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## A Plotinian Reading of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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**Abstract:** *Virginia Woolf is one of the precursors of modernist English fiction and a master of the technique of stream-of-consciousness. One of her masterpieces, To the Lighthouse, basically reflects her literary technique and her vision of life as a female writer at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Woolf's portrayal of the three major characters in the novel, Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, offers the reader an understanding of fulfillment of desires on personal, aesthetic and intellectual levels.*

*Mrs. Ramsay's search for harmony in nature and the household, her role as a mediator between God's creations can be associated with Plotinus's philosophy of reaching the God through contemplation on godly creations. Thus, in this article, the character of Mrs. Ramsay in Woolf's To the Lighthouse will be analyzed in the light of Plotinian philosophy in question.*

**Keywords:** *Mrs. Ramsay, Plotinus, One, contemplation, harmony, balance*

## Virginia Woolf'un *Deniz Feneri* Adlı Romanına Plotinus Felsefesi Işığında Bir Bakış

**Öz:** *Virginia Woolf modernist İngiliz romancılığının öncülerinden biri ve bilinçakışı tekniğinin önde gelen isimlerindendir. Başyapıtlarından biri olan Deniz Feneri adlı romanı, temelde Woolf'un edebî tekniğini ve 20. Yüzyılın başındaki bir kadın yazar olarak hayat görüşünü yansıtır. Woolf'un romandaki üç başkarakterini, Bayan Ramsay, Bay Ramsay ve Lily Briscoe, tasviri okuyucuya bireysel, estetik ve entelektüel düzeyde arzuların tatmini portresi sunar.*

*Bayan Ramsay'in doğada ve ev içi ilişkilerdeki uyum arayışı ve tanrının yaratıları arasındaki arabulucu rolü, Plotinus'un tanrıya ulaşma konusundaki tefekkür felsefesi ile ilişkilendirilebilir. Bu bağlamda, bu makalede, Woolf'un Deniz Feneri eserindeki Bayan Ramsay karakteri Plotinus'un sözü geçen felsefesi ışığında incelenecektir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Bayan Ramsay, Plotinus, Bir, tefekkür, uyum, denge*

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### Introduction

One of the precursors of modernist English fiction, Virginia Woolf's writing came out as a revolution after the Victorian fiction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to her outstanding stance as a female writer in her time and as a literary figure. Writer of nine novels, several stories and non-fiction pieces, Woolf changed the flow of literary history with her inventive themes and mastery of the technique of stream-of-consciousness. In general, Woolf's characters in her novels are portrayed in a struggle to define their selves and reveal their mysterious characters to the readers like Mrs. Dalloway, Lily Briscoe and Orlando. As a strong female figure, Woolf also posited a new system that enables females to define themselves as women with social self-sufficiency. Woolf gives voice to female characters in her novels which is reflected especially in that her writing *To the Lighthouse* "reveals a genuine attempt by both creators (Woolf and Lily) to regard themselves 'seriously'" (Fennelly, 2004:3). Her free stance as a strong female figure in the society and literary history does not necessarily mean that all her female characters are portrayed in the same way as Lily or Mrs. Dalloway is. One other common theme in her major works is the struggle of the self to make a meaning out of life, to define itself and to be understood by the others.

The struggle for the self manifests itself as the search for sexual identity or artistic and aesthetic fulfillment, or sometimes as harmony with the outside in Woolf's fictional works. For example, Lily Briscoe tries to define herself as an independent female artist in a patriarchal atmosphere, or Clarissa Dalloway is in the search of reestablishing her feelings after a set of disappointments and distortions in the social environment. However, Woolf's portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is representative of the Victorian woman with her familial ambitions and search for harmony with her private self and the others around her. Three different ways of struggle for self-definition are presented to the reader in the novel, Mr. Ramsay's being an intellectual one, Lily's an aesthetic one and Mrs. Ramsay's a spiritual one. The sole purpose of the third, Mrs. Ramsay's, is to form a unity within the domestic sphere and between the microcosm and macrocosm, highly applicable to Sufism in the east and Neo-Platonism, especially Plotinus's philosophy and the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, in the west. The reflections of the Neo-Platonic philosophy on Woolf's female character can be analyzed in the light of Plotinus's theories of emanation and the 'One'.

### A Brief Look at Plotinian Concept of "One"

Plotinus is accepted as the father of Neo-platonism in the history of philosophy, as he derived, but changed and developed some ideas of Plato in his writings, called *Enneads*, which are collected and edited by his pupil Porphyry and conveyed through centuries to the modern times. The basis of Plotinus's theory is the belief that there is an unperceivable form in the center of all material and non-material existence, from which all creation overflows or emanates. "Plotinus gives metaphors such as the radiation of heat from fire

or cold from snow, fragrance from a flower or light from the sun” (Wallis, 1995:61). Plotinus calls this original source as the ‘One’. However, according to this view, the One did not create the universe, but all the creation flowed out of this source and came into being. He describes this emanation as a process of going away from perfection to lesser perfection; and for him, the ultimate aim of all the creation is to elevate itself to the level of the One again.

