

## The Exquisitely Wrought Feminine Expression in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Iraj Montashery (Corresponding author)  
Department of Humanities, Lahijan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Lahijan, Iran  
E-mail: iraj.montashery@gmail.com

Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's.  
- Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which is Not One"

One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought.

- Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

'That's my mother,' thought Prue... That is the thing itself.

- Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

### Abstract

This paper mainly focuses on the character of Lily Briscoe, particularly in relation to her stance and positioning between the maternal figure Mrs Ramsay, and the paternal figure Mr Ramsay, as well as how she struggles to find a purely feminine form of expression to escape patriarchal ideology and language, which only accommodate and value masculine identity. To this end, I will argue that Lily awakens her desire for the maternal space to resist patriarchal values; in doing so, she inscribes those desires through the development of a feminine language in her painting. This feminine language disrupts and subverts the culturally constructed hegemony of masculine identity, the latter of which relegates feminine identity to a marginal and subordinate position. Consequently, through her feminine language, Lily is ultimately able to construct a gendered identity for herself, which defies absolute identification with either the paternal or the maternal.

**Keywords:** Desire, Feminine language, Gender, Symbolic, Semiotic, Maternal space

### Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is the story of the failure of symbolic language. In this novel, Woolf attempts to lay bare the possibility and necessity of unearthing buried desires of women within patriarchal society, and how these desires—particularly the desire for the maternal space—can be inscribed in a uniquely feminine language to offer them agency, and accordingly, identity. In this novel, desire functions as a subtext to deconstruct and disturb social and sexual norms. The inscription of desire entails the articulation of the forbidden, the repressed, and the unconscious as Waugh (1989) argues for the centrality of desire in this novel, and notes that "in *To the Lighthouse* the desire for the recovery of an imaginary wholeness, a lost identity with the pre-Oedipal mother, informs both the relations between the characters, particularly the women characters, and the actual language of the novel" (113).

### Mrs Ramsay: the maternal figure

Mrs Ramsay is the central character in the novel: "she had the whole of the other sex under her protection" (*To the Lighthouse*, 5). Her presence is felt throughout the novel, even after her death, chiefly as a maternal figure. Mrs Ramsay is connected to sea imagery, a symbol of maternity, and her insistence that all women must marry (36, 44) emphasises her maternal role in patriarchal society. Her extraordinary beauty and affection for other characters, especially her sympathy and support for her husband, make her stand out. Holden (2006) notes that:

While Mr Ramsay has a clear sense of self, his dependence on Mrs Ramsay calls his autonomy into question. It is evident that he needs her to provide him with the one thing he craves, which is sympathy, in order for him to achieve his independence. Her gift of sympathy brings him into her maternal realm where he is "warmed and soothed" (43).

On the other hand, Mrs Ramsay's voice is described in terms of music, which is reminiscent of a mother's soothing heartbeat to a child. Her words come closer to a rhythmic lullaby when she talks to Cam to help her sleep:

She could see the words echoing as she spoke them rhythmically in Cam's mind, and was repeating after her...and her eyes were opening and shutting, and Mrs Ramsay went on speaking still more monotonously, and more rhythmically and more nonsensically, how she must shut her eyes and go to sleep. (*To the Lighthouse*, 83)

The description given here of Mrs Ramsay's language resembles *écriture féminine*, which originates from the

semiotic order and does not follow the rules of symbolic order. Mrs Ramsay simulates a womb-like space for Cam to take her to the maternal space through her feminine language; therefore it becomes quite clear that feminine language is the only means to construct and inscribe the desire for the maternal space. Lily also describes Mrs Ramsay's presence as offering the same quality one had in a mother's womb; Lily calls her presence "rapture," which has no language, and has just a

silent stare, for which she felt intense gratitude; for nothing so solaced her, eased her of the perplexity of life, and miraculously raised its burdens, as this sublime power, this heavenly gift...she was unquestionably the loveliest of the people." (35)

### **Mr Ramsay: the paternal figure**

Mr Ramsay, on the other hand, is portrayed as a perfect paragon of patriarchy in the novel. Lily is enraged with him, since she thinks that he oppresses Mrs Ramsay: "That man...never gave; that man took. She on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she has died" (*To the Lighthouse*, 112).

