrant colors—green, red, and yellow—promotes the sensory stimulation and physical satisfaction that the house is able to provide. Not only the outside of the house, but also the interior decor is a fusion of diverse elements and styles:

From the veranda, glass doors opened onto a living room. The furniture and the arrangement were basically Western, touched up with some unexceptionable *Chinese bric-a-brac*. An *ivory bodhisattva* stood on the mantel of the fireplace, along with *snuff bottles made of emerald-green jade*; a *small screen with a bamboo motif* curved around the sofa. These *Oriental touches* had been put there, it was clear, for the benefit of foreigners. The English come from so far to see China—one has to give them something of China to see. But this was China as

Westerners imagine it: *exquisite, illogical, very entertaining*. (8, my emphasis)

Madame Liang's house is not only impressive on the outside, but its interior is also designed to 'dazzle' visitors. Although the furniture arrangement is mostly western, Madame Liang's living room is eager to exhibit some "unexceptionable Chinese bric-a-brac"—an "ivory bodhisattva", "snuff bottles made of emerald-green jade", "a small screen with a bamboo motif"—all typical Chinese elements that one would expect to find in a Chinese boutique or museum. It is an subtle image of Hong Kong portrayed from a microscopic point of view; Chang presents how East meets West at a micro level—at the level of furniture and decoration arrangements. Chinese culture, as a native indigenous culture, is supposed to be vibrant and flourishing. However, in colonized Hong Kong, the native Chinese cultural heritage appears to have lost its significance, as it has been marginalized by the upper classes and reduced to a mere adornment of Western culture. In a way, Madame Liang's house serves as a metaphor for colonized Hong Kong, with its unsettling awkwardness reflecting the dislocation of Hong Kong's historical and cultural identity. The colonized Hong Kong has been heavily influenced by British culture, causing it to lose its ancient Chinese roots; on the other hand, however, the colonizers has despised and disrespected Hong Kong, never treating it as an equal. Meanwhile, the narrator employs a cold and indifferent tone to satirize Hong Kong's attempts to impress the colonizers. Through the intricate furniture and decoration arrangements, an artificial image of China is created solely to appeal to foreigners, as the narrator sarcastically points out. Even Weilon herself has become an ornament to "please European and American tourists":

Weilon glanced at her reflection in the glass doors—she too was a touch of typically *colonial Oriental color*. She wore the special uniform of Nanying

Secondary School: a dark blue starched cotton tunic that reached to her knees, over narrow trousers, all in the *late Qing style*. Decking out coeds in the manner of *Boxer-era courtesans* [In original Chinese, Chang describes Weilong dressing like *Sai Jinghua*, a famous prostitute of late Qing dynasty; here Kingsbury translated it as “Boxer-era courtesans”]—that was only one of the ways that the Hong Kong government of the day tried to *please European and American tourists*. (9, my emphasis)

The narrator characterizes Weilong as “a touch of typically colonial Oriental color”—a mere ornamental element. Her school uniform exemplifies the way in which Asian culture is exoticized and commodified to satisfy Western tourists. She receives a modern Western education in school but wears the costume of the late Qing style; what is more absurd is that her costume is in the style of the famous prostitute Sai JinHua<sup>24</sup> in the late Qing Dynasty. Weilong’s dressing reveals that the Hong Kong government is willing to sacrifice pure and naive schoolgirls for the sake of foreign tourists; on the other hand, it also hints at Willow’s tragic ending, as she is going to degrade step by step into a sexual tool for pleasing the colonizers. Weilong’s school uniform is a product of hybridization between traditional Chinese styles and modern Western fashion, similar to the furniture in Madame Liang’s house that blends Eastern and Western elements. The uniform’s design is an artificial and contrived representation of Chinese culture, created to cater to the tastes of the colonizers. In the meanwhile, the analogy drawn between the high school female students and the courtesans also alludes to the thriving prostitution industry in Hong Kong, foreshadowing Weilong’s future as a courtesan who sells her body as a commodity to western customers.

In contrast to Madame Liang’s cold and lifeless house, Weilong’s home in

---

<sup>24</sup> Sai Jinhua was the most famous court woman in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican period. She had outstanding diplomatic skills and played a very important role in Chinese history. Her legendary life story became the prototype for many late Qing novels, of which *The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* is the most famous. Eileen Chang translated this novel herself into English in 1983.

Shanghai is portrayed as a warm and nurturing sanctuary, a place of warmth and love. Later in the novel, when Weilong reminisces about her home in Shanghai during a time of emotional vulnerability, her memories are filled with bits and pieces of daily experience, and her home is a place full of traces of life:

Thinking of it reminded her of everything in her life that seemed *solid, substantial, reliable*—her *home*; the *black iron bed* that she shared with her sister; the quilt on the bed, made of *coarse red-and-white cloth*; the old-fashioned *boxwood dressing table*; the darling little *peach-shaped ceramic jar* that shone red in the sunlight and was filled with talcum powder; the *fashion-girl calendar* tacked up on the wall, the girl’s arms covered with phone numbers her mother had scribbled in a thick pencil script, numbers for the tailor, the employment agency, the soy-milk vender, and two different aunts. (68, my emphasis)

Unlike Madame’s house, which is only meant for visual appeal, Weilong’s home in Shanghai is a place full of life and love. In her Shanghai home, Weilong felt secure and protected; the “glass globe” her father gave her to cool her fever symbolizes the reliability and dependability of her home—everything seemed “solid, substantial, reliable”, which Hong Kong could not provide. One involuntary memory triggers another, the everyday objects becoming the markers of her memories—“black iron bed”, “coarse red-and-white cloth”, “boxwood dressing table”, “peach-shaped ceramic jar”. The “fashion-girl calendar” on which her mother scribbled down several phone numbers reinforces the sense of vitality and intimacy that Weilong associates with her home, which contrasts with the artificial and superficial nature of Madame Liang’s house. All the details of daily life become indicators of Weilong’s yearning for family comfort and support, and at the same time reinforces the sense of desolation over the loss of these precious things.

Upon first glance, Weilong appears to fit the common literary archetype of an

innocent girl seduced by vice, but soon it becomes clear that Weilong is actually quite aware of the risks involved. On the way back from Madame Liang's house, Weilong contemplates: "here I am charging straight into the devil's lair. Whose fault will it be, if I get caught in a trap? (23)." From the very beginning, Wei Long is well-aware of the potential risks she will have to face. Looking back at Mrs. Liang's white house, she senses a gruesome, eerie atmosphere:

That splendid white house, covered in green roof tile, bore more than a passing resemblance to *an ancient imperial tomb*.

Weilong felt like one of those young students in *Pu Songling's old ghost stories*, the kind who goes up a mountain to see a relative and then, on the homeward journey, looks back at the mansion and finds it has become *a grave mound*. If the white Liang mansion had turned into a tomb, it wouldn't have surprised her much. She could see that her aunt was a woman of great ability, and had held back the wheel of history. She had preserved, in her own small world, the opulent lifestyle of the late Qing dynasty. Behind her own doors, she was a little *Empress Cixi*. (23, my emphasis)

Through the filter of Wei Long's emotions and feelings at this moment, the "splendid white house" of Madame Liang is transformed into "an ancient imperial tomb"; and Madame Liang herself takes on the likeness of "little Express Cixi". Madame Liang, whom Weilong sees as "a woman of great ability", seems to be capable of holding back "the wheel of history" and stop the passage of time. Weilong feels as though she has entered the ghost story of Pu Songling. Pu Songling was a famous writer of the Qing Dynasty, and here Chang refers to his famous ghost stories to emphasize the sense of strangeness and bizarreness, and the disorienting and unsettling emotions experienced by Weilong.

With the illusion that she could maintain her best behavior, Weilong soon moves in to Madame Liang's house where she attends lavish parties and meets with a variety of Mrs.

Liang's clientele. Mrs. Liang's garden party has "a touch of nineteenth-century England (36)": some young ladies play the piano and sing "The Last Rose of Summer"; flirtation is everywhere in the air. Once again, the narrator describes the detail painstakingly and adds a hint of sarcasm to her commentary:

Hong Kong society *copies* English custom in every aspect, but goes on adding further touches until the *original* conception is entirely *lost*. Madame Liang's garden party was garishly swathed in *local color*. "Gook luck" paper lanterns had been planted on five-foot poles all around the lawn; when they were lit at dusk, they glimmered vaguely in the background—a perfect prop for Hollywood production of *Secrets of the Qing Palace*. Beach umbrellas were stuck at various angles among the lanterns, *an incongruously Western touch*. Young maids and old amahs, their hair oiled and twisted into long birds, wove through the forest of umbrella poles, proffering cocktails, snacks, and fruit juice on shaky silver trays. (37, my emphasis)

Chang's reference to the movie setting reveals, once again, that Hong Kong is eager to showcase itself and wishes to be seen. Hong Kong "copies" British customs, while infusing them with some "local color", resulting in an odd combination of British and Chinese elements—beach umbrellas adorned with paper lanterns, "an incongruously Western touch".

At Madame Liang's lavish garden party, guests converse in a range of languages, including French, English, Portuguese, Shanghainese, Cantonese, and more. In such an extremely exotic atmosphere, Weilong befriends Zhou Jijie, a young woman of mixed ancestry—"[H]er genealogy was said to be very complicated; it included, at the minimum, Arab, Negro, Indian, Indonesian, and Portuguese Blood, with only a dash of Chinese" (38). Through Zhou Jijie, the reader gains insight into the challenges and difficulties faced by mixed-race individuals in Hong Kong during that period:

We can't marry a Chinese—we've got foreign-style education, so we don't fit in with the *pure* Chinese types. We can't marry a foreigner, either—have you seen any whites here who aren't deeply influenced by *race concepts*? ... Anyone who

marries an Oriental loses his career. In this day and age, who would be that romantic? (45, my emphasis)

Through Zhou's words, we learn about the plight of mixed-blood individuals living in the cultural divide between Chinese and Western cultures during the 1940s in Hong Kong. Like the city Hong Kong itself, they are abandoned by the mother—China<sup>25</sup>, but never fully accepted by the father—the western colonizer. It is also at the party, Weilong encounters Zhou's brother George Qiao, another attractive hybrid who speaks English and Portuguese to tease Weilong and seduce her with no promise of marriage. However, at Madame Liang's instigation, they eventually get married. Despite all the uncertainties, there are also moments of happiness, "for instance, when she and George went to Wanchai on Chinese New Year's Eve, just the two of them, mingling with the crowds" (73). The last scene of the story takes place in Weichai:

The sky overhead was a *dark purple-blue*, and the sea at the end of the winter sky was purple-blue too, but here in the bay was a place like this, a place teeming with people and *lanterns and dazzling goods*—blue ceramic double-handled flowerpots, rolls and rolls of scallion-green velvet brushed with gold, cellophane bags of Balinese Shrimp Crisps, amber-colored durian cakes from the tropics, Buddha-bead bracelets with their big red tassels, light yellow sachets, little crosses made of dark silver, coolie hats—and stretching out beyond these lights and people and market goods, the clear *desolation of sea and sky; endless emptiness, endless terror*. (74, my emphasis)

Under the splendor of "dazzling" goods—"blue", "scallion-green", "amber-colored", "big red", "light yellow", Weilong sees only endless "emptiness" and "desolation". The future seems so bleak and desolate that Weilong could only seek solace and comfort in these trivial things before her eyes. It is precisely because of the uncertainty of the future that the worldly grandeur of daily life becomes so valuable. In the meanwhile, the detailed description of the

---

<sup>25</sup> In Chinese culture, the nation is often feminized as a mother figure, and Chinese often refer to their country as their motherland.

goods exposes the highly commercialized nature of Hong Kong at the time, and Wanchai is a part of Hong Kong “filled with low-class amusements” (73). The narrator notes that “[E]very possible sort of thing was there, but pride of place went to the *human goods* (75)”, highlighting the prevalence of the sex trade in the area. Weilong and George see a group of street girls “standing in the sever light of a gas lamp; the intense chiaroscuro turned their noses light blue and the sides of their faces green, while the rouge that was slathered over their cheeks looked purple” (75). Under the lights, the street girls’ individual features become blurred and distorted, like the prostitutes in Picasso’s paintings. A gang of drunk sailors mistake Weilong for one of them. Weilong is scared and runs into the car. George joked with a smile, “[T]hose drunken mudfish? .. What do they take you for?” “But how am I any different from those girls?” Weilong replies in a deeply sad and sarcastic tone, “[T]hey don’t have a choice—I do it willingly!” (76). Weilong, indeed, just like the street girls of Wanchai—is only a commodity on display and for sale; in the colonized Hong Kong of 1940s, as a matter of fact, it seemed that everything was for sale.

As evident from the aforementioned, one of the prominent features of Chang’s narrative is her obsession with the detail, whether it be the details of the landscape, the interior, the clothing or the appearance. It is noteworthy that Chang’s portrayal of detail is fundamentally different from the realist representation of detail. In a realistic novel, the narrator often visualizes the setting, objects, and characters to render the sense of reality; but this kind of detailization is controlled within a certain degree to maintain the coherence and flowing of the storytelling. However, in Chang’s writing, the narrator delves deep into the details and often lists seemingly insignificant details to such an extent that it undermines the



continuity and coherence of the narrative. Genette's distinction between narration and description is crucial for understanding Chang's writing philosophy. Narration emphasizes "the temporal, dramatic aspect of the narrative" and is concerned with "actions or events considered as pure processes", whereas description "lingers on objects and beings considered in simultaneity", thereby suspending "the course of time" and contributing to "spreading the narrative in space" (Genette, "Frontiers of Narrative" 136). Genette associates narration with the development of the storyline and sequences of events, while description is more related to non-narrative "objects and beings" which suspends the passage of time and extends the narrative in space. Genette's thoughts shed light on the fact that in "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier" Chang deviates from the conventional narrative development by prioritizing the description of details. These de-contextualized, descriptive details are essential to understand Chang's notion of reality and her aesthetics of desolation. In his famous essay titled "The Reality Effect", Roland Barthes proposes that the isolated, descriptive details are not aimed at signifying something concrete, meaningful; quite on the contrary, they function only as indication of "the real", without regard to any concrete meaning. So in this sense, Chang prioritizes the descriptive detail over the continuity of the narration as the key to render "the real", for reality itself is devoid of any concrete content. Narration creates an illusion of coherence and meaning, but description acknowledges the falsity of such intention and undermines any attempt at totalizing the construction of reality. Chang's fascination with detail is thus inseparable from her conception of a fragmented, unsystematic reality; it is through foregrounding the decontextualized, descriptive details that Chang imagines Hong Kong of 1940s as a 'desolate' city—a place devoid of something "solid, substantial, reliable"

(“Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” 68).

