The Image of the Lighthouse and Lily’s Pursuit of Artistic Dreams in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Baker M. Bani-Khair  
Ph. D. in English from Texas A&M University-Commerce, United States  
Hashemite University, Jordan  
bakribakr@yahoo.com

Shadi S. Neimneh  
Ph.D. in English from the University of Oklahoma  
Vice-Dean of Arts at Hashemite University, Jordan  
Corresponding Author: shadin@hu.edu.jo

Abstract

This paper studies the pivotal image of the "lighthouse" in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) from three different perspectives and with relation to one artistic figure in the novel. On a psychological level, the paper explores the image of the lighthouse that seems to synchronize with Lily Briscoe’s inner self that constantly changes in accordance with her psychological dreams and ambitions. In this regard, this image reflects her awareness, self-epiphany, and character development. On philosophical and ontological levels, the image of the lighthouse seems to reflect Lily's views about her being and existence, views that continually change as time goes on. The concept of place represented by the lighthouse manifests how Lily’s character has undergone a drastic development through her contemplation of art and life. Lily has got her own individual philosophy about life because she could also look at things from a different critical and philosophical perspective. Her perceptions of place, the surroundings, and the cycle of time influence her understanding of the meaning of life and death. The paper also investigates the role of art from an unconventional perspective so as to reveal essential concepts such as time, the idea of being, transformation, self-realization, and more importantly—death. As a result, Woolf’s novel emerges as a supremely symbolic, and hence a truly modernist, text.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; *To the Lighthouse*; Art; Imagery; Symbolism; Literary Analysis.
I. Introduction and Literature Review

The image of the lighthouse in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is a very essential aspect in the novel in terms of its association with artistic wishes and dreams, especially for Lily Briscoe who is a major character in the novel. The image of the lighthouse is one of the mysteries that make us think about its significance, dominance, richness, and more importantly about the development of this image which goes in line with the development of the artistic dreams for Lily. Lily’s change of psychological, ontological, personal and social perspectives about herself seems to correlate and synchronize with the constantly changing images of the lighthouse and her perception of the surroundings.

Although many critics have considered different aspects of Woolf’s novel like modernist structure and feminist themes, the rich imagery and symbolism of the lighthouse still warrant more attention. In a related article, Munca Daniela notes in “Virginia Woolf’s Answer to ‘Women Can’t Paint, Women Can’t Write’ in *To the Lighthouse*” that Lily “comes to realize that Mr. Ramsay, like herself, has doubts about the value of his work. She appreciates what he does. Having reached this moment of understanding, Lily will follow Ramsay's progress to the Lighthouse as she works on her painting; and she will complete her work simultaneous to his arrival there, thus bringing closure to her identification with him” (287). Lily begins to be more mature and aware of people around her. The artistic value that she has realized and appreciated in her work as well as in others reflects the amount of maturity, appreciation, and understanding of humanity and the value of human art. This awareness reflects a profound observation of her being and an ontological sense of the surrounding. It makes her appreciate her own inner self. It gives her the love that she always needed, and it bridges the missing chains that she has always looked for in life.

We get to recognize the synchronized picture between Lily’s artistic vision and the surrounding place which seems to provide Lily with power, imagination, and motivation. She does not stop and surrender to frustration, stifling conditions, and patriarchal domination. She goes on to discover the artistic self with strong will and determination. And finally we see this victorious confirmation and reassurance that she grants to her being as she exactly finds what she needs. Munca Daniela stresses the significance of this synchronized picture as Lily reaches the ontological understanding of her being. Daniela asserts that “*To the Lighthouse* culminates with Mr. Ramsay reaching the Lighthouse and Lily Briscoe having her vision. The Ramsay family is reunited and Lily Briscoe realizes that she is not haunted by Mrs. Ramsay’s statement ‘women must marry’. As she matures as a painter Virginia Woolf is overcoming her anger and frustration caused by the fact that she didn’t not fit into the generally accepted pattern of the woman’s role in society and in the family life, and especially of the status of women as artists” (288).

Elizabeth Hirt in “Language in the Silent Space: Virginia Woolf ’s *To the Lighthouse*” refers to the astonishing power of human soul in Lily’s vision about art. She argues that “Virginia Woolf creates a small moment that captures the final significance of the soul's place in this
compelling intimacy, contrasting the strength of the human soul with the spoken and written word. A few of the adult characters sit out on the beach on a dry windy day. Lily gazes at Mrs. Ramsay and reflects that though there is energy in paint and words, ‘What a power was in the human soul!’ (160). To Lily, and similarly to Woolf, the human soul, the essence of life which creates and secures the voiceless understandings of intimacy, possesses the most extraordinary in influence of all (70).

