

JFLC

A R T I C L E S

"Beauty Would Roll Itself up": From Beauty to the Feminine Sublime in *To the Lighthouse*

◎ Yue YANG

Beijing Foreign Studies University

Abstract: Known for her unconventional approach to shaping feminist aesthetics through writing, Virginia Woolf portrays a woman painter's quest for autonomy in the novel *To the Lighthouse*. Critics have probed Woolf's insightful rewriting of the sublime from different angles, but systemic research into her innovative refashioning of the feminine sublime in her novels remains inadequate. Applying the classic and feminist theories on the sublime and beauty, the article investigates how Woolf reimagines a new sublime mode for Lily Briscoe. The article first focuses on how Virginia Woolf writes her personal life into Lily Briscoe's quest for the feminine sublime: the archetypal mother's beauty haunts the woman artist until she works out a new pattern that redefines the position of beauty and sublimity. It then examines Lily's first step to challenge the traditional aesthetics of beauty by embracing her heterogeneity; namely, by accepting her ambivalent attitudes towards Mrs. Ramsay's maternity, she empowers the inner self oppressed by the patriarchal society. Furthermore, Lily enriches the feminine sublime by breaking beyond the subject-object binary and succeeding in building intersubjectivity between her and Mrs. Ramsay, and her and Mr. Ramsay. The article concludes that to attain autonomy, Lily Briscoe builds her feminine sublime by cultivating her heterogeneity and subjectifying the Other. It further reveals that through the portrayal of Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf conveys her rebellion against the beauty fashioned within patriarchal discourse and promotes the new sublime for women artists like herself.

Keywords: *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf, Lily Briscoe, feminine sublime, feminist aesthetics

CLC: I561

Document Code: A

Article ID: 2096-4374(2024)02-0103-16

DOI: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202402009

Introduction

As “one of the keenest and most articulate members of the Bloomsbury Group” (Reed 21), the feminist writer Virginia Woolf injected fresh vitality into the abstract art form characterized by post-impressionism in Bloomsbury aesthetics and developed her unique feminist aesthetics through writing. Focusing on one of Woolf’s representative novels, *To the Lighthouse*, featuring a woman painter’s self-quest and visual arts elements, this paper studies how Woolf reinterprets beauty and sublimity by shaping the heroine Lily Briscoe’s feminine sublime, thereby enriching her feminist aesthetics.

Woolf’s aesthetics represented in her writing has vital “feminist implications” (Goldman 2). Particularly, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf’s insightful rewriting of beauty and the sublime well mediates between aesthetic innovation and feminist conviction, which are “deeply interlinked” (Minow-Pinkney 8), and is thus essential for us to understand her feminist aesthetics. The paper argues that confronted with the restraining conventional beauty embodied in Mrs. Ramsay and her mother Julia Stephen, Woolf boldly rejects this traditional beauty, preferring instead to pave the way for the new mode of the feminine sublime. This becomes Lily’s key to gaining autonomy, while conventional beauty is destined to “roll itself up” (*To the Lighthouse* 243) and recede into the background.

Many of the early researchers focused on Mrs. Ramsay’s domesticated and potent beauty (Humm 237–254; Lilienfeld 345–376), while studies into Woolf’s exploration of a new form of sublimity have arisen recently and more work is still required. Erin Speese argues Woolf reworks the masculine sublime particularly by insisting on a “feminist ethics of intersubjectivity” (23)—an intersubjective sublime—revolving around Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, thus reaching subject/object dynamics. Also focusing on subject, Makiko Minow-Pinkney explicates, in her monograph *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Subject*, such female characters in Woolf’s writings as Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* need to break beyond the symbolic paternal order and articulate their somatic truth, but she does not relate it to the sublime. Satya Raj Subedi traces the use of the privileged moment in *To the Lighthouse* from the perspective of sublimity, yet he focuses on sublimity featuring elevated emotions including James’ experience of the sublime moment at the prospect of a trip to the lighthouse, without unfolding Lily’s unconventional aesthetic and feminine sublime. Patrick Colm Hogan analyzes beauty and sublimity as presented in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as evidenced by Clarissa’s attachment to Sally and, the protagonist’s existential loneliness, among other things, which echo Woolf’s exploration of the aesthetic pair through fictional rewriting.

As a historical pair in aesthetics, beauty and sublimity, with their long-established tradition, deserve further research to help us understand how the feminine sublime works in Woolf’s fiction. The tradition of beauty and sublimity, which began with Longinus and was developed by Burke and Kant, established the two aesthetic concepts as antagonistic to each other and labeled them as possessing distinct gendered natures. According to Edmund Burke, “the sublime is a virile masculine power, one that is contrasted with its passive feminine counterpart, the concept of the beautiful” (qtd. in Shaw 10). The innate aesthetic features have been preserved

in the gender-stereotyped pair. What is beautiful is connected with its being comparatively small, smooth, not obscure, and "light and delicate," while the sublime is defined as being vast, rugged, "dark and gloomy," and massive (Burke 124). Consequently, the feelings evoked in an aesthetic subject differ greatly—the former makes us peaceful and light-hearted, whereas the latter fills us with a sense of awe, profound intricate thoughts and some passion that "excites the consciousness of our power of overcoming every resistance" (Kant, *Critique* 102). Women had no approach to sublimity but to be "beautiful" as defined in the male-centered aesthetics. Nevertheless, since the late 20th century, women scholars have increasingly probed into a "sublime of their own." Among them, Barbara Claire Freeman first put forward the concept of the feminine sublime by arguing that the canonical theories within patriarchal discourse, for instance, the Burkean and Kantian sublime, "evaluate, domesticate and ultimately exclude an otherness, almost without exception, that is gendered as feminine" (4); thus a new sublime mode is desirable for women confronting limitations to exert agency. The feminine sublime means women can engage with the sublime, generally referring to experiences that are awesome, transcendental, and emotionally intense in ways that may differ from traditional masculine perspectives.

