



The Convergence between Prose and Poetry in Virginia Woolf's "Blue & Green"

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the point of intersection and the moment of cross-fertilization between prose and poetry in Virginia Woolf's experimental sketch, – "Blue & Green". It provides an in-depth analysis of Woolf's poetic technique in her short story in which she utilizes most of the features of poetry such as imagery, anaphora, alliteration, repetition, rhythm, and rhyme. Although classified as a short story, "Blue & Green" defies the definition of short stories as it transcends the traditional literary parameters such as plot, characterisation, and setting. Thus, this paper aims to show that "Blue & Green" can be read as a highly descriptive and sensational prose poem. Using rhythmic and poetical prose, the masterpiece which is narrated in the present tense, is carefully measured by many semi-colons and commas that hold the words and narrative together. This can be seen to herald Woolf's more liberated style of prose writing that followed.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, "Blue & Green", short story, poetry, prose poem, and poetic technique

Virginia Woolf's experimental sketch "Blue & Green" has been seen by some critics such as Jean Guiguet (1965) and Dean Baldwin (1989) as an impressionistic and meditative sketch. They make a comparison with painting to indicate the absence of all narrative structure in "Blue & Green" (Guiguet, p. 331). They study Woolf's text as an Impressionist painting focusing on the effect of light upon certain object (Baldwin, p. 26), in the same way, that the Impressionist painters study the influence of light variation on single object at different times of the day.

Other critics, among them Nena Skrbic (2004), Christine Reynier (2009) and Michael Bell (2012) perceive "Blue & Green" as in dialogue with the post-impressionist theories of visual representation, and the exploration of the visual dimension of prose. Skrbic makes the logical link between "Blue & Green" and post-impressionism; she argues that inspired formally by the post-impressionist movement, "Blue and Green" aims to make

a visual statement and might described as passing observations rather than stories shaped by a clear narrative vision. They are linked to the post-impressionist view of art as 'subject less' and use a 'language of form and colour' to bring form in close alliance with the chaos of sense perception (p. 50).

Skrbic's argument implies that "Blue & Green" seems to be a visual painting using the language of form and colour rather than to be a story with a clear subject and clear narration. So the understanding of Woolf's "Blue & Green" depends on the reader's imagination to transform the words into a pictorial image. Similarly, Kathryn Benzel (2004) emphasises that Woolf's sketch can be seen reacting against the conventional narrative sense of plot and characterization, and replacing it by a visual and painting-like structure. Benzel (2004) confirms that

some of [Woolf's] lesser-known short stories are labelled as sketches or caricatures rather than short stories. "A Haunted House," "Blue & Green," "Monday or Tuesday," and "The String Quartet" are stories that seem to defy definition as sketches or caricatures or short stories. To read these pieces is not to accumulate details in the conventional narrative sense of plot and characterisation, but to experience a visionary moment (p. 157).

While most of the writers studied Woolf's "Blue & Green" as an impressionist or post-impressionist sketch focusing on the way that Woolf uses light, colour and form to create a visual moment, this paper sheds light on the point of convergence and the moment of intersection between prose and poetry in Woolf's prose poem – "Blue & Green". It provides an in-depth analysis of Woolf's poetic technique in her text in which she utilizes most of the features of poetry such as imagery, anaphora, alliteration, repetition, rhythm, and rhyme. This paper aims to show that "Blue & Green" can be read as a highly descriptive and sensational prose poem. Using rhythmic and poetical prose, the masterpiece which is narrated in the present tense, is carefully measured by many semi-colons and commas that hold the words and narrative together. This can be seen to herald Woolf's more liberated style of prose writing that followed.