In addition, Ljiljana Ina Gjurgjan in “The Politics of Gender in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*”, notices the teleological value of Lily’s pursuit of art, “Her act of finishing her painting can therefore be seen as a moment of self-realization and a teleological ending of the artistic narrative” (15). However, what is the nuanced role and function of the lighthouse in the novel? What range of thematic and artistic ends does it serve? The following section is an attempt to answer such questions since current scholarship on the novel does not fully explore the full scope of symbolism and imagery related to the lighthouse.

II. Discussion: The Lighthouse between Imagery and Symbolism

Throughout the novel, the image of the lighthouse occupies the central focus of our attention as the novel begins and ends with it. First of all, on the personal level, Lily sees art much as a personal and philosophical view of life towards people, things, and existing realities, such as the reality of death and life. In her pursuit of art, Lily could realize how people think about life differently. Through art only, she could understand the very facts of life, views of people around her, dreams, realities, and existence besides her own contemplations of the surroundings and nature. For example, Lily has been greatly influenced by Mrs. Ramsay who gives her more encouragement to pursue her artistic wishes. Lily feels a great intimacy towards Mrs. Ramsay, and that intimacy is part of her own understanding of the depth of Mrs. Ramsay's emotional and sentimental life appearing as a persistent cling to dreams and hopes. Lily feels that there is something special about Mrs. Ramsay because she could see in her the love of wisdom, secrets, and most importantly the appreciation of art. This passage shows us the depth of feelings that Lily has towards Mrs. Ramsay:

> Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? Was it, once more, the deceptiveness of beauty, so that all one’s perceptions, half-way to truth, were tangled in a golden mesh? Or did she lock up within her some secret which certainly lily Briscoe believed people must have for the world to go on at all? Every one could not be as helter Skelter, hand to mouth as she was. But if they knew, could they tell one what they knew? Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay's knees, close as she could get, smiling to think that Mrs. Ramsay would never know the reason of that pressure, she imagined how in the champer of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasure in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into these secret chambers? (51)
Obviously, Lily sees in Mrs. Ramsay the dreams of art and the aspirations that women look for. She feels sympathy towards her for she has dreams that have never been real, but they all remained suppressed secrets. She sees in her the very dream of woman that she herself dreams to achieve. She could see in her face all the dreams that women want to have in this life, “surely, she could imitate from recollection the glow, the rhapsody, the self-surrender, she had seen on so many women’s faces (on Mrs. Ramsay’s for instance) when on some occasion like this they blazed up—she could remember the look on Mrs. Ramsay’s face into a rapture of sympathy, of delight in the reward they had, which, though the reason of it escaped her, evidently conferred on them the most supreme bliss of which human nature was capable” (150).

While Mrs. Ramsay has influenced Lily positively and given her inspiration and faith, Lily finds the completely opposite picture in Mrs. Ramsay’s husband, Mr. Ramsay, who did not seem to care about art, emotions, and faith. That actually goes in line with the parallel between the "lighthouse" and the ambivalent/contradictory views of people about it. On many occasions in the novel, Mr. Ramsay is described as a hypocrite, but she also keeps changing her views about him as much as she continues to consider her art and change her views and attitudes towards it. Lily could see in Mr. Ramsay the opposite representation of his wife. Although she is reluctant and unable to decide how to judge him, she could see in him the ugliness of tyranny and selfishness of the soul, “Lily Briscoe went on putting away her brushes, looking up, looking down. Looking up, there he was Mr. Ramsay-advancing towards them, swinging, careless, oblivious, and remote. A bit of a hypocrite? She repeated. Oh, no-the most sincere of men, the truest (here he was), the best; but, looking down, she thought, he is absorbed in himself, he is tyrannical, he is unjust; and kept looking down, purposefully, for only so could she keep steady, staying with the Ramsay” (46). Lily was aware of her own artistic potential regardless of the disappointing criticism and irony made by Mr. Ramsay of her own art, belittling her creativity of making critical and artistic views about life. But Lily was drawing what she feels on the picture trying to again more confidence and power, and thinking of Mr. Ramsay’s criticism of woman as we see in this passage:

