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# Ekphrasis in the Modernist Aesthetic: Virginia Woolf's Use of Painting in "To The Lighthouse" and its Effect on Linguistic Expression

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# Ekphrasis in the Modernist Aesthetic

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VIRGINIA WOOLF'S USE OF PAINTING IN "TO THE  
LIGHTHOUSE" AND ITS EFFECT ON LINGUISTIC  
EXPRESSION

Jessica M. Slayton

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MAGISTRALE

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>Early Years: Woolf's Biographical Foundation and its Affect on Her Art</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>III.</b>	<b>A Look at To the Lighthouse and Lily Briscoe as Virginia Woolf</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Painterly Technologies in a Written Sphere</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>V.</b>	<b>A Family Affair: The Internality of Woolf's Works</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>VI.</b>	<b>Woolf and the Post-Impressionists</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>VII.</b>	<b>The Nursery and Other Works</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>VIII.</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>66</b>

## Introduction

Throughout our academic, professional and personal lives, we are consistently reminded of the differences between the arts and the sciences; although both classes of discipline involve exploration, the arts rely on subjective interpretation and analysis whereas the sciences consider the objective analysis of hard evidence as rule. The arts—also frequently referred to as the humanities—also are known as those which focus on the study of human culture. Because of this correlation and the fact that human culture is determined by a multitude of factors, it thus follows that the humanities, too, are made up of a variety of factors. For example, the study of literature, language, history, philosophy, religion, and the visual arts are all encompassed under the broader definition that makes up the humanities. This analysis will isolate the visual arts and literature, and use the relationship found between the two as a way of better understanding the way in which each acts upon the other in terms of linguistic expression.

In many ways this analysis will concern the concept of *ekphrasis* which originated during the time of the Ancient Greeks. This term describes a rhetorical device used to relate one medium of art to another by defining its essence; in this case, the two mediums I will relate are literature and the visual arts, specifically painting. In doing this, both mediums allow one another the chance to enhance the qualities already present in their original forms. Human interpretation is an essential part of allowing *ekphrasis* to function, as the mind's ability to describe and then to interpret is what allows the art to gain new meaning with regards to the piece it is being compared to. The post-impressionist concern—on which this analysis will ground itself—with capturing the essence of all things created an

extremely effective platform for ekphrastic interchange to occur. Therefore, one can better understand the dialogue that takes place between artistic enhancement and cultural development, as both allow humans to build and shift an understanding of what is already known.

The reason that ekphrasis is an attainable concept strictly through the visage of the arts is because the arts allow for a level of subjectivity that is unbeknownst to other disciplines. An “art,” in some cases also referred as a “humanity,” refers to some sort of study of human culture, whether it be through painting, literature, historical events or philosophical thinking. These studies are characterized by the fact that interpretations of the facts can differ from individual to individual. For example, one may look at the same ancient artifact from an anthropological site and come to a vastly different conclusion regarding its cultural meaning than another would. Although these studies are based off of the acquisition of facts or objects, there is typically more than one way of interpreting these facts in order to learn something about those who created and/or used it, as well as to learn something about ourselves.

Although interplay between disciplines is definitely a prevalent topic in the hard sciences, subjectivity is that which specifically allows for the interaction between painting and literature to occur. Painting—as referred to before as one of the most freedom-inducing forms of creativity—relies on human interpretation to be successful. Artists use the power of the visual to convey the message they wish their art to display, therefore creating a sort of visual language. As with all languages, the translation from one to another (in this case, visual to verbal) opens up the original piece to the possibility that original concepts may be lost or

changed in the process. Because this translation is necessary with painting due to the verbal nature of human communication and interpretation, it is possible to see the way in which subjectivity allows for a wide range of meanings to come into play. Painting is therefore inherently both subjective and interpretive with the necessary addition of human assistance. One can speak about writing and literature similarly, even though it does not always require any level of translation in order to be understood and interpreted. As each individual has been subject to different experiences and different levels of education, different words and phrasing may touch each individual differently. Due to the slightly more restrictive nature that occurs with writing than with the visual arts, one may argue that there is less room for subjective interpretation than there is in painting; however, it is necessary to remember that this may only be the case for extremely literal writing, as it is possible to write figuratively and increase the level of interpretation that goes into reading and understanding the work. Writers frequently attempt to use their words to say something without directly saying it in hopes that the reader will either interpret it the way that it was meant to be interpreted—like with painting, this allows for new meaning to come to light based on the differentiation of individual interpretive style.

The visual arts—painting, drawing, photography, sculpture—allow the artist unparalleled creative freedom, as neither material nor technique is rigidly defined. Sculpture, while necessitating that the final product must have some sort of three dimensionality, can be done using clay, marble, or materials found in a junk drawer. Painting must be done using paint; however, the type of paint ranges from water color to acrylic to oil, and one may use a brush, the fingers, or any

other tool in order to put paint to paper. The visual arts are also highly subjective, which allows for an infinite number of individual experiences depending on the one who is taking part in viewing or creating it. It is the ultimate form of open expression devoid of any rule that is not absolutely necessary. The act of writing or reading literature however, while still maintaining an extremely expressive creation process, involves a larger number of restrictions before one can achieve the end goal. While there certainly is still some level of leeway, completed literature must not only comply with the basic grammatical rules of the language it is written in, but it must also follow the guidelines that exist for the specific genre of literature it is classified as. For example, a piece of journalism must report an event, a mystery novel must evoke a sense of solving a puzzle, and fiction must not be a biographical or fact-based work.

However, due to the inventiveness of the modern period there was indeed one exception to the more structured nature of writing over painting and the visual arts; experimental poetry, especially concrete poetry, was a way of rethinking the structure of the literary arts. The compact nature of poetry allows for such experimentation in new forms, whereas it was and still is difficult for a novel to do this. Take for example Mallarmé's 1897 creation, "The Throw of the Dice." The entire structure of the poem is incomparable to any created beforehand due to its almost picturesque organization and disregard for common sets of poetic expectations. It subverted traditional views of poetry and the written word, as it defied structural expectations and still gained a sense of infamy.

Another parallel that can be made here spurs from the Dadaist movement, as there was both Dadaist painting and poetry. Both art forms reveled in the

departure from anything normative and the subversion of traditional ideals in a horrific, offensive way. In fact, it was affectionately referred to by its proponents as an “anti-art” movement, as it rejected logic, reason, capitalism and followed the reaction to World War I. The success of works operating within this canon depended on their ability to break from the norm, thus explaining why writing may have had as much freedom as the visual arts in this case.

Although these examples apply to the writing coming out of the modern period specifically, they do not apply to novelistic writing, which this analysis will concern itself with. The restrictions mentioned above allow for less creative freedom than is given to the visual arts. Although within the sphere of the visual there are movements that typify different works, these movements apply to literature as well. For example, the modernist movement has its roots in both literature as well as the visual arts. One may see a modernist painting that will comply with the characteristics of modernist art, but it will still be a painting that uses any type of paint, any technique, and any subject matter provided that the modernist themes are exemplified. However, a piece of visual art does not have to conform with an artistic movement in order to be successful. Literature must similarly exemplify themes of the modernist movement in order to be modernist, but unlike the visual arts, it has more extensive guidelines to comply to in order to be successful. Regardless of whether or not a writer chooses to work within the sphere of modernism, he or she has no choice but to select a subject matter, and which type of literature he or she will create in order to suit it most successfully. He or she must also follow publication processes, thus allowing for external



forces to in some way shape the work. A painter must only choose his or her subject matter, and is able to approach it in any way that he or she sees fit.

The ekphrastic juxtaposition that occurs with the meeting of the visual arts and literature is one worth investigating due to the differentiation between the levels of creativity enforced within each. In order to do this, I will analyze the use of painting within a work of literature, as one is immediately able to notice its presence, due to the fact that it dictates the portal-like movement from literature into painting and vice versa. Each one affects the other, thus affecting the larger work as a whole. While the presence of painting acts upon the linguistic expression of the literature, the literature also affects the reader's experience with the painting. The two become reliant on each other—the painting could not exist without the words chosen to describe it as such, and the words are shaped by the appearance and visualization of the painting. Furthermore, when one speaks specifically about the modernist aesthetic, he or she must consider the interchange between these two art forms as essential to the continuation of the artistic development. It is also important to note that the mention of a painting and the way in which it is described linguistically does not simply affect the writing that centralizes around it; instead, the painting becomes integral to the work itself and structurally becomes intertwined with the rest of the piece. It pervades the rest of the writing as an underlying force that effectively shapes the work and the viewer's subjective perception of his or her experience with it.

The modernist movement, starting in the late nineteenth century and ending in the early-middle twentieth century, is an excellent platform from which to view the direct interaction between painting and literature due to its tendencies

towards art for art's sake and the emphasis placed upon the deviation from previously held ideals. This standpoint suits the expansion of artistic thinking well, therefore allowing for much experimentation to occur across the board. Artists and writers alike were finding their passions overlapping, and were being influenced by those not in their immediate professional spheres; the influential nature of this exposure was encouraged, as it broadened thinking and expression both individually as well as in the artists' worlds. An example of this transfer can be seen through the Bloomsbury group, and more specifically Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell. Woolf the writer, and Bell the painter, had an extremely close personal relationship which extended itself into their professional lives as well. Each was both influential and inspiring to the other, and this interaction very clearly came through their individual works<sup>1</sup>.

This analysis will primarily focus on Virginia Woolf's usage of painting in her novel *To the Lighthouse* and the way in which it affected the linguistic expression of her writing. Throughout the entire novel one of the characters—Lily Briscoe—is found working on a painting of Mrs. Ramsay and James of the Ramsay family. The painting, although fictional, pervades the entirety of the novel and in a sense becomes a metaphor for the novel itself. Also, it takes on such an important role that it becomes inextricably intertwined with the storyline, and the way in which Woolf utilizes linguistic expression takes on painterly qualities. With this in mind, one can imagine that while the painting becomes a part of the novel's storyline, so does the novel become a sort of painting in itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988.

Due to the fact that the visual arts had a profound effect on her life, interests, and exposure to the painter's underground world, Woolf is an essential character in the study of the painterly effect that writing and words can have when combined with the visual arts. It will also take Vanessa Bell and her accomplishments into account as a comparative and influential force in Woolf's life. Each also had correspondences with Roger Fry, an artist and art critic with whom Bell had an extramarital affair<sup>2</sup>, and Woolf was known as an admirer of French writer Marcel Proust. While Woolf uses language to create a fictional painting (thus developing the linguistic expression alongside it), Proust alludes to real paintings within his own works. This affects the linguistic expression of his writing in a different way; by referring to paintings that have already taken on some sort of art historical meaning, Proust adds meaning to the literature that he inserts into each work. Although doing so in a different way than Woolf does, this addition of meaning adds to the linguistic expression of Proust's original writings because it juxtaposes specific words with predetermined meaning.

Woolf's relationship to a painter, art critic, and fellow modernist writers with interests in visual art allowed her to explore and utilize the visual arts to develop linguistic expression in first and foremost *To the Lighthouse*, but also in her canon of works in general; this greatly contributed to her prowess as one of the most accomplished writers of the twentieth century and the modern world. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf represents herself by the painter Lily Briscoe, and uses

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<sup>2</sup> Fry, Roger. *Letters of Roger Fry*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1972.

the painting that she creates as a metaphor for the entire novel—due to the fact that *To the Lighthouse* itself is a representation of Woolf's life, the fact that she chooses to represent it through both painting and writing cannot be ignored. The reader is able to see the connection to the visual arts through the writing immediately, and henceforth is thus unable to separate the two disciplines from one another.

### **Early Years: Woolf's Biographical Foundation and its Affect on Her Art**

Virginia Woolf's biographical history gave her the foundation that would later set her up well to become one of the most influential post-impressionists hailing from the modernist era. Her intellectual and forward-thinking parents gave her the support system and economical means to pursue that which she was truly passionate about. They also maintained a somewhat strange and strained relationship with their children, creating many discrepancies in their lives that would later provoke Woolf's literary memory. *To the Lighthouse* is completely centered on this relationship from both the visage of a child and of an adult—it is thus essential to understand Woolf's childhood in order to understand her masterpiece. Also, she was very close with her sister who would become a famous painter; this allowed her access into the world of the visual arts which would later provoke her painterly curiosity and ekphrastic exploration. The combination of these two things allowed for Woolf to become the writer that she was, and to explore the interplay between the visual and literary arts that represents the concerns of this analysis.

Virginia and Vanessa Stephen were born to Julia and Leslie Stephen in 1882 and 1879 respectively, at 22 Hyde Park Gate in Kensington. Both of their parents had been involved in previous marriages and therefore much of their relationship was based on the shared foundation of lost first loves<sup>3</sup>. Both parents would end up playing influential roles in the education of the girls as well as the works they would both eventually create; Leslie Stephen, a major player in the nineteenth century literary scene, was a free thinking, outspoken and rationalist individual who instilled the value of the written word and commitment to personal philosophy in his daughters. Through him, they learned what could come from performing difficult yet gratifying work that satisfied them in a way that might not touch other people—they were given the foundation to achieve a place in the social world where this was difficult for women, rather than being raised to be simple-minded, well-behaved housewives. Julia Stephen, on the other hand, was equally hard working as she attempted to care for her extremely large family as well as anyone else who asked. She was both beautiful and gracious, and at times reveled in enjoyment as heartily as she worked<sup>4</sup>. Due to the immense amount of duties that Julia performed on a daily basis, Virginia found that she knew her mother more as a general presence rather than as an actual individual; when written, Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is Virginia's attempt to understand and capture her mother. Here, Mrs. Ramsay/Julia Stephen falls subject to the post-impressionist aesthetic in becoming an essence rather than a defined being. Her inability to convey her as an individual is portrayed through outsider Lily

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3 Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, 1st U.S. ed (Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005).

4 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

Briscoe's difficulty in painting her<sup>5</sup>. Both parents, while clearly providing some sort of turmoil in the girls' childhood, provided the platform on which each would begin working in the disciplines that would become their lives' work.

Virginia and Vanessa had two full siblings, Thoby and Adrian, as well as four half siblings, Gerald, George, Stella, and Laura. Laura, Leslie's daughter from his first marriage, was unknowingly vacant and unstable, but Julia's daughter from her first marriage Stella was twelve years Virginia's senior and acted as another mother figure to her, especially following their mother's death<sup>6</sup>. The combined eight Stephen children mirrored the number and general ages of the Ramsay children in *To the Lighthouse*, suggesting a clear relationship between the fictional and historical families<sup>7</sup>. Julia's death also sparked the first episode of manic depression that would persist throughout the lengthy remainder of Virginia's life. Although up until this point she had been writing consistently and knew that writing would be her life's passion, for the two years following Julia's death Virginia would not pick up her pen, instead settling for constant reading<sup>8</sup>. This routine would continue throughout the episodes—when she would fall into the darkness of her mental illness, her writing would frequently stop; however her writing also became a way of pinpointing the beginning of her recoveries because its reappearance in her life typically coincided with a return to relative normalcy.

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5 Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

6 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

7 Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981

8 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

After this first episode, she began keeping a journal in which she consistently recorded aspects of her daily life—in this, the most repeated words are “Nessa went to drawing.”<sup>9</sup> Here the reader sees that while Virginia had fallen in love with the written word and the beauty of language, her elder sister had found similar solace in the visual arts. The frequency with which Virginia writes about this as part of her daily routine also demonstrates just how often Vanessa was found drawing or working with some other medium; the frequency of her writing becomes shaped by the frequency of Vanessa’s drawing and vice versa, as the language itself chooses exactly how often to record it, but due to the journalistic nature of the writing, it cannot record something that has not happened. Also, although Virginia’s writing was a vice that occupied the power to remove her from darkness, it was not a crutch through which to pour her unhappiness. Instead, it was a judgment free place dedicated to her sharp witted and opinionated views of the world, similar to what writing was her for father.

By 1905, Virginia, Vanessa, and Thoby had moved into a house on Gordon Square with some friends—this house would become known as Bloomsbury, named after its location and became a scene set for social, artistic, and sexual freedoms. This would later prove vital for the development of both of their respective artistic ventures and set the scene for the way in which they would lead their lives: full of vivacity, freedom, and passion. The freedom that so pervaded their social, artistic, and sexual lives translated a sense of fluidity to their art—for example, Virginia’s and Vanessa’s capacity for flexibility in her love and professional life allowed for a flexible relationship between her writing and

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9 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

Vanessa's painting to emerge, where each incorporated some of the other.

Virginia and Vanessa alone exemplified the written and the visual arts, and their interactions with each other as well as the other artists in the house expanded their own talents and influenced the works of all involved. Although the years spent in Bloomsbury were characterized by play and freedom, Virginia also spent much of her time teaching history and composition to adults at Morely College<sup>10</sup>. Her journalism also took off during this time period, but her ambition to write history books—as her father did—remained her principle goal for the time being. Two days after Thoby Stephen's death in 1906, Vanessa Stephen got engaged to Clive Bell and the house on Gordon Square was to be converted into their own house<sup>11</sup>, forcing Virginia to find her own residence with her surviving brother Adrian.

By 1910, Virginia was working on *The Voyage Out* and at risk of falling into another one of the episodes made possible by her illness. She decided to put her work on hold in order to recover before falling deeply into what would have had the ability to cause dangerous physical harm. However, by the time of the opening of the later infamous modernist art exhibition titled “Manet and the Post-Impressionists,” she was ready to return to the artistic world that made up her typical social sphere. Through this exhibition, she as well as Vanessa and Clive Bell made acquaintances with critic Roger Fry<sup>12</sup>, who centralized the topic of painting as one worthy of lengthy discussion—Virginia's fiction would eventually respond to these debates and incorporate painting as a central topic in her writing.

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10Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

11Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

12 Spalding, Frances. *Roger Fry, Art and Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.



In 1912, Virginia found her lifetime companion in Leonard Woolf and they married—he would become an integral part in the creation of her art, and contributed greatly toward that which would free her from public censorship. Because she was not sexually attracted to him, much of their marriage was based on friendship and empathetic playfulness<sup>13</sup>, and the fact that they had both written and published a novel was also a deciding factor. They were soul mates connected on a literary level, and were thus certain that they could lead an enlightened literary life together. In 1917, they bought a printing press that they would use to publish their own materials and that would become a central figure in their household. It would essentially allow for the Woolfs to accord the same level of artistic freedom to Virginia's writing as is typically accorded to the visual arts, specifically painting. Meanwhile, Vanessa Bell was enjoying a raucous family life and becoming decreasingly connected with civilization. She stood out from her peers, and did so knowingly and purposefully.

*To the Lighthouse* has as much to do with the history of Virginia Woolf's family life as it has to do with painting and the visual arts and it is thus necessary to draw these connections immediately. Her initial reasoning for writing the novel was a way of finally reckoning with her past and putting aside all of the ghosts that haunted it—once she finished, she found that she was no longer obsessed with her mother and father and that although they remained in her memory, they did so differently as if they were not longer attached to her. In the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay embody her father and mother, and while the reader sees them through the eyes of the eight Ramsay children (also known as the eight

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13 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

Stephen children) in the first section, he or she also sees them through the more understanding and explicit visage of an adult through the later sections. Mrs. Ramsay is beautiful and adored by the many that she cares for on a daily basis, and she appears at the center of every familial event that occurs. She also, however, is incredibly set in her ways and is obsessed with the feminine role that she must play out in order to succeed in her place as the matriarch of the family. Woolf writes Mr. Ramsay to epitomize both Leslie Stephen as well as herself as she depicts him as self-involved, in need of protection, and obsessed with his work. These characteristics both united as well as divided Virginia and her father, and she therefore writes his character as simultaneously comical and immensely sad<sup>14</sup>.

Woolf also writes herself into the character Lily Briscoe, with whom much of this analysis will concern. Lily is the outsider—she is obsessed with the Ramsay family and yet is shown interacting with them very sparingly, and can obviously never truly be a part of them. She is especially enthralled with Mrs. Ramsay, and grieves deeply when she suddenly dies at the heart of the novel<sup>15</sup>. She is also the central orchestrating figure, and uses her portrait of the Ramsay family—that which depicts Mrs. Ramsay reading to James—as a way of understanding herself, the family, and the relationship that she has with them. In a way, the painting becomes the only way through which she is truly able to interact with them. Like Virginia, using the novel as an attempt to understand her parents and family through her art, Lily Briscoe uses her painting as an attempt to

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14 Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

15 Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

understand the same parents and family through her art. This one of the first instances we see of a contextual and historical interaction occurring between painting and literature, through character and artist.

Although both were married, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell engaged in extramarital affairs throughout the course of their lives—Woolf’s most notable affair was likely her companionship with Vita Sackville-West, whilst Bell’s was likely that with Roger Fry<sup>16</sup>. Both affairs had riveting effects on the artists’ lives, shaping Woolf’s literature and Bell’s painting as they simultaneously affected each other—for example, while Roger Fry was making his mark on Bell’s approach to the visual arts, Bell was simultaneously affecting Woolf’s writing. Conversely, Vita Sackville-West was inspiring Woolf to write differently than she had thus far, which therefore affected Bell’s painting. Here it is possible to see the ways in which art’s affect on other art is influenced by life itself, and that the intricacies that develop between the two pieces of work come from this relationship to the reality that they exist in.