“Blue & Green” was first published in 1921 in *Monday or Tuesday*, a collection remarkable for “reformulating the definition of ‘story’ to eliminate its orientation toward an event” (Skrbic, 2004, p. 49). Although classified as a short story, “Blue & Green” defies the definition of short stories as it is liberated from the traditional literary parameters such as plot, characterization, and setting. Woolf asserts in “Modern Fiction” (1919) that “if [the writer] could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style” (1966, p. 106). In regard to “Blue & Green” and “Monday or Tuesday”, Valerie Shaw (1983) observes that both sketches transcend the traditional short story parameters:

Dissatisfaction with the medium in which stories are told, made Virginia Woolf cultivate a lyrical style in an attempt to bring words closer to the effects of line and colour which she admired in painting. The result was to dislodge the narrative element of prose fiction so radically in favour of sensations and atmospheres that in Woolf’s case it becomes more appropriate to talk of “sketches” than of “stories” (p. 16).

In one of her earliest essays, “The Decay of Essay-writing” (1905), Woolf realises that modern consciousness needs to “liven the faded colours of bygone ages” and, hence, replace the old commodities with “fresh and amusing shapes” (Bowlby, p. 5), affirming that any new “peculiar substance” requires a new narrative form: “you can say in this shape what you cannot with equal fitness say in any other” (Ibid., p. 6). As early as 1908, Woolf reveals to her brother-in-law, the art critic Clive Bell, her aim to approach a new way of writing fiction, as she confides her ambitions to refashion and “reform the novel and capture multitudes of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, and shape infinite strange shape” (1975, p. 356). Again in 1916 in her essay “Hours in a Library”, she asserts the need for a new form of writing to reverse her dissatisfaction with the prevailing form of fiction, insisting that literature was in need of “new forms for our new sensations” (1966, p. 39).

This new narrative form that Woolf seeks to originate is the fusion of prose and poetry – through the arrangement of words, syntax, and figurative language – to create a newly intersected writing style. It is clear that Woolf’s desire to experiment with the new modern style does not include only the novel, but extends to embrace other forms of short fiction. In 1917 she expresses her frustration and dissatisfaction with “the frightfully” and “overpowering” novel, adding “I dare say one ought to invent a completely new form. Anyhow its very amusing to try with these short things” (1976, p. 167). Only four years after this letter, her experimental short story collection, *Monday or Tuesday*, was published.

John Lehmann argues that after the publication of her notable collection of short stories in *Monday or Tuesday*, Woolf succeeded in merging elements of poetry into her prose: “from that moment onwards Virginia Woolf was to remain more poet than novelist, forever searching for new means of dissolving prose into poetry, of refining away all but the husk of action in works which still went under the name of novels, and irradiating them with this strange new light” (1944, p. 150).

Before undertaking the analysis of the “Blue & Green” as a prose poem, it is appropriate to reflect on the definition and the different features of prose poem, the term which recurs throughout the paper.

In his introduction *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology* (1976), Michael Benedikt describes the formal characteristics of this literary form, which he perceives to be “a genre of poetry, self-consciously written in prose, and characterized by the intense use of virtually all the device of poetry, which includes the intense use of devices of verse. The sole exception to access to the possibilities, rather than the set priorities of verse is, we would say, the line break” (p. 47).

According to Stephen Fredman (1990), the prose poem evidences “a fascination with language (through puns, rhyme, repetition, elision, disjunction, excessive troping, and subtle foregrounding of diction) that interferes with the progression of story or idea” (p. 1).

Additionally, David Lehman also defines the prose poem, shedding light on its features as he points out that the prose poem

is a poem written in prose rather than verse. On the page it can look like a paragraph or fragmented short story, but it acts like a poem. It works in sentences rather than lines. With the one exception of the line break, it can make use of all the strategies and tactics of poetry. Just as free verse did away with meter and rhyme, the prose poem does away with the line as the unit of composition. It uses the means of prose toward the ends of poetry (2003, p. 13).

