

## The Law of the Father in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)

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### **Abstract:**

This paper discusses Virginia Woolf's two novels *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway* in the light of a third-wave feminism, namely from a Kristevan perspective. It argues that the existence of the law of the father and the symbolic is extremely important for Woolf as a writer and for the characters of the two novels who are artists. The absence of Woolf's real father does not cancel his symbolic authority. On the contrary, it creates a stronger presence of his power in the life of Woolf, the person and the writer. The artists in the novels also cannot create without a patriarchal structure. Lily Briscoe and Clarissa could rescue their art by clinging to the father while Septimus couldn't save his art or life as he relinquishes the symbolic. This does not mean that the father cannot be challenged, but it means that the semiotic that erupts in the novels should parallel the symbolic or should be within its context.

**Keywords:** Artist, Kristeva, the patriarchal system, the semiotic, the symbolic, third-wave feminism, Woolf

## Introduction

Virginia Woolf (Bell & McNeillie, 1980) wrote in the third volume of her diary on what would have been her father's 96 birthday, sometime after writing *To the Lighthouse*:

He would have been 96, 96, yes, today; & could have been 96, like other people one has known, but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books - inconceivable. ( p.208)

Woolf's father who also represents the symbolic and the patriarchal system seemed to be a hindrance to Woolf's writing. But did the absence of her father as authority mean the end of his power? or did this absence itself create a stronger presence in the life of Woolf, the person and the writer? This paper claims that the second opinion is the correct one although it does not mean that the authority of the father is limitless or irresistible. Instead, it means that the father's presence, especially as language, is essential for the writer in the light of a third-wave feminism.

Woolf's enchantment with paternal power began with her father, the outstanding Victorian critic Leslie Stephen. The daughter-father relationship was described as love-hatred relationship. His influence upon Virginia, the most loved daughter, was immense. In reference to Woolf's famous essay "Professions for Women," Fisher (1990) infers that:

Even when Woolf thinks she has liberated herself from the Angel, that is from feminine influence, she is unable to free herself from the masculine influence that the figure of the Angel masks. She remains 'impeded by the extreme conventionality of the other sex,' a conventionality she associates with her father's code of value. (p. 36)

Woolf's inability to relinquish the power of the father is also clear in her vocation. Fisher (1990) argues that Woolf's writing is following "methodology paralleling the practice of most academic feminists" through the attempt "to establish her persuasiveness by obeying patriarchal authority in order to reveal its contradictions" ( p. 32). This means that although Woolf is able to defy the father, her procedures of challenge lies within and never leaves the context of his powers. In Lacanian terms, only the compliance with the law of the father can lead to his subversion (Fisher, 1990, p. 41). And therefore, Although Woolf was relieved at her father's death, she mourned him many times as a supporter for her writing (Fisher, 1990, p. 42). Woolf (Nicolson & Trautmann, 1975) expressed this in one of her letters:

All this stupid writing and reading about father seems to put him further away, only I know nothing can do that, and I have the curious feeling of living with him every day. I often wonder as we sit talking what it is I am waiting for, and then I know I want to hear what he thinks. (p. 131)

In her influential book *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Moi (2002) attacks the negative response of the Anglo-American feminist, Elaine Showalter, to Woolf's writing. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter (cited in Moi, 2002) thinks that Woolf's writing cannot be described as feminist or political since Woolf does not write about her real personal experience as a woman. Moreover, Showalter shockingly suggests that Woolf flees her female gender identity by

suggesting the idea of androgyny (cited in Moi, 2002, p.7). For Showalter (cited in Moi, 2002), Woolf's two famous essays, "A Room of One's Own" and "Three Guineas," which thoroughly discuss women's social situation and writing, are not feminist at all (p.7). This is because, according to Showalter (cited in Moi, 2002), Woolf is an upper class woman who lacked the experience of women in general (p.4). In addition, Showalter (cited in Moi, 2002) avers that Woolf's work is not revolutionary art that represents strong women (p. 7-8). Contrary to Showalter's argument, Moi (2002) contends that Woolf's writing is rather positive and political and that Showalter's perspective is not modern since she is an advocate of a humanist tradition (p.8). That is, while Showalter seeks the representation of a unified self for women, Woolf adopts the view of "mobile, pluralist viewpoints."

