The Affectivity of Music in Virginia Woolf’s “The String Quartet”

Abstract

By using Virginia Woolf’s short story “The String Quartet,” this paper intends to argue that music for Woolf is not just an entertainment. It not only inspires her to revolutionize the formal structure of fiction, but also creates an affect (a nonhuman and de-subjective sensation) in which audience members are transfixed right by the music when it is played. I will draw on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s conception of affect to demonstrate how the narrator/audience member in the short story is penetrated by the strong affectivity of music, so much so that the formal structure is fragmented into a multiplicity in order to render music visible. In other words, with the strong affectivity of music in “The String Quartet,” Woolf accomplishes musicality as an affective writing style. This writing style does not attempt to see how fiction can be structured like music (as the Huxleyan “musicalization of fiction”), but how the content is transformed to be expressive of the intensive affectivity of music whilst the form of expression partakes of certain non-linguistic and pre-personal properties. Musicality in my argument is correlative to Woolf’s “atomic writing” with which she experiments and intends to achieve in this short story.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, “The String Quartet,” music, affect, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari