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LIGHTING THE HOUSE  
A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf is held to be one of the great feminist writers of modern times. In *To the Lighthouse*, we find Woolf's presentation of a family which is at war with itself, while surrounded by war in the world. In this paper, I would attempt a psychoanalytic reading of the text, based on Freud's views. The paper would focus on the relationship between Mr Ramsey and his son, James, from the perspective of the Oedipus Complex. James would also be looked at separately to bring out his character from Freudian theory of the stages of the development of the boy from boyhood to adulthood. The lighthouse would be taken as a symbol, and be interpreted psychoanalytically. The war and its impact on the family would be looked upon to have created certain drives in the characters, and their actions analysed from that point of view. It must be clarified in this proposal that I do not intend to bring in Lacanian treatment of psychoanalysis, but restrict the interpretation only as per Freud.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, Freud, To the Lighthouse, Virginia Woolf, Literary Theory

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Virginia Woolf's acclaim in literature has been primarily that of a feminist. However, this paper shall trace the markings of psychoanalysis left in the novel. It cannot be denied that feminism has to be studied in connection with psychoanalysis, either to agree or disagree,<sup>1</sup> but this paper would be looking at the psychoanalytic aspects and not the feminist aspects.

The novel is divided into three parts: The Window; Time Passes; and The Lighthouse. The Window looks out towards the Lighthouse and in the third part, the journey is made to the Lighthouse. The naming of the parts, is therefore, symbolic. According to Freud,

A symbol may be defined as 'whatever stands for something, or has representative function'. A banal example is a national flag....swords, umbrellas or pencils may be taken as indicating the penis (Storr 48).

The Window, symbolically, represents openness, and a desire to look out – to be free. It is a desire of wish-fulfilment.<sup>2</sup> In the first book, what we see are desires: desires to fulfil things. The desire is there because the things desired are not there. So, we see James desiring to go to the Lighthouse; Mrs Ramsey desperately trying

to make a marriage arrangement; Mr Ramsey desiring to hear her wife say that she loves him; Lily desperate to prove herself as a painter. They all look out at something that is far – something that they see out of the window of their minds, but do not reach out physically and get.

Time Passes has got no symbolic association – it is a movement. It is the conscious mind working in everyday life. It is the ego, while the previous part had been the id.<sup>3</sup> In the realm of the id, there are unfathomable thoughts, there is the presence of the mysterious, the unknown. It is the realm of hidden thoughts of the unconscious.

So, we find Mr Ramsey desperately trying to make Mrs Ramsey say that she loves him, but Mrs Ramsey does not say so. The thought thus, remains hidden within – it does not come out. The hidden things are however, according to Freud, projected through symbols. Mrs Ramsey does not directly say that she loves him, but says it indirectly – that is, symbolically – by stating that they would go to the Lighthouse when the weather is fine, thereby telling her husband that he agrees with his opinion and telling that she loves him.

Time Passes is the active life, when things happen. However, there are psychological in-depths into it, even though the entire part can be treated as the activity portion of the novel, and we shall come to this discussion later in the paper. If we continue this analogy, The Lighthouse is the super-ego, the ideal state.

The Lighthouse is again symbolic. It is the destination. It was the desired destination of James in the first part; it is the place James reaches in the third part. It was the desire of wish-fulfilment in the first part; it becomes wish-fulfilled object in the third part. So, the name of the third part is symbolic of the destination. It is also the destination reached after the journey in the second part. So, if we take up each part one after the other, we can say that the first part is at home, before the journey; the second part is travelling; and the third part is reaching the place after travelling. The symbolic association of the Lighthouse changes from the first part to the third part. In the first part, the Lighthouse is a symbol of beacon – cutting its powerful rays of light across the cover of darkness. The darkness can be viewed symbolically as ignorance, and also as the darkness of war, which breaks out in the second part. In this respect, the Lighthouse is a source of knowledge.

