

Art and the Artist in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Graham Swift's *The Light of Day*

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to compare issues related to the image and the role of the artist and art in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Swift's *The Light of Day*. In *To the Lighthouse* there is painter Lily Briscoe and in *The Light of Day* there is George Webb's daughter, an art student. The paper will point out what influence the artist's views have on the other characters. The issues related to art and the artist will be analyzed by taking into account the influence of Modernism and Postmodernism. Features of the lyrical novel (as presented by Ralph Freedman and Karen Kaivola), to which both novels belong, will also be discussed in relation to art. There may be features which indicate a continuity between the two trends and an author may deviate from the trend normally associated with his/her time.

Keywords: Modernism, Postmodernism, lyrical novel

1. Motivation

Lily Briscoe is an artist in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In Graham Swift's novel *The Light of Day*, there is another artist: Helen, George Webb's daughter. Lily Briscoe is a painter and she struggles until the end of the novel to finish her painting. Helen is a student at an arts college. Both women are depicted as independent, as leading a rather unconventional life style for their period of time. Also, both of them try to share their vision with the others. Lily has a moment of being when she completes her painting, while Helen tries to make her own father, who is a detective, notice details in paintings.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what Lily and Helen have in common, the way they share their vision and try to make others understand art, the way each of them views art.

2. Perception

Both Lily and Helen have a certain way of perceiving the world. Both are very good observers of the people around them, both of them understand them and pay attention to every detail. Lily also experiences moments of being and tries to draw attention to them, to show them to the others by means of her art.

According to Mitchell Leaska (139), Lily's "effort to transform her sense of the world through shape and color lays bare the aesthetic problems an artist encounters in expressing a private vision." Lily understands and analyzes Mr. Ramsay:

when Bankes suggests that Mr. Ramsay is "a bit of a hypocrite" [...] we discover her undeviating sense of honesty: "Oh, no – the most sincere of men, the the truest (here he was), the best; but, looking down, she thought, he is absorbed in himself, he is tyrannical, he is unjust" (Woolf 72; 76) [...] she knows that Ramsay has what Bankes does not: "a fiery unworldliness; he knows nothing about trifles; he loves dogs and his children [...]. (Woolf 40; 43)

Lily is also aware of Mr. Ramsay's love for his own wife:

For him to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs. Ramsay was a rupture, equivalent, Lily felt, to the loves of dozens of young men... It was love, she thought... 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 spread over the world and become part of the human gain. (Woolf 73-74; 77)

And Lily analyzes Mrs. Ramsay as well. As Leaska observes (140), she "understands Mrs. Ramsay's "mania for marriage," her "irritating habit of "presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand." (Woolf 78; 81) Lily finds an explanation for Mrs. Ramsay's "penchant for seeing other people as downtrodden and pitiable": "[...] it was one of those misjudgements of hers that seemed to be instinctive and to arise from some need of her own rather than of other people's." (Woolf 132)

Leaska (141) points to Lily's sensibility to "her ability to translate her own experience of human relations into subtle insights. She is conscious of the depth and diversity of impulses which govern human behaviour and cast human activity in endless enigmatic shadows. She is sensible to the imperfect vision one individual has of another [...]." Leaska (140) quotes the following fragment as an example of Lily's insight when she describes the image of Mrs. Ramsay sitting at the dinner table:

How childlike, how absurd she was, sitting up there with all her beauty opened again in her, talking about the skins of vegetables. There was something frightening about her... Mrs. Ramsay, Lily felt, as she talked about the skins of vegetables, exalted that, worshipped that; held her hands over it to warm them, to protect it, and yet, having brought it all about, somehow laughed, led her victims, Lily felt, to the altar. (Woolf 152-53; 157)

When the trip to the lighthouse finally takes place, ten years later, Lily notices "the moment of beauty and sudden order in life" which she "seeks to express in art." This means the moment "James has "discovered" his father", "their communication" is "realized, their unity established." Lily manages to see "vividly in the pattern of relationships on her canvas the fleeting harmony which constitutes her vision." (Leaska 142)

Helen in *The Light of Day* teaches her own father to "notice things" (Swift 63). She tells him: "You're a detective, Dad. But you don't see things. You don't notice things." (Swift 63)

George recalls his thoughts on art: "It's true, I didn't know, or care much, about Art. I didn't see the point of looking at pictures. Or painting them." (Swift 63) He also remembers trying to understand art, as a result of his daughter's advice:

I even went to art galleries, and looked – and yawned. I even mugged up on her favourite painter, Caravaggio (they all looked like waxworks to me). And found out he was a bit of a tearaway himself, a bit of a thug on the side, always running up against the law. (Was there a message for me?) A bit of a nancy too. (Swift 63)

Perhaps his daughter's remarks have contributed to his observation of details in his present job as a detective who investigates cases of infidelity. Sarah also taught him how to pay attention to language. The homework he received from her may also have helped him in

the same respect, to notice what goes on around him, as he had to describe what was going on outside for her.

Whereas Lily Briscoe remains an artist until the end (she actually evolves in time until she completes her painting), Helen appears to give up her ideals. She did study art, yet she ends up not doing paintings, but interior design. This is her father's interpretation, as Helen tells him about her lover, Clare: "She's... She's.... brilliant at interior design. [...] We're thinking of setting up – as interior designers, I mean. Of going into partnership-." (Swift 129)

After hearing this, George thinks: "I thought: so it was simple. Your big love was Art. Big pictures in frames. But you'd settle for interior design: that was your big love now." (Swift 129).