Virginia Woolf was greatly affected when the time came that found many of her friends and fellow artists passing away<sup>17</sup>. When Roger Fry followed the line of deaths, she found it to be almost unbearable. Although they had never been romantically involved as he and her sister had been, she found his presence and energy a great motivator towards her passion for the arts due to the simple fact that he was constantly talking about them. He spurred within her the desire to create, and for an artist there is no greater gift that one can give. His funeral—

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<sup>16</sup> Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.  
<sup>17</sup> Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

conducted completely in music as a tribute to his undying love for the arts—seemed finally to answer Virginia’s constant questioning of how to pay proper tribute towards her dying friends in a secular age. Although Fry was a visual artist, he too was keenly aware of the interplay that could occur between multiple forms of art, and respected and valued this interplay so much that he showcased it during his final moments above the ground.

At this point, Woolf found herself surrounded by what felt like only ghosts—Bloomsbury was beginning to fade in both memory as well as in reality. Woolf kept them alive through her continual commitment to those she had left as well as to her literature, and continued to take pleasure in the visually pleasing nature of the words she was able to write. According to Alexandra Harris, “She allowed her facts, in places, to be extremely beautiful, revealing her aesthetic pleasure in ordinary things. The book [referring to *The Years*] has a glimmering quality about it, a sense of significance we can’t quite grasp. Its characters try to articulate their visions...”<sup>18</sup> Even now with her tremendous skill at writing the visual and allowing the visual to shape her writing, Woolf still suffered from the episodes that accompanied her dormant manic depression that would make writing a risk to her health. For example, the work that was put into this book brought her almost to suicide<sup>19</sup>.

As she neared the end of her life, suicide would become a more and more unavoidable ending. With the onset of World War II, both she and Leonard made a pact that in dire circumstances, they would kill themselves together by turning

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18 Harris, Alexandra. *Virginia Woolf*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011.

19 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

on the car exhaust in the garage rather than lose any of their freedoms to the Germans<sup>20</sup>. This demonstrates their commitment to their work and worldviews—something that had been instilled in Woolf since her childhood under her father’s tutelage—as well as the strength of their companionship that they would desire to do something so drastic together. However, the Woolfs never had a chance to enact their plan due to the fact that Virginia’s increasing discontentment with her surroundings and the political world around her. Also, her manic depression made it more difficult for her to cope and come to terms with these things than it was for either Leonard or Vanessa Bell. She could tell that her illness was about to come on, and did not wish to place that burden on Leonard again. In 1941, Virginia Woolf loaded her pocket with a large stone and drowned herself in the river<sup>21</sup>.

Overall, Virginia Woolf led a life of extreme passion—from her upbringing under two hardworking parents who used their talents to provide for their large family to her individual personal life and career that has been glorified from the time it began. Her art was so successful because she was able to put her entire self into it and left no aspect out; while this created an unparalleled realism that could only be achieved through her inclusion of herself, it also took a toll on the sickness that lay dormant inside of her that would breach the surface when she strained or stressed herself too hard. She also lived a life of remarkable circumstance, as she was thrown not only into the underground life of the writer, but of the artist in general—she also was allowed a place in society where few

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20 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

21 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

women were typically allowed. This allowed her to flex her artistic capabilities to their fullest extent and really build upon the world she was a part of. A product of circumstance and interest, Virginia Woolf can be thought of as one of the most vivid, painterly writers of the modern world, and her literature is the perfect material through which one can study the effect of the visual on linguistic expression.

Much of Virginia Woolf's work, one of the strongest examples of which is *To the Lighthouse*, embodies ekphrasis; it constantly relates the world of the visual arts and painting to the meaning of the work as a whole, therefore using the two as a dialogical interplay in order to better enhance the original forms. As mentioned, human interpretation is an essential part of this interaction and it likely could not survive to the extent that it does in Virginia Woolf's work as it does otherwise. The painting that Lily Briscoe does in *To the Lighthouse* not only attempts to capture human interaction, but relies on the interaction of the characters as well as Lily's psychological processes and style of painting to materialize in the reader's mental eye. As it is a fictional work, the painting does not exist outside of the words that describe it, therefore making it subject to Lily's—and indirectly, Virginia's—verbal description. This gives both literature and painting new meaning that is otherwise unachievable.

### **A Look at *To the Lighthouse* and Lily Briscoe as Virginia Woolf**

*To the Lighthouse*, first published in 1927, exemplifies the ideals of high modernism and to this day remains in high regard in comparison to its contemporary novels. It is a fictional novel that is structurally extremely modern

due to its departure from the traditional view of plot—almost nothing actually happens over the course of its pages but instead the focus is placed on the thoughts and observations of the multitude of characters<sup>22</sup>. Because of this, the novel itself becomes an amalgam of voices, many of which are approaching similar subjects or actions, and all of which are acting from separate points of view. This gives the novel a sort of fluidity that allows it to adapt to any shape created by the reader's perceived impression of each character, and the combination of these impressions that occurs as they attempt—not always successfully—to interact with one another.

The act of writing a novel through perspective and observation gives a novel an inherent openness that remains prevalent throughout its entirety. *To the Lighthouse* allows the reader to get to know each character in two ways: first, through personal thoughts and observations, and second, through the thoughts and observations of others. As one can imagine, this creates a fairly biased and conflicting view of each character, as he or she may see him or herself differently than those with whom he or she interacts. For example, the character of Mr. Ramsay is an interesting one due to the fact that many of his children seem to simultaneously adore and despise him. It must also be taken into account that Mr. Ramsay is Woolf's attempt at understanding her father Leslie Stephen from both a child's and an adult's perspective, so to some extent some of the feelings surrounding the fictional character are biographical; this increases and complicates the visage through which the reader sees his character, as there is a

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22 Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981..

historical human being with which to compare him to while also taking into account the biased and perspective-based description Woolf provides.

Structurally, in some ways this resembles the different levels of a painting—the historical view of Woolf’s father can be compared to the historical information that accompanies a painting that does not attempt to reach its meaning on an interpretive level, but rather states the objective facts about its creation. Each character then takes on the meaning bestowed upon themselves by their inner voices, which can be compared to the meaning that an artist bestows upon his or her own work. The artist speaks for the painting in the same way that the individual character speaks for his or herself, and the meaning that comes from this internal reflection and interpretation will not always line up with the meaning bestowed by others. Finally, the interpretation of the painting by others that will always be completely removed from the process of actually creating the ideas that it represents is similar to the interpretation of one character through the eyes of another. The “other” must be considered in the context of experience and exposure to the visual arts—he or she may reach a different conclusion based on knowledge of art history, exposure to similar styles of painting, or subjective taste for the visual arts in general. Because of the variety of interpretive context, this level allows for the most subjectivity to occur, as those who attempt to understand the work also most likely have never spoken to the artist, and usually do not even know who he or she is. They are left to their own devices in terms of creating meaning from visual stimulation, in the same way that an outsider is left to his or her own devices when assessing the character of another human being.



*To the Lighthouse* is structurally similar to a painting based on the interpretive levels that can be accorded to each section of the novel. Also in terms of subject matter, a painting sits at the center of the novel's plot and significance. As mentioned earlier, Lily Briscoe—one of the characters, yet one that is not an actual member of the family—spends much of her time attempting to paint a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay reading to James. To “paint a portrait” of something can be interpreted to mean the act of putting brush to paper, but it also is used figuratively as a way of describing the act of making something easily understandable for someone, and to look at the entire picture. Here, Lily does both; she literally works to paint a picture of the family she so desperately wishes to be a part of, and also works to understand the family as a whole, and her relationship to them as a whole.

She paints them both in reality as well as in her mind, and the reader gains access to her painting, but also her perspective and observations of them that come from her interactions with them. Lily is also somewhat of a cameo for Woolf herself, as she attempts to make sense of her relationship to her family. The reader can thus consider Lily the sole character who is able to achieve all three levels of interpretation described above; she exists historically and factually as a portal into Virginia Woolf's mentality: she is the creator of both the physical painting in the novel as well as the picture that the reader gets of the Ramsay family, and she is also the outsider to the family itself and must settle for an outside interpretation as the closest that she can get to them.

Lily Briscoe from *To the Lighthouse* is an excellent example of the way in which painting relates to literature because as a character, she bridges the gap

between the two, further setting the stage for comparison and influence to pervade the remainder of the work. She plays within the constricts of both disciplines, as painter and as writer, and the fact that Woolf takes us into her subconscious allows us to see her view of the world and how it is shaped by the art that she partakes in. Her role becomes that of the “translator,” and through writing she paints a beautiful picture of the family unit and their consciousness for the reader.

### **Painterly Technologies in a Written Sphere**

Although *To the Lighthouse* acts as the perspective through which this analysis seeks to examine the interplay between literature and visual art, one must first define and consider the artistic techniques employed by the artist that accomplish this. Visual art is able to develop linguistic expression due to these techniques; their adaptation into a verbal sensibility acts as the modifying agent that so affects the literature. For the purposes of this analysis, the painterly techniques that will be discussed are: value, compositional unity, color, and balance. There are infinite ways that these values are able to assist the painter in creating a successful work—they do not remain static in their definitions nor do any demand a sense of strict conformity of the works they apply to. In *To the Lighthouse*, one can see Woolf utilizing the values in the same way that a painter does, thus using painterly techniques to develop and enhance her literary skill.

**Value:** The value of a piece refers to the amount of lightness and darkness of a color, which although present in polychromatic imagery, is most important in monochromatic imagery. It allows for a differentiation between shades of any

give hue, which allows for differentiation between artistic elements to occur<sup>23</sup>. A change in value adds to the visual impact that a work of art has on any given viewer, while simultaneously aiding the artist in his or her attempt to express an idea. Value can also be referred to as luminosity, which literally refers to the amount of light that radiates from a particular color or from an entire picture. The lightness or darkness of a hue or painting is a determinate of the amount of light that is reflected, and thus creates a desired effect based on this.

Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* utilizes value by way of describing literal color but also by assigning meaning to the literary aspects of the novel itself. Also, post-impressionist art in general drew heavily upon value as a way of enhancing their beliefs regarding artistic expression. For example, Paul Cézanne—one of the major painters displayed at Fry's post-impressionist exhibition—was described as one who altered the traditional uses of light and shadow in a painterly and artistic setting. Roger Fry writes that for him,

Instead of accepting the convention of light and shade falling upon objects from the side, he chose what seemed an impossibly difficult method of painting, that of representing them with light falling full upon them. This led to a very great change in the method of modelling, and to a simplification of planes in his pictures which resulted in something closely akin to simple linear designs.<sup>24</sup>

This is a fairly accurate way of describing much of the post-impressionist mantra and technique as followed by Woolf and her peers. Cézanne, an early and extremely influential post-impressionist, was one of the first to warp traditionally

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23 Delahunt, Michael. "ArtLex Art Dictionary." ArtLex Art Dictionary. N.p., Aug. 1996. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

24 Fry, Roger, and Grafton Galleries. *Manet and the Post-impressionists*. London: Ballantyne, 1910. *The Archive*. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.archive.org>>

accepted artistic techniques in order to contort them into something different. His use of light and shadow as a way of flattening planes and creating an impossible light source which as mentioned, can be seen throughout *To the Lighthouse*. For example, the first and third sections of the novel take place in the daylight while the second section takes place in the nighttime. Light and shadow can be used together in order to create a juxtaposition of effects and therefore thoughts that appear far greater than the individual pieces themselves.