### 5.2.2 The Politics of Seeing: Hong Kong under Double Gaze

In her essay “Peking Opera Through Foreign Eyes”, Chang makes a distinction between the way Chinese people view their country and the way foreigners view China, and advocates for observing China from a foreign perspective. By looking at Peking opera through the eyes of foreigners, Chang believes that one can gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. In her stories of Shanghai and Hong Kong in *Chuanqi*, Chang blends the sensibilities of self-conscious observation and being observed. In addition to using the traditional *Chuanqi* genre, Chang also incorporates other narrative techniques from traditional Chinese literature to portray modern China. In so doing, Chang effectively dramatizes “an ‘uneasy’ relationship of the modern to the past (Zou 34)”. As Chang herself elaborates on her front page of *Chuanqi*:

The front page [of *Chuanqi*] is designed by Yan Ying<sup>26</sup>, and borrows a *late Qing painting of a beautiful woman* in fashionable clothes, which paints a woman, with remote thoughts, playing dominoes; beside her sits a nanny, who holds the child. This looks like an ordinary scene after dinner. But outside of the railing, abruptly, there appears a human shape, out of proportion, like a ghost. That is *the modern person*, curiously and intently *looking* inside. If there is anything in this painting making one feel *uneasy*, that is the effect I hope to create. (qtd. in Zou 33-34, my emphasis)

---

<sup>26</sup> Yan Ying was a fellow student of Eileen Chang at the University of Hong Kong, and later became a close friend of Chang. She was featured in several of Chang’s essays; additionally, she created numerous illustrations and photographs for Chang’s works.



**Figure 1.** This image was initially printed as the cover of Eileen Chang’s book, *Chuanqi*, in 1946 by the publisher Shanhe tushu gongsi in Shanghai, and is currently copyrighted by publisher Huangguan in Taiwan.

The politics of ‘seeing’ is significant in interpreting the cover image of Chang’s book, as the act of “‘seeing’ carries with it the connotation of a demarcation of ontological boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ whether racial, social, or sexual” (Chow 3). The “modern person” depicted on the cover appears as “a ghost—empty and faceless”, devoid of identity and “separated and exorcised from the rich details of the late Qing painting, and from this self-contained life” (Zou 34). In sharp contrast to the simplistic sketch of “modern person” is the detailization of the Qing painting—the intricate and “delicate patterns” on the women’s clothes and ornaments, as well as the richly “patterned surfaces” of the furniture in the room (34). If we assume that the gaze of the “modern person” represents that of the Western colonial, then “China” is portrayed as “an ‘other,’ feminized space to the West” (Chow 32). As a result, “China” is feminized and eroticized as “a beautiful woman” to be admired and

examined.

Eileen Chang's awareness of China's subjection to the colonial gaze emerged earlier than Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. This awareness may have come from her reflections on Western literature. During her formative years, Chang attended a Western-style church school and later pursued English literature at the University of Hong Kong, where she became acquainted with classical Western literature. Among other writers she encountered, the English writer Somerset Maugham had a great influence on Chang's writing. Chang herself openly admitted on several occasions that Maugham was one of her favorite authors and expressed her admiration for Maugham's short stories (Gunn 292). As in Maugham's short stories, where China is portrayed as an Orientalized place, with its exoticism largely conceptualized through certain sensual experiences, Chang also emphasizes the visual experience and uses bold and contrasting colors to create a vibrant and overwhelming image of Hong Kong. In "Love in a Fallen City", the protagonist Liusu is struck by the "clashing colors" of billboards along the dock upon her arrival of Hong Kong:

It was fiery afternoon, and the most striking part of the view was the parade of giant billboards along the dock, their *reds*, *oranges*, and *pinks* mirrored in the lush *green* water. Below the surface of the water, bars and blots of *clashing* color plunged in *murderous confusion*. Liusu found herself thinking that in a city of such *hyperboles*, even a sprained ankle would hurt more than it did in other places. Her heart began to pound. ("Love in a Fallen City" 131, my emphasis)

As one can see, here Chang portrays Hong Kong as a place of chaos and violence, with its bold colors "clashing" in "murderous confusion". This imagery reinforces a common Orientalist trope that portrays China and other non-Western cultures as primitive, uncivilized, and dangerous. At the same time, Chang also emphasizes the exoticism and mystery of Hong Kong—the description of the "fiery afternoon" and the "parade of giant billboards" creates a

sense of vibrant energy and excitement. On one hand, China is portrayed as submissive and defenseless, while on the other hand, it is considered to be extremely exotic and mysterious. In “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, Weilong is subjected to voyeuristic scrutiny and reduced to a passive ‘object’ of the gaze, as evidenced by the way the narrator describes her physical features:

She had a small, round *face*, bland but pretty, a ‘powder-puff face’ that would be considered old-fashioned nowadays. *Her eyes* were long and lovely; the fine creases over the lids swept out almost to her hairline. *Her nose* was delicate and thin, her little mouth plump and round. *Her face* may have been somewhat lacking in expression, but vacuousness of that sort does impart the gentle sincerity that one associates with *Old China*. (9, my emphasis)

Weilong’s “powder-puff face” and white skin stands out among the Cantonese, who typically have “olive complexions” (9). The narrator further compares Cantonese girls—“with their deep-set eyes and high cheeks”—to “sweet-and-sour prok bones”, and Shanghai girls to “flour-dipped pork dim sum (9)”, reducing them to a mere visual feast, existing solely to please the senses. The “bland” yet “pretty” appearance of Weilong’s face evokes a sense of “gentle sincerity” associated with the concept of “Old China”—a romanticized and idealized view of China’s past; however, Weilong’s “sincerity” will be soon exploited by the colonizer and she be seduced and demeaned. Throughout the story of “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, the narrator employs a implicit male gaze that sexualizes and objectifies Hong Kong, while Hong Kong also actively presents itself as an exoticized object to fulfill the fantasy of Western colonizers.

There is no doubt that Hong Kong is being feminized and exoticized, and is thus passive and being looked at. However, the issues surrounding the act of seeing and being looked at are much more complex if we take into consideration of the position of an ethnic

spectator. Unlike Maugham's Eurocentric viewpoint, Chang's perspective is neither that of the colonizer (the West) nor that of the colonized (Hong Kong); rather, in "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier", Chang deliberately destabilizes the power structure by identifying Weilong as Shanghainese. That is to say, "Hong Kong is subject to a double gaze: that of the English colonialists and that of the Chinese from Shanghai" (Lee L. 325). Weilong's constant resistance to the colonial gaze, as she is aware of being part of the "colonial color", portrays her as an active subject and not merely a passive object to be looked at. Weilong's identity of being Shanghainese introduces a new perspective—that of a female and ethnic observer. As Chang herself openly acknowledges that her short stories and novellas about Hong Kong<sup>27</sup> are to be dedicated to Shanghainese readers: "The entire time I was writing these stories, I was thinking of Shanghainese people, because I wanted to try to observe Hong Kong through Shanghainese eyes. Only people from Shanghai will be able truly to understand the parts where I wasn't able to make my meaning clear" (*Written on Water* 55). In the very beginning of the short story *Jasmine Tea*, Chang writes: "Hong Kong is a splendid city, but a sad one too" (79). Chang seems to see Hong Kong culture not as "part of 'authentic' Chinese traditions", but rather "a symbol of decadence and inauthenticity 'tainted' by the city's long years of colonial rule and capitalist exploitation" (Yip 94). Hong Kong is "too vulgar and flamboyant in its Western imitation" and lacks Shanghai's refined sophistication and "cultivation" (or *hanyang* in Chinese, which "originally referred to the cultured sophistication of a person who has the elegant appearance of self-restraint") (Lee L. 327). In Chang's point of view, Hong Kong was situated in "a marginalized, 'in-between'

---

<sup>27</sup> Which includes Chang's short stories and novellas: "Aloeswood Ashes: The First Incense Brazier," "Aloeswood Ashes: The Second Incense Brazier," "Jasmine Tea," "Heart Sutra," "Glazed Roof Tiles," "Seal Off", and "Love in a Fallen City."

position overshadowed by both British colonialism and Chinese nativism” (Yip 94).

Weilong’s tragic descending from a naive student into a prostitute serves as a metaphor of the fate of Hong Kong, which is “too eager to ‘prostitute’ itself to the desires of its colonial master” (Lee L. 327). Like the beautiful Chinese woman in Chang’s front page, Hong Kong presents itself as “the object of a Western Orientalist gaze”, which materializes “what existed only in the colonist’s fantasies” (327). This “Orientalist exoticism” is, however, negotiated through Chang’s “narratorial voice of an outsider, one who belongs not to Hong Kong but to Shanghai” (327). Chang—as a female and ethnic spectator—may also take the perspective of the “modern person” featured in her front page. As soon as we imagine the “modern person” as Chang herself, we realize that she is “caught, in a crosscultural context, between the gaze that represents her and the image that is supposed to be her” (Chow 32). The perspective of Chang’s narrator is thus never exclusively “Chinese” or “Western”, but is constantly “in a coterporal, dialogic confrontation (33)” with the Other.

Considering the fact that Hong Kong is today a international city comparable to London and New York, the modern reader may be surprised to find that Chang’s portrayal of Hong Kong in her novellas is patronizing and disdainful. However, Lee reminds us that in Chang’s time, Shanghai had undergone significant architectural transformation and had become a major cosmopolitan metropolis in the world by the 1930s. In contrast, Hong Kong, which had been a British colony for a century, had largely remained its “colonial appearance”: “[A]ll of the official buildings were constructed as exact replicas of the official Palladian style derived from the original model of the Queen’s House in Greenwich, built in 1616” (Lee L. 328). Hong Kong was occupied by Japan from December 1941 to August 1945, during

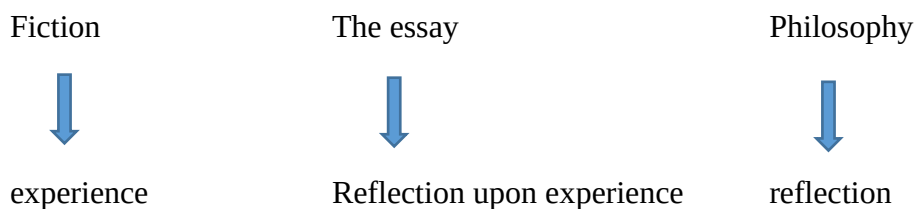
World War II. It was not until Japan handed over Hong Kong to Britain in 1945 that Hong Kong began to flourish into a major metropolis of commerce and has since evolved into a vibrant and dynamic city with its own unique identity and culture. As a native Shanghainese who had taken the new urban reality of Shanghai for granted, it is understandable that Chang saw Hong Kong as an object of colonialism and Oriental exoticism.



## Chapter Six      **Imagining the City as Essayistic Space in *Mrs. Dalloway***

### 6.1    **Nothingness and the Void of the Self**

While walking in the streets of London, the main characters of *Mrs. Dalloway* (Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Smith, and Peter Walsh) are lost in thoughts, and their mind bombarded with questions. They ponder the issues of aging, mortality, and the purpose of life. *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place one day in the “middle of June” in 1923, five years after the Armistice. Change is in the air, as Peter Walsh (who has just returned to London from India) notices that on the streets of London somehow “people looked different” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 48). The city of London has already begun to renew itself after the war. What does life mean at this moment? The devastating Great War has changed every aspect of society, and what would happen next? By focusing on the characters’ reflections and perceptions, Woolf highlights the search for meaning in the aftermath of the World War. I argue that Woolf’s emphasis on philosophical inquiries and the representation of the characters’ introspective musings renders *Mrs. Dalloway* essayistic in nature, for the essay is inherently a form engaging with meaning. On a spectrum which involves fiction, philosophy, and the essay, the essay occupies a place in the middle , as shown below (Atkins 149):



As one can see, fiction is rooted in experience, while philosophy deals with “the transcendent

world of ideas” (152). If reflection is associated with philosophy and experience with fiction, what makes the essay special is its in-betweenness—the essay balances, and hangs between experience and meaning. Of course, as it happens, philosophy could also be wrapped in the fiction, and the fiction can also deal with meaning. As Atkins defends his point, however, the main object of philosophy is “exclusively” meaning; and the meaning in fiction is “not in the foreground but always subordinate to and derived from experience” (150). *Mrs. Dalloway* exhibits essayistic qualities, as the novel foregrounds its philosophical concerns with meaning alongside its representation of experience. Woolf implicitly illustrates this idea through the lens of Peter Walsh’s consciousness—“taking hold of experience”, and “turning it round, slowly, in the light” to examine its meaning (*Mrs. Dalloway* 67). Her enquiry into meaning is anchored in a particular geographical and historical context—post-WWI London—the city as a site of impression, sensation and memory. In this chapter, I will explore how Woolf deviates from conventional realistic narratives and ventures into the realm of essayism, where philosophical enquiry and representation of experience coalesce.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf incorporates essayistic elements to break free from the constraints of linear narrative. While working on her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf had an interesting correspondence with the painter Jacques Raverat regarding their artistic views. Raverat believed that writing was an artistic form largely limited by its intrinsic linearity and unable to “render the complex multiplicity of a mental event”; to illustrate the complexity of mental activities, he used the metaphor of throwing a pebble into a pond, with water splashing “in the outer air in every direction, and under the surface waves that follow one another into forgotten corners” (qtd in Bell 106). Virginia Woolf replied that it was

precisely the limitations of linear narratives that she strives to overcome; Woolf wrote that her mission was to move beyond “the formal railway line of sentence” and to abandon the “falsity of the past (by which I [Woolf] mean Bennett, Galsworthy and so on) [...] people don’t and never did think or feel in that way; but all over the place, in your [Raverat’s] way” (107). Woolf’s dismissal of linear narratives is closely related to the avant-garde *Zeitgeist*, when writers began to plunge into the stream of consciousness (Lodge 297); it is also inseparable from her own interest in exploring innovative forms of fiction and experimenting with new modes of expression.

*Mrs. Dalloway* begins with a sentence, which is also its first paragraph: “Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (3). This concise and simple opening sentence demonstrates Woolf’s determination to break away from the conventions of realistic fiction. Unlike conventional realist novels that begin with a confident narrator who provides the reader with necessary background information, *Mrs. Dalloway* is characterized by uncertainty and indeterminacy. The story’s setting and time remain undisclosed, and the protagonist and narrator’s identities are left unidentified. This abrupt opening sentence immerses the reader in the midst of an ongoing life. To illustrate how Woolf presents a typical stream of consciousness, as well as the contrast between the beginning of a realist novel and a modernist novel, I will cite Stephen Kern’s insightful interpretation of the first two paragraphs of *Mrs. Dalloway*:

Mrs. Dalloway [who?] said [to whom?] she would buy the flowers [for what?] herself.

For Lucy [who?] had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges [why?]; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! [into what?] For so it had always seemed [tense shift here to past perfect the only indication that action moves back to unidentified moment in time] to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges [sound that links present with past], which she could hear now [when?], she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton [where? Later we learn it's her parents' summer home] into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that *something awful was about to happen*; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing, and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?"—was that it?—"I prefer men to cauliflowers"—was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace—Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days ... (*Mrs. Dalloway* 3; Kern 129, my emphasis)

As one can see from Kern's comments inside the quoted paragraphs, *Mrs. Dalloway* "starts with indirect speech from an unidentified protagonist to an unnamed interlocutor, then continues with narration that conflates events as two unidentified places and times in a diction that shifts ambiguously between that of the protagonist and that of the narrator" (129). The opening passage is packed with references and implications which are "intentionally vague and unexplained"; one can also discern elements of "incoherence" and "disunity", "of wandering from a single subject" (Humphrey 32) The reader must endure the unanswered questions and persevere with reading; only later on, one realizes that "something awful was about to happen" here might refer to Peter Walsh's interruption of Clarissa's kiss with Sally Seton on the terrace at Bourton, which Clarissa describes as "the most exquisite moment of her whole life" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 35). One memory triggers another, leading to a series of recollections. As Clarissa was musing "among the vegetables", Peter interjects with a sarcastic comment about her preference for "men to cauliflowers". At this stage of the novel, it is still unclear to the reader how far back Clarissa's memories extend. Even Clarissa herself

seems to question the reliability of her memories as she keeps asking, “was that it?”, “was that it?” The reader, who is already familiar with *Mrs Dalloway*, might discern Clarissa’s repression of her lesbian love on a second reading. As such, the beginning of *Mrs. Dalloway* is much less intelligible than that of a realist novel. Reading *Mrs. Dalloway* is akin to solving a riddle filled with unexpected revelations and concealed meanings. One must tolerate the ambiguities during the initial reading and revisit the novel multiple times to uncover its numerous layers of significance.

