

An Interpretation of *To the lighthouse* from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

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Abstract: Virginia Woolf's masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*, fully presents readers with her ecofeministic consciousness although ecofeminism did not come into existence in the era when she created this work. By analyzing the main characters the Ramsay couple and Lily Briscoe, this paper aims to interpret the ecofeminism reflected in this novel. Mr. Ramsay always ignores natural law, making no further progress in his career; Mrs. Ramsay enjoys the beauty of nature, making people around her happy and pleased; Lily alienates herself from nature, feeling puzzled about her painting. In terms of ecofeministic relationship between men and women, the differences in the values of the Ramsay couple result in the breaking up of their emotion, which stimulates Mr. Ramsay to accept some of the views of females; the reconciliation of Lily and Mr. Ramsay leads to their increasingly harmonious relation, which helps Lily achieve an ultimate completion of her painting. With her unique writing style, Virginia Woolf conveys to her readers the importance of achieving harmony between humans and nature and equality between men and women.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, *To the lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf

1. Introduction

1.1. Virginia Woolf and *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), an outstanding British female writer, was known as one of the pioneers of the stream of consciousness. She also played an important role in the feminism in the 20th century. She devoted herself to fighting for women's rights to vote and more opportunities to receive education, which may find expression in many of her essays, book reviews and novels, such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and *Three Guineas* (1938).

To the lighthouse is a quasi-autobiographical stream of consciousness novel written by Woolf in 1927, and the prototypes of the Ramsay couple are her parents. This novel, which consists of three parts, tells about the experiences of the Ramsay family and several guests during their summer holiday. In the first part, because of bad weather, the wish to go to the lighthouse does not come true. In the second part, since the war has broken out, the Ramsays and the guests have to leave the house. In the third part, after Mrs. Ramsay has passed away, people return to the house. Mr. Ramsay decides

to take their children to the lighthouse and Lily Briscoe ultimately accomplishes her pictures. Since its publication, many scholars have paid much attention to the novel and given high recognition to Woolf's writing, the unique style of which is much different from the traditional one in that era. In April 1928, this novel won the famous French literature award - Prix Femina.

1.2. Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism, which is also called ecological feminism, is widely regarded as the third wave of feminism. K. Sivaranjani and S. Rajarajan pointed out that the crusade of ecofeminism linked the philosophy of feminism with ecology [1]. The term was first created by Françoise d'Eaubonne, a French writer who called on women to lead an ecological revolution to save the Earth by building up a kind of new relationship between man and nature and also a new relationship between men and women.

Ecofeminism was also an environmental movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, calling for more opportunities for women to participate actively in ecological issues. In the West, gender and environment have always been important and

popular topics in literature; therefore, ecofeminism has gradually drawn much attention and many scholars started to interpret literary works from the perspective of ecofeminism.

2. Literature Review

Since *To the Lighthouse* was published, both domestic and abroad scholars attached much importance to this novel and interpreted it from different perspectives. This novel is famous for the narrative device of the stream of consciousness, such as the change of perspective, the usage of symbolism and music structure, and the reference of painting. Gao Feng stated that western scholars who had studied Woolf's works focused on the form of its modernism, the spirit of feminism and the character of postmodernism [2]. At the same time, domestic scholars who had done many researches about Woolf mainly concentrated on the fields of theme, theory and feminism.

As for this work, scholars have various opinions. Hui Jingrui assumed that the lighthouse could be the embodiment of the harmonious relationship between men and women, and their successful arrival at the lighthouse implied that Woolf had positive attitude towards feminism [3]. Ferhat Ordu and Murat Karakaş also commented that *To the Lighthouse* was one of the Woolf's most influential works, and feminism might be traced in many of Woolf's works [4]. From the perspective of feminist criticism, they thought that Woolf "tries to solve the gender identity problem in *To the Lighthouse* and focuses upon the struggle of the Modern woman against the dominant Patriarchal male characters and submissive female characters trying to find her own way out [4]". Besides, Wang Nan indicated that Woolf tried to awaken women's consciousness of their own ideological principles, encouraging them to think independently and to achieve their own integrity [5].