In short, Woolf's exploration of the sublime has always been a worthwhile topic in studying *To the Lighthouse* from the perspective of feminist aesthetics. As mentioned above, it is sometimes examined in conjunction with beauty. Nevertheless, systemic research into Woolf's innovative take on shaping the feminine sublime in *To the Lighthouse* remains inadequate. Those who analyze Mrs. Ramsay's beauty do not further probe into its influence on Lily Briscoe's outlook on individual independence, and what kind of sublimity Lily and her painting have made deserves more attention. Hence, this paper will focus on how Lily's artistic pursuit and personal relationships reflect her quest for the feminine sublime and feminist autonomy by tracing her acceptance and rejection of Mrs. Ramsay's charm. Furthermore, it reveals that through Lily Briscoe, Woolf attained the feminine sublime as a woman artist herself. The analysis will apply the classic theories and feminist ones on the sublime and beauty and delve into Lily's feminine sublime, embodied in individual heterogeneity and intersubjectivity.

Reimagine the Sublime: Woolf Writing Life into *To the Lighthouse*

Why does Virginia Woolf refashion a new mode of the feminine sublime in her works? How much can we detect from the characters in *To the Lighthouse*, given its autobiographical quality, the realistic basis for the author's and Lily Briscoe's coping with beauty and constructing sublimity? By analyzing Julia Stephen as the haunting beauty of the archetypal mother, and the conundrums facing women artists like Woolf and Vanessa Bell, this section argues that the feminine sublime became an outlet in Woolf's time for women artists to exert their agency and embrace autonomy. Thus, it remains a task for Lily Briscoe, as portrayed by Woolf, to rise over the patriarchal traditions to create "a new sublime mode for her own ends" (Krouse 298).

In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe is overwhelmed by Mrs. Ramsay's matriarchal beauty until

age 44, when she finally balances her vision and the mother figure's influence, which parallels the author's personal experience. Though her mother died when she was merely 13, Woolf too was haunted by her mother's beauty until 44, the same age as Lily in the third part. As clarified by Margaret Drabble, "There is no doubt that Julia, herself a famous Pre-Raphaelite beauty, was the model for the generous, hospitable, kind-hearted Mrs. Ramsay" (xiii). Julia Stephen, the prototype of Mrs. Ramsay, inherits the qualities of the Great Mother archetype, which, according to Erich Neumann, symbolizes an idealized version of the mother figure: nurturing, caring, and protective. On one hand, Julia Stephen was selflessly affectionate towards her husband and children and charitably helped the underprivileged, for which Vanessa Bell, Woolf's sister, commented that Mrs. Ramsay well reflected the "extraordinary beauty of [her mother's] character" (xiii). On the other hand, such selflessness and benevolence shaped Julia Stephen as a traditional Victorian housewife, an Angel in the House, so that she shouldered domestic pressure and exerted her matriarchal influence on her daughter.

Julia Stephen's beauty made her a beautiful object in others' paintings, just as Mrs. Ramsay in Lily's picture. As a result, under the gaze of a photographer or painter, Julia was always treated as a passive object, mirroring her position in the family—a housewife expected to satisfy others' needs. Leslie Stephen, however, frequently compared his wife to the Madonna for her beauty and perfect motherhood. As Stephen himself portrayed Julia in his photograph album in an idealistic way,

The love of a mother for her children is the most beautiful thing in the world [...]. [Julia] was a perfect mother, a very ideal type of mother; and in her the maternal instincts were, as it seemed, but the refined essence of the love which showed its strength in every other relation of life. (83)

Just as Julia's acceptance of the socially constructed feminine role "sets the tone for centuries of the female moral obligation to submissiveness" (Pepe 47), Mrs. Ramsay is much more concerned about her husband and children than herself. Woolf disagreed with her mother's "angelic" quality and as a daughter she had the same feeling as Lily does towards the surrogate mother's death due to her lifelong offering: "Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving. She had died" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 203).

For Woolf, the selfless, submissive, and self-sacrificing beauty of her mother not only led to her mother's deprivation of subjectivity but affected her career. The memory of Julia Stephen as a domestic angel disturbed Woolf to the point that she heard her mother's voice "almost daily for thirty-two years after her death" (Shannon Forbes 464) until "I wrote the book [*To the Lighthouse*] very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her" ("A Sketch of the Past" 81). For Woolf, a woman artist, it is the angel that must be killed. Otherwise, the phantom will keep inhibiting her from making breakthroughs. Woolf rejects her mother's every attempt to sympathize, "flatter" and "deceive" others, and live purely ("Professions" 237) rather than genuinely because those qualities will distract a woman from attending to her own cause—say, make it impossible to write a critical

essay, let alone a novel. As Woolf depicts,

[...] you cannot review a book without a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel in the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must—to put it bluntly—tell lies if they are to succeed. ("Professions" 238)

Consequently, a woman artist, capable of an independent mind, must persist in dismissing the influential angel at home so that she acts according to her will rather than fulfill some social conventions. The corollary of succumbing oneself to the conventional beauty of the archetypal mother would be self-restraint. A woman artist must pick up the inkpot, throw it at where the phantom haunts and keep concentrating on her work. Back to the fictional artist, Lily Briscoe, she must treat her work seriously and attentively while shielding herself from Mrs. Ramsay's matriarchal demands on her behavior, involving sympathizing with men and getting married.

