Vision of Reality in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf’s experience of the social, the solitary, and the visionary of human experience is revealed in both her group expression and individual expression. She believed that one could realize the private life by loosely accepting the code of behaviour prescribed by a particular social group, in their private life. Her vision of reality postulated both a world of time-flux and a universal harmony outside of flux. Her purpose as an artist was to communicate in the unity and flow of character and symbol this double aspect of reality which combined to form the common life. Lily’s vision of life itself has been surrounded by fluid impressions and personalities. All the fluidity of impressions, of human personalities, of things, which have touched Lily have been struck into stability by that unity which is the singleness of her reality vision.

**Keywords:** Reality, Life, Experience, Personality, Harmony.

It is in solitude that Ramsay and Lily Briscoe speculate about a question fundamental to Virginia Woolf’s world vision: how can the individual impose stability upon a world of instability? However before we can comprehensively understand the answers which Mrs. Ramsay and Lily give to their question we must first examine Mrs. Woolf’s presentation of a fluid world. Incessantly sweeping inward and receding in the ever-extending waters of time change *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay’s murmurs to herself expresses the fluidity of the Woolf world. Mrs. Woolf describes the changes in the Ramsay home, the change of day into night and of season into season. Mrs. Ramsay believes that life is chaotic, fragmentary, and disillusioning. But for Mrs. Ramsay, as for Virginia Woolf, “nothing is simply one thing” (277). Thus Virginia Woolf does not finally conclude that the fluid universe swept along in the tumult of time change is entirely chaotic and purposeless, if she sees only disunity her. Later we shall find that she see unity as well.

Mrs. Woolf implies a similarity between the temporal flux in the physical world and a similar flux in the consciousness of the individual. As physical nature is reassembled into night and day, into the four seasons on the assembly line of outer time change, so is human life melted down and rewarded by the character’s drifting inner time consciousness. A stitch of Mrs. Ramsay’s past life has been dropped and picked up in the memory and associations. Mrs. Ramsay recedes into the cloak of outer time, which clings to all human life. Lily Briscoe articulates the idea of human life receding into time-flux: “Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone. . . we can ride over her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us” (260).

Mrs. Ramsay denies the philosophical concept of time that an object is at one moment what it is at another; fluid experience dissolves the object in inner time change. After her dinner-party, Mrs. Ramsay pauses to look at her husband, her children, and her guests, who, diminishing in Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness, are already challenged from the present to the past. Mrs. Ramsay expresses the coincidence of personality and the physical world when she thinks it odd, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers, felt they expressed one. Mrs. Ramsay has a close affinity to the physical world of things. Often,
as above, she implies that the human personality and the physical world are two separate streams emptying into each other to form a unified whole of experience. Reality is found in this concrete, physical world which Mrs. Ramsay enjoys and identifies herself with. Significantly, Mrs. Ramsay’s mind singles out concrete, physical objects whereas Mr. Ramsay’s mind generalizes the real world.

Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe combine personality, the fluidity of time change, and the universe into a stability which Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe’s sense of the harmonic unity of reality deals with. Mrs. Ramsay imposes design upon a liquid world of evanescent shapes and sounds by the unity of her deep-rooted personality. Mrs. Ramsay’s wisdom is the creativeness of her personality. Mrs. Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself, so that she had only strength enough to move her finger. Mrs. Ramsay’s entrance at her dinner-party signals the change from separateness to unity. Immediately her husband, her children, and her guests are still-live into singleness, into stability. When Mrs. Ramsay leaves the dining-room, the solidity of many personalities merged into her personality dissolves again into the fluidity of separately flowing personalities. Both Ramsay and Lily comment upon this unity which exists in personality. Ramsay sees her mother standing on the stairs above her shortly after the dinner party and thinks, while she is regarding her painting. Lily Briscoe makes a similar comment: “Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, Life stand still here; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent . . . was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay she repeated. She owed it all to her” (240-241).

Mrs. Ramsay has the sense of the stable unity of her personality. Lily Briscoe, who alone understands the real significance of Ramsay’s personality, articulates the change that has taken place in the house on the Isles. After Mrs. Ramsay’s death, stability has again become instability; unity has been sliced up and separated into the fluidity of time-change. However, Mrs. Ramsay later returns to become a part of Lily’s painting; together Mrs. Ramsay complete a unified design.

Lily turns to art for unity in a flowing world. And like most artists, she doubts the worth of her work even as she does it, must do it. She has exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting. She had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul left of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. She looked at the canvas, lightly scored. However, Lily’s painting and Mrs. Ramsay’s personality, though they are expressive of the unity of reality, are only the outward manifestations “of the deeper harmonic unity of reality which is the business of the artist to find and collect and communicate” (1). Thus the journey to the Lighthouse, which Mr. Ramsay and his two children take in the third section, is both a literal and symbolic treatment of the direction away from, fluidity toward unity; for symbolically the journey to the Lighthouse is the journey of the soul through the sea-waves of consciousness to a stable object outside the fluidity is either outer or inner time-change.

