

Harmony and Integration: The Core of Woolf's Truth **—A Brief Analysis of “Wedge-shaped Core of Darkness” in *To the Lighthouse***

Abstract Based on the principal theories and previous studies about Virginia Woolf and her work, considering Woolf's view about life and writing, this paper attempts to explore the life philosophy of Virginia Woolf about truth and reality by analyzing the symbolic meaning of the image of “wedge-shaped core of darkness” in *To the Lighthouse*, which appears once in Chapter 11 of the book, but could be the very symbol to demonstrate Woolf's inward understanding of truth and reality.

Key Words “wedge-shaped core of darkness”, shape, color, harmony and integration, truth of life

To the Lighthouse is one of the master pieces of Virginia Woolf. As a great work that features the use of the characters' stream of consciousness and “its brilliant visual imagination”, “extensive use of symbolism”(Su), it has been attracting much attention and arousing a lot of discussions among readers and critics. Quite many papers and books have probed the work through a wide range of approaches, such as the Psychological Approach, Feminist Approach, Post-colonialism Approach, Deconstruction Approach, Narratology Approach, Ecological Approach and Cultural Approach—almost from every perspective—among which the last two, respectively represented by Shen Fuying from Shandong University and Gao Fen from Zhejiang University, are the most prevailing and influential by far in China.

Throughout the whole book, there are many impressive symbols, such as the lighthouse, the light, and Lily Briscoe's progression of her painting, and so on, permeating here and there, function significantly to stir imagination, evoke emotions and reveal Woolf's understanding about life.

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Why Use An Image of Illusive Entity?

What is “reality”? What is “truth” to Woolf? Many critics find that Woolf tends to put concepts like “reality”, “truth”, “life”, and “spirit” together(Gao Fen, 31). In one of her lectures in Zhejiang University, Gao notes that, to Woolf, literature is an uncovering of the real; it is true to facts, imagination, integrity, the art and the mind concurrently. In 1929 in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf elevates her belief to a wholeness of the truth, a unification of truth and illusion:

What is meant by ‘reality’? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable — now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech ...But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates. (eBooks@Adelaide)

In the eyes of Woolf, reality seems “erratic”, “undependable”, but it is the thing that “permanent”. How to present it before the readers? In what way make it exposed to the world?

Regarding Woolf's writing ideology, she receives considerable influence from S. T. Coleridge. She once described her feeling after reading him that many of his letters were congested with things, quivering there (Woolf, 1942:105 Quoted in Gao.37)

Woolf is also affected by her sister Vanessa Bell, who is an impressionist painter, from which Woolf gets

inspirations for a kind of visualized writing. She grasps and records those specific moments in life and names them “moments of being”. According to Yang Lixin, “moments of being” is a nuclear concept which “condenses Virginia Woolf’s consciousness of life, covers both levels of her life philosophy and writing idea”(81).

Gao Fen, as a senior scholar of the study of Woolf, views that Woolf’s “reality” is an integrated and inseparable whole of objective “reality” and subjective “reality”. On the one hand, all things are changing and uncertain, the entities are illusive but natural; on the other hand, the entity is the only way to reveal the primordial. The only way out is to transcend things and emotions, and to express the truth between the real and the unreal. Actually, in a book, Woolf believes “(we) want something that has been shaped and clarified, cut to catch the light, hard as gem or rock with the seal of human experience in it”(Quoted in Gao’s Lecture) It can be safely said that Woolf needs something that the readers can feel and see to convey her experience through it. It may seem illusive and uncertain, but it can uncover the primordial and the fundamental.

So Woolf presents her “reality” by shaping a tangible and concrete entity while injecting her metaphysical ideas into it. It is a combination of concrete image of objects with abstract thoughts. Through these images of “moments of being”, Woolf glimpses into chaos and trivial of daily life, mirrors certain aspects of human beings and quests the meaning of truth and reality. The image of “wedge-shaped core of darkness” is one of those significant and special “moments of being”, and is the very image that Woolf resorts to visualize her thoughts.

The Symbolic Meaning of the Image

In Chapter 11, when Mrs. Ramsay, after a busy and exhausted day finds her “shrunk...to...a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others” (Woolf, 45). This image is evidently specific and profound in meanings.

