

**Self-Representation and the Novel:
A New Historicist Reading of Authorial Defacement in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse***

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Abstract

This study is aimed at analysing how Virginia Woolf, one of the outstanding English novelists searches for identity of a modernist artist within her novel, *To the Lighthouse*. This is because self-representation involves self-fashioning. She utilises the technique of self-representation for enunciating defacement in the novel. She models the character of Lily Briscoe around her historical life and uses the character to represent her identity of an artist. The analysis in the study is based on the perspectives of new historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose and Michael Foucault. This is because New Historicism is interested in studying the reconstruction of the historical (self-representational) within the imaginative piece of writing. The study concludes that *To the Lighthouse* exemplifies an autobiographical novel, a mode in which historical elements of literature find their ways into fiction.

Key words: *Novel, Self-narration, defacement*

Introduction

The emergence of the novel as a genre of fictional narrative marked a significant achievement in the world of literature. From its inception, the novel has proved to be an enduring literary and cultural form. As Arnold puts it: “the novel suffices itself to being an effective way of reasserting the broader human culture” (1951:1). This indicates that the novel’s central concern is human beings and the society. However, that does not make the novel free from the problem of definition, description and genre identification. Eagleton (2005) for instance sees the novel as a genre that actively undermines all definitions and “it is less a genre than anti-genre” (1) since it cannibalises all “other literary modes and mixes their bits and pieces promiscuously together” (1).

This means that the novel does certainly elude genre classification or definition and is, by implication, a hybrid literary form, because it allows for the reconstruction of many other

modes within it including self-narratives. The novel focuses on the lives of real people in the real world which includes the life of the novelist. This makes the genre more complex to understand and it is not unconnected with the rigidity and, at the same time, delicacy of the term genre.

Anderson, (2001:35) defines genre as a “specific type of artistic or cultural composition identified by codes which the audience recognize them”. This means that genre is a nomenclature given to certain compositions that share similar characteristics or identities. Abrahams, M. H. and Geoffrey, G. H. (2008:134) hold that “the genre into which literary works have been grouped at different times are very numerous, and the criteria on which the class significations have been based are highly variable”. There are many criteria that guide the classification of certain works to a particular genre and these criteria vary. It is in this regard, Derrida (1980) argues that there is always a genre and genres, meaning that a particular work of literature can belong to one genre or more. Examples of typical genre categories include science fiction, crime fiction, autobiography, etc. Derrida (1980) holds that every text must be identified with a particular genre. By Derrida’s argument, it appears that there is the possibility of reconstructing the historical modes in the novel genre, an instance that establishes the presence of self-narration within a novel that may be called “autobiographical novel”.

Virginia Woolf is one of those English novelists who experimented with the novel. Being a modernist novelist, Woolf combines fiction with history, especially her personal history by way of modelling characters that are a reflection of her historical life. Such characters include Lilly Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, the character that is studied here as an alter-ego of Woolf. The reading of Briscoe as a reflection of Woolf goes well with the New Historicist view of literature and history as complementary, thus, Montrose’s popular postulation of “the historicity of text and textuality of history” (1989)

Woolf’s technique of Self-representation in this novel follows what DeMan (1989) calls “defacement”, an instance by which an autobiographer hides their identity in writing his or her life. For DeMan, defacement is an autobiographical technique of concealing the known identity of a writer to write about the same life that is hidden. Woolf defaces her identity in *To the Lighthouse* by creating the character of Briscoe that may be, on the surface, assumed different from Woolf’s personality. However, many of Briscoe’s personality traits are identifiable with Woolf’s historical life.

The period that spans Woolf’s life was one of important historical, cultural and social changes for Great Britain. Perhaps, this is why *To the Lighthouse* embodies the social, historical and the cultural changes the Great Britain underwent during that time. Again, the assumption of the British ruling class of cultural superiority and the rationality and the civilisation of the European institutions were severely shattered after the First World War, (1914-18). The Great War, as it was called, demonstrated the destructive forces of

European civilisation. For Woolf as an individual, the war threw doubt on many of her central beliefs and values of the time. For the entire Europe, it did much to initiate a new age of European culture, the age of scepticism. There were many other indications of the world's change at that period. The Soviet revolution of 1917, for example, swept away a whole order and posed a challenge to the old ruling classes of the world. These experiences affected many countries in Europe, including England, Woolf's native countries.

New Historicism

Owing to the ambivalent relationship between text and context, the disciplinary boundary between history and fiction attracts attention of literary scholarship. But since 1970 and with the emergence of New Historicism, history and fiction have no longer existed as opposite sides of a pendulum as contemporary literary theory has gradually obliterated the boundaries between them. History is, according to Foucault (1984), a discourse constructed by "literary imagination" and "power relation" and in this sense it is ideological and subjective, always open to multiple inquiries and re-interpretation. New Historicism is one of those theories that juxtapose history and literature or fiction. History in this sense means the factual writings that are verifiable by time and space (including self-narration and/or self-representation). Literature here means the imaginative and creative writings that include the novel.

