

Contemporary Reviews of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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This article deals with Modernism as a cultural movement; in the late of the 19th and the first part of the 20th century, and also the art of writing biography as a modernist technique used by so many modernist writers including Virginia Woolf. My main focus will be on Virginia Woolf's contemporary's reviews, and their analysis of her most beautiful novel *To the Lighthouse*. I will start sequentially with S.H Derbyshire's "An Analysis of Mrs. Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*", then, Kenneth Tighe "Art and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*, Martin Corner's essay "Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*", Peter Knox-Shaw "To the Lighthouse: The Novel as Elegy"., Glenn Pederson "Vision into the Lighthouse", Jack F. Stewart's essay "Light in *To the Lighthouse*".

Keywords: Modernism, Biography, Art, Atheism, Mysticism, Theism, Neo-paganism, Monotheism, Elegy, Ernest Cassirer, Fons et Origo, Pantheism, Pre-Raphaelite, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Tao or Dao, Eros, Cupid, Logos, Yin and Yang.

Modernism is a cultural movement; in the late in the 19th and the first part of the 20th century. It occurred in art, literature, music and architecture. It came as a reaction to the Victorian values, depending on a rejection of tradition. This was one of the very first things that I have in my memory before the starting of this course in the current month, while my new definition is that movement which meant to describe a variety of tendencies within the European literature in the late of the 19th and the early 20th centuries and its main principle is the power of the human beings to create or reshape their environment and stop questioning by (What), but to question by (How).

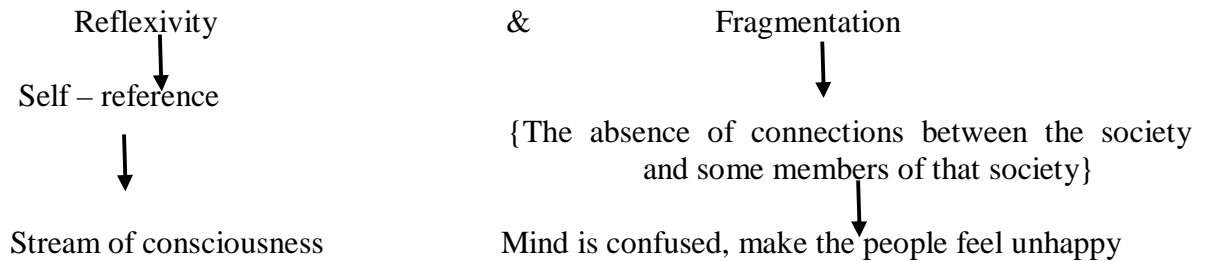
At the beginning, and as a member of the Eastern society, I understood that the word modernism means to forget our past, our traditions and our civilizations, it was about 5 years ago, as the customs and traditions that I was raised by, would prefer you don't see what others (Modernist World) achievement in their different aspects of progress and developments (and also from the religion point of view), as you know that the Muslim's environment would not accept any modernist thoughts which can be change the young Muslim's vision about their real life . But because of my simple study for Modernism it became clear to me that the issue of modernity is a necessity for every human being in order to grasp the true image of life, but within some conditions including

don't imitate what others are doing or believing in, because modernity will make us argue (how) and sometimes disbelieve in the simple way of understanding the life which is one of the main features of the (Realism).

Subsequently, I understood what modernism, modernity and modern means, and also I had a chance to experiment one of the greatest modernist writer Virginia Woolf by discussion her novel Mrs. Dalloway. In addition to the definition of modernism I understood the main features of Literary Modernism which are:

1- The change of Genres and structure ===== { Such as non- leaner style }

2-



So, the change of genres and structure in the literary works, such as the rise of what is known to be the writing biography, and here I will focus on Hermione Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf. In my society, we have Muslim biographies of Prophets as well as the Prophet Muhammad's biography in the early history of Islam began to be written. These biographies focused on the lives of the prophets and their companions. It contained more social data for a large segment of the population than other works of that period. So, for me, the basic definition of biography was the record of a particular man's life, presents a subject's life story, highlighting various aspects of life and it should make the character live again, it is not a mere record of names and dates; it create the personality by transmitting the facts and dates into life. This kind of biography was concentrating on the historical events and it might be called as a historical biography. When studying literature, literary biography for me is the exploration of the lives of writers and artists and that is the traditional linear way of writing a biography (a fact , a name , a place and a birthday), not like the modern literary biography such us our case study which is the biography of Virginia Woolf by Hermione Lee which she followed the non-leaner style, in her book for example, when she opened her book with question that Woolf herself asked "My God, how does one write a Biography ?". For me, the pure biography should be a realistic record of a person's life with all his virtues and petty weakness, not just mentioning the brightest side of his life just like what happened in the most of historical biographies in which they are mentioning only the virtues of that person by avoiding all the weakness or the bad features of that person or talking mythically about him. So, I can call this kind of biography the "impure" biography or the mythical biography in which human beings were treated in such a king of biography as gods and goddesses.

Furthermore, I prefer a literary biography only when it does not included the personal views of the biographer in which the biographers should stay away from his subject and view it clearly and dispassionately. Additionally, in my opinion the biographer must give us a true portrait of the individual without aiming at flattery, and it should be well constructed. It is doubtless, true that an ill-written biography, it can give us pleasure and delight, just like Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf, it is helpfully arranged thematically ("Biography," " Madness", "Reading") which makes it much more engaging (I think) than most literary biographies that I've faced. Lee knows her Virginia Woolf and her works and is able to separate the myth from the reality.

Lee's biography for me at the beginning, was not a casual read easy biography as it is so steeped in Woolf's work, her life, Bloomsbury. But while reading it, I could at this point go on about how much I learnt about Woolf and about what a wonderful writer she was (and still). What Lee does do well though is analyze the historical context and look at the lives and work of those around her. There are lots of interesting leads to follow and I noted down several references to books, authors and events which I will follow and read (if time allows). I got the sense that Lee seemed to be actively wrestling with the material in order to present Virginia Woolf in the most complete way possible instead of choosing to exaggerate, actively pointing out the ways in which Virginia Woolf was more than the sum of her illnesses and abuses, which is a style that I appreciate very much.

Reading Lee's biography, then, was a matter of adding details to an affection I already had by filling in the gaps that are hinted at in Woolf's work because I felt that this biography is tending to become more and more psychological. Lee tries to analyze the hidden feelings of Virginia Woolf. In conclusion, it was really interesting to discuss the art of biography and especially when it is concerning Virginia Woolf, and it is really enriched my knowledge about the great Virginia Woolf as a human being not just as an author and it really took me to her time and made me feel her life as if I am member of that age. Because Lee was just like the photographers who is taking her picture as it is, she did the same by describing the life of Virginia Woolf which make her biography to be away from the "impure" one or the mythical one.

In Kenneth Tighe's essay "Art and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*, Art, Atheism, Mysticism, Theism, Neo-paganism, Monotheism all these terms are stated in Tighe and Corner's essays. After reading these essays and other sources, I come to understand that during the life of Virginia Woolf, there is not any sign for her atheism, but of course it depends on the way of interpretation to the meaning of atheism; in case of religion case, yes, she did not visit any church in her life but is that an accurate proof of describing her as an atheist human being by avoiding all her other experiences such as the mystical one. Virginia Woolf did not announce about her rejection of God, or her disbelief. According to my perception, though, some critics consider her as an atheist according to her character speech, on the contrary, most of her novel's characters such as Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* can be consider as a mystical human being. Kenneth Tighe says that the Ramsay's family lived a secular life, and their children were fond of teasing Charles Tansley when they described him as the "little atheist", but accordingly, Mr. Ramsay is a larger atheist too, but we cannot judge him as a whole in the novel because his attitudes has been changed by the end of the novel and specifically on the boat scene, on his leap from the extraordinary to the ordinary level. Tighe claims that the atheism of Mr. Ramsay and Tansley are a part of an intellectual ambition that becomes associated with egotism, while, atheism for Mrs. Ramsay is part of self-reliance, strength of character. In *To the Lighthouse*, there is no unity between the people, paradoxically, they are physically close, but emotionally remote and this gap has been enhanced by the Virginia Woolf's narrative technique by using the interior monologue of her characters to tell her story.