It’s well known and widely acknowledged that Woolf creates the character of Mrs. Ramsay with her mother, Julia Stephen as the prototype, an ideal wife and mother in Woolf’s mind. It’s also clear that the role of Mrs. Ramsay arouses a lot of discussions and interpretations. Viewed from Freud’s Psychological approach, the “wedge-shaped core of darkness” refers to the self of Mrs. Ramsay, the embodiment of Id, i.e. the innermost Self of Mrs. Ramsay who is said, by some critics, to be an “Angel in the House” whose emotions and desires are repressed by the patriarchy Victorian Society. Meanwhile from the Feminist perspective, this image becomes the embodiment of Mrs. Ramsay’s unwilling compromise between her will and the reality because she wants to rebel against the role of “a prisoner in the living room” (Li Yunchuan) but cannot shake off the fetters of that imposed on her.

In the book, Mrs. Ramsay attempts to defy her angel role but still willingly spares no efforts to fulfill the angel role. She tries to dominate her life and exert control over others, but is made to fail or give up. She sometimes feels disappointed with the reality, exhausted with the chaos and busy trifles of life. She now and then is rather nagging to urge others to get married while secretly holds a wish that her beloved youngest son could always be a boy as time goes by. She endeavors to build some warm bond between the isolated souls but finds it hard to establish some order in the chaotic and changeable world. All these ideas seem to make opposition and separation as the central theme in this book. Is it the real intention of Woolf to put people and things against each other?

Mrs. Ramsay may stand for the Victorian ideal woman, the “Angel in the House” or the “prisoner in the living room”, whose altruistic ideas and voluntary deeds to help others, no matter families, friends or the poor and weak, are neglected and her own desires give way to other people’s need. She may be an angelic mother and a considerate friend busy with offering sympathy and support to her husband, taking care of children, and helping others. She is respected, loved, and admired, and remembered, but meanwhile she gets herself torn apart.

However when she “(shrinks) to...a wedge-shaped core of darkness” (45), she obtains the sense of harmony and integration, the sense of a whole self of her, the sense of a whole of everything together. Her

shrinking is not intending to retreat to her Self in it nor does she feel sad or depressed. Instead, she gains boundless freedom and enjoyment by entering the mysterious realm of self-consciousness, because it is a place in which “There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability” (Ch. 11). At that moment, this “wedge-shaped core of darkness” conveys not frustrated retreatment, but cool detachment with a loving heart. The image is not only a woman’s spiritual silhouette; it is an attitude, a way to appreciate the world, the people, the nature, and the life. At that moment, she is it; it is nature. They are an integral whole.

In fact, the “wedge-shaped core of darkness” denotes harmony and integration which is like a thread running through the whole book. In *To the Lighthouse*, harmony and integration between people can be found in love between husband and wife (Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay), in reconciliation between father and son (James and Mr. Ramsay), brother and sister (James and Cam), in the making-up between lovers by having “a better partner” (Minta and Paul). It also lies in the harmony and integration of human and nature, life and art, illusion and reality (Lily Briscoe finally knows how to finish her painting and “make(s) it done”). This is the central idea of Mrs. Ramsay, and it is also the core of truth to Woolf.

Why This Color and This Shape?

Woolf says, “...painting and writing... have much in common. The novelist after all wants to make us see... All great writers are colorists” (Quoted in Jack F. Stuart’s “Color in *To the Lighthouse*”). Holding this view, though deeply influenced by her impressionist painter sister who inspired her to define the concept of “moments of being”, Woolf goes beyond impressionism and symbolism in her writing. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf not only uses color as an effective medium for expressing both individual and universal experience, but lavishes colors upon her characters so as to seek the essence of truth.

Colors and certain images permeate in *To the Lighthouse*. Like a carnival party. There are a variety of kinds of colors, such as blue, high blue, bright violet, purple, greenery, silver, red, black, white, pale, yellow, etc. Certain colors have certain connotations when associated to certain characters. For example, red, reddish are often used on Mr. Ramsay, which is related to something of truth and masculine or male chauvinism; green and blue are frequently applied to Lily Briscoe, which indicates androgyny, the state of having both vitality and sense of males and imagination and sensibility of females.

Images also can list many. The lighthouse of silvery and misty-looking tower and the lighthouse of the white-washed-rock tower make it hard to decide which one is the truth, which one is the illusion; the “yellow eye” of the light stroke from the lighthouse, the light of spirit, which Mrs. Ramsay equates herself with, would never fail to give Mrs. Ramsay comfort and encouragement; the “triangular purple shade” beside the window is the embodiment of nobility and tranquility of the beautiful and admirable Mrs. Ramsay which seems mysterious to Lily Briscoe at that moment in the book.

