

Feminism Revealed From Lily's Picture in *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract

Narration about Lily and her picture runs through Woolf's masterpiece *To the Lighthouse*. Through analyzing the metaphor of Lily holding a brush and the blankness left in the middle of the picture, this paper aims to illustrate the feminist thoughts revealed from the picture.

Key words: Feminism; Blankness; Lily's picture; Women; Men

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INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* presents the story of an eminent scholar's family, the Ramsays. At the beginning of the story, the Ramsays are on vocation with some friends in their seaside villa. The youngest child James asks to go to the lighthouse the next day, which receives warm response from Mrs. Ramsay with "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow" (Woolf, 1994, p.1), but cold disapproval from Mr. Ramsay with "But it won't be fine" (p.1). The scene changes from Mrs. Ramsay attempting to distract her son from disappointment to other members. Then in the flow of consciousness, Mrs. Ramsay remembers that she is supposed to be keeping her head as much as possible in the same position for Lily Briscoe, who is painting her. Lily Briscoe, a friend of the Ramsays', comes to stage as a single woman painter, who

has been trying to draw a picture for the mother and her little son. During the painting, somehow it seems a bit difficult for her to deal with the blankness in the middle of the picture, which perplexes her even at the following dinner party. The unfinished picture is put aside for ten years during which Mrs. Ramsay has passed away. It is until the Ramsays return to the villa that the picture is mentioned again. When Mr. Ramsay sails with his two children to the Lighthouse, Lily struggles with her aesthetic problem, finally resolving them as the Ramsays land at the lighthouse and the novel ends.

1. WOMAN FROM HOLDING KNITTING NEEDLES TO A BRUSH

The narration about Lily and her painting occupies a considerable length of the story and the novel ends with the completion of her picture, which is no doubt of particular importance to the theme. "As Woolf certainly intended, Lily Briscoe's paintings have usually been read as analogous to the novel itself, implying in turn that Lily represents Woolf herself" (Hussey, 1995, p.42). As a pioneer of feminism, Woolf expresses her feminist thoughts through novels. Likewise, her consciousness of feminism may be supposed to express through Lily's picture.

Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are the two important female figures in the novel. An in-depth analytic comparison had better be made between the two women in order that we have a good understanding of the theme.

It is notable that Lily has a special intimacy for Mrs. Ramsay. She has to "control her impulse to fling herself (thank heaven she had always resisted so far) at Mrs. Ramsay's knee and say to her—but what could one say to her? 'I'm in love with you?' No, that was not true" (p.14). When Mrs. Ramsay makes a night visit to Lily and tries to persuade her to marry, she "laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay's lap and laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed almost

hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand" (p.36).

Some critics hold that these descriptions reveal Woolf's lesbian attachment to Mrs. Ramsay. About their relationship, Lisa Williams says that "Lily is like a bee drawn to the intangible... Lily's unfulfilled lesbian longing for this Mrs. Ramsay, the icon of Victorian womanhood, leaves her completely isolated. Even though Lily can reject the values Mrs. Ramsay represents, she is still nonetheless in love with her" (Williams, p.143). She also points out that Mrs. Ramsay and Lily have set up a special mother-daughter relationship, both of whom are artists to some extent. They depend on each other and reject each other at the same time.

In my opinion, Lily's attachment to Mrs. Ramsay can never be regarded as a lesbian eroticism. As an unmarried, plain-looking but independent woman, Lily represents the spirit of woman's pursuit of equality and emancipation. Her appearance and character don't cater to the needs of men. It seems that Woolf doesn't want to relate this woman to anything that men like. However, it is evident that in order to pursue her ideal, Lily has sacrificed a lot including youth, love and comfortable life. Her attachment to Mrs. Ramsay indicates her longing for return to women's traditional role. Mrs. Ramsay, "as a symbol of white western beauty and fertility, romanticized and adored by men, and at the same time emotionally battered by their tempers and demands", has to suppress herself all the time so that little by little has turned an instrument and accomplice of male discourse hegemony (Williams, p.143). She feels the helplessness when her requirement of going to the Lighthouse is rejected by her husband. In her subconscious, there must have been the idea of women's independence and equality. Her appreciation of Lily also shows the longing for the independent role of woman. All in all, under patriarchy, woman's personality is split. Maybe as the two aspects of women, neither Mrs. Ramsay nor Lily is the perfect state of woman.

