# FRAMING LIFE: THE OTHER REALITY

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*Abstract*

What is real and what is fictional? Where does reality end for fiction to begin? In *To the Lighthouse* (which the present paper deals with, with a focus on Mrs Ramsay) as well as in the other novels, Virginia Woolf challenges the very concept of reality, changing the conventional rapport between the world outside (outer events) and the world inside (inner events/movements). The writer focuses on the characters' inner reality perceived as the "true reality", an attempt to frame and give meaning to life, built on experiencing, on contemplating the external world.

**Keywords: inner reality, lighthouse, waves, sharing, self-exposure, beauty**

The way we perceive ourselves and the outside world dictates the identity path we follow, always on the border between exterior reality (objective reality) and inner reality (subjective reality; reality filtered by the mind, the past conditioning the approach to reality).

The novel the present paper focuses on, *To the Lighthouse*, is both fictional and autobiographical, being partly regarded as an elegy on Woolf's dead parents, a lamentation rooted in her childhood, thus, to a certain extent, a representation of her own self, meant to help her come to terms with her past, bringing forth not only the characters' inner reality, but the writer's as well.

In *To the Lighthouse* the focus is on the mother figure, Mrs Ramsay, and to a lesser extent on the father figure, Mr Ramsay, on the parents Virginia Woolf needed to bring back into the present by means of the written word. These characters' inner reality dictates the rapport established with the others, that is with the world outside themselves, either making the others feel attracted, even fascinated by them (Mrs Ramsay – serene, beautiful, mysterious, genuine, young-at-heart, compassionate, protective), or making the others resent them (Mr Ramsay – frustrated, mediocre, weak, false, egotistic).

Memory and feelings constitute the bridge that connects the two perspectives on reality in the novel. In the preface to the translated edition, Vera Calin (1972: VI) states that in her novels, Virginia Woolf employs involuntary memory, triggered by common, insignificant sensory facts which bring to consciousness flashes of the past, while exterior reality is absorbed "in the texture of the characters by means of emotion" (VIII, our translation). Calin also emphasises the fact that the "tunnels" or "caves" (as she calls them) that Woolf creates in the depiction of each character, represent attempts to encompass the mystery of human nature and "to extend inner reality" (VII).

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Inner reality becomes then, the true reality Woolf refers to in her diary (Woolf 2005: 74), outweighing exterior reality, still escaping any definitive analysis. The masks imposed by the conventions of objective reality disappear and the characters reveal themselves in all the incommensurability of the interior labyrinth, where chronology and space lose their contour and weight.

According to Calin (XIV), we can distinguish in *To the Lighthouse*, a certain rapport established by the writer between "the inner flux and objective behavior", where external behavior belongs to an artificial existence characterized by rigid patterns, while the individual's experiences (seen from the perspective of inner reality/duration) are free of any imposed-on limitations, spontaneous, genuine.

We can 'trace' Virginia in Rose the child, in adolescent Nancy, in Cam, in Lily the woman painter, in animating scenes rooted in Woolf's memories, in the characters that remind of people in her life as she rewrites her own family history:

> *She 'is' the child Rose, choosing her mother's jewelry in the parental bedroom; she 'is' the adolescent Nancy, making an empire out of a rock pool and drawing in her skirts at the sight of adult passion; she 'is' Cam in the nursery being talked asleep by her mother, and Cam in the boat adoring and hating her father; she 'is' also Lily, painting this book. (Lee in Woolf, 1992: xxx)*

Painting the book indeed, for Woolf's process of writing (game and/or struggle) is just like her character's endeavoring process of painting, trying to catch the essence, to (re)create a world in which her dreams as a(n) artist/writer and her need to go into her past in order to be able to cope with the present are brought together. "The external frame of *To the Lighthouse*", says Gruber, "is like a static canvas, with chiaroscuro settings" (1935: 122), and she further asserts that the painting represents the attempt to objectify the problems and to explain life: "It is painting which has brought this explanation of life, painting with its defined object and its limitations of static time. It is painting which creates a satisfying form within the uncertain fluency of life" (123). We can assert then that writing is for Woolf precisely this way of creating form, of giving contour to life by means of representing inner reality, a process ("its attempt at something", *TTL* 225), a journey which finds its completion in a fathomless moment of illumination ("I have had my vision", says Lily Briscoe), when that unknown, missing something finally takes shape on the 'blurred' canvas of life.

Nothing extra-ordinary takes place in the novel, nothing that goes beyond the borders of common life, and yet, it is this common life that comes to frame the self in *To the Lighthouse*. If we refer to Mr Ramsay, it is obvious that the reality he accepts is not a deep one, but one of "simple objects and simple truths" (Apter 76), a reality 'enslaved' by his ambition to reach R in the alphabet of thought/knowledge which "engaged the energies of his splendid mind" (*TTL* 39), by his disappointment and frustration of never



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being able to reach Z, by his need for Mrs Ramsay's reassuring words and presence, and by his concern with the survival of his porous fame.