A woman artist's pursuit had been hindered by more than matriarchal force before and during Woolf's times, which is well portrayed in *To the Lighthouse*. The mock verdict "Women cannot do this, women cannot do that" in the novel comes not only from the mean, boring pedant Charles Tansley but from the whole phallogentric society (67), where a painter like Lily Briscoe needs to defy the conventional forces to establish herself with her talents and ability. As depicted in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, professions for women had always been limited. In the early 20th century, the late Victorian age, women novelists mushroomed but much as some opportunities for them to write and publish their works were available, women's intelligence was still constrained to a large extent: "There would always have been that assertion—you cannot do this, you are incapable of doing that—to protest against, to overcome" (*Room* 72). Probably, this effect on novelists was not that prominent anymore since women novelists of merit already existed. Yet "for painters it must still have some sting in it; and for musicians, I imagine, is even now active and poisonous in the extreme" (72). Writers, painters, and musicians all belong to artists, who yield writings, paintings or musical pieces with their creativity and sensitivity. The exertion of their creativity comes out through their independent thinking. As Woolf rebuts in her monograph, "[i]t is thoughtless to condemn them [women], or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex" (92). Hence, women, like Lily Briscoe, should be encouraged and justified to walk out of their domestic "comfort zone" and breathe in a broader realm.

The creation of Lily Briscoe is inseparable from Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell, who is a woman painter known for her pioneering work in drawing female nudes and using paints to portray, as much as possible, the "real" woman behind the ideal images constructed under the phallogentric system of values. As Henry R. Harrington observes, "Woolf was used to thinking of her own and her sister's artistic progress as parallel" (376). Such a parallel is manifest in Vanessa Bell's pioneering artistic creation, in line with what Woolf intends to endow a woman with—subjectivity. Different from Julia Stephen's objectified existence in paintings, Vanessa Bell

allows her painter identity to exert the influence of subjectivity. As Jane Goldman comments, “She is simultaneously an artist whose subject matter is her own sex, and who inscribes her sexuality in art” (153). Hence, the change in the painting subjects intimates the possibility of “autonomous sexuality” (153), namely woman as both the subject and object of the artistic gaze, and who is now able to bring out the beauty of her soul. As Woolf argued, “Above all, you must illumine your own soul with its profundities and its shallows, and its vanities and its generousities, and say what your beauty means to you or your plainness [...]” (*Room* 120). It is noted that Woolf realized the necessity of investing beauty with new meanings to fulfill women’s initiative and artistic potential, which gives birth to the woman writer’s representation of the feminine sublime through a painter.

In brief, based on her pursuit of writing and Vanessa Bell’s innovative status in post-impressionist art, Woolf expects to overcome the hindrance to and stereotypes of women artists bound by beauty in a patriarchal discourse and to found feminine aesthetics that empower women artists with autonomy. The prospect of the feminine sublime featuring a woman artist’s independence is well embodied in Lily Briscoe, who struggles with conventional beauty, with her heterogeneity formed and intersubjectivity attained between herself and the Other. These themes will be further explored in the next two sections.

Attachment and Rejection: Lily Briscoe’s Heterogeneity as Response to Mrs. Ramsay’s Beauty

Lily Briscoe, a woman painter, meets challenges in the novel similar to those confronting Virginia Woolf in reality. Hence, establishing the feminine sublime becomes Lily’s solution to exerting her will in life and art. One of the essential features of her sublimity lies in her heterogeneity, namely her internal struggles with the dominating beauty embodied in Mrs. Ramsay. As explicated by Barbara Claire Freeman, it is the initiative to rebel against patriarchy and break through reality constraints that breed a woman’s heterogeneity—struggles with inner conflict like decisiveness and hesitance, resistance and compromise—thereby cultivating her feminine sublime. The feature of the coexistence of seemingly disparate elements distinguishes it from the dichotomy and absolute incompatibility in the masculine sublime as indicated by Longinus, whose “repression of a certain heterogeneous and irreconcilable desire has far-reaching consequences in the history of the sublime’s theorization” (Shaw 14). The masculine sublime denies women’s right to value their experiences, emotions, and subjectivity. Nevertheless, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf well depicts Lily’s emotionally intense experiences and feelings about “the complexity of things” (138): Lily’s attachment to and rejection of Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty generated by her motherhood and hidden self are dualistic and ambivalent, making it possible for Lily to value her own experiences and individuality.

Mrs. Ramsay’s maternal beauty and hidden self also play important roles in shaping Lily’s heterogeneity. To maintain her model role as a domestic angel, Mrs. Ramsay provides her husband with selfless compassion and extends her motherly devotion to others through charity work. When

Mrs. Ramsay reads books in broad daylight, Mr. Ramsay prefers to think of her inexperience and plainness—"he likes to think that she was not clever, not book-learned at all" (*To the Lighthouse* 163), echoing with Kantian beauty, a shallow, simple understanding of women. Emmanuel Kant attributes beauty to women, "the fair sex" and the sublime to men based on his claims that women are designed for "beautiful understanding," some fine feelings instead of "deep," profound and fundamental ones, which are exclusively possessed by males (*Observations* 78). In other words, Kant denies women's capacity for reasoning, and a woman like Mrs. Ramsay attempting to do "laborious learning or painful pondering" would only "destroy the merits that are proper to her sex" (78). The plot of Mr. Ramsay watching Mrs. Ramsay read and doubting whether she comprehends what she is reading implies the husband "cannot see beyond her beauty," beyond a caring wife who is asked to meet the expectations of a patriarchal society (de Gay 5). Furthermore, Mrs. Ramsay's motherly love expands to those in need through charity work. When Mrs. Ramsay along with Charles Tansley doles out money in the local neighborhood, Charles Tansley realizes Mrs. Ramsay's beauty ahead of him, "[w]ith stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 21). Cyclamen and violets are emblematic of devotion, empathy, humility, and purity (Maddie Forbes; Merva). Both are also closely related to the Virgin Mary in praise of her modesty as portrayed in the works of Leonardo da Vinci (*Madonna and Child with Flowers*) and Giovanni Paolo (*Madonna of Humility*), which mirrors Mrs. Ramsay's motherly halo. It is noted that Mrs. Ramsay stands motionless for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria when Mr. Tansley becomes suddenly aware of her unrivalled beauty: "it was this—she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 21). The specific scene underscores motherhood in abeyance with Victorian conventions. Mrs. Ramsay's benevolence and dedication are made prominent beyond her family, which enhances her unaltered figure as a sacrificial angel.