Xin Linping thought that ecofeminist literary criticism was a new way of criticism and it focused on the relationship between women's domination and natural domination, and it constantly provided a new perspective for people to understand literary works [6]. Sun Biru stated that Woolf's "Androgyny" thought had exerted an objective influence on western feminist literary criticism in later generations [7]. By analyzing the novel from the angle of ecofeminism criticism, Wang Ping indicated that the potential topics, such as culture, gender, and race, could be dug from the novel, which made readers clearly understand the important relationship between humans and nature, between men and women [8]. Lü Hongling assumed that modern critics, by studying her experiences and fiction writing, often focused on Woolf's identity as a feminist. Meanwhile, their criticism put too much emphasis on the elements of biography and gender [9].

Although many scholars have done researches about this novel, most of them focused on such aspects as the theme of novel, Woolf's writing styles and Woolf's feminism. Only a few scholars concentrated on the interpretation of ecofeminism. It is necessary to study Woolf's thoughts from a relatively appropriate perspective. It is not difficult for readers to find that many of Woolf's works contain ecological and

feministic awareness. Therefore, this thesis aims to interpret the combination of ecology and feminism reflected in this novel by analyzing the characters and the era background, in hopes of helping readers better understand the ecological balance between humans and nature, as well as the harmonious and equal relationship between men and women.

3. The Ecofeministic Relationship Between Humans and Nature

The major problem that human civilization has to face is the relationship between man and nature. This requires people to show respect for the rules of nature. There are many descriptions about the relationship between humans and nature in Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* [10], which advocates the ecological theory of harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature.

3.1. Ramsay Couple and Nature

According to environmentalists, the basic factor that has caused the ecological problem is "anthropocentrism". However, ecofeminists believe that the fundamental cause of the ecological crisis is "androcentrism" or patriarchal society [11], because people always try to control nature and even go beyond nature, which can be easily seen in this novel --- Mr. Ramsay is a good instance.

Mr. Ramsay is a philosopher who always sticks to rational thinking. At the beginning of the first part, Mrs. Ramsay promises her son James that they will go to the lighthouse the next day. When Mr. Ramsay gets to know this, he decides to reject this suggestion, because he insists that, based on his observation, the weather of the following day should be bad. Thus, he thinks that Mrs. Ramsay's promise has gone against objective truth. When Mr. Ramsay denies his son's request to go to the lighthouse regardless of the disappointment of his son and his wife, he enjoys the dominant position in the family. With his family members' submitting to his decisions, it feels like he can control everything in the world. Meanwhile, he always disparages his wife, although his wife is much better than him in many aspects. He always thinks that only what he says is true and is always true. Moreover, he is unwilling to please anyone, even though the person is his own child. Therefore, his son James hates many of Mr. Ramsay's exalted and sublime gestures. James also hates father's strictness and egotism. What's more, Mr. Ramsay also thinks that human thinking can be ranked in order of the alphabet. He has already reached Q and he still insists that he should reach R. Thus he decides to spare no efforts to hit this target. His desire for secular success makes him eager to transcend nature's restrictions on humans, and it also constantly drives humans to struggle to conquer nature. What Mr. Ramsay has done represents males' role and inner thoughts in that era, which actually reflects human attitudes towards nature --- people assume that they can take control of everything, including nature. Humans often try to leave marks to achieve a certain form of transcendence. As a matter of fact, in front of nature,

people are so insignificant that they have no ability to control it.

In ecofeminists' views, women are closely related to nature because nature largely possesses some qualities of women, such as fertility force of women, which is completely different from male power and is recognized as the source of females' special strength [12]. Therefore, it is not strange that, contrary to Mr. Ramsay's indifference towards nature, Mrs. Ramsay is willing to appreciate and recognize nature. And when Mrs. Ramsay is enjoying the beauty of nature, Mr. Ramsay just has a sigh with the words "poor little world". Mrs. Ramsay "seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating" [13]. Here, Woolf compares Mrs. Ramsay to spring water and fog beads, which implies that Mrs. Ramsay always cares much about her husband's feelings and needs. The author always connects Mrs. Ramsay with nature, indirectly conveying the idea that, just like what nature does to human-beings, females can constantly provide energy and support to males. Another description also shows this correlation: Mrs. Ramsay "seems to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself" [13]. Here, Woolf compares Mrs. Ramsay, who feels exhausted after consoling Mr. Ramsay, to the withered flower. These metaphors indicate the relationship between human beings and nature: human beings are attached to nature; nature gives birth to human beings.