To investigate how Woolf moves beyond the linear realist narrative, I will briefly examine two distinct narrative types—apsychological narrative and psychological narrative. In a sense, apsychological narrative can be characterized as plot-centered, and psychological narrative as character-centered. More specifically, in psychological narrative “everything is subservient to the psychology of the characters”, and “the actions are not there to ‘illustrate’ character but in which, on the contrary, the characters are subservient to the action” (Chatman 113). Take the statement “Clarissa walks in the city” as an example. A psychological narrative like Woolf’s or Joyce’s would highlight Clarissa’s experience of walking in the city, while an apsychological narrative would focus on the action of walking which leads to a certain consequence and contributes to the development of the plot line. Conventional realist narratives “subordinate character to plot; make it a function of plot, a necessary but derivative consequence of the chronologic of story” (113). In contrast, modernist narratives prioritize the subjective experience of the characters, emphasizing the flow of consciousness over the causality or chronological order of events. As Woolf’s characters walk in the streets of London, their minds also wander, contemplating the meaning of life and the essence of self.

But if Woolf foregrounds the experience of walking and thinking, rather than how the consequence of the action contribute to the development of the plot line, how does she achieve characterization? In other words, what sets Woolf's Clarissa apart from a realistic character?

In a realist narrative, a character is functional, and a trait of a character causes immediate consequences: if Hashem is portrayed as a greedy man, he will quickly start searching for money. This trait "has virtually amalgamated with its consequent action: the relation is now not potential/fulfillment but durative/punctual or even iterative/instance. The anecdotal trait is always provocative of action; there can be no unacted-upon motives or yearnings" (114). In modernist narratives, however, a trait is manifested in different ways: if Mrs. Dalloway feels overwhelmed by the news of Septimus' suicide at her party, she might have (A) become a hermit, (B) commit suicide too, (C) leave her party, (D) do nothing. In a realist narrative, Mrs. Dalloway can only take one action that serves as a functional role for the development of the plot; the characters are, therefore, "deprived of choice, and become in a real sense mere automatic functions of the plot" (114). In contrast, although we are aware that what actually occurs in *Mrs. Dalloway* is that Mrs. Dalloway takes a moment to digest the news and promptly returns to her party, what is foregrounded is her inner struggle and conflict beneath her calmness of re-assuming the duties as party hostess. Unlike realist narratives, which exclude other possibilities, modernist narratives like *Mrs. Dalloway* "preserve openness and treat characters as autonomous beings, not as mere plot functions"; modernist characters' personalities are thus an open-ended complex, "subject to further speculations and enrichments, visions and revisions" (119). Modernists believe that the idea

of a totality of mental traits that define an individual's personality or self is only a idealized, theoretical construct—"a limit never to be reached, a horizon toward which we travel, hopefully with increasing intellectual and emotional maturity" (121). Could the self then be attained in some other way? Is it teleological and cumulative in nature?

In order to investigate these questions and explore Woolf's perception of the self in *Mrs. Dalloway*, I will briefly examine the self through the narrative approach. The narrative perspective of the self identifies robust correlations between "selfhood, narrative, and agency" (Schechtman 397). As Schechtman states, "[T]o be agents we must be intelligible to ourselves and to others; our actions must be meaningful and significant in a way that cannot be captured in purely naturalistic terms, but requires that we interpret our behaviors in the context of a narrative" (397). The self, from this point of view, is a narrative construction; the access to the self is thus mediated by the narrative. This approach is fundamentally 'hermeneutical', for it regards human being as "self-interpreting beings". To construct a story about one's life, is "an interpretative feat"—a process of "continuing interpretations and reinterpretations", rather than a simple "recounting of the brute facts" (182). Ricoeur, as one of the main proponents of narrative view of the self, asserts that the narrative approach practice could solve the "traditional dilemma of having to choose between the Cartesian notion of the self as a principle of identity that remains the same throughout the diversity of its different states and the positions of Hume and Nietzsche, who held an identical subject to be nothing but a substantialist illusion" (Zahavi 325). Ricoeur's notion of the self is rooted in the idea that the narrative self undergoes "changes and mutations within the cohesion of a lifetime", and the "story of a life continuous to be reconfigured by all the

truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about him- or herself” (325). This narrative view sees the self as constructed by the story told about the self. The question of “who am I?” is thus turned into the question of “how my life story is shaped?”.

The narrative view presupposes that the various components of a story cohere to form a significant entirety. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, one could easily identify some elements that challenge this assumption. Rather than a well-rounded whole, the reader is presented with mere fragments or moments of Clarissa’s life and memories. It is significant that *Mrs. Dalloway* only deals with one day of Clarissa’s life, for it implies that it is impossible to summarize Clarissa’s whole life time in a coherent narrative. What’s more, the narrative view assumes that the self is accessed through stories, and lives are imbued with meaning. However, the ordinary people (like Clarissa) might also have rich and robust self, even if she lacks any grand life-story to tell; she may possess a plethora of admirable qualities that make for a rich and fulfilling self, but these qualities might not add up to the specific “Beginning, Middle, End” temporal structure that makes for a so-called good narrative.

A narrative not only imposes greater coherence, completeness, and closure on life experience, but also has an inherent bias as it tends to favor a specific perspective to the exclusion of others. Events in the narrative hang together and gain their significance by their relation to the story’s end, either helping to bring it about or thwarting its culmination. The narrative view, which defines the self by the narrative in which it is embedded, ultimately holds the meaning and value of the self hostage to the end of the story. However, in reality, many lives come to an end at inopportune moments—either cut short prematurely, or dragging on after the highlight moment is done; and intuitively, one would not agree that



these ‘abrupt’ endings would make the ‘selves’ living these lives less valuable. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, Septimus’ life ends at a young age—it ends rather prematurely by normal standards. However, one would not consider Septimus’s self as less fulfilled. Quite on the contrary, Woolf regards Septimus’s decision to take suicide as a expression of defiance, a genuine communication of the self: “Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 156).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf challenges the narrative view of the self and extends the truth of the self beyond narrative construction. In his essay “Against Narrativity”, Strawson distinguishes two forms of self-experience. One is termed as Diachronic self-experience: “one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future”; this idea regards the self as something that “persists over a long stretch of time, perhaps for life” (430). Another form of self-experience is termed as Episodic, which does not view life as a continuity; Episodic people acknowledge that the past shaped the present, but they do not necessarily experience the past as being alive in the present. Upon first sight, Clarissa’s self-experience appears to be “Diachronic”, for her body is rooted in the ‘now’ while her mind flies back to memories of the past. However, each time her mind drifts into the past, the vibrant stimulation of the city pull her thoughts back to the present. Walking in the city facilitates and strengthens her Episodic experience of the self, as Clarissa herself famously claims—“what she loved; life; London; this moment of June” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 4).

As the narrative view regards the self as something constructed out of a multitude of remembered events and experiences, it assumes that certain actions and traits are an integral part of us while others are merely incidental. As critics often point out, Clarissa and Septimus share many qualities. While Septimus is overwhelmed by the wickedness of the world, Clarissa is oppressed by the pressure of upper-class life. Both Septimus and Clarissa are haunted by the thoughts of death throughout the novel—Septimus is preoccupied with Evan’s death and Clarissa dwells constantly on the inevitability of her own death. Both, in one way or other, live a lifestyle that aligns with imperialism, nationalism, and war, but at the same time, become victims of it. Both have bird-like faces; both love Shakespeare; both are attuned to life’s deep meaning and manage to find beauty in the world despite of their suffering and isolation. However, the question remains: what is the essence of the similarities and differences between Clarissa’s self and Septimus’ self ?

In a realist fiction, the “richly detailed textures of characterization” seldom subvert the “coherent wholeness” of the self, and psychological complexity can be tolerated only if the fundamental structure of the self remain “unaffected by a history of fragmented, discontinuous desires” (Kern 26). Throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, such a intelligible, well-defined self is absent. It is not hard to discern Clarissa’s inner conflict over her self-definition, and Woolf seems to imply that the self is just piles of properties, differing from other selves in endlessly trivial ways. There seems to be a lack of the deep patterns that are supposed to make selfhood distinct and significant. The definition of the self is thus impossible, as Clarissa realizes it: “[S]he would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that ... and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am

this, I am that” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 7). This quote illustrates Clarissa’s “self-declared unwillingness to ‘sum up’ others (Squier 94)”, for there is no profound, metaphysical difference between individuals; while individuals do have different properties, these differences are totally trivial.

Woolf’s perspective on the self is deeply intertwined the emerging discipline of psychology, which offered fresh perspectives for exploring the intricacies of human consciousness, the workings of the mind, and the formation of individual identity. In the realm of psychology, the self is intricately linked to the psyche and consciousness, forming an interconnected web of psychological processes and experiences. As William James puts it, the self is nothing but a “stream of thought, of consciousness” (239). Ernst Mach sees the self as contingent—the self “is not a definite, unalterable, sharply-grounded entity” but rather “a mass of sensation, loosely bundled together” (29). Freud too, regard the self as “a fragmentary mental agency that lacks autonomy”—the self is “is not even master of its own house (Freud 285)”, as the mind is “undergirded by myriad intersections of unconscious processes (Kern 26)”. Kern considers this reluctance to encapsulate the self as a common theme found in modernist novels (26). In *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Faulkner’s protagonist Darl Bundren concludes: “I don’t know if I am or not. Jewel [Darl’s brother] knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not” (76). In a similar way, James Joyces dramatizes the impossibility of defining the self in *Ulysses*: after a seaside encounter with Gerty MacDowell, Leopold Bloom attempts to leave a message about himself for her in the sand, but struggles with finding the right words and can only come up with “I”; then, a moment later, “AM. A”; but finally erases the words in the sand (qtd. Kern 26). Likewise, in

*Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf emphasizes Clarissa's self-reflection, contradictions and existential crisis:

she had a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's ... But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), *this body*, with all its capacities, seemed *nothing--- nothing at all*. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bind Street, this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs Richard Dalloway. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 9, my emphasis)

Clarissa's body may be rooted in the "now", at this moment, but her mind is obviously flowing back and forth between the "past" and "now". Clarissa imagines herself "no more marrying, no more having children now", thus negating the social, functional role as Mrs. Dalloway—the title of the novel which tries to define her. This awareness of the conflict between one's self and one's social role echoes in *The Man Without Qualities*, where Musil explores "how public roles drain inner substance"—"one's qualities or characteristics are diffused by multiple roles, as an individual has a professional, national, civic, class, geographic, sexual, conscious, unconscious, and private character" (30). The protagonist Ulrich tries to unite them, "but they dissolve him, so that he is really nothing more than a small basin hollowed out by these many streamlets" (30). The "empty, invisible space (30)" offers the possibility to create new characteristics of one's own, but after losing the battle in youth, most people become docile and accept the public persona (Kern 25). But the housewife Clarissa seems to preserve a valuable rebellious spirit: although her rebellion is very portrayed subtly in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the reader can still discern Clarissa's inner struggle and endeavor to break away from her social role as Mrs. Dalloway.

Unlike a realist character who develops a fuller sense of self through overcoming

challenging circumstances, the core of self in *Mrs Dalloway* seems to be devoid and dissolved in the first place. The repeated negation “nothing—nothing at all” suggests that human existence lacks inherent meaning and is characterized by a sense of “nothingness at its core” (Kern 24). This sense of nothingness in the novel echoes the broader condition of modernity, where human experience is shaped by the “continuous destruction of the historical, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic contexts that give human life meaning” (Goodstein 10). *Mrs Dalloway* was published at a time when World War I had dramatically shaken the foundations of traditional moral, cultural and historical frameworks, and people were beginning to lose faith in traditional values. In addition, despite significant advancements in science and technology, they had not lived up to their promise of freeing humanity from the bondage of nature and contingency. What human beings face now is a modern dilemma—the rational, programmatic progress as promised by the Enlightenment can no longer offer guidance and assurance for individuals, and may even conflict with the idiosyncrasy of human feelings, consciousness, emotions, and sensations. Accordingly, individuals experience a lack of substantial meaning in their lives, as stated by Goodstein: “[S]elf and world collapses in a nihilistic affirmation that nothing means, nothing pleases, nothing matters” (Goodstein 1). In *Mrs Dalloway*, this sense of “nothingness” and meaninglessness is further amplified by the irretrievable past and inevitable death.

The notion of “nothingness”, however, may also bring positive effect. By negating the essential meaning of life, “nothingness” also denies the past, thus releasing Clarissa from the shackles of the past in the moment of emptiness. Sartre regards “nothingness” as the essence of freedom: “[I]n freedom man invalidates past and creates his own Nothingness”;

“Nothingness is freedom intercalated between past and future” (76). In *Mrs Dalloway*, urban space is imagined as a space of “nothingness”, which liberates Clarissa from the constraints of the past and the anxiety of future temporarily. When the doors of Clarissa’s house are “taken off their hinges” in preparation for her party, Clarissa also opens her self up to the city, where her normal, stable self is able to be unhinged, and her public, social role as an upper-class housewife unsettled.

## 6.2 The Self Constituted by Urban Experience

To represent the inner reality through the stream of consciousness is to go beyond the limits of conventional narratives which are strictly bound to a certain pattern of time and space, since human consciousness does not follow a rigid temporal progression. What Woolf aims to render in words is the interior reality of her characters—namely, what is happening inside their minds, as they experience the city with their own memories, fantasies, projections, associations. Woolf foregrounds decentered consciousness, fragmented thoughts, as well as discontinuous flashbacks, thus constantly pulling the characters away from the narrative progression. In this way, the city is imagined as an essayistic space that does not conform to a linear connection between past, present and future, but instead fosters digression, fragmentation and dislocation.

