



LIMINALITY OF THE LIGHTHOUSE IMAGE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

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Liminal places and liminal characters have an ultimate role in shaping *To the Lighthouse's* aesthetic vision and character consciousness. The aim of this paper is to discuss the lighthouse image as a liminal place that both reveals the complexity and subtlety of the human relationships and helps to figure out the understanding of the self and change in the novel. The function of liminal places in forming the journey to the self is argued through the concepts *separation*, *liminality* and *aggregation* that were introduced by Arnold van Gennep and developed by Victor Turner.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse, Lighthouse Image, Liminality

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is largely centered on the image of the lighthouse, around which the novel progresses with the image functioning as a medium unveiling the inner worlds of the characters. Thus, the aim of this paper is to discuss the ways in which the lighthouse image is rendered a liminal intensity in Woolf's work in order to explore the sub-textual function of liminality, a function which may provide a stimulating frame for an examination of the characters in the novel such as Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, James and Lily Briscoe. It is crucial to remember that lighthouse image is not the only liminal image in the novel. However, the scope of this paper is limited to an exploration of the lighthouse image in the novel.

The concept of liminality, which is derived from the latin word *limen* meaning threshold, refers to a transitory, in-between state or space characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity and potential for change, was first introduced by the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his 1909 book *The Rites of Passage*. In his book he has noted that virtually all human societies use ceremonial rites to mark significant transitions in the social status of individuals and he discovered that rites of passage often share similar features, including a period of segregation from everyday life, a liminal state of transition from one status to the next, and a process of reintroduction to the social order with a new standing (Gennep 3). As a result of this discovery he develops three sub-categories, namely *rites of separation*, *transition rites* (liminal rites) and *rites of incorporation* through which he stresses the importance of transitions. Victor Turner, who also looked into the importance of the concept of liminality, emphasizes the three phases: separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation (Turner 94). For Turner, the first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a "state"); the second phase takes place during the intervening liminal period in which, the state of the ritual subject (the "passenger") is ambiguous since s/he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state; in the third phase the passage is consummated (94). Turner also defines liminality as a concept that articulates any "betwixt and between situation or object" (93).

Liminality of the Lighthouse Image

In *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature*, Hein Viljoen and Chris van der Merwe explain the relevance of the idea of liminality for literature stating that texts not only describe and represent liminal states, persons and transformations, but also that the space of the text itself is a symbolically demarcated liminal zone where transformations are allowed to happen – imaginary transformations that model and possibly bring into being new ways of thinking and being (11). Drawing upon this enunciation of the notion of liminality, it could be argued that *To the Lighthouse* holds different kinds of liminalities. Since the focus of this paper will be on the lighthouse image, it is necessary to ask what makes the lighthouse a liminal place?

First of all, the lighthouse is between sea and land; it is a piece of land which is far away from the main island, but it also seems to be a part of the sea as it is in the sea and wild waves constantly strike it. Secondly, the lighthouse is a place that is between light and darkness. At nights the lighthouse, transmitting bright flashes of light, functions as a form of navigation for the guidance of ships. Regarding the novel, particularly in the first part of the book, the lighthouse is situated between present and future; that is to say, the family members are on the island, and the time is temporal *present* (the time that is now) and James wants to go to the lighthouse which is always postponed, so the trip to the lighthouse represents *future*.

There is also a psychological aspect of the lighthouse represented through the characters in the novel. For instance, James' insistence on going to the lighthouse could be explored within the frame of his relationship with his mother. James spends most of his time with his mother who holds the family members together. Thus, it is possible to suggest that for James lighthouse symbolizes Mrs. Ramsay for she lightens James' life, she gives hope to him about going to the lighthouse by saying "if it is fine tomorrow" (259) and "Perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing" (266). While on the boat heading to the lighthouse, James thinks about his mother and in his train of thoughts he states that "she alone spoke the truth; to her alone could he speak it. That was the source of her everlasting attraction of him, perhaps; she was a person to whom one could say what came into one's head" (377). This statement supports the idea that Mrs. Ramsay represents feelings of hope for James. In the novel, the lighthouse becomes an image that is associated with Mrs. Ramsay. For instance, in the section entitled "The Lighthouse" Mr. Ramsay insists on taking the trip to the lighthouse, as it was what Mrs. Ramsay wanted besides James. After her death, he feels indebted to her and takes the trip.

