

Original Paper

## Reading "The Window" of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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### Abstract

The introduction discusses differences of opinions among critics with regard to the three-part structure and value of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and the problem of its "story".

It is often said that the kernel of the book is not a "story"; it is a group of people who have met at a summer house on an island, their relationships to one another including a marriage, the Ramsays' marriage.

In the novel I have found a structure much like what Seymour Chatman calls "a plot of revelation"<sup>1</sup>, in this case a gradual revelation of the disturbed relationship between husband and wife. The scene between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay comes to a climax when they stroll in the garden. There is much critical discussion about this scene. This essay presents two different readings of the scene, and attempts to read "The Window", part 1 of *To the Lighthouse* in detail as "a plot of revelation".

**Key words** : story, a plot of revelation, style, time, narrative progress

### Introduction

Most readers of the novel would generally agree with David Daiches that, "the planning and eventual accomplishment of this expedition [to the Lighthouse] constitute the main principle of integration employed by Virginia Woolf to unify the story".<sup>2</sup> But at the same time they might feel that "the meaning of the relationship between the planned trip to the lighthouse and the actual trip many years later remains unexpressed, enigmatic, only dimly to be conjectured".<sup>3</sup> It is a question upon which there is much controversy.

A. Bennet goes so far as to regret that "she [Mrs.

Ramsay] goes and dies, and her decease cuts the book in two".<sup>4</sup> Likewise L. Kronenberger shares his dissatisfaction: "Mr. Ramsay is no longer interesting — can it be because he is no longer counterpoised against his wife?".<sup>5</sup> And he also remarks that "all their reaching of the lighthouse at last conveys no significance". Moreover R. Z. Temple has doubts about the fact that "the artist's role, properly subsidiary in Part 1, has come in Part 3 to take on such importance that Lily's final brushstroke ends the book".<sup>6</sup> And A. Kettle shares the same feelings: "What does Lily Briscoe's vision really amount to? In what sense is the episode in the boat between James and Mr. Ramsay really a

1 David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston, 1981), p. 27.

2 David Daiches, *Virginia Woolf* (New Directions, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1942), p. 80.

3 Erich Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking" from *Twentieth Century Interpretations of To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Thomas A. Vogler (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1970), p. 51.

4 *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 200.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 196.

6 *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 100.

culmination of their earlier relationship?"<sup>7</sup>

These are some of the considerations that arise from the three-part structure of the book, a structure which affects the valuation of the work. In that respect O. Williams sees that "the average novel-reader. . . will probably judge the first section of *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs. Ramsay is alive, the most successful"<sup>8</sup> R. Z. Temple presents Philip Toynbee's contention, which goes a step further than O. Williams', that "Part 1 should have been published separately".<sup>9</sup>

### Part 1 Style

The first part of the novel, "The Window" delineates a group of people who have met at a summer house on an island on the Scottish west coast in September before the Great War.

The novel begins, as David Daiches also points out<sup>10</sup>, in a very abrupt way: a boy is cutting out pictures from a store catalogue with his mother knitting a reddish-brown stocking beside him, and a conversation is going on. At once we get the sense of people's minds' working, especially Mrs. Ramsay's. We jump into the midst of things, like this:

"Yes, of course, if it's fine to-morrow," said Mrs. Ramsay. "But you'll have to be up with the lark," she added.

It comes out of nowhere: We do not know what she is talking about, nor what she is agreeing to. The importance of her words is in the inner response of her son.

The boy, James Ramsay, is so pleased with what his mother says, the picture of a mere refrigerator in the catalogue becomes charged with meaning, becomes the symbol of happiness. We do not know why a

refrigerator. His mother has inferred that they will go to the Lighthouse. James, though he is only six years old, has the feeling that he has been looking forward to this "for years and years", and at last his mother says it will be "tomorrow".

Then we have a long sentence packed with lots of incidental bits and pieces. We have to pass through all these before we get to the climax of the sentence, "heavenly bliss"; and then a symbolical fact is stated in a simple sentence: "It was fringed with joy". This is very typical of the style of the novel.