Despite Mrs. Ramsay's penetrating beauty, due to her dedication to satisfying others' needs with her motherly tenderness, Mrs. Ramsay has her "wedge-shaped core of darkness" (85) inhabited by her deeper self. Lily has detected the secret zone but fails to probe into it: "What was the spirit in her, the essential thing [...]?" (67). The private space hides Mrs. Ramsay's inner world. It is a place, "a room of her own," where with her "sense and perception of identity invisible to others" (86), Mrs. Ramsay is left unconcerned, and she needs to do nothing but "[to] be silent; to be alone [...] and] shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself" (85–86). Scholars have offered different interpretations of Mrs. Ramsay's mysterious dark core. According to Shannon Forbes's study of *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay's wedge-shaped core of darkness breaks the boundary of the Angel in the House and is "comprised of competing conflicting desires—wanting to gain acceptance but wanting also to be a modern woman" (464). Although she continues to commit to domestic chores, she indeed feels a different sense of self at that time that renders her horizon infinite and opens her up to new possibilities. This self, as Mrs. Ramsay intimates, is liberated from its burdens and ready for "the strangest adventures", beneath which, "it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 85). Yet it is dubious that Mrs. Ramsay longs for a fresh modern life as Shannon Forbes suggests, since Mrs. Ramsay has been reconciled to her domestic life without any complaint for years. Concerning

her aging, Mrs. Ramsay blames it on herself—her being overanxious about the expenditure of the greenhouse and the rest of domestic chores. Instead of changing the traditions, this woman is probably thinking about expanding her strength to unite and eternize things beyond the domestic sphere and the neighborhood. Thais Rutledge argues the core shows that Mrs. Ramsay desires more than caring for her family and neighbors—“the strangest adventures,” as Woolf describes it. Personally speaking, the woman is also pondering over what is necessary to realize her meaning of life: “But what have I done with my life?” Mrs. Ramsay constantly asks herself (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 112). In her pictured horizons, there are Indian plains and a Roman church, which are ever-lasting natural scenery and building steep in history along with the long steady strokes of the lighthouse. Those are the moments when “things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity” (85–86). Such thoughts testify to her quest for connection among people, an extension of her motherhood. Meanwhile, the darkness and obscurity of Mrs. Ramsay leave us with an impression distinct from her conventional meek beauty, thus going to the other side in aesthetics. Mrs. Ramsay’s core of darkness bears qualities of the sublime according to Edmund Burke: such a dark world exclusive to herself and inaccessible to others promises a “self-generating, dark, and obscure power” (Shaw 59), which can engender strong feelings in Mrs. Ramsay in contrast to her usual calmness and peace. Notably, such elusive internal force might empower her to overcome difficulties as she tries to tackle unexpected tasks ahead for people’s connection to one another. Indeed, that is one of the effects when sublimity comes into play according to Kant (*Critique* 102). Nonetheless, while Burke acknowledges the dominance of sublimity in masculine intelligence, Mrs. Ramsay’s hidden self behind her usual angelic beauty indicates the broken antithetic relationship between beauty and the sublime. With such sublime individuality mute most of the time in Mrs. Ramsay, it is up to Lily Briscoe to manifest her unconventional internal world. Overall, Mrs. Ramsay’s covert innermost center and her irresistible outward beauty complicate Lily’s position on the surrogate mother manifest in Lily’s views on love and marriage and a purple triangle as her artistic solution.

Love for Lily is both beautiful and tedious, which presents her ambivalent attitude towards Mrs. Ramsay’s “work of art”—marriage and harmony among people. On the one hand, Lily Briscoe sneers at the engagement between Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley and feels satisfied that she need not enter the “altar” of marriage (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 138) for its superficial and transient beauty at the expense of her autonomy, thus being exempt from self-degradation and dilution. On the evening when the Ramsays and their guests have dinner together inside the bright and cozy cottage, Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty “open[s] again in her”: she has successfully prepared the delicious *boeuf en daube* and delicate fruit dishes, which brings the rambling and distracted people together (136). Moreover, her efforts to be a matchmaker contribute to Paul and Minta’s engagement, which, nonetheless, is “childlike” and “absurd” (136) for Lily, a then-unmarried woman in her thirties. Mrs. Ramsay acts like a mother enthusiastic about being a go-between for her “children.” At that time, Lily realizes that “there was something frightening in her [Mrs. Ramsay] [and she] was irresistible, [and always] got her own way in the end” (136). But the couple’s matrimony turns out not to go smoothly. As ten years pass by, Lily wishes the deceased Mrs. Ramsay could know her beauty in acting, as a matchmaker between Minta and

Paul, Lily and William, does not work as well as she wished: Minta and Paul are likely to break up and Lily still stays unmarried ten years later. Consequently, "all her being, even her beauty become[s] for a moment, dusty and out of date" (263). Lily rejects marriage and the kind of love where the woman is degraded to an Angel in the House, and the man becomes the Patriarch relying on his wife's sympathy.