In the novel, whenever Mrs. Ramsay is free, she occupies herself with knitting stockings which she intends to present the lighthouse keeper's boy. Knitting, or needlework, is often regarded as a symbol of women's traditional role in literary works. It is a legal and allowable means of self-expression prescribed by men in patriarchal system since in ancient time "women are unable or unwilling to write their own history, and often resort to needlework" (Fitzwilliam, p.12).

The scene of Mrs. Ramsay knitting stockings appears again and again, which carries multiple meanings. Firstly, in the overwhelming patriarchal society, knitting, as a traditional role of women, is prescribed by men. Through this prescription, women are confined to household and unable to compete with men in any other social fields. Secondly, women have to accept passively this

traditional role imposed by men and learn to get used to it, losing their own identity and even becoming defenders of patriarchy. Thirdly, knitting has become women's special means of expression, so Mrs. Ramsay intends to send stockings (signals sent by women) as a gift to the lighthouse (a symbol of men's world) keeper's little boy. Maybe through this special means of expression, Mrs. Ramsay wants to fulfill her tour to the lighthouse. Fourthly, stocking is the metaphor of vagina, female genitalia. Compared with the symbol of male genitalia in the novel, "a beak of brass", the metaphor of penis, the shape and essence of stockings call the readers to mind of tolerance, generosity and tenderness while "beak of brass" of coldness, rigidity and roughness. By repeating the knitting activity, Mrs. Ramsay is defined as a traditional woman.

In contrast to Mrs. Ramsay, Lily holds a brush in hand and is always busy with painting. In fact, nobody really takes her as a painter and she has to struggle not only against her hostess's feeling that "one could not take her painting very seriously" but also against Charles Tansley's whispering in her ear that "women can't paint, women can't write". For years, it seems that writing and painting have been men's business and women are so inferior to men in intelligence that they are regarded only as housekeepers. In literary history, women writers have to bear much more sufferings and tortures than men writers since writing has been a field where men reject women to tread. Obviously men fear that if women mastered the discourse power which men have monopolized, they would never have the superiority to women.

Just as Howard Harper points out, Lily is the only consciousness evoked in all three parts of the novel, identifying her with "the final, transcendent consciousness" (Harper, 1982, p.149). She is lonely because nobody really understands her; she is brave because she dare break the law that women can only hold needle and begins to hold a brush which has ever been the patents of men. Her behavior shows that women long for equality and independence and want to have a new way of self-expression.

2. MULTIPLE MEANING OF THE BLANKNESS

In the middle of the picture, a space is left for ten years and the woman painter has been hesitant to decide whether a tree should be put there. In spite of Woolf's brief writing style, the blankness of the picture is mentioned again and again, which has always been Lily's main concern. Even at the dinner party, she is obsessed with it, "I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space. That's what I shall do. That's what has been puzzling me. She took up the salt cellar and put it down again on a flower in the pattern in the table-cloth, so as to remind herself to move the tree."

However, in *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, a comprehensive reference to Woolf, under the title of *To the Lighthouse*, many comments are cited here but none concerning the blankness of the picture is mentioned. The writer's intention on designing the blankness of the picture must be ignored by her readers. What special meaning on earth does the blankness carry?

2.1 Aphasic Women

Blankness hints absence and loss. The blankness in the middle of the picture can be linked to the fact that women have lost the ability to express. They are patients with aphasia. For a long time in history women have been deprived of the rights of writing history. Under patriarchal system, they are confined to the legal and allowable means of expression—needlework. When Lily begins to express herself by painting, she finds it difficult to speak since she cannot understand the discourse that men have been using.

Lily finds herself unable to understand Mr. Ramsay's works and asks Andrew what his father's books are about: "Subject and object and the nature of reality," Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens, she had no notion what that meant, "Think of a kitchen table then," he told her, "when you're not there." From then on, whenever she "thought of his work" she always saw clearly before her a large kitchen table. Evidently Lily doesn't understand this typical man-styled discourse. Likewise she doesn't agree to the mainstream artist Mr. Paunceforte's artistic vision. In Lily's eyes,

The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white, since she saw them like that, fashionable though it was, since Mr. Paunceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent. Then beneath the color there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself—struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: "But this is what I see; this is what I see," and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her. (p.14)

In fact, not only Lily, Mrs. Ramsay also finds the difference of Mr. Paunceforte's picture. "Since Mr. Paunceforte had been there, three years before, all the pictures were like that she said, green and grey, with lemon-colored sailing-boats, and pink women on the beach" (p.10). Mr. Paunceforte is obviously the embodiment of patriarchy and pink is the traditional color that men use to name women.

