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**The Value of Femininity in Spiritual Salvation in *To the Lighthouse***

**Abstract**

In 20th century, the European people were facing disasters in spirits due to the industrial development and the warfare, when the modernist literature began prevailing there. One of the characters of modernist novel is stream-of-consciousness, which are the thoughts, comments, questions or feelings of the characters. In Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* published in 1927, the streams-of-consciousness unveil the essence of every character’s existence and the way of everyone’s self-fulfillment, especially of the two main characters, Mr. Ramsey and Mrs. Ramsey. The essences and ways these two characters represents respectively ration and passion, sense and sensibility, or the traditional masculinity and femininity. By making comparisons and conflicts between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey, the preference of a more sensitive and caring femininity of Virginia Woolf through Lily’s eyes were expressed. The intimacy between femininity and everyday house chores can also be found in this novel, also in accordance with some contemporary phenomenology. Through the arguments and comments in this novel, we can infer the important role that femininity plays in spiritual salvation, namely, finding the meaning of the life and reaching a harmonious world, which also conveys Virginia Woolf’s wish for a better world.

*Key words: femininity, spiritual salvation, sensibility, affection*

**Biographical Analysis of Virginia Woolf’s when writing *To the Lighthouse***

*To the Lighthouse* was published in May, 1927, when Virginia Woolf was 44.

During the 20th century when the technologies and industries were rapidly changing the lifestyle and social structure in Europe, a sense of loneliness, nothingness and alienation haunted among European people. The upcoming of World War 1 further shook their good dreams of the future and faith in the absolute rationality and truth, which used to be long embraced in European philosophies. Modern thoughts about turning to new ways of saving the spirits in depression emerged, including Heidegger’s giving up rationality and focusing on other meanings in our daily lives, which was published in his *Being and Time* in February, 1927.

Brought up in an ideal Victorian family, Virginia Woolf felt the conflict of her parents’ thinking patterns since her childhood. Her father was an eminent literary figure and the first editor of the Dictionary of National Biography, who owns more rationality, while her mother was a beautiful photographer with prominent social connections who is more sensitive. She expressed her motivation for writing this novel in *A Writer’s Diary* at the age of 44:

*This is going to be fairly short; to have father's character done complete in it; and mother's; and St. Ives; and childhood; and all the usual things I try to put in—life, death, etc. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel.* (Woolf 14)

During Virginia Woolf’s life, depression troubles her mind, which was intensified by her parents’ and sister’s deaths and the World War 1. It might be inferred that Virginia Woolf’s intention was first to memorize the two distinct characters of her parents, and in showing her preference to a feminine character to express her wish of saving the spirits with affection and a building a more harmonious world.

**Journey to the Lighthouse as a Way of Spiritual Salvation**

The idea of the journey to the lighthouse is a symbol of achieve spiritual salvation in life is firstly addressed in various former literature. WANG Wen’s research suggests that *To the Lighthouse* was written under Woolf’s motivation of “unveiling the nature and value of life through the depiction of the complicated inner worlds of different characters”. This novel is attempting to express the “two relations which are important in life, among human beings and between human and the world”. Virginia Woolf’s wish in reaching a harmony in these two relations and form an order in disorder was expressed in this novel. She also holds the view that “Once we have grasped the main thread of life determinism, we can follow the trail and make sense of it”.

A journey also has the same metaphorical pattern of reaching a goal in life, as it is suggested in George Lakoff’s *Metaphors We Live by*. This metaphor is also self-evident in the novel itself, as the novel is titled by the name of a journey, and as it begins with the conversation on whether tomorrow is fine to go to the lighthouse, and ended by the family’s reaching the lighthouse:

*“He has landed,” she said aloud. “It is finished.”… “He stood there as if he were spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind; she thought he was surveying, tolerantly and compassionately, their final destiny.”* (Woolf 145)

Meanwhile, in mentioning expressions like “weakness and suffering of mankind” and “final destiny”, the novel is not only a description or a memory of the journey, but

**The Characteristics of Femininity in Conflicting with Masculinity**

As the parents of the family and the center among the guests, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey are in the center of the power structure of the family, namely, their emotions, feelings, thinking patterns and orders all have an great influence on the others. Thus, these two characters are taken as the research objects of this paper.