The Isle of Skye, absences a logic of unity or an Art, "nothing was simply one thing" (*To the Lighthouse*, P.186).", with or without its people, but later on this unity brought by a human being (men and women) by the making of art. For Virginia Woolf, art is not only the painting, poetry it is a various kinds of human activities, the creative work that help in unifying the souls with one another and with the outside world. So, Carmichael, Lily Briscoe, and Mrs. Ramsay is an artist, but

from different dimensions (poetry, paint, and match-making). Mrs. Ramsay is an artist who is able to connect the distinct elements together. So, she has a mystical experience by fusing those elements or by reconstructing the people that surrounded her, especially her own husband, to create in the absence unity.

So, we can apply the term "Neo- Paganism", or the contemporary paganism on the character of Mrs. Ramsay. This term is characterized by Dennis Carpenter as "a synthesis of historical inspiration and present-day creativity". Neo-pagans or modern pagans attempt to reconstruct or recover original, ethnic religions as found in historical sources as accurately as possible. Mrs. Ramsay's creativity is demonstrated in her party or on her character personalities, "it is an example of positive community spirit that emerges almost magically out of isolated egos" Kenneth Tighe claimed. In this party Mrs. Ramsay follows Clarissa Dalloway, namesake of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. Clarissa too was a doubter with regard to mono-theism. Mrs. Ramsay had a desire for gathering people that at once an art. Monotheism is defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica as belief in the existence of one god. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church gives a more restricted definition: "belief in one personal and transcendent God",

(" ...not for a moment did she believe in God.")

(Mrs. Dalloway 29)

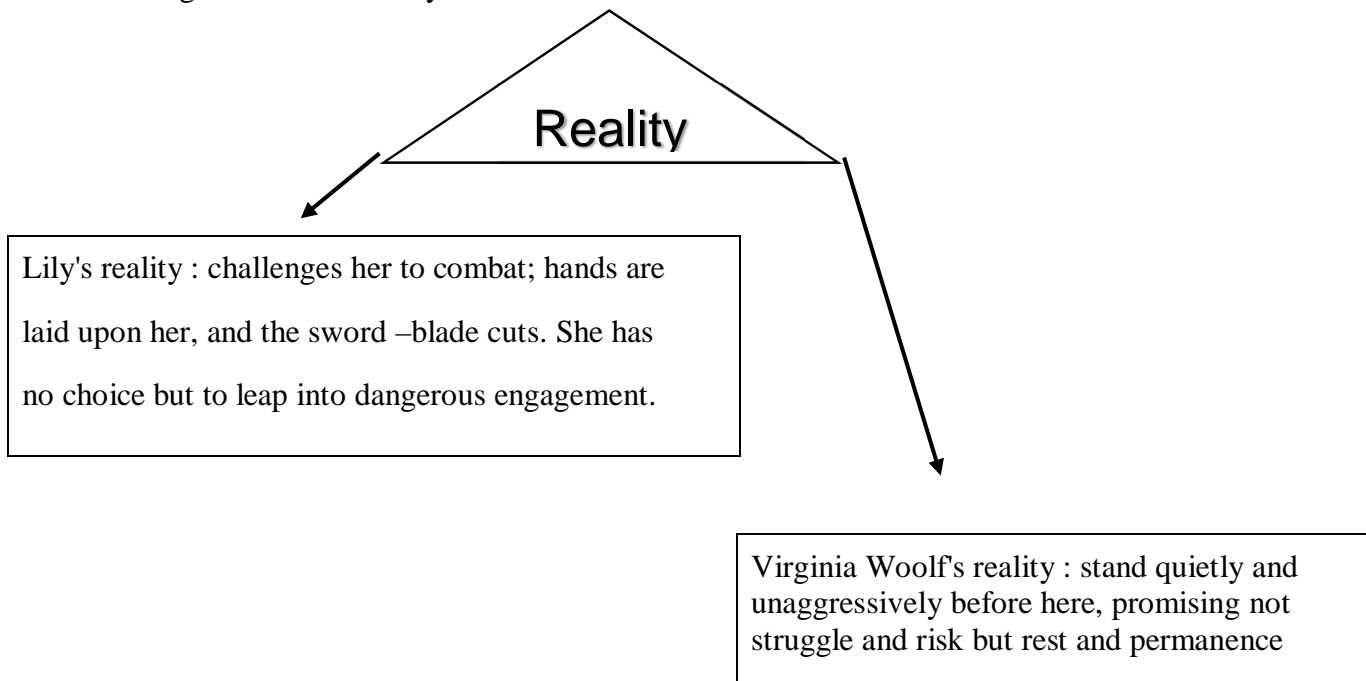
Lily Briscoe, the artist, the painter, the creator, with her art we are taken through the combative, painful process of art from beginning to completion. In order to complete her art she must hide her self-doubts and feelings of personal inadequacy. She does so by remembering the days of Mrs. Ramsay, and during the process of painting she was associated with her departed friend. She understood that in order to get her vision she has to make a balance between the presence of the remnant characters and with the absence of Mrs. Ramsay. By this process, art is described to be holy and scared.

