



# Lily Briscoe and her canvas: Kleinian depression in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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## ABSTRACT

*To the Lighthouse*, is Virginia Woolf's most autobiographical novel and one which Woolf herself ascertained as her most psychoanalytic tale both in its construction and motivations. Bearing in mind the psychological significance it held for Woolf, this paper seeks to draw attention to Lily Briscoe's canvas as the novel's psychic space as the entrance into the implicit, unthought known (Bollas, 1987) within Lily Briscoe's subjectivity as echoing that of Woolf's own. Travelling (in-)between "the transitional space" (Winnicott, 1971) as engendered by the gap between the novel's overt narrative and Lily Briscoe's canvas, it seeks to venture into the unwritten psychic space separated from the novel's oedipalized landscape. The paper provides a Kleinian reading to bring to light the undercurrents of Kleinian depression in Lily, un-narrated by Woolf but reverberating throughout the novel.

## 1. The haunting of the unthought known

On the 5th of May, two events of significance happened in Virginia Woolf's life. The first was the unexpected death of her mother, Julia Stephen, through rheumatic fever in 1895 when Woolf was thirteen.<sup>1</sup> The second, thirty-two years later, was the publication of her novel *To the Lighthouse* in 1927 when Woolf was forty-five. The coincidence intrigues, as the date of death of the mother became the date of birth of Woolf's semi-autobiographical novel and one that is penetrated by her psychoanalytic musings on the mother-child relationship. *To the Lighthouse* was a rare exception indeed, which Woolf herself acknowledged as her most psychoanalytic tale both in its construction and motivations. As someone who bore sufficient acquaintance with psychoanalysis, due to her social involvement in the Bloomsbury circle, and her later involvement in The Hogarth Press co-founded with her husband Leonard Woolf, her address of the approach was never without a certain sense of suspicion and caginess, especially towards Freudianism (Wolf and Wolf, 1979; Zwerdling, 1986).

Despite her distaste for Freudianism and Freud as a person, who she had met (Meisel, 2013), the influence of psychoanalysis on her work is salient. Looking into the relationship between Woolf's novels and her personal history, Abel (1989) observes that Woolf's novels are often laden with latent ruminations about past experiences and their ongoing influence on present circumstances. Panken (1987), through an intensive reading of Woolf's work, came to identify some recurrent

themes depicted by Woolf; above all was the psychological experience of helplessness and powerlessness experienced by the female characters, with an unmistakable undercurrent of rage in them that seems all too easy to be misunderstood and dismissed by those around them. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the repetition of certain types of characters could signify certain unconscious conflicts haunting the author's mental life. It is in this sense that Elizabeth Bowen beckons us to consider the close relation between the psyche and novel-writing, famously saying, "the term 'creation of character' (or characters) is misleading. Characters pre-exist, they are *found*" (cited in Hague, 2003: 95–96, italics added). Fictional creation foregoes its fictitious nature when the origin of them is recognised as coming from the place of the author's unconscious truths (Bowie, 1987). Similarly, for Woolf, who was not at all unfamiliar with the concept of the unconscious, writing would seem the most natural way through which the emotional fragments of psychological life could be re-visited. Between pen and paper, the creative yet cathartic practice of writing seemingly marked the passage through which her unknown selves travelled and came to her mind. If memories from the past had served Woolf as a reservoir from which she drew novelistic inspiration (Woolf, 2002[1939]), then the unconscious mind would have been the intuitive impulses disrupting the coherence of narrative and of thinking itself. These coexisting processes, as Hague (2003) observes, give rise to an inextricable tension of contrary forces, between the intended plots and what seems an autonomous force taking hold of the pen and directing the writing itself,

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<sup>1</sup> The tragic loss of her mother was to be reinforced by the sequential death of her half-sister and substitute mother figure, Stella, two years after in 1897 (Rose, 1978).

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from which a set of characters with highly complex psychological lives emerge. *To the Lighthouse* was a work incubated in such a tension.

Recorded in her writer's diary her original motivation for the novel had been to:

have father's characters 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, 1985[1953]: 75).

The memories of the past, as Woolf herself acknowledged here, were a direct source from which she retrieved fragmentary memories in piecing together scenes, characters, and plots. Both literally and metaphorically, the reproduction of her memories with her father had been set as the novel's central theme. As she began to work on *To the Lighthouse*, however, the process of writing seemed to have become increasingly subsumed into intuitional occurrences of "the unthought known" (Bollas, 1987). The unthought known, in Bollas' conceptualisation, refers to what is known experientially to the person and yet at the same time remains cognitively and linguistically inaccessible. The process of writing *To the Lighthouse* was catalytic for the resurfacing of distressing moments which was articulable only in a fragmented and desolate way at the time of happening (Woolf, 1990 [1987]). Those moments, as I will demonstrate, particularly concern the inner conflictual experiences in relation to the mother. Comparing the process of working on *To the Lighthouse* to undergoing psychoanalytic treatment, Woolf commented on the effect of writing as akin to that of the therapeutic process which allowed her to express "some very long felt and deeply felt emotion" and in expressing and elaborating it, she "laid it out to rest" (2002 [1939]: 81). Haunted by the unthought known is like being "under the deep spell of the uncanny" (ibid: 37). For Bollas, it is only when we can begin to transform the unthought known into conscious self-knowledge that we can be released from its spell.