In order to explain her point of view, Moi (2002) divides the history of feminism into three stages: First-wave feminism that demands equality between the sexes; second-wave feminism that emphasizes difference between the sexes; and third-wave feminism that deconstructs the opposition between the female and male (p.12). Moi (2002) thinks that Woolf took the third position, which focuses upon the multiplicity of identity and the flight from fixed gender identity, earlier than the theory itself. This position, according to Moi (2002), is represented by the French feminist and theorist Julia Kristeva. Moi (2002) explains that Kristeva is an advocate of revolutionary practice of art "in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning" (p.11). Kristeva calls those rhythms of the body the semiotic (cited in Moi, p.11). The semiotic, is related to the pre-Oedipal mother figure and to the unconscious pulsations which is capable of disrupting the symbolic, patriarchal order and language (Moi, 2002, p.11). On a personal level, this leads to the subject's fall into an imaginary chaos and madness, but on an aesthetic level, this leads to creativity (Moi, 2002, p.11). Virginia Woolf's writing, in agreement with Moi's discussion, was somehow capable of oscillating between the semiotic and the symbolic, the mother and the father, the animalistic and the cultural, and between insanity and sanity.

At the end of her argument with Showalter, Moi invites the reader to a Kristevan, third-wave feminist approach to Woolf (an androgynous reading in a Woolfian term) instead of a humanist approach. In this kind of reading, the father is not looked at as a transcendental signified that cannot be changed, but rather a necessary element in the psychic and linguistic formation of the writer and the writing. No writing can be done with a total victory of the feminine. Clinging to the symbolic is a must. This is what this paper will argue especially in Woolf's two famous novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

## Discussion

*To the Lighthouse: A Journey to the Father*

In *To The Light House*, Woolf achieves an artistic liberation by disposing of the mother in the novel according to many critics. Anderson (2004), for example, argues that "killing" the mother figure is liberating personally and aesthetically to Woolf (p.5). Woolf was able to write the novel after the death of her real mother, Julia Stephen. Likewise Lily Briscoe, the painter who is a close friend to Mrs. Ramsay in the novel, manages to finish her painting only after her symbolic mother dies. This is exactly what Woolf (1993) recommends doing generally, i.e., to kill one's mother, in order to be able to write in her famous essay "Professions for Women":

What could be easier than to write articles and [. . .]? But wait a moment. Articles have to be about something. Mine, I seem to remember, was about a novel by a famous man. And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her [. . .] And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page [. . .] Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: "My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure." And she made as if to guide my pen [. . .] I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. (p. 102-3)

Mrs. Ramsay represents this ideal, domestic Victorian mother described in the essay. She is traditional to the core and so definitely part of the patriarchal system. However, Woolf claims that by killing this kind of mother, one can produce art that is revolutionary. Earnest (2011), depending on Kristeva's theory, explains this contradiction when she demonstrates that language, and thus art, has an underlying semiotic, feminine powers that is revealed when the mother is killed (p.38).

In this sense, the death of Mrs. Ramsay in the middle of the novel enables the artist Lily Briscoe to be creative. Earnest suggests that the absence of the mother unusually early in the novel leads to the confrontation of the semiotic, which is denied by most male characters in the novel especially Mr. Ramsay. Earnest (2011) defines the semiotic as loss of boundary and relapsing to a pre-symbolic stage (p. iii). This flow of the semiotic threatens the rigidity of self and language, but enables the artist/daughter Lily Briscoe to achieve change (Earnest, 2011, p. iii).

Earnest (2011) contends that the ambiguous ending of the novel is indicative. For her, we do not know whether Mr. Ramsay had reached the lighthouse or not. This is, Earnest (2011) continues to argue, because the gender roles in the novel have changed and the female voice becomes stronger:

It is Lily who speaks and whose voice is heard, while Mr. Ramsay's voice remains silent. Like Kristeva's notion that both men and women have access to the semiotic and symbolic process in language, once the patriarchal "Angel of the House" is killed, women are able to become speaking subjects with access and recognition to the symbolic aspect of language, and the father is no longer resigned to a monotheistic, patriarchal, symbolic process and they no longer need to deny the semiotic process in language. At the end of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily recognizes the need to speak and Mr.