As the central characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* navigate through the cityscape there comes a point when they are no longer just reacting: they are interacting, being created anew by the exchange between their inner thoughts and exterior surroundings. In a sense, the urban

experience becomes a constitutive element of their identity. While walking in the city, Woolf's characters project their subjectivity onto the urban space; in the meanwhile, they are shaped by their urban experience. Susan Merrill Squier delves into the relationship between Virginia Woolf's literary works and the city of London in her book, *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City*, and puts forth the following argument:

Consideration of the novel's three focal street scenes—Clarissa's opening walk up Bond Street to buy flowers for her party (MD, 3-19), Peter's stroll from Clarissa's home in Westminster to Regent's Park (72-83), and Septimus's hallucinatory ramble down Bond Street to Regent's park (20-31)—reveals that all three characters are defined by the streets through which they pass. The buildings, people, and events of their common urban surroundings establish their characters and social circumstances for themselves, for each other, and for the reader; furthermore, the three street scenes compactly present in these early pages the novel's major issues, and they anticipate its conclusion. (94)

Through depicting the distinctively different ways of her three main characters responding to and interacting with the city, Woolf is able to achieve self-characterization. For instance, Clarissa's urban experience of walking up Bond Street at the very beginning of the novel, establishes vital traits about her personality—hypersensitive to the urban stimuli and highly sympathetic toward others. "Clarissa thinks of herself not as an important figure, but as part of the background" (94). The city seems to possess the magic power of blurring her inner and the outer, her self and the other. On the one hand, from the very moment of her stepping into the city, Clarissa is confronting the crisis of losing her personal identity; on the other hand, the city also provides her with an opportunity to break free from her social role as Mrs. Dalloway and rejuvenate her sense of self. As she wanders through the streets of London, Clarissa feels herself merging with the crowd:

did it not become consoling to believe that ... somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in

each other, *she being part*, she was positive, of the trees at home; *part of the people she had never met* (*Mrs Dalloway* 9, my emphasis).

As she navigates through the city, the urban stimuli infiltrates Clarissa's consciousness and shapes her self:

For having lived in Westminster—how many years now? Over twenty,—one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or walking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed (*Mrs Dalloway* 4-5).

Clarissa is so overwhelmed by the urban stimuli that she “confuses internal (individual) events with external (general) occurrences” (Squier 94). The consequence is that she cannot distinguish the pause between heartbeats from the silence before Big Ben, or tell apart the heart beating from the bell ringing; furthermore, she seems unable to separate the beloved city around her from her love for life itself (94):

Heaven only knows why one loves it so,  
... what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (*Mrs Dalloway* 4)

Along with Clarissa's tendency to merge with the city, here comes the collapse of the social hierarchy (Squier 96). Rather than feeling superior as an upper-middle class member, she embraces kinship with other city dwellers for the common ground: “life; London; this moment of June”. This celebration of life in the city transcends class boundaries, and affirms a community including even the “veriest frumps” and drunks “sitting on doorstep” (*Mrs Dalloway* 20). Despite the city appears to be a hybrid space with a diverse range of social groups, when a traffic jam occurs, everyone seems to be equal: “she [Clarissa] thought, more ridiculous, more unlike anything there has ever been than one could conceive; and the Queen herself held up; the Queen herself unable to pass” (*Mrs Dalloway* 14). Regardless who they



are, the moment they step into the city, they become anonymous and unidentifiable, blending into the crowd. Being hypersensitive to the urban stimuli, Clarissa feels a strong sense of connection with others while she walks in the city, and consequently, London becomes a place where “inter-involved lived play themselves out and collective experience, present and past, is keenly felt” (Alter 108). This characteristic of Clarissa—the feeling, or rather the ability of being “part of people she had never met”—culminates later on in the novel, when she learns of the news of Septimus’s suicide. It is through the city that two strangers’ lines of life have crossed and been woven together, although they never met and knew nothing about each other.

Despite the overwhelming feeling of merging with the crowd, there are also moments when Clarissa’s experience of walking up Bond Street aligns with her social identity—an upper-class housewife of a politician. In the scene of traffic jam, Clarissa’s snobbishness towards the middle class is evident: “[T]he British middle classes sitting sideways on the tops of omnibuses with parcels and umbrellas, yes, even furs on a day like this, were, she thought, more ridiculous, more like anything there has ever been than one could conceive; and the Queen herself held up...” (*Mrs Dalloway* 16-17). Clarissa seems to regard the omnibus and its passengers as personally guilty of obstructing the car’s progress. Unlike the middle-class individuals who have to commute to central London by bus everyday, Clarissa is a wealthy housewife with social and economic power, and a privileged *flâneuse*, who could enjoy the freedom to leisurely stroll the city streets.

Apart from her privileged class status, Clarissa’s pleasant walk is only possible due to the specific historical context in which she lives. From Victorian times onwards,

women's involvement in city life has shifted from the domestic to the public sphere, which is manifested by the metropolitan phenomena—the new woman, the working girl, the female shopper; all became growing types of female presence in the modern city. Previously the city streets has been the realm only of men, or of women escorted by men, and of women who had to resort to prostitution for survival. But the early twentieth-century saw an increased freedom to walk alone in certain districts, at least during the hours of daylight, the freedom to work (what Elizabeth wants to do later on in the novel), within certain prescribed limits, as well as the freedom to shop—to wander through the commercial districts in order to look, to compare and to buy. “Female characters from starkly different backgrounds—Ada Moss, the struggling actress forced into occasional prostitution in Mansfield's *Pictures*, Mirian Henderson, the respectable working girl and autodidact in Richardson's *Pilgrimage* and the wealthy politician's wife, Clarissa Dalloway, in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*—are all depicted as being able to enjoy the freedom to walk though London alone” (Seal, “From Streetwalker to Street Walker: The Rise of the *Flaneuse*”). The emergence of consumerism in the early nineteenth century provided legitimacy to women's desire to step outside and embark on street adventures. By opening the door and venturing out, women broke free from patriarchal conventions and limitations, liberating themselves from domestic restrictions and giving rise to a new form of urban subjectivity.

Despite the fleeting moments of freedom and liberation Clarissa experiences while walking, her urban experience primarily characterizes her as a traditional housewife. As a woman walking in a space traditionally dominated by and experienced as masculine, she faces certain challenges. In the midst of the loud noises of the city, she must raise her voice in

order to be heard: “My party to-night! Remember my party to-night! [Clarissa] cried, having to raise her voice against the roar of the open air, and, overwhelmed by the traffic and the sound of all the clocks striking, her voice . . . sounded frail and thin and very far away” (*Mrs Dalloway* 41). Physically, she has to make compromise as well: in the busy traffic of central London, she has to wait “for Durtnall’s van to pass” (3). In the meanwhile, Clarissa is subjected to the male gaze the moment she steps outside her home; when she waits the van to pass, she is scrutinized from a male perspective: “[A] charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her” (3). To those who know Clarissa and to passersby on the street, Clarissa is regarded only as her social role, Mrs. Dalloway, an identity that Clarissa tries to escape throughout the novel.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the social role of the characters correspond to the different districts of London where they traverse. Clarissa walks through Westminster and up Bond Streets, historically a hub for male politics and female social power, while Clarissa’s daughter Elizabeth takes a omnibus ride up the Strand, a newly booming business center of profession male and female (Squier 99). Elizabeth thinks about being a doctor, a farmer, and is quite thrilled with the fact that “every profession is open to women” in her generation (*Mrs Dalloway* 115). Unlike Clarissa, who despises the bus as a vulgar mode of transportation for the middle class, Elizabeth embraces it as a brand new product of the modern era. Amidst bustling crowds, Elizabeth experiences a sense of empowerment and resolution to actively shape the city’s future:

The feet of those people busy about their activities, hands putting stone to stone, minds eternally occupied not with trivial chatterings (comparing women to poplars...) but with thoughts of ships, of business, of law, of administration, and with it all so stately (she was in the Temple), gay (there was the river), pious

(there was the Church), made her quite determined, whatever her mother might say, to become wither farmer or a doctor... it was the sort of thing that did sometimes happen, when one was alone—buildings without architects' names, crowds of people coming back from the city having more power ... than any of the books Miss Kilman had lent her, to stimulate what lay slumbrous, clumsy, and shy on the mind's sandy floor to break surface... an impulse, a revelation, which has its effects forever, and then down again it went to the sandy floor. (116)

Despite both Clarissa and Elizabeth feeling exhilarated while being in the city, their experiences, visions of the world, and conceptions of the self are vastly different from one another. Clarissa has “a passion for gloves” and shoes, while Elizabeth cares “not a straw for either of them” (9). Clarissa knows “nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book, except memoirs in bed” (7), while Elizabeth takes great pleasure in politics and modern history. Clarissa takes pleasure in hosting parties, whereas Elizabeth would rather spend time in the country with her father than at her mother's party. Clarissa feels herself merging with the background, while Elizabeth navigates the city with confidence and determination: “Suddenly Elizabeth stepped forward and most competently boarded the omnibus, in front of everybody” (115). Clarissa is the embodiment of the traditional female role, while Elizabeth rebels against “whatever her mother might say (116)” —against that tradition and presents herself as a new women of modern age.

Apart from Elizabeth's experience in the city, Peter Walsh's urban experience also complements that of Clarissa's. Peter's urban experience characterizes himself as “an active, even daring figure”, who ruled “a district twice as big as Ireland” (*Mrs Dalloway* 43) in India. His walk—“up Victoria Street, down Whitehall, through Trafalgar Square and along Cockspur Street, Haymarket, Piccadilly, and Regent Streets”—emphasizes the imperial and male power (Squier 103). Strikingly, Clarissa's and Peter's reaction and perception of the

London street are antithetically complementary: Clarissa, the refined wife of a socially prominent member of Parliament, a sensitive mother, and elegant society hostess, “experiences in her most intense apprehensions of the urban scene a quasi-physical merging of self and scene”; Peter, the aging bachelor (once briefly married), a colonial functionary (a loser in the eyes of Clarissa), “observes the scene with a similar celebratory feeling, but from a certain distance, on the street, as spectator” (Alter 112). Throughout the novel, Peter’s obsession with voyeurism becomes evident: he glanced into a house through an opened door; he peers up at lit windows; or he glimpses young couples, “dallying, embracing, shrunk up under the shower of a tree” (*Mrs Dalloway* 46); he even pursues a pretty young woman with the red carnation, whom he encounters while walking through Trafalgar Square, until she disappears into a nearby house. After watching her vanish into the distance, Peter stood on the street lost in thought:

It was a splendid morning too. Like *the pulse of a perfect heart*, life struck straight through the streets. There was no fumbling—no hesitation. Sweeping and swerving, accurately, punctually, noiselessly, there precisely at the right moment, the motor-car stopped at the door. The girl, silk-stockinged, feathered, evanescent, but not to him particularly attractive (for he had had his fling), alighted. Admirable butlers, tawny chow dogs, halls laid in black and white lozenges with white blinds blowing, Peter saw through the opened door and approved of *A splendid achievement* in its own way, after all, London; the season; *civilization*. (*Mrs Dalloway* 46-7, my emphasis)

While walking in the city, Peter feels invigorated by the “undulating life-rhythm of the city”—in his own words, “the pulse” of the urban heart (Alter 110). With his harmless exercise in voyeurism Peter presents himself as a “celebratory *flaneur*”, who oscillates between a sense of isolation and a feeling of connection with the urban surroundings; what Peter celebrates is, in his own words, “civilization”—“choreographed rituals of culture”,

which offers him the “spectacle of upper-class life, with its motorcars and fashionably dressed young women, its marble-floored residences presided over by dignified butlers” (109). For Peter, who has just returned to London after spending five years in the colonial provinces, the city presents itself as a grand spectacle and a vivid symbol of imperial power.

Last but not least, Septimus Warren Smith’s urban experiences (especially its connection to his sufferings from ‘shell shock’ and hallucinations of his deceased friend, Evans) characterizes him as a tragic and insane figure. The central London evokes and exacerbates Septimus’ agony, for it serves as a reminder of the political system that causes his sufferings. The processions of youthful soldiers reminds Peter Walsh of the power of empire and “dominance by race and gender” (*Mrs Dalloway* 48); what Septimus sees in the city is “only more evidence of his agonizing sense of turmoil, confusion, and emotional suffocation: lines of lunatics humiliatingly on public display; placards telling of men buried and women burned alive; dead men walking and dogs metamorphosing into men” (Squier 106). Unlike Clarissa’s, Elizabeth’s, and Peter’s enjoyable urban experience, Septimus’s experience of the city is agonizing and insufferable.

For Septimus, the complex urban stimuli produces mental confusion, and the city seems to shower “consciousness with an overabundance of fleeting stimuli that induce a certain disorientation, that transform observation into phantasmagoria or hallucination”; in addition, “his notion of cerebral play does not seem to involve much purposeful poetic construction” (Alter 107). Septimus’s chaotic mind stands in stark contrast to the relatively ordered minds of Clarissa and Peter, who are able to pull pieces of their impressions together, and construct “the world around it from the materials that the world gives it (107)” — “making

it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh” (*Mrs Dalloway* 4); “[A]bsorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness, this life” (*Mrs Dalloway* 139). The city bestows on Clarissa’s and Peter’s consciousness “a plethora of materials” that can be woven together into patterns; consequently, Clarissa and Peter feel “enriched, not daunted” by the urban stimuli (Alter 107). In the case of Septimus, however, the city overwhelms his consciousness with an over-abundance of fleeting stimuli, which induces disorientation and transforms his observation into phantasmagoria and hallucination. Therefore, Clarissa and Peter feel invigorated and enriched by the city, while Septimus experiences only alienation and confusion.

Through the portrayal of how her three main characters interact with and react to the city, Woolf skillfully develops their individual characterizations: Clarissa Dalloway is depicted as a sensitive and compassionate upper-class housewife, while Elizabeth Dalloway embodies the confident and forward-thinking ideals of the New Woman movement; Peter Walsh, on the other hand, is portrayed as an aging bachelor and colonial functionary, and Septimus Warren Smith emerges as a highly complex and deeply troubled character, who suffers from severe psychological trauma as a result of his experiences in World War I. Through portraying the characters’ immersed consciousness as they navigate the city of London, Woolf weaves together different temporalities—the uneasy memories of the past, the anxieties about the future, and the vivid experiences of the present moment of a beautiful June day. It is through the characters’ urban encounters that Woolf is able to achieve the dialectical interplay between London in different temporal dimensions—the London of the present; ancient London in Roman times; and London in the distant future—within the span

of a single day.

The city—perceived and experienced by different characters—becomes “an ephemeral and piecemeal admixture of sense and memory” (Falcetta 113). Although street and place names are mentioned throughout the novel, the reader cannot actually ‘see’ the city; there is none of the painstakingly detailed descriptions of the external environment typically found in realist fiction. What the reader sees is, in effect, a city distorted through the memories, emotions, and associations of the characters. Therefore, instead of a “representation” of the city—or at least certain selected bits and pieces of it—what Woolf actually offers in *Mrs Dalloway* is “a long series of poetic meditations, set in a minimal frame, on the city as a theater of vitality and transience, the city as an image of the human condition” (Alter 120). What we observe is a process of transforming the outside of the metropolis into the inside of mental life; what we experience is the city as a state of mind—a projection of one’s subjectivity; the city is something what the mind actively makes of it, or even transform it.

