



VIRGINIA WOOLF'S 'TO THE LIGHT HOUSE': THE PAINFUL JOURNEY OF DEATH AND MOURNING

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Abstract

The paper focuses on Mrs. Virginia Woolf's principal concern in her novel 'To the Light House' which is death. Why should a human being strive for any objective when death is an inescapable part of life? In her work 'To the Light House', Virginia Woolf explores man's problem and her struggle with death. Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley are plagued by the fear of death, fearing that they will fail in their endeavours. The dilemma is not resolved in the novel because Woolf retains his ambiguity. Woolf goes so far as to deny the existence of God, saying, "How could any Lord have created this world?" Mrs. Ramsay wonders aloud, concluding that the world is far too full of pain to have been created by a divine saviour" (To the Light House 64). *To the Light House*, a novel by Virginia Woolf, deals with the issue of death and grieving by revealing horrific recollections from her past as well as the characters' haunting experiences. Memories, dreams, and the fascination with death are three major themes in this story. Death is a more recurring theme in ancient literature than love.

Keywords: *Death, Mourning, Saviour, Haunting, Concluding, Revelling, God, Horrific, Dreams.*

Introduction

Virginia Woolf was born at 22 Hyde Park Gate, London in 1882. This location served as setting for her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf was a brilliant British author who was close

friends with T.S. Eliot, Dorothea Stephen, and W.B. Yeats, among other notable writers and poets. Virginia Woolf's diaries and letters, according to Sherman C. Feinstein, give sufficient evidence to support the claim that she suffered from a "classical instance of manic-depressive disease that meets every criterion" (339). Woolf is a product of post-World War I socio-political pressures. The new writing skills created by James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence had an impact on her. In her works, she used the Stream of Consciousness technique and relied on Freud's and Jung's psychoanalytical theories.

Since she had suffered neurosis herself, she experimented with various sorts of detachment of self in all of her writings. Woolf was "self-destructive, and masochistic," according to Shirley Panken, because she appears in her novels as a "highly guilt-ridden" (13) lady. She became an international personality in the field of British fiction after publishing *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931). The deaths of many of Woolf's friends and relatives left her shaken. She had a negative outlook on life. She created characters who suffered from neurosis and despair and go through psychological nightmares. Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway is Richard's ailing wife. Her marriage is terrible since her spouse is an impotent, and she has a dual personality. Clarissa Dalloway's true character is depicted through the perspective of Peter Walsh, and Septimus Smith's existence is heartbreaking. Lucrezia, his Italian wife, is sick of him though she has come to see Dr. Sir William Bradshaw. Septimus' suicide represents the neurotic experiences of combat heroes who returned from battle shell-shocked. Woolf dramatises the troops' psychological journeys when they return from the war. The party serves as a metaphor for Mrs. Dalloway's inner vacuum. Big Ben is in charge of her activities as she wanders through St James's Park. Ironically, the novel's characters are all afflicted by time consciousness.

To the Lighthouse, published in 1927, is a novel by Virginia Woolf that is primarily concerned with the First World War. Woolf's depiction of the Great War and the history surrounding it both symbolises and mitigates the societal pain that accompanied it. The work is punctuated by violence and destruction, which serve as reminders of British society's flaws. The novel *To the Lighthouse* is set in the postwar era. Characters in the narrative try to reconcile their struggles with ageing, and Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay with the quickly changing world. Woolf examines the process of grief, and the novel implies that for Woolf, grieving never ends. She ends with something unclear, ineffable, and unfinished, but she isn't interested in writing tidy, final grieving stories. The narrative implies that mourning the tragedy of war or death must take place on a regular, inconclusive basis. Woolf distinguishes between private and public loss. While Lily is able to come to terms with her personal loss, she is unable to do so with the war. Woolf claims that some occurrences are unshakable, that they cannot be reconciled, and that the devastation is too complete.

Death and Mourning in the life of Lilly

The term "death instincts" were used by Sigmund Freud in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he posits that "the goal of all life is death" (12). Trauma, according to Freud, triggers the desire to die. "If the stimulation and tension is just too great, too painful, then nirvana becomes inseparable from death" (95). "Life is a detour on the trip from birth to death, and trauma may make life so unbearable that a short-cut is tempting" (61). One no longer wishes to take the long detour through life that leads to death. Because it's a desire to return, and return, and return, eventually to a state of non-being, the repeating compulsion could be a manner of acting out this urge to return to the most primal condition. The idea of death runs throughout Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In dealing with the issue of death and grieving, Virginia Woolf applies modern strategies like irony and parody. Her work *To the Lighthouse* was written during the time known as "The Explosion of Modernism," which lasted from 1910 to 1930. She belonged to the second generation of Modernism since she recognised herself as an inventor. As she observed, she established her own beliefs regarding the Modern novel and she commented:

"Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumcised spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?" (Woolf 213).