At this moment, very suddenly, his father, Mr. Ramsay, on his evening stroll, passes and hears the conversation, and says, "But it won't be fine". The weather won't be good enough to go on a boat trip to the Lighthouse. Then appeasingly Mrs. Ramsay says, "But it may be fine — I expect it will be fine". At once she is mediating between the two.

Mrs. Ramsay is knitting a reddish-brown stocking for the Lighthouse keeper's little son; and this leads her to think of things she has said to her children about the men who work on the Lighthouse. At once her mind becomes occupied with the life of the men on the Lighthouse: the loneliness and danger. "How would you like that?" In her head she addresses herself to her daughters, before we come back to the immediate present and Mr. Ramsay's evening walk.

We have a glimpse of Charles Tansley, the atheist. "It's due west", says he. He is agreeing with Mr. Ramsay. So it is the worst wind for going to the Lighthouse. When Tansley says this, Mrs. Ramsay thinks how disagreeable he is. And this passes into the comment that her daughters had made on Tansley. Though he is an annoying man, Mrs. Ramsay is annoyed by something in her daughters' mocking treatment of him. Her mind rushes contrarily to his defence. "It's due west", says Tansley, then we have "Nonsense". She says this in reply to some past impoliteness of theirs. So we have what seems to be a definite action, but it is only a remembered one: "She turned with severity upon Nancy. He had not chased them, she said. He had been asked".<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Twentieth Century Interpretations of To the Lighthouse*, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> *The Critical Heritage*, p. 204.

<sup>9</sup> *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> David Daiches, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 80.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (The Hogarth Press, London, 1977), p. 16.

Tansley is their guest; he must not be treated rudely. She feels that men however annoying must be treated with respect. Then we catch a glimpse of her daughters' attitude to Mrs. Ramsay. They are planning to be different women from their mother, a middle-class Victorian housewife, more independent, less solicitous towards men. Of course Mrs. Ramsay knows that her daughters feel slightly rebellious against her. Her correction of their manners about Tansley reminds her that her daughters see things differently from her.

"There'll be no landing at the Lighthouse to-morrow", says Tansley. He agrees with Mr. Ramsay as he always does. He is indeed a nuisance, but Mrs. Ramsay thinks of him primarily in terms of his attitude to her husband. He is always respectful or rather humble towards Mr. Ramsay. Passing on, we see more about the reactions of the daughters to Tansley. But we have not moved anywhere in the narrative sense;<sup>12</sup> we are still in the same moment of time. That is why the book is often said to have no easily recognizable "story".

All these thoughts have taken place in Mrs. Ramsay's mind in a moment. The intervening passage has taken place in the moments between two connected sentences, "It's due west" and "There'll be no landing at the Lighthouse to-morrow". Between these two sentences we have Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts about Tansley, children, her life, husband and some general impressions of men.

Here in the opening we do not have any deliberate description of the room or the place. The details of the situation are only given to us without any prominence; they come in incidentally. Mother and boy are sitting in the drawing room with the window open, and the father walking up and down the terrace with his disciple; Charles Tansley stops in front of the window and says, "It won't be fine". Then Mrs. Ramsay says, "But it may be fine — I expect it will be fine".

## Part 2 Narrative progress

So far, then, almost nothing has happened; we have seen inside Mrs. Ramsay's mind as she is still in the room taking care of James. Then it seems that she goes out on an errand and she invites Tansley to go with her, or I should say it is pretty clear that she goes out on an errand which takes place in the present. We do not know whether it is what Mrs. Ramsay is remembering or actually taking place, as Virginia Woolf does not make clear the distinction between what happened in the past and what is happening in the present, though other things which have appeared to be taking place in the present are just remembered incidents.

The brief section 2 reverts to the present, the scene in the drawing room. Here Tansley makes the same statement again: "No going to the Lighthouse, James", in the way he echoes Mr. Ramsay. And immediately all Mrs. Ramsay's warm feelings towards Tansley, which had made her let him carry her bag, are switched in a moment into antagonism. Mrs. Ramsay is extremely annoyed and she thinks him an "odious little man": "[W]hy go on saying that?"

In section 3 James is still cutting out things from the catalogue. Hardly a minute has passed. They are still there in the drawing room. Mrs. Ramsay is trying to comfort James, by finding interesting pictures to cut out, when again we hear the voice of Mr. Ramsay from outside. He is quoting a battle poem of Tennyson's, "The Charge of the Light Brigade": "Stormed at with shot and shell", — something which expresses his attitude to life.