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Paul Cézanne le Grand Pin

One of Cézanne's paintings displayed at "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" was titled "Le grand pin"<sup>25</sup> (seen above). Painted in 1896 and translated as "The Large Pine," both title and image display much of the post-impressionist mantra and technical devices. The viewer is faced with a fully brightened tree, and cannot quite tell from which direction the light is actually coming from, due to the fact that the light actually follows the path the viewer takes in observing it. This places the light in the power of the viewer and creates the sense that he or she controls the effect that the tree has on him or her. Also, the essence of the tree is displayed far more strongly than the tree itself is, as it blurs and shifts in a visual wind. Its tree-ness is defined by its semi-removal from the rest of the trees in the background, but it also appears to be one in the same with them due to the blurring that occurs between all of their leaves. It is therefore both individual and part of a whole; it expresses both the essence of itself but also as tree among the forest of trees.

The tree is placed front and center, making it the thing that first attracts the attention of the viewer. It spans between an orange ground and a bright blue sky, both of which hold a sort of power over the tree due to their opaque and dynamic brilliance, and balance it there in the center as an unmovable entity. The neutrally colored trunk branches out into many different greens that alter and shift with the viewer's perspective, simultaneously creating the effect of many inseparable trees rather than a given amount of individual items. The blue sky also shows a sort of

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25 Fry, Roger, and Grafton Galleries. *Manet and the Post-impressionists*. London: Ballantyne, 1910. *The Archive*. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.archive.org>>

motion, as if touched by a rippling yet invisible breeze. The addition of the center tree unifies the entirety of the painting due to its subtle prominence and ability to simultaneously act as the rest of its kind do.

It is also interesting to note that this center tree shares commonalities with Lily Briscoe's painting, as it is a tree that helps her to unify and complete her painting, and a center line that creates the final movement necessary. Cézanne's painting combines these two painterly choices and places a tree directly in the center of his work to pull it all together. He even names the work after this final and essential moment, in a vastly un-descriptive "The Large Pine." Rather than describing the tree fully through words, he allows for his audience to form their own opinions and descriptions by providing very little concrete evidence for them to work with, both literarily and visually. As Woolf states in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, "But the Edwardians were never interested in character in itself; or in the book in itself. They were interested in something outside. Their books, then, were incomplete as books, and required that the reader should finish them, actively and practically, for himself."<sup>26</sup> Cézanne does this through painting, and provides the essence of a tree while leaving deeper interpretation to the viewers.

Cézanne's removal of shadow and usage of flat, fully-brightened planes allowed for the viewer to gain the perspective that he himself desired, rather than allowing each to see the interplay from a different light. *To the Lighthouse* serves as Woolf's look into her own past as both child and adult, and depicts the characters from their own perspectives; she therefore shapes the reader's opinions

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26 Woolf, Virginia. *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*. London: L. and Virginia Woolf, 1924. Print.

and perceptions of each character by his or her expression of his or herself, which of course comes back to Woolf's own perspective as she is the one who gives life to each character. She is thus pointing the reader in the same direction that she herself decides to view each autobiographical character in, essentially creating a fully brightened, flat plane through which to observe and experience them on. Also, by depicting each character by way of internal thoughts and external perceptions, she effectively places the analytical "light source" directly upon him or her, due to the fact that their perceptions and thoughts are more or less confessions of their deepest selves.

Cézanne's work was appropriated throughout the modern and post-impressionist era for many reasons, and it is thus not surprising that Virginia Woolf was inspired upon viewing his art at the 1910 exhibition. For example, his popularity spurs from the fact that he "thus showed how it was possible to pass from the complexity of the appearance of things to the geometrical simplicity which design demands, his art has appealed enormously to later designers."<sup>27</sup> He essentially acted as one of the founding members of modernism and more specifically the post-impressionist ideological movement due to this—his art was accessible, subversive, new, and powerful enough to appeal to many of the young artists in Woolf's generation.

**Artistic Unity:** When a piece achieves a quality of wholeness or oneness through the use of the principles of design (balance, emphasis, eurythmy, harmony, horror vacui, limitation, movement, pattern, proportion, rhythm,

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<sup>27</sup> Fry, Roger, and Christopher Reed. *A Roger Fry Reader*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996. Print.

tension, unity, variety), it is referred to as having achieved compositional unity<sup>28</sup>. This refers to a piece that has combined all of its parts into one complete and cohesive whole. The principles do not need to be used in equal quantities, but instead a composition is considered unified when the relationships between its parts interact in such a way that no part may be altered without changing the aesthetic integrity and meaning of the work.

Lily completes her picture by “drawing a line there, in the centre<sup>29</sup>,” this addition gives her piece a sense of unity and by Fry’s standard, gives it the order and balance necessary to be considered successful. He states, “In a picture, this unity is due to a balancing of the attractions of the eye about the central line of the picture<sup>30</sup>. Like Lily, Woolf states “One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together”<sup>31</sup>—here it is possible to draw a connection between Lily’s completed painting and Woolf’s completed *To the Lighthouse*. The two works become intertwined by the processes through which they reach their endings, thus demonstrating the connection to visual art that so pervades throughout Woolf’s writing.

**Color:** Color is that which defines the tonal differences in a painter’s work and palette. It is produced by the light of various wavelengths that is reflected back to the eyes when the light hits an object. It has three properties: hue (the

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28 Delahunt, Michael. "ArtLex Art Dictionary." ArtLex Art Dictionary. N.p., Aug. 1996. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

29 Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, 1st U.S. ed (Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005).

30 Fry, Roger, and Christopher Reed. *A Roger Fry Reader*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996. Print.

31 Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, 1st U.S. ed (Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005).



common name for the color), intensity (the strength and purity of the color), and value (the lightness or darkness of a color). This is not to be confused with pigment, which is the synthetic or natural substance by which the color is made<sup>32</sup>.

Woolf's use of color pervades *To the Lighthouse* in many ways and does so throughout the entirety of the novel. Lily Briscoe, the woman who spends her time painting the Ramsays and essentially creates the painting through which a metaphor for the novel itself is created, uses color as a way of speaking. Also, Woolf uses color in order to enhance descriptive imagery most frequently when concerning Lily; this both draws the reader's attention to Lily's role as a painter of pictures and images but also to the fact that Woolf herself—she who Lily most strongly represents—was influenced by color and painting. For example, in one of the first experiences that the reader has with Lily, Woolf writes, "It suddenly gets cold. The sun seems to give less heat,' she said, looking about her, for it was bright enough, the grass still a soft deep green, the house starred in its greenery with purple passion flowers, and rooks dropping cool cries from the high blue."<sup>33</sup> The use of color here enhances the reader's understanding of the way that Lily the painter views things, but also the way that Lily as Virginia Woolf saw the world through painterly color.

The aspect of this passage that I find most interesting is the part that reads, "...rooks dropping cool cries from the high blue." First, Woolf associates the

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32 Delahunt, Michael. "ArtLex Art Dictionary." ArtLex Art Dictionary. N.p., Aug. 1996. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

33 Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

feeling “cool” with the active word “cries.” Although one can read “cool” as “cold,” the fact that it is followed by “high blue” refocuses the reader on “cool” as a way of describing a spectrum of colors. This clearly draws upon the painterly view of “blue” as more than just one hue but instead a part of a whole; it is both part of the seemingly infinite group of blue hues, but also a part of the larger group of cool colors that are found on the color wheel. The rooks mentioned are also found “dropping” the cool colored cries, which creates the image of a painter dropping colors onto his or her canvas and allows the reader to visualize the sky.

It then continues on to refer to the specific blue as “high blue.” This is an interesting way of describing the blue—one would typically expect the novelist to refer to blue as anything ranging from light and dark blue, to cerulean, indigo, or turquoise. “High blue” gives the impression that Woolf is again concerning herself with the essence of the color, rather than simply attaching a pre-characterized word to the original hue in order to assist the reader in understanding its shade. “High” can refer to status, saturation and intensity, placement, frequency, mental state, and much more. The reader is then left to his or her own devices in order to understand the color, in the same way that the post-impressionist painters operates, or the way that a painter does not tell the viewer the name of the color being used but rather forces him or her to look at it to decide for him or herself.

Another example of Woolf writing as a painterly figure through color comes during Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner preparation:

“...after the first stoop the flames stood upright and drew with them into visibility the long table entire, and in the middle a yellow and purple dish

of fruit. What had she done with it, Mrs. Ramsay wondered, for Rose's arrangement of the grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of the bananas, made her think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune's banquet, of the bunch that hangs with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus (in some picture), among the leopard skins and the torches lolloping red and gold...<sup>34</sup>

To begin with the obvious, Woolf clearly refers to a painting in this passage. She writes "(in some picture)" in reference to Bacchus and the vine leaves, both of which were extremely prevalent in ancient Greek and Roman art (either as Bacchus or Dionysus). Take for example the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii—the wall paintings found on this site depict the Dionysian mysteries in mainly red and gold, again resembling the passage Woolf writes.



To continue along this same line of thought, a study of ancient Roman art also gives us the wall painting in the Tomb of the Leopards, which again relates back to the passage. Although Woolf is not directly referring to either of these works,

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34 Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

the resemblance enhances the ability of the written passage to appear like a painting.

This passage also resembles the act of painting in the same way that the passage described earlier does—as the reader gets farther into the passage, the color imagery and technical writing creates the sensibility that he or she is not reading a novel but is instead viewing a painting. When describing the dinner table, Mrs. Ramsay places an extensive amount of emphasis on the color of all of the items, ranging from the purple and yellow of the dish and the pink of the shell to actually naming specific fruits of which the reader would more than likely be well aware of their associated color. The dinner table itself becomes like a painter's palate covered in paints waiting to be used. Another aspect of the passage that is important to consider is the fact that the name Rose is used to refer to the child that actually created the colorful arrangement. Although Rose is primarily a flower and a name, in an artist's vocabulary, it is frequently used to describe a soft reddish pink color. The colorful arrangement was created by a color in its own right, and the girl who controls the color's name acts as the artist of the colorful scene in the same way that Woolf orchestrates the whole thing as the writer. In the same way that Woolf creates the sense that blue is dropping onto the scenery as a painter drops blue onto his or her canvas, she also creates the sense that an entire dinner is no more than an amalgam of color, as if inhabiting a painter's palate.

**Balance:** Balance can be thought of as a design technique that refers to the arrangement of the artistic elements of a piece. Its implementation creates a pleasing sense of stability by arranging the composition in a way that denotes

equity of weight—different portions of each composition hold different levels of dominance with respect towards the others<sup>35</sup>. This allows the artist a sense of freedom that comes from his or her ability to create a piece that is symmetrical, asymmetrical, or radial. While symmetrical balance occurs when the parts being balanced are equal and identical and subsequently reflect one another, asymmetrical balance occurs when there is a lack of balance between the parts. Radial balance, on the other hand, comes from a composition's ability to balance itself regardless of the denoted axis and resembles a wheel.

