

Windows of Doom: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Spatial and Temporal Forces in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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In *To The Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf problematizes the symbolic order of the domestic sphere by studying the absence and repression inherent in the structures of domesticity. Woolf contrasts the structured space of the domestic sphere—the Ramsays' cottage—with the destructive and regenerative temporal forces of the natural world surrounding it. While the domestic space structures the lives of the characters, the natural, cyclical, temporal forces become emblematic of their own more unstructured, natural impulses—creating a stark juxtaposition between the repressive spatiality of domesticity and the unstructured temporality of nature. By referencing the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and Kristeva, I will demonstrate how Woolf seeks to rectify an inherent absence within the symbolic order of the domestic sphere by reorienting abject temporal forces to a place within it. However, her objective of reunifying the contrary forces of natural, cyclical temporality with structural domesticity ultimately fails as it remains in the realm of abstraction and artistic “vision,” illustrating the impossibility of the liberation of natural life forces within a structural world that does not have room for them (Woolf 209).

The domesticity embodied by the Ramsays' cottage is emblematic of Lacan's symbolic order, as it structures and governs the modes in which people relate to one another, forcing them to adhere to an accepted norm of behaviour. The domestic sphere is Lacan's “realm of culture” in an otherwise wild and unstructured landscape, or among “the imaginary order of nature” (Evans 202). The domestic sphere is characterized by the structures and laws of the symbolic order that “regulate kinship relations,” interpersonal relationships, and “desire” (Evans 201–02). In the house, people are subject to and governed by the conditions of the domestic space, forcing each character to fulfil his or her prescribed role in order to conform to the structural demands of domesticity. In order to successfully function within the domestic space and the symbolic order, Mrs. Ramsay

must be the attentive mother who reads to her son; Charles Tansley must be the polite guest; and the young girls “all must marry” (Woolf 49). Deviations from such norms, as in the case of Mr. Tansley, who at times fails to be the polite guest, result in negative reactions from the community—Mr. Tansley becomes disliked and on multiple occasions is described as “odious” simply because he “says disagreeable things” and fails to behave according to social norms (5). The interpersonal relationships that pervade this novel are thus governed by the symbolic order, resulting, as Lacan theorizes, in an inherent absence of meaning.

According to Lacan, the symbolic order is characterized by an “absence of any fixed” notion of meaning due to the contingent nature of the sign in a world composed of interpretive subjectivity (Evans 203). In *To The Lighthouse*, characters’ identities are obscured among a myriad of subjective impressions, resulting in a domestic sphere that is populated by absence—an absence that becomes for Lily, as for Woolf, the inherent problem of domesticity. Among the interpersonal relationships of the domestic space there exists an irreconcilable distance, one which Lily captures in her painting. Lily’s painting, an extremely abstract rendition of the domestic space, studies the relationship between indeterminate “masses” and embodies the forms of Mrs. Ramsay and James in one “triangular purple shape” (Woolf 52, 148). In her artistic act, Lily does not claim to know either character intimately enough to accurately reproduce them. Lily attributes this impossibility of knowing another to the social expectations that perpetuate the symbolic order, claiming that because “she had done the usual trick”—subscribed to social norms—“she would never know [Mr. Tansley],” and “he would never know her” (92). Such a “question of some relation between th[e] masses” becomes for Lily the insoluble problem of her painting, with the masses being separated by an irreconcilable absence at the center (147–48). The social expectations inherent within both the domestic sphere and the symbolic order create a distinct distance between people, resulting in an inherent absence that becomes, as manifested in Lily’s painting, the fundamental problem of domesticity.

The temporal force of nature, existing both formally outside of the domestic space and as an inherent constituent of the domestic life, stands in contrast to the structural force of domesticity. The wild, unstructured temporal forces of nature, embodied within the “fall of the waves” and the “light of the Lighthouse,” are spatially distinct from the domestic structures of the house, only reaching the ears and eyes of the people within through the windows and open doors (15, 61). As Mrs. Ramsay sits “in the window which open[s] on the terrace,” she is “interrupted” by “the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach,” and later distracted by “the stroke of the Lighthouse” (15, 63). These natural cyclical forces have no symbolic place within the realm of domesticity and disrupt Mrs. Ramsay’s domestic activities whenever they enter the house. While the temporal forces exist symbolically and formally outside the domestic sphere, they are also embodied within the structure of the novel and form an intrinsic part of the rhythm of domestic life. Woolf structures both the larger narrative and the novel’s domestic life according to the cyclical rhythm of the waves. The novel begins with a continual narrative departure and return to Mrs. Ramsay and James. The narrative seems to move away from them and build up tension before spilling over and calmly returning to the iconic image of mother and son. The domestic sphere that Woolf captures is built upon a foundation of the very cyclicity that does not have a symbolic place within the walls of the house. Woolf thus foregrounds a tension within the realm of domesticity: that of identification with a force that is both intrinsic to one’s life and disruptive to the symbolic order that life occurs within.