The unconscious, as Kingsbury and Pile (2014) point out, manifests as "processes" (p. 14). If *To the Lighthouse* was partially driven by the haunting of the unthought known then writing could be seen as a "pliant medium" (Milner, 1950) enabling the unconscious contents to be "reincarnated in some external form" (Milner, 1987: 227). By virtue of reincarnating the past familial drama into the aesthetic moments in a fictional world, Woolf would have seemed to succeed in exorcise herself from the ghost of the dead. As noted in her diary, "I wrote [*To the Lighthouse*] very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice" (2002 [1939]: 81). Written at a time when Woolf was close in age to her late mother at her death, *To the Lighthouse* could be seen as Woolf's most valiant endeavour to "narrate, trace, or retrospectively reconstruct" (Lamm, 1997: 46) the particular kind of psychoanalytic tale which explores the psychological difficulties engendered by the uncertainties between intimacy and estrangement, separation and belonging. It signifies a deepening engagement with psychoanalytic thinking through which she endeavoured to alchemize the personal narrative of trauma into a coherent artistic whole with emotional depth.

Autobiographical documents have identified Lily Briscoe as a revelatory character of the author herself (Goring, 2012). Bearing in mind the psychological significance *To the Lighthouse* held for Woolf, this paper seeks to shift the attention to the place of the implicit, "unthought known" (Bollas, 1987) within Lily Briscoe's<sup>2</sup> subjectivity, as echoing that of the author's own. It also seeks to reconstitute fragments of the novel's overt narrative specifically through Kleinian thinking to

illuminate the hidden undercurrents of a Kleinian depression, un-narrated by the author but reverberating within the psychic domain of the novel. Particularly I will draw attention to Lily's canvas as the psychic dimension of the novel outside of language.

## 2. From phallus to breasts: a feminist return to "The fabled land"

In writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's mind was drawn to the earliest moments with her mother, particularly her experience of the maternal presence and absence as a child (Woolf, 2002[1939]: 93). These moments are primarily expressed through Lily Briscoe, an unmarried woman and family friend of the Ramsay's, whose emotional tides appear to be orchestrated by the gravitational pull of Mrs Ramsay, the mother figure of the family. Positioned as a literary, and not biological, daughter, Lily is marginalised within the society around her and the significance of her presence in the family metaphorically evoked through the phrase "on the edge of the lawn" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 191). However, when we do hear her voice, it mainly concerns Mrs Ramsay. In her voice, we hear her longing for intimacy with Mrs Ramsay and moments of psychological conflict brought about by her thoughts of her. The latter was to culminate in the aftermath of Mrs Ramsay's death,<sup>3</sup> haunting the emotional terrain of the novel as well as Lily Briscoe's canvas. In Lily Briscoe, we can detect Woolf's Kleinian influence, as her existence orbits around the maternal universe and not a paternal one (Abel, 1989). Melanie Klein, who Woolf had met in person, celebrated femininity and worked towards a matricentric framework, earning Woolf's admiration as a "woman of character & force" (cited in Bahun, 2013: 97). Lily's daughterly reverie of the mother, and her on-going quest for Mrs Ramsay after her death, intentionally or not, legitimise the theoretical relevance of Kleinian theory that gives the maternal body a central place.

But if *To the Lighthouse* indicated Woolf's inclination towards Kleinian theory over the more orthodox father-centred narrative proposed by the Freudian ideology of her time (Abel, 1989), it was done covertly. A surface reading of the novel can easily give the impression of her finally succumbing to Freudian theory. Mainly this is through the way the father, Mr Ramsay, is positioned at the centre of the overt narrative and through her introduction of the Oedipal plot carried throughout as an on-going strand of unfolding narrative of the Ramsay children. Indeed, the character of the father is the most vigorous amongst all. Woolf's portrayal of Mr Ramsay vividly conjured up a tyrannical presence imbued with unrestrained, overbearing emotionalism, who triumphed in dominating those around him. The rest struggle but comply. The character of Mr Ramsay seemingly reaffirms not only the patriarchal dominance of the post-Victorian familial scenes inextricable from Woolf's lived experience but also the then patricentric psychoanalytic climate in favour of Freudianism.<sup>4</sup> The novel was seemingly written in compliance to Freudian theory and perhaps also to cater to an increasingly popular trend, concurrent with a growing recognition of Freud in England, of imbuing fiction with psychoanalytic ideas (Dever, 1998).