Mr Ramsay, who sticks to the principles of truth and rationality, attempts to bring up his children like himself, in spite of their reluctance. While he appeals to logic and thwarts the possibility of going to the lighthouse by asserting that "It won't be fine," James begins to develop hatred towards his father:

Had there been an axe handy, a poker or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr Ramsay excited in his children's breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought) but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgement. What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact. (3)

Mr Ramsay demonstrates how patriarchy stands between mother and child in the first place, and also how it prevents and denies the possibility of multiple desires—especially desire for the maternal space—after Oedipalisation. James childhood hatred of his father testifies this:

He hated him for coming up to them, for stopping and looking down on them; he hated him for interrupting them...but most of all he hated the twang and twitter of his father's emotion which, vibrating round them, disturbed the perfect simplicity and good sense of his relations with his mother. (27)

As Waugh (1989) notes "Mr Ramsay, in effect, attempts to deny the fulfilment of pre-Oedipal desire, asserts a reality principle which insists that James enters the rational world of the symbolic order, and accepts that desire can never, in fact, be satisfied"(111).

### **Lily and Mrs Ramsay**

In the novel, Mrs Ramsay is portrayed as submissive, and Lily as subversive and they expose two possible facets of femininity. In sharp contrast to Mrs Ramsay, Lily says 'no' to patriarchy in every possible way. She declines to get married to William Bankes in spite of Mrs Ramsay's insistence, and pays no heed to Mr Ramsay's amorous advances after the demise of his wife. Above all, she rejects all the prescribed paths and expectations concerning women, particularly with regards to their artistic talents and sexual desires. Lily is fully aware of the fact that marriage would bring the same lot to her as it did for Mrs Ramsay.

Lily's relationship to Mrs Ramsay is multifaceted and multidimensional. While Mrs Ramsay is the endless source of inspiration and fascination for her, she is at the same time a target of criticism for Lily. Lily rejects heterosexual relations, since she observes with her own distancing and discerning eyes that in heterosexual relationships, the one who must sacrifice and subordinate is the woman. She sees that Mr Ramsay demands and her wife gives. Lily even pities Minta, who will be devoured by the "fangs" of Paul's passion, and she is happy that she has not submitted herself to such degrading heterosexual relations.

Lily's decision on relinquishing heterosexual relations opens up the chances of unleashing her desires for the maternal space, which finds embodiment in Lily's same sex desire for Mrs Ramsay—hitherto forbidden for her because of her ambivalent attitudes towards heterosexism. She turns to her to satisfy her long delayed desire through intimacy with Mrs Ramsay, which could also bring about artistic fruitfulness as well. Before Mrs Ramsay's death, Lily thinks that her relationship with her could not be put in words:

What could one say to her? 'I'm in love with you'? No, that was not true. 'I'm in love with this all', waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children? It was absurd, it was impossible. One could not say what one meant (*To the Lighthouse*, 14)

Even after Mrs Ramsay's death, Lily still finds it difficult to express her desire for her:

For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? Express that emptiness there? (She was looking at the drawing-room steps; they looked extraordinarily empty.) It was one's body feeling, not one's mind. The physical sensations that went with the bare look of the steps had become suddenly

extremely unpleasant. 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! Oh Mrs Ramsay! (133)

The consuming desire for the lost mother, represented by Mrs Ramsay, seeks expression, but the “emotion of the body” defies any means of expression or representation, at least through patriarchal language.

Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs Ramsay’s knees, close as she could get, smiling to think that Mrs Ramsay would never know the reason of that pressure, she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? (37)

Ann Ronchetti (2004) comments on the last sentence and notes that “The image of penetration in the last sentence is not simply phallic, but also suggests a longing for fusion with the mother” (72). For Lily, the relationship with Mrs Ramsay is reminiscent of the fusion and unity with the mother in the semiotic *chora*; the consuming desire of Lily is to become “inextricably the same, one with the object one adored” (37). “Secret chambers” explicitly refers to the maternal space; she further explains how she feels that she merges with her object of desire, which patriarchy always plotted to separate:

What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? Or the heart? Could loving, as people call 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. (37; emphasis mine)

Waugh (1989) argues that Woolf in this novel explores “Lily’s struggle between the desire for subjective autonomy and the desire to be at one with mother-figure of Mrs Ramsay” (109). There isn’t a clue in the novel regarding Lily’s real mother; Mrs Ramsay however, functions as a mother figure, and throughout the text, Lily wishes to merge and identify with her. Even Lily’s rejection of Mrs Ramsay’s insistence on marriage could be justified on the ground that Lily attempts to make the connection between Mrs Ramsay and herself stronger, one which would be destroyed if Lily got married.