### **6.3 The Dynamic Interplay between the City and the Self**

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the city is portrayed as an essayistic space, not only in the sense that Woolf’s characters become highly self-conscious in the city, but more importantly, Woolf’s city is a place where the self encounters the public. Woolf foregrounds the dynamic interplay between the internal and external, between the city and the mind. As Clarissa walks through the busy streets of London, a non-stop rain of heterogeneous stimuli falls on her senses, and



what she experiences is a kind of visual and mental fragmentation—an essential element of modernity. Woolf utilizes the technique of fragmented sentences to create the impression of a world in which the present seems disconnected from the past and all subjective experiences of space, time, and human relationships are fragmented. For instance, when Clarissa crosses Victoria Street, she or the narrator (in this case, the narrative situation is ambiguous) contemplates:

For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. 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.  
(*Mrs Dalloway* 4)

Woolf uses fragmented sentences to visualize the fast-changing urban scenes as a series of disjointed images, conveying fleeting and discontinuous effects of the temporal with every picture/scene changing. The emphasis is being placed on the dynamics in terms of time, space, identity; everything is unstable and constantly changing. Through the technique of fragmented sentences, Woolf captures the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent nature of the city, evoking a sense of chaos in the urban atmosphere, and generating a sense of aura, of immediacy, of freshness, of atmosphere. Woolf seems to imply that it is impossible to see the whole picture, or to catch the whole truth, (for instance, the identity of the person in the broken car on Bond Street remains unknown), one must negotiate with the fragmented reality, for the better understanding of city and life. In the meanwhile, the fleeting images of the urban scene records the dynamics of the city, mimicking and establishing the rhythm of the

city life (what Peter refers to as “the pulse of a perfect heart”). It is this rhythm of city life that instills in Clarissa a profound feeling of vitality, and allows her to move “beyond the prospect of her own inevitable death, and beyond the prison of her own subjectivity” (Alter 111).

In an attempt to dive under the surface of things and to explore the depths of human consciousness, Woolf also borrows cinematic technique—particularly montage, through which she connects images of a fragmented world and assembles the pieces of discontinuous thought activity into a specific sequence, without imposing any authoritative order or meaning. Eisenstein’s definition of montage boils down to the concept of “collision”: “[B]y collision. By the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other. By conflict. By collision ... From the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept” (133, original emphasis). The juxtaposition of two elements creates a magical effect, as exemplified by the airplane skywriting scene in *Mrs Dalloway*:

Suddenly *Mrs. Coates* looked up into the sky. The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! Making letters in the sky! Every one looked up. [...]

“Blaxo,” said *Mrs. Coates* in a strained, awestricken voice. [...]

“Kreemo,” murmured *Mrs. Bletchley*, like a sleepwalker. With his hat held out perfectly still in his hand, *Mr. Bowley* gazed straight up. [...]

The aeroplane turned and raced and swooped exactly where it liked, swiftly, freely, like a skater—

“That’s an E”, said *Mrs. Bletchley*— or a dancer—

“It’s toffee,” murmured *Mrs. Bowley*— [...]

It had gone; it was behind the clouds. [...] Then suddenly, as a train comes out of a tunnel, the aeroplane rushed out the clouds again, the sound boring into the ears of all the people in the Mall, in the Green Park, in Piccadilly, in Regent Streets, in Regent’s Park. [...]

*Lucrezia Warren Smith*, sitting by her husband's side on a seat in Regent's Park in the Broad Walk, looked up.

"Look, Look, Septimus!" she cried. [...]

So thought Septimus, looking up, they are signaling to me. Not indeed in actual words. (*Mrs Dalloway* 17-8, my emphasis)

The linear narrative collapses in Woolf's remarkable dealings with the shifting viewpoints. For most of the novel, the reader sees the world from Clarissa's perspective, yet in this airplane skywriting scene, five different perspectives are experienced in just three pages. What is notable here is the juxtaposition of several characters' perspectives and consciousnesses, achieved by means of multiple focalizations. As triggered by the same object or event, the narrative shifts from one character to another seamlessly—Mrs. Coates, Mrs. Bletchely, Mr. Bowley, Lucrezia Warren Smith, and finally, Septimus. By juxtaposing the reactions of different characters to the same stimulus, Woolf presents "a cross-section view of London" (Humphrey 56); and more importantly, the shifting perspectives allows Woolf to introduce "Septimus' psyche in its only overt relationship possible to that of her protagonist—that is, its relation in time and space" (56). If Woolf's narrative perspective jumps directly from Clarissa's to Septimus', it may appear rather abrupt and awkward to the reader, for Clarissa and Septimus, after all, never meet each other in the novel, and their relationship remains largely "tenuous" and "symbolic" (56). However, after multiple shifts in perspective, the transition from Clarissa's to Septimus' consciousness appears to be very smooth and natural.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf not only utilizes the techniques of fragmented sentences and montage, but also highlights the dynamic interplay between urban stimuli and the interior monologue of characters to render the fragmentation of urban experience. The indirect

interior monologue of Mrs Dalloway is constantly interrupted by the hustles and bustles of city, as evidenced by Woolf's syntax and employment of parenthesis, for example, "[M]uch rather would she have been one of those people like Richard who did things for themselves, whereas, *she thought, waiting to cross*, half the time she did things not simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that; perfect idiocy she knew (*and now the policeman held up his hand*) for no one was ever for a second taken in" (*Mrs Dalloway* 9; my emphasis). The interaction between the urban surroundings and Clarissa's inner activities plays a significant role in shaping Woolf's narrative, as the urban stimuli trigger Mrs Dalloway's deeply-buried memory of her past and guides the direction of her thoughts. While walking on Bond Street, she was "fascinated" by the early morning city atmosphere, by "its flags flying; its shops; no splash; no glitter; one roll of tweed in the shop where her father had bought his suits for fifty years; a few pearls; salmon on an iceblock" (*Mrs Dalloway* 9). Just a moment earlier, she feels "the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown" (9). But now, because of the encounter of the glove shop, her thoughts on "this being Mrs Dalloway" in city calls a halt, and she thinks of her Uncle William, her daughter Elizabeth, and the "perfect" pre-War time. She recalls "her old Uncle William used to say a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves"; she remembers "'she has a passion for gloves"; "but her own daughter, her Elizabeth, cared not a straw for either of them" (9).

The interplay between the urban reality and Clarissa's consciousness reaches its peak when she pushes through the swing doors of Mulberry's the florists. Having been dwelling on Miss Kilman for so long, she "cries to herself," "nonsense, nonsense!" (*Mrs Dalloway* 10). Simultaneously she pushes the door of flower shop and stops her thoughts on

the dice of life, on the soul, on the self love and hatred. The stimuli of the city and the innermost thoughts of Clarissa cooperate with each other, producing a fragmented and impressionistic urban experience. The urban surroundings and internal activities constantly interrupt but simultaneously complement each other, creating a sense of urban fluidity where “everything is running together” and “consciousness and city are becoming indistinguishable” (Garvey 60).

#### **6.4 The City as an Organic Whole**

Despite the free flowing of the consciousness, *Mrs. Dalloway* is a well-structured novel, with the upper-class housewife Clarissa and the suicidal war veteran Septimus serving as the main focalizers of the consciousness. The seemingly smooth flow of consciousness is actually the result of meticulous planning and organization. In the year of 2019, Parisian Press SP Books published a facsimile manuscript of *Mrs. Dalloway*, which includes Woolf’s three original handwritten notebooks. These beautiful notebooks offer a unique glimpse into the writer’s mind. Seeing Woolf’s scrawls on the page, the reader can visualize her thinking process and the paths she was exploring. Rather than creating her characters through some predetermined blueprints, Woolf discovers her characters in the process of writing—digging “out beautiful caves” behind her character, as Woolf herself puts it (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume II* 263). Woolf’s notes serve as an excellent guide to her writing process, illuminating the paths she blazed and the discoveries she made along the way. The manuscript reveals Woolf’s hesitation on choosing between the book’s final title “Mrs. Dalloway” and its original name

“The Hours”. The manuscript also shows how the opening of the final version differs dramatically from that of the original draft—the original version begins with the description of the bells and temples of Westminster, which is more overtly concerned with the theme of time, while the beginning of the final version is more succinct and straightforward. More strikingly, the manuscripts also reveals that the original version focuses on Peter Walsh, and Clarissa Dalloway is more of a peripheral character; but during the process of writing, Clarissa moves more and more into the center, and the novel ends up being titled with her married name.

The city of London is crucial to the structure of the novel, as the geography of central London as well as its restrictions shape the flow of consciousness and allow the intense concentration on thought. As mentioned earlier, several prolonged walking scenes of different characters contribute to the narrative’s distinct structure, and the novel is basically a sequence of thoughts interspersed with scenes of action and character interaction that catalyze and provoke further thoughts. While composing *Mrs. Dalloway*, one of the biggest challenges Woolf faces is to organize all pieces of thoughts into a organic whole and connect characters (neighbors, friends, strangers) with each other. Woolf initially came up with the idea of using chorus to connect different parts of the novel. But soon she landed on a better solution—using the natural sound of London—the sounds of Big Ben, to punctuate the story by having these bells as a counter point to each other going off at the quarter hour, the half hour, the hour, each kind of echoing and resonating in the air of London on the beautiful June day in the middle of the heat wave. In the manuscript of *Mrs. Dalloway*, one could see the spaces between various narrative sections. In British edition there are 12 spaces, each space

symbolizing 1 hour of the day. The sound of Big Ben, which recurs throughout the novel, serves as its central motif; it is through the chimes of Big Ben that Woolf synchronizes the lived moments of most of her characters' lives, as one can see from the following passage:

It was precisely twelve o'clock; twelve by Big Ben; whose stroke was wafted over the northern part of London; blent with that of other clocks, mixed in a *thin ethereal way* with the clouds and wisps of smoke, and died up there among the seagulls—twelve o'clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on the bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street. Twelve was the hour of their appointment. Probably, Rezia thought, that was Sir William Bradshaw's house with the grey motor car in front of it. (The leaden circles *dissolved* in the air.) (*Mrs. Dalloway* 80, my emphasis)

The chimes of Big Ben connects Clarissa and the Warren Smiths in “a thin ethereal way”; in the meanwhile, the narrative shifts smoothly from the narrator's perspective into Rezia's consciousness. The line—“[T]he leaden circles dissolved in the air”—has chimed earlier in the novel; it will chime again before the narrative ends. This “familiarity and solidity ground the reader amidst the narrative flux. Repetition within the novel replicates the recursive nature of memory and functions as a marker to help the reader impose order on what might otherwise feel like a chaotic narrative” (Falcetta 129). Additionally, the chimes of Big Ben also reinforced the passage of time and heralded the arrival of death.

The precise and stable calendar and clock time, however, is continually challenged by the constant oscillation of the temporal dimensions. Despite of the fact that Woolf restricts her narration rigorously to the consciousness of her characters, and the temporal oscillations are always motivated through the present stimuli and the personal memories of the characters, the consciousness-centered narrative in fact facilitates a form of “archeological perception of the city because consciousness, though constantly impinged upon by present stimuli, can also exert great freedom in reverting to the cultural past” (Alter

115). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, this aspect of the city as an archaeological site is achieved to a large degree through the focalization of the character—Rezia, Septimus’s wife, who (on her first appearance in the novel) feels foreign and estranged in the British city, and aptly imagines the first encounter of the ancient Romans with the place: “perhaps at midnight, when *all boundaries are lost*, the country reverts to its *ancient shape*, as the Romans saw it, lying cloudy, when they landed, and the hills has no names and rives wound they knew not where” (*Mrs Dalloway* 24, my emphasis). The mental image of ancient Rome that Rezia conjures up stands in sharp contrast to this June day of London in 1923, keenly felt by Clarissa and Peter. Furthermore, it is also through Rezia’s consciousness that Woolf envisions the decay of city in the remote future. In the motorcar accident scene, where Rezia is trapped in the crowd, she imagines the unidentified passenger as

the enduring symbol of the state which will be known to curious antiquaries sifting the ruins of time, when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along the pavement this Wednesday morning are but bones with a few wedding rings mixed up in their dust and the gold stoppings of innumerable decayed teeth. (*Mrs Dalloway* 14)

A city, seen through the filter of consciousness, presents itself “to the awareness of the observer not only as a densely various set of sensory data in the present moment but also as a kind of archeological site, showing traces of its passage through a series of historical strata” (Alter 115). Through Rezia’s consciousness, we experience the dialectical interplay between London in different temporal dimensions—the London of the present; ancient London in Roman times; and London in the distant future. “The vast temporal horizon opened up in the novel both backward and forward” coincides with Clarissa’s ruminations on the transience of human life, the fear of death, and the quest for immortality (117). By emphasizing and



repeating the reflections on mortality and life, Woolf constructs “a system of values based on the vital presence of immediate sensory impressions”, with the joy and vitality of the moment reinforcing the dark reflection on death (110). In so doing, Woolf surpasses the confines of the private consciousness and establishes an organic connection between her characters. The most remarkable instance of this dissolution of private consciousness occurs in the scene of an old beggar woman, who chants in the street with an “voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth”—this scene is observed by both Peter and Rezia:

Through all ages—when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise—the battered woman—for she wore a skirt—with her right hand exposed, her left clutching her side, stood singing of love—love which has lasted a million years, she sang, love which prevails, and millions of years ago, her lover, who had been dead these centuries, had walked, she crooned, with her in May; but in the course of ages, long as summer days, and flaming, she remembered, with nothing but red asters, he had gone; death’s enormous sickle had swept those tremendous hills, and when at last she laid her hoary and immensely aged head on the earth, now become a mere cinder of ice, she implored the Gods to lay by her side a bunch of purple heather, there on her high burial place which the last rays of the last sun caressed; for then the pageant of the universe would be over. (*Mrs Dalloway* 69)

This gloomy meditation resonates with Chang’s desolate view on the fate of human civilization. The extraordinarily long time span—spanning from the prehistoric era of “tusk and mammoth” to the extinction of life on earth—are condensed in a few lines and thus dramatizes the transience of life and civilization; the old beggar woman, portrayed as “a mythic figure persisting through the ages”, takes us through the vicissitudes of time (Alter 118). Interestingly, it is difficult to discern whether this somber reflection belongs to Peter’s internal monologue or to the narrator’s own musings.

One of the notable characteristics of *Mrs. Dalloway* is the narrator’s reluctance

to dominate the narrative, and a character's voice and the narrator's voice often become indistinguishable. It is often difficult to determine whether the sentence belongs to the character's thoughts or the narrator's comments—this is what Banfield calls the “unspeakable sentence” (108). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf blurs the boundary between the character's inner thoughts and the authorial viewpoint of the narrator. Woolf employs neither the omniscient narrator of the nineteenth-century novel and the Edwardian novel who is concerned with external reality, nor the narrator who, is completely absent from the characters' internal monologues (like Molly Bloom's monologue in *Ulysses*). Instead, Woolf simultaneously establishes and undermines the authority of the narrator: she employs free indirect discourse extensively, blurring dichotomies such as “speech/thought, character/narrator, mimesis/diegesis and style/content”, and forcing the reader to “come to terms with the fact of irresolvable readings” (Snaith 71). Free indirect discourse allows Woolf to merge two voices—the narrator's voice as external, and character's inner voice as internal. The negotiation and fusion of these two distinctive voices is the product of the complexity and opacity of inner activities, as Banfield observes, “[T]he mind is never transparent, not even to ‘omniscient narrators’. Rather, its contents are hypothetically reconstructed and represented in a language sensitive to its various modes” (211). Woolf's ambiguous narrative situation draws attention to the impenetrability of the mind, and the fact that a well-crafted narrative is only a radical simplification of experience and consciousness. Narrative is, in essence, only an edited and reduced version of the experienced consciousness, an organized construct of the elusive mind out of chaos.

