

Fatality and Bereavement in Virginia Woolf's

To the Lighthouse

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Virginia Woolf reconsiders the conventional traditions of the Victorian novel in a variety of ways. One of the traditions she tries to break up with is the expression of fatality and mourning, the themes that find a broad expression in the Victorian novel. In this paper, we will examine the available literature on these themes and present different views of a large number of critics on death and mourning in modernist novel, and then in *To the Lighthouse*, in particular. Virginia Woolf supposed the novel to be an elegy from the very beginning when she decided to get rid of her mother's haunting image and dedicate the novel to her. However, her presentation and expression of death and mourning are so different from those of other modernist writers that we thought to examine the subject matter at length. Critics agree on the elegiac character of the novel. Here, the novel shows what makes it really elegiac, and which works had a considerable influence on her while writing the novel. On the other hand, the novel exhibits a number of characteristics of the pastoral elegy.

The public values of the Victorian novel gave way to more personally conceived notions of value, dependent on the novelist's intuitions and sensibilities rather than on public agreement. The modern novelist had to draw his criterion of significance in human affairs from his own intuitions and therefore, he needed to find ways of convincing the reader that his own private criterion and his private sense of what was significant in experience was truly valid. A new technical burden was thus imposed on the novelist's prose, for it had now to build up a world of values instead of drawing on an existing world of values. And one of the reasons for such a new attitude was the impact of World War I which resulted in the loss of all human values. There weren't any traditional human values to rely on but disappointment. So the novelist had to turn to his personal, private intuition to create a world of values and vision. "Virginia Woolf tried to solve the problem by using some of the devices of poetry in order to suggest the novelist's own sense of value and vision of the world." (Gültekin, 2000: 161). From this perspective, Virginia Woolf's purpose was to make her readers to plunge into her own 'vision of the world' by displaying her own 'sense of value'.

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Writing in the 1920s, Virginia Woolf was keenly aware of the mood in Europe, time for public mourning had now passed, and life continued, though radically and forever altered. As one of the most prominent modernist writers, it is so obvious that Woolf was profoundly affected by the destructive power of the war and reflected the cold face of the Great War in her fiction. In a way, the section of “Time Passes” in *To the Lighthouse* is just like the representation of the changes and the chaos that the war brought. In this respect, as the Great War had a great impact on the face of the whole world, we see the traces of the war in the novel. In other words, the feeling of darkness, abandonment, and loneliness can be considered as the results of the war and death. Woolf notes the great rift at this time (World War I) between established (nineteenth century) and new (twentieth century) ideas about what roles and occupations are proper for a woman of the upper class. On one level, the work as a whole reflects the discontinuity of English life brought about by World War I, the shift from late Victorian security to the 1920s world of change and loss. Beginning with the absence of all light, in the “downpouring of immense darkness”, Virginia Woolf explores the nature of cosmic chaos and national disaster in which the death of Mrs. Ramsay is revealed in a parenthesis and the death of Andrew Ramsay in the war and of Prue Ramsay in childbirth are merely referred to in brackets. (Woolf, 1994: 93). Her theme of destruction and restoration is personified in the deterioration of the house.

Virginia Woolf's personal vision was greatly influenced by the members of her family. In writing *To the Lighthouse*, for example, she worked through difficulties that had been present in her relationship with her Victorian father and her mother. Life and death, the lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay, and many more sub- themes are tackled in the novel. Through Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique, one can realize the thoughts and feelings, the immediate perceptions, self-revelation, and consciousness of the characters in detail, but the issues go beyond the concerns of philosophy, psychology and gender. Virginia Woolf was always aware of the changes taking place in her own times. The events of the Great War she experienced tormented her in addition to the deaths among her family and friends, eventually leading to her taking her own life. The effects of the destructions and slaughter of the Great War gave rise in Virginia Woolf's generation to the feeling of mistrust towards civilization and existent truth and values. It is clear that Virginia Woolf was affected by the Great War as well. In this respect, we can witness footprints of the war and its destructive effects in Woolf's fiction, and her despair with the way in which contemporary events were changing her world played a part in her suicide. In this study, in the light of the information mentioned above, we will try to focus on the concept of death and mourning in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* within the framework of the significant events of

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the period, Woolf's autobiographical references, and views of a number of critics. In the first chapter, we will try to depict the difference between Woolf's own portrayal of the concept in her work and the concept of death and mourning in Modernist novels in general, the effects of the Great War and the inevitable end on Virginia Woolf's fiction. At this point, we aim to illustrate how Woolf was influenced by the events of her age. In the following chapter, we will try to demonstrate how Woolf considered *To the Lighthouse* as an elegiac work and what made the novel elegy by focusing on points of view of various critics.

As defined in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, one of the conventional features of the pastoral elegy is "the poet raises questions about the justice of fate, or else of Providence, and adverts to the corrupt conditions of his own times." (Abrams, 2005:p.78). We also encounter this convention of pastoral elegy especially in Mrs. Ramsay's expressions throughout the novel. Only once she utters: But alas, divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain; it does not please him; he covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so breaks them, so confuses them that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth. For our sentence deserves a glimpse only; our toil respite only. (Woolf, 1994: 92-93).