3.2. *Lily Briscoe and Nature*

In the novel, Lily Briscoe is a female painter who has always been looked down upon by males. In that era, she hopes to remove the humble status as a woman and to be treated as an equal of men. Therefore, Lily is quite different from traditional women in that age. For example, showing no interest in topics about family and marriage which women always care about, she is keen on painting pictures, a hobby that only belongs to men in her days. She devotes herself to painting with the eagerness to finish her paintings. Mrs. Ramsay always persuades Lily to get married; however, Lily says that she is not interested in marriage. When Mrs. Ramsay tells Lily that an unmarried woman might miss the best of her life, Lily only retorts that, with her family and her favorite hobby painting as her companions, she feels satisfied with her current life. It is obvious that Lily pursues androphany in the process of painting so much that she even subdues her feeling as a woman. Lily's devotion to painting is like Mr. Ramsay's dedication to philosophy; Lily's respect for color in her creation is just the same as Mr. Ramsay's respect for facts. Her pursuit of achieving success like males makes her suppress herself as a female so much that she has isolated herself from nature, which actually restricts her artistic imagination in her creation. This separation of herself and nature makes her fail to finish her painting. This point can also be proved in the third part of the novel: after Lily and other people return to the beach house ten years later, she resumes the unfinished

painting, but at the beginning she still has little inspiration in creation. Here, the example implies that humans should not compulsively separate themselves from nature.

What's more, there is a detail that frequently occurs in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Lily is not certain about where to locate the tree in her paintings. In the third part of the novel, ten years have passed and the similar scene is mentioned again: "When she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little sprig or leaf pattern on the table-cloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation. There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture. Move the tree to the middle, she had said" [13]. Lily fails to paint the picture which can satisfy herself before she has achieved her self-reconciliation. She is so unsure about herself that she keeps changing the position of the tree in the picture all the time. Later, having realized that she should not alienate herself from nature, Lily finally decides on the position of the tree. Therefore, it can be learned that nature can provide humans with inspiration. It is not difficult to find that her frequent changing the position of the tree in the picture shows that her understanding of nature and her living method have been constantly changing. The fact that the arrangement of the tree is finally decided upon and she succeeds in finishing her picture just symbolizes that Lily has achieved her self-reconciliation, which is similar to the reconciliation between humans and nature.

4. The Ecofeministic Relationship Between Men and Women

The deterioration of the ecological relationship between people is a very important topic for modernist writers, especially for those sensitive writers like Virginia Woolf. As in many other works, Woolf shows much concern for the spiritual relationship between people in *To the Lighthouse* [14]. Moreover, Woolf believes that ecological problems include problems between people, because human beings always over-emphasize rationality and self-personality, but neglect others' personalities. This phenomenon especially happens between men and women.

4.1. *Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay*

Mr. Ramsay is obsessed with thinking about philosophical issues and talking about academic problems with other scholars. He has achieved a lot in his academic career, which is confirmed by his friend Mr. Bankes, who comments that Mr. Ramsay is one of those who will dedicate themselves to work before the age of forty. Mr. Ramsay has really attained a high level of achievement in philosophy. The way he communicates with Mrs. Ramsay and their children shows his arbitrariness and arrogance. For example, when Mr. Ramsay once again rudely prevents them from going to the lighthouse the next day, Mrs. Ramsay begins to retort Mr. Ramsay's decision so that she may comfort their son James. However, Mr. Ramsay becomes so raged that he even stamps his foot on the stone steps. He thinks that Mrs. Ramsay's promise to their

son James cannot come true, for the weather is uncertain. What's more, Mr. Ramsay is not satisfied with Mrs. Ramsay's exaggerating remarks. He himself respects rationality and facts very much. Therefore, he assumes that his wife's bad habit of overstating the case will negatively influence their children's personalities. He also thinks that Mrs. Ramsay's perceptual knowledge of life is typical of the stubborn and short-sighted views of women. Gradually, cracks occur in the relationship between Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay.

