

Image Analysis of the Sea in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Yajuan Wang^{1, 2}

¹Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Hetao College, Bayannur City, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 015000, China

²Philippine Christian University Center for International Education, Manila, 1004, Philippines

Abstract

Virginia Woolf is a stream-of-consciousness novelist. The prominent feature of her stream-of-consciousness novels is that she penetrates into the inner world of people and depicts the inner world of characters in a more thorough way. Woolf's application of the element of the sea to the creation of literary works can maximize the expressiveness of the stream of consciousness novels, especially in describing the psychological and spiritual activities of the characters. The unimagined flow of consciousness and numerous image setting successfully build the uniqueness of the stream of consciousness novels.

Keywords

Virginia Woolf; The Image of the Sea; *To the Lighthouse*.

1. Introduction

After the First World War, Western modernism literature developed rapidly. In the 1920s, the stream of consciousness novels in Britain and the United States rose to prominence and became popular in Europe and the United States, causing waves of heat. Its rise has exerted a great influence on the development of modern novels and even the whole world literature. Virginia Woolf is an outstanding representative of stream of consciousness novels in Britain and America, and the most important female writer in the history of modern English literature. She devoted her life to the reform of the novel and the art of innovation, the pursuit of the characters' spiritual world, and the successful application of stream of consciousness technique to modern novels. Virginia Woolf's important novels such as "The Mark on the Wall", "The Voyage Out", "Jacob's Room", "Mrs. Dalloway", "To the Lighthouse", "The Waves", and "Between the Acts" have made brilliant achievements. She has made an outstanding contribution to the development of modern world literature.

Among Virginia Woolf's many works, *To the Lighthouse* is recognized as her best work. She creates this classic work with a flowing mind like water, and at the same time, she frequently uses the archetypal image of the sea to connect the whole work.

The history of Western Marine literature can be traced back to 931 BC, the epic poem "Odyssey" written by the ancient Greek bard Homer can be regarded as the beginning of Western Marine literature. Yang Zhongju observes: "Those literary works permeating the spirit of the sea, or reflecting the writer's obvious consciousness of the sea, or taking the sea or sea spirit as the description or singing object, or describing life with the sea as the obvious background, or connected with the sea and endowing people or things with the atmosphere of the sea can be included in the category of Marine literature." Duan Bo points out: "The so-called 'Marine literature' refers to the sea as the main scene or background of the narrative or story, the sea, sailors, ships, islands and other elements as the main elements of the novel, and sailors as the main characters in the narrative. "It is a literary work that vividly illustrates the complex relationship between the sea and human beings, human beings and nature, and human beings

and society, as well as its aesthetic implications, based on nautical narratives, maritime adventures, and shipwrecks, or based on experiences at sea."

In the novel *To the Lighthouse*, the frequent appearance of sea water interprets its archetypal image in many ways and gives it a definite form of existence. The archetypal image of water is found in the Bible. The book of Genesis says: "Before the creation of the world, chaos reigned, the earth floated in a dark, silent space. There was no land, only the full sea. The spirit of God floats on the sea." [2] The pre-creation world is described here as chaotic, with no division between heaven and earth. Later, the water is divided into upper and lower parts by the air. The air is called heaven, the water below is grouped together, and the exposed part is called earth. The water in the sky becomes rain to moisten all things, and the water on the earth provides a guarantee for the survival of new life. Therefore, water is not only the gestation but also the bearer of heaven and earth, which were born and float in the primordial sea. [3] In Woolf's work, the sea is on full display. The construction of ocean images echoes each other with the plot and rhythm in the work, representing different life ideas and feelings in different time and space. It is a symphony of real life, and also reflects people's expectation and pursuit of ideal. The lighthouse in the sea has an imago prototype that is deeply rooted in people's hearts, that is, it symbolizes brightness, wisdom and determination, while "going to the lighthouse" itself carries the meaning of pilgrimage, and has the metaphor of pursuing truth and reaching the ideal realm of life. On the other hand, the images of sea water, waves and sea breeze vividly show the characters' feelings of real life and the process of psychological change. In the flow of the characters' consciousness, the image of the sea becomes richer and fuller.

