



Analysis of Women Images in to the Lighthouse

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Abstract

Through the analysis of the two women Mrs. Ramsay and Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, this paper makes a comparison between the two figures. It is found that they are different in many ways but at the same time have something in common. The two women represent the two sides of women. Only these two sides are united, the woman is completed.

Key words: *To the Lighthouse*; Mrs. Ramsay; Lily; Woman

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INTRODUCTION

In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf created two women: Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. Mrs. Ramsay is the heroine of the novel while the woman painter Lily is the supporting heroine. Analysis of the two women is the key to understanding the whole text. For one thing, the two women are quite different in many respects. For another, they do have something in common.

1. MRS. RAMSAY

To the Lighthouse consists of three parts, and the first part occupies more than one half of the whole novel in which Mrs. Ramsay is the central figure. In the second and third

parts, although Mrs. Ramsay dies of a sudden death, her image appears in other people's reminiscence and imagination again and again as if she were still living in the novel.

For years, Mrs. Ramsay has been the focus of attention of critics. Under critics' pen, the image of Mrs. Ramsay tends to turn from positive to negative. For some critics, Mrs. Ramsay is an "ideal mother, who functions at the level of myth" (Marder, p.46), both a living woman and a "perfect symbolic figure". (Ibid, p.128) She is the embodiment of Goddess Demeter and represents beauty and love. Her identification with Demeter "underscores the ritual function of the woman in marriage and maternity (Hoffman, p.100). But for other critics, Mrs. Ramsay is "an isolated person" and a "deceptive self-denigrating apparatus with which she first dramatically gains sympathy and then coerces people to do what she wishes" (Leaska, p.124). Heibrun even comments that Mrs. Ramsay "seduced" readers into worshipping her as "the mother goddess, the earth mother in all her beauty". (Heibrun, p.156) Anyhow, Mrs. Ramsay is the nickname of tradition and her traditional role is revealed from several aspects.

First, Mrs. Ramsay is very beautiful. In Mr. Bankes's imagination, Mrs. Ramsay is as beautiful as a goddess. "He saw her at the end of the line, Greek, blue-eyed, straight-nosed. How incongruous it seemed to be telephoning to a woman likes that. The Graces assembling seemed to have joined hands in meadows of asphodel to compose that face." (Woolf, p.21) Mr. Bankes's worship of her beauty is also reflected in Lily's eyes and turns into a holy love:

And she was about to say something criticizing Mrs. Ramsay... when Mr. Bankes made it entirely unnecessary for her to speak by his rapture. For such it was considering his age, turned sixty, and his cleanliness and his impersonality, and the white scientific coat which seemed to clothe him. For him to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs. Ramsay was a rapture, equivalent, Lily felt, to the loves of dozens of young men (and perhaps Mrs. Ramsay had never excited the loves of dozens of young men). It

was love, she thought, pretending to move her canvas, distilled and filtered; love that never attempted to clutch its object; but, like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain. (Ibid, p.34)

Although Mrs. Ramsay pays the least attention to her own beauty, her beauty really does good to her and other people. For example, she finds that people are easily pleased by her beauty:

After all, she had not generally any difficulty in making people like her; for instance, George Manning; Mr. Wallace; famous as they were, they would come to her of an evening, quietly, and talk alone over her fire. She bore about with her, she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty; she carried it erect into any room that she entered; and after all, veil it as she might, and shrink from the monotony of bearing that it imposed on her, her beauty was apparent. She had been admired. She had been loved. (Ibid, p.30)

Her beauty can also help men regain confidence. When Mr. Tansley feels embarrassed for his imprudent support of Mr. Ramsay's disagreement to the lighthouse the next day, Mrs. Ramsay asks him to go with her to a town visit for company. When he is waiting for her return from a poor woman, he finds that she

...stood quite motionless for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter; and all at once he realized that it was this: it was this—she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen. With stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets—what nonsense was he thinking? She was fifty at least; she had eight children. Stepping through fields of flowers and taking to her breast buds that had broken and lambs that had fallen; with the stars in her eyes and the wind in her hair... Charles Tansley felt an extraordinary pride; felt the wind and the cyclamen and the violets for he was walking with a beautiful woman for the first time in his life. He had hold of her bag. (Ibid, pp.10-11)

Mrs. Ramsay's beauty is also reflected in other figures' eyes. Her youngest son, James "felt her rise in a rosy-flowered fruit tree laid with leaves and dancing boughs". (Ibid, p.28) And when she is in pensive mood, Mr. Ramsay "turned and saw her. Ah! She was lovely, lovelier now than ever he thought. But he could not speak to her. He could not interrupt her...She was aloof from him now in her beauty, in her sadness..." (Ibid, p.47).