Moreover, the occasional refutation from Mrs. Ramsay makes Mr. Ramsay very angry at that moment. He usually loses his temper, and thus loses his gentleman character. After all, Mrs. Ramsay respects her husband very much. Whenever Mr. Ramsay shows his discontent, Mrs. Ramsay may instantly notice his emotional changes and responds immediately to meet his demands. Although Mr. Ramsay always makes complaints about his wife's personality, he still hopes that his wife may approve of his viewpoints and have admiration for him. In the long run, this has made Mrs. Ramsay very tired. She often feels that "she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions" [13]. Thus, the relationship between Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay has gradually teemed with conflicts and contradictions. The crack has become increasingly widened.

Although Mrs. Ramsay is very respectful to Mr. Ramsay, there is a bit of dissatisfaction in her heart, because Mr. Ramsay frequently criticizes her and tramples on her most cherished self-esteem. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay is unwilling to show her own inner world to Mr. Ramsay. As a matter of fact, in the depth of her heart, Mrs. Ramsay is also eager to obtain recognition and understanding from her husband. However, in their inharmonious relation, it is always Mrs. Ramsay who makes compromises; she unilaterally sacrifices her perceptual cognition to meet her husband's spiritual needs. Little by little, the relationship between husband and wife has become so tense that it is on the verge of breaking up. Finally, Mrs. Ramsay breaks down emotionally and death begins to approach her.

It is not until Mr. Ramsay's death that Mr. Ramsay comes to realize that he has lost his spiritual and emotional sustenance. He even begins to resort to Lily's attention and sympathy, which he once obtained from Mrs. Ramsay when she was alive. In order to cherish the memory of his wife, he returns to his beach house ten years later and takes the children to the lighthouse. However, what Mr. Ramsay does after Mrs. Ramsay's death cannot make his wife come back to life. He cannot redeem the relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and himself. Finally, Mr. Ramsay starts to recognize and appreciate the merits of women. It can be easily seen that the harmonious sexual relationship of ecofeminism is very important, especially in marriage.

4.2. Mr. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe

Lily's image is presented to readers through Mrs. Ramsay's description that Lily has little Chinese eyes and puckered-up face and that she never has any plan to get married. Although she is neither very young nor beautiful, she has her own

shining points. As Liu Shan points out, Lily is so strong-minded, courageous and independent that she will never easily give up [15]. The shining points in her personality can help her realize her dreams. Although the people around her, such as Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Banks, have denied her talents and dreams, she has not wavered in her pursuit of dreams. She seems not satisfied with her status as an elegant, beautiful and virtuous woman. She still loves those careers that should have belonged to men. She hopes to use her own brush to paint a sky of her own. However, those men, represented by Mr. Ramsay, believe that women do not have the ability to write or paint. What's worse, even Mrs. Ramsay, who is a female, looks down upon Lily, saying that no one will take Lily's paintings seriously. Thus, at first, Lily and Ramsay couple cannot get along with each other very well.

Lily is a new female who is different from Mrs. Ramsay, so her view of Mr. Ramsay is different from Mrs. Ramsay's. Her initial understanding of Mr. Ramsay is from Mr. Ramsay's son, Andrew. She gets to know that Mr. Ramsay is a philosopher whose research is on the nature of reality. Therefore, when she thinks of Mr. Ramsay's work, she will always be reminded of a scrubbed kitchen table, which is a symbol of her deep admiration for Mr. Ramsay's intelligence. However, when Lily once comments on Mr. Ramsay while chatting with Mr. Banks, she assumes that Mr. Ramsay is a petty, selfish and egotistical man. Meanwhile, Lily also finds that Mr. Ramsay loves dogs and his children. It is obvious that although Lily does not recognize some aspects of Mr. Ramsay's personality, she still admires Mr. Ramsay for his kindness and his academic achievements. Lily objectively comments on both merits and demerits of Mr. Ramsay. Therefore, on the one hand, Lily shows respect for Mr. Ramsay's profound knowledge; on the other hand, she expresses disapproval of his defects. Gradually, the relationship between Lily and Mr. Ramsay begins to change and also becomes pacified.