On the other hand, Lily is attached to the passion and adventures invoked by one's affections for a person of the opposite sex. Under Mrs. Ramsay's arrangement, Paul and Minta accompany each other to the beach where, however, Minta loses her valuable brooch accidentally. Afterwards, Paul boasts at table that he is to find the brooch early the next morning for his lover. Lily cannot resist her desire to help this young man indulged in love. That is because though thinking of love as "the stupidest, the most barbaric of human passions" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 138), Lily still appreciates the excitement and the ensuing challenges brought by man's love for woman so that she "would be the one to pounce on the brooch half-hidden by some stone, and thus herself be included among the sailors and adventurers" (138). Holding a complex attitude towards love—"there is nothing more tedious, puerile, and inhumane than love, yet it is also beautiful and necessary" (139)—Lily keeps a safe distance from matrimony and heterosexual relationships.

Furthermore, Lily, a woman artist, transforms her mixed feelings towards Mrs. Ramsay's maternity in life into her artwork—a purple triangle on the canvas. The beauty of Mrs. Ramsay along with James fits in with William Bankes's reverence for *Madonna and Child*, yet Lily cannot bluntly draw on her canvas a conventional mother. This is because, in Lily's view, virtues expected from motherhood come too handy so that a woman's autonomy is prisoned—"beauty was not everything. Beauty had this penalty. It came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life—froze it" (118). Mrs. Ramsay never allows her silenced "core of darkness" to breathe freely and openly (85). By contrast, Lily courageously voices her painting philosophy when working on a painting revolving around a traditional theme. Even William Bankes, Mr. Ramsay's old friend who rejects family life and disagrees with Mr. Ramsay's succumbing to a woman's beauty and getting married, has to acknowledge Mrs. Ramsay's famous beauty for sitting with her child—a Madonna-Child scene. At that time, Mrs. Ramsay's penetrating beauty like a torch, apparent and potent, shines brightly through people's hearts and minds: "She bore with her, she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty" (57). Such beauty with its maternal halo must be treated with reverence. Facing the enquiry from Mr. Bankes, who has already recognized the charm of the classic scene—"Did she [Lily] not admire their beauty?" (57), she explains to the conventional Renaissance art appreciator the necessity of combining shadow with light when painting mother and son. Lily, a motherless spinster living with her aging father, has derived from Mrs. Ramsay some motherly affection, and when picturing Mrs. Ramsay and James on the steps, she is also affected by the great motherhood. Yet she is afraid that assuming such peace and tranquility could freeze a woman's married life. In response to Mrs. Ramsay's motherly care, Lily dislikes her disposition to pity others, especially males, as if "the life in her, her resolve to live again, had been stirred by pity" (114). Therefore, she deems it necessary to vitalize her painting by interweaving shadow with light and adding "the little agitations; the flush, the pallor,

some queer distortion, some light or shadow, which made the face unrecognizable for a moment and yet added quality one saw forever after” (239–240), quality marked by autonomy and self-consciousness.

Beneath the cover of beauty, as expected by society, always exists something personal and vibrant like Mrs. Ramsay’s “latent desires” (42) or Lily’s vision, which is indispensable for giving free rein to a woman’s sensibility and capacity. Lily would like the shadow and the light to coexist with the abstract triangular figure, which parallels Mrs. Ramsay’s obscure, dark core. Apart from the chiaroscuro, another post-impressionist approach in painting, that is, simplifying the majestic mother and son with a triangle, blurs and weakens Mrs. Ramsay’s overwhelming power as a matriarch so that one can identify with the motherly greatness but avoid being carried away by the demands of the surrogate mother—i.e., you should get married; or you are responsible for sympathizing with your male partner. Furthermore, according to Wassily Kandinsky, the founding father of abstract arts, the triangle has its “spiritual entity” (Kandinsky, *Concerning* 29), that is, “Un triangle provoque une émotion vivante, parce que lui-même est un être vivant” (“a triangle provokes a vibrant emotion because it itself is a vibrant being”; Kandinsky, “Enquête” 54; my translation). Hence, there are agitations and changes in the solemn, eternal motherly scene. Lily does not neglect the significance of mother and son because she admires their beauty, presented in motherly love and its irresistible cohesive power. Instead, Lily, with a different outlook on marriage and life from Mrs. Ramsay, desires to exert her artistic vision against the halo of the archetypal mother. Couldn’t there be something beyond conventional beauty, say individual tastes, against the dominant social routines? Couldn’t she work out something rewarding without binding herself to marriage? The personal approach to drawing Mrs. Ramsay as a purple triangle marks Lily’s initial step in art to defy Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty while revering and relying on it.

In brief, the masculine sublime smotheres the possibility of a “passage to knowledge of the other side” (Bowers 68), which, in the case of women’s aesthetic pursuits, means an unconventional pathway for women to value their emotions, judgment, and initiative. Such otherness inhabiting one individual’s thinking propels a woman like Lily Briscoe to uncover the repressed and mute aspects of herself in mainstream society, and by accepting the heterogeneity in her outlook on life and art, the woman gropes around for a sublime of her own. Such dualistic reaction constitutes Lily’s heterogeneity, laying a foundation for the woman artist’s further breakthroughs in connecting herself with her artistic object and what is more, the Other in life, which is going to be discussed in the next section.