In “Blue & Green” Woolf sets out to portray the sensation of colour in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. Beginning with the title – “Blue & Green” – it is written in italics with the symbol (&) in between, and is divided into two descriptive paragraphs facing one another on two pages with the subtitles “GREEN.” and “BLUE.” written in capital letters with a full stop following each subtitle as seen in the original Hogarth edition of *Monday or Tuesday* (Sim, 2010, p. 73). The way that Woolf writes the title and subtitles gives the reader a hint of what is to come. Woolf touches on an idea that was to be popularized by Clive Bell and Roger Fry and that became widely associated with Post-Impressionism, that of “significant form”, where art is viewed as using the “language of form and color” (Fry, ‘Post-Impressionism’, p. 17, 2006), a language in which form and content are bound together to create a visual language through visual metaphors and the arrangement of syntactic elements.

Woolf places “GREEN.” on the left side of the page describing the different colours and shapes that are produced when the lustre dropped on the white marble during daylight. In contrast, “BLUE.” stands on the right side of the page, the green light with the sun’s rays missing, as it is night time. Again, the various images of colours as perceived by the viewer are depicted.

In order to begin the analysis of “Blue & Green” as a prose poem, line breaks and capital letters are added to make the paragraphs look like poems. However, the words and punctuation are exactly as in the original copy.

GREEN.

THE PORTED fingers of glass hang downwards.
 The light slides down the glass, and drops a pool of green.
 All day long the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble.
 The feathers of parakeets — their harsh cries — sharp blades of palm trees — green, too;
 Green needles glittering in the sun.
 But the hard glass drips on to the marble;
 The pools hover above the desert sand;
 The camels lurch through them;
 The pools settle on the marble;
 Rushes edge them;
 Weeds clog them;
 Here and there a white blossom;
 The frog flops over;
 At night the stars are set there unbroken.
 Evening comes,
 And the shadow sweeps the green over the mantelpiece;
 The ruffled surface of ocean.
 No ships come;
 The aimless waves sway beneath the empty sky. It’s night;
 The needles drip blots of blue.
 The green’s out (Woolf, 2003, p. 136).

BLUE.

The snub-nosed monster rises to the surface and spouts through his blunt nostrils
 two columns of water,
 Which, fiery-white in the centre,
 Spray off into a fringe of blue beads.
 Strokes of blue line the black tarpaulin of his hide.
 Slushing the water through mouth and nostrils he sings,
 Heavy with water,
 And the blue closes over him dowsing the polished pebbles of his eyes.
 Thrown upon the beach he lies,
 Blunt, obtuse, shedding dry blue scales.
 Their metallic blue stains the rusty iron on the beach.
 Blue are the ribs of the wrecked rowing boat.
 A wave rolls beneath the blue bells.
 But the cathedral’s different,
 Cold, incense laden, faint blue with the veils of madonnas (Woolf, 2003, p. 136).

“Green” begins with observations during the daytime where the green light is being personified as having “ported fingers” from which drops of green colour slide down the glass. This personification embodies a metaphor around an

artist who is while pouring paints on his/her canvas, the dots of colour dropping unintentionally upon the marble. As the sketch progresses another metaphor to portray the green colour is used; the “feathers of parakeets” is being compared with “sharp blades of palm trees” which look like “green needles glittering in the sun”. To connect these phrases together, Woolf does not use linking words; instead she draws line form, or in other words, parenthetical dashes: “The feathers of parakeets — their harsh cries — sharp blades of palm trees — green”. Again, her style is compared with the post-impressionist idea of “significant form”, as Fry points out that “[t]he artist plays upon us by the rhythm of line, by colour, by abstract form, and by the quality of the matter he employs” (Fry, 2006, p. 14). Additionally, it is clearly apparent that as a poet, Woolf indulges herself in the poetic style through the high preciseness of figures of speech. As noticed above, in five short lines, three different figures of speech are being used; personification, metaphor, and simile.