New historicism on this note through one of its key theorists, Louise Montrose insist on the 'Historicity of the text and textuality of history' (1989:20). One of the means of accessing history is through its textual form. Therefore, this canon of "textuality of history and historicity of text" suggest the presence of fact in fiction, as well as the presence of fiction in fact. Since the novel is a text surrounded by history, therefore, it is absorption of history. The writer of the novel is embedded in the history. This rapprochement of literature and history has allowed for the special kind of fictional works, i.e. those based on documentary experiences and which self-representation is one of their techniques.

Catherine Gallagher explains New Historicism as "reading literary and non-literary texts as constituents of historical discourse that are both inside and outside of texts" (1989:37). "Inside" here refers to the intrinsic elements of the text, which includes the philosophical and the symbolic structures of the text, and "outside" refers to the extrinsic elements like social, cultural and historical densities of the text. These extrinsic elements include the writer's life experiences including how the writer searches for identity within the historical context he or she navigated through. Moreover, Greenblatt (1980: 5) argues that:

Language like other sign system is a collective construction; our interpretation task must be to grasp more sensitively the consequences of this fact by investigating both social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the word in the literary text.

Thus, Greenblatt shares with Gallegher the idea of interpreting the text from both “inside” and “outside” of it. By “social presence to the world of the texts”, the society where the text emanates from is understood. Moreover, by “social presence of the word in the literary text” it makes it clear that the text through language captures the social, cultural and ideological aspects of the society since the text itself is a historical discourse.

New Historicism is cynical to the role of the writer since the theory considers history as the sole object of analysis. However, Greenblatt’s suggests that the work of the critic is to interpret the literary work in such a way that the work represents the social and cultural life of the society as it is embodied by history. With this argument, the place of the writer in the analysis is spelt out but not as the maker of the story but as non-autonomous agent of history and at the same time its witness that is subjected by the multiple social and political forces of his era.

Again, Stephen Greenblatt further situates the writer of literature amid three paraphernalia within which the text circulates:

Literature functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behaviour of the particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behaviour is shaped and as a reflection upon these codes (1980:13).

This highlights that literature is a system made up of four basic inseparable things; an explanation of the ways of life of its writer, writer’s search for identity, a guide for the audience and the critics for understanding the writer and his society and a guide for all those who wish to shape their lives in line with the writer or his lifestyle. In addition, Greenblatt (1990:21) argues that:

Novels enable us to glimpse the social processes through which objects, gestures, rituals and phrases are fashioned and moved from one zone of display to another...Novels characteristically conceal this process, so that we have a misleading impression of fixity and little sense of the historical transactions through which the great texts we study have been fashioned

This implies that the novel more than any other literary genre, can be analysed through the perspective of New Historicism since on Greenblatt's argument the genre gives a comprehensive picture of the social happenings of the society where it stems. It also accounts for the "historical transactions" that give birth to the text itself and it is a highlight about the history of its writer.

Authorial Defacement and Identity-Searching in *To the Lighthouse*

To the Lighthouse was published in 1927 and received the most appreciation from the readers of her works. Bell argues that Roger Fry wrote to Woolf that *To the Lighthouse* is "the best thing you have done actually better than Mrs. Dalloway" and Woolf replied that "it has kept me on the right path, so far as writing goes more than anyone" (1986:128). According to Bell, "Frye wrote to Woolf that "the book is awfully sad, very beautiful both in (non-radiant) colour and shape, it stirs me much more to questions of whether and why than anything else you have written". Woolf replied to the effect that "it is also one of the writer's favourite; my present opinion is that it is easily the best of my books" (Woolf, 1980:77-78).

The novel consists of three parts. In the first part, the Ramsays are on vacation with some friends in their village by the sea. The youngest child, James, makes a request about "going to the lighthouse" the next day, which receives a warm response from his father; with only the weather being a possible excuse. With the flow of consciousness, the picture shifts from mother and son to other members and friends of the family and then to a family dinner party with the beautiful hostess, Mrs. Ramsay as the centre. In the second part, war breaks out and ten years pass. Mrs. Ramsay suddenly dies. Her beautiful daughter, Prue, gets married but later dies at childbirth, and her clever son also dies on the war front. In the third part, the broken family returns to the villa by the sea, and under the leadership of Mr. Ramsay, together with his two children, Can and James, they set out for the Light House.