Balance is a prevalent theme that permeates throughout Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In the same way that it would be an underlying factor of a painting's composition, it underlies Woolf's literary expression as a basic principle that dictated her planning. For example, Briggs brings the reader's attention to the fact that before even writing *To the Lighthouse*, she drew the figure "H" in her notebook as a visual representation for the novel's future schematic outline. This visual aid pervades the novel in many different ways, and thus serves as an immediate parallel between the literary and the visual—if the two were not able to be linked, the visual would not be able to be used as a metaphor for any aspect of the literary, let alone one as integral to its creation as a compositional aspect.

The "H" can be found in something as simplistic as the format through which *To the Lighthouse* is told; it begins with the monumental first section, "The Window," which reflects the early years of the Ramsay family's history alongside the supporting characters, such as Lily Briscoe. The final section, entitled "The

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35 Delahunt, Michael. "ArtLex Art Dictionary." ArtLex Art Dictionary. N.p., Aug. 1996. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

Lighthouse,” is equally monumental, and reflects Mr. Ramsay’s journey to the lighthouse with James and Cam. These two sections refer to the vertical legs of the figure “H” and therefore serve as the stable and parallel moments through which a sense of power and dignity can be achieved; visual artists use vertical lines in order to convey the same sentiments. The section titled “Time Passes,” in contrast to the sections previously mentioned, is a far more transitive addition and acts as the connecting horizontal line found in the figure “H.” Though it is far less monumental than the other two sections and essentially serves as an agent to carry the reader from “The Window” to “The Lighthouse,” its importance spawns from the fact that it conveys an absence of conflict and a restful peace, broadening and relaxing the war and harsh weather that it connects. Again, horizontal lines are used to fulfill this purpose in the visual arts and can be seen doing so in the literary world of *To the Lighthouse*. The parallel that can be drawn here between the literary and the visual serves to accentuate the fact that Woolf composed this work with a painterly mind, and allowed the symbolic visual to balance it.

Another way that Woolf uses the figure “H” as a way of grounding her composition is through the figures of Lily Briscoe and Mr. Ramsay, and is therefore using painterly and visual qualities to enhance the development of her characters. According to Briggs, both exist as entities that struggle to connect to their endings by way of the horizontal line in the same manner as the storyline itself does<sup>36</sup>; Lily is attempting to finish her painting of Mrs. Ramsay while Mr. Ramsay is simultaneously attempting to reach the lighthouse with his children.

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36 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

Throughout the novel, the difficulty that these two tasks present for both characters is impossible to miss, and neither reaches his or her respective goals until the very end. In order to solve the conflicts, Woolf mimics the figure “H” shape of the entire novel in the final section by dividing it into thirteen sections and using the seventh and middle-most section as the transitive, horizontal piece. Her concern with form and mass as a way of finding a solution to a problem again serves to reveal Woolf’s painterly aesthetic—it points to an expressive and spatial way of thinking that acts as a major characteristic of the modernist movement. The words Woolf chooses are inherently affected by the compositional organization, and their subsequent balancing depends on their placement.

The lighthouse itself also reflects the figure “H” that shapes the entire novel due to the fact that it has three beams, two of which are long and the third short. This serves as a juxtaposition of the artistic technique of employing light with its literary symbolism—it stands as a defining and imposing figure that centers the novel while simultaneously remains associated with the saving power of light against the oppressive force that is darkness. It also measures time in terms of light which again connects the novel to the visual arts, because time is one of the elements that creates a fundamental difference between paintings and writing<sup>37</sup>. Time allows novels a sort of successive unity that cannot exist in a painting; the fact that a purely novelistic quality is demonstrated by an essential

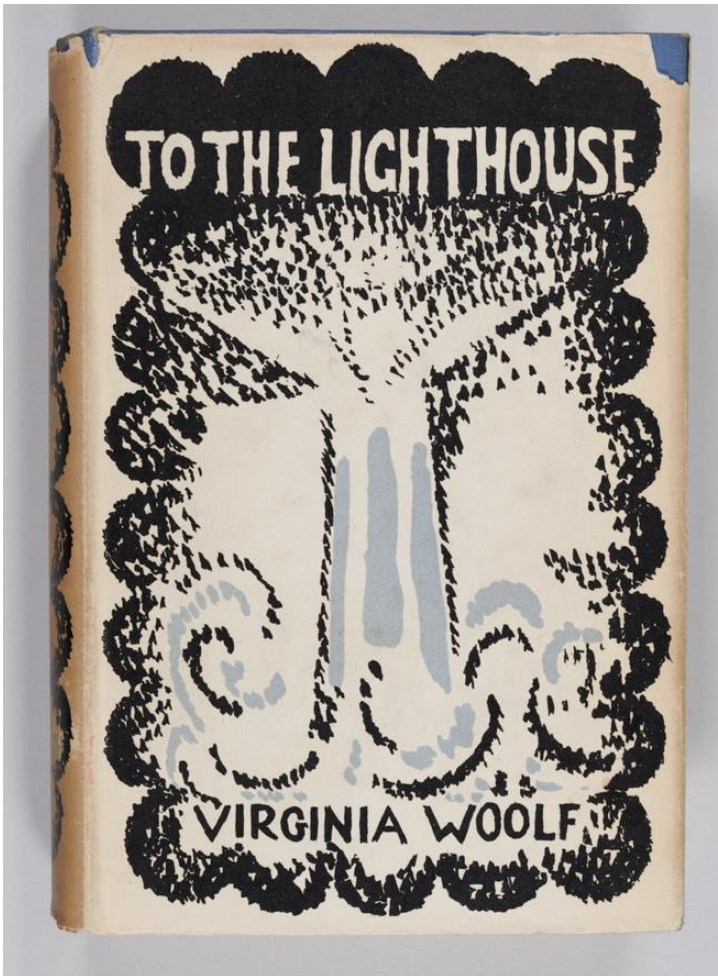
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37 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

technique of painting and visual arts connects the two art forms in a way that cannot be ignored.

### **A Family Affair: The Internality of Woolf's Works**

Biographically, it's extremely clear that Virginia Woolf was close both personally and artistically with her sister Vanessa Bell; this is exhibited with even further clarity through the fact that she asked her sister to illustrate the dust jackets of the majority of the original versions of her published works<sup>38</sup>.



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38 Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988



The image above is the original dust jacket design for *To the Lighthouse*, painted by Vanessa Bell. Here we see the visual and the literary coming together in an artistic fusion that acts as a testament to each artists' ability and vision. Woolf also publishes the novel through her and her husband's printing company Hogarth Press. The novel thus remains as untouched by external forces as a novel can be while still retaining some level of success; by remaining in the family as described, it attains a painterly sense of freedom due to the fact that it doesn't have to jump through the same hoops that some other written works do. Its complete production is controlled, and allows for Woolf to retain autonomy over her own work without compromising it in any way.

This takes into account the fact that as previously discussed, the visual arts typically are allowed more freedom of expression than the literary arts are. This is due to the fact that books need some sort of production and distribution method in order to justify themselves, while paintings only require exhibitions and responses. Even so, a successful exhibition and response is not necessary to ensure success in painting. For example, Vincent van Gogh's work was greatly unappreciated in a critical sense throughout his lifetime and was not considered great painting until viewed posthumously. However, this did not impact the creation of the work itself and instead simply affected the creator. Although narrative can be experimental in the same way that many paintings are, the process through which it is created must in some way be organized, and it cannot be created without this organization.

The Woolfs were unique in the sense that they controlled not only the writing of the novel, but also its publication and distribution. Although the

organized process remains, the fact that it was author controlled eliminates the external forces that frequently touch and warp literature. Let us refer to James Joyce and his unforgettable novel, *Ulysses*. Although Joyce was writing and around the same time as Woolf was and was arguably more experimental and modernistic than she was, he did not have access to his own printing press. *Ulysses* in particular contained potentially obscene material and was thus censored from publication in the United States; this resulted in difficulty finding a publisher anywhere, and the magazine that had been publishing the novel serially was stopped. Although the novel did finally get published in Europe in 1922 and abroad in the United States in 1933, the hurdles that accompanied external publication greatly stunted the transmittance of Joyce's ideas and the success of his most infamous novel. Woolf avoided controversy and time constraints by publishing her own novels with her and Leonard's printing company, Hogarth Press. It thus becomes more painterly by giving the creator full control of the work, regardless of the level of freedom of expression actually in place by nature of the medium. Virginia Woolf is therefore acting in same way as a painter would, and may be to some extent influenced by her sister's freedom of expression.

Bell's dust jacket designs play into this idea nicely and support much of Woolf's goals in writing this novel. Although here Woolf relinquishes one aspect of the creation of her novel to her sister, it remains within the family, and with Virginia's closest ally at that. This choice must therefore be accorded some significance, as it denotes an extension of Virginia's self into the painterly world of Vanessa. She creates a juxtaposition between her work and Vanessa's work

while simultaneously suggesting a subliminal connection between the painter and the writer, and furthermore between painting and writing.

A painting of a still life evokes a similar reader response as a description found in literature does; with this in mind, both types of art mirror each other in their respective disciplines through the visage of the artist. When it comes to her characters, Woolf employs descriptive language as a way to characterize individuals. She captures their portraits through the usage of words and conversations, but also relies on visual images to convey that which cannot be expressed by words. Here she uses the literary version of a trope in the visual arts as the primary way of portraying the characters that populate her novels. Also, the typical lack of physical description that follows her verbal portraiture creates a pervasion sense of facelessness, which leads to a timelessness and universality that allows each figure to surpass his or her own individual ego.

Similar themes pervade both sisters' works, demonstrating a connection and/or artistic functionality operating on a similar level. For example, flowers are one reoccurring subject in both sisters' descriptive and visual still life works. While Woolf uses them as a simultaneous counterpoint to the human condition and poster-child for the feminine role, Bell simply delights in the act of painting them. However, Bell's work on the dust jackets of Woolf's novels combine the visual depiction of organic matter with the literary meaning that Woolf herself has

accorded to it, thus shedding new light on the power that the visual can have on the literary<sup>39</sup>.