Generally, Mr. Ramsey is the representative of masculinity while Mrs. Ramsey is the incarnation of femininity. Through comparison of these two virtues and the comments by some characters, Virginia Woolf shows her preference to femininity, who cares about the meaning which are long forgotten by people, and a more harmonious world which European people are in desperate need of at that time.

The femininity differs from masculinity in the following aspects through this novel’s depiction of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey.

1. **Goal of self-fulfillment**

Mr. Ramsey’s goal is linear and straight-forward, while Mrs. Ramsey’s is reticular, focusing more on those which Mr. Ramsey forgets aside and beside.

For Mr. Ramsey, he only has two clear goals at the beginning of the story: reaching the lighthouse in physics and reaching “Z” in thought. His life is marked strictly by every step he takes towards his goal. There is a vivid example in Chapter 3, when everyone is not in time to get ready for going to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsey “had stormed”, shouting “What’s the use of going now?” In only recognizing the “use” of reaching the lighthouse, we can conclude that his goal is straight-forward and linear.

Yet there are many “uses” that others are doing, through the observing of female eyes. Lily, as a narrator or as judge in this conflict between ration and affection by paint her painting of life, were recalling the deceased Mrs. Ramsey painfully while painting her “life”. She was in the past, out of the linear time when paint, while Mr. Ramsey always reminds her of being back to the linear reality. However, this conflict rather reveals the value of the things, spaces and meanings outside of the linear goal, which would confirm the readers to disagree with masculinity and empathize femininity.

*To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people’s feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that, without replying, dazed and blinded, she bent her heads as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked. There was nothing to be said.* (Woolf 22)

For Mrs. Ramsey, the goal of self-fulfillment is to have her husband happy, her children healthy, and her relationships harmony. most important way in which the characters in the book emerge from their nothingness is to love the world, to have compassion for it, to make it one in spirit. She is happy in every tiny chore of her everyday life. In raising her children, she wishes her children would never grow up and leave her, and said that she would be proud of Andrew even if he does not get the scholar; in serving the guests, she is concerned with every one’s own affairs like expecting some ones to marry.

It is noticeable that the things that Mrs. Ramsey is interested in and that be endowed with sweetness and beauty, are merely the chores of daily life and the daily routines of a housewife, which commonly be written as humble and menial things in traditional narration. In the foregrounding of these house chores and humble thoughts, Virginia Woolf is showing her confirmation of this type of female self in fulfillment, instead of the flat and rational one which has been long held by the mainstream value system.

1. **View on relations among humans**

Mr. Ramsey often have conflicts with other family members. He is the biggest enemy of his son James. Though Mr. Ramsey has never had direct quarrel with others, there are several “Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hold in his father’s breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it” to hurt Mr. Ramsey, as Mr. Ramsey said “it won’t be fine”, tomorrow, which breaks the dream of going to the lighthouse of James. “What he said was true”, “never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his children”. True though his words and deeds may follow, they often hurt other’s heart.

In the quest of the truth, masculinity not only hurts others, but also forms a sense of competition among human beings. In Mr. Ramsey’s comparing his goal of reaching A to Z, what always occupies his mind is not what the truth belike exactly, or what will be the benefits of the truth; instead, he always thinks about how many people would reach the destiny as if he will possibly lack behind. In this competition, Mr. Ramsey loses the concern to other meanings in life and the caring on people around.

In comparison, Mrs. Ramsey is a perfect consoler, and probably the binder of the family. The clearest evidence is that her stream-of-consciousness takes most of the chapter 1, in which every character was introduced and depicted through her eyes. Thus, the connection and combination of each character are down through Mrs. Ramsey. The evidence is also found in the family gathering, when “directly she went a sort of disintegration set in; they wavered about, went different ways”. Since Mrs. Ramsey’s absent results in the disintegration, her presence works as a binder in the family. When she comes downstairs, “like a queen, she finds her subjects assembled in the hall, and she looks down on them, comes among them, silently acknowledges their praise and receives their adoration”.(Woolf 57) When conversations between guests at dinner are awkward, Madame consciously tries to reconcile "the quarrels, the disagreements, the discord, the various prejudices woven into every fiber of life", and what she does is to avoid them and bring harmony and order to life.