Painting is a type of discourse. Lily cannot understand the dominant discourse specially framed by men because when faced with the overwhelming influence of male

discourse hegemony, Lily, a voice of new women, becomes aphasic.

2.2 Absence, Loss and Protest

Human history is created by both men and women, but women have been excluded from writing history with pen and brush. They are confined to the role of mother-wife and become "angel in the house that should be killed". The striking blankness of the picture just symbolizes the history of women's humiliation. It reminds readers of women's absence in writing history and the loss of women's identity in the process of human history writing.

By painting, Lily tries to show that women should write their history in their own discourse which can never be replaced by men's. While the blankness can be regarded as a silent protest from women and the gap of ten years that the blankness has been left represents the process of women seeking their own identity.

2.3 Completion of the Picture

In order to realize her dream of painting, Lily has to sacrifice a lot and rejects all traditional roles of women. Different from Mrs. Ramsay who tends to please and comfort men, Lily rejects all such traditional roles. After Mrs. Ramsay has passed away, Mr. Ramsay turns upon Lily for comfort. However, Lily tries every means to reject to pity him: "...she pretended to drink out of her empty coffee cup so as to escape him—to escape his demand on her, to put aside a moment longer that imperious need... she turned her back to the window lest Mr. Ramsay should see her. She must escape somehow, be alone somewhere" (p.110).

Lily's rejecting to pity men is a rejection of the traditional mother-wife role which is imposed on women as the sole role in society by patriarchy. Woman is mother in nature. Yet under patriarchal system men deprives women of other social roles and recognizes the mother-wife role as their only legitimate role.

Before Mr. Ramsay goes to the Lighthouse, he again wants Lily to give him sympathy that his wife never refuses, but Lily shows quite indifferent attitude and exclaims "What beautiful boots". Lily's exclamation at this completely inappropriate moment becomes a turning point. Mr. Ramsay stoops over her shoe and "...three times he knotted her shoe; three times he unknotted it". In my opinion, the fact that Mr. Ramsay stoops to knot and unknot the shoe for Lily means a compromise of men. It hints the social order that men have been superior to women is finally broken. And just because of this, he gains sympathy from Lily which she has always refused to give him, "when he was stooping over her shoe, should she be so tormented with sympathy for him that, as she stooped too, the blood rushed to her face, and, thinking of her callousness (she had called him a play-actor) she felt her eyes swell and tingle with tears..." (p.115). At the final moment, when both Mr. Ramsay and Lily stoop,

men and women eventually are kept in the same and equal position, so Lily willingly accepts the mother-wife role and learns to forgive men.

3. WHO IS THE CENTER

The blankness is left for ten years in the middle of the picture and Lily has been hesitant to decide whether a tree should be put there. The tree is no doubt a symbol of women's productivity since Mrs. Ramsay is once compared to a tree, "James, as he stood stiff between her knees, felt her rise in a rosy-flowered fruit tree laid with leaves and dancing boughs" (p.28). Eventually after the Ramsays have successfully reached the Lighthouse, Lily finishes her picture and puts the tree in the very middle of the picture. The tree placed in the middle indicates that Lily, the representative of women independence, has managed to restore the truth: Woman is the real mother of the world, but not man. Women should and can learn to write their history in their own discourse. That the blankness of the picture is finally filled means that women eventually learn to express themselves in their own way. It is Lily's perseverance and self-sacrifice that make her picture complete.

SUMMARY

The novel begins with Mrs. Ramsay's promise to her son of going to the lighthouse and ends in the completion of Lily's picture. Such beginning and ending carry active meaning. Just as Nicola Bradbury points out, "'Yes' is the first word of *To the Lighthouse* and 'I have had my vision' is its close: positive affirmation of an attitude of acceptance and achievement" (p.ix). Lighthouse may be the embodiment of harmonious relationship between two sexes while the successful landing at the lighthouse indicates that Woolf holds an optimistic attitude towards feminism.

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