In her still life paintings, “Vanessa Bell does emphasize the nonhuman realm of objects that contains and transcends complicated human activities. To her, solid objects as well as fruits and flowers provide endlessly fascinating possibilities for combining shapes, lines, and colors. We see them with the intensity and angle of her vision...”<sup>40</sup> While Bell uses flowers to entertain her love of all things aforementioned, Woolf uses them to stand figuratively for moments of intense perception. *To the Lighthouse* is, to some extent, a moment of intense perception in its entirety, and although the dust jacket does not feature any flowers, the lighthouse that it does feature appears to look strikingly similar to a tree. The tree is a sort of organic matter similar to a flower but larger and more enveloping of its surroundings—it cannot be ignored or destroyed as easily as a flower can be. The novel itself, while containing a great many moments of perception both introspectively and between characters, also exists as Woolf’s attempt to understand her parents as they were during her childhood and as they would be during her adult life. Like a tree, it is therefore an undeniable umbrella that collects all of her perceptions into one. The lighthouse as a tree also coincides with the finishing compositional piece of Lily Briscoe’s painting. In the same way that the correct placement of the tree allows her to finally be satisfied

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39 Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters’ Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988

40 Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters’ Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988.

with her painting, the lighthouse finally gives Cam, James, and Mr. Ramsay a sense of closure on the previous chapters of their lives. To go even further, the completion of the novel itself would likely have acted as both tree and lighthouse, giving Woolf the needed closure on her relationship with her parents.

Bell's choice to render the lighthouse in a somewhat ambiguous way is owed partly to her understanding of Woolf's intention behind the novel—of the many Stephen children, Bell was the one most capable of understanding where Virginia was coming from. Similar to the way that Woolf's featureless characters spawn from her descriptive language, Bell's ambiguous dust jacket illustration spawns from the limitations placed upon her by the technology of the printing press. In the case of *To the Lighthouse* and the rest of Woolf's works, Vanessa used mainly black and white coloring with the occasional addition of one or two other colors<sup>41</sup>. She was unable to paint in the vibrant way that she was used to doing; however, in painting black is frequently used to bring out the other colors that surround it. The black of Bell's illustration draws the viewer's attention to its subtleties, while the overarching family tree that pervades Woolf's writing draws the reader's attention to the subtle interactions that give so much life to the novel.

Another motif that occurs frequently in both Bell's paintings and Woolf's writing is the window; this is relevant to this discussion due to the similar meaning that accompanies both windows and flowers as well as the fact that the first section of *To the Lighthouse* is entitled "The Window." According to Gillespie, flowers and the window suggest "interpenetrating interiors and

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41 Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988.

exteriors, of human individuality asserted in domestic surroundings and lost beyond those artificial boundaries, and of the beauty and fragility of human life—  
...”<sup>42</sup> While flowers reflect the feminine role and ability to mix the exterior natural world with the interior human world, windows allow for a direct entryway or exchange of information to occur between the two. Through a window, one may be able to see into the secret and private world of a family or out into the wild, untamed, and unexplained way of the earth. Lily Briscoe attempts to see into the Ramsays’ private lives through her painting; for her, it acts as a clearer and more traversable window than any of the real windows that line the house. She is able to “see” and understand more clearly through her art than she can through reality in the same way that Virginia Woolf can more easily gain access to her parents’ world through her writing than she was able to in her childhood.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the first section (the first monumental vertical line of the “H” figure) is entitled “The Window.” With this titling alone, one is able to grasp the level of importance that windows had for Woolf, to take this a step further, the fact that the major “window” of the novel is a painting points towards the sheer important and influence that the visual arts had on her. Everything the reader experiences in the novel is from a subjective, interior point of view and the window motif only serves to strengthen this. Aside from the painting, each character is the window to his or her own role in the novel, as Woolf inspects each through her own window.

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42 Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters’ Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988.

“The Window” is by far the most autobiographically centered part of the novel, as it involves all of the Ramsay/Stephen children, both parents, and the various neighbors that make their way into the Ramsays’ lives. Through this section, the reader becomes acquainted with each family member’s personality as well as the relationships they all have with one another. Woolf does this, as mentioned before, through subjective and interior voicing. What we know of each character comes mainly from their own voice—whether that means through words, actions, or thoughts. Here Woolf literally gets herself into the mind of each member of her family again in order to achieve her end goal of understanding and seeing each of them more clearly. She looks at each of them as if for the first time and is thus placed onto a similar playing field as the reader. Woolf herself explains that although she worked on it constantly until it was finished, the writing of this novel took a toll on her mentally due to the strain of not only inhabiting her family members’ minds, but also from the simple act of recounting the details of her childhood.

Although the book is largely a collection of Woolf’s own memories and perspectives, she is viewing them from the perspective of a window, painting, and work of literature and the first section serves to illustrate this. From the most basic level, Woolf is writing a novel about her past and familial relationships and is therefore doing so through writing. However, her mimetic character Lily Briscoe is simultaneously attempting to understand the same family by way of painting; we therefore are able to connect the two as a way of understanding a very real, personalized statement. Woolf’s respect for painting and the visual arts clearly contributed to her use of painting in this novel. To take it one step further,

the painting in the novel represents the window into the Ramsay's lives, again connecting painting and visual arts as the title of the first section is "The Window."

### **Woolf and the Post-Impressionists**

Virginia Woolf is famously quoted as saying "On or about December 1910, human character changed." Around this point, the old values and criticisms that art was subject to were changing at an unprecedented level<sup>43</sup>, resulting in an overall change in the world of art. The term "post-impressionism" was not widely used to describe this change and the varied group of artists who promoted it until Roger Fry created an exhibition in 1910 entitled "Manet and the Post-Impressionists." Through this exhibition, Fry tied the growing school of post-impressionism and the young artists who gave it life to the already esteemed name of Manet, thus simultaneously giving validation to the methodology and concretely defining a concept that had not yet fully materialized<sup>44</sup>. In his written introduction to the show Fry writes, "The pictures collected together in the present Exhibition are the work of a group of artists who cannot be defined by any single term. The term 'Synthesists,' which has been applied to them by learned criticism, does indeed express a quality underlying their diversity... This, indeed, is the first source of their quarrel with the Impressionists: the Post-Impressionists

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43 Kelley, Alice van Buren. *To the Lighthouse: The Marriage of Life and Art*. Twayne's Masterwork Studies no. 11. Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1987.

44 Fry, Roger. *Letters of Roger Fry*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1972.



consider the Impressionists too naturalistic.”<sup>45</sup> With this, he acknowledges the incorrectness of the singularity placed upon the group; by nature they are multifaceted and diverse, which flows forth into their art, allowing for a multitude of styles and techniques to emerge. In the following pages, the ways in which both Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell used this stylistic diversity will be analyzed in depth.

Many of those with whom Virginia Woolf surrounded herself were connected to post-impressionism. Although their varied styles did not necessarily mesh into a unified and cohesive one, they all operated with the common goal of exaggerating impressionistic techniques and mantras. Each artist did this in his or her own way; for example, while van Gogh intensified and physically thickened the already vibrantly painted impressionistic colors, Cézanne moved away from the impressionistic separation of color and towards the separation of entire planes of color.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf uses Mr. Paunceforte as an artistic foil to Lily’s character; where Lily is a post-impressionist like Woolf herself, concerned with shape and form, Paunceforte paints with an attention to realistic detail and surface effect. Lily finds herself interested in the relationship between masses, light, and shadows, and echoes Roger Fry in her concern for underlying form,

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45 Fry, Roger, and Grafton Galleries. *Manet and the Post-impressionists*. London: Ballantyne, 1910. *The Archive*. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.archive.org>>

inner truth, and compositional balance<sup>46</sup>. All of this amounts to a focus on the essence or inherent truth of any given subject, rather than its outer characteristics typically grounded in realism.

“Manet and the Post-Impressionists” took place in the Grafton Galleries in London and greatly influenced many of the artists who experienced it. It exposed many of London’s young artists to the worlds of Cézanne, Seurat, and van Gogh, and although it was a disaster in both the public and critical spheres, it clearly had an effect on Virginia Woolf. Some of the painters on display and samples of their paintings at the exhibition were:

Dead at time of exhibition: Posthumous works

Edouard Manet (1832-1883) – Portrait d’enfant

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) – Le grand pin

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) – Bouquet de Fleurs

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) – Arles

Henri-Edmond Cross (1856-1910) – Petites Montagnes mauresques

Living at time of exhibition: Contemporary works

Jules Flandrin – La danse des vendanges

Picasso – Portrait de M. Sagot

Paul Sionac – Le Remorqueur

Georges Séurat -- Le Phare à Honfleur

Maurice Denis

Paul Sérusier

Herbin

Louis Valtat

Pierre Laprade

Félix Vallotton

Maurice de Vlaminck

Henri Matisse

Albert Marquet

André Derain

Othon Frieze

Jean Puy

Odilon Redon

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46 Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, 1st U.S. ed (Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005).

Pierre Girieud  
Henri Manguin<sup>47</sup>

Desmond MacCarthy, literary critic, was made Secretary of the event by creator Roger Fry—he assisted Fry and Vanessa’s husband Clive in the acquisition of many of the Parisian paintings<sup>48</sup>. Most of the art dealers they negotiated with were extremely willing to break into the London art scene, thus contributing to the large variety of painters mentioned above. Some of the work was actually for sale at this event, while others were simply there on loan. The works were so different and outlandish from what had previously been accepted as contemporary style that many disliked the exhibition and considered the paintings the work of lunatics. Many even considered it dangerous, as it departed from the London cultural ideals and expectations so strongly that society decided that the artists were vastly untalented. Woolf herself declared that it sent the public into “paroxysms of rage and laughter.”<sup>49</sup> However, for those within the actual art world, the exhibition acted as an initial playing field for the advent of modernity. The Burlington Magazine writes,

While the exhibition did not make its leading artists household names overnight, it prepared the ground for their eventual canonisation over the following decade. Gauguin, whose work escaped the worst excesses of critical abuse, became a figure of romance and rebellion, his life evoked a few years later in Somerset Maugham’s bestselling novel *The Moon and Sixpence*; Van Gogh was the deranged genius of popular imagination, although the publication of his letters in the following decade put paid to the idea of him as an undisciplined lunatic; and Cézanne, from being an

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47 Fry, Roger, and Grafton Galleries. *Manet and the Post-impressionists*. London: Ballantyne, 1910. *The Archive*. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.archive.org>>

48 Fry, Roger. *Letters of Roger Fry*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1972

49 McKenzie, Janet. "Radical Bloomsbury: The Art Of Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, 1905–1925." *Studio International*. Brighton Museum and Publisher, 09 Oct. 2011. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.

incompetent ‘bungler’, rapidly assumed shaman-like status in the development of Modernism.<sup>50</sup>

“Manet and the Post-Impressionists” influenced the art world all across the world, as leading members of art communities from many different countries were in attendance. It was a prefiguration of its American counterpart, the Armory Show. Set in New York City in 1913, about a third of its exhibitions displayed works by the European artists that Fry displayed in his show. The paintings had a similar effect on their American audience, who found them jarring, insane, and yet extraordinarily ingenious and profound<sup>51</sup>. Like “The Armory Show,” “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” had an influence spread far and wide but also remained close to home, affecting those who were directly and indirectly involved in its creation; Virginia Woolf found it influential enough to declare it a leading proponent of a worldwide change in human nature. Due to this strong assertion, it can be concluded that the paintings had a great effect on her and by extension, her literature.

