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

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the theme of death as the main concern of Mrs. Virginia Woolf in her novel *To the Light House*. The main question is why should a human being strive for any goal when death is inevitable in life? Virginia Woolf explores the dilemma of man and her struggle with death in her novel *To the Light House*. Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley are tormented by the fear of death that they will not succeed in their strivings. The novel doesn't resolve the conflict as Wood maintains an ambivalence. Woolf even rejects the existence of God: "How could any Lord have made this world? And Mrs. Ramsay asks herself, concluding that the world is too full of suffering to have been created by a divine savior" (*To the Light House* 64). Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Light House* deals with the problem of death and mourning presenting the traumatic memories of her past and the haunting experiences of the characters. This novel has three significant characterizes; memories, dreams and obsession of death. In ancient literature death is a very popular theme than love.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 at 22 Hyde Park Gate, London. This became the setting for *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf was a great British novelist and was

closely associated with prominent writers and poets such as T.S. Eliot and Dorothea Stephen and W.B. Yeats. Sherman C. Feinstein avers that the diaries and letters of Virginia Woolf provide enough evidence to support the argument that she suffered from a "classical case of manic-depressive illness which fulfills every criterion" (339). Woolf is the product of socio-political forces after the Great War. She was impacted by the new techniques invented by James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence. She introduced in her novels the technique of the Stream of Consciousness and relied on the psychoanalytical theories propounded by Freud and Jung.

In all her novels she experimented with various forms of dissociation of self since she herself experienced the neurosis. Shirley Panken opines that Woolf was "self-destructive, and masochistic" (4) as she emerges in her novels as "deeply guilt-ridden" (13) woman. She published *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931) and became an international celebrity in the domain of British fiction. Woolf was shaken by the deaths of her many friends and relatives. She formed a pessimistic vision of life. She created characters that experience psychological nightmares suffering from neurosis and depression. Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway is the sick wife of Richard. She is a split personality and her married life is awful since her husband is an impotent. The real character of Clarissa Dalloway is portrayed through the point of view of Peter Walsh, The life of Septimus Smith is heart rending. His Italian wife, Lucrezia is sick of him who has come to meet Dr. Sir William Bradshaw. Suicide of Septimus symbolizes the neurotic experiences of the war heroes who returned from the war being shell-shocked. Woolf dramatizes the psychological trajectories of the soldiers who returned from the war. The party is used as a symbol to depict the inner void of Mrs. Dalloway. Her activities are controlled by Big Ben as she walks through St James's Park. Ironically all the characters in the novel are haunted by the time consciousness.

Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* was published in 1927 fundamentally engaged with the First World War. Woolf's conceptualization

of The Great War and the history around it represents and mitigates the accompanying cultural trauma. Violence and destruction pierce the novel as reminders of British society's imperfection. *To the Lighthouse* deals with the post-war world. In the novel characters try to assimilate their struggle with the age, and Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay themselves with the rapidly changing world. Woolf explores how to grieve, and the novel indicates that to Woolf, grieving never concluded. She leaves with something ambiguous, ineffable, and incomplete, but she does not seek to write clean, conclusive stories about mourning. The novel suggests that mourning the trauma of war or death must constantly, inconclusively occur. Woolf draws a distinction between personal and public loss. While Lily achieves resolution around her personal loss, she does not have the same success with the war itself. Woolf suggests that some events are unassailable, that they cannot be integrated that the destruction is too complete.

Death and Mourning in the life of Lily

Freud describes the term the death instincts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which he proposes the idea that "the goal of all life is death"(12). Freud claims that trauma incites the death drive. One sees this in Freud's speculation about the nirvana principle, "If the stimulation and tension is just too great, too painful, then nirvana becomes inseparable from death" (95). Freud asserts "life is a detour on the trip from birth to death, and trauma may make life so unbearable that a short-cut is tempting" (61). One no longer wants to continue on the long detour through life to death. The repetition compulsion may be a way of acting-out this desire to return to the foremost primitive state because it's a desire to return, and return, and return, ultimately to a state of non-being. Dante devotes the whole *Divine Comedy* to the theme of death. Virginia Woolf employs the modern techniques such as irony and parody in treating the theme of death and mourning. Her novel *To the Lighthouse* belongs to the period called "The Explosion of Modernism" covering 1910-1930. She belongs to the second generation of Modernism as she was fully aware that

she was an innovator. She formulated her own ideas about the Modern novel as she commented:

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

The critics observe that the novel is her semi-autobiographical and is elegiac in tone evoking the melancholy mood of John Milton's *Lycidas*. The major characters of the novel are psychologically burdened with the mysterious role of death in human life. Auerbach observes that "the novel *To the Light House* of Virginia Woolf breathes an air of vague and helpless sadness" (201). Woolf's own life was nightmarish when she wrote this novel; her mother died, her sister died and she read about the killings of millions of soldiers in World War I. Stella McNichol calls this novel "an auto-biographical novel, not autobiography is also nearer to the truth" (143). The plot of the novel *To the Light House* has three parts and "Time Passes" is the most significant section written in lyrical style. Naicholas Bradbury opines that "Time Passes" section depicts the hallucinations and nightmarish dreams of Mrs. Ramsay. Mark Gaipa (2003) observes that "Time Passes" seems to be the silent requiem for the dead" (Gaipa 183). Andrew says in the beginning of the novel that "it's almost too dark to see" (Virginia Woolf, *To the Light House* 93). The image of darkness is very effective as it heightens the mood of death and despair. The imagery of the empty house in the first section of the novel symbolizes the "dead bodies." The house is empty as all are dead and there are no inhabitants with "the doors locked wood cracked" and "the nights full of wind and distraction" (Woolf 95). All the images of death and destruction, darkness and distraction are used to depict the trauma of the characters. The imagery of the empty house and desolate environment symbolizes the inner turbulent

world of characters just as “by one the lamps were all extinguished and the death of three characters is depicted” (Woolf, 93). The plot of the novel gives the feeling of loneliness, disorder, desolation and chaos. The family departs and for ten years they remain away and darkness covers the house: “Dust settles, books yellow, and silence ascends, filling the rooms with emptiness” (96). The deserted and desolate house described in the section *Time Passes* is the nucleus of the novel foreshadowing the deaths of the family intensifying the gloomy atmosphere:

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

The death of Mrs. Ramsay is the central event in the novel and when she wrote her novel she had already experienced the scenes of the traumatic deaths of her mother, her sister, her brother and her father. The anguish and pain had gone deeper in her bones. Virginia Woolf was so depressed that she attempted twice to commit suicide and finally she succeeded in 1941 as she had been under acute trauma. The guilt of being surviving and the futility of life is the real fabric of this novel. Vladimir Nabokov observes that Woolf is depicting “functional death” in the novel *To the Light House*. Nabokov (1980) further avers that “functional death affects the development of the novel and is introduced for structural purposes, purposes of development” (19). James’s dream to visit the lighthouse comes true. Mrs. Ramsay’s daughter Cam is extremely sad but Lily Briscoe finds hard to articulate what he feels: “For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing, nothing than she could express at all”(Woolf 145). Lily Briscoe feels lonely as “the house, the place, the morning, and all seemed strangers to her on the morning without Mrs. Ramsay” (14). At the beginning of the novel Lily is a guest at Ramsay’s summer home. She is an unmarried

painter. Her character represents Woolf's idea of female artist. In the third part of the novel, Mr. Ramsay makes a trip to the lighthouse with his children Cam and James whereas Lily stays at the cottage and reminisces about dead Mrs. Ramsay. As we can see, *To the Lighthouse* is penetrated by the motif of death. She was dead. This persisting pressure deepened Lily's anxiety about the future of her paintings. "Can't paint, can't write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously considering what her plan of attack should be. For the mass loomed before her; it protruded; she felt it pressing on her eyeballs" (173). Lily embodies Woolf's anxious worries about insufficient quality of her writings. It is the power of art that she is able to overcome her grief but she often gets the traumatic shocks when she recollects the old memories of her mother. It is very difficult to reconcile to the reality of the death of her mother and Lily expresses her deep love for her mother as she cries out in despair: "Mrs. Ramsay?" Virginia Woolf has depicted the psychological pain of Lily thus: "For one moment she felt that if they both got up, here, now on the lawn, and demanded an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexpressible....Mrs. Ramsay" (Woolf 131).