2. Image Description of the Sea in *To the Lighthouse*

In the first and second parts of the novel, the image of the sea is fierce, violent and difficult to conquer. In the consciousness of all characters, the sea is mostly roaring. The interweaving of calmness and turbulence of the sea seems to be the waves of life, symbolizing human hesitation and fear of real life. In this regard, Woolf pointed out through Lily's thoughts: "How life is composed of small things that are adjacent to each other and independent of each other, and condensed into a complete and undulating wave, and people are rolling and undulating with this wave." The protagonist Mrs. Ramsay also thinks of time but "that's just fleeting rainbow", the wave of the beach again and again to provoke Mrs. Ramsay's fear of unpredictable life, sound wave "like a terrible drum roll, sounded the rhythm of life, reminiscent of the island is washed out, was sucked into the huge waves swept away". Seemingly peaceful life hides various contradictions and conflicts in life, and people can only go with the flow in the waves of life. The second part of the novel, *As Time Goes By*, describes the "sea of waves and breakers" in the darkness of wind and destruction, which foretells the pain and suffering of life. Mrs. Ramsay died suddenly, Prue died in childbirth, and Andrew died in battle. Out of the shadows of war and death came this sight: "The silent ghost of a gray ship, appearing and disappearing from the sea; There was a purple spot on the surface of the sea, as if something had secretly exploded beneath the surface and spilled blood." It is a powerful indictment of the impermanence of life and the cruelty of war, and the rolling waves of life make people deeply aware that in the vast ocean of the universe, all human life is infinitely insignificant and forever vaporized. At this point, the calm situation of the sea is completely broken, "the wind and waves to chase, like a giant sea monster unaccountable bodies, rational light never penetrate their forehead, them layer by layer of overlapping loan, suddenly burst into the night and day (for day and night and the days are invisible to run together), play the stupid game, until the whole universe seemed to be fighting and churning aimlessly in the wild with willful desires ". The cruel reality makes the Ramsey family lost in the turbulent waves of life, without the support and direction of life.

In the third part, when the waves of life slowly recede, people pick up the scattered fragments of memory and think about the real meaning of life. At this time, the change of ocean image fully reflects the gradual enrichment and perfection of the characters' life, emotion and soul. The Ramsey family finally set foot on the journey to the lighthouse, the spiritual shackles between the father and the children were released, and the family finally realized the spiritual communication and reunion, and determined the direction of life. At this point, the image of the sea begins to become gentle and calm. "It was a beautiful, calm day." Their ship "carefully chose its course, passed the other ships, and rode out to sea." The image of Mrs. Ramsay also rose in Lily's mind. "Life stood still here." At this time, the sea is "clear and smooth as a mirror", and the cliffs and sailing sails "seem to communicate with each other and receive information from each other". People and the sea instantly form a permanent connection. When the storm has passed and the sea is calm again, the sea is like a mirror of reality, reflecting the relief and understanding in people's hearts after the baptism and experience of life. Under the guidance of his wife's spiritual light, people are suddenly enlightened about life and death, time and space, pain and hope. People finally completed the spiritual voyage beyond time and space and life and death, and art life also enjoyed eternal space. Here, Woolf compares the waves with the rapids of life, connects the real years with memories, shows the homogenous real life with the vastness and breadth of the ocean, and shows the journey of life with the instant and real eternity.

3. The Image of the Sea Has Multiple Symbolic Meanings

The images and plots in *To the Lighthouse* contain rich symbolic meanings, and the stream of consciousness of the characters in the book implies the author's ideology. Woolf expresses her thoughts on the material world and the inner world of human beings through the eyes and imagination of the characters in the book. As a special language symbol, the description of "ocean space" in the book has a metaphorical function. The author depicts the vast human world while describing the ocean space. This paper argues that there are at least two symbolic meanings of sea space in *To the Lighthouse* -- the ideal place of human beings and the power to devour human destiny.