Both Bell and Woolf painted and wrote with an emphasis on the essence of the individual rather than the individual itself; this is a largely postmodernist ideology, but the extent to which both sisters followed its mantra indicates the influence that each had on the other’s work. This also brings in ekphrasis, thus allowing for each medium to affect the other. Ekphrasis allows whole mediums

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50" The Shock of the Old: 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists'" *The Burlington Magazine* 152.1293 (2012): n. pag. Web. 3 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.burlington.org.uk>>

51 Vitale, Tom. "'Armory Show' That Shocked America In 1913, Celebrates 100." *NPR*. NPR, 17 Feb. 2013. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

or specific works that span across them to be compared and analyzed, essentially resulting in a mutually influential experience due to the fact that it relies on the essence of what each medium is truly expressing. The post-impressionist emphasis on the essence rather than the details and structure of a whole creates an ideal platform for ekphrasis to occur, as it does between Woolf and Bell.

For example, as demonstrated by *The Nursery*, Bell's figures were often featureless or painted with ambiguous and undetailed facial features. This influenced Virginia's writing, as she often based her subjects off of people in her life and yet never failed to cloak them in some level of ambiguity and universality. Both felt that too many details did not enhance but instead impeded one's ability to tell a narrative, and that it was instead most important to tell the "creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and genders." To return to *To the Lighthouse*, the reader does not gain a singular, objective, and factual view of any character, but instead receives the essence—that which makes up his or her essential self—of what and who they are from the thoughts and perceptions of themselves and those around them.

This also translates to the sisters' views on landscape paintings and writings. Neither appreciated the time and effort that would go into truly finishing a landscape piece due to the frustration that would accompany the changing light, nor did their lack of attention to factual details bestow upon them an interest in portraying the intricacies of nature. Instead, they preferred to use sketches or descriptions of landscape materials and used them to create a piece that reflected the essential core of what the landscape represented. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf could easily have created a beautiful description of the

landscape including the lighthouse itself; instead, the viewer rarely hears anything about the entire visual picture that the Ramsay family and friends look out at each day. The lighthouse's main purpose is a symbolic one, created from the meanings associated with it for each character. It is not simply a beautiful seascape centered on a lighthouse, but is instead a conceptual platform representing the troubles and trials of each character, amalgamated into one single whole in the form of a lighthouse in the middle of the seashore.

The dispute that occurred between the impressionists and post-impressionists regarding naturalism was one that would essentially define both schools of art. However, despite this major difference, the two were united by an inherent resolve to express his or her own temperament, regardless of what contemporary ideals considered worthwhile or beautiful. Where impressionists concerned themselves most strongly with the idea of displaying characteristics of objects yet undocumented through the interplay of light, shadow, and color, post-impressionists used these same features to display the emotion that the object evoked. The way in which the light and shadow revealed previously untouched facets of the object was no longer the foremost concern, but instead the attention to nature took on a more rebellious undertone. To the post-impressionist, a lack of focus on conforming to nature's boundaries allowed for the artist to express its emotional significance, or the "most important subject matter of art."

Fry goes on to discuss the ways in which impressionism fails to express the "treeness of the tree" by placing too much emphasis on capturing the tree as it is at the very precise moment of the artist's viewing of it. This is reminiscent of Lily's struggles with her painting in *To the Lighthouse*, as she finds herself

questioning where to place the tree. Its placement becomes that which the success of her painting hangs by—notice that here, it is not the physical representation of the tree that dictates its success, nor the correct placement regarding where Lily sees it in respect to where she stands. She holds complete control over where and how she paints the tree, and is clearly working as a post-impressionist due to the fact that her main concern is placing the tree where she feels it belongs in an emotional sense. It cannot stay where she does not feel satisfied with it, regardless of its physical correctness. Here, Virginia Woolf is clearly drawing upon post-impressionist painterly ideals as a way of supporting and developing the linguistic expression of her novel.

Van Gogh is quoted as stating, “Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use colour arbitrarily, in order to express myself forcibly”<sup>52</sup> in discussing his approach to painting nature. For van Gogh and the other post-impressionists, nature was not reason for art in itself, but it was instead the inspiration for its analysis that would result in creation. This vantage point became essential for Virginia Woolf as she wrote her novels. For example, in *To the Lighthouse*, it can be seen through the structure of Woolf’s writing as well as through Lily Briscoe’s work. *To the Lighthouse* exists first and foremost as Woolf’s attempt to understand and sympathize with her parents on both a childlike and adult level. She paints the human nature of the characters through their own thoughts more than anything else—she therefore is not simply depicting

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52 J. P. H. HOUSE, “POST-IMPRESSIONIST VISIONS OF NATURE,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 128, no. 5289 (August 1, 1980): 568–588.

the characters through their actions as a spectator would do, but is analyzing their nature enough in order to speak from within each of them. In the same way that van Gogh paints his subjects using an analytical and forcible approach to naturalism, Woolf writes to force an understanding of her subjects.

Lily Briscoe also exhibits van Gogh's sentiment regarding post-impressionist expression as a kindred painter. Throughout *To the Lighthouse*, the reader experiences her struggle with her painting first hand. However, the struggle does not come from an inability to paint, or a lack of artistic experience. Although she clearly struggles with confidence with her work, the reader is able to come to the conclusion that she is technically savvy enough to create something. Her true conflict comes from her inability to place the pieces of her painting in a way that resonates with her. She attempts to paint a portrait of the Ramsays in their yard, particularly of the woman she most admires, Mrs. Ramsay. The subject is clearly something close to her heart, and she therefore wants to express both the family as well as their meaning to her, rather than simply painting the scene in a basic, superficial sense.

When one considers the fact that Lily Briscoe and Virginia Woolf strongly parallel one another, this comparison gains a new level of meaning. While Woolf attempts to reach an understanding of and closeness to her family by painting a written picture of them, Lily attempts to do the same by painting a physical picture of them. Both do so in a way that echoes van Gogh's sentiment that insists they work in a way that is pleasing to their own selves, and for their own purposes. They use their respective "colors" arbitrarily in order to forcibly reach the goals they have created for themselves. Had the goal been to simply paint an



attractive picture, both Woolf and Lily would have had a far easier time conveying to their audiences that which they were trying to convey to themselves.

According to House, there are three essential branches of the post-impressionist mantra regarding nature: the pursuit of unity, of abstraction and “the dream,” and of forcible expression<sup>53</sup>. The methodology of painting is an integral and underlying aspect of each of these three branches, which illustrates that much of the post-impressionist mantra in the visual arts revolved around the creation process. This can also be applied to Virginia Woolf’s writing of the novel *To the Lighthouse* and we are therefore able to make another connection between the visual arts and Woolf’s linguistic expression.

The pursuit of unity comes through very clearly through both Woolf’s creation of the novel itself, but also through Lily Briscoe’s need to finish her painting; she is continually unable to figure out what exactly it is missing; the painting has no sense of unity due to some unattainable missing facet, and this tortures Lily in the same way that Woolf herself is unable to reach the lighthouse through the Ramsays. This all comes to a head in the very last pages of the novel—Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James finally reach the lighthouse as Lily, standing back on the beach, finally realizes what is missing from her painting. She paints a line down the middle and realizes that it is finally a unified piece, perhaps in the same way that for Mr. Ramsay (although likely not for his children), his reaching the lighthouse after the many years written into the novel

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53 J. P. H. House, “Post-Impressionist Visions of Nature,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 128, no. 5289 (August 1, 1980): 568–588.

has finally unified his family. Woolf herself, in finishing the novel itself, not only creates a unified novel but finally is able to fulfill a lifelong wish to understand her family and unify her adult and child-like impressions of them.

While the unification of the painting and novel coincide perfectly, there is also a certain level of abstraction that pervades the entirety of the novel. From a basic standpoint, Lily's painting itself appears to be of a somewhat abstract nature, due to the fact that a single line down the middle is that which finally completes it. More importantly, however, the painting is a metaphor for the novel itself rather than simply a painting. It serves to illustrate the Ramsay family and their attempt to understand one another and overcome the grief that essentially destroys them. It is Woolf's attempt to understand her family, and expresses her frustration in trying to do so. Lily watches the Ramsays from the outside and tries to capture them statically, as one would do when creating a literary description. Also, the novel itself represents Woolf's perception; the quest for the lighthouse can really be thought of less as a physical trip to a lighthouse and more as a psychological expedition from the abstract to reality. Woolf takes her familial experiences and shifts them from abstract memories into part of her own reality.

Finally, *To the Lighthouse* utilizes the desire for "the dream" and "forcible expression" as a way of defining itself. From the beginning, Lily Briscoe's dream is to finish her painting, thus bringing her closer to her beloved Ramsays; conversely, the Ramsay children dream of the lighthouse and what lies there. This is also a dream for the expression of the subjective, as the subjective pervades the entire novel and characterizes what they believe will happen once they reach this end goal. Each character places a different meaning upon the lighthouse and the

journey to it. Also, the acquisition of the goal—for Lily, the completed painting and for the Ramsays, the reaching of the lighthouse—requires some level of expression, either verbally, mentally, or creatively.

Woolf falls very much into the post-impressionist style as she discusses each of her characters. Her individual perception of reality greatly affected the way in which she created the style, form, and rhythm of her writing and novels—this again refers to the post-impressionist belief that mandates a focus on the emotion that a subject evokes as a way of approaching the representation of that same object. One way that she does this comes from the way that she uses different dichotomous elements of life<sup>54</sup> as a way of creating unity within her work. In the same way that a painter may use light and dark to accomplish this goal, Woolf uses opposites to create a wholesome and complete composition—it gains a sort of asymmetrical balance that is essential in understanding the work.

For example, the dichotomous nature of male versus female is discussed extensively throughout *To the Lighthouse*. This can be seen through the various male/female pairs that substantiate the novel, the most important of which are seen through Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. While a painter may use his or her brush to demonstrate the inherent differences between men and women by using physical tropes—a dark, rough, angular male paired with a fair, soft, gentle female—so does Woolf use her words to create a similar comparison. Mr. Ramsay is withdrawn and intellectual, frequently struggling to express his emotions in an understandable way. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, is the quintessential

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54 Kelley, Alice van Buren. *To the Lighthouse: The Marriage of Life and Art*. Twayne's Masterwork Studies no. 11. Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1987.

woman: she dotes on her husband, cares for her children, and maintains a level of order within the household that creates a façade of perfection and familial unity.

Her examination of her mother in particular paves the way for an examination of the female in general—this becomes especially relevant when compared with the fact that this is Woolf's most strongly autobiographical work which offers portraits of both of her parents and a self-portrait of her own experiences as a female artist. The novel compares her portrait to her mother's, and thus says something about the particular feminine vision of the Victorian mother in contrast with the change that was affecting women's lives in the post war era. It serves as both reflective and analytical, but always returns to the emotions that the comparisons evoke both for others as well as for Woolf herself—it's clear here that Woolf's critical, portrait-like approach to her writing stems to some extent from the portrait-like nature of many of the post-impressionist painting that was occurring simultaneously.