The Artistic Vision in Sublimity: Intersubjectivity Built Through Empathy

Lily Briscoe’s ambivalent attitude towards Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty is necessary for her, a woman, to rise above the phallogocentric rules to engage in artistic creation. Yet the painter struggles with one pronounced question: What to do with the painting object, or how to subjectify the Other? Speese illuminates how it is human relationships between the self and

the Other, the subject and object, that distinguish the conventional sublime from the sublime allowing for women's autonomy. The new mode of sublimity justifies women's subjectivity and allows for empathy to play a role in subjectifying the Other, making it distinct from the traditional male-centered sublimity characterized by men's overwhelming reason and the intention toward dominance and rivalry. Like Vanessa Bell, Lily Briscoe finds it significant to endow her painting object with subjectivity through communal vision and empathy. It is noted that through empathy, subjectivity is not exclusive to one person but shared by two individuals. This section is to analyze how in the final section "The Lighthouse," Lily Briscoe, a then 44-year-old maid, achieves her vision for an independent woman artist and has her feminine sublime enriched through building intersubjectivity.

Linguistic ineffectiveness contributes to Lily's internal struggle with her identity as a woman painter, and by turning from linguistic expression to emotional connections, the traditional communalities based on patriarchal ideals are replaced by shared subjectivity, namely intersubjectivity. In "The Lighthouse," the painter Lily Briscoe is engaged in restarting her painting on the lawn. After Mr. Ramsay and his children set out for the lighthouse, Lily contemplates her perceptions of the Ramsays, and her role in rejecting marriage and excluding Victorian feminine sympathy. When sitting with Mr. Carmichael, an older man who is the Ramsays' neighbor and then a known poet, Lily feels the urge to confide to him something "[a]bout life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 240), yet she is discouraged by the fact that "[o]ne could say nothing to nobody" (240). The failure of language to communicate one's subjectivity, namely one's thoughts and emotions, in a genuine and complete way is already realized by Mrs. Ramsay, who finds it impossible to tell her husband that she loves him: "He [Mr. Ramsay] found talking so much easier than she did. He could say things—she never could [...] she never told him that she loved him [...]. It was only that she never could say what she felt" (166). That is because words once spoken out could betray one's initial intentions and language can never be adequate to express one's feelings and thoughts as they occur in the first place in one's mind. As Woolf relays, "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 ideas sunk back again [...]" (240). Hence, both women are confronted with linguistic inexpressibility, hereby keeping their deep thoughts to themselves.

Nevertheless, Lily bridges the inadequacy of language to share experience by empathizing with others, especially Mrs. Ramsay, which fulfils her quest for the feminine sublime. Such emotional association, as Speese delineates, suggests "a psychological component in the understanding of subjectivity and character" (44). When painting Mrs. Ramsay on the drawing-room steps, Lily sees through William Bankes's eyes "the shape of a woman, peaceful and silent, with downcast eyes" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 239). The beauty of Mrs. Ramsay comes from her mute image, like a beautiful object that ideally suits the Victorian expectations of an Angel in the House, yet all "agitations, flushes and pallors" are kept to herself. William Bankes's shallow understanding of Mrs. Ramsay is in accordance with the Kantian aesthetic judgment depending on communal understandings that "construct ideological ideals," as Christine Froula pinpoints (Speese 120). It is what is hidden inexpressible that constitutes one's

subjectivity, rather than obediently following the ideological ideals like the angelic Mother. For Lily Briscoe and Woolf, the ineffectiveness of language means shaking those commonalities fitting in with traditional sublimity; in which case, the feminine sublime demands affective knowledge, a human-to-human empathy.

By sharing the same perception, Lily first develops her empathy for Mrs. Ramsay, who should not merely be a beautiful artistic object in Lily's painting—the figure symbolized by a purple triangle—or the exclusive Other, but a real mother figure deserving reverence in Lily's heart.

Though differing in their attitudes towards love and women's role, both women long to attain something which will render their life rewarding and everlasting. In this sense, the mutual moments allow Lily to establish intersubjectivity between her and the mother figure. While admiring Mrs. Ramsay's achievement, Lily is marooned in the old, vast question of individuals, which "traversed the sky of the soul perpetually, [...] [and] which was apt to particularise itself at such moments as these" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 218): that is, "What's the meaning of life?" At this moment, Lily Briscoe was going through the same confusion as her archetypal mother did. Moreover, Lily is curious about what Mrs. Ramsay, serenely resting while observing everything around her on the beach, is thinking of and how she feels: "What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke?" (267). Lily attempts to figure out Mrs. Ramsay's intentions when she screws up her eyes as Mrs. Ramsay has done and both women simultaneously hear a wave falling on the beach; it is a "joint attention" or "the ability to share attention to some object with another person and mutually recognize that the attention is shared," as Vera Tobin delineates (185). It seems that their senses are connected at the instant. Later, Lily wonders how Mrs. Ramsay would respond to her children's enquiries, and as Mr. Ramsay stops abruptly ahead of his wife and raises her from the chair, Lily not only serves as a witness, a gazer, but also a thought reader—"letting herself be helped by him, Mrs. Ramsay had thought (Lily supposed) the time has come now; Yes, she would say it now. Yes, she would marry him" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 267). The stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse blur the psychological activities of the two women, making it hard to distinguish Lily's surmise from Mrs. Ramsay's inner thoughts. Detachment and objectivity cloud emotion and judgment, but it is noted that Lily increasingly puts herself in Mrs. Ramsay's position, narrowing the distance between herself and the deceased woman. Woolf's description of Lily's thoughts flows so seamlessly that Lily's conjectures about Mrs. Ramsay's thinking merge into her judgment: "Who knows what we are, what we feel?" (232). Those enquiries constitute Mrs. Ramsay's questions when coping with her dark core—the "silenced sublime" as well as the woman painter's ultimate questions in quest of the feminine sublime. Through pondering over those questions, Lily builds intersubjectivity with her surrogate mother.