The change in Lily's views of Mr. Ramsay takes place in the last part of the novel. After a lapse of ten years, they meet again. Mrs. Ramsay has passed away, and Mr. Ramsay has lost his spiritual support. When Lily tries to finish her painting, which has been puzzling her for a long time, Mr. Ramsay frequently appears in front of Lily in the hope that he may seek comfort from her. At first, Lily tries her best to console him just like Mrs. Ramsay, but she finds that she cannot make it. She has no choice but to pretend to drink coffee in order to avoid talking to Mr. Ramsay. Lily is eager to finish the painting, but Mr. Ramsay frequently comes to her for consolation, which makes Lily feel that Mr. Ramsay is too annoying, because he keeps interrupting her thoughts. However, little by little, Lily finally decides to respond to Mr. Ramsay. She does not comfort him with direct soothing words but with praises that Mr. Ramsay's leather shoes are good-looking, which makes Mr. Ramsay very satisfied. Lily begins to show sympathy for Mr. Ramsay, but when she intends to comfort Mr. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay no longer needs it. He has become such a distinguished elderly man that he no longer needs her comfort and sympathy. Anyway, on the

whole, the relationship between Lily and Mr. Ramsay has changed for the better.

At the beginning, Lily is full of masculinity. She neither has the slightest of female's charm nor knows the beauty of euphemism. She only cares about her own personal dreams. Ten years later, Lily is no longer that radical. When she praises Mr. Ramsay's shoes, she regains a woman's feeling of compassion and sympathy. Lily finally completes self-reconciliation by fusing rationality and sensibility. She succeeds in combining characteristics of both men and women. By so doing, she has achieved a better understanding of art and even life.

Lily's change and self-reconciliation reflect the important feature of ecofeminism named androgyny, which means that one achieves the combination of sexual characteristics of both men and women. Therefore, Lily is a typical character that represents androgyny in Woolf's novel. With the character Lily, Woolf presents readers with her concept of ecofeminism.

5. Conclusion

Mr. Ramsay has achieved a lot in academic research on philosophy. However, he still wants to pursue the secular success that is actually out of his reach. Mr. Ramsay thinks that once he has obtained great achievement, he will not be forgotten in the long river of history and thus he may be eternal. In fact, nothing can be eternal. Nature has its own rules. Mr. Ramsay's thinking does not comply with natural law, which prevents his career from making further progress. Different from him, his wife Mrs. Ramsay enjoys beauty of nature and is full of love for life, making people around her happy and content. Thus, Woolf's ecological consciousness is revealed in this novel --- humans and nature co-exist in the same biosphere in which they should live in harmony with each other. As for the relationship between Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay, it is after Mrs. Ramsay's death that Mr. Ramsay comes to realize that he actually needs his wife and he shouldn't have ignored his wife's inner world. Mr. Ramsay begins to appreciate the merits of females. This shows that the harmony of the ecofeministic relationship between two genders is very important in marriage.

When it comes to the relationship between Lily and nature, Lily learns that she cannot isolate herself from nature. She gradually realizes that only when she reconciles herself with nature can she create good paintings. While dealing with the relationship with Mr. Ramsay, Lily is no longer that radical. Instead, she tries to have a better understanding of Mrs. Ramsay. Finally, Lily begins to regain a female's feeling of compassion. As a matter of fact, Woolf's ecological female consciousness finds expression in the character Lily. Woolf proposes that men and women should get along well with each other. In her views, women do not have to act as angels like Mrs. Ramsay. Instead, women can become new females like

Lily, who may have their independent spirits and may bravely pursue their own dreams.

All in all, the novel *To the Lighthouse* allows readers to reflect deeply on the balance between humans and nature, as well as the equality of men and women. It may provide people with inspiration to come up with some practical solutions to the ecofeministic problems even nowadays.

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