Where Woolf kept her intended meaning obscure, she opened up space for subjective interpretations to enrich the possible meanings of the original texts (Barthes, 1998[1967]). In one passage, her description of the character of the father, Mr Ramsay, lends the interpretive possibility that it was not only referring to the father in the fiction but

<sup>3</sup> The death of Mrs Ramsay and Prue, one of the Ramsay children, in the story, which in reality most likely represented the death of Woolf's own mother and her half-sister, Stella.

<sup>4</sup> Due to the politics within the psychoanalytic circle at the time, it was not uncommon for the theorists such as Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott to establish themselves as followers to Freud, which inevitably involved underplaying their theoretical differences in order to secure a place for their work and the on-going influence in the psychoanalytic community (Likierman, 2001; Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> The reason of my focusing on Lily has to do with the historical context: during the writing of the novel, Virginia Woolf's brother, Adrian, a trained psychoanalyst who just completed Klein's London lecture series, visited her, and this, as recorded in Woolf's diary, brought about her creation of Lily Briscoe (Abel, 1989: 68).

also, on a deeper level, to Freud, the father of psychoanalysis:

What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth ... never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of his own children ... should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 182).

Reading beyond the text, could this passage be Woolf's camouflaged criticism of Freud, whose thinking championed the paternalistic rationality (Grotstein and Rinsley, 1994) and of his characteristic authoritarian dictate? Whilst we cannot know this, what we can see is that the paternal dominance enforced by Mr Ramsay, who triumphed over the family with uncompromising fierceness and by his representation of himself as the voice of absolute truth, paralleled the Freudian ethos of masculinity that produced men as higher moral beings "independent of its emotional origins" (Freud, 1925: 257-8).

In Freud's construction of masculinity, and as it is embedded in the evolving narratives of the youngest Ramsay boy, James, male gender identity finds expression through achieving a gradual dis-attachment from, hence dis-identification with, his primary emotional bond with the mother. By turning away from his "emotional origins" a boy denounces his erotic interests in the maternal body, and seeks identification with the all-powerful phallus instead, to reassert the patriarchal sovereignty as his father's heir. Freud's Oedipal theory explicitly positions fathering as what "rescues the child from the regressive absorption in the mother" (Frosh, 2002: 2). It, therefore, regards the child's shift from breasts, as the first object of love, to phallus as a developmental triumph.

The oedipal progression from breasts to phallus, however, could not be achieved without a significant, irretrievable loss – the loss of the "passage to that fabled land where the brightest hopes are" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 182). Although Woolf left her intended meaning of the "fabled land" unexplained, from a Kleinian perspective it could possibly be read as alluding to the "emotional origins" of the soothing *pre-oedipal* encapsulation with the mother, the essence of which lies outside the law of logic and rationality that a father enforces (Frosh, 2002). Indeed, Freud's psychosexual framework engenders a normative developmental theory that positions phallus as the object of desire. Freud's claim of how one should develop psychosexually as a daughter, by overcoming the primary bond with the mother and to mature through the Oedipal dynamics of implicit prohibitions and eroticized longings, is uncompromising (Hirsch, 1989: 99). To be a Freudian daughter, therefore, is to surrender to the intervention of the father as a third person who serves to break up the pre-oedipal mother-child bond.

Freud's theory reflects the socio-cultural reality of gender prejudices of the post-Victorian society Woolf lived in. His authoritarian assertion arrested his capacity to consider a feminist perspective from which Woolf, as a woman and a daughter, passionately ventured in her work. To Freud, femininity (Freud, 1925, 1933) is represented by what a woman fails to possess, her lack of phallus, and the lack of "the super-ego ... so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men" (Freud, 1925: 257-8). However, whilst the traditional Freudian rhetoric appeared to dominate the plots by Woolf's portrayal of the triangular tensions amongst the Ramsay family, we can see Lily Briscoe as the one who *escaped* the Freudian law. As a non-biological daughter who fell outside the bound of the family and who "need never marry" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 310), she was free to relish an incessant reminiscence of the maternal body. This "fabled land", fertilised by the maternal nurturance that wraps the baby to the breast of milk, of warmth, was a prohibited site to the Freudian daughter, Cam, who surrendered to the father and drifted aimlessly after the mother's death. It could only be found through Lily Briscoe, whose character arc centres around feminist nostalgia for the unattainable breasts, re-created through her canvas outside of language.

