The Distortion of Time Through Human Consciousness

Written in the middle of the Modernist movement and a couple of decades after Einstein published his paper on relativity, *To the Lighthouse* is a unification of Modernism’s exploration of consciousness and the scientific discoveries regarding time and space. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf uses the powerful presence of Mrs. Ramsay and the shifting symbolism of the lighthouse to show how memory and the interconnectedness of humans’ consciousness bend time, which parallels the scientific revelations of general relativity that were being explored at the time.

*To the Lighthouse* was published by Virginia Woolf in 1927, which was around the middle of the literary Modernism movement. Literature published during the Modernist Period is often characterized by a divergence from traditional methods of interacting with and understanding the world. One of the main focuses of literature from this period is consciousness of self, and key traits of Modernist literature include experimentation with form and stream-of-consciousness narration, where a concentration on writing form is prioritized over content (White). In 1905, Einstein published his paper on his theory of special relativity, which illustrated the connection between space and time into the singular entity of space-time, a continuum that can be distorted by large pieces of matter. Einstein’s theory also included the idea that the speed of light in a vacuum is independent of the motion of observers (Redd). *To the Lighthouse* ultimately applies Einstein’s understanding of time to Modernism’s focus on the human consciousness by illustrating how Mrs. Ramsay’s presence and the memory of Mrs. Ramsay bend the nature of time.

In his article about quantum physics and relativity, Brown draws parallels between “the quantum physical understanding of a holistic universe” and the group consciousness reflected in the interconnectedness of the characters in *To the Lighthouse* (Brown 43). He claims that Mrs. Ramsay is the unifying force for this consciousness, as she seems to “[bind her dinner guests] to her and to each other by directly accessing and sharing the thoughts beneath the words and silences” (Brown 45). On the other hand, Graham focuses on the lighthouse as “the central symbol of the book” (Graham 191), but he does describe it as “an objective correlative for Mrs.
Ramsay’s vision” (Graham 191). He describes the first section of the novel as representative of an individual’s vision of life, the second section as an assault on it by time, and the third section as an affirmation of it. To complement Graham’s argument, Morris argues that *To the Lighthouse* is ultimately “a voyage into the past to recapture a memory” (Morris 57), and that “the lighthouse standing alone in the midst of an infinite ocean symbolizes a moment… that remains forever free from the ebb and tide of ephemeral life” in a way that parallels Mrs. Ramsay’s role in the life of her family and friends. Synthesizing the implications of these claims leads to the conclusion that Mrs. Ramsay’s presence and vision of life is powerful enough to shape the perception of time, and due to Mrs. Ramsay’s lingering consciousness by the lighthouse, the other characters can use the lighthouse as a bridge to the past.

The first section of *To the Lighthouse* focuses on the unifying presence of Mrs. Ramsay amidst the cast of characters enjoying their summer afternoon. Mrs. Ramsay’s influence on every other character is undeniable, from Paul’s proposal to Minta, as “he felt somehow that [Mrs. Ramsay] was the one who had made him do it” (Woolf 78), to the promise of the journey to the lighthouse, which James clings to for the duration of the first section. Even as Lily finishes her painting ten years later, she reflects on the “little daily miracles” of life at the summer house (Woolf 161), on “Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, ‘Life stand still here’” (Woolf 161). The effects of Mrs. Ramsay’s presence on the fabric of human consciousness and time are analogous to a large entity of matter warping the space-time continuum; in this case, it is not beings of significant weight that affect the perception of time, but rather entities that embody a collection of human experience and emotion. Just as objects of significant mass slow the perception of time to observers, Mrs. Ramsay’s presence is able to lengthen the experience of time. Mrs. Ramsay once sighs about “how she never wanted James to grow a day older! or Cam either. Those two she would have liked to keep for ever just as they were” (Woolf 58). When coupled with Lily’s observation about how Mrs. Ramsay seemed able to command time to “stand still” (Woolf 161), Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts reflect how her consciousness is able to expand and distort the passing of time, since the first section of the book revolves around Mrs. Ramsay and acts as an elongation of time.
These effects of Mrs. Ramsay’s presence on time can best be illustrated by the contrast between the narration of the first and second sections of the novel. The second section of *To the Lighthouse* is marked by a sudden shift in style, as instead of elongating time as she did in the first section of the novel, Woolf instead compresses it by covering ten years in the course of twenty pages. The first chapter of “Time Passes” marks the conclusion of the first half of the novel and the point at which the readers must “wait for the future to show” (Woolf 125), using the symbolism and imagery of light to highlight this turning point. This is due to the fact that in the beginning of *To the Lighthouse*, light is representative of the future and forward movement of time. While the details of the Ramsays’ day remains at the foreground of the story, the lighthouse’s presence still never fades, remaining as a symbol of tomorrow and what is to come. The lighthouse is the image the characters are inexplicably drawn towards and the destination for their journey.

Andrew’s comment in Chapter I of “Time Passes” about how it is “almost too dark to see” and Prue’s remark about distinguishing the sea from the land show how the moment’s connection to light (Woolf 125), and thus the future, has been severed, allowing for the distortion and warping of the structure of time. The dark imagery and description of the extinguishing of the lamps also reinforce the idea that the first half of the novel, a characterization of seven hours with the Ramsay family, is being isolated and immortalized from the pains of time. This idea is analogous to the vacuum in Einstein’s theory of relativity, as a vacuum is space devoid of matter. If Mrs. Ramsay is the object that bends the continuum and draws in the observers, then a vacuum would be a space and time without her, which is indeed what the characters are about to enter. Thus, the symbolism of the lighthouse helps Woolf transition the narrative into a section where the rules of time are bent because of the effects of human interaction and the loss of Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness.