Ramsey recognizes the need for silence. (p.62)

One agrees that the woman voice represented by Lily Briscoe is definitely stronger at the end of the novel due to the bursting of the semiotic. After all, she is able to silence Charles Tansley's voice, the voice that was telling her all along that "women can't paint, can't write" (234). This, however, under no circumstances shall silence the father and his presence in the context of the whole novel and its intricate relationships. The Oedipal theme that starts the novel becomes even stronger towards the end of the novel. For example, James, Mr. Ramsay's son, still has the same urge that he had at the beginning of the novel to kill his father:

He had always kept this old symbol of taking a knife and striking his father to the heart. Only now, as he grew older, and stand staring at his father in an impotent rage, it was not him, that old man reading whom he wanted to kill, but it was the thing that descended on him --- without his knowing perhaps: that fierce sudden black-winged harpy, with its talons and its beak all cold and hard, that struck and struck on you (he could feel the beak on his bare legs, where it had struck when he was a child).  
(269-270)

It is obvious how the power of the father is magnifying over the years and how the wound of castration is never healed. The "tyranny" and "despotism" of James's father paralyzes his creative thinking (270): "But all the time he thought of [his mother], he was conscious of his father following his thought, surveying it, making it shiver and falter. At last he ceased to think" (270; 274). As for Cam, Mr. Ramsay's daughter who joined him and her brother to the lighthouse, she is fascinated of both of them: "Her brother was most god-like, her father most suppliant. And to which did she yield, she thought, sitting between them, gazing at the shore whose points were all unknown to her [.]" (247). She thinks of her father during the journey as a wise man who acts "as if he knew so well all the things that happened in the world" and as "a great Spanish gentleman [. . .] handing a flower to a lady at a window" (301). She believes that "He was shabby, and simple, [. . .] and yet he was leading them on a great expedition" (301). But the most significant incident is when Woolf emphasizes the symbolic side of Mr. Ramsay which is related to language and which attracts Cam:

She looked at him reading the little book with his legs curled; the little book whose Yellowish pages she knew, without knowing what was written on them [. . .]. But What might be written in the book which had rounded its edges off in his pocket, She did not know. (297)

During the journey, she also pondered her childhood when she used to watch how her father wrote "so equally, so neatly from one side of the page to another" (278). Mr. Ramsay stands for language, for what is read and written and Cam, who represents the patriarchal woman, like her mother, is always absent from yet fascinated by it.

Although Lily Briscoe is different from Cam and Mrs. Ramsay, she still depends heavily on the symbolic system. Lily as is shown above is a revolutionary person and artist. She refuses traditional notions, such as the importance of marriage, women's lack of creative talent, and women's idealized role as housewives and mothers. At the same time, she is willing to lose herself and identity for her art's sake:

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 [. . .] by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current. 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 memories And ideas [.] (234)

The semiotic here is threatening to perish not only Lily's self, but also her art which dwells on that engulfing "hideously difficult white space" (234). As an artist she still needs the symbolic in order to protect her creation. This is why she could not silence the father at the end of the novel as Earnest suggests. She needs him as a symbol of language in order to create. Moreover, Mr. Ramsay reaching the island is never hesitant as Earnest claims (62). The last section of the novel declares that "He must have reached it," "He has landed" (304). This incident was doubly emphasized by a man, Mr. Carmichael, a "god" in Lily's eyes: "He [. . .] said, shading his eyes with his hand: 'They will have landed,'" (305). Only then Lily "felt that she had been right" about Mr. Ramsay and his children reaching the island (305). Therefore, it is no coincidence that the last section is called "The Light House." We as readers would have expected something more like "The Painting" or "The Vision" as a title for that section. But all we get is more emphasis on the title of the novel which is counterproductive to the feminist project of Woolf. It seems that from the beginning that the journey whether that of Mr. Ramsay, James, Cam, or even Lily Briscoe would eventually lead to the lighthouse.

Although the lighthouse has been identified with Mrs. Ramsay, it has a number of patriarchal aspects, not to mention the fact that it is a phallic symbol. To explain this paradox, Tarr (2001) suggests that "Though Woolf turned the light inward to illuminate women's lives, as a symbol of distance and objectivity, of empirical truth, it is nevertheless a symbol of tradition and patriarchy" (262). Lily could never have done her painting without a parallel, symbolic incident of James, who was praised for the first time by his father for steering the boat towards the island, and Mr. Ramsay reaching the lighthouse.