### 3. Lily Briscoe as the transitional space

The overarching plot of *To the Lighthouse* is scaffolded with Freudian metaphors but underneath there co-exists an alternative reality that orbits around a Kleinian universe through Lily Briscoe. Whilst Woolf let Mr Ramsay, the father, enjoy the narrative centre, she gave centrality to Mrs Ramsay, the mother, in Lily's aesthetic moments, signifying another *layered* theme of the novel. The break between the space of the novel's overt narrative and the surface of Lily's canvas marks what can be effectively reflected upon through Winnicott's (1971) idea of 'the transitional space'. The transitional space serves as "an intermediate area" (p. 6) that joins up the external reality and the psychic reality whilst simultaneously blurring the boundary between the two. In this in-between space, fractured incongruities of thoughts co-exist alongside the primitive register of affective experiences. It is here they are temporarily kept as they are, without exerting pressure on the subject who is otherwise tasked perpetually to distinguish between reality and fantasy. The transitional space is, therefore, a "resting place" (p. 3) for the subject where the need for belonging to either the external or the internal reality can be temporarily suspended. In *To the Lighthouse*, the sense of transitional space can be seen as created through the subjectivity of Lily Briscoe, whose narrative deviates from the accepted social mandates and are marginalised to moments inconsequential to the overall progression of Ramsay drama. Marginality here seems crucial. It would seem that it was after all Lily's marginality that enables an alternate spatial and temporal frame that resists the normative temporality governed by patricentric rhythm. Her marginality sustains a transitional space that exists independently of the reality of the "universal law" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 216), spoken and practiced by the Ramsay subjects. That is, a resting place that withstands and conserves incongruities between rationality and emotionality in the face of the Freud-Klein dichotomy. We see Lily, perhaps as Woolf's vehicle, travel unrestrainedly in-between the external reality of unfolding plots and her canvas as the unconscious, psychic dimension of the novel. Her rhythm, therefore, reveals a transitional time in a permanent oscillation between external and inner happenings, conscious ruminations and the unthought known. It is in this transitional sphere, certainties dissolve into imaginative creativity so "fluid and open" (p. 414) that it permeates into every aspect of the subject's experiential existence (Eigen, 1981). We should not be surprised that the aesthetic space of the canvas should belong to Lily.

### 4. Lily Briscoe's canvas as the psychic space of *To the Lighthouse*

If Lily opens up the transitional space, the surface of her canvas could be seen as providing an entrance to the dimensions of psychic life hosting the unthought known. By transferring onto Lily's canvas, Woolf reconfigured a different form of expression through brush-strokes and colours to capture the essence of something that could not have been put to words, nor consciously thought about. When Lily brings herself to paint, the aesthetic experience extends to a meditative recollection of the past: "[s]he was not inventing; she was only trying to smooth out something she had been given years ago folded up; something she had seen" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 326). If "folded up" implies repression, Lily's act of painting would imply a spontaneous quest of the essence of lingering affects lost through time and through repression; and reminiscence of the forbidden yet irresistible desires unspoken and unthinkable. Rather like the relationship between Woolf and *To the Lighthouse*, Lily does not seek to "invent" something new on her canvas. Her paintbrush, perhaps symbolizing Woolf's pen, seems seized by intuitive, creative impulses that decidedly direct the artist to map the psychical contours of unconscious knowledge – "of embodied-spatialised desire and fear" (Nast, 2000: 223). As we will see, these can be localised on the aesthetic space of the canvas as a doorway to "the interiorised place" (ibid) of the novel - somewhere language cannot reach.

The surface<sup>5</sup> of the canvas figuratively registers her mind's free-as-sociative wandering. Yet their meanings resist language, resist the inquisitive, male gaze which, as we see, insists on intruding upon her solitary moments with too high a "scientific" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 214) spirit. Upon being asked about her painting, at which point she "would have snatched her picture off the easel" - instead, she submitted and "braced herself to stand the awful trial" (p. 217). "[In] that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she [Lily] felt the need of darkness" (ibid). Her ambiguity encourages further questioning, but she cannot deliberate further. She cannot give a sense of clarity by equating symbols with language that is so demanded of her - "For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? Express that emptiness there?" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 311).

As she ponders to herself,

It was one's body feeling, not one's mind. ... To want and not to have sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have - to want and want - how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again. (p. 311)

What Lily is aware of, the "emotions of the body" (ibid) that cannot be conveyed through words, holds a central space in the Kleinian theory of infantile experience. To Klein, at the beginning of life there is no differentiation between the bodily experience and the psychic experience, as the psychic space is dominated by the somatic events of the body, such as the satisfaction and deprivation through the availability of the mother's breast, crucial to its survival (Klein, 1923; Isaacs, 1991[1952]). As Lily aptly puts it, "it was one's body feeling, not one's mind", the very origin of the emotional life is founded on the sensory experience, whether or not one's bodily needs are satisfied. Further to this is that Klein (1946) believes that the infant is born with a readiness to develop object relations through differentiating good experience ("want and have") from the bad experience ("want and not to have") during the primary relationship with the mother. Through the psychological mechanism of splitting, the infant builds up an internal constellation of part-object world populating itself with the good and the bad objects, symbolizing the gratifying breast and the frustrating breast. The mother's breasts sustain the phantasy life of the infant; in the same way, Mrs Ramsay, her presence and absence, fertilises the novel's psychic ground as separate from its textual foregrounding of the father.