Virginia Woolf is an agnostic, mystic human being. It is hardly to judge her as an atheist in this novel, so I disagree with Martin Corner by describing her as an atheist in *To the Lighthouse*. In the novel she presents the creative power of rational mysticism, particularly through the characters of Lily and Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay is a rational mystic who works at reunion opposites and bringing together illogical fragments into an active unity. A similar creative power is also included by Lily Briscoe, her spiritual heir. Lily is a rational Mystic, in addition to being a creative artist; she shares Mrs. Ramsay's mystical energy toward unity. So mystical is the painting of Lily Briscoe, when she was near to finish her painting, she was thinking what she is doing through one image in particular, it is an image that express both what both what her art requires of her, and what life as whole demands. Another form of mystical experience relating to Lily Briscoe, she stands on the lawn, she feels as though everything is approaching a point of comprehension – stability as it was called by Martin Corner, and Lily feels that she is within reach of some "conclusive revelation", something that fuses herself with the outer-self. I have been reading in the novel when she finds herself sweeping:

**" Was she crying then for Mrs. Ramsay, without being aware of any unhappiness?
She addressed old Mr. Carmichael again. What was it then? What did it mean?
Could things thrust their hands up and grip one; could the blade cut; the first grasp?
Was there no safety?" (To the Lighthouse, p.277)**

We have more than events in *To the Lighthouse*, which contain two kinds of "mystical experience", "introvertive" and "extravertive". One turning inwards to the pure self, and the other outwards to the world, it means that the mystic fuses into a union with natural objects or with "Nature" as a whole. So we can consider Virginia Woolf's mystical experience which stated in her

novel as an extravertive mystical experience, as I mentioned in the later paragraph concerning Lily on the lawn. It is a blending process between the individual and the outer world. Furthermore, there are other experiences in which the self faces a reality of the outer world in which there is a blending or merging takes place. In other word, we can call them as fusing and facing experiences. Mrs. Ramsay is self-absorb with some of her guests can be consider as a fusing kind of mystical experience. Virginia Woolf sees a danger in fusing experiences for two reasons: 1- They are momentary and involuntary. 2- The "fusing" experiences do not readily reveal their true nature; they are delusive, not in the sense of being in real, but in that they tend to impose a false interpretation. While on another occasion, the variety of "facing" kind of mystical experience stated in the novel many times, for example, Lily Briscoe sees she challenges her canvas. She too is aware of something not herself, "this other thing," which is "truth" and "reality". But this reality is different from Virginia Woolf's reality.



But by the time, that Lily's painting is finished, this difference becomes very much less, when Lily got her vision he has been reaching her rest and stability also. So it is the same reality, the same vision, the same "truth". Martin Corner states that "what is true of painting is true of life as a whole: it is all danger and risk. The mystical perception is related to the reality, Lil's desire to be on the level of ordinary in order to get her vision. Virginia Woolf favorite experience is the "facing" variety of mystical experiences because it is closer to the heart of her view of the world. From this point, we have two kinds of mystical experiences in *To the Lighthouse*, one suggesting security and the other risk, one "the hands of the Lord" and the other is a lonely character on the edge of a tower. Even atheism in the novel is an implied atheism represented by Mr. Ramsay and his atheism from the early beginning of the novel, he leaps from the extraordinary to the ordinary in which he blends himself with the outer self. So, finally he turns into mystic human being, so cannot judge him as an atheist as whole. Mr. Ramsay's life is an achievement of atheism; and the nature of this atheism brings his atheist attitudes into the "facing" variety of mysticism, but his atheism is not complete, he begins as a kind of atheist who has not forgiven God for not existing; and this atheism is incomplete. We saw how he learns to attend to the ordinary level, even by readings which helps him to follow the facing experience, he enjoys reading Walter Scott's *The Antiquary*. Lily's point of