The true stream of consciousness consists of disjointed and haphazard

impressions and sensations that elude verbal expression. In *Mrs Dalloway*, this sense of opacity is also reflected in the enigmatic and indecipherable nature of the city in which the characters are situated. Woolf seems to imply that one must confront the shock and discontinuity of narration to reveal the “deeper truth” beneath the surface, just as one must uncover the hidden social meanings embedded in the multi-layered fabrics of the city. As in the scene of sky-writing, the crowd outside Buckingham Palace, Septimus, Lucrezia and Clarissa all interpret the smoky letters written by the plane in their own unique ways. “A C was it? an E, then an L? Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing a K, and E, a Y perhaps?” (*Mrs Dalloway* 17). The city is imagined as an essayistic space which prompts the “exemption of meaning”—signs and symbols become “decentered and free floating” and the absolute meaning is dissolved (Barthes, *Empire of Signs* 62). As free-floating signs undermine signification and eliminate finale meaning, the reader is encouraged “not only to absorb the signs on the page but to fill in the missing letters that make up the missing words” (Bradshaw xlv). Just as the message conveyed through sky-writing seems too elusive to grasp at first glance, a novel like *Mrs. Dalloway* will always invite a second reading and encourage new interpretations to ponder.

## **Conclusion**

### **The Essayistic and Modernity**

My thesis investigated the literary representation of reality, the city and the self in the writings of Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf. The research aimed to explore Eileen Chang's and Virginia Woolf's innovative ways of imagining the city and conceptualizing self-experience in different forms of writings—essays, short stories, novellas, and novels. Implicit in my investigation was a particular understanding of modernism's depiction of the city and the self: I viewed literary modernism as a transformative movement that critically interrogated the conventional notions of reality and selfhood; it presented a fresh perspective that acknowledged the significant influence and inherent complexities posed by the modern city on the understanding of reality and selfhood. I regarded the essayistic mode of expression as an integral part of the modernist paradigm. The essayistic is characterized by a critical examination of the comprehensibility of reality, the narratability of the modern experience, as well as the inherent intricacy and open-endedness of that experience.

Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf stand as emblematic figures of modernist literature in their respective contexts of Chinese modernism and English modernism. Although Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf never had the opportunity to meet in person, their literary works engage in a cross-cultural dialogue that surpasses geographical and temporal boundaries. Both Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf perceive reality as a flux—which lacks systematic meaning or coherent order and therefore requires a more flexible and open-ended form of expression to convey its nuanced nature. Chang and Woolf embarked on a parallel mission to capture and portray the intricate complexities and disorienting experiences of the

modern world. They recognized that the traditional narrative forms, with their linear plots and conventional methods of characterizations, were inadequate for conveying the elusive and heterogeneous nature of modern existence. As Chinese writer Zengqi Wang puts it,

Life is scattered, not organized in a clear progression, filled with coincidence, with thousands of possible beginnings and tends of thousands of potential outcomes. There has never been a person for whom every second of life equates to the paragraphs, sentences, words, punctuation, or empty spaces in fiction. (trans. qtd. FitzGerald 1)

The conventional forms of writing fall short of capturing the inherent disorder and uncertainty that define reality. Just like Zengqi Wang, Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf were dissatisfied with the linearity of structured narrative. For Chang and Woolf, it is impossible to render the chaos and uncertainty of reality, as well as the multiplicity and heterogeneity of human existence in a coherent and all-encompassing manner. By deviating from conventional literary forms, Chang and Woolf sought to convey the transient, the uncertain, the discontinuous and the fragmented mode of existence of the modern world. Both Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang embrace the power of digression, and employ a fragmented, non-linear style to capture the fluidity of reality and multiplicity of the modern self. Instead of the conventional narrative view of reality which displays formal continuity and coherence, Woolf and Chang employ the more 'open' form of the essayistic that caters to the fragmented, discontinuous, and incoherent experience of reality.

The essayistic conceptualization of reality in the works of Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf imbues their writings with a modernistic quality. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that their engagements with modernity were situated within totally different cultural contexts. In the discourse of Western modernism, modernity encompasses not only a

material reality arising from industrialism and capitalism but also serves as a form for critiquing modernity itself; modernism, within this framework, represents a form of expression that reflexively engages with the modern lifestyle and experiences through creative means (Chen L. 175). In my investigation of Woolf's engagement with modernity, numerous factors are considered—including the pervasive sense of social alienation, the influence of the psychoanalytic movement, the disorienting impact of two World Wars—all these elements contribute to my understanding of Woolf's response to the complexities and challenges of the modern era. Moreover, Woolf's modernist writing is characterized by its experimental nature. In a way, her modernist writing can be seen as a form of formalism, as it explores innovative literary techniques, experiments with different forms, and breaks away from conventional narrative structures. Woolf is determined to break away from conventional storytelling methods and explore new modes of expression.

In sharp contrast to western modernism, the relationship between Chinese modernism and modernity is more complicated. Chang's writing of 1940s Shanghai and Hong Kong emerged within a dynamic political and cultural milieu, characterized by the enduring presence of colonial powers, the existence of diverse political factions and ideologies, and the looming threat of Japanese invasion. Chang's approach to modernity, however, sets her apart from her contemporaries. Rather than focusing on collective identity or social classes, Chang directs her attention to the struggles and aspirations of individuals as they navigate their daily lives in times of political turmoil. Chang was more concerned with the exploration of individual psychology, personal relationships and the intricate relationship between modernity and tradition. Chang's works were marked by a meticulous observation of

intricate details, subtle psychological discernment, and a touch of sarcasm. In contrast to the idealistic notions of ‘Man’, ‘Self’, ‘China’ embraced by the May Fourth writers, Chang’s essayistic exploration of modernity is defined by her aesthetics of *desolation*. Unlike the optimistic perspective of a modernized China held by the May Fourth writers, Chang perceives the whole human civilization as inherently desolate. She envisions that “the hurried march of modernity”—“the linear, deterministic notion of history as progress (Lee L. 287)”—will eventually culminate in destruction, and “everything one touches will ultimately crumble to nothingness (Chang, *Written on Water* 214)”.

This pervasive sense of ‘nothingness’, emptiness, and disillusionment that permeates the human existence in the modern society is also echoed in the works of Virginia Woolf. In her novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf envisions the decay of city London in the remote future through Rezia’s consciousness. Living in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in turmoil, an era marked by chaos and uncertainty, both Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf bore witness to the profound social and cultural transformations unfolding globally and infiltrating every aspect of life. The traumas inflicted by the two World Wars deeply impacted their consciousness and left an indelible imprint on their artistic expression. The experiences of the World Wars shattered traditional moral, cultural, and historical frameworks, leading to a crisis of faith in established values. Despite remarkable progress in science and technology, the promised liberation of humanity from the constraints of nature and contingency remained elusive. This gave rise to a modern dilemma, wherein the rational and programmatic notion of progress espoused during the Enlightenment can no longer offer the guidance and reassurance individuals sought; as a matter of fact, it frequently clashed with the idiosyncrasy

of human feelings, consciousness, emotions, and sensations. In such a context, Chang and Woolf grappled with the profound challenges of their era. Their writings embody an exploration of the human condition in a rapidly changing world, where the certainties of the past were crumbling, and new possibilities and uncertainties emerged. In the midst of a fragmented and unpredictable world, Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf turned to the essayistic as a means to grapple with the search for, or rather, the loss of, meaning.

### **The City and the Essay**

The unique capacity of the essayistic lies in its capacity to create connections and tensions and to probe the dynamic interplay between external and internal reality, subject and object, individual and collective, whole and fragment, as well as the city and the self. The modern city, in its complexity and heterogeneity, becomes increasingly resistant to narrativization within the constraints of linear, teleological storytelling, and attains its fullest expression in the essayistic form. In this study, I considered the essayistic form as ontologically urban, as uniquely expressive of modern urban experience. Significantly, the essayistic mode of expression plays a significant role in enabling Chang and Woolf to generate nuanced and multilayered portraits of the city and the self—one that acknowledges the multiplicity of human experience and the constant flux of urban reality.

To Chang and Woolf, the city was more than just a physical space—it was a living, breathing organism that encapsulated the essence of modernity. By shifting the focus from physical descriptions of the city to the corresponding thoughts, emotions and



impressions, Chang and Woolf translate the modern urban consciousness into an unique style of writing—the essayistic mode of expression. This essayistic mode of expression takes its shape in the flux and phantasmagoria of the modern city; it constantly opposes the cohesive vision and totalizing mapping of unified narrative. The notion that the city is inherently unnarratable and defies being reduced to a single, overarching narrative is a key feature that defines the modernistic nature of Chang’s and Woolf’s writings.

Both Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf share a profound affection and ardor for the city, and this sentiment has greatly influenced their literary endeavors. The streets, the noises, the crowds, and the city itself as a collective human living conditions and the form of human existence are the sources of their inspiration and creation. In the writing of Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf, the city becomes a tapestry of intertwined stories, experiences, and aspirations, where the pulse of human existence beats in harmony with the urban landscape. The city transcends its physicality and becomes a construction of the mind, a projection of the self, and a manifestation of cultural and historical forces. Beyond its material and physical aspects, the city presents itself as a metaphorical and personalized space where emotions, psyche, memories, and fantasies find their outlet and expression. For Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang, the city itself is a site of complexity and contradiction that is always open to new interpretations. The city is an enigma, a labyrinth that Chang and Woolf try to navigate in their writings.

The essayistic mode of expression, characterized by its non-linear and open-ended structures, serves as a powerful tool for representing the multiplicity of human experience and the flux of urban reality. As my investigation of Eileen Chang and Virginia

Woolf has demonstrated, the essayistic allows them to capture the complexities and contradictions inherent in modern urban life, particularly the dynamic interaction between the self and the city. Chang's and Woolf's utilization of the essayistic in their writings of the city is not a mere coincidence but a product of historical conditions. With the increasing complexity of the modern city, the conventional teleological and linear narratives no longer suffice to effectively depict its nuances. In response, the essayistic mode emerges as a more suitable and perceptive approach to capturing the intricate dynamics and fluidity of urban reality, as well as the elusive nature of consciousness. In this regard, the city transforms into an essayistic space, embodying the very essence of the essayistic form by fostering digression, fragmentation, and dislocation. Much like the essay, the city invites an engagement with intricacies and paradoxes of modernity, allowing for a deeper understanding of modern human existence.

\*\*\*

Despite often being overshadowed by their longer narratives, the essays of both authors hold significant importance and possess substantial value as standalone works. Through my investigation, I have uncovered the significance of the essay as a form and the inherent worth of their essays independent of their fiction. Chang and Woolf regard the essay as a form of self-expression which blends the personal and subjective with the objective and universal to create a unique mode of expression that challenges traditional notions of self, reality, and experience. The essay embraces subjectivity without being self-centered, extending its reach beyond the individual and personal and forging connections with the world and the Other. The essay reflects the process of thinking and essaying, wherein the self constantly adapts

and responds to the experience. The essay values flexibility and spontaneity, and rejects closure and systematic organization. In so doing, the essay is able to encompass fragmented and incoherent elements of experience, without imposing a narrative upon the flux of reality. The essay serves as a metaphor for the city, allowing for a digressive and non-linear expression of urban experience.

Chang's essays are characterized by a natural and fluid writing style that is often compared to the flow of water. Through Chang's artistry, the modern Chinese essay becomes a structure of fluidity and flexibility, where she combines essay writing with other literary and cultural genres. Eileen Chang's essays defy straight narration and instead embody a hybrid of rambling observations, random musings, analytical insights, disjointed reflections, gossipy anecdotes, and engaging conversations. In her essays, literary and art criticism, autobiographical fiction, gossip, conjecture, anecdotes, history, philosophy are all rolled into one. Likewise, Woolf's essays unfold without a predetermined plan or structured framework. Walking and the thoughts that Woolf encounters while walking play a significant role in her artistic and aesthetic practice. Her wandering journey on foot through the city unlocks her unconscious mind, and her essays capture the meandering of her thoughts on paper. With her urban essays formally mimicking the characteristics of the experience of walking in the city, Woolf creates new forms of writing by transforming the urban consciousness into a unique style of writing. This aligns with Benjamin's digressive and wandering urban writings, where the act of walking becomes a metaphorical vehicle for expression.

Through my research, it becomes evident that the modernist short story has emerged as a distinctive and significant form of writing. The modernist short story sets itself

apart from the long narratives in two key elements—its brevity and immediacy, which eventually leads to its ‘intensity’ and its ‘exaggerated artifice’. The modernist short story prioritizes the portrayal of sensations, impressions, and inner experiences, thereby challenging the conventions of chronological order and causality. Compared to the novel with its more extensive scope of time and space, the modernist short story demonstrates an intrinsic ability to capture the episodic nature of modern urban experience. In contrast to the novel, the short story depends less on the development of the plot, or the elements of narrative to hold together. The modernist short story can thus afford to place more emphasis on sensation and inner experience, effectively breaking away from the flow of life (the continuous experience). Compared to the long narrative of the novel, the short story assumes a more formless nature and more faithfully captures heterogeneous impressions and consciousness.

In Woolf’s and Chang’s short stories, the city is imagined as a site of curiosity and mystery, where one encounters hundreds of faceless, mysterious strangers everyday, and bumps up against numerous, unresolved events. Facing the flux of modern urban life, Woolf and Chang mobilize the essayistic in their narratives to consciously subvert the purposeful, cohesive dynamic of the plot, on which realist novels typically rely. The essayistic allows for a more fluid and flexible mode of representation for rendering the elusive and provisional experience of urban chance encounter—what Eileen Chang terms as “nonoccurrence” (“Sealed Off” 251), and Virginia Woolf refers to as “unwritten” (“An Unwritten Novel” 15). The essayistic offers a means to capture the ephemeral and transient nature of urban experiences in a manner that conventional narratives fail to fully convey.

In their novels and novellas, both Woolf and Chang utilize the essayistic to subvert the norms of mimesis and transcend the limitations of teleologically shaped and sustained narrative. However, their approaches to this endeavor differ significantly. Woolf experiments with the genre of the novel and subverts the purposeful dynamics of a novel-shaping master narrative which is teleologically shaped and sustained. By blurring the boundary between the character's inner thoughts and the authorial viewpoint of the narrator, Woolf's narrative creates ambiguity and highlights the inscrutability of the mind and the fragmented nature of impressions and sensations. In contrast, Chang disrupts the conventional coherence of narrative agency in her novellas by introducing a *metafictional* layer of narration. Unlike Woolf's extensive use of free indirect discourse, where the narrator's voice merges with the character's mind, Chang's narrator suddenly jumps out of the character's consciousness and maintains a clearly defined boundary from the story being narrated, thus imbuing the tone with a touch of cold sarcasm.