The themes of suicide and death are striking points in Virginia Woolf's fiction. For instance, especially Septimus Smith's suicide in *Mrs. Dalloway* and the death of the three characters (Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew, and Prue) in *To the Lighthouse* are good examples of foreshadowing of Woolf's inner desire for death. *To the Lighthouse* is a long meditation on time, death, and the 'work' of mourning. The relationship between the three is clear; in dealing with death, time must pass and mourning must be done. In fact, the novel is a part of Virginia Woolf's own process of understanding her own preoccupation with death and trouble with mourning. Thus, from the very beginning, the relationship between death and life is a central theme that dominates Woolf's fiction in various ways. From this perspective, Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* can be interpreted as a mirror of Woolf's inner world in terms of portraying her own views about death and mourning. The major reason why Virginia Woolf was so affected by the feeling of death is undoubtedly the death of her mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen. When Virginia Woolf was thirteen years old, she was led into a family bedroom to view the dead mother's body. It is so ironic that she broke into compulsive laughter and hid her face behind her hands. As one of Savage's patients and as the subject of much biographical writing, Virginia Woolf embodies the effects of this easy correlation between madness and grief. In Woolf's case, the issue becomes crystallized in a specific moment: why was the family physician called in to treat the thirteen-

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year- old Virginia Stephen after her mother died. That moment marks a break with Victorian mourning ritual, and makes vivid the transition from social grief practices to medical and psychological therapies. Her own writings, both autobiographical and fictional, offer a critique of this transition and describe a post- Freudian form of grief work. For instance, in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf removes mourning from the realms of femininity and medicine, and provides a positive model for grief work. (1995: 310) As we mentioned before, her mother's death triggered Virginia's first breakdown; her father's death when she was twenty- two caused a severe breakdown and a suicide attempt. According to recent theorists, eating and sleeping disorders, hallucinations, anger, and depression are non-pathological manifestations of grief.

Mrs. Ramsay, in *To the Lighthouse*, lives, dies, and then begins to disintegrate, blurring to a memory existing only in the minds of those who once knew her. As she paints, Lily ponders the dead and thinks:

Oh the dead! she murmured, one pitied them, one brushed them aside, one had even a little contempt for them. They are at our mercy. Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone, she thought. We can override her wishes, improve away her limited, old- fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us. (Woolf, 1994: 127-128)

Mrs. Ramsay's hope that her created moments would cast meaning on life seems more than wishful thinking. In "Time Passes", "Certain airs, detached from the body of the wind." (Woolf, 1994: 91) explore the house with intelligent purpose, looking for sleeping humans. Their personification and the dispassionate rendering of matters related to human affairs serve to diminish the significance of human lives. In *To the Lighthouse*, it seems as if Mrs. Ramsay had not died. In the second section of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf describes the state of existence within the Ramsays' abandoned, rotting summer house. In this section, time streams through "the rites of passage that mark human growth, through the seasons of measurement between birth and death or like spring and fall." (Capo, 2000: 22). In this respect, we see the parallelism between birth and death and the seasons- spring and fall. As spring symbolises rebirth and refreshment, fall gives us the idea of chaos, destruction, and loneliness. So, the readers can clearly feel this parallelism throughout the novel. In this novel, time streams through seasons of hope and promise; for example, within a single year, it moves through spring; within a single lifetime, it moves through marriage. At this point, passing of time symbolizes both human growth and the parallelism between seasons and lifetime, and eventually the inevitable end. The third section of the novel, *The Lighthouse* is told in chronological time and encompasses the events of a single day, one that takes place ten years after the first day. No doubt that Mrs. Ramsay's death is a turning point in

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To the Lighthouse. From the very beginning, Mrs. Ramsay is considered as a dominant mother figure, who is responsible for the order in the house. According to some critics, Mrs. Ramsay symbolizes the 'lighthouse' enlightening the house. However, as a result of her death, all the unity and order disappears in the house and the characters feel as if they lost their hopes about the future. Since she serves as a leading figure, they realize that the 'light' in the 'house' fades away and they lose their guide in life. Meanwhile, it is important to note that it is not a coincidence to encounter Mrs. Ramsay's death in "Time Passes" section. This section presents the readers the destructive face of the war and death resulting in darkness, despair, and fear. The Ramsays in *To the Lighthouse* are also engaged in a work of mourning. The trip to the lighthouse fulfills the aborted journey discussed in "The Window", and in doing so honors both Mrs. Ramsay's beauty and her social work.

In the last chapter, we will try to emphasize how the concept of death and mourning was dealt with in *To the Lighthouse* based especially on the character of Lily Briscoe and her epiphanic experiences about both the meaning of life and the central figure Mrs. Ramsay. Thus, from the view of Woolf, one can only imagine a "new vision of death; active, positive, like all the rest, exciting; and of great importance- as an experience." (Woolf, 1978: 117). The way Virginia Woolf handles death is radically different from the conventional (Victorian) description with funeral ceremonies and mourners. Like other features of the novel genre, she experiments skillfully with the death phenomenon as well.

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