The final touch in Lily's painting is "a line [. . .] in the centre" rather than the rhythmic destructive image she started her vision with (306). A line is a symbol of linear time and history which connote tradition and therefore patriarchy. However, the line also represents Lily's nascent attempt at self-realization, through art. This line lies in the centre, again referring to the position of the father, or the subject position, through which the marginal feminine position tries to break out. In support of this, Jacobus (1992) points out that:

one could see it as the line of minimal difference that makes possible the process which Kristeva calls abjection – the earliest emergence of the subject as distinct from the mother, and the entry of the not- yet subject into signification. (p.103)

At the beginning of the last section, Lily thought that "There was something perhaps wrong with the design" of the painting and she wondered if it was "the line of the wall [that] wanted breaking" (283). This means that at the beginning of her vision she wanted to eliminate lines to let the semiotic burst through her painting, but it seems that she was afraid that without the symbolic she could not finish her piece of art. This might interpret the parallelism of the two events at the end of the novel: navigating to the lighthouse and Lily's drawing, the symbolic and the semiotic paralleling

each other without one taking over as other critics suggested. Lily Briscoe, as Woolf, could not have fulfilled her aesthetic vision without making an emphasis on the father and the symbolic.

### *Mrs. Dalloway* and the Symbolic Order

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa represents "the perfect hostess" (5). This is how her ex-lover Peter Walsh describes her and this is exactly what is fully realized at the end of the novel. Clarissa is a successful wife and mother in the traditional sense in the English society. She excels especially in throwing parties for high society. In fact, the whole book is about one June day preparation for a party which is eventually attended by the prime minister himself.

Anderson (2004) assumes that "If Clarissa inhabits the domestic end of our spectrum in *Mrs. Dalloway*, then Septimus fills the role analogous to Lily Briscoe's in *To the Lighthouse* -- that of artist" (p.21). It has been traditional in the criticism of *Mrs. Dalloway* to look at Septimus as Clarissa's double or alter ego (Hanson, 1994, p.62). However, Anderson (2004) suggests that Septimus is not only a double but also an artist although nothing describes him so directly in the novel. Before Septimus goes to war, Anderson (2004, p.22) explains, Septimus loved a woman called Miss Isabel Pole who taught "in the Waterloo Road upon Shakespeare" (90). He wrote poems to her and she compared him to Romantic poets. Even his fight in the war was purely for romantic reasons (Anderson, 2004, p.22): "[Septimus] went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square" (91). After war, he stopped writing poetry, and instead, "Septimus's insanity opens up to him a world of beauty and spirituality which remains sealed off to others" (Anderson, 2004, p.22). Moreover, Anderson (2004) gives an example of the extreme artistic talents of Septimus by emphasizing the incident of the aeroplane that advertises by writing words in the sky as an indication of the deep beauty that he feels towards a secret language that no other person is capable of feeling (p.22).

In *To the Lighthouse*, the death of Mrs. Ramsay liberates Lily Briscoe and so she completes her painting. As for Septimus, he loses connection with language and any symbolic representation. This supports the idea that Lily resorts to the symbolic towards the end of the novel, unlike Septimus who relinquishes all the aspects of the patriarchal system after having a shell shock. Anderson (2004) sees Lily as an artist whose creation "conform[s] to a conventional definition of 'high' art" (p. 23), that is, an art that conforms to strict tradition of form. In other words, Lily could not have done her painting without relating to the symbolic.

From another perspective, if we look at Septimus as Clarissa's double, then he would represent what Clarissa describes as "an offering" that she has to make in order for her to live. Clarissa also looks at her party as "an offering, to combine, to create; but to whom?" (130-131). Septimus is that abject, or scapegoat that Clarissa has to jettison in order for her to continue her art. This is the "angel" that has to be killed in order for Clarissa to present and create. What makes him a perfect offering is, what Hanson (1994) calls the 'feminine' characteristics that he has (p. 65). The news of the death of Septimus comes during the party, and Clarissa experiences her own death momentarily through his death (Batchelor, 1991, p.87). The timing of the offering during the party is significant so that Clarissa would be able eventually to live. It is only through sacrificing Septimus that she is capable of creating her own kind of art, which is the art of living: "She felt somehow very like him- the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went living" (200).