This idea of separation from the origin and will to return to it may seem to be similar to Platonic idea of ‘separation’ and ‘reunion’ with the origin which he calls ‘Ens’. However, Plotinus’s idea of creation is not a disengagement from the One, but a derivation from it. In other words, “Plato sees the world and its products as being separated from the One, as mere copies of the ideas of the One. Plotinus sees the world and its products as being part of the One.” (Bryson, 2013:1). This means that the One manifests itself in its products and this emanation is not a complete separation, but a relatedness to the One, a multiplication of the One. God’s manifestation of itself in the world of objects bares some traces of his own.

Plotinus defines the One as “not even a beginning, nor even an end, for it is simply the disinterested orientational precipitation that permits all beings to recognize themselves as somehow other than a supreme ‘I’, but a constituent of the ‘We’.” (Ennead I.1.7) So, it can be inferred that all of creation struggles to be united with the One during the process of ‘Being’. Plotinus indicates that the only way of reaching the One is ‘contemplation’ in which the soul in a way rises itself to a certain magnitude out of the material world and recognizes its sole purpose in itself. This contemplation is a bridge between the two worlds, according to Plotinus, which he calls ‘Here’ (the material world) and ‘There’ (the desired realm). As God manifested himself in his productions, this contemplation is best conducted through the discovery of one’s inner beauty which reflects the bliss of the emanation.

In this way of thinking, there is always a possibility for the creation to rise again to the origin with the knowledge of the self. Art, according to Plotinus, is one of the tools which form a bridge between ‘here’ and ‘there’. Although the products of the One bare the traces of the ultimate origin, there is still a lack in the nature of this product, which requires fulfillment in order to elevate itself. This fulfillment or ‘completeness’ is the supreme aim of the soul, which means the discovery of the One inside the creation.

#### **Traces of Plotinian Philosophy in *To the Lighthouse***

Artistic creation is a means to complete the half-made self by “adding where nature is lacking” as the objects of art “are holders of beauty.” (Ennead I.1.6). For this creation, human beings need to look inside their soul to derive what is beautiful and to understand for what purpose (s)he is created. To discover one’s own higher nature means the realization of the God-given potential in one’s soul to make itself more than a separate self, like a

complement for a higher scope. Each complement in life strives to unite with the others to reach the source of beauty, a kind of harmony. Human beings' struggle for this completeness begins with the realization of the meaning of being and purpose in existence. This search for the self gives human beings the drive for the aesthetic and artistic creation. This kind of a struggle is portrayed in three different dimensions in Virginia Woolf's famous novel *To the Lighthouse*, in which Woolf portrays three selves trying to reach a kind of fulfillment in their own terms. In this article, it will be argued that the concepts of beauty and completeness are chased by Woolf's characters in *To the Lighthouse* in order to discover their roles as complements in a Grand system.

Plotinian ideology of beauty can be analyzed as striking a happy medium in human life between various other voices and thus leading this multiplicity into a harmonious order. Human beings use their own medium of interest in their own perception and in their own struggle for the meaning in life. Lily Briscoe tries to use her art and catch a vision in order to make sense of her individual existence; Mrs. Ramsay seems to be the good mixer or the buffer zone between clashing personalities and Mr. Ramsay is the self-centered character who is obsessed with perfection, although the perfection lies within himself. In this sense, Mr. Ramsay and Lily can be said to have ambition for self-knowledge and self-fulfillment, whereas Mrs. Ramsay seems to have come out of herself and be struggling for a harmony in the chaos. The beauty coming from within the individuals is obviously discovered only by Mrs. Ramsay, as she seems to be satisfied and content with what she has. To be satisfied with world's beauty in creation is like a contemplation leading the human beings to a kind of union with the One for Plotinus. Self-knowledge is beauty; lack of it is ugliness according to him. Lily Briscoe and Mr. Ramsay are clearly in the search of this self-knowledge throughout the novel.

The major characters in the novel have their own artistic and aesthetic approaches to take out the core of existence and generate a meaning out of life, to reach "the completest expression of its own nature" (Fry, 1965:22). The story rotates on the Ramsay family's plans to make a short trip to the lighthouse around the island on which their summer house is located; but in particular, this main line of story is used to reflect the struggle of the characters in order to prove their own existence. In the very beginning, little James turns the idea of the trip to the lighthouse into a competition with his father, through which he aims to overcome his father's control. Mr. Ramsay, on the other hand, seems to be suffering from an unanswered question of immortality and the possibility of paltriness of his existence. Being a former metaphysician, Mr. Ramsay is anxious about being forgotten and lose his significance in the human history. He resembles his existence to a voyage between A and Z in terms of intellectual fulfillment and he sees himself stuck in the letter 'Q'. In this long way in front of him to reach 'Z', he feels that he has been repeating himself all the time, he is not going to progress any more. Woolf takes his consciousness out by saying: "He was a failure- that R was beyond him. He would never

reach R. On to R once more. R..." (2002:25). This hopelessness for the future leaves Mr. Ramsay incapable in his relationships with the others around him and in his ambition to reach completeness. For example, in the scene where all the guests and family members come together in the summer house, Woolf makes an analysis of him through the consciousness of his wife, Mrs. Ramsay, of his incapability of looking at life from a different perspective, with more intimacy to realize the beauty within the creation, stating: "His understanding often astonished her. But did he notice the flowers? No. Did he notice the view? No. Did he even notice his own daughter's beauty or whether there was pudding on his plate or roast beef?" (2002:51). This is an exact criticism of his character through the eyes of his wife, as he is lacking the insight to discover human beings' amplitude and depth already present even in himself.