3.1. Symbolizing the Ideal of Human Beings

In *To the Lighthouse*, the light of the lighthouse meets and interacts with the eyes of the characters on the sea, where the lighthouse stands and it is the only way to reach it. From this perspective, ocean space symbolizes where the Ramseys (and humanity) want to go. Mr. Ramsay begins the novel by throwing cold water on James's desire to go to the lighthouse, because he is a philosopher and used to taking a rational approach to life. In Mr. Ramsey's inner monologue later, the author explains why he thinks the weather is bad -- "They're his flesh and blood, and they have to learn from an early age that life is hard; Facts will not budge. To the fabled world where even our brightest hope dies and our fragile boat drowns in the darkness... The most important qualities a person needs are courage, truth and perseverance. [3]"

To reach the lighthouse, in Mr. Ramsay's view, is to reach "the fabled world", and the only way to reach it is across the sea. Ten years after the Ramseys gave in to reason and didn't go to the lighthouse, they finally found the courage to reach it. Woolf also affirms the possibility of the ultimate realization of human ideals. Mr. Ramsay led his children out to sea, and the wind carried them to the foot of the lighthouse. James realized his childhood dream. In the ocean space, they find their ideal. Through the ocean space they pursue hard life; they believe they can reach their ideal.

3.2. Symbolizing the State of Broad Mind and Natural Truth

A close reading of the novel shows that the author's vivid descriptions of the sea convey her own and her characters' yearning for a broad-minded and natural state. In the novel, Mrs. Ramsay often thinks "in the face of the endless azure ocean", with the grey lighthouse standing in the hazy haze. On the basis of thinking about her own value, Mrs. Ramsay takes care of every member of her family and her friends, even strangers, tenderly. Mrs. Ramsay is the embodiment of the spirit of philanthropy, she also pursues the true state of self. When Mr. Ramsey doubts himself as a "loser", needs "sympathy", Mrs. Ramsay "immediately into the air showers of a burst of energy, a spray of water", "and the lack of vitality of the unfortunate men, join in the luscious fertile of life, and a fog bead, like a bare copper beak, desperately suck". Mrs. Ramsey devoted herself to her husband and family, trying to accommodate the sensitive Mr. Ramsey and take care of his emotions. When Mr. Ramsay repeats sarcastically, "No lighthouse tomorrow," she caresses her son's hair sympathetically, protecting his young heart with a keen desire. It is because of Mrs. Ramsay's "glue" magic and ability to look into other people's minds that she can see things as they really are. As she gazed at the open sea, Mrs. Ramsay felt again the vastness of the sea and her own insignificance. Her existence is organic, including not only the basic activities of life, but also spiritual integrity.

While writing *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf was often plagued by illness, and a deep sense of depression and despair enveloped her, but she finally managed to get through this difficult period with her ability to fight through hardships. The same is true for Mrs. Ramsay in her novels. Mrs. Ramsay never regrets her decisions, never shirks difficulties and responsibilities, and never plays favorites, balancing all the trivial things in her life, not only in the midst of life's turmoil, but also in the midst of criticism. Mrs. Ramsay is able to resolve these differences with a sense of self and peace of mind. Mrs. Ramsay is always alive and seems to glow. In the company of the ocean, she listened to the roar of the waves, "as if, as she sat with her children, she reassuringly repeated over and over the words of some old lullaby, Nature's whisper: 'I am protecting you -- I am supporting you.'" Through the sea, Virginia Woolf also expressed her lifelong desire to remain truly simple in a world of complexity.