The second group of lines, which extends from line 6 to line 13, is characterized by the succession of semicolons, which shows the variant elements that Woolf uses to achieve the poetic effect:

But the hard glass drips on to the marble;
 The pools hover above the dessert sand;
 The camels lurch through them;
 The pools settle on the marble;
 Rushes edge them;
 Weeds clog them;
 Here and there a white blossom;
 The frog flops over;

It is clearly evident that if each line is read individually, with a pause after each one, the narrative looks like a fragmented short story. However, the sketch acts like a poem with the use of semicolons which hold the narrative together and allow the reader to move from one line to the next without pause, as if moving from one line to another in a stanza. Concerning the sequence of semicolons, Nena Skrbic points out that their succession, with no end-stops, which holds the words together and looks like a consequence of fragmented sentences, sketches a thin narrative stretched thin. Added to this, Skrbic argues that “*the series of semicolons act as a sort of visual tagline, forcing the reader to break up the reading experience into a series of visual frames*” (Skrbic, 2004, p. 54).

Moreover, the poetic coherence is achieved through Woolf’s skilful employment of anaphora by the repetition of “the” at the beginning of successive clauses, which is repeated twenty four times throughout the sketch.

In addition to the anaphora that Woolf employs in “Green”, the repetition of certain words serves to give emphasis; as for instance, each of “glass”, “marble”, and “pool(s)” is repeated three times while “green” is repeated six times in the text and twice in the title and subtitle. That is to say that the elements which are very important in depicting the reflection of the green colour on the marble are repeated to emphasise this pictorial image.

Also the pronoun “them” is repeated three times at the middle of the sketch and in clauses that are equal in length, portioned by semicolons, and act as an end rhyme:

But the hard glass drips on to the marble;

 The pools hover above the dessert sand;
 The camels lurch through **them**;

 The pools settle on the marble;

 Rushes edge **them**;

 Weeds clog **them**;

According to Skrbic, “[t]he repetition of ‘them’ compels the reader to read spatially, ‘to look for similarities,’ producing an experience that is almost the antithesis of reading in time” (2004, p. 54).

Added to this, the alliterative patterns and the initial rhyme as shown in the italicised and underlined consonants below also work to create the poetic effect:

THE PORTED fingers of glass hang downwards. a
The light slides down the glass, and drops a pool of green. b
 All day long **the** ten fingers of **the** lustre drop green upon **the** marble. c

The feathers of parakeets — the ir harsh cries — sharp blades of palm trees — green, too;	d
Green needles glittering in the sun.	e
But the hard glass drips on to the <i>marble</i> ;	c
The pools hover above the dessert sand;	f
The camels lurch through the m;	g
The pools settle on the <i>marble</i> ;	c
Rushes edge the m;	g
Weeds clog the m;	g
Here and the re a white blossom;	h
The frog flops over;	i
At night the stars are set the re <i>unbroken</i> .	j
Evening <i>comes</i> ,	k
And the shadow sweeps the green over the mantelpiece;	l
The ruffled surface of <i>ocean</i> .	j
No ships <i>come</i> ;	m
The aimless waves sway beneath the empty sky. It's <i>night</i> ;	n
The needles drip blots of blue.	o
The green's <i>out</i> .	n

To outline the rhyme scheme of this sketch, it would be as follows: *abcdecfgchhijklmknopo*. The first nine lines form one unit, consisting of two non-rhyming lines followed by a rhyming line (abc, dec, fgc). The next three lines again comprise a distinct unit, in which the first and second lines rhyme while the third is non-rhyming (ggh). In the next two units, the lines are non-rhyming; however, the second line of the first unit rhymes with the second line of the second unit (ijk) and (ljm). The sketch finally ends with the first line rhyming with the third line (non). As a whole, the sketch is therefore, an assortment of different rhyming techniques. Some lines rhyme together while others either fail to rhyme or are completely free of rhyming. The entire sketch can be said to rhyme, but it would be misleading to suggest it as having a rhyme scheme. All of these poetic devices show that Woolf creates a prose poem that is symmetrically arranged.