George begins to understand and analyze characters in a manner similar to Lily Briscoe's. He analyzes Sarah, Bob, Kristina. While doing so he imagines lots of scenes with them – all in an attempt to better picture the situation. He makes suppositions like a detective should do in order to understand his case.

George also has a revelation towards the end of the novel – that his love for Sarah doesn't fade. We are not told about Helen's moments of vision and we don't have access to her perception of the world as we do in Lily's case. Helen is there just to teach George how to perceive art and with art what is around him, to notice details. She is one of his teachers, the other one being Sarah (who teaches him how to use words and how to pay attention to language).

According to Kaivola (22), becoming an artist consists of a change involving perception: "The project transforming oneself into an artist who represents instead of being represented by others is a difficult enterprise fraught with ambivalence [...] Lily must rid herself of Mrs. Ramsey's shadow [...]."

3. Lifestyle

Both Lily and Helen lead a rebellious lifestyle for their time. Lily doesn't marry (as Mrs. Ramsay tells her she should) and Helen's partner in business and life is another woman, Clare. Moreover, Lily is a painter while Charles Tansley believes that women cannot paint and Helen is very rebellious when she is in school.

Ten years later after the events described in the first part of the novel *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe, "a little embittered and brittle from solitude" (Leaska 140) remembers Mrs. Ramsay and her advice to marry, which she offered to everyone. Mrs. Ramsay has

faded and gone... We can over-ride her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us. Mockingly she seemed to see her there at the end of the corridor of years saying, of all incongruous things, "Marry, marry!"... And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes. They're happy like that; I'm happy like this. Life has changed completely. At that all her being, even her beauty, became for a moment, dusty and out of date. For a moment Lily... summing up the Rayleys, triumphed over Mrs Ramsay, who would never know how Paul went to coffee-houses and had a mistress; how he sat on the ground and Minta handed him his tools; how she stood here painting, had never married, not even William Bankes. (Woolf 260; 269-70)

Charles Tansley would "tell her women can't write, women can't paint, not so much that he believed it, as that for some odd reason he wished it?"

Mrs. Ramsay, despite her advice and her wish to see marriages around her, admires Lily as an artist and she also admires her as a person, with her own lifestyle:

But the sight of the girl standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded her; she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily's picture. 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; she was an independent little creature, and Mrs Ramsay liked her for it; so, remembering her promise, she bent her head. (Woolf 17-18)

George Webb recalls the time when his daughter was a teenager and she used to be very rebellious. The fact that he was a policeman "wasn't a cool or easy thing for any teenager [...] in those days." (Swift 61) Her clothes, her hair, her behaviour were all a rebel's. During weekends she used to go with her gang and "sometimes disappear all night." (Swift 62) George believes she hated him for being a policeman but she also hated her own mother. She didn't get along with her parents during her teen years. Things became different later, however. She took her father's side in her parents' separation. They began to have a very good relationship after he was left by his wife. George says, "She's almost thirty now, and I'm turned fifty. The years between us haven't changed, but when we see each other now it feels like we're just two contemporaries, two grown-ups." (Swift 60).

As years pass, Helen changes. Her change is significant, as her father George Webb notices. From her personality to her dreams about art. Something else changes or maybe it was something George hadn't noticed about her during the whole time. He expected to see her in a love relationship with a man, yet she announces him she is in a relationship with a woman. This may still be regarded as a challenge to generally expected relationships and even lifestyle.

Lily Briscoe remains unmarried over the years, not agreeing with Mrs. Ramsay's views until the end. She remains an artist and she keeps her wish to finish the painting. Finally, she manages to have her vision and finish her painting. Lily too changes as her artistic vision evolves over the years. In time, she is able to perceive aspects of life intensely, to experience moments of being and to express them in her art. She also manages to prove Tansley's conception about women not being able to paint wrong.

Her relation to Mrs. Ramsay may include feelings other than admiration for her and her artistic perception of her: "[Lily] had much ado to control her impulse to fling herself (thank Heaven she had always resisted so far) at Mrs. Ramsey's knee and say to her - but what could one say to her? "I'm in love with you?" (Woolf 19)

There is a slight suggestion that Lily too may have had lesbian feelings for Mrs. Ramsay, although Lily is said to perceive Mrs. Ramsay as a mother figure mostly. Unlike George Webb's daughter, however, Lily will not live together with a woman.

Hassan (74) mentions that "Modernism seems to stress the relationship between the creative sensibility and the work of art, between addresser and message, postmodernism that between message and addressee." (Gerhard Hoffman, Alfred Hornung and Rudiger Kunow 40).

4. Conclusions

In *To the Lighthouse*, we assist to the process of artistic creation, which can be seen not only in art but in life. Lily creates her painting based on real characters and real events around her, by expressing her own perception of them.

In *The Light of Day*, Helen's role is not to create an artistic object in a similar way to Lily's painting, but to influence her own father's perception of the world, to make him notice details. She doesn't leave a painting, yet she manages to teach her own father how to perceive the world intensely, so that he too manages to have "moments of being."

The two characters, Lily and Helen, may be regarded as instances of Modern and, respectively, Postmodern ideas about art. Modernism was concerned with high art, while Postmodernism with popular art, or art that can be understood by anybody.

"Light" is present in both titles and in both novels. It appears to refer to a better perception, to a clearer understanding of the world, to moments of vision, of revelation.

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