

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**Identity Crisis in Virginia Woolf's
*To the Lighthouse***

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ABSTRACT

IDENTITY CRISIS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

BY

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As a modernist novelist, Woolf who had her intense awareness of her contemporary reality, quitted her old style in favor of a new style that suited her tendency: the stream of consciousness novel. Woolf's style, infact, invites comparison with such outstanding figures of the modernist novel as James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, and William Faulkner though it possesses its own unique characteristics. Part of this study is a survey of the context of Woolf's art in the context of Modernist tradition.

The present study is the analysis of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in order to shed light on the concept of identity crisis, by adopting a psycho-existential view based on the early German existentialists; therefore, principles of such thinkers as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are mentioned as they apply to Woolf's novel. The aim of the study is

to establish this point that despite Woolf's striking affinities with such thinkers, the issue is mainly neglected by critics, who even when in rare cases they mention Woolf in the light of existentialism, they view it rather crudely and with an emphasis on the negative aspects of it such as absurdity and nihilism.

In addition, different critical views on Woolf are discussed from the negative early reactions, to the efforts of prominent figures undertaken to introduce her as a modernist to different turns the criticism of her work has taken during the present age. Finally the principles of existentialism are traced in *To the Lighthouse* and conclusions are deduced which but show the negligence of the question by literary critics. The conclusion reached confirms that the impact of existentialism has indeed been very significant in the fiction of Virginia Woolf.

CHAPTER I

Modernism

1.0. Modernism

Some critics believe that the most remarkable feature of Virginia Woolf's career as an author is her innovatory experiments with form and content. During her life, she moved from one experiment to another; literary and social criticism, biography and autobiography and the novel are fields on which she wrote, but she is primarily known as a modernist novelist who perfected the stream of consciousness method. As a modernist she believed that the conventions of the novel were no longer adequate for expressing the contemporary man's situation; what Lionel Trilling says of modern literature is equally true of Virginia Woolf's conviction:

. . . Committed to everything in human experience that militates against custom, abstract order or even reason itself, modern literature has elevated individual existence over social man, unconscious perceptions, passion and will over intellection and systematic morals, dynamic vision over the static image, dense actuality over practical reality. (Trilling 5)

Michael Bell mentions that modernism is not an original movement, but a joint effect produced by highly self-conscious avant-garde

authors such as Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, and Ezra Pound whose works depend less on their personal and national context than an awareness of one or more of the others. Indeed, it resembled more an atmosphere of joining authors who somehow unconsciously contributed to it and even abhorred the label and focussed on the question of time, personal identity and aesthetic and spiritual developments. One of the early remarks on modernism was made by R. A. Scott James, which was not indeed favorable:

There are characteristics of modern life in general which can only be summed up, as Mr. Thomas Hardy and others have summed them up, by the word 'modernism'. The hybrid may not be pleasant to delicate ears, but perhaps what it expresses is not a very pleasant thing. (Randall Stevenson 2-3)

Likewise, Wyndham Lewis, in *Time and Western Man and Men Without Art* (1934) sees the modern fiction of such novelists as Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and, James Joyce full of demerits. Even Virginia Woolf, while admiring Joyce's art of the novel in *Ulysses* in "Modern Fiction", later disapproved of it.

Woolf, by reason of her superb freedom from convention, both in form and content, is unrivaled among English novelists and invites comparison with Joyce, Conrad, and Faulkner. She began with novels not much different from her contemporaries, and by weaving a delicate psychological issue in the stream of consciousness novel, surpassed them. She alongside with such other novelists as Joseph

Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, and James Joyce passed by the structural pattern of the novel and adopted her new style. Indeed, modernism includes a wide range of minor and major figures who had one common characteristic: an intense awareness of the contemporary life.

Oswald Spengler, the historian-philosopher, with *the Decline of the West*, had a powerful impact which indirectly paved the ground for modernism in Europe and America. Like the seven previous cultures, he asserted, the Western culture's doom is inevitable, so man should follow his own wishes and instincts. Henry Bergson, with his concept of reality as flux, emphasized the importance of an everlasting fluid of impressions and cited the necessity of an intuitive style for expression. His approach to reality was an intuitive one disseminated among different levels of society. To him time was not mere passage of hours and days but a combination of this notion with the inner flux of the character presented in the form of reveries, memories, flashbacks, impressions, etc, and this is the same as what Woolf called "luminous halo" and Henry James, "halo or fringe." To him, time was these transitional phases of consciousness, an inward duration, a conscious fluid in which nothing can be forgotten, not sequential, separate incidents.

In 1910 the Post-Impressionist Exhibition of London, set by Roger Fry and Desmond MacCarthy, introduced such painters as Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso; new paintings were exhibited including

Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, in which he had presented not different points of view in presenting a face but the same sides of one face, surprised people to a great extent. Checkov's stories were translated into English in 1909 and Dostoevsky's works into French in 1912. The first two volumes of twelve volumes of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* appeared in 1890's and the rest of it later in 1911. Freud and Jung lectured on psychoanalysis in 1909. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* had already been published in 1859. These, all led to the new generation's abhorrence of superficial reality about which Woolf herself has asserted:

. . . if a writer were a free man and not a slave he could base his works upon his own feelings and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted sense, and perhaps a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (*The Common Reader* 189)