Septimus is the other artist (or the other), the mad artist that one should sacrifice if one is to represent and create (Clarissa's party) or write (Woolf's writing). In other words, an alliance with the father and the symbolic becomes extremely important for the artist as we have seen in *To The Lighthouse*. The existence of the prime minister who is a symbol of the English society is a stark evidence of relying on authorities with symbolic power. Even Clarissa's only revolutionary friend Sally Seton who she meets after years in the party is found surprisingly as a convert to a social being. Seton is married and she is a mother of five children. Moreover, the traditional doctor, Bradshaw, who indirectly causes the death of Septimus, is in the party too. We have definitely other characters in the party who have romantic sides in them, like Clarissa herself and like Peter Walsh who hates and criticizes her parties. These two characters emphasize the semiotic and the creative side of the party no doubt. However they are put, all in all, in a social context that is so much strengthened by the death of Septimus as an offering.

The semiotic which erupts in the novel and which is represented by the character of Septimus shows the excessive reaction of the artist to life. In the case of Septimus this is considered madness rather than art. In fact, Kristeva (1982) thinks that a writer writes in order to get rid of his fear, of an engulfing semiotic: "The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death" (p. 38). Septimus was definitely one of those artists who lost their abilities to metaphorize. For him "it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning" (94). This is why Septimus asked his wife Reiza to burn all the things he had written (158). Septimus's inability to metaphorize leads him to fear language and life and ultimately leads him to commit suicide. Unlike Septimus and very much like Lily Briscoe, Clarissa creates her parties (art) with the approval of the social system.

At the end of the party and after Clarissa retreats to a room to think of Septimus' suicide, she experiences a revelation, a kind of rebirth. She starts to see beauty more than before and she herself becomes beautiful. She delights Peter with her return. He sees that something has changed in her and that her appearance illuminates love and beauty. This means that it is only after the death of Septimus that Clarissa starts to appreciate life more. Furthermore, if death was a better choice for Septimus than words, for Clarissa words and her party in the context of Richard's Dalloway's house is the better communicant. The title of the novel is important here as it suggests that any beauty, any artistic attempt, or any "death" must take place within a patriarchal context. Clarissa, the free romantic woman, is also and most importantly Mrs. Dalloway. As the end of *To the Lighthouse* there is this parallelism, at the end of the *Mrs. Dalloway*, between the semiotic and the symbolic, death and life, ugliness and beauty, insanity and sanity, the outside and the inside. Without this parallelism and most importantly without the existence of the symbolic side of the equation, Clarissa would not have been able to metaphorize her life.

### Conclusion

In both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, the successful artist, represented by Lily Briscoe and Clarissa, needed the symbolic in order to create. Septimus, the "mad" artist that relinquished the symbolic could not live nor create. The semiotic cannot erupt in the text announcing the victory of the "feminine" on the patriarchal. The patriarchal still exists strongly in spite of the feminist critics' hailing that it was done with. A feminine accomplishment is done in both novels but not on the expense of the symbolic.

As Hanson (1994) correctly noticed:

It can be argued that the writing of Virginia Woolf works towards the introduction into the symbolic order of that which has been repressed within it, especially the feminine/the body. What happens then, however, is only too familiar: in an attempt to articulate 'the new', the feminist writer/artist ends up with something which is uncannily like the old. For in whatever way we define the feminine as different, we risk ending up with a category which exists only in a negative relation to the existing order, and which can also be viewed as both restrictive and divisive. (p. 92)

This means that any attempt at creating a totally different order would risk creating an equally confining one. The semiotic cannot exist and cannot defy the symbolic without being represented within it as the third-wave feminism suggests. The artist oscillates between the two until the end without daring to relinquish the masculine structure. Both the semiotic and the symbolic parallel each other in *To the Lighthouse*: Lily's Briscoe's vision and Mr. Ramsay's reaching the lighthouse and in *Mrs. Dalloway*: Clarissa throwing a social party and the death of Septimus as offering.

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