### **Lily and the struggle for feminine expression**

Lily epitomises an alternative path for women for displaying desires, finding feminine agency, and defining identity other than the one drawn and determined by patriarchy. Lily struggles to acquire a purely feminine language—a form of expression to mirror and reflect her feminine desires as a woman—as the narrative of the story proceeds. Her quest in the first place is to resist patriarchy through the only possible way accessible to her; since Lily considers patriarchal language to be the constructor of the present condition in society, she assumes that through the invention of another type of language, she will be able to resist and escape the rigid and restrictive boundaries of patriarchy. Lily first needs to prove the repeated patriarchal idea in the novel that “women can’t paint, women can’t write” (*To the Lighthouse*, 35, 62, 66, 119) wrong. The words uttered by Charles Tansley do not correspond with reality; it is just a mechanism through which patriarchy pushes female subjects into seclusion and silence. Lily is the character in the novel designated to oppose this, and she notes that Tansley utters those words “not so much that he believed it, as that for some odd reason he wished it” (146).

Lily’s dilemma is this: she must either succumb to patriarchy, marry and keep silent like Mrs Ramsay or she must enter the quest and oppose all this, find a proper language to represent herself, and through this language gain agency and identity. Lily takes the second route to move beyond the confines of symbolic language. For Lily, the notion that men are speaking subjects and women silent objects is a mere social construct. Through her painting, she not only rejects this patriarchal maxim, but also develops a purely feminine form of expression to oppose symbolic language. Since subjectivity is a social construct to Lily, she endeavours to construct it differently through a female point of view, and in doing so, her painting becomes a medium with a plural signification to inscribe and represent women and their desires. Otsuka (2008) argues that “Lily’s painting represents Woolf’s attempt to liberate female identity from patriarchal oppression (the symbolic) by uncovering the gender-free realm (the semiotic) repressed within the symbolic” (3).

In the first part, in which Lily decides to paint something on her canvas, she attempts to express her own desire, especially maternal desire, through the medium of painting; her artistic process is a mechanism through which to oppose patriarchy and its imposition of silence on female subjects. Lily claims her identity through her painting; Lily’s subjectivity grows out of Mrs Ramsay’s objectivity, since she occupies the place of the object in both patriarchal society and in Lily’s painting. Out of Lily’s canvas, a new mode of expression develops to prove the possibility of female agency. Like in *The Waves*, phrase-making is considered an artificial act which is arbitrary. Lily notes that “All this phrase-making was a game...for if she had said half what he [Mr

Ramsay] said, she would have blown her brains out by now. It annoyed her, this phrase-making” (50). Even considering the relationship between Mr and Mrs Ramsay, Mr Ramsay is quite comfortable in expressing himself through language, but the reverse does not hold true.

He found talking so much easier than she did. He could say things—she never could. So naturally it was always he that said the things...A heartless woman he called her; she never told him that she loved him. But it was not so—it was not so. It was only that she never could say what she felt...Then, knowing that he was watching her, instead of saying anything she turned, holding her stocking, and looked at him. And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. (89)

Therefore, the connection and communication on the side of Lily or Mrs Ramsay tend to be wordless. They both aim to be *the thing-in-itself*. As noted above, Lily despises phrase-making, since it encourages absence; what Lily desires to achieve is presence, an unmediated relation with the object of her love. Phrase vs. wordless communication or silence becomes her battleground, and she valorises the latter, because this mode of expression encourages presence and provides a strategy for simulating the pre-Oedipal period, in which there is no language. Patricia Laurence in *The Reading of Silence* (1991) examines Woolf’s narrative patterns of silence and language, and notes that she “both uses and questions language in creating a narrative space for silence” (7); Laurence further argues that Woolf’s valorising of women’s silence “undermines not only patriarchal but also Western notions of talk and silence” (8).

In short, Lily believes that language spoils and distorts things. In a climactic scene, she says: “Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge? Aren’t things spoiled then...by saying them? Aren’t we more expressive thus?” (*To the Lighthouse*, 128). Therefore, Lily attempts to invent an entirely different language for expressing these desires, which could not be expressed otherwise, especially through patriarchal language. For this very reason, when William Bankes asks her to explain what she wished “to indicate by the triangular purple shape, ‘just there?’” Lily notes that her abstract coloured shape is “Mrs Ramsay reading to James” (38). She knows that no one would guess that it was a human shape, but she makes no attempt at likeness. And she further qualifies and justifies her own technique, explaining that her painting “was not of them...not in *his* sense” (38, emphasis mine).