Julia Kristeva explores the existence of such an entity in her theory of the abject. The abject is fundamentally both a part of the self and “opposed” to the self and is founded on the notion that the self recognizes a part of itself in the other (Kristeva 230). Kristeva theorizes that this results in a blurring of the distinction between subject and object, or between the self and the other, provoking the subject to react with horror to a disruption in the symbolic order by a thing that “lies outside, beyond” the symbolic order and “does not respect [its] borders, positions, [or] rules” (230–32).

Coming into contact with the abject provokes “violent, dark revolts of being” that draw the subject “toward the place where meaning collapses”: the border of “nonexistence” and “of [one’s] condition as a living being” (229–31). The abject is thus both opposed to and constitutive to the conditions of the symbolic order. As it challenges the conditions of the symbolic order, it provokes the subject to reflect on the nature of meaning and dimensions of being, thus challenging their symbolic construction of their own lives.

Since it exists both outside the symbolic order and as a constitutive member of it, the cyclicity of nature is an embodiment of Kristeva’s abject, provoking “violent, dark revolts of being” from the members of the domestic household as it draws them “toward the place where meaning collapses” (229–30). When Mrs. Ramsay sits “in the window which open[s] on the terrace”—within the domestic sphere yet close to the nature beyond—she is provoked by “the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach” to indulge in “violent, dark” thoughts while neglecting her domestic duties (Woolf 15; Kristeva 229). As the falling waves “remorselessly beat the measure of life,” they provoke Mrs. Ramsay to “think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea” or, more generally, to consider the nature of destruction and death and the manner in which a subject transitions to an object (Woolf 16). Mrs. Ramsay reacts with “an impulse of terror” when she comes into contact with the abject temporal forces. As life becomes indefinable, fleeting, and “ephemeral,” she is brought to “the place where meaning”—and her symbolic order—“collapses” (16; Kristeva 230). Mrs. Ramsay must thus “permanently thrust aside” the cyclical forces of nature by “not let[ting] herself look at [them]” in order to avoid the collapse of meaning and the symbolic order of domesticity (231; Woolf 68).

Lily offers a solution to the inherent absence of domesticity in her final artistic “vision” by symbolically repositioning the abject temporal forces to a place within the domestic sphere, drawing together contrary forces to solve the problem of the “relation between [the] masses” (148,

209). To connect the two disparate masses in her painting, Lily, “with a sudden intensity,” draws “a line... in the centre” (209). As Lily’s painting is an abstract rendition of the domestic scene, it can be assumed that this line is also an abstract representation. While it would only be pure speculation to surmise that, having a similar perpendicular shape, this line may represent the Lighthouse—one of the cyclical, abject temporal forces that inspire Mrs. Ramsay’s dark ruminations—the spirit in which the line is painted also recalls more natural temporal forces. Regardless of the line’s symbolic correlative, Lily’s act of painting stems not from a structured rationality typical of the domestic sphere, but rather from a more inspired, unstructured impulse typical of the natural temporal forces outside of the domestic sphere. The line is thus associated with the abject temporal forces whether or not it is directly representative of them. That we cannot conceive of an objective quality within this line that solves the problem of absence in Lily’s painting (and thus in the domestic sphere) points to an inherent inconceivability of these temporal forces and thus a corresponding inconceivability of solving the problem of absence. As Lily’s solution does not transcend an aesthetic inspiration, it remains in the realm of abstraction. Lily’s artistic vision thus fails to offer any cogent solution to the inherent absence of the symbolic order in domesticity, illustrating that it is impossible for natural life forces to be liberated in a structure that does not have room for them.

In *To The Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf seeks to reconcile the contrary forces of structural domesticity and cyclical, temporal nature through Lily’s artistic act. The relationship between the domestic sphere and nature’s temporal forces can be described by the relationship between Lacan’s symbolic order and Kristeva’s abject, where the symbolic order is characterized by absence and the temporal natural forces exist both in opposition to and in concert with the structures of domesticity. Woolf seeks to rectify the inherent absence in the symbolic order of domesticity by reorienting abject temporal forces to a place within the domestic realm. This act of reconciliation ultimately fails to be practical, however, as it is

an artistic act and thus remains in the realm of abstraction. Perhaps Woolf is suggesting that the symbolic conception of a solution to the problematic inherent absence of domesticity, even in the realm of artistic abstraction, is the first step toward being able to conceive of a more practical, cogent solution that would transcend the bounds of artistic “vision” (209).

I am in the third year of my English degree. My current fascination is with theory and its applications, but I also like to read and work with all kinds of literature and poetry and find my interests not necessarily limited to a single era or genre. I wrote this paper for one of my preferred traditions of literature: British Modernist Literature which I studied under Tara Thomson. I found that my topic slowly evolved from a fairly limited consideration of the inherent absence at the heart of To The Lighthouse to a more complex exploration of the way that characters interact with the forces that surround them. My thinking about such issues led me to incorporate Julia Kristeva and then Lacan, both of whom (at the point of my writing) I knew about vaguely but was not yet very familiar with. In writing this paper, I not only figured out a lot about how to apply theory effectively but also read a lot about Lacan and Kristeva in my attempts to adequately understand them and became more familiar with some of their ideas. I did not originally conceive of this paper as a psychoanalytic analysis of To The Lighthouse, but it rather became that as I explored the issues I initially noticed with increasingly more depth.

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Works Cited

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