He was really, Lily Briscoe thought, in spite of his eyes, but then look at his nose, look at his hands, the most uncaring human being she had ever met. Then why did she mind what she said? Women can’t write, women can’t paint—what did that matter coming from him, since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it? Why did her whole being bow, like corn under wind, and erect itself again from this abasement only with a great and rather painful effort? She must make it once more. There’s the sprig on the table cloth; there’s my painting; I must move the tree to the middle; that matter’s nothing else. Could she not hold fast to that, she asked herself, and not lose her temper, and not argue; and if she wanted revenge take it by laughing at him?“ Oh, Mr. Tansley,” she said, “Do take me to the light house with you. I should so love it.” (86)

Lily’s views about herself and others keep changing as time goes on, but also her reflections of the place change with the constant change of the place itself. The lighthouse symbolizes how one’s experience of the self also changes with time and place. Lily’s character has undergone a drastic development throughout her journey of art. Furthermore, her perception about herself and life are all in association with the change of the surroundings including people around her, things, and the place. In fact, her sense of the surroundings around her has given her a new philosophical view about art and life. She could realize how art can be so intimate to the soul.
when it is closely juxtaposed with one’s vision about life. The image of the lighthouse and the place seems to influence Lily’s views about herself, existence, art, life, death, and relationships.

On a psychological level, Lily’s character and image of the self have undergone several changes which are actually in association with the psychological and social representations for the lives of people around her and the image of the inspiring place. Lily who has a dream to become an artist, and who just keeps seeing her potential of pursuing her own artistic dreams toward the very end of the novel, keeps struggling with an inner conflict, suspecting her own desires and dreams, and doubting her own potentials. The place is always to her, a sense of pursuit and a destination to begin her own journey of pursuing art with, including people like Mrs. Ramsay. Throughout the development of her artistic character, she could overcome her doubts and feel the sense of triumph over the fear within her by the moment she had that epiphany about herself, when she could arrive at what she was seeking from the very beginning of the novel. She could realize at the end how art can be more like satisfaction, a journey into life, maturity and experience. By the time Lily finishes her painting, she frees herself from the boundaries of the self and the place which once made her feel skeptical about herself. Lily was aware that Mr. Ramsay’s criticism of her was not more than a frustration that she can overcome through her trust in her potential. In the beginning of her artistic journey, Lily lost the trust in herself, and in her art, but she could overcome that feeling the moment she had that realization through forcing her way and shaping her own view about life. Lily sees that the lighthouse is just a far-fetched dream that is always sought by people, always attempted, visited, and envisioned. The lighthouse seems more of spiritual and psychological value than being just a place. For Lily, and for most of the characters, the lighthouse carries all the memories of the past and all the visions for the future. To Lily, the lighthouse represents the symbols toward the unreachable future, and the far-fetched dream, which from her point of view cannot be attainable. The lighthouse represents the unreachable dream that reflects her own dream, which we do not see come into being, but it remains Lily’s vision which is correlated with the dream of art and life. From the very beginning of the novel, the lighthouse looks like a destination for hope, happiness, and a place for contemplating one’s self. And for Lily, it is part of her own psychological life; it is more like an ultimate dream which remains unfulfilled up to the very end of the novel. This image is constantly developing and changing in accordance with the development of the psychological maturity within Lily’s self, and also with the maturity of her experience of the philosophical and critical views of life.

Psychologically speaking, the fear of loss, despair and failure appear to dominate a great part of the inner psychic motivation that keeps making Lily change her perceptions about things. In addition, Lily keeps projecting her own inner views about life and art on the place, and she also keeps emptying her own emotions on her painting and through her reflections on the lighthouse, which exercises a tremendous influence on her own artistic wishes. For example, the lighthouse seems so far to her in the same way she thinks that she is so far from grasping her own dreams, and her own artistic wishes. This is a quotation that describes Lily’s feelings about the lighthouse:

Her sympathy seemed to be cast back on her, like a bramble sprung across her face. She felt curiously divided, as if one part of her was drawn out there-it was a still day, hazy; the light house looked this
morning at an immense distance; the other had fixed itself doggedly, solidly, here on the lawn. She saw her canvas as if it had floated up and placed itself white and uncompromising directly before her. It seemed to rebuke her with its cold stare for all this hurry and agitation; this folly and waste of emotion. (156)

The lighthouse seems more like a vision which Lily could picture and depict at the very end of the novel through finishing her own artistic piece of art and gaining a new vision which she was searching for early in her life. By the time she finishes her painting, Lily has got her own individual philosophy about life, and she can also look at things from a different critical and philosophical angle. She has seen her vision in her art and painting, but her vision is also parallel to the embodiment of the lighthouse which eventually remains as a dream that has never come into reality. As we see in this quotation at the very end of the novel, Lily has found her vision:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (208)