One of the most distinct and intriguing aspect of Chang's storytelling is the extensive employment of what I refer to as essayistic moments, i.e. when the pace of storytelling slows down and the narrative becomes decentralized and even abruptly pulled away from the development of the plot. These essayistic moments break the continuity of the plot development, and challenges the ongoing cause/effect chain of the narrative. Seemingly unrelated to the plot, such moments are significant because they allow the reader to plunge into the character's consciousness and see the world from his/her point of view. But Chang's essayistic moments are not limited to past memories or present psychological activities of a character. There is also essayistic moments where an arbitrary object is detailed and amplified,

creating an unexpected effect. These essayistic moments (seemingly unrelated to the storyline) challenge the reader's impulse to immediately contextualize it within the narrative, and invite the reader to simply experience that fleeting moment. The non-narrative, essayistic moments conjure up an awareness of the beauty of impermanence and evoke a poignant sense of transience.

In a realistic narrative, a character is functional, and a trait of a character causes immediate consequences. In Woolf's essayistic narratives, however, a trait is manifested in different ways and open to possibilities. In contrast to realistic narratives that exclude other possibilities, modernist narratives such as *Mrs. Dalloway* embrace openness and regard characters as autonomous beings rather than mere plot functions. As a result, modernist characters possess multifaceted personalities that remain open to further exploration, interpretations, and revisions, allowing for ongoing speculation and enrichment. Characters no longer possess fixed and absolute qualities; instead, they exhibit mutable, interchangeable, and sometimes conflicting traits. Characterization shifts from presenting a unified individual to depicting a collection of diverse traits. Actions are no longer used to illustrate the qualities of characters; but on the contrary, characters are subservient to actions and to be derived from the accumulation of experiences and actions.

Realist fiction typically maintains the coherent wholeness of the self, rarely allowing the richly details and intricate design of characterization to undermine it, and psychological complexity is deemed acceptable only when the fundamental structure of the self remains unharmed by fragmentation and the presence of diverse desires. In Woolf's essayistic novel *Mrs Dalloway*, however, such an intelligible, well-defined self is absent.

There is no profound, metaphysical difference between individuals; while individuals do have different properties, these differences are totally trivial. The self is just piles of properties, differing from other selves in endlessly trivial ways. There seems to be a lack of the deep patterns that are supposed to make selfhood distinct and significant. The definition of the self is thus impossible. Unlike a realist character who develops a fuller sense of self through overcoming challenging circumstances, the core of self in *Mrs Dalloway* seems to be devoid and dissolved in the first place. Woolf's essayistic narrative illustrate that the idea of a totality of mental traits that define an individual's personality or self is only a idealized, theoretical construct.

\*\*\*

The essence of the essayistic form lies in its inherent deconstructive nature, as it challenges the realist's notion of a coherent and continuous understanding of reality, self, and city. Rather than adhering to a fixed and stable interpretation, the essayistic embraces the notion of reality as ever-changing and in a state of flux. It recognizes the self as fragmented and dissolved, devoid of a unified and singular identity. Furthermore, the essayistic perceives the city as heterogeneous and multifaceted space that accommodates a diverse array of discourses, narratives, and temporalities. These complexities of reality, self, and city elude the confines of linear narratives, making the essayistic form the ideal medium to capture their dynamic and intricate nature.

Virginia Woolf's understanding of the essayistic is deeply influenced by the ideas of Montaigne, Nietzsche, Bergson, Deleuze, as well as the modernist European essay tradition represented by Lukacs, Benjamin, Musil, and Adorno. On the other hand, Eileen

Chang's conceptualization of the essayistic is more rooted in the philosophical concerns of ancient Chinese philosophy, particularly Taoism. Virginia Woolf's practice of the essayistic emerges as a response to the dogmatic realism, which upheld a positivist optimism that reality is stable and coherent and narrative fiction can effectively represent that objective reality. While realists' narrative strives to present a narratively well-organized world, Virginia Woolf's essayistic mode of writing resists the urge to simplify the complexities of reality into a coherent narrative and instead embraces the fragmentation and uncertainty that is inherent in lived experience. Eileen Chang's engagement with the essayistic is closely intertwined with her aesthetics of *desolation*, which serves as a means to disrupt simplistic mimetic representation and narrow understandings of truth. In Chang's writings, the essayistic becomes a celebration of openness, a process that refuses closure and constantly reminds us of the presence of the Other.

The exploration of the essayistic in this thesis is not only about the practice of the form, but also about its philosophical concerns—its spirit of freedom and adventure, as well as its inherent unfinished nature. In this spirit of the essayistic, it is important to acknowledge that this research primarily focused on the early works of Eileen Chang and Virginia Woolf due to the limited span of the thesis. Further investigation is therefore necessary to delve into the evolving imaginings of the city, the self, and modernity in the broader scope of Eileen Chang's and Woolf's works.



## Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. "The Essay as Form". *New German Critique*, No.32. Spring- Summer, 1984, pp. 151-171.

Alter, Robert. *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*. London: Yale University Press, 2005.

Alexander, Neal. *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011.

Allen, Judith. *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Aristotle. *The Complete Writings of Aristotle*, vol 2, edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Atkins, G. Douglas. *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth*. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2005.

Bahun, Sanja. *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin : University of Texas Press, 1981.

Banfield, Ann. *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1982.

Barthes, Roland. "Writing Degree Zero". *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1984, pp. 26-27.

---. "Inaugural Lecture, College de France." *A Barthes Reader*. ed. Susan Sontag. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

---. *Empire of Signs*. tran. Richad Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

---. "Semiology and the Urban". *Rethinking Architecture*. ed. Leach. London: Routledge, 1997.

---. *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972.

Bartkuvienė, Linara. "Virginia Woolf's Aesthetics of Modern Fiction: Search for Form in a Short Story 'The Mark on the Wall.'" *Literatura* 47.4 (2005): 7-16.

Bateman, Benjamin. "Train(ing) Modernism: Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, and the Moving Locations of

Queerness". *Transport in British Fiction: Technologies of Movement, 1840-1940*. ed. Adrienne E. Gavin, and Andrew F. Humphries. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Curiosities esthétiques*. Paris: Hermann, 1968.

---. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Pléiade-Gallimard, 1961.

---. "The Painter of Modern Life". *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne. 2nd ed. London: Phaidon, 1995.

Baugh, Bruce. "Space and Place: Walking through Kamloops". *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, September, 2010, University of Manitoba, Vol. 43, No. 3 (September 2010), pp. 87-120.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 2000.

Beckett, Samuel. "Dante... Bruno... Vico... Joyce". *Our Examination Round his Factification for Incarnation of Work in Progress*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.

Bell, Quentin. *Virginia Woolf: A Biography, II*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972

Benjamin, Walter. *One-Way Street*. London: New Left Books, 1979.

---. "A Berlin Chronicle". *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, tr. E. Jephcott. New York: Schocken Books, 1978.

---. *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. London: Fontana, 1973.

---. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

---. *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. New York: Verso, 1998.

---. "Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism", *Selected Writings: 1927-1934*, vol. 2, part 1, ed. Michael Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 3-6.

Bernett, Paula Marafino. "Digression and Memory: The Handmaiden Effect." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, fall 2012, Vol. 14. No. 2, Michigan State University Press, pp. 119-127.

Bowley, Rachel. *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Buck, G. *The Metaphor: A Study in the Psychology of Rhetoric*. Ann Arbor: Inland, 1899.

Budgen, Frank. *James Joyce and the Making of "Ulysses" and Other Writings*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Busch, Kathrin. "Phantasmagorical Research: How Theory Becomes Art in the Work of Roland Barthes." *Artistic Research and Literature*. ed. Corina Caduff and Tan Wälchli. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2019.

Butler, Christopher. *Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe, 1990-1916*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Bradbury, Malcolm. "London 1890-1920." *Modernism 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978b, pp. 172-191.

Bradshaw, David. Introduction. *Mrs Dalloway*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Brecht, Bertolt. "On Chinese Acting". *The Tulane Drama Review*, Sep., 1961, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Sep., 1961), Published by: The MIT Press, pp. 130-136.

Byrne, Connor Reed. "Habitable Cities: Modernism, Urban Space, and Everyday Life." *Dalspace*, Dalhousie University, 2010. Web. 5 Jun. 2018. <https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/handle/10222/13030>

Cannella, Shannon M. "The Path Toward the Other: Relational Subjectivity in Modern Chinese Literature, 1919-1945". Thesis published by Columbia University, 2014.

Chang, Eileen. *Written on Water*, ed. Nicole Huang, trans. Andrew F. Jones. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2005.

--- "Sealed Off". *Love in a Fallen City*, trans and intro. Karen Kingsbury. New York: New York Review of Books, 2006.

--- "Love in a Fallen City". *Love in a Fallen City*, trans and intro. Karen Kingsbury. New York: New York Review of Books, 2006.

--- "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier". *Love in a Fallen City*, trans and intro. Karen Kingsbury. New York: New York Review of Books, 2006.

---. *Nightmare in the Red Chamber*. Hong Kong: Huang-kuan, 1996.

---. *Chuanqi zengding ben* [Romances, expanded edition]. Shanghai: Shanhe tushu gongsi, 1946.

Chambers, Ross. *Loiterature*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

Chang, Kwang-chih. *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*. Cambridge & Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Chapman, Michael. "The Fiction Maker: The Short Story in Literary Education". *CRUX: A Journal on the Teaching of English*, 1984, pp. 3-20.

Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Chen, Lingchei Letty. "Reading between Chinese Modernism and Modernity: A Methodological Reflection". *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol. 24, Dec. 2002, pp. 175-188.

Chen, Ellen M. "Nothingness and the Mother Principle in Early Chinese Taoism." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 9.3 (1969): 391–405.

Chen, Lingchei Letty. "Reading between Chinese Modernism and Modernity: A Methodological Reflection". *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Dec., 2002, Vol. 24, pp. 175-188.

Cheng, Kai-Yuan. "Self and the Dream of the Butterfly in the Zhuangzi." *Philosophy East and West* 64.3 (2014): 563–597.

Cheung, Esther M.K. "The Ordinary Fashion Show: Eileen Chang's Profane Illumination and Mnemonic Art." *Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres*. Hong Kong: HongKong University Press, 2012.

Chow, Rey. *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1991.

Corrigan, Timothy. *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

---. "Essayism and Contemporary Film Narrative". *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia*, ed. Elizabeth A. Papazian and Caroline Eades. London: Wallflower Press, 2016.

Cresswell, Tim. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Dawson, W. J. "The Modern Short Story". *The North American Review*, Dec., 1909, Vol. 190, No. 649 (Dec., 1909), Published by: University of Northern Iowa, pp. 799- 810

De Botton, Alain. "What is the stream of Consciousness?" YouTube, uploaded by The School of Life, 7 September 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu9L5zQ4g0Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu9L5zQ4g0Q)

De Certeau, Michel. "Walking in the City." *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Randall. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 91-110.

Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe. Harmondworth: Penguin, 1968.

---. "Fifth Set of Objections to the Philosophical Meditations (Pierre Gassendi) and Replies (Descartes)" (1641). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald

Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984, pp. 179-277.

Derek, Attridge. "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other". *PMLA* (special topic: Ethics and Literary Study 114, 1 (1999): 20-31.

Derrida, Jacques. "Violence et Métaphysique." *In Writing and Difference*. trans. and Intr. Alan Bass. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, pp. 79-153.

Donald, James. *Imagining the Modern City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

---. "The Immaterial City: Representation, Imagination, and Media Technologies". *A Companion to the City*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 46-54.

Dowden, Stephen. *Sympathy for the Abyss: A Study in the Novel of German Modernism: Kafka, Broch, and Thomas Mann*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986.

Eisenstein, Sergei. "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram". *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 127-39.

Eliasova, Vera. "Woman in the City: Female Flanerie and the Modern Urban Imagination." *ProQuest*. UMI Dissertation Publishing, 7 Sept. 2011. Web. 15 Jan. 2022.

Falcetta, Jennie-Rebecca. "Geometries of Space and Time: The Cubist London of "Mrs. Dalloway". *Wolf Studies Annual*, published by Pace University Press, 2007, Vol. 13, pp. 111-136.

Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Feinstein, H. "Meaning and Visual Metaphor". *Studies in Art Education*, 1982, Vol. 23, published by National Art Education Association, pp. 45-55.

Ferguson, Suzanne C. "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form". *Modern Fiction Studies*, Spring 1982, Vol. 28, No. 1, SPECIAL ISSUE: THE MODERN SHORT STORY (Spring 1982), Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 13-24.

FitzGerald, Carolyn. *Fragmenting Modernisms: Chinese Wartime Literature, Art, and Film, 1937-49*. Boston: Brill, 2013.

Foucault, Michel. *Il sogno* [Italian translation of the Introduction in L. Binswanger, *Le rêve et l'existence*]. Milan: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2003.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth, 1953.

Friedman, Norman. "Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition." *Short Story Theory at the*

*Crossroads*. Lohafer and Clarey 13-31.

---. "What Makes a Short Story Short?" *Modern Fiction Studies*, Summer 1958, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer 1958), Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 103-117.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies", *Modernism/ modernity*, 17.3 (2010): 471-99.

Friedrich, Hugo. *Montaigne*, intro. Philippe Desan, trans. Dawn Eng. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991.

Frisby, David. "The Flâneur in Social Theory". *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester. London: Routledge, 1994.

Garvey, Johanna X. K. "Difference and Continuity: The Voices of Dalloway" (1991). *English Faculty Publications*. Paper 3. <http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/english-facultypubs/3>

Genette, Gerard. "Frontiers of Narrative". *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Gilloch, Graeme. *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

Girardot, Norman J. *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: The Theme of Chaos (Hun-tun)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Glenn, Paul E. "The Politics of Truth: Power in Nietzsche's Epistemology". *Political Research Quarterly*, Dec. 2004, Vol. 57, No. 4, published by Sage Publications, Inc. on behalf of the University of Utah, pp. 575-583.

Gleber, Anke. *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture*. Princeton, Nj: Princeton UP, 1999.

Gold, Hazel. "Literature in a Paralytic Mode: Digression as Transgression in 'La Regenta'". *Revista Hispanica Moderna*, Jun., 1995, Ano 48, No. 1, University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 54-68.

Golston, Michael. *Poetic Machinations: Allegory, Surrealism, and Postmodern Poetic Form*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

Good, Graham. *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Goodheart, Eugene. "The Fate of Realism or The Teleology of Narrative". *Salmagundi*, Summer-Fall 1978,

No. 42, *The Politics of Anti-Realism* (Summer-Fall 1978), pp. 74-83.

Goodman, Andrew. "Walking with the World: Toward an Ecological Approach to Performative Art Practice". *Walking and the Aesthetics of Modernity: Pedestrian Mobility in Literature and the Arts*, ed. Klaus Benesch and Francois Specq. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 141-154.

Goodstein, Elizabeth S. *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Groth, Helen, and Natalya Lusty. *Dream and Modernity: A Cultural History*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Gualtieri, Elena. *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past*. New York: St Martin's, 2000.

Gunn, Edward. *The Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking 1937-1945*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

Harrison, Thomas. *Essayism: Conrad, Musil, and Pirandello*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Harding, Desmond. *Writing the City: Urban Visions & Literary Modernism*. New York & London: Routledge, 2003.

Head, Dominic. *The modernist short story: a study in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Heraclitus. *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Hessel, Franz. *Walking in Berlin: a flaneur in the capital*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017.

Highmore, Ben. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Hsia, Chih-ting [C. T.]. "Eileen Chang". *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1971.