Women’s view on bonds among humans is rather a “sisterhood” than a “brotherhood”. “Brotherhood”, according to the Bible, includes an original sense of the domestic hierarchy, for every man was narrated to be “born” by his father. Yet every woman was not mentioned to have such a hierarchy. Being suffocated together and suffering the same, the “sisterhood” they dreams of has inheritably a sense of affection and equality, rather than competition and power. The dream of “sisterhood” was also conveyed in the intimacy between Lily and Mrs. Ramsey. When Lily embracing Mrs. Ramsey’s knees, she could not help speaking out her love towards Mrs. Ramsey and describes their relations as the intimacy which “was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tables, nothing that could be written in any language known to men”. Her love is beyond the their social roles, only to be a deep, thoughtful and valuable one. (Woolf 39)

1. **Changing of attitudes from masculinity towards femininity**

In Chapter 3, it is surprising that Mr. Ramsey has the tendency to accept the view and feeling labeled with femininity. Perhaps it was because so much was lost during the ten years of WORLD WAR 1, the family must make changes to prevent being drowned into sorrowness and to sustain life. Changes have been made, first to Mr. Ramsey. He raised the idea of preparing gifts for the lighthouse keeper, even the one who used to insist to doing this has passed away. Given his old age, this deed is by no means only to complete the unfinished act of ten years ago, but also indicates that he is realizing gradually the meaning of life outside his “linear” truth. Under the influence of Mrs. Ramsey, Mr. Ramsey also gradually forgive himself in not being able to reach “Z”: it is fine to know that someone will reach there, no matter that one is or is not himself.

1. **Narration in favor of femininity**

The traditional narrative style and principles of narrative are to arrange characters and scenes within a certain plot according to a certain chronological, spatial and logical relationship, describing life experiences and social changes.

The stream-of-consciousness novel, on the other hand, is the opposite: it breaks down the boundaries of time and space, lightens the plot, and expresses the inner emotional changes of the characters, which is anti-rational and anti-logical. It objectively serves to promote the "full human character" advocated by feminism. Therefore, looking at the stream-of-consciousness novel through the female gaze is both a new interpretation of its meaning and conscious recognition of its function as a female discourse. Meanwhile, under the divine gaze of the female gaze, stream-of-consciousness fiction also takes on another meaning, namely, the questioning and reflection on logocentrism in the field of literature when human beings go to the extremes of their own rationality, and people realize that rational narratives are deficient and cannot reflect the true spiritual life of human beings in a complete and comprehensive manner.

Thus, the stream-of-consciousness novel itself is an inevitable reversal of the development of the rational element in art; the development of art towards the emotional aspect is a manifestation of man's artistic quest for human perfection, for either the rational or the sensual in art is incomplete to the extreme.

**How Femininity Backs to Human Nature**

The novel proposes two solutions to break the binary divisions, which will further result in the fusion of femininity into the long alienated human nature.

The first is the reversal of the hierarchy between the “mainstream” men and the “other” women. Mrs. Ramsey tells her son a fairy tale, *The Story of the Fisherman and the Goldfish*: A fisherman caught a goldfish, who asked him to be released on condition that it would meet all his demands. When the fisherman's wife learned of this, she repeatedly drove her husband to the goldfish to meet all his demands: from ordinary household utensils to the throne of the queen, and drove him out of the palace. With the magical help of the goldfish, the woman becomes the ruler of the kingdom, at the center of political culture, dominating everything, including men, thus reversing the hierarchical binary of male and female and giving women the upper hand.

The other solution focuses on the possibility of reversing the hierarchy by de-emphasizing the differences and hierarchical advantages between sexes, in order to move towards an integration of masculine and feminine. Virginia Woolf, in her *A Room of One’s Own*, has proposed her androgyny theory that a perfect man or woman possesses the virtues of both men and women.