The reader later encounters the character of Lily Briscoe in the story. Briscoe is first presented in the novel through the eyes of Mrs. Ramsay, thus; "But the sight of the girl standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded her" (21). This quote reveals that the first glimpse shows Briscoe standing apart from the other characters "on the edge of the lawn painting", and by this it should be understood that Lily's relation with other characters is very significant. Briscoe is to be the outside-onlooker and a "masked" representation of the artists that creates the novel, complementing the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay by rounding up the complex presentation of "reality" which is at the heart of it. This reality, considering Greenblatt's (1980) argument of the social presence of the world of the literary text in the text, is interpreted as Virginia Woolf's perception about her parents, although Briscoe, to some extent, cannot be regarded as a fictional

portraiture of Woolf. She could rather be seen as Woolf's creation of a character through whom she could reveal her perspective about her parent; a character that looks at her parents from the perspective of someone who loved them, but was not their child; someone who shares much resemblance to Woolf both being an artist, or to some extent a "defaced" representation of Woolf.

The fictional detachment of Briscoe from Woolf gives Woolf a free will to criticize her parent without guilt. Criticism of her parent is the main project she sets out to undertake via the character of Briscoe. Since it may be difficult for her to do that openly considering the cultural nature of the Victorian era, Woolf chooses an autobiographical technique popularized by deMan (1980), "defacement", to undertake this criticism. She defaces and guises under Briscoe to make clear her own identity of an artist, who through her artistic production, criticizes what she perceives to be wrong doing within the culture she navigates through. By employing an autobiographical technique to represent her own identity, we understand the reconstruction of the historical or the self-representational within the fictive mode and this suggests what Montrose (1989) describes as "the historicity of the text".

Woolf deliberately makes Briscoe differ with her in many of their social and psychological traits. For instance, Woolf was married and was already a distinguished literary artists/critic as at the time she wrote the novel. Again, Briscoe may equally be seen as a projection of what Woolf might have become had her father lived, and if she had been forced to "take care of him" as he earlier wanted. She would have remained in "her own inadequacy, her insignificance, keeping house for her father off the Brompton road" (19). Woolf realised that with her upbringing in the Victorian time, she had only narrowly escaped. Had her father not died in 1895, leaving Vanessa, Toby, Virginia and Adrian free to "sport with infidel ideas" (6), things might have been very different. On her father's birthday in November 1928 as contained in her diary, she speculated about the possibility of this:

Father's birthday. He would have been 96, 96, years, today: and could have been 96, like other people one has known: but mercifully was not. His life would have ended mine. What would have happened no writing, no books- in conquerable (1953: 135).

The death of Woolf's father, Lesley Stephen paved a way for her to, in the words of Greenblatt (1980), "fashion identity" as an artist. This coincides with Briscoe's refusal, in the novel, to pay heed to Mr. Ramsay's amorous advances after the death of his wife. In addition, Briscoe rejects all the prescribed paths and expectations concerning

women, particularly with regard to their artistic talents and sexual desires. She is fully aware of the fact that marriage would bring the same lot to her life as it did for Mrs. Ramsay. She rejects heterosexual relations since she observes with distancing and discerning eyes that in heterosexual or marital relationship, the one who must sacrifice and subordinate is the woman. She even pities Minta who is devoured by the “fangs” of Paul’s passion. Briscoe is happy that she had not submitted herself to such degrading heterosexual relations.

This explains how Briscoe is caught making identity similar to that of Woolf even though she differs from Woolf in some psycho-social attributes including being married. Briscoe’s conviction about the negative effect of marriage on a woman is equally speculated by Woolf. She argues that heterosexual relations or desire is not what attracts her in her matrimonial relations. She, thus, wrote to her husband Leonardo in her letters:

As I told you brutally the other day I felt no physical attraction in you. There were moments when you kissed me, the other day was one, when I felt no more than a rock, and yet, your caring for me as you do almost overwhelm me. It is so real and so strange (1912:55).

This explains that she feared marriage in her early life as it involves emotional and sexual partnership. She rejected many advances from suitors but only succumb to the pressures by Leonardo with his caring attitudes which attracted her.

In the novel, Briscoe’s decision to relinquish heterosexual relations opens up the chances of unleashing her wish to establish relationship with Mrs. Ramsay, even though they are of the same sex, which could bring about artistic fruitfulness as well. Before Mrs. Ramsay’s death, Briscoe thinks that her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay could not be expressed in words, thus, “what could one say to her? I am in love with you? No, that was not true. I’m in love with this all, waving her hand at the hedge; at the house at the children? It was absurd.... one could not say what one meant” (76). This suggests that Woolf depicts her own struggle to obtain and assert female autonomy as she was constantly threatened or undermined by the Victorian universals that is characterized as a society built upon the foundation of patriarchy.