> *He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q. [...] But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach* R *it would be something. [...] In the flash of darkness he heard people saying – he was a failure – that* R *was beyond him. He would never reach* R. *On to* R, *once more.* R – *(TTL 39)*

Moreover, the distinction between the two classes of men Mr Ramsay depicts reflects his need for personal confirmation and his vanity as well. He is not one of "the gifted, the inspired" ones, as he calls them, but rather a "steady goer" repeating the letters of the alphabet one by one, struggling to get further and further:

> *[...] he could see, without wishing it, that old, that obvious distinction between the two classes of men; on the one hand the steady goers of superhuman strength who, plodding and persevering, repeat the whole alphabet in order, twenty-six letters in all, from start to finish; on the other the gifted, the inspired who, miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash – the way of genius. He had not genius; he laid no claim to that: but he had, or might have had, the power to repeat every letter of the alphabet from A to Z accurately in order. Meanwhile, he stuck at Q. On, then, on to* R. *(TTL 40)*

Mr Ramsay's reality is not his wife's: his rejects sympathy, beauty and hope, leaving him in a world of loneliness (Apter, 1979: 76), while Mrs Ramsay's comprises all three; this empowers her to give her husband the sympathy and comfort of beauty he longs for, to comfort and give hope to her children and to the ones in need while being concerned with her kids' survival and wishing to become "an investigator, elucidating the social problem" (*TTL* 13). A reality built around vanity, shallowness, helplessness versus one built around beauty, sacrifice, acceptance. And all these bring us to the idea of sharing, understood in terms of influencing the evolution and perception of the self. In *Virginia Woolf. A Study of Her Novels*, Apter points out the fact that in *To the Lighthouse*, "the consciousness, with its creative sensibility, not only discovers a true picture of the world but discovers a picture which can be shared" (75). External reality is not excluded and, as Apter asserts, the characters' personal visions can be communicated; one character can understand another character's perspective on the world outside, which may bring about an understanding of the world inside.

"That man [...] never gave; that man took" (*TTL* 163) says Lily Briscoe, her words reflecting Mr Ramsay's egotistic view of the world which denies the openness to the others (frustration and loneliness triggered, perceived by the others as signs of aggression due to an inability to communicate/share coherently and, let us say, assertively); still he



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needs the others (especially Mrs Ramsay) to open up to him, to reassure him of his self, to balance this 'cracked', vulnerable sense of self: "It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his bareness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life" (*TTL* 43). When Mr Ramsay looks into himself, says Apter, all he can find is "ignorance and emptiness which continually eat away at him", while his reality is "stark and immobile and deadly objective. He is unable to recognise his own individuality […]. As a result, the world has no meaning for him; it is blankly opposed to him, and he can discover nothing in it" (77).

However, sharing (understood as self-exposure) implies running some risks as well: on the one hand, giving so much of one's self to the others makes one's self/identity wither (Mrs Ramsay) and on the other hand, revealing one's self triggers a certain vulnerability (the others' answer to and impact on the exposed self; Lily Briscoe). Mrs Ramsay is both an observer (waiting for the others "to reveal themselves to her" Apter 84) and a sharer, and her beauty and sympathetic knowledge bind people together. But in doing so, her own self dissipates: "she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions" (*TTL* 37), "there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was lavish and spent" (44).

Apter (86) brings into discussion Mrs Ramsay's belief that the windows (which stand for the eyes) are the ones that should be open and not the doors (which stand for the self); it is exactly this feeling of privacy that one should protect in order to prevent the self from dissolution – windows allow a kind of distant investigation/contemplation, while open doors imply exposure, allowing a direct access to one's self. As Apter underlines, this sense of privacy, this self that Mrs Ramsay finds in solitude represents the basis of her responses to her family: "This self, however, which emerges in total isolation, is not opposed to her responses to her family, but the basis of those responses; it is from this silence that her knowledge of others comes" (86).