But why here, a black “wedge-shaped core of darkness”, instead of something purple like the “triangular purple shade” or something yellow like the light stroke is used on Mrs. Ramsay? Because among all the colors, black is most closely associated to death, or the Id, something mysterious or stable, or something deep and eternal, which often are the words to describe the nature of truth and life.

Stuart applies the following words to Woolf’s characters,

Intrinsic constitutions and structures are reflected in the colors, which are generated by dispersion and filtration of the white light of life and by electromagnetic vibrations in the psycho-physiological medium of the individual. ... Objects do not have colors, but for the eye, all objects exposed to light absorb some rays and reflect others. Only Mrs. Ramsay, as she identifies herself with the light, or enters the “wedge-shaped core of darkness” transcends colorific diffraction and becomes pure being. “After burning and illuminating”, she sinks back through the “violet end of spectrum” (Lily’s “triangular purple shade”) to achromatic invisibility. (Quoted in Stuart, “Color in *To the Lighthouse*”)

“If light which falls on a body is completely absorbed by that body”, explains Chevreul in a scientific way,

“so that it disappears from sight, as in falling into a perfectly dark cavity, then the body appears to us dark” (Quoted in “Color in *To the Lighthouse*” Stuart). At this moment of being, something black is seen and seized in one glance.

Mrs. Ramsay is the incarnation of love, so the image is a shape looks like the shape of heart. Mrs. Ramsay loves people. She devotes herself to her family and cares about other people selflessly with great love. Her instinct is to “build nest at people’s heart”. She is the bond between family members and friends, the spiritual prop to her callous husband, and a caring mother to her children.

Apart from people, Mrs. Ramsay loves all the things of life, things of beauty. She instinctually realizes that everything in nature are connected to the other. In her mind, there is harmony and integration between man and nature. When she feels exhausted or perplexed, she gets energy and inspiration from the light stroke of the lighthouse and views the third stroke as the light of her own spirit. When seeing the non-living things, trees, flowers and rivers, she feels that they seem to have life, and become the same thing, to speak in one voice. After her abrupt departure on an evening, she could still exist in the flowers, in the trees, in the rivers, lingering in the memories of the people to whom she offers love, companion, and consideration generously.

According to Shen Fuying, in an ecological reading, Mrs. Ramsay has a particular approach to appreciating and understanding the world which is similar to Chinese Daoism:

Human beings should apprehend the nature of nature, locate their own position in nature and try to establish ecological harmony with nature. Human beings should love all living beings in the world, obey nature's law, share the same rhythm and the same fate with nature and get united with nature. It has much in common with Chinese Taoism (Shen, 68-80)

Holding this view, Mrs. Ramsay makes herself merge naturally into the world and integrates with it by shrinking to “a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others, but tangible to mind.

Conclusion

Gao suggests that unlike the epistemological position, Woolf’s truth is ontological, which refers to the present of subject and object together and the true and the untrue together, rather than merely pursuing “things in themselves” or “consciousness in us”. Such a position is similar to that of Heidegger, who believes that “truth, in the most primordial sense, is Dasein's disclosedness,” and “that Dasein is equiprimordially both in the truth and in untruth” (Lecture).

It echoes with Laozi’s “Tao”, “If ‘Tao’ is referred as an object, it is ambiguous and elusive, in which there are image and thing. It is dim and remote, yet there is the real intrinsically. The real is true and could be justified.”(Chapter 21) On that evening, Mrs. Ramsay heaves sighs of reflection when reading the lines:

All the lives we ever lived,
And all the lives to be,
Are full of trees and changing leaves. (86)

In the transient, flowing chaos, Woolf, like Mrs. Ramsay, finds something harmonious, stable and eternal. She is intoxicated in the ultimate reverie. In that “wedge-shaped core of darkness”, she allows herself a free ride with self-indulgence, fully enjoy the freedom of spirit and her complete integrating with nature and eternity—life.

The harmony and integration of the inner self and the outer world, human beings and nature, entity and thoughts, reality and illusion, real and unreal, something “between things, beyond things”(Quoted in Gao, Lecture) is condensed in this “wedge-shaped core of darkness”. This is the core of truth and life, and the core of Woolf’s life philosophy.

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