In the second section of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf displays the effects Mrs. Ramsay’s absence on time by rapidly accelerating the passage of time while maintaining an atmosphere of timelessness. For instance, in the first chapter, Woolf makes a point of having Mr. Carmichael remain awake reading by the light even when “one by one the lights were all extinguished” (Woolf 125). She then begins a new chapter with an almost timeless description of the house at
night, a long, drawn-out description that causes the reader to loosen their grasp on their sense of time. However, Woolf ultimately ends the chapter with Mr. Carmichael blowing out his candle. By having Mr. Carmichael’s actions loosely sandwich this description, Woolf reinforces the idea of time as a fluid and nonlinear entity, for the reader is jarred by the juxtaposition of the linear, external time against the looser and more abstract concept of time.

Another example of where this aura of timelessness surrounds the acceleration of time can be seen in the third chapter of “Time Passes.” Chapter III is significant due to its function as a transitional passage in “Time Passes,” which causes it to be one of the turning points in the novel. This passage is preceded by Mr. Carmichael finally blowing out his candle and going to sleep, which projects an air of finality, as if the second act of a play can finally begin now that the entire cast of characters has concluded their actions in the first. While Woolf seems to imply through the narrative that a singular night is passing, her prose gives the impression that it is years instead. For instance, the phrases “bird sings, a cock crows, or a faint green quickens, like a turning leaf” (Woolf 127), all have connotations of morning and new beginnings. By listing these images rapidly, Woolf gives the impression that multiple mornings have already passed.

Additionally, Woolf personifies winter as “dealing [nights] equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers” (Woolf 127), and this imagery contributes to the idea that nights are passing endlessly and quickly. The repetition of “the autumn trees” does this as well (Woolf 127), rooting the passing of multiple seasons to one central image. The separate descriptions of the autumn trees -- shifting from “ravaged” to “[gleaming] in the yellow moonlight” (Woolf 127) -- heightens the feeling that despite the illusion of continuity, the world continues to change and move forward, ultimately casting time as a fluid and fluctuating structure.

The writing style of the second section is reflective of how the absence of Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness shifts the passage of time. In contrast to the first section, where Woolf paints a picture of the human consciousness by elaborating on every detail and thought regarding the characters, Woolf mainly narrates this section with long, abstract descriptions of nature and inanimate objects. Details regarding the lives of the characters are dropped in brackets and rather matter-of-factly, such as the announcement that Mrs. Ramsay had “died rather suddenly the night before” (Woolf 128), and that Prue had “died that summer in some illness connected with
childbirth” (Woolf 132), while Andrew had been “blown up in France” (Woolf 133). This reinforces the idea that time is passing independent of human experience now that Mrs. Ramsay is dead, just as in a vacuum, the speed of light is unaffected by the motion of its observers. However, as the second section of this novel draws to a close, Lily Briscoe “[has] her bag carried up to the house late one evening” (Woolf 141), and this action is enclosed in parentheses rather than brackets. As parentheses are used in writing more naturally than brackets, this reflects how the narration of time’s passage is about to return to the style of the first section. Though Mrs. Ramsay is dead, the house still contains her vivid memory and thus traces of her consciousness. By returning to the house, Lily is entering that fabric of time affected by Mrs. Ramsay’s presence.

The lighthouse served as a symbol of possibility and the future in the first section of the novel; however, by the third and last section of the book, it has transformed into an image of the past. Though Mrs. Ramsay is dead, the memory of her lives on through the house and the promise of the lighthouse. Thus, these two landmarks are able to serve as bridge to the past, delivering the characters back to a space where Mrs. Ramsay’s presence could lengthen the experienced passage of time. The effects of Mrs. Ramsay’s lingering presence in the house on the other characters is immediately apparent -- Woolf describes how Cam had “looked round for someone who was not there, for Mrs. Ramsay, presumably” (Woolf 149), how Lily is once more experiencing frustration with her painting and “it was all Mrs. Ramsay’s fault” (page 150), how James no longer views the journey to the lighthouse as a delight, but rather as a chore. This shows that even in death, Mrs. Ramsay’s memory continues to shape the human consciousness of those surrounding her.

Woolf maintains her experimentation with form and narrative style in the third section of the book, which continues to illustrate the effect of Mrs. Ramsay’s presence on time. Through returning to a narrative style similar to the first section of the novel, Woolf reflects the idea that the return to a space containing traces of Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness can continue to warp the perception of time. However, Mrs. Ramsay herself is not physically present, and her absence is still acutely felt by all the characters, so the third section retains some of the stylistic elements of the second section, which include bracketed, impersonal narrations. Examples of this are
chapters six and nine, which are brief, impersonal chapters interspersed among the other more natural chapters.

Lily’s completion of her painting in the third section is also reflective of how the lighthouse is an effective symbol of the past. Lily’s painting has remained unfinished for ten years, and though it initially seems she will be unable to continue with the subject of the painting dead, she is ultimately able to finish because of the Ramsays’ journey to the lighthouse. Though Lily had long suffered over trying to understand the Ramsays in the first section of the book, ten years later, she is finally able to say, “I have had my vision” (Woolf 209). Lily completes her painting and arrives at her revelations just as she imagines the boat has reached the lighthouse, at last being delivered to that future that Mrs. Ramsay had promised so long ago. This shows once more how traces of Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness continue to bend the passage and perception of time, since the lighthouse contains the memories of Mrs. Ramsay’s vision and presence, acting as a bridge to Mrs. Ramsay herself.

As seen through the shifting imagery of the lighthouse and the powerful influence of Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness, *To the Lighthouse* fundamentally acts not only as an expression of Modernist ideas, but also as a parallel to the scientific discoveries of the time. The effects of Mrs. Ramsay’s presence on time, both in life and in memory, ultimately reflect that human interconnectedness can transcend even the laws of time.
Works Cited


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