If we are to take that meaning, we get some Biblical allusions: “The entrance of Thy word giveth light” (Ps. 119:120) and “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light”. (Matt. 4:16) The light, in both these examples, acts as hope, acts as deliverance. In *To the Lighthouse*, the Lighthouse acts as the place of hope; the place of deliverance. Allusions might not seem to have psychoanalytical relevance on their surface level, but if one looks at the very nature of allusion, one would realise it is the result of a thought which lies in the unconscious or the subconscious mind of the creator of the allusion, for otherwise, the indirect reference would not have been made possible. So, we can say this is the result of the subconscious religious thought of the author which has resulted in the making of the Lighthouse in this allusive way. There are other Biblical references in the novel, especially at the end. In the last two chapters, there is the use of the clause “It is finished”, (Woolf 332) first by Lily, and then by the author, in talking about landing to the Lighthouse and Lily’s painting. The allusion to the words of Christ, “It is finished”, and the words of God, “It is done” cannot be missed by the conscious reader. The novel too, has finished, just like the journey to the Lighthouse and the painting. Therefore, a psychoanalytic reading would safely place the author as having had a direct voice of her subconscious thought (of religion, and also of the task of finishing the novel) through these phrasings.

Let us now look at the other symbolic meanings of the Lighthouse. Freud has said that “The very great majority of symbols in dreams are sexual symbols” (Freud *SE* xv. 153). Freud has explicitly stated that in the pre-puberty stage, the boy would identify any long and pointed object with the phallus, and would desire for it, for that is his identity of being a male.<sup>4</sup> If we are to take this interpretation, we are to state that the Lighthouse is a symbol of the phallus for James.

That seems so, for he desires to go to it – he longs to go to it. The Lighthouse thus, is his assertion of manhood. He gets into a dissent with his father, who has his way and James is deprived of his wish. It has already been stated that The Window is like id, and presents the hidden things of the mind, which are not brought out into practice, that is, they are not part of the conscious mind. So, we see James’ desire to go to the

Lighthouse – a symbol of the phallus – as a projection of the deep unconscious Oedipal thoughts of the child, and they remain a desire, and are not fulfilled in that part.



Figure 1. The lighthouse as a symbol of phallus.

< [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Landsort\\_lighthouse\\_2012b.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Landsort_lighthouse_2012b.jpg) >

This dissent with the father, and the father suppressing him down, and James' feelings of bitterness at his father is an example of the Oedipus Complex. According to Freud, every male child, before the puberty stage, that is, in the third stage, which he calls the "Phallic Stage", has got affectionate feelings for his mother, and seeing the father in possession of the mother, develops a feeling of bitterness towards his father. The little ego of the boy makes him see his father as a stronger force, which is there where it wants to be – beside the mother. In Freud's words,

A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and now I consider it a universal event in early childhood, even if not so early in children who have been made hysterical....If this is so, we can understand the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the objections that reason raises against the presupposition of fate; and we can understand why the later 'drama of fate' was bound to fail so miserably (Masson 271-272).

James has got lots of bitter feelings for his father, for he feels he always hinders him. It is the mother who treats him with affection, and he, as per the boy suffering from the Oedipus Complex, turns towards the mother for comfort.

Freud states that this feeling of the boy would grow out as he enters puberty and adulthood. He would then see his father as the person who has achieved what he wants to achieve, and will take him as his ideal, and will wish to have a wife, and possess her. His first bitter state towards his father is his id; the father is symbolically the super-ego, telling the child that that cannot be done, and the ego compromises between the two of them. This ego can then symbolically be Mrs Ramsey.

But after the Phallic stage, he would no longer see the father with bitterness, as someone who tries to hinder what he wants, but with a feeling of respect, as someone who has asserted his maleness, and would want to follow suit, and stand beside his father. Fisher and Greenberg states,

It would appear that he [the boy] gives up his acute competitive stance vis-à-vis father because father transmits friendly positive messages inviting him to join up rather than fight...He invites his son to

draw close, to form an alliance, to adopt an identity, and to accept his values (Fisher and Greenberg 222).