The thing that Lily could come up with through her art is the vision which she makes about herself, the existence of things, and the passing of time and its influence on things including her own self. This parallel is made clear when we see how Lily reflects on the place, and how the lighthouse could represent what has been totally suppressed within Lily. Her awareness of her own vision and her perception about things have become an intertwined texture of her psychological and philosophical views about things. This is clearly seen when we compare her painting with the lighthouse and how they completely look identical. Also, the idea of being and existence seems vital in her view about herself, the surroundings, and the lighthouse. She says, “Against her will she had come to the surface, and found herself half out of the picture, looking, a little dazedly, as if at unreal things, at Mr. Carmichael. He lay on his chair with his hands clasped above his paunch not reading, or sleeping, but basking like a creature gorged with existence. His book had fallen on to the grass” (178).

Lily could see in the lighthouse the things that she aspires to get. She could see the missing things that she keeps searching for but never have found like the ultimate freedom, the beauty of the self, eternity and continuation. The more she contemplates the lighthouse, the more she discovers the harmony and the unity of the self and the very axioms of life and death. Lily can see how much she belongs to the place through seeing the very human images of life as well as the very true relations of being and harmony with the place. She begins to realize that deep intimacy of the self with nature, and with the very surroundings of the place. Lily can also see the paradoxes and juxtapositions of life and death, sorrow and happiness, depth and shallowness, light and darkness. She knows that only through darkness could one see light, and that through the others one could see the self:

Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon
seemed to her limitless. There were all the places she had not seen; the Indian plains; she felt herself pushing aside the thick leather curtain of a church in Rome. This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was space, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles) but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the light house, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. (63)

The lighthouse symbolizes the dreams and wishes of characters in the novel. Lily’s artistic wishes begin from that place and extend to the end of her artistic attempts as a haunting, irreplaceable memory that has its effects on the artistic wishes that Lily has been searching for from the outset. Obviously, Lily’s artistic journey blooms out of this place and extends through a developmental stage which finally leads her to discover what she has been seeking from the very beginning. This is very a noticeable idea when analyzing her attachment to her artistic wishes and her contemplation of the place which finally gives her that artistic satisfaction, but again the image of the lighthouse has also changed by the time she can make her dream come true. It is self-realization that makes her see her way through the place. The light that she could see in the lighthouse is only the light that she could discover in herself at the end, and by the time she had this self-epiphany she could notice how she has changed and how things around her have also completely changed by time.

The image of the lighthouse is always connected with someone’s attitude toward life, art, hope, despair, achievement, or death. To Lily, the lighthouse is also connected with the most intense psychological moments of self-realization and epiphany which the characters experience but in totally different psychological responses that express their dreams and ambitions. However, to some of them the lighthouse seems like a dream that should come true, while some of them see it as a destination for happiness or childhood dreams. David Diaches in his book *Virginia Woolf* refers to this fluidity and retrospect of one’s personal views about place in *To the Lighthouse* when he says, “The fluidity which characterized Mrs. Dalloway and *To The Light House*, the quite and effective mingling of objective even and character’s thought stream, the subtle alteration of retrospect and anticipation so as to win free of the limitations of traditional chronological narrative, tended to blur the edge of personality: characters are resolved into their ever changing component parts, and their essential unity is difficult to disentangle from multifarious stream of thoughts and impressions in terms of which they are characterized” (104). So, dreams of childhood are told to us as flashbacks that show how deep Lily and others are rooted in the place, signifying how fresh these memories are and their influence on everyone’s characters, especially Lily as well as the Ramsay’s sons. In addition, these dreams appear as conflicts between reality and imagination. Lee in his book *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* refers to
the significance of the overlap between the real and the metaphorical conflict within Lily, asserting the significance of the place which relates to this issue we are dealing with (126). As we may notice, Lily’s childhood dreams were all coming as flashbacks and reflections on the lighthouse. Lily keeps watching the place and people in the place connecting her past with her future, her childhood memories with her womanhood aspirations. We notice in this passage how Lily could see in the place the memories of her childhood through the stress on the word “children”,

Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at that light, for example. And it would lift up on it some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind like that “children don’t forget, children don’t forget” which she would repeat and begin adding to it, it will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, we are in the hands of the lord. (63)

Also, the lighthouse means a lot to Ramsay’s sons. For example, the lighthouse means childhood dreams, the past and the future as we see when Paul expresses his feelings after he came to the lighthouse saying, “‘I have done it, Mrs. Ramsay; thanks to you.’ And so turning into the lane that led to the house, he could see lights moving about in the upper windows. They must be awfully late then. People were getting ready for dinner. The house was all lit up, and the lights after the darkness made his eyes feel full, and he said to himself, childishly, as he walked up the drive, lights, lights, lights, and repeated in a dazed way, lights, lights, lights, as they came into the house staring about him with his face quite stiff. But, good heavens, he said to himself, putting his hand to his tie, I must not make fool of myself” (78). To Paul, the lighthouse means what it means to Lily, but with different ambitions, views, and aspirations.