Lily Briscoe, the independent and self-sufficient woman painter, seemingly shares the same anxiety with Mr. Ramsay in her pessimism about immortality and the survival of human beings through artistic productions. Lily, throughout the novel, tries to capture a single moment of beauty out of life and save it in her painting forever. To her, natural form is "a riddle (a knot) that must be solved through art, through the cognitive potential of aesthetic vision" (Koppen, 2001:384). Her efforts are based largely upon getting meaning out of the world through art, as she is always trying to pick the right colors and put them into the right order, and complete the lacking part in the nature, just as Plotinus put forward. She usually philosophizes about life "being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach" (2002:34). Her search for beauty leads her to a deep examination of Mrs. Ramsay and her artistic approach in terms of sustaining the familial order and harmony. Towards the end of the novel she questions life after losing Mrs. Ramsay; maybe with a deep feeling of envy in her heart for her, she says:

What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, "Life stand still here"; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she repeated. She owed it all to her. (2002:120-1)

This revelation is highly similar to Plotinus's idea of soul's ability to contemplate and reach Godly Beauty in that, through both processes, something futile is made meaningful, and something chaotic is made orderly. Mrs. Ramsay was a master of her art in terms of knowing the self, tearing down the borders and giving voice to the God inside her by her love for the creation.

Mrs. Ramsay has a way with everything around her, forming bridges between the God's creations and thus between this world and the desired one. She knows how to create a heaven on earth, respectful and patient even for her self-indulgent husband. For several times in the novel, the readers are presented with a Mrs. Ramsay figure through the eyes of Lily Briscoe, with a coloring of admiration, as she constantly questions: "Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? ... or did she lock up within her some secret which certainly Lily Briscoe believed people must have for the world to go on at all?"(2002:37). It is clear from this sentence that Mrs. Ramsay has some abilities and privileges that the others around her are lacking. Having discovered her potential as a beautiful creation of God, she tries to convey this realization to her acquaintances. In the scene, for example, when the children are scared by the skull in their room and cannot sleep due to the fear of it, she manages to find out some way, wrapping the thing with a shawl and decorating the boys' imaginations about the skull with her secret ability of sensuousness and empathy. At the very beginning of the novel, it was again her who found a compromise between her husband and little James, saving the boy's sense of hopefulness and optimism for the future. Her deep awareness of the beauty around her, as a reflection of godly perfection, is clear in her attitude and sympathy towards the objects in the environment:

It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover. (2002:46)

On the other hand, Mrs. Ramsay's struggle for unity in domestic sphere can also be viewed as the strong stance of a woman that is able to make her voice heard by the others, especially seeking dominance over her husband and children. For example, Pedersen defines Mrs. Ramsay's attitude towards the others around her as "antagonism" demanding that "her desires be fulfilled without compromise"(1958:591). However, her frequent efforts on matching-up the young women and men in the summer house, her settlement of every disagreement between the other people and the destruction of the order following her death refute such an argument and support her constructive role in the novel.

With the sudden death of Mrs. Ramsay, the pre-established order seems to collapse in the summer house and all the people scatter around, even the house bears the traces of the absence of an order after ten years. With the second introduction of the characters to the audience, one can suddenly feel that there is a dramatic change in their perceptions of the world and the people around them. The reader sees Mr. Ramsay eventually on a boat taking the children to the lighthouse with seemingly more intimacy and understanding in his heart and soul, Lily in a deep longing for Mrs. Ramsay and sympathy even for Mr. Ramsay, the children having a better way with their father. The change in Lily's personality seems to be the most drastic one, and the revelation that she has been looking for since the very beginning of the novel comes to her at a certain point, which she describes as "having her vision" at the end of the novel (2002:154). She realizes "the moment of beauty and sudden order in life" that she "seeks to express in art" (Leaska, 1970:142). Through her art, she manages to take a meaningful moment out of the realm of the time and store it forever. Finally she takes the core of her own existence, the God inside herself out.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, in the light of Plotinian philosophy, the central, shaping figure in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is obviously Mrs. Ramsay whom Schneider describes as "the light-giving dome" in the eyes of Lily Briscoe (1984:1000). Her presence obviously brings order and harmony, and in her absence all the other characters seem to be deeply moved and changed in terms of their attitudes towards each other and the environment. Mr. Ramsay seems to have come to terms with his children, Lily with his art and the children with the symbolic, unattainable relic of their childhood, the lighthouse. The contentment with the creation brings good relationships with the creator and his cosmos. Mrs. Ramsay, as a symbol of this balance between the microcosm and the macrocosm, manages to reveal what she knows to the residents of the summer house only after her death, coming together with the 'One' both spiritually and physically.

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