James, whose wish to visit the lighthouse was postponed both because of the weather and by his father, is full of hatred towards his father and on the boat he even thinks that "if there had been an axe handy, a knife, or anything with a sharp point he would have seized it and struck his father through the heart" (377). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this hatred can be linked to liminality. In the first part of the novel while sitting by the window with his mother, James cuts some pictures from the magazine and Mrs. Ramsay notices that he cuts the picture of a pocket knife with six blades (267). Interestingly, the blade image first appears in the opening paragraphs of the book in relation to Mr. Ramsay where Mr. Ramsay is described as "lean as knife, narrow as the blade one [...]" (1). While James is thinking about his mother on the boat the narrator states that "all the time James thought of her, he was conscious of his father following his thought, shadowing it, making it shiver and falter" (377). Julia Briggs interprets these moments as Oedipal symbols that signify James' castration (147) as Mr. Ramsay is the authoritative figure at home who is an obstacle to James to go to the lighthouse. This psychoanalytic interpretation can also be related to liminality with regard to James' entrapped position between his mother and father. However, his anger towards his father subsides when they sail to the lighthouse, as the narrator indicates:

At last he ceased to think; there he sat with his hand on the tiller in the sun, staring at the Lighthouse, powerless to move, powerless to flick off these grains of misery which settled on his mind one after another. A rope seemed to bind him there, and his father had knotted it and he could only escape by taking a knife and plunging it... But at that moment the sail swung slowly round, filled slowly out, the boat seemed to shake herself, and then to move off half conscious in her sleep, and then she woke and shot through the

waves. The relief was extraordinary. They all seemed to fall away from each other again and to be at their ease, and the fishing-lines slanted taut across the side of the boat (377).

The extract above also proves that James feels relieved and he is shaken and this helps him to separate himself from his father (metaphorically). Mr. Ramsay is also in a liminal position, a position that could be attributed to his concern about his philosophical works. He seems to be concerned about not being remembered with his works after his death, saying, “The stone you kick with your foot will outlast Shakespeare” (279). This statement indicates what he thinks about art and being remembered. He is, thus, in a liminal place between present and future.

Liminality is a temporary situation, if the situation is permanent, it can not be defined as liminal. Being a temporary situation by its very nature, do all these liminalities of the characters dissolve? In order to understand whether liminalities of the characters in the novel dissolve or not, Arnold van Gennep’s sub-categories which were later developed by Victor Turner as *separation*, *liminality*, *aggregation* will be useful. Although it was a study based on the rites of primitive societies, it can be useful to show how liminality can dissolve. This structure is developed from the observations of rites, a part of which is the liminal phase that occurs when the mundane or the ordinary world is left. The trip to the lighthouse which takes too much time to happen and for which the visitors prepare may remind the reader of a kind of rite as it means to leave the world they know.

To begin with, Mrs. Ramsay is a multidimensional character who both holds the family members and other guests at home together. She is idolized by Lily Briscoe, and her beauty mesmerized men. She also has the role of a match-maker, since she tries to fix Lily Briscoe with William Bankes, and she helps Paul and Minta to get together. Moreover, at the beginning of the novel she seems to be the only character who is aware of the fact that life cycle will continue whether she exists or not. It is significant to note that she is the one who hears the waves all the time. Thus, the idiosyncratic composition represented by Mrs. Ramsay could be read as a symbol relating to the existence and permanency of nature as the waves will always be there, sometimes mild and sometimes wild. As the narrator points out:

[...] the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, ‘I am guarding you – I am your support’, but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow – this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror (267).

By emphasising the “monotonous fall of the waves” and “repeat over and over again” the narrator points the permanency of nature out, however, on the other hand, the destructive feature of nature and the shortness of human life are highlighted by stressing “destruction of the island”, “its engulfment in the sea”, “day had slipped past in one quick doing after another” and “ephemeral as a rainbow”. This contradiction reveals the awareness of Mrs. Ramsay about nature and life. Mrs. Ramsay is also the one who thinks about the lighthouse besides James. At nights the lighthouse still exists even though they do not see it (Mr. Ramsay’s philosophy of subject, object and the nature of reality).

She saw the light again. With some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all, one’s relations changed, she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves pure lemon which

curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough! (297).

This extract suggests that Mrs. Ramsay tends to accept the supremacy of nature and the temporality of the human being, an idea which implies that the first part of the novel and her thoughts about nature, her family, Lily and the lighthouse are the symbols of her leaving the liminal phase and aggregating with herself, time and nature. She admires nature, observes the mountains, and she always wants the windows open for she likes the idea of nature exuding into the house. Furthermore, she seems to internalize Mr. Ramsay's philosophy about the nature of objects as she understands that lighthouse will be there whether she sees it or not. Hence, because of her awareness Mrs. Ramsay is the character who dies first in the novel and with her death she is not at a liminal position anymore; as she enters a permanent state.