As time passed, Mrs. Ramsay continued to find refuge in the ocean. She seemed to be outside the whirlpool of life, supported by the divine inspiration of the sea. As Lao Tzu said: "Nothing in the world is weaker than water, but everything in the world needs water in conquering the strongest." Mrs. Ramsay draws her strength from the ocean water. She herself is like water, flowing freely and smartly, standing out from the world with a simple and pure attitude. Mrs. Ramsay is also like Shelley's rook, riding on the wind, through the fragmented fog to fly, being the soul from the nature of the inspiration, with her own love and the firm strength of the heart to heal all disputes. "It rolls up and down, lapping the shore, breaking waves; the light of ecstasy shone in her eyes, and waves of pure joy rushed into her heart, and she felt: This is enough! That's enough!" Mrs. Ramsay finds a certain, solid direction in the nothingness and clutter of everyday life, "this steady, long column of light, that's her column of light." She broke through a lot of trifles that troubled her. While enjoying peace in her heart, she obtained the real existence of human beings and reached the realm of immortality. Goffen once writes that "She [Virginia Woolf] showed a particular preference for works that advocated the feeling of life," This unique experience trained her to be highly sensitive to the nature of life. For her, literature is the most comfortable form of capturing, expressing and interpreting the truth of life." Virginia Woolf combined the sea and life perception in her works to help people understand the nature of life and call on people to pursue their own true state. The vast ocean at this time conveys a spiritual power that is beyond anything else.

3.3. Symbolizing the Power That Engulfs Human Destiny

The sea space is not always calm in "To the Lighthouse," and Woolf also writes about the brutal side of the sea, a symbol of the power to engulf human destiny. Mr. Ramsey's philosophy has reached its limit. For him, the financial pressure of supporting his family and the anxiety of fulfilling his life's dream are like the dark waves beneath a calm sea. Facing the ocean, Mr. Ramsay realized the smallness and fragility of his fate.

This was his destiny, his particular destiny, whether it suited his wishes or not: there he was, standing like a solitary seabird, in a land that was slowly being eroded by the sea. ... It was his destiny, his gift, that the sea was eating away at the ground beneath us, and we were unconscious of it. [3]

Mr. Ramsay felt his gift and his vitality ebbing away, as if destroyed by an irresistible force, swallowed up by a vast, unforgiving space. The sense of vulnerability facing vast things is not only reflected in life, but also in fate. Woolf describes Mr. Ramsay as a lonely seabird standing on a rock in the middle of the sea, realizing that his own ignorance is impenetrable, that he is in the midst of a destructive force, allowing himself to be swept away by the ocean space. In the final scene of the novel, Lily, who is painting on the lawn, also feels the power of ocean space to engulf human destiny. This kind of understanding transcending life and death and time is the love and courage that Mrs. Ramsey brings to everyone. Mrs. Ramsay's love finally triumphs over the devouring power of ocean space, over death, and gives meaning to the lost.

The profound meaning of the sea space in *To the Lighthouse* is as broad and profound as itself. In Woolf's view, the ocean space is filled with human ideals, the mystery, the unknown and death, but she ultimately believes that human effort and love are larger and more powerful than the ocean space. The author's values are revealed in the symbolic meanings of the sea space, which have given the sea space a "foreground" status and enriched the multiple meanings of the work.

3.4. Denoting a State of Self-purification and Spiritual Sublimation

Virginia Woolf portrays various characters in *To the Lighthouse*, and they have different views on life in the face of the ocean. In the novel, it is not only Mr. Ramsay who is alone, but also the other characters in the novel who are in a state of loneliness and incomprehension. Yan Baoping mentioned in "For Poetic Dwelling": "After this (20th century), the loneliness of characters in literary works shows a kind of loneliness in which human individual existence is torn and damaged and lacks the complete state of human existence." As Mr. Ramsey looked out over the bay, he marveled, "The sea is eroding away the land beneath our feet, and we don't know it." In the pursuit of knowledge and fame, Mr. Ramsey blindly pursues truth and reason. He does not know the right way living in the world, and ignores the emotional connection between people. His excessive desire keeps him stuck in the pursuit of "R" and makes him feel small. The waters of the invasion are like a labyrinth of Mr. Ramsey's own creation, in which he is trapped, disconnected from his daily life and concerned only with his own reputation and research.