view has been changed towards Mr. Ramsay especially at the boat scene, when he sat on the boat with his children (ordinaries), he shifts from inward into outward.

Mr. Ramsay is able to face the reality without self-pity, it can be considered also as turning point from the atheism to mysticism. For Lily, the purpose of her painting is to know the ordinary as miracle, and it was a reward of her success (I have had my Vision) which is the reality of life. Mr. Ramsay also has got his vision also, but it is not the "Z" of his philosophical argument, it is a matter of experience, and not of philosophy. In Lily's eyes, he reaches a moment of transfiguration, from extreme age to youth, he discovers a new lightness and freedom in his release from egoism and this also contain kind of "mystical experience"*.

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 (*) **Mystical Experience:** It is a synonymous with the term " religious experience", " spiritual experience", or a " sacred experience". The concept originated in the 19th century as a defense against the growing rationalism of western society. William James popularized the use of the term " religious experience in his book: *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A study in human nature.*

The death of Julia Duckworth and her memory is the main reason that push Virginia Woolf to write *To the Lighthouse*, "I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse* laid them in my Mind",_(Virginia Woolf's diary,1928). All we agree that Virginia Woolf's style in writing *To the Lighthouse* is different than her previous works, for example, by dividing her novel into three parts and also by using her stream of consciousness as if she wanted to make her novel readable even to the level of ordinary people, and the reason beyond this for me because it is about her very beloved mother, that she used to see her (her ghost) daily, but after writing the novel as she claimed, she did not see her again in her dream. Hence, the word 'elegy' is related to the main idea of the novel, as she explains in her diary that her new novel required a new name, and she said that she should use the word 'elegy'. The word elegy for me was much concerned with poetry, the mournful poem, but after reading Shaw's essay, I come to know that Virginia Woolf applies the feature of an elegiac poem on her novel to be an elegiac novel as it was called by Shaw. Elegy is a lyrical poem of mourning, but *To the Lighthouse* is a poem of renewing the life instead of just mourning, and I completely agrees with Shaw in his comparing the elegy with tragedy, he says that: "Tragedy is the darkling slope towards death", " Elegy is the ascent from death".

I agree with Peter Knox-Shaw point of view when he is relating the novel to the subtype of elegy which is Pastoral elegy which is a poem about death and rural life. The conventional pastoral elegy has many features, for example, (1) the mourner usually starts his work by invoking the muses, and goes to make frequent reference to other figures, (2) the praise of the dead people and detailing on their effects on the remnants and upon nature, as Virginia Woolf's praising of Mrs. Ramsay and her effects on the remnants.

In my opinion, Shaw succeeds in his explanation of an elegiac work and especially when he chooses John Milton's *Lycidas* in 1637. John Milton describes Edward King as a 'Selfless', also Virginia Woolf intentionally described her mother, I mean (Mrs. Ramsay) as a selfless human being. *Lycidas* functions can be applied on *To the Lighthouse* in this way:

- 1- John Milton offers a life of the departed===== *The Window.*
- 2- John Milton records the impact of death===== *Time Passes.*
- 3- John Milton returns to the present ===== *The Lighthouse.*

Finally, I agree with Shaw when he says that *To the Lighthouse* is the essentiality poetic form of elegy, I founded it is hard to disagree with Peter Knox-Shaw. The novel for me is like John Donne's poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" which is also an elegiac Poem.