Her canvas allows for expression of the unthought known through transitioning into a language "not known to men" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 216). Herein the primitive registers of sensory and emotional experiences from the pre-oedipal attachment with the mother can be re-evoked (Abel, 1989). Her attempt to paint therefore symbolises a movement of the unthought known tracing her pre-linguistic "emotional origins" which precedes the cognitive-linguistic construction of ethics, morality, and rationality. Lily Briscoe, who communicates through art, echoes Woolf's own language of symbolic layers (of sea, sky, storm, rock etc) in conjuring the emotive rhythms of the novel. Lily's canvas seems to provide a shelter, an ultimate 'room of one's own', for her subjective yet elusive recapturing of the maternal body from the Freudian third person destined to break the bliss of mother-infant fusion.

Through painting, Lily silently withdraws from the condescending paternal censorship that can be heard most vividly through the voice of Charles Tansley, who whispered in Lily's ear, "women can't write, women can't paint" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 214). Non-coincidentally, Tansley's critical voice against women<sup>6</sup> closely mimics that of Freud,

who regarded women as discounted beings due to the lack of a phallus. Through her painting, Lily escapes from the oedipalized landscape into a reminiscence of the fabled land, where her brightest hopes once flourished and beckon us into the maternal universe where her existence orbits around Mrs Ramsay, the surrogate mother.

Seeing the canvas as the psychic space, "the relation of masses, of lights and of shadows" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 218) on her canvas would articulate the internal object relations repressed and unknown to the owner herself.<sup>7</sup> The contrast of the light and shadow could be the separate entities of the good and the bad objects internally created and differentiated by means of splitting. But how to bring together the good objects and the bad objects (Klein, 1935)? As Lily ponders, "how to connect this mass on the right hand with that one the left"? Her awareness and anxiety about the danger that ensues in the process of connecting them that "by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken" (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 218) coincide with what Klein sees as the major challenge with which a depressive baby is confronted.

Re-phrasing Lily's psychical paradox evoked by painting in Klein's own words,

[H]ow to put the bits together in the right way and at the right time; how to pick out the good bits and do away with the bad ones; how to bring the object to life when it has been put together; and there is the anxiety of being interfered with in this task by bad objects and by one's own hatred, etc. (Klein, 1935: 153)

The question of how to unite the split-off objects, the extremely bad and the extremely good, into a whole is essentially concerned with the issue of loss. The bad and the good are required to contrast one another, like shadow and light, which exist only in contrast to each other. The process of merging the good and the bad to a whole inevitably reduces the differentiation between them. The diminishing contrast between them conjures up in the infant a painful feeling of loss, from that of the absolute perfection of the loved object (Klein, 1935). Herein lies the psychological work of giving up an unrealistic perception of the ideal object to which one directs one's love, in order to gradually come to terms with the sense of the 'real object' - a real object that represents the imperfections and the inevitable limitations of life (Likierman, 2001). To acknowledge and accept the loss of the ideal object of unlimited gratification is what Klein sees as an essential step towards overcoming the depressive position.

Moreover, the loss of the ideal object is not the only loss a depressive infant has to bear. In Klein's view, both the good and the bad objects are emotionally indispensable. The sharp division between them allows the infant to retain both the feeling of love and hate. The realisation of the whole object, therefore, generates the psychical conflicts between love and hate, preservation and destruction, as it forces into the infant's awareness that the disappointing bad object is the same as the good object that she continues to need and rely upon. It is at this moment that she realises she has lost not only a good object but also a bad one; the bad object that is needed to validate the hostility and aggression so powerfully experienced in her phantasy. The original ambivalence felt towards the object, therefore, becomes difficult to maintain, threatened by this new realisation, and the result is an emotional insecurity and psychic conflict inflicted by irredeemable polarisation between love and hate.

<sup>7</sup> Abel's argument is that Lily's painting seeks to capture her struggle in the early negotiations of the ego-boundaries in the mother-baby dyad (1989). I find this both an abstract account and potentially an underappreciation of Klein's original view where the infant is only perceiving and relating to the mother as a part-object through her breasts. Further to this is the controversy between Freud and Klein where Freud believed that infancy is sheltered in primary narcissism, hence the differentiation between self and other is impossible and did not agree with Klein that the infant could partly recognize the mother through her breasts (Likierman, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> As Kingsbury and Pile (2014: 14) argues, the unconscious is not a bounded place but can be detected out there on the surface, e.g. in the case of a Freudian slip.

<sup>6</sup> Tansley's voice was to continually echo in Lily's mind throughout the novel in the form of harassing self-doubt and insecurity. It was to add to her struggles to negotiate an autonomous identity as an unmarried woman artist.