Zhuangzi said in *Tianxia*, "If you are strong, you will be destroyed; if you are sharp, you will be defeated." Mr. Ramsey is hurting those around him with his "toughness". James was disappointed when Mr. Ramsay announced irrefutably that "the weather will not be fine tomorrow" and that "we cannot go to the lighthouse." Mr. Ramsay did not yet realize the psychological toll that his brutal tyranny and obstinacy had taken on those around him. After his wife's death, Mr. Ramsay gradually realized the spiritual role of his wife and the powerful power of the ocean to contain all things. He gradually understood and absorbed the trivialities of life. When he finally went to sea with James and praised him for steering like a natural sailor, James was satisfied. At this time, James slowly rediscovers the emotional connection with his father. "Now the sail came round slowly, and by and by it filled with wind, and the little boat seemed to sway her, and set sail half asleep, and then came to herself, and galloped on through

the waves. It's incredibly comforting." The boat seemed to embody James. He had not understood why his mother's warm embrace and loving care had gone too soon, his father's indifference, his simple wish to go to the lighthouse had not come true. Then he came to understand the confusion and pain his father had experienced and decided to fight his way forward.

Lily was told that "women can't paint or write," but she continued to search for her vibrant self. Facing the ocean, Lily's heart has never been in comfort and peace. She thought, "How life is made up of little things that are separate and adjacent to each other, and come together into a single, undulating wave, with which man rises and falls, and washes out there on the beach." Virginia Woolf was first and foremost a human being as a writer. In her works, this kind of life is a kind of living with freedom and independence consciousness of contemporary human individual life. Lawrence's "Transgressive Sinner" combines characters, ocean and desire to create a "tide of life" full of passion and vitality, and in "To the Lighthouse," the waves are also alive. Life is like an ocean wave. As the protagonists of the novel, they will inevitably bump up and down and encounter all kinds of difficulties and hardships, but how to choose and how to face them is the most important. Still eager to finish the painting after the war and mental trauma, Lily grasped the object and settled on it, "finally painting the illusion that has been haunting me for years." Virginia Woolf called on people to be independent and free modern people with the consciousness of individual life subjects through the description of the ocean and the thinking of each character in life. As they neared the lighthouse, the Ramseys reoriented themselves against the headwind, which now pushed them along. "The sailboat passed by the reef, tossing and bouncing wildly in rhythm. You can hear the crashing waves, the splashing of the water, the roaring of the waves, as they come rolling in and leaping and beating against the rocks, as if they were wild animals, free to roll and play like this forever." The waves of the moment are alive, free and powerful, helping Mr. Ramsay and his children reach the lighthouse, and helping Lily finish her painting and realize her true self. At this time, Mr. Ramsay, James, and Lily get a new life. While harmonizing with nature, they realized their independent, free, complete and firm selves, sublimated their souls and perfectly displayed a transparent outlook on life.

4. Conclusion

With a unique and delicate writing style, Virginia Woolf widely uses the archetypal image of water in her works, showing the connotation incisively and vividly, and broadening the extension of her works. The sea water in her works not only has mysterious features, brings people an irresistible impulse to adventure, but also has the soothing effect of a mother, calming people's flustered hearts with her gentleness. It still has the abstract meaning of eternal life, connecting heaven and earth, connecting people's hearts. The moving sea not only drives the author's strokes, but also drives the human mind, provoking people to think about the endless universe and the fate of human beings. In her passionate novel *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf successfully uses symbolism to capture the emotions of her characters. The image of the sea is integrated with the inner feelings of the characters in the novel. The crystal sea, the sound of the waves and the sound of the sea give rhythm to the daily life, create a friendly, subtle and sensitive atmosphere, and show eternal interest. Taking the character as the center and the character's inner truth as the content, with the help of the rich ocean image, the author profoundly examines the relationship between the individual mind and the sea. Finally, this poetic and spiritual writing way, Virginia Woolf presents readers with a classic works full of clever stream of consciousness.

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