Furthermore, it is important to shed light on the various types of imagery that Woolf utilises since the aesthetic appreciation and the emotional experience of poetry do not only emerge from rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, simile, and symbols, but also from imagery. "GREEN" is rich in sensuous imagery as now discussed:

Woolf begins this sketch with a visual image, depicting a ray of green light dripping onto the marble, thereby encouraging the reader to enter a world of imagination through his/her journey of discovering the sensation of colour. The sense of visual is also reinforced by the idea of green colour. The image is visual but the other sense is clearly tactile shown by the words "slide down" and "drops" which imply contact between the light and the glass, and the marble surface:

THE PORTED fingers of glass hang downwards. The light slides down the glass, and drops a pool of green.
All day long the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble.

In the following cluster of clauses, Woolf mixes visual, tactile and auditory imagery; the feathers of the parakeets are glittering like the green needles of palm trees gleaming in the sun. Yet the heat of the sun on the blades of the palm trees will also be felt as a tactile experience. The auditory image recurs with the harsh cries of the parrots:

The feathers of parakeets — their harsh cries — sharp blades of palm trees — green, too; green needles
glittering in the sun.

Woolf once again combines visual imagery with tactile imagery. Here, she creates a visual image of the pools settling upon the desert land and a tactile image created by the meeting of the camel's legs with the sand.

The pools hover above the desert sand; the camels lurch through them.

"GREEN" ends with a visual image when the green light begins to fade away as evening falls; the viewer feels the atmosphere of the coming of the night; the shadow touches the surface of the ocean; no ships; the waves moves forth and back; the green light is out and new blue light starts to emerge, evoking the image of the sea:

At night the stars are set there unbroken. Evening comes, and the shadow sweeps the green over the mantelpiece; the ruffled surface of ocean. No ships come; the aimless waves sway beneath the empty sky. It's night; the needles drip blots of blue. The green's out.

With the vanishing of the green light, the second sketch, "BLUE" has beautifully controlled the narrative and begun by portraying the perception of blue at night when the sunlight has completely disappeared and the colour is inconspicuous.

In comparison to "GREEN", "BLUE" is syntactically smoother; long sentences including no breaks, nor dashes or semicolons:

The snub-nosed monster rises to the surface and spouts through his blunt nostrils two columns of water, which, fiery-white in the centre, spray off into a fringe of blue beads.

[...] Slushing the water through mouth and nostrils he sings, heavy with water, and the blue closes over him dowsing the polished pebbles of his eyes.

Thrown upon the beach he lies, blunt, obtuse, shedding dry blue scales.

Their metallic blue stains the rusty iron on the beach. Blue are the ribs of the wrecked rowing boat.

[...] A wave rolls beneath the blue bells. But the cathedral's different, cold, incense laden, faint blue with the veils of madonnas.

As Woolf continues to use imagery to strengthen the reader's engagement with the text and to reconstruct the development of the narrative in "GREEN", she follows the same technique as in "BLUE". Everything in her sketch is translated into imagery. She begins her narrative with a visual image:

The snub-nosed monster rises to the surface and spouts through his blunt nostrils two columns of water, which, fiery-white in the centre, spray off into a fringe of blue beads. [...] Slushing the water through mouth and nostrils he sings, heavy with water, and the blue closes over him dowsing the polished pebbles of his eyes.

While the image is visual, it is clear that the primary sense here is the auditory one, represented in the sound of the splashing of water through the monster's mouth and nostrils. There is also the idea of auditory evocation in the action of singing.

Multiple sensory clustering in "BLUE" helps the reader to imagine the transformation of blue colour in addition to its different shades that have been depicted. It is clearly seen in the following lines:

Thrown upon the beach he lies, blunt, obtuse, shedding dry blue scales. Their metallic blue stains the rusty iron on the beach. Blue are the ribs of the wrecked rowing boat. [...] A wave rolls beneath the blue bells. But the cathedral's different, cold, incense laden, faint blue with the veils of madonnas.