Apart from endowing Mrs. Ramsay, the "beautiful object," with subjectivity, just as the painting would be incomplete in the end but for the last central linear stroke, Lily Briscoe's vision, featuring her sublimity, is inseparable from the empathetic moment between her and Mr. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay keeps soliciting sympathy from women, especially his wife, yet seldom cares about others' needs and instead, usually hurts others with his stubborn reasoning. Domineering and selfish as Mr. Ramsay is to Lily, the two share something in common—both suffer the pain of

existential loneliness, in other words, a sense of forlornness arising from self-struggle for living, and both yearn to pursue a rewarding cause while concerned about whether their works or name will last. On one level, Mr. Ramsay is entangled with his philosophical thinking about life and death as evidenced by his frequent sighing, "we perished, each alone" (257). Such cries have affected Lily, with those words being materialized into the frustrating, formidable enemy of hers—emptiness left on the canvas, emblematic of life's void. Having realized the invalidity of language, Lily strives to ease her helplessness and loneliness through empathy. On another level, having reached Q, a realm only a few Englishmen have done, Mr. Ramsay desires higher achievements—to reach R and even the ultimate Z—for they mean being respected and memorized by people for a longer period of time. To attain his goal, Mr. Ramsay could not indulge himself in love and marriage, and rather, he must keep his distance from Mrs. Ramsay—his intellectual world is inviolable to her. The same is true of Lily, who deals with the surrogate mother with both attachment and rejection.

Mr. Ramsay's arrival in the lighthouse is conducive to Lily's completion of her painting as well as Lily's actualization of intersubjectivity. Before Mr. Ramsay sails for the lighthouse, Lily resists Mr. Ramsay's solicitation of solace and instead praises his beautiful boots. Lily is reluctant to voice something sympathetic to the demanding widower near her because words are most likely to lead her astray to surrender to patriarchal needs, which is exactly what she has been struggling to evade. Rather, failure in verbal language gives more space for Lily to be put in the old man's shoes in a ground-breaking way. Upon Mr. Ramsay's departure, Lily feels "[s] he wanted him" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 273), and the moment when Mr. Ramsay reaches his destination inspires Lily to complete her work of art. Upon Mr. Ramsay and his children's arrival at the lighthouse, Lily says aloud, "He [Mr. Ramsay] has landed. It is finished." Afterwards, the painter says to herself, "it was finished" when turning to her canvas and leaving the last stroke in the center (280). The first "it" refers to Mr. Ramsay's journey to the lighthouse, by approaching which, "a symbolic achievement of 'R' has been made" (Proudfit 32). The second one indicates Lily's eventual completion of her work of art. The two "it"s echo with each other for by adopting her post-impressionist technique, namely, "superimposing a second point of view on the first" when painting a distant object (Harrington 364), Lily draws a line representing the lighthouse in the distance from the perspective of Mr. Ramsay sailing to the lighthouse. In this sense, Lily reaches her mental lighthouse as well. Mr. Ramsay's journey along with his children to the lighthouse indicates progress in braving the challenges and setbacks in his life. He insists on bringing his children to the lighthouse, which reminds them of the amiable domestic angel who, however, has passed away, but the journey turns out to be Mr. Ramsay's first step to accompany his children as a lovable and wise father instead of a vain tyrant when the mother is absent. In this sense, Mr. Ramsay plays the role of a father complementary to the mother Mrs. Ramsay, and by sharing their perspectives, Lily "reunites the Victorian parents not as Angel and Patriarch but as mother and father, woman and man" (Speese 131). The shared vision connects Lily's subjectivity with another person's, in which case, Mr. Ramsay, like Mrs. Ramsay, is no longer an objective Other in Lily's sight, but an individual worth affective understanding. Thereby, Lily Briscoe advances towards her feminine sublime which overcomes the patriarchal binary constructs

between subject and object, between the self and the Other.

To summarize, Woolf resituates the sublime in an emotional space that transcends reason and objectivity and promotes empathy and intersubjectivity by breaking the idealized stereotypes and resorting to feelings. Between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, as well as Lily and Mr. Ramsay, “a reciprocal, empathetic and intersubjective sublime emerge[s] in the interactions of subjects” (Speese 4). The establishment of intersubjectivity marks Lily’s acquisition of her vision—artistic creativity and interpersonal empathy, thus allowing her to reconcile her artistic pursuit with interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf writes her personal life into Lily Briscoe’s experiences: the woman artist navigates the challenges of being overwhelmed by the archetypal mother’s beauty and ultimately works out a new pattern that redefines the position of beauty and sublimity. Therefore, Woolf is dedicated to elevating women’s pursuit of independence through Lily’s quest for the feminine sublime and relies on the woman painter to cope with her relationship with the art—for Woolf, her writing—and with her mother, who is a victim but also a “collaborator in the patriarchal oppression of her own sex” (Krouse 296).

To attain her autonomy by refashioning the aesthetics of beauty and sublimity, Lily Briscoe first learns to embrace her heterogeneous self; namely, by accepting her ambivalent attitudes towards Mrs. Ramsay’s maternity, she empowers the inner self oppressed by the patriarchal society. Against women’s homogeneous nature shaped in a phallocentric system of values, Lily interprets love as both beautiful and tedious and expresses her reverence to Mrs. Ramsay’s motherly care with a purple triangle in the painting, which, however, indicates her stance in sticking to her unconventional artistic style and lifestyle. On another level, given the ineffectiveness of language, empathy becomes indispensable when the dichotomy of subject/the self versus object/the Other needs to be removed. As a result, intersubjectivity is built between Lily and her archetypal mother, Mrs. Ramsay, and Lily and the Patriarch figure, Mr. Ramsay. This breakthrough invests the woman with an inclusive outlook on interpersonal relationship, and the interconversion between different subjects gives birth to a novel mode of relation cultivated by a woman artist, which is empathetic, reciprocal and equal.