Here Lily implicitly rejects patriarchal expectations regarding the language of her painting; she expresses herself in a different sense, and not in “his sense.” On the other hand, the most prominent preoccupation in Lily’s thinking process, her painting, and her resolution to further her artistic career is that: “It was a question...how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left” (39). The creation of balance in her painting becomes a very crucial aspect in the development of her expression as a woman, and this is the idea that she repeatedly returns to, before resolving it at the end of the novel: “Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space. That’s what I shall do. That’s what has been puzzling me” (61). In the course of Lily’s artistic career, she always recalls, as noted above, Mr Tansley “whispering in her ear, ‘Women can’t paint, women can’t write’” (35), so as to prove the opposite through the development of her genuine form of painting and expression. This is why the way she wishes to express her desires in her painting becomes a central obsession: “I must move the tree to the middle; that matters—nothing else” (62).

After Mrs Ramsay’s death, Lily returns to her painting that she had left unfinished for ten years with the old question again: “There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture. Move the tree to the middle, she had said. She had never finished that picture” (110). At this point, it becomes quite clear that the creation of balance by moving the tree to the centre of her picture acquires symbolic weight in Lily’s painting; yet, she knows that the very presence of Mr Ramsay will upset that balance.

But with Mr Ramsay bearing down on her, she could do nothing. Every time he approached—he was walking up and down the terrace—ruin approached, chaos approached. She could not paint...He made it impossible for her to do anything...She did her best to look, when his back was turned, at her picture; that line there, that mass there. But it was out of the question. Let him be fifty feet away, let him not even speak to you, let him not even see you, he permeated, he prevailed, he imposed himself. He changed everything. She could not see the colour; she could not see the lines; even with his back turned to her, she could only think, But he will be down on me in a moment. (111-2)

### **The-thing-in-itself as a feminine language**

Why does or should Lily paint? As noted above, Lily’s desire is to get closer to the mother figure, Mrs Ramsay, who symbolises maternal space. The only accessible route for subjects to approach this maternal space after entering into the symbolic order is, paradoxically, through language. Language, by its very nature, follows the arbitrary rule between signifier and signified. Instead of helping subjects (either feminine or masculine) to get closer to what is signified, arbitrary language enforces distance. Therefore, symbolic language is, in itself, responsible for the separation of signifier and signified. There is a desperate desire in Woolf’s writing to approach the thing-in-itself, which, as previously noted, refers to actual things in the world without language’s



mediation, or in other words, the signified without the entangling free play of signifiers. Mrs Ramsay's daughter, Prue refers to her mother as "the thing itself" (*To the Lighthouse*, 84). The mother, or maternal space, is the transcendental signified, since it is a reality independent of language—it precedes the free play of signifiers through the mechanism of difference. Lily's quest is to find a way to approach this transcendental signified—she knows that the arbitrary language of patriarchy is itself responsible for the creation of the gap between subjects and the maternal space, which has consequently given rise to the emergence of desire. Over the span of ten years, Lily thus contemplates a new mode of expression to escape this arbitrary language of patriarchy.

Furthermore, I argue that Mrs Ramsay's death is a crucial prerequisite for Lily to find this new mode of expression. Her absence awakens Lily's maternal and feminine desires—desires which seek inscription in Lily's painting. Painting becomes Lily's feminine mode of expression, which escapes the arbitrariness of patriarchal language; therefore, in Lily's non-arbitrary mode of expression, there is an overlap between the signifier and the signified. Lily's final vision, which helps her complete her long-awaited painting, is her discovery of the thing-in-itself, which ends all enquiries and quests for meaning and identity, since it is the transcendental signified preceding symbolic language.

Abel (1989) calls the ten years between the two parts of the novel "the decade of suspended desire," (94), which I strongly agree with. First, the mother is present and there is a unity between her and the child; then this unity breaks when the child is separated from her mother, so as to allow the child to become social and enter the realm of language; at the last stage, the so-called social subject, who is divided since he/she is frustrated after finding that the promise of a well-defined identity is a fiction, once more desires the presence of the mother.