## 5. Maternal body as the desired (unattainable) object

As previously discussed, the origin of emotionality, in Kleinian discourse, can and should be located in the maternal body.<sup>8</sup> In Lily we can see a “territorial” (Likierman, 2001: 70) preoccupation with the site of the maternal body which, at its prime, manifests as fantasies of merging with and non-differentiation from it. She recollects moments with Mrs Ramsay:

“Could love, as people called it, make her and Mrs Ramsay one? For it was not knowledge, but *unity* that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought leaning her head on Mrs Ramsay's knee. Nothing happened! Nothing! Nothing!, as she leant her head against Mrs Ramsay's knee” (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 216; italics added)

Lily's act of leaning her head on Mrs Ramsay's knee displays and exposes her desire for the maternal body, rendering Mrs Ramsay an all-powerful object. But her desire is not one that can be fulfilled due to, as vividly portrayed here, an unresponsive breast. What ensues is an intense destructive cry of rage towards Mrs Ramsay as soon as Lily realises her desire is unrequited - “Nothing happened! Nothing! Nothing!”. Like a baby who perceives the mother's inability to respond to her emotional needs, Mrs Ramsay, who is “always so occupied” (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 328), is now *felt* to be the withdrawn breast - the depriving bad-object that threatens the infant's survival. In the face of maternal deprivation, the wilfully destructive impulses in the baby are triggered for the purpose of destroying through oral sadism the bad object in phantasy. Here the destructive rage in Lily mimics the image of a hungry infant attacking the unfulfilling breast. An almost omnipresent figure, Mrs Ramsay's presence is at the same time mystical – despite her prowess in pulling together individual beings, she – like a majestic statue of divine beauty – cannot reach out to those she brings near. To experience the prolonged maternal deprivation of “want and want and not to have” can cause devastating and powerful anxieties in the infant. The psychic turmoil stirred up by the unattainable maternal object, so powerfully experienced by Lily, is to be compounded by Mrs Ramsay's sudden death.

“The place was gone to rack and ruin” (p. 283) in the void of maternal maintenance. On discovering Mrs Ramsay's death, Lily is lost for words, “for really, what did she feel [...] nothing she could express at all” (p. 287). Occupying the same seat at the breakfast table just like how it used to be. Only that what accompanied her by her side was Mr Ramsay, who with “his distraught wild gaze” (p.287) penetrated into the space that now seemed all too empty. She hoped only to be left alone uninterrupted – “to escape this demand on her” (p. 287). In that strange morning, “words became symbols” (p.287) scripting indecipherable messages all over the empty spaces. Lily felt, if she could put them together, into words, she would have “got at the truth of things” (p. 287). Words never arrived. Once again, she turned to her canvas. By setting up her canvas on the easel she had hoped to “ward off Mr Ramsay and his exactingness” (p. 290). She had wanted to return to the questions she was asked long ago, about “the relation between those masses” (p. 289) of her painting as if she has now had the solutions. Lily finds herself unable to concentrate on her canvas, however, constantly fearing the imposition and interruption of the lingering presence of Mr Ramsay, “he'll be down on me in a moment, demanding” (p. 290).

She is too unsettled to even see clearly what is on her canvas, holding on tightly to her brush – the only “dependable thing in a world

of strife, ruin and chaos” (p. 290). But this anger she feels, “the brush slightly trembling in her fingers” (p. 290), is directed towards Mrs Ramsay, who previously mediated in-between - and with her death now leaves Lily fully exposed to the determined intrusions of the father.

It was all Mrs Ramsay's doing. She was dead. Here was Lily, at forty-four, wasting her time, unable to do a thing ... it was all Mrs Ramsay's fault. She was dead. The step where she used to sit was empty. She was dead. (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 290)

When anger recedes, Lily's impossible desire to reunite with Mrs Ramsay intensifies, “‘Mrs Ramsay! Mrs Ramsay!’ as she cried, feeling the old horror come back – *to want and want and not to have*. Could she inflict that still?” (p. 329, italics added). In Kleinian terms, the *old* horror Mrs Ramsay inflicts through her death, in essence symbolises an inarticulable dread originating in the primitive infantile experiences of maternal deprivation and unresponsiveness that brings about the most annihilating sense of anxiety. Ambivalence saturates Lily's entanglement with Mrs Ramsay, gaining momentum after her passing. Her physical death signifies the maternal body being forever out of reach, out of sight. Reparation becomes impossible in the absence of the mother, throwing into question how one can reconcile the unresolved desire for, and the unresolved aggression towards, Mrs Ramsay?