The novel is semi-autobiographical, according to critics, and is elegiac in tone, reflecting the sad mood of John Milton's *Lycidas*. The novel's central characters are psychologically burdened by the perplexing function of death in human life. Auerbach points out that "the novel *To the Light House* of Virginia Woolf breathes an air of vague and helpless sadness" (201). When Woolf wrote this novel, her own life had become a nightmare: her mother had died, her sister had died, and she had read about the deaths of millions of soldiers in World War 1. This novel is referred to by Stella McNichol as "an auto-biographical novel, not autobiography is also nearer to the truth" (143). The novel *To the Light House* is divided into three sections, the most important of which is "Time Passes," which is written in a poetic way. Mrs. Ramsay's hallucinations and terrifying dreams are depicted in the "Time Passes" section, according to Naicholas Bradbury. According to Mark Gaipa (2003), "Time Passes" appears to be "the silent requiem for the dead" (Gaipa 183). "Time Passes," according to Mark Gaipa (2003), looks to be "it's almost too dark to see" (Virginia Woolf, *To the Light House* 93). Darkness is a powerful image because it heightens the sense of death and misery. The "dead bodies" are symbolised by the empty house in the novel's initial part. The house is deserted, as all of the residents have died, and there are no survivors with "the doors locked wood cracked" and "the nights full of wind and distraction" (Woolf 95). The characters' trauma is depicted through all of the imagery of death and destruction, gloom and distraction. The vision of the empty house and harsh surroundings represents the characters' inner chaotic world "by one the lamps were all extinguished and the death of three characters is depicted" (Woolf, 93). The novel's plot conveys a sense of isolation, disarray, despair, and turmoil. The family leaves and does not return for ten years, leaving the house in darkness: "Dust settles, books yellow, and silence ascends, filling the rooms with emptiness" (96). The novel's nucleus is the lonely and dismal house depicted in the section "Time Passes" which foreshadows the family's deaths, heightening the melancholy atmosphere:

"When darkness fell...darkness came now in the softer light of spring mixed with moonlight gliding gently as if it laid its caress and lingered stealthily and looked and came lovingly again. But in the very lull of this loving caress, as the long stroke leant upon the bed, the rock was rent asunder; another fold of the shawl loosened; there and swayed". (Woolf 98)

Mrs. Ramsay's death is the key event in the novel, and at the time she wrote it, she had previously witnessed the horrific deaths of her mother, sister, brother, and father. Her agony and pain had penetrated further into her bones. Virginia Woolf was so miserable that she tried suicide twice before finally succeeding in 1941 while suffering from acute trauma. The real thread of this work is the guilt of surviving and the futility of life. Woolf depicts "functional death" in *To the Light House*, according to Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov (1980) goes on to say that "functional death affects the development of the novel and is introduced for structural purposes, purposes of development" (19). The visit to the lighthouse is a dream come true for James. Cam, Mrs. Ramsay's daughter, is depressed, but Lily Briscoe has trouble expressing his feelings: "For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing, nothing than she could express at all"(Woolf 145). Lily Briscoe is feeling lonely as "the house, the place, the morning, and all seemed strangers to her on the morning without Mrs. Ramsay" (14). Lily is a guest in Ramsay's summer house at the start of the story. She is a single painter. Woolf's notion of a female artist is embodied by her character. Mr. Ramsay goes to the lighthouse with his children Cam and James in the third portion of the tale, while Lily stays at the cottage and thinks about Mrs. Ramsay, who is deceased. As we can see, death is a recurring theme in *To the Lighthouse*. She was no longer alive. Lily's fear over the future of her paintings grew as a result of the constant pressure. "Can't paint, can't write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously considering what her plan of attack should be. For the mass loomed before her; it protruded; she felt it pressing on her eyeballs" (173). Woolf's anxiety over the inadequacy of her writings is embodied by Lily. She is able to transcend her grief via the force of creativity, although she frequently has

emotional shocks while recalling old memories of her mother. Lily displays her profound love for her mother as she cries out in despair: "Mrs. Ramsay?" It's difficult to grasp the reality of her mother's death, and Lily expresses her strong love for her mother as she cries out in despair: "Mrs. Ramsay?" Lily's psychological anguish was described by Virginia Woolf as follows: "For one moment she felt that if they both got up, here, now on the lawn, and demanded an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexpressible....Mrs. Ramsay" (Woolf 131).