On the ontological level, Lily always has her view about existence that she continuously sees in her own painting and how that painting represents a transitory moment of existence exactly as the person who appears in it, but also her view about existence is correlated in the same way with emptiness, hollowness and death that she feels when she contemplates the lighthouse. Lily could also see how death can just be a natural part of life’s cycle. But she could also see how immortal art is, even though she doubts that her painting would be, and that one day it is going to die exactly like human beings. Lily also starts to realize that death could be as necessary as life and that all things would die because they are all part of nature. Lily could see both death and life in her picture, and that immortality through art might also be something impossible. The picture that Lily was drawing is a parallel for death and life images,

She looked at her picture. That would have been his answer, presumably-how “you” and “I” and “she” pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint. Yet it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa; yet even so, even of this scrawl, not of the actual picture, perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it remained forever, she was going to say, or, for the words spoken sounded even to herself, too boastful, to hint, wordlessly; when, looking at the picture, she was surprised to find that she could not see it. Her eyes were full of a hot liquid (she did not think of tears at first) which, without disturbing the firmness of her lips, made the air thick, rolled down her cheeks. She had perfect control of her self-oh yes! - in every other way. (180)
The image of the lighthouse seems to take all that space and place that goes in line with Lily’s views about life, and her own wishes of making her dreams come true. To Lily, the lighthouse seems much more like a whole picture of life that reflects her personal attitude and philosophy about her being and existence. As we notice in this quotation, Lily contemplates her own being, and looking at herself all that she could see is emptiness, “The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low. Then one gave it up; then the idea sunk back again; then one became like most middle-aged people, cautious, furtive, with wrinkles between the eyes and a look of perpetual apprehension. For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? Express that emptiness there? (She was looking at the drawing-room steps; they looked extraordinarily empty)” (178).

Obviously, the emptiness that Lily feels is also connected with her sense of the gradual wasting of her own artistic wishes and dreams that have never come into being exactly like the door steps which seem to her empty, hollow, and meaningless. Lily continues to contemplate her own being, as we notice in this passage, “It was one’s body feeling, not one’s mind. The physical sensations that went with the bare look of the steps had become suddenly extremely unpleasant. To want and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have – to want and to want-how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again!” (187)

From an ontological perspective, the novel sheds light on the idea of being and how one’s being can just be developing and growing as one grows up within time and place. Lily’s being and her conceptions about others have totally changed by the time we see certain realities change across the place. Actually the chapter entitled “Time Passes” shows the idea of being as one’s sensation of change about the self, and how the self can change as long as the realities of time and place change consecutively. Probably, the sense of time passing, and the sense of waiting as time passes and changes entities is one of the most suggestive issues that the novel tackles through Lily’s philosophy of life, time and place.

In fact, Lily’s ontological sense of being was part of her contemplations of nature, her reflections on place and time. She could raise all these ontological questions about human existence, and the doubts one has about the very true facts of death and life. She could see in nature and in her art the questions she was thinking over and over and never found an answer for. Only during this long journey with the self and art and through nature could she reach the facts she was looking for:

The nights now are full of wind and destruction; the trees plunge and bend and their leaves fly Heleter Skelter until the lawn is blistered with them and they lie packed in gutters and choke rain-pipes and scatter damp paths. Also the sea tosses itself and breaks itself, and beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw off his bed clothes and go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul. The hand dwindles in his hand; the voice bellows in his ear. Almost it would appear that it is useless in such confusion to ask the night those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore, which tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer. (128)
This intimacy that Lily feels towards nature is an ontologically profound experience, as Lily feels that she is part of this changing world and that she is herself changing within the boundaries of time and place. She feels that she belongs to nature, the silence in the house, the soils of the land, and the creatures around. In fact, the image of the house as old, abandoned, deserted, grassy, and silent is just a mere reflection of Lily’s images about life and death. Also the depiction of the four seasons is also a representation of that cyclical rotation of life and death which Lily keeps raising questions about to reach a point where she could locate herself in nature and find answers for her own existence. Lily was always asking questions about her own existence, and she was seeking answers in nature, as this passage explains, “Did nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began with equal complacence; she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture. That dream, of shaping, completing, finding in solitude on the beach and answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath? Impatient, despairing yet love to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations), to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken.” (134)