---. *The Classic Chinese Novel*. New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1968.

Huang, Nicole. *Woman, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s*. Boston: University of Oxford Press, 2005.

---, Nicole. "Eileen Chang and Alternative Wartime Narrative". *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow, Kirk A. Denton, Bruce Fulton, Sharalyn Orbaugh. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Hull, Simon Peter. *The Familiar Essay, Romantic Affect and Metropolitan Culture: The Sweet Security of*

*Streets*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.

Humphrey, Robert. *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958.

Hunter, Lynette. "Allegory Happens: Allegory and the Arts Post-1926". *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copeland and Peter Struck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Huxley, Aldous. "Preface to *The Collected Essays of Aldous Huxley*." *Essays on the Essay Film*, edited by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

Hühn, Peter. *Eventfulness in British Fiction*. ed. Fotis Jannidis, Matias Martinez, and John Pier Wolf Schmid. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010.

James, William. *The principles of psychology*, Vol I. New York: Holt, 1890.

Jaillant, Lise, and Alison E. Martin. "Introduction: Global Modernism". *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 13, no. 1, Feb. 2018, pp. 1-13.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Random House, 1961.

Kafka, Franz. "On the Tram". *The Complete Stories*, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken, 1971.

Karjalainen, Pauli, and Anssi Paasi. "Contrasting the Nature of the Written City: Helsinki in Regionalistic Thought and as a Dwelling-Place". *Writing the City: Eden, Babylon and the New Jerusalem*, ed. Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, pp. 59-80.

Kern, Stephen. *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Kingsbury, Karen S. Introduction. *Love in a Fallen City*, trans. and intro. Karen S. Kingsbury. New York: New York Review of Books, 2006.

Klein, Lucas. *Written On Water*, Rain Taxi Online Edition, Fall 2005. Web. 10 Sept. 2020. <https://www.raintaxi.com/written-on-water/>

Kornhiser, Laurel Ann. "Junctions: The Railroad, Consumerism, and Deep Time in Nineteenth-Century Literature." *University Libraries*. Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, January 2010. Web. 10 Jan. 2022. <https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/>

Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*. New York: Harper Classics, 1986.

Lamos, Colleen. "Queer Conjunctions in Modernism." *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex*



*Intersections*. Ed. Bonnie Kime Scott. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Langbauer, Laurie. "The City, the Everyday, and Boredom: The Case of Sherlock Holmes", *differences* (1993), 5.3: 80-120.

Larsson, Lisbeth. *Walking Virginia Woolf's London: An Investigation in Literary Geography*, trans. David Jones. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Laughlin, Charles A. *The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

Leach, Neil. *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Le Corbusier. *The City of Tomorrow*, trans. Frederick Etchells. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1971.

Lee, Leo Ou-fan. *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. New York: Random House, 2010.

Lee, Leo Ou-fan. *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Lefebvre, Henri. "Continuities and Discontinuities". *Writing on Cities*, trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

Lehan, Richard. *The City in Literature: an Intellectual and Cultural History*. California: University of California Press, 1998.

Lewis, Tyson E. "The Art of Straying: Benjamin on Distraction and the Informal Education of the City". *Educational Theory*, Volume 69, Issue 2 "Special Issue: Symposium: Urban Education and the Creative City", Apr. 2019, pp. 169-183.

Liu, An (178? - 122 B. C.), *Huainanzi* [The Master of Huainan], ed. And annotated by Gao You (fl. 205? - 212), in vol. 7 of *Zhuzi jicheng* [Collection of Classics].

Link, Perry. *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth Century Chinese Cities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

Lodge, David. "The Language of Modernist Fiction: Metaphor and Metonymy", *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

---. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the typology of Modern Literature*. Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Lopate, Phillip. "Introduction". *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Lovell, Julia. Foreword to *Lust, Caution: The Story*, by Eileen Chang, trans. Julia Lovell. New York: Anchor, 2007.

Löffler Catharina. *Walking in the City: Urban Experience and Literary Psychogeography in Eighteenth-century London*. Stuttgart: JB Metzler, 2017.

Lukács, Georg. *Soul and Form*, trans. Anne Bostock. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1974.

---. *The Theory of the Novel*. Cambridge: The M. I. T. Press, 1971.

Luo, Guanzhong. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, trans. Martin Palmer. London: Penguin Classics, 2018.

Macauley, David. "Walking the City". *The Aesthetics of Human Environments*. ed. Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson. Sydney: Broadview Press, 2007.

Mach, Ernst. *The Analysis of Sensations*. New York: Dover, 1959.

Marcus, John T. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961.

Marcus, Laura. "Virginia Woolf and Digression: Adventures in Consciousness". *Digressions in European Literature: From Cervantes to Sebald*, ed. Alexis Grohmann and Caragh Wells. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 118-129.

---. *Virginia Woolf*. Northcote: British Council, 2004.

Martel, James R. "Walter Benjamin's Black Flashlight: Promoting Misreading over Persuasion to Decenter Textual and Political Authority". *Political Theory*, October 2015, Vol. 43, No. 5.

Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. London: Thousand Oaks, 2005.

Mauthner, Fritz. *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1967.

May, Charles E. "Reality in the Modern Short Story". *Style*, Fall 1993, Vol. 27, No. 3, *The Short Story: Theory and Practice* (Fall 1993), Published by: Penn State University Press, pp. 369-379.

McBride, Patrizia C. "The Narrative Restitution of Experience: Walter Benjamin's Storytelling." *The*

*Chatter of the Visible: Montage and Narrative in Weimar Germany*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2016.

Meretoja, Hanna. "Narrative and Human Existence: Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics". *New Literary History*, WINTER 2014, Vol. 45, No. 1(WINTER 2014), pp. 89-109.

Michaelides, Pavlos E. Modernity and the Existential Metaphysics of Life and Death in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, CD-ROM. ISSN: 1944-6934 :: 09(04):101–118 (2017).

Mieszkowski, Jan. *Crises of the Sentence*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Miller, Donald F. "Metaphor, Thinking, and Thought." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Summer 1982, Vol. 39, No. 2, Institute of General Semantics, pp. 134-150.

Montaigne, Michel de. *Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Essays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.

Musil, Robert. *The Man without Qualities*, trans by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser. London: Picador Classics, 1988.

Nicholson, Geoff. *The Lost Art of Walking: the History, Science, Philosophy, and Literature of Pedestrianism*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Boo, 1966.

---. "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense". *Philosophy and Truth: Selctions from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the 1870s*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale. NJ: Humanities Press, 1979.

---. *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Book, 1974.

---. *The Antichrist*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.

---. "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense". *Philosophy and Truth: Selctions from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the 1870s*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale. NJ: Humanities Press, 1979.

Olson, Elder. "An Outline of Poetic Theory", *Critics and Criticism*, edited by R. S. Crane, pp. 546-566. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Parks, Robert E. "The City: Suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the urban environment (1925)." *The Subcultures Reader*, 2rd, ed. Ken Gelder. London: Routledge, 1997.

Parsons, Deborah L. *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Pasco, Allan H. "The Short Story: The Short of It". *Style*, Fall 1993, Vol. 27, No. 3, The Short Story:

Theory and Practice (Fall 1993), Published by: Penn State University Press, pp. 442-451.

Ping-kwan, Leung. "Two Discourses on Colonialism: Huang Guliou and Eileen Chang on Hong Kong of the Forties". *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*, ed. Rey Chow. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 79-98.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "Review of Twice-Told Tales," *Graham's Magazine*, 1842 May.

Pollard, D. E. Review of *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities*, by Perry Link. *The China Quarterly*, vol 91, Sep. 1982, pp. 524-525.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It". *Poetics*, 10 (1981), 175-94.

Preston, Peter, and Simpson-Housley. "Introduction: Writing the City". *Writing the City: Eden, Babylon and the New Jerusalem*, ed. Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, pp.1-16.

Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols, trans. Various, ed. Christopher Prendergast. London: Penguin, 2002.

Randall, Bryony. *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blarney and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

---. "The Creativity of Language". *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario Valdés. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.

Robinson, Jeffrey C. *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1989.

Rogoff, Seth. *The Politics of the Dreamscape*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

Rosenbaum, S. P. *Women & Fiction: The Manuscript Versions of A Room of One's Own*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

Rossiter, Benjamin, and Katherine Gibson. "Walking and Performing 'the City': A Melbourne Chronicle". *A Companion to the City*. ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen. M. Coverley: Penguin, 2012.

Rummel, Andrea. "The City, the Self and the Real-and-Imagined: Ford Madox Ford and Paris". *Ford Madox Ford's Cosmopolis: Psycho-geography. Flanerie and the Cultures of Paris*. New York: Brill, 2016.

Saloman, Randi. *Virginia Woolf's Essayism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Sandberg, Eric. "Eileen Chang's "Sealed Off" and the Possibility of Modernist Romance". *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 49 no 2, 2018, p.233-256. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/ari.2018.0019.

Sartwell, Crispin. *End of Story: Toward an Annihilation of Language and History*. New York: State University of New York, 2000.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *L'etre et le ndant*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957.

Seal, Bobby. "From Streetwalker to Street Walker: The Rise of the Flaneuse." *Psychogeographicreview* 24 Oct. 2012. Accessed 3 Feb. 2022.

Seeley, Tracy. "Flights of Fancy: Spatial Digression and Storytelling in A Room of One's Own". *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place*, ed. Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth. Chippenham and Eastbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

---. "Virginia Woolf's 'Street Haunting' and the Art of Digressive Passage." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*. Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 2013). Michigan: Michigan State University Press.

Schechtman, Marya. "The Narrative Self". *The Oxford Handbook of The Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 394-418.

Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*. California: University of California Press, 2014.

Scholes, Robert. "Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative". *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 200-208.

Schuman, Rebecca. *Kafka and Wittgenstein: the Case for an Analytic Modernism*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2015.

Schwab, Christinae. "Anthropological Perspectives on the European Urban Landscape." *A Companion to the Anthropology of Europe*, ed. Ullrich Kockel, Mairead Nic Craith, and Jonas Frykman. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*, ed. R. B Parker. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994.

Shih, Shu-mei. *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937*. California: University of California Press 2001.

Shutova, Ekaterina. Devereux, Barry. and Anna Korhonen. "Conceptual Metaphor Theory Meets the Data: A Corpus-based Human Annotation Study." *Language Resources and Evaluation*, Autumn 2013, Vol. 47,

No. 4, Springer, pp. 1261-1284.

Sim, Lorraine. *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Snaith, Anna. *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin, 2001.

Sokel, Walter. "Brecht's Concept of Character". *Comparative Drama*, Fall 1971, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fall 1971), Published by: Comparative Drama, pp. 177-192.

---. "Kafka and Modernism." *Franz Kafka*, new edition, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010, pp. 37-52.

Squier, Susan Merrill. *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Stanchina, Gabriella. "The butterfly dream as 'creative dream:' dreaming and subjectivity in Zhuangzi and María Zambrano". *Asian Philosophy*, 2018, 28:1, 84-95, DOI: 10.1080/09552367.2018.1428049

Strawson, Galen. "Against Narrativity". *Ratio*, Volume 7, Issue 4, published in Dec. 2004. pp. 428-452. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.2004.00264.x> Accessed 22 May 2022.

Sun, Cecile Chu-chin. "Mimesis and Xing, Two Modes of Viewing Reality: Comparing English and Chinese Poetry". *Comparative Literature Studies*, 2006, Vol. 43, No. 3, Classics and Contemporary Literary/Culture/Theory (2006), pp. 326-354.

Swensen, Cole. "On Walking On." *Conjunctions*, No. 63, SPEAKING VOLUMES (2014).

Talay-Turner, Zeynep. *Philosophy, Literature, and the Dissolution of the Subject: Nietzsche, Musil, Atay*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014.

Tao Yuanming. *Tao Yuanming ji* [Tao Yuanming's Works], ed. Lu Qinli. Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979.

Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. "Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu", *Screen*, Volume 17, Issue 2, Summer 1976, pp 41-73.

Topping, Margaret. "Errant Eyes: Digression, Metaphor and Desire in Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time". *Digressions in European Literature: from Cervantes to Sebald*, ed. Alexis Grohmann and Caragh Wells. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 106-117.

Tzu, Lao. *Dao DeJing: The Book of the Way*. California: University of California Press, 1997.

Ventura, Anya. "Virginia Woolf's Pencil". *Ploughshares*, 13<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2018.

Wang, Ban. *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. ed. Bal, Mieke, and Hent de Vries. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Warner, Eric. *Virginia Woolf, The Waves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Watson, Burton. *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. Columbia University Press, 2013.

Weinstein, Philip. *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality". *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 1-24.

---. "The Burden of History". *History and Theory* 5:2, 1966, pp. 111–34.

Whitworth, Michael. "Virginia Woolf and Modernism." *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp 146-63.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Penguin Random House UK, 2016.

---. "Modern Fiction". *Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

---. "Character in Fiction". *Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

---. "The Decay of Essay-Writing". *Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

---. "The Modern Essay". *Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

---. "Craftsmanship". *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.

--- "The Narrow Bridge of Art", *Collected Essays, vol 2*. London: Hogarth, 1966.

---. *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed. Andrew McNeillie. London: The Hogarth Press, 1984.

---. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume II: 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie. London: Hogarth, 1980.

---. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume III: 1925-30*. London: Penguin, 1982.

---. *Collected Essays, vol 4*. London: Hogarth, 1966, 1967.

---. *Mrs Dalloway*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

---. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol.4: 1929-1931*. Ed. Nigel Nicholson. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.

---. *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.

---. "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown". *Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

---. "An Unwritten Novel". *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*. London: Hogarth Press, 1962, pp. 14-26.

---. "The Mark on the Wall." *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. ed. Susan Dick. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1989, pp. 83-89.

---. *The London Scene: Five Essays*. New York: Frank Hallman, 1975.

Wu, K.-M. (1986). Dream in Nietzsche and Chuang Tzu. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 13, 371–382.

Xiao, Chi. *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Dec., 1993, Vol. 15 (Dec., 1993), pp. 17-35.

Yaron, Idan and Herzog, Omri. "Kafka's ruins in popular culture: A story of Metamorphosis." *Journal of Popular Culture* (2013), 46:5, 1092-106.

Yip, Man-Fung. *Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity: Aesthetics, Representation, Circulation*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017.

Yu, Pauline. *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Zahavi, Dan. "Unity of Consciousness and the Problem of Self". *The Oxford Handbook of The Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 316-338.

Zhang, Xudong. *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century*. Duke: Duke University Press, 2008.

Zhang, Longxi. *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1992.

Zhou, Zuyan. Chaos and the Gourd in "The Dream of the Red Chamber", *T'oung Pao*, 2001, Second Series, Vol. 87, Fasc. 4/5 (2001), published by Brill, pp. 251-288.

Zou, Lin. "The Commercialization of Emotions in Zhang Ailing's Fiction". *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (February 2011), published by Association for Asian Studies, pp. 29-51.



Zumthor, Paul. "La brièveté comme forme". *Formation, codification et rayonnement d'un genre médiéval: La nouvelle. Actes du Colloque International de Montréal*. McGill University. 1982. Ed. Michelangelo Picone, et al. Montreal: Plato, 1983, pp. 3-8.