After I have read the novel, I come to understand that life, death and Mrs. Ramsay are the central issues of the novel. But I have been shocked by reading the first page of Glenn Pedersen's *Vision in To the Lighthouse*, especially when he claims that the beauty of Mrs. Ramsay is a superficial, positive creature, by explaining, according to Lily Briscoe's *Vision* that Mrs. Ramsay is a negative force which takes over the lighthouse and this prevents the integration of the family. I disagree with Glenn's point of view in this occasion, because the presence of Mrs. Ramsay in the novel is not just a thoughtful and patient woman, but also as a protector for the family. "prevents the integration of the family", I also disagree with the writer by describing her as an abstract towards the unity of the family, because her aim at the beginning is to preserve James's hope which is to reach to the lighthouse. Yes, later, she understood that Mr. Ramsay was correct by saying the weather will not be fine next day, but the purpose of this from my point of view is to make the hope for James possible, to preserve the world around her as possible.

Glenn Pederson in his essay entitled "Vision in to the Lighthouse ", claims that Mrs. Ramsay's attitude toward others is determined by their attitude toward her. But while reading *To the Lighthouse*, I recognize that she behaves in an equal way towards her guests, even if for those who do not pay attention to her kindness, for example, when she decided to go to the city, she asks Mr. Carmichael if she can bring something for him to make him more comfortable by ignoring her feelings that he does not like her, so she is treating her guests in an equal way.

From her way of writing, Glenn is just like a lawyer for Mr. Ramsay, by the end of his essay, he claims that Mr. Ramsay has integrated the family, and Mrs. Ramsay is guilty essentially because of her desire for selfhood. I can realize his thoughts against the feminist ideas and thought by his supporting to Mr. Ramsay, and finally by describing Mrs. Ramsay as matriarch, which encouraging Oedipus complex in her son the way that I really don't like to describe Mrs. Ramsay in such a negative way.

Mrs. Ramsay is unifying the family during her life, and she is assisting Lily Briscoe to get her vision till the end of the novel, not just like what Glenn has described her, when he says that "the family integration is not possible while she lives; only after her death", In conclusion, I can say that *To the Lighthouse*, has more than one vision it depends on our interpretations, for me, the vision of the lighthouse can be as follows:

- 1-James's desire to go to the lighthouse.
- 2-Mr. Ramsay's fulfillment to understand the life, and he has to fuse himself to the level of ordinary.
- 3-It is an artistic vision of Lily Briscoe's paintings.
- 4- Virginia Woolf's proud of success, by making balance between the absent and the present in order to understand the meaning of life "I have had my vision"

Jack F. Stewart's essay "The light in *To the Lighthouse*" was not merely to describe Mrs. Ramsay as light, but also to draw some similarities between truth and light. The writer traces the light through the window, time passes and the lighthouse. In the *Window*, the writer states that light is the positive force of visionary consciousness. The first appearance in *To the Lighthouse*, the lighthouse seen by Mrs. Ramsay as a distant object, "a rigid vertical dominating" "the view ... that her husband loved" (TTL, P.25). The lighthouse was an old beacon in the middle of the sea " the hoary lighthouse". In Mrs. Ramsay's vision, she is aware of intellectual reality at the center of her landscape, and also of nature, imaginative symbolized by the colors blue and green. Blue and green

are regularly collective, blue associated with the sea, distance, transcendence; green with green shawl, illusion, and imagination. In my opinion, the whole concern of the essay concerning with Mrs. Ramsay, and especially "the window". In his view, Stewart is making Mrs. Ramsay as a synonym of the window, in which the window is the only path that light is penetrating it into the house, and so as Mrs. Ramsay is the window that her surrenders character are seeing the light, the truth only in her face. The second appearance of the lighthouse not as a distant object, but as a source of light, after Mrs. Ramsay finishes reading the story of the fisherman's wife, she looked across the sea, she saw the lighthouse reflected in James's eyes. The beacon is a reminder of James's desire to go to the lighthouse, and of his father's stern refusal. Ernst Cassirer (1) observes that, "light and shadow go together. The light manifests itself only in the shadow it casts...". Thus, it is in darkness and solitude that Mrs. Ramsay achieves illumination through her mystical experience by merging herself with the outer self (the light). Mrs. Ramsay, however, exchanges "the fret, hurry, the stir" (TTL, P.100) of self for the freedom, peace, and stability.