In fact, there is a big focus on the image of light in the novel, and that image of light always represents something different every time we see this light coming in and fading away. The image of light throughout the novel seems to represent different responses to people, especially Lily. Interestingly enough, the coming of the light reflects ambivalent responses and feelings. Sometimes, the light represents the sense of fear and anxiety people have about their very tiny things in their future. For example, Lily was seeing this light as an omen for doom, impending evil, death, as we see in this passage: “the light in the garden told her that; and the whitening of the flowers and something grey in the leaves conspired together to rouse in her a feeling of anxiety” (61). Sometimes, light is connected with beauty of the self synchronized with the beauty of nature that Lily and Mrs. Ramsay consistently see around them, as we see in this passage, “she looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie. She praised herself in praising the light, without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching; she was beautiful like that light. It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus(she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself.”(64)

At other times, the light seems to trigger the past dreams with the dire nostalgia and compassion for the past days, “the lights were rippling and running as if they were drops of silver water held firm in a wind. And all the poverty, all the suffering had turned to that, Mrs. Ramsay thought. The lights of the town of the harbor and the boats seemed like a phantom net floating there to mark something which had sunk” (68). The image of light seems also to tie with the ontological perspectives that Lily keeps thinking about. It is always tied with the question of being and existence, with “who am I?”, as we see in this passage:

Some cleavage of the dark there must have been, some channel in the depths of obscurity through which light enough issued to twist her face grinning in the glass and make her, turning to her job again, mumble out the old music hall song. The mystic, the visionary, walking the beach on a fine night,
stirring a puddle, looking at a stone, asking themselves “what am I,” “what is this”? Had suddenly an answer vouchsafed them, they could not say what it was) so that they were warm in the frost and had comfort in the desert. But Mrs. McNab continued to drink and gossip as before. (131)

Interestingly enough, the beam of light also seems to represent the very narrow hope that Lily and Mrs. Ramsay cling to. The light represents a woman’s dreams of family and stability, “The lighthouse, the lighthouse, what is that got to do of some primeval gust (for really he could not restrain himself any longer), there issued from him such a groan that any other woman in the whole world would have done something—all except myself, thought lily, girding at herself bitterly, who am not a woman, but a peevish, ill-tempered, dried-up old maid, presumably” (151). Throughout her contemplations of the place, Lily could have changed a lot of her views and concepts about life, love, struggle, and art. For example, through her criticism of the relationships between Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay, she could find out that love is also changeable and constantly varying exactly like the way we change our views about the place. From her point of view, love should be based on congruity and understanding. She could see how love can just be one of the richest things that one can see in nature and in the unity of nature because love is a natural part of this unity. This quotation shows us how intimate and close Lily was to nature, “It was some such feeling of completeness perhaps which ten years ago, standing almost where she stood now, had made her say that she must be in love with place. Love had a thousand shapes. There might be lovers whose gift it was to choose out the elements of things and place them together and so, giving them a wholeness not theirs in life, make of some scene, or meeting of people (all now gone and separate), one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers, and love plays.” (192)

III. Conclusion

The image of the lighthouse is clearly influential and powerful, since it represents the lively aspirations and dreams that are intertwined with people’s perspectives about life. This central image is also synchronized with the images and flashes of life, whether they are psychological, social, or personal/familial. These constantly changing images of the lighthouse symbolize a constant change in people’s conditions, dreams, and ambitions. More importantly, they suggest the cyclical rotation of life and death images that keep reoccurring in the place. In brief, the constant juxtaposition of the lighthouse against Lily’s artistic vision and the lives of the Ramsays makes it a pivotal symbol of creativity, flux, hopes, frustrations, and importantly achievements. The multi-layered psychological, ontological, and philosophical meanings and associations of the lighthouse make it a recurring symbol in the novel and a unifying thread in a modernist, lyrical novel that works more through subjective reactions and impressions rather than conventional narration and realistic details. And just as the lighthouse is a pivotal image occupying a significant role in the lives of characters in the novel, it is equally a structuring device that endows the novel with shape and focus in the same way it endows characters’ lives with meaning.
References


http://www.ijhcs.com/index.php/ijhcs/index