### **The Nursery and Other Works**

The artists at Bloombury, including both Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, were of the belief that artistic unity and completeness can only be achieved if it is detached; each element of the work itself—shapes, colors, patterns etc.—was meant to be selected in conjunction with the other artistic elements in that same piece rather than from any outside source. However, in both sisters' works one is able to find a prevalence of certain themes and motifs, added to their canons either consciously or subconsciously<sup>55</sup>. While in Vanessa Bell's work, one may

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55 Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (New Haven: Ticknor & Fields, 1983)

find large subject groups and similarly arranged still life paintings, Woolf's works tend to connect through the interest in self-expression and understanding that so permeates her writing. Here *To the Lighthouse* works within Woolf's canon similarly to Bell's group of paintings—although each work stands completely alone and is reliant only on itself, it explores the inner consciousness that is Woolf's mind and helps her to understand her parents and childhood as a part of herself.

Hogarth Press may have had as much of a significance to Vanessa Bell as it did to the Woolfs. To reiterate, many of the original publications of Virginia's literary works were accompanied by dust jackets reflecting woodcut painting by Bell. It was in fact Bell's idea to use the press to publish artists' woodcuts, but this turned into a concentration on her own illustrations and a collaboration between sisters. According to Spalding, "The illustration work that she produced for it provides visual proof of the way in which Virginia's writing stirred and enriched her imagination."<sup>56</sup> Due to the nature of their relationship, the fact that Woolf's work was able to affect Bell so necessitates that the reverse effect would have been true as well. This can be seen by the fact that although Dora Carrington did at first contribute to the woodcut collection by Hogarth, Bell's illustrations quickly became the only ones that Woolf would use for her own novels. Regarding the one created specifically for *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf found her sister's illustration simultaneously truthful, lovely, and upsetting<sup>57</sup>. It is

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56 Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (New Haven: Ticknor & Fields, 1983).

57 Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988.

no coincidence that these terms also capture the essence of the novel itself. It exists as a final and truthful attempt by Virginia to understand her relationship to her parents both as a child and as an adult, and while this brings her a sense of peace and contentedness, it also disturbs and upsets her at times.

This interaction also caused each sister to delve more deeply into the other's art form, further developing the relationship between literature and visual art; Virginia began to attempt to describe works of art through literature and to Vanessa, and Vanessa began to consider books through a more critical vantage point<sup>58</sup>. Their works began to work off of one another—this can be seen through Bell's *The Nursery* in comparison to *To the Lighthouse*. This is a tragically lost painting, but luckily a photograph of it exists in Gillespie's study<sup>59</sup>. It was painted after the fact, and can be thought of as yet another Stephen-esque comment on the nature of motherhood. Although it retains the distinctive planes of color so typical of Bell's paintings, the colors are far more muted than one would see in many of her other paintings. Also, there are no gestures painted as an attempt to convey a sense of motion—the stillness that remains creates an almost nostalgic feeling, as if the viewer is looking back at a photograph rather than at a scene occurring as he or she views it. In the same way that Virginia Woolf uses her literary capabilities to approach the topic of her familial relationships, Vanessa Bell uses her paintings to reflect on similar subjects.

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58 Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (New Haven: Ticknor & Fields, 1983).

59 Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988.



3.24. Vanessa Bell. *The Nursery*, 1930–32. Location unknown. Courtesy of Frances Spalding; permission of Angelica Garnett.

Bell's painting *The Nursery* is likely a painterly evocation inspired by Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*; it appears to be an exploration of motherhood in the same way that *To the Lighthouse* is Woolf's examination of her parents and childhood. Also, according to Gillespie, the painting is a successful attempt to classify the relationship between adults and children as one that is both intimate and independent<sup>60</sup>. This very accurately mirrors the sentiment found in Woolf's work, as it is her attempt to understand the relationship between her siblings, her parents, and herself from the vantage point of children and adults as well as from that of adults and adults.

Bell accomplishes this in a few ways, the first being the juxtaposition between clothing and position that occurs between the women and the children. While the women are clothed, the children are stark naked thus differentiating the

<sup>60</sup> Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988.

two groupings. Nudity evokes a sense of youth, savagery, and therefore makes it known that the children are those who must be cared for as opposed to the women who are the caregivers. They are well dressed, thus symbolizing their role and status in society and as mothers. However, the figures are still all arranged in a circle which indicates a harmonious atmosphere that pervades the scene. Mother and child, while different in many respects, still possess an intimate and infinite relationship. This serves as Vanessa's attempt to understand her mother, as *To the Lighthouse* serves as Virginia's attempt—here again it is possible to see the sisters working off of and influencing one another.

Virginia Woolf's short stories exhibit her tendency towards considering the visual arts in her writing as successfully as her novels do. For example, there are two complimentary paragraphs entitled "Blue and Green" in her collection of short stories *Monday or Tuesday*. For Woolf, the visual arts stimulated an immense interest in color itself and its significance to human perception and consciousness; blue and green in particular intrigued her specifically because of their relationships both with the philosopher G. E. Moore and with her sister Vanessa Bell<sup>61</sup>. Moore uses the colors to talk about the "object of consciousness" versus consciousness itself. She is also acutely aware of the fact that she is unable to convey color as well as a painter can, and yet "Blue and Green" displays her attempt to subvert this boundary.

"Blue and Green" depicts two different "scenes," one hailing from the day and the other from the night respectively. In the same way that a painter carefully

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61 Gillespie, Diane F. *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1988.



selects or mixes his or her paints in order to create the exact effect that he or she desires, Woolf the writer employs figurative language. Although she is not physically selecting colors that illustrate the feeling she wishes to evoke, even Vanessa Bell appreciates her ability to portray precise shades of both colors through the language that she uses—in the case of Green, she continuously and simply uses the word “green,” but does so in association with multiple tangible items that display different physical shades of green. The reader then pictures that subject, allowing the type of green that Woolf wishes to convey to take over the reader’s mental image and color that which she relates it to. For example, she writes “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;...”<sup>62</sup> The green begins as an aqueous, sparkling substance and transforms into a bright yellow-green, later shifting into a leafy green and finally into a dark, earthy green. Each subject is accompanied by a descriptive sentiment that further enhances the reader’s understanding of the green at hand. The parakeet green implies harsh cries, while the palm trees and needles are respectively sharp and glittering. With this juxtaposition of descriptive words and preconceived subjects, Woolf attempts to capture the ability that consciousness has in perceiving color.

The way that Woolf approaches the depiction of color also highlights her belief that color is inherently subjective. While she uses one term that is

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62 Woolf, Virginia. "Blue and Green." *Monday or Tuesday*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and, 1921. N. pag. Print.

indisputably concrete in its coloration, she accompanies it with a term that is looser in its visualization. For example, “Blue” acts as a metaphor for the oncoming night and personifies it through the description of a monster. It states, “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.”<sup>63</sup> It describes the blue first and foremost as metallic—one is easily able to imagine a blue with a metalloid sheen. Woolf then goes a step further however, and describes the blue as one that stains. This complicated the statement a bit, as it is unclear exactly how an intangible blue is capable of staining the physical rusty iron. This opens up the field for some level of subjectivity in interpreting the stain the blue leaves, and exactly how it leaves it. This again mimics the visual arts due to the fact that the visual arts rarely act as an objective force. They present the viewer with a collaborative composition of colors—varying in degrees of course, but clearly defined colors nonetheless—but allow him or her to interpret the significance of the colors on his or her own. The painting itself becomes a subjective play on the individual consciousness, and Woolf’s writing here attempts to operate in the same fashion.

Woolf expressed her sentiments regarding the 1910 art exhibition through her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” It is in this essay that she famously states “On or about December 1910, human character changed,” and thus goes on

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63 Woolf, Virginia. "Blue and Green." *Monday or Tuesday*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and, 1921. N. pag. Print.

to explain how she believes that it did this in terms of literature<sup>64</sup>. Due to the fact that the moment she refers to coincides with “Manet and the Post-Impressionists,” one must conclude that this exhibition played a role in her determination; this clearly demonstrates the effect that the visual arts had on her personage and artistic efforts. Perhaps more importantly, she wrote this essay directly before she wrote *To the Lighthouse*, which again points to the fact that she really was thinking about the visual arts while writing it. In order to explain what she believes this change has caused she writes, “All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.” Notice the non-inclusion of the visual arts; this is because it was indeed the visual arts that spurred the change in all of these other aspects. The change in human character spawning from the ideological changes set in place by exhibitions such as Fry’s was powerful enough to her that it pervaded through all other aspects of humanity; the post-impressionists created a new platform through which to create art which allowed for artists and non-artists of all kinds to reevaluate their ways of thinking.

In her essay, Woolf uses anecdotal evidence as shown through her experience observing “Mr. Smith” and “Mrs. Brown” to give a specific instance of this change in motion. She states,

Here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs. Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her. I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to

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64 Woolf, Virginia. *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*. London: L. and Virginia Woolf, 1924. Print.

express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved. To express character, I have said; but you will at once reflect that the very widest interpretation can be put upon those words<sup>65</sup>.

Her emphasis on character here is absolutely essential to her writings and stylistic preferences. As I have mentioned, both she and her sister preferred to write the essence of a subject in order to create his or her character rather than describe the subject in a superficial and broad way. She acknowledges the fact that expressing character invites a wide range of interpretation, but simply appreciates the fact that the novel is moving away from what it had been in years past. The willingness to change allows for a wider range of acceptance within different social and artistic spheres—it is clear that Woolf's emphasis on character throughout her novels falls into this category nicely. She experiences a character impose itself upon another person in reality, which highlights the essence of that character rather than its simple personality traits. The character becomes a singular, invisible entity that permeates time and space and those that surround it.

## **Conclusion**

“But life and art cannot be separated, and Lily recognizes that art feeds upon life while life, in turn, may be susceptible, like a picture, to arrangement and order.”<sup>66</sup> The sentiment that aligns life and art has been one to stand the test of time, as art has played a major role in culture and civilization, and has defined

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65 Woolf, Virginia. *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*. London: L. and Virginia Woolf, 1924. Print.

66 Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. 1st U.S. ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc, 2005.

movements and ideologies in monumental ways. Art is subject to ekphrasis, and thus affects itself and other art forms in an influential way. The post-impressionist movement was one through which a dialogue between the visual arts and the literary arts was created that allowed for it to thrive and grow alongside each individual proponent.

Sisters Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, two major female figures working in the early twentieth century art world, exhibited this interaction through their close relationship and therefore interacting works. Bell, a painter, designed the dust jackets for Woolf's novels, and Woolf was extremely influenced by the 1910 exhibition, "Manet and the Post-Impressionists." Her novel *To the Lighthouse* explores the relationship that she had with her parents and family from multiple perspectives, and uses a painting as a metaphor for her life and message; when combining this with the fact that she uses the painter Lily Briscoe to represent her own role in the scenario, it is impossible to ignore the role that painting has had on both her own personal ideology as well as her literary work.

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