**From Where Comes the Value of Femininity**

1. **The illness in the binary division of gender qualities**

Through the analysis above, it is noticeable that the femininity is not a value excluded within the female people, neither is the masculinity. The definition of them could only be, that while masculinity is the mainstream of the society, those who are “the other”, own affection towards others, and dream of a world of harmony (sisterhood) possess femininity. Masculinity and femininity here are the Victorian stereotyped gender qualities, labeling with hierarchy and power.

The division of this binary was long rooted in human history. Since patriarchal societies replaced matriarchal societies, there has been a social division of labor between men and women. Women stayed at home, looking after the family and raising children, while men entered society. As a result of this division of labor, women who stay at home live at home with their children and husbands as the only emotional and hopeful support in their lives. It was therefore only natural that they cultivated too much affection and kinship. In order to obtain more means of production and livelihood, to gain a certain social honor and status and to maintain a family life, men then had to use their reason to judge and discriminate, making their practices more purposeful and utilitarian. This is also true of social interactions between people, where the rational element takes precedence over the emotional one.

Naturalist Feminism also provides an explanation towards this division of binary. Rosemary Radford Reuther’s *The New Feminine New Earth: Sexist Ideology and Human Liberation* (1975) analyses women's fertility as enabling them to recognize the whole cycle of natural ecology, and the sense of existential mortality as a result of a patriarchal culture. The sense of existential mortality is at the root of a patriarchal culture in which men often feel anxiety and emptiness because they are unaware of their reproductive function. Driven by this culture, men covet material possessions and consume natural resources without restraint. (WANG Ping, 70)

Since the division of binary gender has been ill itself, it would be one reason that why the men who are requested to follow ration were alienated by the technology, ideology and all other questions related to the absolute truth. Introducing the thinking patterns of femininity seems to be a necessity to bring back the human nature to human beings.

1. The spiritual pursuits in Europe in 20th century.

As the founder of phenomenology, Husserl's ideas had a major influence on many 20th century thinkers. In the face of this profound cultural crisis, Husserl offers Europeans a prescription for a "living world". He argued that the root cause of this crisis was that the world of science had secretly replaced and forgotten the world of life in the process of its own construction, and that to escape from this crisis, it was necessary to return to the world of life. He concludes that "the lifeworld is the forgotten foundation of natural science." (YI Junqing, 117)

Among the major thinkers of the 20th century, Heidegger, the founder of existentialism, also offers a profound analysis of the world of life. He treats the world of everyday life as a profound and comprehensive alienation of the modern world of everyday life through an analysis of man's being in the world, and especially through an analysis of man's everyday co-existence.

The aim of Heidegger's philosophy is to inquire into the "meaning of being". He argues that traditional Western metaphysics has always approached the meaning of being from the ready-made, the given, i.e., the being, and has failed to truly understand what being is. He therefore argues that the meaning of being is revealed by starting from this being. human existence, which unfolds its own nature and reveals the meaning of being through 'being in the world'. Heidegger uses the terms 'being thrown into' and 'annoyance' to reveal the structure of the 'being' of this being. The being of this being begins with the state of being thrown into. When one is thrown into the world, one has to deal on the one hand with the being that surrounds one. the object at hand, and on the other hand with the being that is in the world together, the former of which can be regarded as 'annoying' and the latter as 'annoying', Boredom is thus embedded in the world of the common being as the basic earthly structure of this being. In this way, Heidegger develops an analysis of the everyday co-existent world. (YI Junqing, 122)

The femininity by the traditional and stereotyped definition, is closely related to the every life. It manifests itself in various “being through into” and “annoyance”.

**Conclusion**

In analyzing the difference between the thinking and feeling patterns of typical masculinity and femininity possessed respectively by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey, Virginia Woolf’s preference towards femininity was expressed. Femininity, owned mainly by Mrs. Ramsey, has the value to combine people and console the hurt in hearts, which is in need by the European experiencing the rapid development and the World War. In searching for femininity, Virginia Woolf expressed her wish for the nature of life, as natural affections and everyday-life meanings, to return back to the lives, and for a better world of sisterhood and harmony.

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