Mr. Ramsay has a habit of marching about the garden while thinking about the subjects of philosophy. And he does not notice what is around him; hardly seeing anything, he almost bumps into Lily Briscoe as she is painting there. So Mr. Ramsay's voice is heard by Lily, and it leads us out into section 4, where we meet the painter, Lily Briscoe, an unmarried woman, and William Bankes, a widower, taking a walk.

Mr. Ramsay comes very close to Lily who is trying hard to paint the scene, and disturbs her concentration. He has nearly knocked over her painting which she is busy working on. The "action"

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Freedman proposes "the lyrical narrative" in his book, *The Lyrical Novel* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963), and refers to David Daiches' words "an unstable equilibrium between lyrical and narrative art" in his *Virginia Woolf*, p. 202.

moves into Lily's mind, as she starts to collect together her thoughts about Mr. Ramsay. And it is from Lily Briscoe's point of view that we now meet Mr. Bankes, a botanist, and a fellow guest. He comes in as he approaches Lily, and he comes into her mind; we see him first through her eyes: "he stood beside her now in his judicial way" (I, 4, p. 33). Then next moment we see in turn Lily through his eyes.

While Lily is talking to Bankes and thinking about her painting, she is reflecting on the whole situation. And Lily Briscoe being an artist tries to put her feelings into an objective form in words. But as she draws closer to the emotional life, language just breaks down. It does not really express what she is trying to settle for herself by putting it into words. So she is very conscious how words never really match the reality of her impressions. And she just says: "It suddenly gets cold. The sun seems to give less heat" (p. 35). And they stroll along towards the red hot poker.

With section 5, we are back in the same situation again where we started. The section begins: "'And even if it isn't fine to-morrow', said Mrs. Ramsay, raising her eyes to glance at William Bankes and Lily Briscoe as they passed, 'it will be another day'." She catches sights of William Bankes and Lily Briscoe, when she starts thinking about Lily. Mrs. Ramsay now has reached the point where the stocking needs to be measured against James's leg. She wants to finish it by tomorrow in case they go to the Lighthouse. She is knitting it to give to the Lighthouse keeper whose son has a bad leg. So there is a sense of narrative progress measured by the length of the stocking.<sup>13</sup> At this very moment a capital idea flashed across her mind: "William and Lily should marry".

Thinking their marriage, Mrs. Ramsay measures the stocking against James's leg. And James for various reasons will not stand still. While Mrs. Ramsay is doing this, she thinks about the house in more detail. James still fidgets, until Mrs. Ramsay gets a bit annoyed and she speaks to him severely. She says: "Stand still. Don't be tiresome". Then she says with the voice of great sadness: "It's too short", "ever so

much too short". Half an inch. We know now that she is a great exaggerator, which is one of the things that annoys her husband who is, of course, very exact. (p. 54)

### Part 3 A plot of revelation

From section 6 to section 11 we have Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts and Mr. Ramsay's one after the other with Lily Briscoe and William Bankes's scenes inserted in between.

We see that Mrs. Ramsay's attitude to her husband is a little bit complex at the moment because her husband said "Damn you", and she is very hurt. Mr. Ramsay, of course, already feels sorry that he said that.

He stood by her in silence. Very humbly, at length, he said that he would step over and ask the Coastguards if she liked. (p. 54)

Upon which Mrs. Ramsay's mood changes abruptly to "reverence" and a corresponding humility. Then we follow Mr. Ramsay's thoughts, and his reactions. He is walking around the garden thinking. In a way he has escaped out into the garden. Mrs. Ramsay is still in the room, and he is very much aware of her sitting there near the window with James. Here is a relationship, a husband and wife relationship, which in Mrs. Ramsay's eyes is a failure.