In the third part, we see James achieving that phase. He has travelled with time, and has grown out of his childish misdirected anger, and is reconciled to Mr Ramsey. They both work together to guide the boat safely to the Lighthouse. Speaking symbolically, we might say that he has reached the phallus. The Lighthouse is there to assert his masculinity, and he goes inside it. The Lighthouse, in this stage, also becomes a place of comfort after the war is over. It is a place to offer peace to the Ramsey family.

The Ramsey family has been the victim of war, along with other families. Freud has stated that the desire to go to war is a certain kind of instinct, called the death instinct. Freud states that

After long hesitations and vacillations, we have decided to assume the existence of only two basic instincts, *Eros* and *the destructive instinct*.... the aim of the second is... to undo connections and so to destroy things. In the case of the destructive instinct we may suppose that its final aim is to lead what is living into an inorganic state. For this reason, we also call it the *death instinct* (Freud, *SE*, xxiii, 148).

In the novel, however, we see the effects of the war on the Ramsey family more than the desire to go to war. Soldiers coming from the First World War and the Second World War have been reported to have suffered from hallucinations and disillusion, and the trauma of war. Many of them had to undergo psychoanalytic treatment. We see the Ramsey family as one which suffers from the effects of the war. There is a mellowed effect in their conduct in the beginning of the third part – the enthusiastic group which had gathered for the dinner party in the first part is no longer to be found in the changed family members, who return after the war. It is the fresh sea waters that freshen them; it is the sight of the Lighthouse that sets them at rest.

During the war, the Ramsey family leaves the house, but there is someone who is there in it. There is a ghostly figure inside the house, and the identity of that figure is never known. The ghost, if we take it to be a ghost, is a figure of darkness in the dark lonely house. If we take the house as a symbol for the mind, this ghost is the unconscious, which is there, but cannot be shaped properly, but is necessary in the mind. The consciousness would then be the other characters; when they leave, and the ghostly figure moves about, that can be likened to the state of man when he is sleeping, and the consciousness rests, and the unconscious thoughts try to surface. However, there is also the coming of the subconscious while sleeping, and that would be the caretaker, or the housekeeper. The subconscious stays between the conscious and the unconscious, and the housekeeper stays between the characters and the ghostly figure. She – the subconscious – manages the house in the absence of the characters – the conscious.

Let us now take up psychoanalytic interpretation to establish a relationship between the author and the novel. Unlike Roland Barthes' celebrated essay, *Death of the Author*, psychoanalytic interpretation would like to draw connection between an author and a text. The text is the conscious projection of the author's conscious, subconscious and unconscious minds. Virginia Woolf has been acclaimed as a feminist writer, and feminism can be interpreted from psychoanalytic aspects, as has already been remarked at the beginning of the paper. So, when a feminist writer writes a novel, or any work for that matter, there is no death of the author, for the writer is very much alive in the work, and wants to assert her identity, for the very purpose of feminist writing is to assert identity.

The novel presents Lily painting a picture, at which she faces a comment, "Women can't pant; women can't write" (Woolf 102). The statement about painting is understood, but why does the character have to state they cannot "write"? That is clearly the author's insertion, to make the readers aware of the position of women and the outlook towards women, and brings out Virginia Woolf's condition from that angle – she is trying to write – something which the society believes they cannot do. We might thus, state the "can't write" part as a resurgence of the repressed desire by the author. Comment has already been made over some phrases which are found in the last two chapters, and they show a definite identification of the author with the work, like Lily's identification with the painting. Lily has finished her painting; the author has finished her work – both state, "It was done; it was finished" (Woolf 333).

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**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>The works of Julia Kristeva are important in understand this aspect, for she draws upon many psychoanalytical aspects, only to deviate from them.

<sup>2</sup>Freud affirmed that, with very few exceptions, dreams were disguised, hallucinatory fulfilments of repressed wishes (Storr 44).

<sup>3</sup>According to Freud, ego refers to the conscious part, while id refers mainly to the unconscious.

<sup>4</sup>Dreams contain symbols, in which one thing may stand for another, as in the classic example of a tower representing the phallus (Bocock 34).

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