### **Lily and the in-between—third—gender identity**

Whenever Lily starts painting, the past invests her present, particularly through the function of memory: "She went on tunnelling her way into her picture, into the past" (*To the Lighthouse*, 129). Although Mrs Ramsay's omnipresent influence is on Lily, she is simultaneously aware that as an artist, she must be an independent person and detach herself from the patriarchal values which dominated Mrs Ramsay's life: "Mrs Ramsay has faded and gone, she thought. We can override her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas" (130). It is at this point that she moves away from full identification with maternity; she offers a proposition that "she would move the tree to the middle, and need never marry anybody, and she had felt an enormous exaltation" (131). Here, Lily is clearly stating her stance that she is willing to occupy a space in-between, through which she can escape the rigid boundaries of the symbolic and the limitations of full identification with the mother via marriage. As Taylor (2006) notes:

Women, then, according to Kristeva, have most often either over-identified with and desired the mother and lived silently incarnate existence, or have over-identified with and desired the father and become militants, devotees, or even fanatics of the structuring systems of society...In *About Chinese Women*, Kristeva in fact encourages women to reject both paths described above. Over-investing in neither the semiotic nor the symbolic, Kristeva suggests that women negotiate a space in between. They should identify with the father just enough to gain entry into language, culture, time, and history, but they should refuse to adopt fixed roles within this realm or to invest fully in an alienating *imago*; they should play with identities and never forget the semiotic music which they have (partially) left behind. In such a way, women can introduce the repressed, the maternal, the incomprehensible into language by maintaining an 'impossible dialectic' between the semiotic and the symbolic. (59-60)

I argue that Lily follows Kristeva's prescription explained above: she neither submits herself to the devastating structure of the symbolic order, nor the limiting horizon of complete identification with the mother; in this respect, Lily's persistent preoccupation with striking a balance in her painting makes full sense. She notes that "For whatever reason she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr Ramsay and the picture" (*To the Lighthouse*, 143). Lily has already come to terms with the fact that she is not going to follow the path Mrs Ramsay prescribed for women; the point at stake, however, is that she was at rage with Mr Ramsay from the beginning of the novel, and for achieving a balance between the symbolic and the semiotic she needs to reconcile herself with him as well. This comes the moment when Lily offers sympathy to the desperate Mr Ramsay.

Why, at this completely inappropriate moment, when he was stooping over her shoes, should she be so tormented with sympathy for him that, as she stooped too, the blood rushed to her face, and, thinking of her callousness (she had called him a play-actor) she felt her eyes swell and tingle with tears? Thus occupied he seemed to her a figure of infinite pathos. (115)

With this final reconciliation with the paternal figure, Lily's "feeling for Mr Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further across the bay" (142). And finally, she notes that "Ah, but she was relieved. Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning, she had given him at last" (154).

Lily's painting finally makes full sense when Mrs Ramsay dies, and she attempts to capture her essence, influence and absence in her painting. In this painting, Lily demonstrates Lacan's views on desire and

how desire emerges. Her desire for Mrs Ramsay is twofold: she attempts both to represent the absent maternal figure, and to overcome her absence and influence. The journey to the lighthouse—the maternal space—is only possible in maternal *absence*, which is marked by Mrs Ramsay’s death. Even Lily’s painting develops through her desire for the maternal space, which is marked by the absence of her object of desire; but still, Lily is not able to capture the essence of Mrs Ramsay and produce a feminine representation of her. As Hanson (1994) states:

It is the death of the mother which brings about this crisis of representation, destroying any sure sense of connection between word and world, or signifier and signified. So this ‘matricidal’ central section of the novel might suggest that it is the problematic of access to a female voice and/or a female tradition (symbolised, in the novel, by Mrs Ramsay) which makes it so difficult for Lily Briscoe to paint. (81)

### **Lily and the inscription of desire**

One of the hallmarks of Woolf’s writing, especially in *To the Lighthouse*, is to create and simulate pre-symbolic wholeness and unity. The moments of intimacy in her works, like the semiotic kiss between Clarissa and Sally in *Mrs Dalloway* are experienced in silence, which marks and emphasises the necessity of removing symbolic language from those moments, for they will only intrude and create distance between the subjects.

Lily recognises the possibility of generating a womb-like space in the rigid boundaries of the symbolic order, which is very similar to the Kristevan description of the semiotic, in which women have not yet been subjugated to male desire. From this time on, Lily attempts to inscribe this “moment” of intimacy through her feminine language. For this reason, she chooses a maternal figure and her pure love for her child as the subject of her painting: it is a “love that never attempted to clutch its object; but, like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain” (*To the Lighthouse*, 34). This maternal love in her painting is reminiscent of her own scene with Mrs Ramsay. Here for the first time Lily gives voice to her desire and inscribes it through language; she is aware of the inadequacy of men’s language to describe and inscribe the female desire for unity and oneness with the object of desire—the maternal body). Since Lily’s semiotic desire could not be inscribed through the symbolic language of the patriarchy, from this time she begins to contemplate more on a uniquely feminine medium to convey and express her desire for the maternal space. The images of merging with the object of desire indicates Lily’s reluctance at constructing a separate identity from the mother figure; instead, she longs for the dissolution of identity and merging with the mother—the state she had in the semiotic *chora*. She then clearly qualifies her description of merging with Mrs Ramsay: “...not inscription on tablets, nothing that could be known in any language known to men” (37). What this means is that patriarchal language is quite unable to represent or describe Lily’s feminine experience and “moment.” Another type of language is needed, and Lily’s quest then becomes the exploration of the possibility of such a language through her painting. Lily’s quest is that of transcending symbolic language and its subsequent expectations and prescriptions. She struggles to escape such expectations through inventing her own feminine part of language, to inscribe her maternal desire and consequently, to construct her identity. Since the desire for maternal space defies expression in symbolic language, Lily devises and contemplates another form of expression to express her desires. Moriconi (1996) notes that “Lily’s artistic process represents a dismantling of symbolic language as her canvas becomes a subversive utterance. Lily’s vision of colors and shapes disrupts and dissects symbolic language’s process of representation” (59). Furthermore, Otsuka (2008) notes that:

Lily’s painting represents another way of expressing desires for the maternal body—the semiotic. Estelle Barrett observes that ‘Kristeva’s re-evaluation of the healing capacity of poetic [semiotic] language [can be] applied to other forms of ‘poetic’ expression such as painting, music and dance’...Through painting, Lily wants to uncover the semiotic, which is repressed within the symbolic realm because it is incompatible with it. (25)

Abel (1989) notes that “Lily finds in the ‘language’ of painting (the spatial relations on the canvas and the discourse they generate) a means of representing the boundary negotiations that characterise the mother-infant bond” (69). After getting quite close to Mrs Ramsay and experiencing a temporary “moment,” Lily is frustrated by the fact that once the maternal space is abjected, it is impossible to fully return to such a state of wholeness: “Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! As she leant her head against Mrs Ramsay’s knee. And yet, she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs Ramsay’s heart” (*To the Lighthouse* 37). Therefore, Mrs Ramsay remains unavailable to Lily, because the symbolic order, by its very nature, prevents and forbids subjects from getting closer to the maternal space once she is abjected—it is the price to pay for entering into the realm of language. Even Mrs Ramsay herself is aware of the impossibility of describing the relations between a mother and a child through symbolic language; thinking about Rose, her daughter, she notes that “some deep, some buried, some quite speechless feeling that one had for one’s mother at Rose’s age” (59). Lily describes the same impossibility, in terms of inscribing desire through painting, in the following way:

[B]eneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. (14)

Lily likens the inscription of her maternal desire on canvas as “dreadful” as a dark passage is for a child. The image of a “dark passage” resembles the dark world of the womb and the semiotic *chora*. Lily attempts to capture this dark space in her painting without succumbing to the symbolic language in its rendering and representation. As Moriconi (1996) states:

Lily struggles to produce a unity, a shared language, between her vision and her canvas. While Lily's ‘passage from conception to work’ starts with her impulse not to ‘tamper with the bright violet and the staring white,’ the difficulty for Lily becomes when her eyes move from the landscape, the site of impressions, to the blank canvas, the site of representation. In this moment, Lily continually struggles to attain the unity between her vision and her painting, however, she only achieves a *choraic* unity of color (55).

Although it would seem that there is always a distance between “conception” and “work,” Lily must represent the outside world together with her desire, without confining herself to patriarchal language. Kristeva notes that “[T]he very practice of art necessitates reinvesting the maternal *chora* so that it transgresses the symbolic order” (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984, 102). Lily's painting offers her a unique way to express her individuality and identity. As Lily later notes to herself: “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with...Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with” (*To the Lighthouse*, 147).

The source of Lily's desire for maternal space, or the material for her painting, comes directly from her unconscious; therefore, to extract the material from her unconscious, she needs to move away from her established identity in the symbolic order. Mrs Ramsay's death facilitates Lily's painting vision, since it awakens her unconscious desires for the maternal space. Trying to distance herself from the expectations of culture and gender, Lily desires to paint in a genderless state: “She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner, subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general” (39).