M. A. Leaska thinks that Mrs. Ramsay is a manipulator and Mr. Ramsay a victim.

But despite the licit charges brought by some readers against him [Mr. Ramsay] for his sympathy-mongering, we are entitled to the suspicion that much of his self-pity is a consequence of Mrs. Ramsay's distance and solitude. Her obscure and nameless estrangement inevitably exacts from him, too, the price of being alone. He knows that she will not permit him entry into her world; he knows too that she cannot step over into his. Their walk through the garden bears eloquent testimony of her, and consequently his, enforced isolation. Even in these circumstances,

<sup>13</sup> See Erich Auerbach, "The brown Stocking".

however, he is acquiescent, loyal, and grateful :<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Leaska may be right, and I am not going to argue this question at this moment. Later I will come back to this and compare his view with a feminist critic's. Before that let us quote a passage. If we go beyond the text and search for the reason of Mrs. Ramsay's, what Dr. Leaska calls, "obscure and nameless estrangement", we will naturally come to meet some reasons. Here is one of them presented by Mark Spilka. He argues as follows :

She [Mrs. Ramsay] doesn't love him [Mr. Ramsay] passionately, as Julia Duckworth loved Herbert<sup>15</sup>, . . . . Suppose we posit here that her spoken vows belong to another man, a ghostly thief of love who exists, or once existed, outside the text, but whom Virginia Woolf is now trying (not always successfully) to suppress. This would explain Mrs. Ramsay's curious silences, and it would also explain why she is so remote from Ramsay, in her melancholia, that he can not "protect her".<sup>16</sup> (underline mine)

Although Professor Spilka's suppositions are very intriguing, we should treat them carefully. There I can not help noticing a latent binary opposition, the authentic/ the fictional, as a postulate. To comment along the lines of Deconstructive criticism, the opposition is asymmetrical, and the authentic takes priority

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell A. Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1977), p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Duckworth was the first husband of Virginia Woolf's mother Julia. Let us quote a passage from a book entitled *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf* by Phyllis Rose: "Julia Jackson was used to admiration: Woolner, the sculptor, and Holman Hunt, the painter, are said to have proposed to her when she was in her teens. She chose to marry instead a man with no pretensions to art or intellectuality, the handsome, wealthy, and respectable barrister Herbert Duckworth, by whom she had three children and with whom she was exquisitely happy, until one day, reaching up to pluck her a fig, he burst an abscess and died." (pp. 10-11).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Spilka, *Virginia Woolf's Quarrel with Grieving*, (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1980), pp. 91-92.

over the fictional.<sup>17</sup>

In section 8 we are given Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts and then Mr. Ramsay's again one after the other. Then we come back at the end of section 10 to the question of the Lighthouse. A very touching little scene is presented. The light of the Lighthouse having been lit, James, just before being taken off to the bedroom by the Swiss girl Mildred, although he has been told many times, — "It will be wet tomorrow", nearly asks again if they are going to the Lighthouse. Mrs. Ramsay feels disappointment for James, and goes on thinking.

Mr. Ramsay is feeling rather bad because he has had a disagreement with his wife and marched away from her, in a way, to escape. That is why when he looks back and sees Mrs. Ramsay and James in the window, he feels a need to protect them.

Mrs. Ramsay, in section 12, leaves her place by the window to go up to her husband to speak to him. "For he wished, she knew, to protect her. (The last sentence of the section 11)" It is getting cooler as darkness comes, so she puts her green shawl around her shoulders and goes into the garden. It is a very beautiful scene that captures so much what seems to be typical in the conversation of wives and husbands.

Significantly all the messages, however, are not in what she says, but in what she does not say. Then they talk about Charles Tansley, a disciple of Mr. Ramsay who is with them at the summer house.

There was no harm in him, he added, and was just about to say that anyhow he was the only young man in England who admired his — when he choked it back. He would not bother her again about his books. (p. 106)

He does not want to worry Mrs. Ramsay with this whole subject, so he in turn holds something back, just as he is about to say it, out of consideration of Mrs. Ramsay. At this moment she needed his scrupulous care or thoughtfulness for her and her feelings. So he

<sup>17</sup> See Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1982), p. 120.

says, "These flowers seem creditable". Well, they are in emotional contact even though there is nothing genuine in his reaction. Mrs. Ramsay knows that he is not interested but she is asking him to look at the flowers. So he could pretend to notice them, which he thinks will please her, and it does please her. Here communication is, to our mind, at the deepest, and we could feel how they understand each other or how close they are. All the same it is important to note that they are communicating by both pretending. There is much critical discussion about this point.