Likewise, Peter Faulkner has named remarkable works of the early twentieth century, those of Stravinsky, Proust and Picasso as well as Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, Yeats, Joyce, and Woolf's as modernist works and has ascribed the years between 1910 and 1930 to it. In his view, the modern art has its roots in the political, social, economic, and cultural context of the time. Every aspect of man's life, social as well as individual, was changing and moving towards complexity, and the modern artist, self-conscious and aloof, tended towards

complexity as a part of this general tide. According to many historians, the main cause of modernism was World War I. The Great War was much distressing to the public who were already shocked by the amazing social changes technology had created. They witnessed the decline of Britain's national supremacy, and no longer felt secure, physically or emotionally. And it created different reactions in the men of letters; a limited range of them wrote on the theme of war, among whom there are figures such as Richard Aldington, the author of *Death of a Hero* (1929) and Ford Madox Ford with his *Tietjens Tetralogy* (1924-28). Still many literary figures such as Joyce either intended to avoid the subject or to write on it covertly like Woolf. The War, technology, and unemployment, the rise of different social and political parties such as Fascism and Feminism changed the social scene drastically, and psychology and philosophy and science deepened the new consciousness; figures such as Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sir James Frazer and Albert Einstein appeared whose views presented the world with a new perspective and gave a new direction to the sober artist's thought and that of the audience who either tended toward political or social parties or sought consolation in human relations. And this spirit lasted well into the 1940's.

The stream of consciousness novel was the product of this epoch in the history of the world and that of Britain. According to

some critics its rise should be sought in the psychoanalysis school of Adler, Freud and Jung, but they sometimes go to excess and emphasize the importance of psychoanalysis as the mere criteria with which the work of art should be examined. Some other critics emphasize the role of Post-Impressionist painting in shaping the stream of consciousness novel, and still some others define it as an imitation of cinema. There are critics such as Edward Bowling whose views seem to be more conclusive. He has defined it as "a direct quotation of the mind" and a means of outpouring the innermost emotions and ideas of the author, and Henry Bergson defines it in the light of three key terms: time, memory, and the unconscious. All the traits of the traditional novel including characterization, chronological order and setting are reduced to the minimum degree to achieve the ultimate goal of capturing the reality, "original" and comprehensive. The stream of consciousness novel has certainly its roots in the prevailing atmosphere, and this spirit is the product of all the above factors. Psychoanalysis, Post-Impressionism, cinema, Bergsonism, new reality and objectivity made the artist aware of the necessity of a new technique of expression.

The early examples of the stream of consciousness technique were seen in such novelists as Dostoevsky and Dickens (in the initial section of *the Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 1870), but they were fragmentary and crude, and mostly expressed from the point of view

of abnormal states of mind or characters. Later in 1915 Dorothy Richardson developed it in *The Painted Roofs* and subsequently Joyce published his *Portrait of The Artist As a Young Man* in 1916. Woolf used this method in 1922 in *Jacob's Room* and Joyce's *Ulysses* appeared in the same year.

Woolf who was intensely aware of the fundamental changes in the social scene and beliefs, in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" asserts:

All human relations have shifted-those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature. (Madrer 31-2)

Later in *Modern Fiction* she calls Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells, the Edwardians, "materialists," for in her view they pay so much attention to the details of physical and social elements that they forget the character and the original reality. In this sense, the new technique of the novel can be called the continuation of realism, developed by changes in human relations and psychology. This period was the time of decline in religious faith and in belief in the Orthodox Christianity, a time of decline in values, social and familial as well as individual.

Woolf's two early novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919) follow the traditional pattern of the novel. *The Voyage Out* centers around Rachel Vinrace, whose life is a movement toward self-knowledge. Brought up in a leisurely atmosphere, she

gains an awareness of life and of her true self. In Night and Day, which in Woolf's own view was more sophisticated, she portrays Katherin Hilbery, an intelligent upper-middle class granddaughter of a famous poet in an atmosphere resembling that of the contemporary social comedy. Ralf Denham provokes her into a new recognition, both intellectual and social, and they are united at the end. However, later Woolf quit this style in favor of her new technique of stream of consciousness, in order to construct a meditative, economical style, which could at the same time, take the burden of intellectual conversations and conscious creation off her works and give them a mood similar to that of poetry. In fact, to her, the free flow of consciousness, which includes all the intuitions, memories, associations, reveries, etc. mattered more than public events.

1.1. The Statement of the Problem

While Woolf herself believed what the novel lacks is the impersonal emotions of poetry which her vision is deeply affected by psychological realism. It seems that almost all of her characters suffer from identity crisis, a term first used during the second World War and defined by critics as losing a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity, which itself causes an internal conflict, a stark existential fact. Even the most seemingly self-possessed characters, who are idealistic figures for others characters of her works and their

harmonizing and fortifying power, figures such as Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay and Bernard, are not exceptions. Woolf herself has maintained that it is in an atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have to create, but it seems that the same conflict is reflected in her works: her world itself is a world of doubt and conflict; what the characters have to do is to struggle to create a sense of meaning in this world.

The present study is a kind of psycho-philosophical analysis mainly on one of Woolf's stream of consciousness novels, *To The Lighthouse*, in order to shed light on characters and characterization in the light of existentialism, a philosophy which has had more impact on literature than any other philosophy. This study can be defined as the expansion of Jean Guiguet's view that "two features of Existentialism . . . recur throughout her work: the Absurd and the anguish of the moment" (37). So it should be noted that by referring to existentialism, it is not meant to label Woolf as a proponent of this philosophy but to assert that the characters and the world she has created resemble literary existential characters, similar to what Guiguet has expressed. Therefore, the principles of major existentialist philosophers and perhaps other philosophers are expressed and applied to Woolf's works as far as they are applicable and appropriate to the discussion. Therefore, for instance Hegel's description of "the unhappy conscious as a state of mind in which the