As Woolf writes, Lily wishes that “beauty would roll itself up” (*To the Lighthouse* 243). In other words, beauty should give way to something unconventional to the benefit of women’s autonomy. In the phallocentric society of the Victorian Age, beauty did not endow women with an opportunity to exert their agency. Rather, women, degraded to “the second sex” according to Simone de Beauvoir, were labeled as beautiful with their potential restrained and their profound self silenced. Consequently, in quest of an independent life and career, women artists like Lily Briscoe, Woolf, and Vanessa Bell, must overthrow the dominance of beauty enforced on them and pioneer a sublimity of their own. Woolf’s feminine sublime reveals her thorough introspections on the limitation of traditional beauty imposed on women as individuals, and

furthermore, it poses a direct challenge to the orthodox sublime in the patriarchal tradition.

In a nutshell, this article investigates Woolf's review and rewriting of the exclusionary male-dominated aesthetics in terms of the sublime and beauty. By offering a detailed analysis of Lily Briscoe's feminine sublime on the grounds of Woolf's personal experiences, it intends to shed light on how a woman artist in Woolf's time gets stuck in and overcomes a patriarchal system of values, particularly in aesthetics. For Woolf, she has trailblazed a way out for the likes of herself and Lily Briscoe. Not only does recognition of the feminine sublime as reflected in *To the Lighthouse* do justice to women's experiences and subjectivity, but it serves as a corrective to the patriarchal society where women's visions are blinded and their voices mute. Finally, it is hoped that more research will be done on Woolf's fictional narration of women's experiences from which their aesthetic values can be and should be uncovered, cherished, and memorized.

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2010.
- Bowers, Suzanne. "'Beloved' and the New Apocalypse." *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1990, pp. 59–77.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Columbia UP, 1958.
- de Gay, Jane. "Behind the Purple Triangle: Art and Iconography in 'To the Lighthouse.'" *Woolf Studies Annual*, vol. 5, 1999, pp. 1–23.
- Drabble, Margaret. Introduction. *To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf, Oxford UP, 1992, pp. xii–xxxii.
- Forbes, Maddie. "Cyclamen Flower: Meaning, Symbolism, and Colors." *Pansy Maiden*, 25 June 2021, www.pansymaiden.com/flowers/meaning/cyclamen/.
- Forbes, Shannon. "'When Sometimes She Imagined Herself like Her Mother': The Contrasting Responses of Cam and Mrs. Ramsay to the Role of the Angel in the House." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2000, pp. 464–487.
- Freeman, Barbara C. *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. California UP, 1997.
- Goldman, Jane. *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Harrington, Henry R. "The Central Line down the Middle of 'To the Lighthouse.'" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1980, pp. 363–382.
- Hogan, Patrick C. "Literary Aesthetics: Beauty, the Brain, and Mrs. Dalloway." *Beauty and Sublimity: A Cognitive Aesthetics of Literature and the Arts*, by Patrick C. Hogan, Cambridge UP, 2016, pp. 19–45.
- Humm, Maggie. "Beauty and Woolf." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2006, pp. 237–254.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Translated by M. T. H. Sadler, Dover Publications, 1977.
- . "'Enquête' and 'Toile Vide, Etc.'" *Cahiers d'Art*, Editions Cahiers d'Art, V–VI (1935), p. 117.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- . *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. U of California P, 1960.
- Krouse, Tonya. "'I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess': Lily Briscoe, Mrs. Ramsay, and the Postmodern Sublime." *Virginia Woolf and Her Influences*, Pace UP, 1998, pp. 294–301.
- Lilienfeld, Jane. "'The Deceptiveness of Beauty': Mother Love and Mother Hate in *To the Lighthouse*." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1977, pp. 345–376.
- Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels*. Edinburgh UP, 2010.

- Merva, Vladka. "Violet Flower Meaning and Symbolism: Ultimate Guide to Viola Modesty." *Simply Beyond Herbs*, 18 Mar. 2024. simplybeyondherbs.com/violet-flower-meaning/.
- Neumann, Erich. *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*. Princeton UP, 1972.
- Pepe, Joy M. "Lily Briscoe's Painting of Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Julia Stephen in Painting and Photography." *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, no. 97, 2021, pp. 45–48.
- Proudfit, Sharon W. "Lily Briscoe's Painting: A Key to Personal Relationships in 'To the Lighthouse.'" *Criticism*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1971, pp. 26–38.
- Reed, Christopher. "Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury Aesthetics." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1992, pp. 20–43.
- Rutledge, Thais. "Woolf's Feminine Spaces and the New Woman in *To the Lighthouse*: The Cases of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe." *South Central Review*, vol. 37 no. 1, 2020, pp. 73–101.
- Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*. Routledge. 2006.
- Subedi, S. R. "Virginia Woolf's *To the Light House*: Revelation of Sublime in Privileged Moments." *Kaumodaki: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2022, pp. 78–86.
- Speese, Erin. *Gender and the Intersubjective Sublime in Faulkner, Forster, Lawrence and Woolf*. Routledge, 2017.
- Stephen, Leslie. *Sir Leslie Stephen's Mausoleum Book*. Clarendon Press, 1977.
- Tobin, Vera. "Joint Attention, *To the Lighthouse*, and Modernist Representations of Intersubjectivity." *English Text Construction*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010, pp. 185–202.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Vintage Classics, 2018.
- . "Professions for Woman." *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays*, by Virginia Woolf, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, pp. 235–242.
- . *To the Lighthouse*. Oxford UP, 1992.
- . "A Sketch of the Past." *Moments of Being*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd ed., Harvrest Harcourt, 1985, p. 81.