Woolf’s metaphysical world obscures the distant lighthouse; but while fluidity is a very real part of the characters experience, even the most consciously elaborated and emphasized part fluidity, is not the totality of that experience. When the swimming character pauses for breath, he sees the distant beam of the Lighthouse flash its shadow upon the restless currents of time-change. It is then that tries swimmer experiences a flash of insight into a reality immune from the changing currents of time which waver and vanish as they flow through the swimmer’s consciousness. Virginia Woolf symbolizes reality in a physical object because the Lighthouse rock is comparatively stable whereas the human consciousness, which perceives reality, is continuously in flow until it touches that reality outside itself. Virginia describes the fixity and permanence, characteristic of the Lighthouse, in her definition of reality.

Virginia Woolf says that until a human being has tapped, until the symbol becomes interlocked into the experience of a human life, it remains a thing apart, an unknown truth and reality. Both Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay live in the presence of its reality. Symbolically, their perceptions of reality are usually interlocked with the Lighthouse, in her mystical experience; Mrs. Ramsay identifies
the experience with the third stroke of the Lighthouse. For Lily Briscoe, as for Mrs. Ramsay, the Lighthouse symbolizes her vision of life. When Mr. Ramsay lands on the shore of the Lighthouse, Lily simultaneously finishes her painting which expresses her vision of life. Though Mr. Ramsay makes the journey to the Lighthouse, journey seems to be little more than the right direction toward reality; the only thing that Mrs. Woolf suggests that Mr. Ramsay achieves in it is the loss, a loss which is only the requisite to perceiving reality, not the perception itself.

Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe symbolize the ideality into experience. Sinking down into reality, they receive their sense of beingness and of wholeness; it is their perception of reality which enables them to impose design upon time-flow, to exchange the resistances loneliness of the solitary life for the arrested completeness. Lily retreats into the self to perceive reality, they work within a paradox: it is by the method of self-awareness that they come to their perception of reality, but it is only they lose the self that they experience it. At the unconscious level Lily has her moment of insight, without self, she discovers reality.

Mrs. Ramsay experiences reality by letting her conscious mind overflow into the impressions of her description of Mrs. Ramsay’s and Lily’s mystical experiences. Virginia Woolf reveals her own mystical impulse to discover things drawing together into the beauty of harmonically counterpointed order and significance. Ramsay and Lily were self-propelled in their flow to the focal point of enduringness and completeness. Mrs. Ramsay, whose personality is both social and solitary, experiences the stillness and completeness of reality during her dinner-party. Lily Briscoe too sinks down into the unity of reality. Woolf emphasizes that the discovery of this common life is wisdom.

In *To the Lighthouse* the harmony of this common life is portrayed. Lily combines the experience of another human life with hers to form a single indeterminate whole. Virginia Woolf’s common life has cosmic proportions in the common life. She includes not only the experiences of people but also all inanimate things. All things, losing identity which is separateness, flow and merge into the common life. Mrs. Ramsay feels the community of all things in this common life.

Though the common life is achieved by fluidity, it is, paradoxically, the feeling of form within formlessness which the sensation of reality gives to the common life. All this fluidity converges upon the fixity and permanence of the Lighthouse. Lily Briscoe describes the common life, but full to the brim, she seemed to be standing up to the lips in some substance, Briscoe is painting her reel of life. By inference, we discover that Lily Briscoe is painting a picture in the way that Virginia Woolf expects. Mrs. Woolf says that the artist must have a mind, incandescent, with no obstacle in it and no foreign matter unconsumed. Lily Briscoe paints in this detached manner. Lily is painting Mrs. Brown or life itself for the painting is something more general than Mrs. Ramsay and son James, and the something more general is life itself. As the running lines symbolize fluidity, Mrs. Ramsay symbolizes the unity within fluidity. The difficult white space is symbolic of the difficulty with which the vision is drawn together and presented.

Lily’s vision of life itself has been surrounded by fluid impressions and personalities. All the fluidity of impressions, of human personalities, of things, which have touched Lily have been struck into stability by that unity which is the singleness of her vision. Thus the human personality becomes symbolic of the common life into which all things flow and merge into the form of that personality. The vision of reality, stilled in the moment, dissolves quickly, almost imperceptibly, into the flux of everyday experience. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily experience this same loss of momentary vision to the flux of the everyday world. The vision of reality is dim and unsubstantial. Lily and Mrs. Ramsay merely glimpse the distant beams of the Lighthouse through a spray of sea-foam. They live in a fluid world of the sea and consequently they can only translate an outside reality, stable and unified, into the vague and intangible character of the fluid life.
References