Thus, Mrs. Ramsay's death symbolizes the separation of the family from the denial of the problems they have. Their liminality comes to the centre and it is deftly depicted with the empty house in the section entitled "Time Passes". They leave the house (as it is a summer house) and do not return for ten years. This part of the novel includes no characters, and therefore there is not a focalization of a character. Although liminality provides freedom of movement and it is, by its very nature, a temporal phenomenon, after the death of Mrs. Ramsay, the liminality of other characters (James, Mr. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe) continues for ten years. This fact reveals a different feature of liminality. Björn Thomassen quotes Szokolazai who claims that modernity is itself a kind of permanent liminality: a continuous testing, a constant research for self-overcoming, an incessant breaking down of traditional boundaries and an existential sense of alienation and loss of being at home that in the modern episteme establishes itself as normality (30). Based on this insight, Thomassen asserts that "it is increasingly evident that the modern world is characterized by a constant proliferation of empty spaces or non-spaces, a movement whereby the liminal becomes central and establishes itself as a normality" (30). In other words, there is a *temporal fixation* of liminal conditions. The ten years of absence and the empty house which is destroyed in time points to the temporal fixation of the liminal in the "Time Passes" section. Similarly, the postponement of the trip to the lighthouse, and Lily's inability to finish the painting exemplify temporal fixations. The confined position of the characters continues until they set sail for the trip to the lighthouse. Returning to the island fails to resolve the problems; since the lighthouse is far away in the sea, and they have to stay in between, between the island and the lighthouse as "the sea was more important now than the shore" (379). In this way, they have to look back at their past from a distance, as they get further, they gain a new perspective, and this is why it is important for them to take a trip to the lighthouse. (Even Lily Briscoe thinks that "so much depends on distance: whether people are near us or far from us; for her feeling for Mr Ramsay changed as he sailed farther and farther across the bay (380)). They have to understand the flux of the time, and the ongoing cycle of nature. The ship accident, as a result of which a lot of sailors died, also shows them, especially to Cam, that the sea, thus nature can overpower them. ("About here, she thought, dabbling her fingers in the water, a ship had sunk, and she murmured, dreamily, half asleep, how we perished, each alone" (380)). As they get closer to the lighthouse their mood changes, James and Cam's anger towards their father lessens, ("that they will fight tyranny to the death" (387)), Mr Ramsay's concern about being remembered in the future fades away. He embraces the idea that he "will perish" like everybody else. Thus, the liminal phase ends, and they aggregate; James' and Cam's feelings of hatred towards their father dissolve, Cam even starts to understand her father, and Lily Briscoe finishes her painting by accepting the death of Mrs Ramsay.

The lighthouse is the liminal place with the help of which internal struggles of the Ramsay family are resolved. It symbolizes the transition from one milieu to another, from hatred / anger to a peace of mind. The lighthouse is represented as a place that is recollected by the characters in the novel. In her work "Places Remembers Events: Towards an Ethics of Encounter", Emily Orley argues that places hold their own histories and this memory is animated by the people who visit those places (37). In line with Orley's argument, the lighthouse in the novel animates feelings and thoughts. So, the lighthouse that is a human construction is brought to life and a reciprocal process occurs. However, the lighthouse that the characters

thought about in the first section of the novel is not the same as what characters think when they see the actual lighthouse in the last section. There are two views over the lighthouse with respect to how it was initially envisioned by the characters, and how the characters feel about it when they finally see it closely. As the narrator indicates:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now – James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the whitewashed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too. It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. In the evening one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where the sat” (376).

As they get closer it seems different “ So it was like that, James thought, the Lighthouse one had seen across the bay all these years; it was a stark tower on a bare rock” (387)).

Thus, it is understood that besides all liminal features of it, the lighthouse is transitory and liminal in its very nature, and is constantly suspended in a state of in-betweenness, an idea which can be attributed to the contradiction between past feelings and the present ones. The lighthouse does not have a permanent meaning, but in spatial terms its liminality between the land and sea remains. It comprises a contradiction in itself since, it is both transitory, temporal and permanent. In *Places on Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity*, Rob Shields explains that “conceptions of space – which are central to any ontology – are part and parcel of notions of reality. Much more than simply a world view, this sense of space, one’s spatiality, is a fundamental component of one’s relationship to the world” (39). The lighthouse, as a conception of space turns into reality in the characters’ minds, and a rite of spatial passage becomes a rite of spiritual passage and this transition shapes the characters, and thus the lighthouse turns into a central figure that enables this change. Liminality leads to changes and transformation, and in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* there is a transformative possibility. Flows of thoughts which help the characters to transcend psychological and emotional impassés are the nub of the novel. The lighthouse acts as a “rite of passage”, and it enables characters to finally come to terms with the traumatic changes in their lives; for they confront with the self’s dark side, a confrontation which results in the death of their old selves and the birth of the new ones.

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