In the Victorian era, the clash of gender ideologies were very common themes of arts including literature. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf emphasises the subversion of traditional female gender roles through the character of Briscoe, the character that embodies her own identity by way of masking as a woman artists or feminist novelist. Briscoe represents Woolf; an idealised feminist woman who challenges male’s hegemony to achieve a sense of individuality, a reputable feminist writer of the modern times. Briscoe’s finished painting and epiphany at the end of the novel help to establish Woolf’s

artistic accomplishment there by becoming a truly liberated female artist. Briscoe's desire to break away from conventional female cultural norms and stereo-type in order to achieve autonomy can only be fully equaled with Woolf.

Again, Briscoe's status as a middle class aged-woman, who values artistic achievement over the prospective of marriage, becomes increasingly difficult to maintain against the circumscribed expectations of the society. The pressure to confirm to specific female gender roles weighs heavily upon her conscious "even when she looked at the mass of the line, at the colour, at Mrs. Ramsay sitting in the window with James, she kept a feeder on her surroundings lost someone should creep up and suddenly she would find her picture at" (67). This likens her to Woolf who suffers from a moral crisis over her desire to pursue art as a vocation, because of gender inequalities and male prejudices imposed upon the woman. Hussey (1995: 42) argues in this relation that "Woolf certainly intended Briscoe's paintings be read as analogous to the novel itself, implying in turn that Briscoe represents Woolf herself and her vocation as a female artist in the society that is dominated by patriarchy".

This implies that Briscoe's painting project in the novel is, in many ways, similar to Woolf's project for writing *To the Lighthouse*. The middle section of the novel where Woolf uses words to sketch the essence of ten years of time passage for the Ramsay's family by remembering the slow decline of their houses in the Isle Skye reveals that she obliquely and indirectly depicts the decay of their historical house in Isle Skye. This is similar to the painting strategy that Briscoe uses in the novel, thus:

It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, Lily said. She knew Williams Banke's objection – that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. For what reason had she introduced them then? He asked. Why indeed except that if there, in that corner it was bright, here in this, she felt the need of darkness. Simple, obvious, common place, as it was, Mr. Bankes was interested. Mother and child then – objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beautify-might be reduced, he pondered to purple shadow without irreverence.

Briscoe attempts to capture something truthful in her portrait without being too picky about making the painting actually look like Mrs. Ramsay. In painting the essence of Mrs. Ramsay, she also represents something inexpressible; mother and child; objects of universal veneration; objects of admiration and respect. This echoes Woolf's work in getting the essence of their own family by representing the lives of their father, Lesley Stephen and mother, Julia Stephen in the characters of Mr. And Mrs. Ramsay.

Not only that, but Woolf's project in this novel also resembles what Briscoe is doing in her painting in that she is working to get the essence of family structure at large more generally by jotting down moments from two days separated by ten years. Woolf, like Briscoe, uses the "simple obvious, common place" to get at really profound issue between mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. In the final section of the novel, *the Lighthouse*, Briscoe's intense personal struggle to reconcile herself with her art, reveals her attempts to move beyond the "blast of doubt" which both society and biology impose on her, thus:

Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting, she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul left of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacles and exposed without protection to all the blast of doubt (37)

Such doubts are self-imposed since Briscoe is still unsure of her fate as both woman and artist. Yet, considering comments offered by men like Charles Tansley (representative of her British Victorian Society) who claim "women can't write, women can't paint" (91), the reader understands Briscoe's natural inclination to take such words to heart, believing in this claim of general truth (i.e. all women cannot write nor paint) and in its personal applicability (i.e. Briscoe Cannot write nor paint).

By implication, this means that Woolf cannot become a writer. In essence, Briscoe's struggle between heeding what she is told by men that "women can't paint", as she knows as a woman that women can write and paint represents Woolf's struggle to disprove the Victorian universal assumption. The Victorian assumption is that women cannot write. Woolf, therefore, proves herself an outstanding female artist of her time. This explains how *To the Lighthouse* serves as, in the argument of Greenblatt (1980), an "expression of the codes by which behaviour is shaped" since the text depicts how in the modernist era, writing helped to shape the universal behaviour of regarding women as "weak" and "cannot write".

Conclusion

This study explores the novel as a fictional genre that allows multiple other modes, including writer's personal history to be present within it and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is analysed as an example of this process. The study highlights the autobiographical densities of *To the Lighthouse* by demonstrating how the writer handles the technique of "defacement", a technique that is known for being used by writers of autobiography within the novel genre that is widely regarded as fiction. The study uses

New Historicism to demonstrate the extent to which the personal history of Woolf features in her novel. This is because New Historicism is cynical to generic boundaries of literature by holding text and context, or text and history in constant tension in its analytical process. The study concludes on a note that *To the Lighthouse* exemplifies the autobiographical novel.

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