After Mrs Ramsay's death, Lily's incessant search for her and enormous psychic pain continue throughout the novel, “but nothing happened. The pain increased. [...] Heaven be praised, no one had heard her cry that ignominious cry, stop pain, stop! She had not obviously taken leave of her senses” (p. 313). And yet, “no one had seen her step off her strip of board into the waters of annihilation” (ibid, italics added). This annihilation, in a Kleinian sense, can be seen as a metaphorical recall of ontological dread swamped with intense desires for the maternal body re-awakened but unfulfilled. And yet no one has come to her rescue for they cannot know her pain; for it is inarticulable to those around her. As Hirsch (1989) observes, Freudian critics often see the loss of Mrs Ramsay as an opportunity for Lily to grow from an infantile regressive wish for symbiosis with the maternal body, so she can gradually come to terms with loss through the work of mourning. Melanie Klein, who initiated mother-centred thinking in her psychoanalysis (Doane and Hodges, 1992), enables an alternative framing of psychological life that is refigured and engulfed by the maternal presence and absence, fusion and separation. It is in Kleinian theory that Woolf finds the theoretical ground for her later, famous, declaration, that “we think back through our mothers if we are woman” (Woolf, 1929).

The death of the maternal body marks a transition of the state of mind. “‘Mrs. Ramsay!’ [Lily] said aloud, ‘Mrs. Ramsay!’ The tears ran down her face” (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 313). Rage has subdued, giving way to *powerless vanity* and *grief*. It can be said that the physical death of the maternal body, once it sets in the mind as an undeniable reality, alters the ego's relationship with the lost object of fluctuating love-hate ambivalence. The process of grieving shifts the object-relation from a dominance of hate to a prevalence of love. As frequently observed in a child's reaction to the loss of an ambivalently loved object, the ego moderates its own relation to the lost object in order to psychologically justify the despair, remorse, and anxiety in the dissolution of the ambivalently loved object (Klein, 1935). The nature of Lily's anxiety seemed to have shifted at this point. From perceiving the self-generated destructive impulses projected onto the bad object, who has now been lost, as persecutory and dangerous, to *owning*<sup>9</sup> her destructive impulses as coming from herself in a state of remorse that it has done real harm to the loved object. In brief, the shift from paranoid anxiety to

<sup>8</sup> The maternal body, conceptualised by Kristeva as “a site of conflicting desires” (cited in Creed, 1993: 11), signifies both a universal life-giving space and an all-powerful enclosure, like the spider's web, that threatens the child's becoming of a separate subject.

<sup>9</sup> It is when the depressive position has been successfully achieved that the individual comes to take responsibility for their aggressive, sadistic impulses, and for the damage she has done to her objects, either external or internal one (Segal, 1952).

depressive anxiety comes in the wake of an awareness that the bad object and the good object are, in fact, localised in the same body.

Providing an illustration of depressive anxiety, Klein (1935) describes, “[a] little child which believes, when its mother disappears, that it has eaten her up and destroyed her (whether from motives of love or of hate)” (pp. 150). Later, Klein (1991[1944]) emphasized her view that the phantastic wishes and impulses are *felt to be omnipotent* in early minds. In the same sense, if we could give voice to Lily’s unconscious mind in a state of depressive anxiety, could her “ignominious cry” be actually a cry of remorseful guilt that, ‘It is I who have destroyed Mrs Ramsay with my sadistic, phantastic wishes of her destruction!’? The psychological shift marked by this is a transition into melancholia, a progress of the mental state from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position. This is marked by anxieties generated from within in relation to one’s primary instincts of aggression, and *the feeling of guilt* as a result of the fantasised destruction of the maternal body as the desired object.

## 6. Lily Briscoe and the Kleinian depression: conclusive comments

A Kleinian formulation of the depressive position is one filled with painful fragility in the wake of a sense of guilt after several significant losses of part-objects felt to be caused by oneself. Instead of seeing separation from the mother as an essential task for psychological development, Klein believes instead in the importance of the consistency of the maternal nurturance. Mothering is necessary to aid the infant in overcoming the depressive position with its unique emotional difficulties, involving two central tasks: mourning and reparation (Klein, 1940, 1946). The losses need to be mourned so that they can be fully acknowledged and accepted; the lost good object needs to be restored to enable a sense of emotional security that the goodness of the mother is still within reach. The mother, the external object, by repeatedly returning to the infant, reassures the infant that the wholeness of the mother is unharmed, that what is lost can be regained. The mother’s continual provision of her presence and nurture to the baby reassures her that her rage and sadistic attacks are in fact tolerable and that her wish for reparation can be granted.

With maternal reassurances of unfailing love, the external world is perceived as less dangerous, as the baby lessens her need to disown her rage and aggression through the primitive mechanism of projection. In Klein’s view, the importance of the external object lies in its neutralizing effect on the internally generated anxiety, either paranoid or depressive, so, powerfully experienced in the child (Mitchell, 1981). This takes place through the process of the child’s building up of the internalized goodness from the loved object that strengthens the child’s ego capacity to adapt to the imperfect reality of life where frustrations and limitations are inevitable. The emotional security needed to be able to love and hate with greater ease is gained through successful reparation with the loved object, leading the infant to outgrow her depressive anxieties.