In my opinion, the emphasis of Mrs. Ramsay's beauty is a basic element in shaping her as the traditional aspect of women. In patriarchal society, as "the other" of men, women are prescribed by men in various ways. Beauty, an embodiment of men's visual and physical pleasure, is exaggerated as the basic element of virtue and is imposed on women nearly as a moral routine while wisdom is belittled in order that they become easier for men to rule. Another famous classical figure created by Brothers Grimm, Snow White, is a typical representative. When we analyze this fairytale, we can find the subtext of men. It is well-known that Snow White is faultlessly beautiful, kind and capable, and is loved by all men such as seven dwarfs,

the prince, and so on. However, somehow Snow White seems to be so silly that she is taken in by her stepmother so many times. Obviously men don't like the fact that women own wisdom which will threaten the patriarchy.

Similarly, in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, clever Elizabeth is never so popular as her elder sister Jane who, just like Snow White, is very beautiful, kind-hearted, and simple-minded. It is very difficult for her to believe that there really exists such a villain as Mr. Wickham who elopes with Lydia and doesn't want to shoulder any responsibility for her. However, even her rival Miss Bingley has to admit Jane is faultless. In contrast, it seems that only Mr. Darcy appreciates Elizabeth and after they get married, even Elizabeth's mother, Mrs. Benet can't understand why the richest man chooses to marry Elizabeth, not her sister Jane.

No doubt just like Jane and Snow White, Mrs. Ramsay's beauty caters to the needs of men. Through the description of her beauty, she is confirmed as the traditional aspect of woman and also the ideal woman in men's eyes so she can own the ideal beauty men long for.

Second, Mrs. Ramsay tends to cater to the needs of men. It is evident that Mrs. Ramsay has tried every means to please men. It seems that only when men are satisfied with her, she feels happy. When Mr. Tansley supports her husband's view that they can't go to the Lighthouse the next day, she says "Nonsense" with great severity, which makes the young man very awkward. In order to comfort Mr. Tansley, Mrs. Ramsay invites him to go to the city with her and helps him to regain confidence.

She knows clearly that Mr. Carmichael doesn't like her, but she never forgets to pay special attention to Mr. Carmichael, and whenever she goes to the town, she asks him purposely, "Stamp, writing-paper, tobacco?" (Ibid, p.8) But he just shows indifferent attitude towards her and thinks her "a little nervous" (Ibid, p.9).

But partly for that very reason she respected him". (Ibid, p.70) When her children think the old man is a bit sloppy, she shows sympathy for him, and all the time she is trying to guess what the man is thinking about. Little by little, she seems to understand this old man in her own way: "What was obvious to her was that the poor man was unhappy, came to them every year as an escape; and yet every year, she felt the same thing; he did not trust her... It was his wife's doing. (Ibid, p.29)

No doubt Mr. Carmichael is a patient of misogyny. The indifference he shows to Mrs. Ramsay, the embodiment of female beauty, tolerance, and obedience, is the arrogance that man shows to woman in the patriarchal system. His attitude shows clearly that man is superior to woman, and in the relationship between man and woman, man gets the upper hand of woman all the time.

However, Mrs. Ramsay always tries to show special respect for Mr. Carmichael. Even when her husband dislikes the latter's table manners, she immediately stands on the side of Mr. Carmichael. And when she finds that Mr. Carmichael doesn't trust her, she immediately

searches for a scapegoat for herself, that is, Mr. Carmichael's wife. Under the patriarchal system, Mrs. Ramsay is the eternal victim. She chooses to betray her own gender and to minimize the losses. In the end, she becomes the assistant of patriarchy.

Third, Mrs. Ramsay loves to make match for others. It may be one of the most important reasons that many critics tend to regard Mrs. Ramsay as the embodiment of Goddess Demeter who is in charge of marriage and reproduction. When she sees William Bankes and Lily Briscoe pass by the window, she smiles because "an admirable idea had flashed upon her this very second—William and Lily should marry". (Ibid, p.19) She even comes to Lily's bedroom at midnight and tries to persuade her to marry. She insists

that she (Lily) must, Minta must, they all must marry, since in the whole world, whatever laurels might be tossed to her (but Mrs. Ramsay cared not a fig for her painting), or triumphs won by her (probably Mrs. Ramsay had had her share of those) ... there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman has missed the best of life... (Ibid, p. 36)

She also acts as a matchmaker for Paul and Minta. Before the dinner party described in the novel, she waits for the return of her children and the young couple anxiously. For one thing, she worries about their safety; for another, she is eager to know the result of Paul's proposal. Sometimes she feels puzzled:

Was she wrong in this, she asked herself, reviewing her conduct of the past week or two, and wondering if she had indeed put any pressure upon Minta, who was only twenty-four, to make up her mind. She was uneasy. Had she not laughed about it? Was she not forgetting again how strongly she influenced people? Marriage needed --- oh all sorts of qualities (the bill for the greenhouse would be fifty pounds). (Ibid, p.44)

In fact, Woolf has clearly told readers why Mrs. Ramsay loves to be a match-maker for others. First, economic dependence on man makes woman have no choice but to marry, since in the flow of consciousness a very cruel fact that "the bill for the greenhouse would be fifty pounds" is revealed, which turns beautiful love into cruel reality. Later, when Paul tells her the result of his proposal, her response confirms this terrible truth again, "seeing the gold watch lying in his hand, Mrs. Ramsay felt, How extraordinarily lucky Minta is! She is marrying a man who has a gold watch in a wash-leather bag!" (Ibid, p.84) Just like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* whose ambition is to marry her beautiful daughters off, Mrs. Ramsay knows clearly marriage is the only economic guarantee for woman. Second, woman under patriarchy has lost discourse power, and marriage is the legal identity of woman allowed by man.

Last, Mrs. Ramsay is occupied with knitting stockings which she intends to present the lighthouse keeper's little boy. In the novel, there are more than ten descriptions of her knitting stocking. In many classical works, women are described as some hard-working ones busy with

knitting, weaving or needlework. In *Odysseus* by Homer, when faced with so many suitors, Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, occupies herself with weaving shroud for her father-in-law all day long. What is weaved during the day will be unwoven during the night. In this way, she successfully excuses herself from the suitors and gains enough time for waiting for the return of her husband. From then on, Penelope has become the synonym of virginity. In this story, weaving plays a very important role in the strategy of Penelope. When Odysseus is absent and the greedy suitors (male hegemony) get the absolute upper hand, weaving seems to be the only allowable and reasonable female language. It becomes the symbol of female wisdom and the only weapon against the male authority.

Similarly, in *The Scarlet Letter*, after the heroine Hester Prynne commits adultery and wears the letter A which is the badge of sin, she is actually driven out of human society. Yet by practicing excellent needlework for the nobles, she earns her living and at the same time keeps contact with society and finally achieves spiritual salvation. Under the control of rigid Puritan atmosphere, needlework becomes the only decent and acceptable means of livelihood of women. Through this special and pure female language, Hester Prynne returns to the traditional definition of women by patriarchy and is again accepted by Puritan society. In that age, "Women are unable and unwilling to write their own history and often resort to needlework" and becomes special artists (Fitzwilliam, p.12). However, we have to admit that "as an artist, Hester Prynne has never gone beyond the women's boundaries prescribed by men. Her instrument of expression is the needle, not a pen. Her resistance is invisible writing" (Chen, p.95).

In *To the Lighthouse*, the scene of Mrs. Ramsay knitting stockings appear again and again. In my opinion, knitting stockings are a metaphor of women's traditional role. The activity of knitting carries multiple meanings. Firstly, in the overwhelmingly patriarchal society, this traditional role is prescribed by men. Through this prescription, women are confined to household and unable to compete with men in any other fields. Secondly, women have to accept passively this traditional role imposed by men and learn to get used to it, losing their own identity and even becoming defenders of patriarchy like Mrs. Ramsay. Thirdly, like Penelope's weaving and Hester Prynne's needlework, knitting is Mrs. Ramsay's special means of expression, so she intends to send stockings (signals sent by women) as present at the lighthouse (a symbol of men's world) keeper's little boy. Maybe through this special means of expression, Mrs. Ramsay wants to fulfill her tour to the lighthouse. Fourthly, stocking is the metaphor of vagina, female genitalia. Compared with the symbol of male genitalia in the novel, "a beak of brass", the metaphor of penis, (Woolf,

1994, p.27) the shape and essence of stockings remind us of tolerance, generosity and tenderness while “beak of brass” reminds us of coldness, rigidity and roughness. By repeating the knitting activity, Mrs. Ramsay is defined as a traditional woman.