To create a different type of language in her painting, Lily needs to shed her previous identity and gain a new one. As an artist, Lily does not depend on patriarchy to construct her identity. Her brush turns to be “the one dependable thing” (112), a subversive tool to dismantle patriarchal language. The final section of the novel exposes Lily's progress in painting, which is developed in parallel with her psychological growth. There, she has to decide over her ambivalence between the need for autonomy and the longing for intimacy. Ronchetti (2004) quotes Juliet Mitchell in saying that the “triangle of jealousy and longing” evident in Lily's relationship to the Ramsays suggests a pre-Oedipal fixation, and that to progress into heterosexual womanhood, girls must transfer their libidinal desire from the mother (what Mitchell terms “mother-*detachment*”) onto the father in the Oedipal stage, and onto other males in their adulthood (74). Ronchetti (2004) adds that

[t]o a large extent, Lily's psychological and artistic activity in the novel's final part focuses on the strong conflicting emotions which Lily experiences in thinking about Mrs Ramsay, who must be demythologized—reduced to ordinary proportions—so that Lily may internalize her feminine qualities and undergo a rebirth into mature sexuality. Mrs Ramsay's unavailability to women prevents the actual gratification of Lily's longing for intimacy, but aids her in the sense of forcing her to develop within herself those qualities she seeks in Mrs Ramsay, enabling her to reach this new level of maturation.(74).

The unconscious impulses and materials then rush to find expression in Lily's painting:

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. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it—a third time. And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related. (*To the Lighthouse*, 118)

Ronchetti (2004) also notes that the empty space in Lily's painting can have multiple symbolic associations:

On the one hand, it appears to reflect Mrs Ramsay's absence and Lily's accompanying feelings of loss and hollowness...If the space is also viewed as representative of Mrs Ramsay's absence and Lily's resulting feeling of hollowness, Lily's filling in the space can be seen as an effort both to imitate and to recreate Mrs Ramsay psychically, in effect to nurture herself (77-8).

Besides a complete painting, Lily's artistic career produces a new type of expression and identity. This means that Lily not only produces a genuine feminine language but also constructs a unique gender for herself based on this language.

Then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it

was now heavier and went slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her...Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance...her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues (*To the Lighthouse*, 119).

Hanson (1994) describes the sexual imagery in the above excerpt as follows:

The metaphor of female orgasm and female sexual pleasure might lie behind this passage, as it more obviously underlies the description of Mrs Ramsay's ecstasy as she looks at the lighthouse beam and her creation of a 'fountain' of reassurance for her husband...In this passage Woolf presents the mark of painting/articulation as driven by an autonomous feminine desire which finds expression through the rhythmical modelling (shaping, sculpting) of 'white space' into the waves/arabesques of female-defined form. (91)

In the final section of the novel, Lily needs to overcome her ambivalent feelings towards patriarchy, particularly as embodied by Mr Ramsay, in order to reach an encompassing vision and construct the new identity she requires. Finally, she only achieves a silent, partial conciliation with him (and patriarchy), but even this helps her achieve her final vision. Mr Ramsay bends over to tie Lily's shoe, rendering him a "figure of infinite pathos" (*To the Lighthouse*, 115) that Lily feels sympathy for—her recognition of Ramsay's vulnerability extracts and creates a genuinely feminine response within her. Where Lily was once critical of Mrs Ramsay for offering sympathy to Mr Ramsay, she now performs the same role. Suddenly, she begins to feel that her mind is full of love "as if she had something she must share...so full her mind was of what she was thinking, of what she was seeing...She wanted him" (150). She then willingly gives Mr Ramsay what he desperately needed after his wife's death: sympathy. Lily "had stretched her body and mind to the utmost. Ah, but she was relieved. Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning, she had given him at last" (154).

For Lily the artist, Mrs Ramsay is the source of all her inspiration and creativity; she notes that "when she thought of Mrs Ramsay...phrases came. Vision came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was...the thing itself before it had been made anything" (143-4). As noted before, Mrs Ramsay's absence is a necessary element to rekindle Lily's desire for the maternal space, since it is her death, and the attendant memories of her, that provide the impetus for the completion of her painting. Lily is under the spell of Mrs Ramsay's memories which assault her one after another; she cannot help but think of her. The presence of absence is quite evident in Lily's continual recollection of Mrs Ramsay in different scenes. After Mrs Ramsay's death, Lily even more strongly realises the bond between herself and Mrs Ramsay; she is influenced by Mrs Ramsay's omnipotent presence, allowing the material in her unconscious full expression in her art, and she is brimming with inexpressible memories of Mrs Ramsay. Lily is finally convinced that she is now able to capture and represent Mrs Ramsay in her painting after ten years, especially after finding a way of expressing her "emotions of the body" in that ten year period:

There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something...it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again...she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (154)

Lily's "blurred" vision is transformed into a finished representation only after the tension between masculine and feminine elements is resolved: the "line there, in the centre" of the painting is the space in-between. Abel interprets this line as being the successful negotiation of a boundary between herself and the mother-figure (82), while Ronchetti (2004) notes that:

At the simplest level, the line may be seen to represent the male principle in Ramsay, who no longer poses a threat to Lily in her new psychological relationship to Mrs Ramsay. Lily's placement of the line in the center of the modeled space, which can be associated with both Mrs Ramsay and Lily in her new creative and emotional fertility, reveals her acceptance of Ramsay, both in relation to Mrs Ramsay and to herself. Equally significantly, the inclusion of the line suggests Lily's confident assertion of her new sense of self. (78)

But I argue instead that the line at the centre represents the perfect balance between the symbolic and the semiotic orders, since it creates a new space—a new subject position in the in-between state to represent both/and logic, that escapes the patriarchal logic of either/or. In doing so, Lily constructs a third gender, and secures a space to express herself and her identity. Hilton (1996) notes that "Lily, as a woman artist, has found a mode of self expression which allows her to circumvent the patriarchal injunctions of the symbolic order" (55) and rehabilitates her sufficiently to disprove the validity of Mr Tansley's words that "Women can't paint, women can't write" (*To the Lighthouse*, 48). As Waugh (1989) aptly concludes:



Lily, implicitly recognizing the symbolic as an order constituted within the terms of the Law of the Father, and faced with the choice of alienation and masquerade (if she pursues her desire to paint) or acceptance and repression (of her desire in order to marry), longs to escape its terms altogether. (113) Instead, Lily struggles to construct her desired identity through her resistance to patriarchal rules and language. She located the contours of such an identity in-between the symbolic and semiotic order. The symbolic is rejected, since it forces its own rules, regulations and language onto subjects, and denies the existence of desire regardless of the expectations of society. The semiotic is also not completely embraced, since it is both unattainable after entering into the language and the symbolic order, and it also threatens the construction of identity, because desiring the wholeness of the relation with the mother in the semiotic order inevitably entails the dissolution and fragmentation of identity.

### Conclusion

The journey to the lighthouse is actually a journey to the maternal space, to retrieve the childhood unity with the mother, which is lost after entering into language and the symbolic order. This is why both Mr Ramsay's journey to the lighthouse and Lily's completion of the painting are kept in suspension, because the complete separation and absence of mother is indispensable for the creation of the desire for the maternal space. In other words, Mrs Ramsay's absence from the narrative of the final section of the story is a necessary prerequisite, and facilitates the creation of desire for the maternal space and return to the semiotic *chora*. The completion of the journey and the painting at the same time, one by a patriarchal figure, and the other by a feminine figure, displays a genuine reconciliation between masculine and feminine elements in the development and construction of a new type of identity.

Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* severely and implicitly criticises the consequences and dangers of binary thinking, and how it reduces both male and female subjects (especially the latter) to fixed roles and gender identities within patriarchy. By juxtaposing Mr and Mrs Ramsay in the novel, Woolf introduces Mr Ramsay as an undisputed figure of patriarchy, and Mrs Ramsay as a purely maternal and innocent victim of patriarchy. Woolf then introduces the subversive Lily who attempts, through her painting, to bridge the chasm between complete identification with either the paternal or maternal figure, to arrive at an in-between state. This in-between state offers Lily a vantage point of standing apart from the sole symbolic or the semiotic order, and she is able to construct a fluid identity which is the sum total of both the symbolic and semiotic orders, instead of succumbing to patriarchal either/or binary thinking. Lily's identity could be located within the logic of both/and, which Woolf encourages in this novel.

### References

- Abel E (1989) *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Hanson C (1994) *Women Writers: Virginia Woolf*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Hilton M L (1996) 'Splinters and Mosaics': *Virginia Woolf and the Subjectivity of the Woman Artist*. Diss. Acadia University.
- Holden L (2006) *Virginia Woolf and the Pursuit of Female Language*. Diss. California State University.
- Irigaray L (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Kristeva J (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Laurence P O (1991) *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Moriconi C K (1996) *Writing Woman's Sentence: Virginia Woolf's L'écriture féminine*. Diss. San Jose State University.
- Otsuka R (2008) *Subject in Process: Modernist Characterization in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse*. Diss. California State University.
- Ronchetti A (2004) *The Artist, Society & Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's Novels*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Taylor C (2006) Kristevan Themes in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.3: 57-77.
- Waugh P (1989) *Feminine Fiction, Revisiting the Postmodern*. London: Routledge.
- Woolf V (1994) *To the Lighthouse*. London: Wordsworth.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

### CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

**Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

### MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Academic conference: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/upcoming-conferences-call-for-paper/>

### IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

