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Feature—*Twentieth Century Women's Writing*

Research Article:

Atoms, Freud and Gender in Nature: The New Modern Woman  
Emerges in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

*Sharon Worley*

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Atoms, Freud and Gender in Nature: The New Modern Woman  
Emerges in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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The fragmentation of the material world, shown through associative streams of imagery, mirrors that of the social structure as it is represented in *To the Lighthouse* through the characters. Scholars have remarked on the associative stream of consciousness patterns in Woolf's prose that mirror those of her literary contemporaries, James Joyce and Marcel Proust. Abstraction in modern art movements form a parallel with literary modernism, and also reflects the influence of modern physics through the breakdown of matter into movements of atoms and energy. Woolf's scientific approach encompasses both modern physics, which measures waves of light, water and sound, as well as the uncharted territory of the Freudian subconscious. By juxtaposing the social interactions of her characters, who suggest the normalcy of middle-class life, with associative streams of imagery, based on the elements of water, wind and fire, the author appeals to the reader's subconscious in her articulation of the fragmentation of both society and nature. In the modernist consciousness of the early twentieth-century, this fragmentation of imagery in both art and literature parallels modern scientific discoveries which seek to uncover the natural laws governing civilization and nature.

The character, Lily Briscoe, is the composite of Woolf, an author, and her sister, Vanessa Bell, an artist, who emerges as both a feminist and a modern woman in relinquishing traditional gender roles models in favor of forging new paths towards feminist liberation. Taken collectively Woolf, the omniscient narrator, and Briscoe, the feminist artist, represent the author/artist-observer who dissects society and nature in search of new modern alternatives. The portrait of the artist that emerges in *To the Lighthouse* is that of a dispassionate and objective observer of the ebb and flow of life's moments, landmarks, and momentary sensations. In this work,

Woolf's feminist implications are stated subliminally through the associative imagery she concocts.

This poses a dilemma for women prior to the feminist movement of the 1970s and employment equality. Woolf does not articulate the political and moral implications of her philosophy until after women win the right to suffrage in Britain in 1928 with her publication of "A Room of One's Own" (1929). In the absence of a cogent political feminist agenda referencing equal rights and women's suffrage, Woolf's novel is inspired by intellectual cross-currents forming the modernist consciousness. In writing drafts of her essay, "A Room of One's Own," Woolf addresses the issue of gender and civilization in terms similar to those outlined by Freud in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

[I] {one} can think [back] through [my] ones mothers, as through [my] ones fathers; [I can think] one can think of [civilisation] creating as the [inheritors of] {as a part} civilisation; or as an alien [...] when I walked down Whitehall, {there had been} a distinct break in my consciousness; [had] From being the natural inheritor of civilization, its statues, its government buildings, its triumphal arches, I had suddenly become an alien, a critic: and {as if I had thought back through a different universe to a woman in a tree; who had denied that this civilization was any of her doing} (Woolf, *Women and Fiction* 27).

This passage demonstrates the transition from the gender pronoun "she" to the universal "one," Woolf evades the gender analysis of Freud which suggests that women evolve or devolve in response to their fear of nature, while men evolve by conquering their fear of nature. In choosing the pronoun "one" for the title of the essay, "A Room of One's Own," Woolf seeks to "take claim to civilization," rather than becoming alienated from it (16-17). In conquering the forces of nature in a literary genre, Woolf turned to modern physics which appeared to deconstruct the natural elements on which civilization and its Freudian drives were founded.

In her article, "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World," Louise Westling writes Woolf "integrated the radical ontological and epistemological perspectives suggested by quantum physics" (855). Einstein's theories, which were well known among the generation of intellectuals of the 1920s, suggested a new rhetoric to Woolf, who sought to achieve "a symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all of the traces of the minds [sic] passage through the world; & achieve in the end, some kind of whole made of shivering fragments" (*A Passionate Apprentice* 393). More

recently, Paul Brown has argued that Einstein affirmed Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen's theory that "the boundaries of consciousness were fixed" (41):

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf depicts a relative world but also directly interrogates the issues of objectivity and realism that interested her father and that Einstein spent the remainder of his career trying to prove. Woolf's exploration of the fuzzy boundaries between subjects and objects coincides with the quantum physical understanding of a holistic universe. (40)

Woolf projected her feelings, and those of her characters, onto nature like a romantic poet, but analyzed them like a modern scientist. Following the departure of her close friend Vita Sackville-West, Woolf contemplates her feelings in terms of dissipating atmospheric effects and confides in her diary on 8 February 1926:

Of a dim November fog; the lights dulled & damped. I walked towards the sound of a barrel organ in Marchmont Street. But this will disperse; then I shall want her, clearly & distinctly. Then not-- & so on. One wants to finish sentences. One wants that atmosphere --- to me so rosy & calm [...] She taps so many source of life [...] sitting on the floor this evening in the gaslight [...] the invigoration of again beginning my novel [...] All these fountains play on my being & intermingle (*Women and Fiction* 57).

Woolf's lesbian feelings towards her friend found full expression in her feminist impulses and desire to deconstruct traditional gender roles in society. Her modern consciousness, which integrated an awareness of modern science and modern art with literary theory, allowed Woolf to effectively create tangential visual and verbal realms of reality and fantasy where traditional gendered social obligations recede like the rhythms of light, water and atmosphere to reveal new possibilities from the eclectic decaying layers of civilization.

The intersection of psychology and gender in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is apparent in her study of character archetypes and revision of gender roles. Woolf, however, claimed not to have studied Freud despite the fact that she and her husband, Leonard Woolf, became the psychoanalyst's English publisher. She acknowledged having "glanced" at the proofs, but insisted that her knowledge was purely superficial and her application of his techniques "instinctive" (Broughton 152). In fact, as Panethea Broughton has shown, Woolf's knowledge of Freud was filtered through her relationship with Roger Fry, who continuously confided his interpretation of Freud in his letters to Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell (155). Woolf quoted extracts from these letters in writing her biography of Fry (*Roger Fry*, 188, 196). On March 11, 1919, for example, Fry wrote to Bell that his "reading of Freud

would amuse you by its extreme indecency. Nearly everything from painting to book collecting is explained as a mere outcome of anal-eroticism" (Sutton 448; Broughton 155). While Woolf is not believed to have read Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) until she was writing Fry's biography in 1939, she clearly shared some of Freud's ideas which she learned through her association with Fry while she was writing *To the Lighthouse*. Freud defines the "ocean feeling" that some people experience as something "limitless, boundless and eternal" which "is a feeling of an indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the world as a whole" (2). Freud's dissection and analysis of society's motivating drives and instincts inspired Woolf's literary dissection of social role models as portrayed through the characters of the Ramsays onto whom she projected her parents' personalities. Woolf, however, rejected Freud's claim that instinct was stronger than reason and was the primary building block of civilization. On the other hand, according to Broughton, Woolf agreed that the "conscience is an internalization of external authority necessary for repressing civilized man's libidinous and aggressive instincts" (156).

According to Nicky Platt, "debate in Bloomsbury circles during the mid-1920s appears to have been especially stimulated by psychoanalytic theories, and in particular the challenge they threw down to artists' sense of their own worth and vision" (158). The artists resented Freud's claim that their artistic impulses implicated them as neurotics and sexual perverts. As a result of her association with the Bloomsbury Group, Woolf became acquainted with the art criticism of Fry and his essay, "The Artist and Psycho-Analysis" (1924). The scientific approach to art which this essay explores influenced Woolf's portrayal of the artist's approach to traditional social role models as a response to the 'psycho-analytic physics' of the natural world. According to Fry, Freud analyzes the Bohemian artist in contradistinction with the successful bourgeoisie artist who sublimates his unsatisfied libido in the creation of fantasy ("The Artist and Psycho-Analysis" 358). The Bohemian artist rejects social responsibility and the primitive taboos which gave rise to the social custom of marriage. Fry also references Freud's theory of language as evidence that "all human activities [...] have their ultimate origins in some part of the purely animal and instinctive life of our earliest ancestors" (352). Fry concurs with Freud on the most basic level that art arises from biological origins and social rivalry, and that its primary use is to convey feelings.

This preoccupation with the instinctive element of science suggests that art be used scientifically as an exploratory venue. Fry affirmed the modernist view that by creating images, the artist or author, references an associative stream of feelings

associated with those images so that “we shall get from the contemplation of the form the echo of all the feelings belonging to the associated objects” (355). The connection between civilization and art is important because it contains the nascence of human values and the building block of social structures. By analyzing and referencing these codes contained within her associative figurative imagery, the artist or author, can delve into the human psyche in order to reevaluate and reorder society. From the perspective of modern feminism, this is an essential activity. It not only liberates the feminist author, Woolf, who seeks to exorcise the memory of her parents who have died, but also opens up new vistas for future generations of feminists who dare to renounce traditional social gender roles in favor of modernism.

Woolf’s introduction to modern art began in 1910 with Fry’s exhibition of Post-Impressionism at the Grafton Galleries. According to Fry, in his essay “The Post-Impressionists”(1910), modernism emerges in art with the Impressionist, Claude Monet, who “changed his severe, closely constructed style for one in which the shifting, elusive aspects of nature were accentuated” (83). Paul Cezanne, the Post-Impressionist, drew upon this aspect of style while emphasizing design and architectural effects comparable to primitive art (83). John Hawley Robert notes the correlation between the abstraction of form in art and the simplification of characterization in Woolf’s novels, stating that she attempted to “do in the novel what Picasso and Cezanne did in art.” In the absence of traditional plot structures, “human relationships form a design [...] or composition in which individual personalities give way to an agreement among formal parts.” He also notes that the character, Lily Briscoe’s “ideas about art are identical with those of Roger Fry”(835). More recently, Jonathan Quick argues that the modernist style in art was a major influence on Woolf’s development. By 1924, according to Quick, she engages in a rational analysis which presents her characters as liberated and modern as a result of her recognition that “human consciousness,” like modern art, had changed (548).

By viewing Woolf’s fragmentation and formal analysis of the artist and her relationship to traditional social constructs as the tandem result of Freudian theory and modernist formalism in art and physics, a theory of the subconscious in art and literature emerges where Woolf seeks to reveal the underlying structure of social obligations while breaking them apart to reveal new modern feminist alternatives. Seeking to find meaning in life through the aesthetic pleasures of transitory, fleeting moments, Woolf’s protagonist, Lily Briscoe, is an observer who recognizes that the

dismantlement of social constructs and their responsibilities in the modern world is rewarded with aesthetic and intellectual pleasures as well as the achievements of artists and writers. While Woolf's sister, Vanessa, conformed to social expectations by marrying and having a child, Woolf resisted these social responsibilities. Delving into the Freudian subconscious realm of social origins and sexual taboos, Woolf's portrayal of the characters based on their parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, is also an act of scientific analysis, in which she reveals the origins of the social institution of marriage, while seeking to exorcise it of its necessary conformity in the modern world.

Woolf's uses symbolism in *To the Lighthouse* to contrast nature with the works of civilization, and specifically, men. The sea is contrasted with the phallic Freudian symbol of the lighthouse, while the tree in Lily Briscoe's painting represents the organic family tree and the artist's choice to reject nature's subservient gendered role. Faced with the prospects for a gender neutral society and full equality, Lily Briscoe focuses on the tree as a symbol of her emerging yet androgynous gender equality. Through her contemplation of the passage of time and the aging process, as portrayed through the lives of the Ramsays, Briscoe realizes that she is emerging as an independent woman and artist in a man's world. By the end of the novel, Lily Briscoe arrives at the correct placement of the tree in the center of her painting, and at the same time realizes that she does not need a man to complete her life or her identity, while Mr. Ramsay, whose character is based on Woolf's father, the academic national biographer, Leslie Stephen, cannot get past "Q," or queen and matriarchy, in the alphabet (37). This poses a new problem in a society dominated by a patriarchal social structure. It requires that the feminist deconstruct and restructure society. She has to rethink the problems of industry and nature, while nurturing future generations.

The shifting modern world offers new solutions for changes in the social structure. This modernism can be expressed in modern art with its dissolving forms. It also approximates the fragmentation of society and new discoveries in quantum physics, in which the natural world is broken down into waves and atoms. Finding the place of the modern woman among the debris of the past is the new purpose of the feminist. She forestalls marriage and children to establish her own identity and career. The prose of *To the Lighthouse* reveals the dissipation of nineteenth-century social constructs by making analogies with the waves and atoms of modern physics. Social interactions among characters in the novel are juxtaposed against temporary shifts of matter represented by the elements of wind, water and fire in

which atoms coalesce into patterns like waves for a brief time, before breaking apart to congeal in other shifting designs.