The overall image starts out visually with the monster lying upon the beach and "shedding" his "scale", then the tactile sense is inferred when his body touches the beach. This is followed by the auditory sense of the rowing of the boat and the rolling of the waves, culminating again with the visual reference to colour in the metallic blue stain. One could say that Woolf combines the three senses repeatedly to further intensify this image.

Beyond the imagery techniques already mentioned, Woolf has skilfully mastered the sound techniques which are certainly important elements of her craft. To enhance the integrity of her prose poem, to create a musical quality, and to establish rhythm within it, she uses a good deal of alliteration. John Strachan and Richard Terry clarify the impact of alliteration on the structure of the poem as creating both integrity and formal connections between the lines of the poem:

The effect of alliteration is to create a formal connection between the first and second halves of the line (or between the first half-line and second half line as it would originally have been). In this sense, it gives a structural integrity to the poem and also, as all sound patterns do, lends it a sort of musicality. Yet, the sound-patterning overall serves a functional rather than a descriptive purpose (Strachan and Terry, 2011, p. 50).

The alliterative patterns in "snub", "surface", "spouts" and "spray"; "water", "which" and white; "fiery" and "fringe"; "blunt", "blue" and "beads"; "blue" and "black"; "his" and "hide"; "he" and "heavy"; "with" and "water"; "beach", "blunt" and "blue"; "ribs", "wrecked", and "rowing"; "beneath", "blue" and "bells"; "but" and "blue" help to establish rhythm within this prose poem, and to create formal connections between the words in a series which ultimately provides the text with structural unity and coherence.

Repetition of certain words is another technique that Woolf uses to create sound effect and to provide her prose poem with a regular pattern; for example, each of the words "blunt" and "nostrils" is repeated twice, while "water" is repeated three times, and the word "blue" is repeated nine times in the text, and twice in the title and subtitle.

The overall poetic technique that Woolf applies in “Blue & Green” shows that her experimental sketch can be considered as a prose poem rather than a short story.

Three years after the publication of “Blue & Green”, and while working on *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf records her desire for writing poetry:

It is poetry that I want now – long poems. Indeed I’m thinking of reading [Thomson’s] *The Seasons*. I want the concentration & the romance, & the words all glued together, fused, glowing: have no time to waste any more on prose. Yet this must be the very opposite to what people say. When I was 20 I liked 18th century prose; I liked Hakluyt, Merimee. I read masses of Carlyle, Scott’s life & letters, Gibbon, all sorts of two volume biographies, & Shelley. Now its poetry I want, so I repeat like a tipsy sailor in front of a public (Woolf, 1978, p. 310).

In her essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art” (1927), which is also known as “Poetry, Fiction and the Future”, Woolf proclaims her dissatisfaction of the traditional way of using prose as it is the common and ordinary form used by all types of people to achieve the common purposes of life; “[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 businessmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants”. Therefore, she looks forward to creating a new shape of writing, which she proposes will resemble poetry in the sense that it will have ‘much of the ordinariness of prose’ but many of the features of poetry:

[It] will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose [...] it will express the ideas of the characters closely and vividly, but from a different angle. It will resemble poetry in this that it will give not only or mainly people’s relations to each other and their activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude (1966, pp. 224–5).

By blurring the lines between prose and poetry, Woolf aims to illuminate the role played by poetry when used together with prose. As quoted above, poetry “will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude”, in addition to the emotions that are aroused and the beauty that is produced, as she says: “poetry has always been overwhelmingly on the side of beauty. She has always insisted on certain rights, such as rhyme, metre, poetic diction” (1966, pp. 223).

“Blue & Green” crystallizes Woolf’s aspiration to develop a new way of writing the novel. In fact, the sketch anticipates *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To The Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and *The Waves* (1931) in which the form of writing definitely embraces poetical attributes. Hence “Blue & Green” can be seen as spearheading Woolf’s new and alternative way of representing fiction, that being one in which genre, prose and poetry intertwine to create a different and more appealing aesthetic.

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