Lily's tears streamed down her cheeks as she became emotional. Her trauma is heightened as she recalls ancient recollections of her mother:

"Mrs. Ramsay! Lily cried, "Mrs. Ramsay!" But nothing happened. The pain increased. That anguish could reduce one to such a pitch of imbecility, she thought...Heaven be praised, no one had heard her cry those ignominious cries, stop pain, stop!" (Woolf 132)

Lily is a painter, but she is unable to transcend her anguish as she tries to find a method to express herself on the canvas: "looking at the step where she used to sit" (112). Lily is dealing with the truth of death. As a writer, Woolf deals with death as she writes "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought....I have had my vision" (151). Cam is also haunted by her mother's traumatic memories as she "screwed her handkerchief round her finger" (124). She is adamant about not visiting the lighthouse "She was thinking paths and lawn, thick and knotted they had lived there, were gone: were rubbed out; were past; were unreal..." (124). Cam is in such a state of worry that she quotes lines from Cooper's poetry *The Castaway* to illustrate her mental anguish "We perished each alone, for her father's words broke and broke again in her mind" (Woolf 125). Woolf quotes Shakespeare's famous sentence in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* "Fear no more the heat of the sun" to portray Clarissa's mental anguish, while in this work Woolf uses Cooper to reflect Cam's psychological strain. All of the key characters, including Ramsay, Mr. Bankes, Mr. Tansley, and Lily, are depressed and contemplate death, as Woolf has dedicated many pages delving into the nature of trauma gripping the individuals' psyches. In the following line, Virginia Woolf uses the concept of darkness to convey the ambience of death and mourning:

"Nothing it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest drawers". (93)

Many insights on the workings of the human psyche were available when Virginia Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse* in 1924. She'd read Sigmund Freud's *Interpretations of Dreams* and *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Obsessions, according to Freud, are similar to dreams. It can be illustrated in a scene from *To the Lighthouse* where a vessel is "rubbed into rapture, almost to bursting; but in the novel it does burst and floods the floor of the mind with ecstasy" (100). Woolf speculates on the memory's dream element, in which the reality is beyond man's comprehension: "I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there...as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen" (Woolf 67). Woolf had a lot of restless nights "the memory of the mother-displacing her from her natural centrality, and lying half asleep, half awake, in bed and the waves breaking behind a yellow blind, its cord and little scorn moving across the floor" (Woolf 65). The fragmented state of the characters is depicted in the section "Time Passes." Andrews asserts "One by one of the lamps were all extinguished and one by one all the major characters die; the death of the three characters in the novel and a down pouring of immense darkness began" (Woolf 93). Mrs. Ramsay is terrified, and she expresses her death consciousness as follows:

“Nothing it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at key holes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers.” (Woolf 93)

Mrs. Ramsay is perplexed and worried because the approaching doom haunts her. However, when she realises that even Lord is not with her, she experiences severe psychological distress and expresses her depression as follows:

“How could any Lord have made this world? She asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew”. (Woolf 44)

Mrs. Ramsay, according to Mark Spilka, is a victim of neurosis and is suffering from acute trauma. Her psychological agony stems from her sense of isolation and suppressed emotion. Mrs. Ramsay's traumatised condition is shown by visions of darkness, emptiness, misery, and hallucinations. Lily Briscoe suffers from mental anguish as a result of her inability to confront the harsh truths of life. Her psychological distress can be felt in the following lines:

“Sitting alone (for Nancy went out again) among the clean cups at the long table she felt cut off from other people, able only to go on watching, asking, wondering. The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her. She had no attachment here, she felt, no relations with it, anything might happen”. (*To the Lighthouse* 160)

Lily clearly feels neglected, isolated, and without a sense of purpose in life. This nervous emotion does not have to be confirmation of mental illness, but it can serve as a precursor to it. Bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic depression, is a disorder that results from depression and anxiety. Moments of indifference also appear in Lily Briscoe's life as “Mrs. Ramsay dead; Andrew killed; Prue dead too – repeat it as she might, it roused no feeling in her” (160). As we can see, Lily's sentiments are similar to Septimus'. Despite the fact that she was expected to be sorry and sorrowful about Mrs. Ramsay's death and the deaths of some of her children, she remained unconcerned. She, like Septimus, has sentiments of indifference or numbness, and thus she feels horrible, but not because of the deaths, but because she has neither sadness nor sorrow.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's *To the Light House* gives new insights into the study of trauma. Woolf examined shell shock damage from a contemporary standpoint. She's aggravating the “wounding, the body, psyche and trauma” (Spika 20). *To the Light House* by Virginia Woolf explores the inner self of characters who are stuck in a world of darkness and uncertainty. Woolf's characters are fascinated, and the plot revolves around memory, dreams, and obsession. As Sigmund Freud phrased it, “the dream situation represents as fulfilled a wish which is known to consciousness” (*The Interpretation of Dreams*. 165). According to Sigmund Freud: “The wish in such cases is either itself a repressed one and alien to consciousness, or it is intimately connected with repressed thoughts and is based upon them” (165). As a result, dreams are “disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes and the future which the dream shows us is not the one which will occur but the one which we should like to occur” (165). Woolf depicts the impact of dreams and suppressed wishes through the psyche of the protagonists in *To the Light House*. Mrs. Ramsay's old recollections occupy Lily's mind, and the disturbing memories become a major source of her trauma. Woolf is convinced that “The most important of all my memories are my personal haunting memories of the harrowing scenes of deaths of my parents and of my brother and sister” (64). The novel's characters are unable to escape their haunted past memories, and they eventually realise that death is the only way to be free of this torment.

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