Now let us present a female reader's response to this scene, which would compensate for the bias in the response of Dr. Leaska who tends to show himself very sensitive to a male character, Mr. Ramsay. Jane Lilienfeld, a contributor to an anthology entitled *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, notes Mr. Ramsay's hesitation or inability to say what he has in his mind :

The Ramsays do love one another ; yet their marriage compromise restricts growth, keeps each frustrated, and does not allow mature intellectual interchange. If Mr. Ramsay had been able to admit his wife's great intelligence, he need not have faced his intellectual fears alone. If he could have confided to her in clear discourse the very problems he fantasies about, their union would have enabled him to face his tasks and perhaps have brought him closer to R.<sup>18</sup>

And she continues, "It is partly her fault that he is dependent on her false praise rather than capable of facing and dealing with his hesitations about his work".

Lilienfeld also admits that Mrs. Ramsay manipulates Mr. Ramsay and others, but she is sympathetic about Mrs. Ramsay's circumscribed situation quoting a passage from John Stuart Mill's book *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Mill writes as follows in the quoted passage :

Women are schooled into suppressing [their

aggressions] in their most natural and healthy direction, but the internal principle remains, in a different outward form. An active and energetic mind, if denied liberty, will seek for power ; refused the command of itself, it will assert its personality by attempting to control others . . . . Where liberty cannot be hoped for and power can, power becomes the grand object of human desires.<sup>19</sup>

Thus Lilienfeld argues that Mrs. Ramsay has been trained to be "the Angel in the House"<sup>20</sup>, "the socially accepted ideal"<sup>21</sup>, or trained to play the female roles in accordance with upper middle class Victorian manners and values. In the essay she has neatly set the Ramsays' marriage in the frame of the mid or late Victorian patriarchal marriage. Although we are ready to accept her view that "the Ramsays' marriage is time-bound, founded on middle-class Victorian roles and values", we cannot help noticing the fact that Virginia Woolf, besides presenting a particular Victorian couple, also has in mind types representing the more general male and female differences. In order to depict, to use Ralph Freedman's words, "a more symbolic reflection of society and human relationships", Virginia Woolf "transpose[s] life to a more universal plane"<sup>22</sup>, an imaginary island.<sup>23</sup> But here what I rate highly in her essay is that the feminist criticism with which Lilienfeld reverses the priority of male readings

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>20</sup> See *What Manner of Woman*, pp. 130-131 : "Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854-56) was the great poetic celebration of womanhood and domestic bliss. . . . The poem illustrates Patmore's belief (subscribed to in the abstract by most Victorians) that married love was an indispensable civilizing power, and that a true husband and a true wife can realize a fullness of love in each other that is analogous to God's love for man". See also Virginia Woolf, *Women and Writing*, ed. by Michèle Barrett, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1979), pp. 58-59.

<sup>21</sup> See Carolyn G. Heilbrun, "Marriage Perceived : English Literature 1873-1941" in *What Manner of Woman*, p. 175.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel*, p. 228.

<sup>23</sup> David Daiches makes it clear, in a footnote in his book, *Virginia Woolf* (1942) that we cannot specify the island. pp. 83-84.

<sup>18</sup> Jane Lilienfeld, "Where the Spear Plants Grew", *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, p. 162.

over female readings; there were indeed no such readings as "male" readings until the feminist criticism produced them.<sup>24</sup>

Although Mrs. Ramsay is very much aware that he needs to protect her (and that is why she is gone into the garden, to allow him the chance of showing protection), she is not so aware that he needs her protection. We may well imagine that Mr. Ramsay's position is not so simple as Mrs. Ramsay might think. Or I should say that she just ignores his needing it at this moment because somewhere underneath is her feeling of "the inadequacy of human relationships".

Although between the Ramsays it is always true that Mrs. Ramsay is more in control of the situation than Mr. Ramsay is, it is Mrs. Ramsay who creates the best things that happen between her and her husband. However that may be, I should say that they are good companions for life.

At the end of section 13 Mrs. Ramsay asks a question about the people who have gone to the beach. "Haven't they come back yet?" The scene between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay ends with that.

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<sup>24</sup> See J. Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p. 120.