According to J. E. Cirlot's *A Dictionary of Symbols*, "Light, traditionally, is equated with the spirit,". The lighthouse is seen as an object by all characters except Mrs. Ramsay, who sees it in a visionary sense. She has no need to go to it, like the others who must see it "face to face". I really appreciate the writer's use of symbolism when he states that "Mrs. Ramsay as the sea encircling the rock with its waves". She is the *Fons et Origo* (2). Mrs. Ramsay becomes an archetypal source of light and energy for others. The fact that Mrs. Ramsay's personal light can be considered as the light that she almost spent in sacrificing her energy for others.

The writer pointed out that the light expresses Mrs. Ramsay's feelings, not only to herself, but to the reader, "her indirect interior monologue shows a trace of irony: she is aware of indulging a private mood of pantheism (3)", and her response to the Light is expressed in Pre-Raphaelite (4) imagery that would do credit to Burne Jones (5): "There rose, and she looked and looked.... there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover" (TTL, PP. 101-02). As if she is in love with the life that lies beyond the self. Hence the lighthouse beam is a symbol of truth, and "objective correlative" for the life-force itself. Norman Friedman claims the Mrs. Ramsay has a "Double Vision," both "subjectivity involved in and objectivity detached from life", and therefore able to see it whole, in other word, it means to harmonize one's self with the nature (Tao or Dao) (6).

The writer pointed out, that the alternating strokes of light and darkness of the lighthouse, clearly relates to the symbol of the Tao. Mrs. Ramsay opens herself to Light as Eros (7)"desire", but then she fills herself with the power of energy from which she can restore her husband in his quest for Truth as Logos(8) "ground, reason". Jack F. Stewart states that Ramsays embody opposite values of Eros and Logos, Yin and Yang (9), that combine to make a whole human figure; their ultimate unity is symbolized by the rotating light in darkness of the lighthouse. Then the writer is giving a detailed description of light in the time passes, and the lighthouse. According to my point of view, this article is to relate the Light to Mrs. Ramsay and also to say the original light is that which seen by Mrs. Ramsay for the first time, and it is the synonym of the Truth of life, which is seen by Mrs. Ramsay since the beginning of the novel in a contrary, with the remnants characters, in which they need to go to the beacon in order to discover the truth of life. In conclusion, we can summarize the presents of Light in to the Lighthouse as follows:

- 1- The Window = Light is the positive force of visionary consciousness.
- 2- Time Passes = Light is the negative equivalent of departed consciousness.

- 3- The Lighthouse= Light is the reanimation of consciousness in a creative rhythm the seeks spiritual and artistic Oneness.

1-Ernest Cassirer: - German philosopher, which supply an idealistic philosophy of science, he developed the theory of symbolism and used it to expand phenomenology of knowledge.

2-Fons et Origo:- Is a Latin term means "Source and Origin", for example, describes Italy as the Fons et Origo of classical music.

3-Pantheism: is the belief that the universe (or nature as the totality of everything) is identical with divinity, or that everything composes an all-encompassing, immanent God.

4- Pre-Raphaelite:- a group of English painters, poets, and critics founded in 1848 by William Holamn Hunt. The group intention was to reform art by rejecting what is considered the "mechanistic approach", first adopted by mannerist artists who succeeded Raphael and Michangelo.

5- Sir Edward Burne- Jones, 1st Baronet (1833-1898) was a British artist and designer, closely associated with the later phase of the Pre- Raphaelite.

6- Tao or Dao: - Is a Chinese concept signifying way, path to harmonize one's will with the nature. The most important subject in this respect is the Taoist concept of "**De**" which means the virtue.

7- Eros: - Is the "Desire", in Greek Mythology was the God of Love.

8- Cupid:- God of Desire in Greek Mythology.

9- Logos:- Is the "ground", "reason", "speech", "word".

10- Yin and Yang: - Chinese concept to describe how apposite or contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, how they give rise to each other as they interrelate to one another. For example (Light and Dark).

In conclusion, I come to understand that literature has not a single meaning, it has more than one interpretation, and it is different from one literary era into another. For writers, Art is religion for them through which they try to find meaning in life.

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