Lily becomes emotional and the tears ran down her cheeks. The old memories of her mother intensify her trauma as she recollects:

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

Lily is a painter but she cannot overcome her grief as she struggle a way to put upon the canvas: "looking at the step where she used to sit" (112). Lily struggles with reality of death. Woolf deals with death as Woolf writes: "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought....I have had my vision" (151). Cam is also burdened with the traumatic memories of her

mother as she “screwed her handkerchief round her finger” (124). She doesn’t want to go to the lighthouse “She was thinking paths and lawn, thick and knotted they had lived there, were gone: were rubbed out; were past; were unreal...” (124). Cam is so much stressed that she quotes the lines from Cooper’s poem *The Castaway* to express her psychological agony thus: “We perished each alone, for her father’s words broke and broke again in her mind” (Woolf 125). In her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf refers to the famous line from Shakespeare “Fear no more the heat of the sun” to reflect the mental agony of Clarissa and in this novel Woolf quotes from Cooper reflecting the psychological burden of Cam. All the major characters Ramsay, Mr. Bankes, Mr. Tansley and Lily are despondent as they are musings over death as Woolf has devoted many pages to investigate the nature of trauma gripping the psyche of the characters. Virginia Woolf gives the image of darkness in the following passage to describe the atmosphere of death and mourning:

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

When Virginia Woolf wrote this novel in 1924, many explorations were available on the working of human psyche. She had read Freud’s *Interpretations of Dreams* and *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Freud compares obsessions to dreams. This reminds a scene in *To the Lighthouse* of a vessel that is being “rubbed into rapture, almost to bursting; but in the novel it does burst and floods the floor of the mind with ecstasy” (100). Woolf speculates the dream element hidden in the memory in which the reality is beyond the comprehension of man: “I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there...as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen” (Woolf 67). Woolf had sleepless nights “the memory of the mother-displacing her from her natural centrality, and lying half asleep, half awake, in bed and the waves breaking

behind a yellow blind, its cord and little scorn moving across the floor” (Woolf 65). The section “Time Passes” depicts the disintegrated condition of the characters. Andrews says: “One by one of the lamps were all extinguished and one by one all the major characters die; the death of the three characters in the novel and a down pouring of immense darkness began” (Woolf 93). Mrs. Ramsay is fear-ridden expressing her death consciousness:

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

Mrs. Ramsay is confused and bewildered since she is haunted by the impending doom. But when she becomes aware that even Lord is not with her she suffers acute psychological pain as she expresses her depression:

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

Mark Spilka observes that Mrs. Ramsay is suffering from acute trauma and is a victim of neurosis. Her psychological anguish is the result of her alienation and blocked emotion. The images of darkness; emptiness; desolation and hallucinations reveal the traumatic condition of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily Briscoe suffers mental torture as she is unable to face the harsh realities of the life. Her mental agony can be experienced through these feelings:

Sitting alone (for Nancy went out again) among the clean cups at the long table she felt cut off from other people, able only to go on watching, asking, wondering. The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her.

She had no attachment here, she felt, no relations with it, anything might happen. (*To the Lighthouse* 160)

It is obvious that Lily feels highly abandoned, lonely and without sense of life. This anxious feeling does not have to necessarily be proof of mental illness but can be considered as its beginning. Depressions and anxiety brings us to another disorder which is called Bipolar disorder formerly also known as manic depression. Moments of indifference also penetrate life of Lily Briscoe as “Mrs. Ramsay dead; Andrew killed; Prue dead too – repeat it as she might, it roused no feeling in her” (160). As we can see, Lily’s feelings are similar to Septimus’, although she was supposed to feel sadness and sorrow because of the death of Mrs. Ramsay and some of her children she felt very indifferent. As well as Septimus, she experiences feelings of indifference or numbness therefore she feels bad but not because of the surrounding death but because she feels neither sadness nor sorrow.

Conclusion

To the Light House of Virginia Woolf reveals new insights of an examination of trauma. Woolf has explored the shell shock trauma from the modern perspectives. She is dramatizing the “wounding, the body, psyche and trauma” (Spika 20). Virginia Woolf’s *To the Light House* digs out the inner world of the characters trapped in the abyss of darkness and confusion. The characters of Woolf are obsessed and the plot is structured around memory, dream and obsession. Freud puts it “the dream situation represents as fulfilled a wish which is known to consciousness” (*The Interpretation of Dreams*. 165). Freud says: “The wish in such cases is either itself a repressed one and alien to consciousness, or it is intimately connected with repressed thoughts and is based upon them” (165). Thus dreams are “disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes and the future which the dream shows us is not the one which will occur but the one which we should like to occur” (165). In the novel *To the Light House*, Woolf dramatizes the impact of dreams and repressed wishes on

the psyche of the characters. Lily is lost in recollecting the old memories of Mrs. Ramsay and the haunting memories become a major cause of her trauma. Woolf believes that “The most important of all my memories are my personal haunting memories of the harrowing scenes of deaths of my parents and of my brother and sister” (64). The characters of the novel find themselves unable to get escape from the haunted past memories and they realize in the end that the only way to get rid of this torture is death.

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