2. LILY BRISCOE

Many critics regard Lily as the supporting actress of the novel who becomes more and more important with the development of the story. One of the most popular views is that Mrs. Ramsay and Lily have a mother-daughter relationship. Lisa Williams even regards them as mother-daughter artists. The daughter artist Lily is busy with her painting all day long while the mother Mrs. Ramsay is also an artist since she successfully arranges her dinner party just like an artist. (Williams, pp.132-148) In my view, Lily represents the independent aspect of woman who strives for her own identity and self-respect. She has to sacrifice her love and marriage in order to pursue the cause of painting and endure the sneers of men that “Women can’t write, women can’t paint”. In contrast to Mrs. Ramsay who regards man as the only idol and hero and immerses herself in the self-deceiving happiness all day long, Lily always keeps calm and finds that in this man’s society woman has to win her independence at the expense of love and common happiness. She always makes self-improvement and pursues her own identity as the final goal and has to give up personal happiness that a common woman owns.

Lily is different from Mrs. Ramsay in many aspects. First, in contrast to Mrs. Ramsay who is consecrated as Goddess because of her beauty, generosity and readiness to show sympathy for men, she is an ordinary-looking woman. It seems that no man is ever attracted by her appearance. In Mrs. Ramsay’s eyes, with her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she will never marry off. At the dinner party, she finds that Lily “faded, under Minta’s glow; became more inconspicuous than ever, in her little grey dress with her little puckered face and her little Chinese eyes. Everything about her was so small”. (Ibid, p.75) But at the same time, Mrs. Ramsay also finds that Lily has some special qualities different from others: “There was in Lily a thread of something; a flare of something; something of her own which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared.” (Ibid, p.75) In Mrs. Ramsay’s eyes, a woman is valueless if she can’t receive recognition of men. In fact, more than once she finds the distinction of Lily from others “Lily’s charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face, but it would take a clever man to see it.” (Ibid, p.19)

Mr. Bankes is one of the few men who find Lily’s unique quality. He thinks that she may be poor, “and without the complexion or the allurements of Miss Doyle

certainly, but with a good sense which made her in his eyes superior to that young lady.” (Ibid, p.13) In contrast, Mr. Ramsay seems to have a superficial liking for Lily. Ten years later, Mr. Ramsay sees Lily again: “She seemed to have shriveled slightly... she looked a little skimpy, wispy; but not unattractive. He liked her.” (Ibid, p.113)

Under Woolf’s pen, Lily isn’t simply a beautiful and brainless woman existing especially for men. She pursues what she really wants, the real moral integrity of woman. She never makes a compromise with patriarchy and chooses marriage as the only way out.

Second, Lily rejects to pity men. In her eyes, Mrs. Ramsay is ready to show sympathy for any man: “She pitied men always as if they lacked something—women never, as if they had something.” (Ibid, p.62) It seems that she always

...had the whole of the other sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain, for their chivalry and valor, for the fact that they negotiated treaties, ruled India, controlled finance; finally for an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to feel or to find agreeable, something trustful, childlike, reverential, which an old woman could take from a young man without loss of dignity... (Ibid, p.4)

In contrast, Lily rejects to offer sympathy to man. At dinner party, harsh Mr. Tansley attacks Mrs. Ramsay again by saying “No going to the Lighthouse tomorrow” in spite of her kindness, which put himself into another awkward condition. (Ibid, p.62) Despite Mr. Tansley’s ingratitude, Mrs. Ramsay is eager to help him out of the awkwardness and wants Lily to give a hand. Lily knows clearly about the condition but wouldn’t like to help him. She remembers all the time what he has said “Women can’t write, women can’t paint”. She analyzes the condition in a reasonable way and tries to make a sound judgment:

There is a code of behavior she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself; as indeed it is their duty, she reflected, in her old-maidenly fairness, to help us, suppose the Tube were to burst into flames. Then, she thought, I should certainly expect Mr. Tansley to get me out. But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things? So she sat there smiling. (Ibid, p.66)

When Mrs. Ramsay pities men, she shows a selfless spirit and plays the role of mother in men’s life. In other words, she forgets her own identity as an individual. But no doubt Lily tries all the time to win equality with and justice from men. In pursuit of identity, her awareness as a woman is emphasized.

Although Mr. Ramsay can always gain sympathy from his wife, his demands for sympathy are rejected by Lily mercilessly. Since Mrs. Ramsay’s death, ten years has passed when they meet again, Mr. Ramsay is so eager to show his loneliness and despair to Lily in order to gain sympathy from her. Obviously he wants the same

sympathy as he has got from his wife. However, Lily tries every means to reject to pity him:

...she pretended to drink out of her empty coffee cup so as to escape him --- to escape his demand on her, to put aside a moment longer that imperious need... she turned her back to the window lest Mr. Ramsay should see her. She must escape somehow, be alone somewhere. (Ibid, p.110)

Yet Mr. Ramsay is so persistent that Lily is much troubled:

She set her clean canvas firmly upon the easel, as a barrier, frail, but she hoped sufficiently substantial to ward off Mr. Ramsay and his exactingness. She did her best to look, when his back was turned, at her picture; that line there, that mass there. But it was out of the question. Let him be fifty feet away, let him not even speak to you, let him not even see you, he permeated, he prevailed, he imposed himself. He changed everything. She could not see the color; she could not see the lines; even with his back turned to her, she could only think, but he'll be down on me in a moment, demanding something she felt she could not give him...she fidgeted. That man, she thought, her anger rising in her, never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died --- and had left all this... (Ibid, p. 112)

Finally Mr. Ramsay nearly forces her to pity him,

as if he knew that his time ran short, exerted upon her solitary figure the immense pressure of his concentrated woe: his age; his frailty; his desolation; when suddenly, tossing his head impatiently, in his annoyance --- for, after all, what woman could resist him? (Ibid, p. 114)

However, facing his despair, she exclaims a meaningless sentence "what beautiful boots".

In my opinion, Lily's rejecting to pity men is a rejection of the traditional role of woman as mother which is imposed on woman by patriarchy as the sole role of woman in society. Woman is mother in nature. Yet under patriarchal system man deprives woman of other social roles which make woman equal to man and recognizes the role of mother as the only and legitimate role of woman.

Third, different from the matchmaker Mrs. Ramsay, Lily rejects marriage. She seems to keep a cool mind towards marriage all the time. She also holds quite different attitudes towards the Ramsays. She finds that "Mr. Ramsay has none of it (greatness). He is petty, selfish, vain, egotistical; he is spoilt; he is a tyrant; he wears Mrs. Ramsay to death". (Ibid, p.18) He even loses his temper because of an earwig in his milk:

The bedroom door would slam violently early in the morning. He would start from the table in a temper. He would whiz his plate through the window. Then all through the house there would be a sense of doors slamming and blinds fluttering as if a gusty wind were blowing and people scudded about trying in a hasty way to fasten hatches and make things shipshape. (Ibid, p.148)

Mrs. Ramsay seems to live in a fantasy while Lily can see the cruel truth under the veil of happiness. It seems that Mrs. Ramsay, as a traditional woman, has to realize

her value as a woman through marriage and showing sympathy to men, but Lily doesn't regard marriage as the only way out since in such a marriage as the Ramsays' there isn't any equality between man and woman. She satirizes such marriage, "So that is marriage... a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball". (Ibid, p.52) If Mrs. Ramsay is willing to live in a beautiful lie built by men, Lily sees clearly the cruel truth. She finds that the marriage of Minta and Paul matched by Mrs. Ramsay is far from being happy, and beautiful Prue never enjoys happiness her mother has imagined. In a word, after seeing woman's cruel destiny, Lily doesn't want to accept catering to the needs of men as her only goal.

Besides the above narrations, there is also a great difference between the two women. Different from Mrs. Ramsay holding a needle in hand, Lily always holds a brush. In fact, nobody takes Lily's painting seriously and she has to bear the pressure from various aspects. For one thing, she receives discrimination from men. "There was Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, Women can't paint, women can't write..." (Woolf, 1994, p.35) For years, it seems that writing and painting have been men's business and women are so inferior to men in intelligence that they are regarded as only housekeepers. Obviously men fear that if women master the discourse power which men have monopolized, they would never have the superiority to women. For another, Lily has to suffer misunderstanding from her own sex such as Mrs. Ramsay. When she thinks of Lily's picture, "Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; but she was an independent little creature..." (Ibid, p.35)

Lily is lonely because nobody really understands her painting and her choice; Lily is brave because she dare break the law that women can only hold needle and begins to hold a brush which has ever been the patents of men. Her behavior shows that women long for the equality with men and wants to have a new way of expression that really suits them.

CONCLUSION

Under the pen of Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Ramsay is defined as the traditional aspect of woman, who is beautiful, elegant, social and easygoing, capable of housekeeping and is satisfied with her traditional role (always busy with knitting stockings), who tries every means to cater to the needs of men, and attempts to be a match-maker for others since she regards marriage as the only way for women to win economic guarantee. But little by little, she has lost her own identity of woman as an individual. She has become "the angel" that every house owns, and should be killed, so her death is inevitable. Lily represents the independent aspect of woman, who longs for the social equal role with man. Although finally she successfully

finisher the painting she draws for Mrs. Ramsay and her little son, she has to be lonely all her life. In fact, these two quite different women are just the two sides of women—the natural side and social side. Under the patriarchal system, woman is spiritually split. Only the two aspects are united, a woman becomes complete.

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