> *[...] it was a relief when they went to bed. For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of – to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. (TTL 69)*

What Mrs Ramsay experiences in this egoless state is a feeling of liberation, peace being brought to her (Fand 48). Nevertheless, the path of this self is not a linear one. Mrs Ramsay's beauty (a beauty of the spirit, first of all, through which her caring consciousness is shared) fades away when experiencing personal emptiness, together with the beauty of the reality she sees, the beauty of the world outside. "But what have I done with my life?", Mrs Ramsay asks herself at the dinner table as she feels "being past everything, through everything, out of everything, [...] outside that eddy. [...] There was no beauty anywhere." (*TTL* 91). She is now "a fading ship", as Lily perceives her, "drifting into that strange no-man's land where to follow people is impossible"; "How old she



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looks, how worn she looks, Lily thought, and how remote" (92). People being separate is what Mrs Ramsay sees outside herself now, feeling that "the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her." The 'ship' returns to the world of the household patterns, of domestic roles, the familiar pulse being felt again and "life being now strong enough to bear her on again" (91).

The bond between Virginia Woolf and her mother is reflected in the bond between their fictional representatives, Lily Briscoe and the subject of her painting, Mrs Ramsay (Diment 73). The first part of the novel focuses on Mrs Ramsay, on her tidal sea of beauty and the sense of balance she gives to the people around her. Passing away, she becomes the great absence still present in her family's and friends' inner reality, still influencing them. Her death alters everything and the balance is obliterated; the empty house with its doors locked, full of dusted memories, deepens the feeling of time that passed, life that is gone – a wreck of feelings and memories Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast try to infuse some life into while waiting for the long-departed ones to return and to complete the trip to the lighthouse (just another sign of Mrs Ramsay's influence). In the third part, the focus is on Lily Briscoe, the other important female character in the novel, representing "an alternative, creative path for women, than the marriage prospectus set out by Mrs Ramsay" (Goldman 61); she is a discoverer trying to find answers to her questions, and her search for truth/reality is reflected in her attempts to complete her vision, to portray on canvas not only Mrs Ramsay but also her own feelings, overcoming both her (that is, Mrs Ramsay's) absence and influence. The painting, which Goldman labels as "a self-conscious analogue for the novel in which it appears" (61), is an extension of Lily's (undisclosed) self and allowing somebody else to look at it implies self-exposure - a strange mixture of agony, excitement and intimacy:

> *But that any other eyes should see the residue of her thirty-three years, the deposit of each day's living, mixed with something more secret than she had ever spoken or shown in the course of all those days was an* ***agony****. At the same time it was immensely* ***exciting****. [..] But it had been seen; it had been taken from her. This man had shared with her something profoundly* ***intimate.*** *[...] one could walk away down that long gallery not alone any more but arm in arm with somebody – the strangest feeling in the world, and the most exhilarating. (TTL 58, 60, emphasis added)*

Intuition seems to be the one that reveals to Mrs Ramsay the others' hidden, true reality, making her see beyond false frames, beyond layers of conventional identities. She sees in her husband whom the kids resent, a man in need for compassion, for the certainty her love and beauty provide. Moreover, Charles Tansley is perceived by the others as an unpleasant, artificial individual, dominated by ambitions, while Mrs Ramsay intuitively senses his need for love, compassion, friendship; her comforting presence changes him, making him feel flattered, proud of himself and as if he had revived (*TTL* 15, 19).



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Mrs Ramsay's perspective on the outside world is shaped by sensory perception, by "the scale of sounds pressing on top of her" (*TTL* 20), sounds that are filtered from the perspective of the vacillating human consciousness, of the sounds of mental and emotional waves.

Present in almost all her works, the waves - as a symbol - suggest the passing of time and the rhythm of life where monotony is driven away by the movement and the newness of each wave, and anxiety, the feeling of being left adrift in the sea of emotions and thoughts is alleviated by the comforting presence of the lighthouse, which in the novel the present paper deals with is represented not only by the tower-like structure, but also by this privileged character, Mrs Ramsay, the driving force in the novel, flashing out light on the other characters' reality, guiding these travelers through their inner turmoil. Her tranquility is challenged once the rhythm is broken, especially when "her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand" (*TTL* 20). The moments when she senses these breakings of the soothing rhythm are moments of emotional turmoil when she moves from tension to the other extreme, as if "to recoup her for her unnecessary expense of emotion" (20), waiting for "some habitual sound, some mechanical sound" (21) that would make her feel at peace again.

> *[…] 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, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure 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 […]. (TTL 20)*

It is this rhythm of the waves, and by extension, of the world outside that Mrs Ramsay needs in order to keep the rhythm of the world inside, just as Woolf needs the rhythm of writing (her inner reality) in order to cope with the outer reality. The selves Woolf needs to display not only in *To the Lighthouse* but in the other novels as well, move from fiction to autobiography, mirrors framing the writer's adventure that brings together labyrinths, caves, mirrors, (inability to) love, longings, phobias, loneliness, death, survival, change, time, memory and inability to forget. The very quest for an identity that needs to unlearn reality outside and rethink reality within.



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**Abbreviated titles:**

*TTL* *To the Lighthouse*, London: Penguin Classics



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