On the other hand, if, owing to the uncertainty of the good object, the split between the good and the bad object is too powerful for them to be brought together, to synthesize (Klein, 1946), the infant will not be able to *mediate* her hate with love, and the depressive position cannot be worked through (Klein, 1986[1956]). We could see this in Lily whose subjectivity is characterised by her remembering and ruminating on the nature of mother-child relation, shadowed by the ongoing maternal deprivation and, at last, death. Lily’s desperate and urgent needs for reparation echoes repetitively, yet is unanswered throughout *To the Lighthouse*; lovingly or hatefully she was unable to elicit a response from Mrs Ramsay, not by lying against her knee like a hungry baby craving for the nurturing breast, nor by crying out to her again and again in Mrs Ramsay’s absence after death. Her longing for Mrs Ramsay, irrespective of how intense and persistent, could not revive Mrs Ramsay; the insufficiency of Mrs Ramsay’s maternal provision disorients Lily in the labyrinth of the depressive state, only to re-evolve

the trauma through her death. Mrs Ramsay lured her children into the push and pull between desire and fear for she was both “frightening” and “irresistible”, but “always she [Mrs Ramsay] got her own way at the end” (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 253) as Lily thought to herself, unconvinced of ever being loved.

Freud and Klein both saw loss as a pre-condition for depression, however for Klein loss is more ubiquitous. For her, loss encompasses several, inevitable losses such as temporary separation from the good breast, to the most significant event of weaning, where the good breast is felt as lost eternally. On the matter of depression, Klein makes a significant theoretical divergence from Freud by not only declining to see loss as merely a problem of the loss of a libidinal object and object-tie, but also by complicating the meanings of loss through elaborating the complex illustrations of “how loss follows from rage, and how rage threatens obliteration of the object field” (Butler, 1998: 180). It is apparent that Lily’s depressive anxiety is not merely a temporary struggle or artistic sentiment. She carries on throughout the novel by thinking and by painting an inner catastrophe of rage and guilt bound up with the depressive position. It might appear that her depression is directly caused by Mrs Ramsay’s death, which is an actual and articulable event of loss. But, from a Kleinian perspective, we can argue that Lily’s depression existed before Mrs Ramsay’s physical death. We could trace its origins to the earliest situations of loss before language becomes available to put the annihilating feelings of the body into words. Lily’s prolonged struggle with depression was a sign that she was overcome by the loss of the loved object and despair at their irreparability, a feeling that was tragically reactivated by Mrs Ramsay’s death.

A lighthouse, a symbol of hope, warmth and guidance, illuminates a path in the dark that brings the ship safely to port, closely resembles the importance of the mothering<sup>10</sup> that Klein describes in her theory of depression. The mother’s light prevents the infant from drifting into the potential perils entailed in the dark abyss of the depressive state. But if Mrs Ramsay is the lighthouse, her light faded when she was irresponsible and diminished further when she was gone; she failed to be the lighthouse depended upon as the baby ventures into the fathomless ocean of melancholy. In *To The Lighthouse*, we witness a mother, who with all her “astonishing power” (Woolf, 1992[1927]): 310), repeatedly triumphed over the child’s psychological quest even in her absence.

Finally, Mr Ramsay and the children have gone on the boat sailing towards the lighthouse. Left alone, Lily returned to her canvas. She had in mind to paint out her vision, but “there was all the difference in the world between this planning airily away from the canvas, and actually taking her brush and making the first mark” (p. 296). One line is all that she needs to get started, the rest will come. “With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke” (p. 296). Second, then third strokes followed until the running lines joined up to form an enclosed space of emptiness “looming out at her” (p. 296). “What could be more formidable than that space?” (p. 296), she thought, feeling the need to step back from it. She thought about the meaning of life and in that moment she almost heard the voice of Mrs Ramsay, saying “life stands still there” (p. 299). She called out to her, but “all was silence” (p. 299). After a while she took up the brush. As the boat continued to the lighthouse, Lily went on “tunnelling her way into her picture, into the past” (p. 307). For it is the past that holds what she searches. It then came to the final moment, the boat has finally arrived at the lighthouse, she made her final mark with “a line there, in the centre” (p. 334) on her canvas. This was her vision. What does the picture look like? Is it a horizontal or vertical line? We cannot know. As Goring (2012) has pointed out, to elicit a certainty of shapes would inevitably limit the

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that the motherhood discussed in the Kleinian theory should not be seen as an actual “social experience” between the mother and the baby, rather it is how she is perceived, and reacted to in the baby’s phantasy life (Doane and Hodges, 1992: 7).

reader's own vision of the painting. But irrespective of the subjective interpretation of Lily's final artefact, Woolf has, through Lily, shown us that the process of creating is simultaneously a movement of the intuitive, rhythmic dance of the unthought known – where the fabled land can be found.

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