Mr. Ramsay represents the husband and male gender who has been the gardener of the world. He is "sensible, just" (69). He also outlives his wife. Together, they tend the garden, mend the greenhouse and raise the next generation. As divorce becomes a centerpiece of modern life, Woolf examines its basis in primordial origins. Here again, Freud and Fry, are her inspiration. In modern psychology, the imprint of the family social structure was regarded as most important influence on the psychological development of the human personality. In her diary, Woolf writes about her development of her parents characters within the novel. The patriarchal role of her father was the centerpiece in which she portrayed him "sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel*" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 18-19). Placed at the center of the social structure, Woolf deconstructs his authority and patriarchy. In the modern world, women do not need men as providers or defenders. But what is more interesting, is that according to contemporary scientific theories, she reveals this theorem for the reader's subconscious to intuit amid the literal fragmentation of modern atoms and currents harnessed by modern technology.

It is only within traditional gendered roles that Mrs. Ramsay is able to take on an authoritative role. She is like a queen descending upon her court when she holds a dinner party (82). She places herself in the role of the impresario who is responsible for both nurturing and entertaining her guests. The "beef, the bay leaf, the wine" form aesthetic currents of matter in fluids which parallel other actions such as the family of rooks whose black wings "cut into scimitar shapes" as they beat "out, out, out" (83) into the waves of air. Conversations also follow these patterns. Coffee is "that liquid the English call coffee." Butter and cream are also corrupted by the "English dairy system" about which Mrs. Ramsay speaks emphatically with "warmth and eloquence." Fire is another element which mimics human conversation, and which leaps from "tuft to tuft of furze," while her children and husband laugh (105).

Inspired by the self-reflexive examples of her parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, the characters Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay act out traditional bourgeoisie roles. Throughout the novel, Woolf reflects upon life's memories which are constructed as a series of fleeting and disconnected moments. The act of dining is an important landmark in middle class social constructs which transition the reader from the primitive problems of famine to the civilized world of social class and etiquette.

However, as modern society emerges, the rules of etiquette will not be broken “for the Queen of England or the Empress of Mexico” (82), even in sarcasm. Despite her children’s praises, Mrs. Ramsay fears she is a failure when she discovers that her life has no real meaning and she no longer loves her husband.

Lights symbolize the significance of coming together as a community. The house is lit up for the guests and the illumination can be seen from outside. It represents hospitality. When Mrs. Ramsay acts the part of the hostess at the dinner party, she is “like some queen, who finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them [...] and acknowledges their tributes silently, and accepts their devotion” (84-85). The dinner is the basis of community which establishes a “pecking order” in the social status of her guests. The dinner, consisting of *Boeuf en Daube* is the centerpiece of her life’s work and creative endeavors. She arranges her guests about the table, and serves them soup. As a group, the guests come together, but without aesthetic beauty. Adjectives like “merging, flowing and creating” suggest the creative role that Mrs. Ramsay plays in bringing the guests together. It is a rhythm, flux and flow comparable to the waves of the ocean, and forms a parallel with another descriptive series: “listening [...] sheltering and fostering” (86). Isolated and alone like “a weak flame guarded by a newspaper,” the guests lack the context of a cohesive whole or social group. Mrs. Ramsay’s task is to facilitate conversation and interaction among her guests as well as feed them. She becomes, in the capacity of hostess, a creator in Woolf’s concept of the universe which lacks concrete material solidity. Her the within the passage of time, humans, like atoms formed of particles of dust, are suspended in fluid and transported through the waves.

These elements are interspersed like symphonic movements within the broader structure of nature’s elements: the wind and waves. “The nights are now full of wind and destruction” which causes the trees to bend and break, while leaves and branches are scattered across the lawn (132) foreshadowing Mrs. Ramsay’s death. These are the elements which are reflected on the human soul and mark the passage of hours until death forces us to return to the earth’s nucleus and Freud’s ocean of life. Both Woolf, the omniscient narrator, and Briscoe the artist, emerge from this literary forge to construct new possibilities. The synthesis of modern science with modern art and literature facilitates the conquest of past and opens new horizons for future feminists. Woolf’s treatment of nature suggests that as a woman she was forced into a subservient gendered role, unable to fully join the modern world with its scientific discoveries and harnessing of natural forces by technological innovations. Instead, she forges a path for future generations of

feminists who bravely confront the forces of nature and dare to leave their own footprints in the sand.

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