
Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*: A Contemplation on Einstein's Temporal Relativity

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Abstract: In the 20th century, scientists and philosophers proposed radical ideas in an attempt to provide newer and better interpretations of the erratic nature of life. Einstein proposed his theories of special and general relativity in the early 1900s, which completely discarded generalized objective understanding of reality. The present study makes a case that Virginia Woolf's treatment of time in her novel *To The Lighthouse* shares affinity with Albert Einstein's relativistic ideas of time. The paper follows a hermeneutic approach, qualitatively analyzing the novel's tropes and narrative structures that exemplify his theory. It adopts a deconstructive vantage point in the close reading of the text, and aims to prove that *To The Lighthouse* is an extremely fitting example of literature of the modernist era which reflected the advancements in science with the integration of scientific phenomena in its narrative.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, time, Albert Einstein, relativity, modernist

I. INTRODUCTION

The age of Modernism brought with it waves of revolution and transformation of society on a profound level. Conventional notions and perceptions of reality which were considered universal were turned on its head, and made a thing of the past. The age ushered in and encouraged new ways of thought, which brought about a revolution in the societal conscience. Conceptions of reality which were long-established throughout the centuries were questioned. The war, and its resulting socio-political upheavals were a major contributing factor in the scrutiny of the pre-established conventions, beliefs, dogmas, and

perceptions of reality. Pre-conceived knowledge was no longer reliable, neither was the objectivity which had been common to all humanity. All throughout the world, there spread a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the established world order. As the world emerged into a new era, humans scrambled to understand their new surroundings, they desired new and better explanations of the world's condition, and of reality as a whole. The conditions were apt for the emergence of new philosophies and scientific discoveries, which shaped the art, literature and culture of the age of modernism.

The rapid scientific output of the era characterized the age, and shaped modern understanding of life and of the world. The ideas that sprang up were 'inherently strange representations of reality that [were] antithetical to common sense.' (Ettinger, n.d.) Out of the numerous theories that arose, 'some of the best-known theories posit space and time as relative quantities, light and matter as both wavelike and particulate, and reality consciousness as interpenetrating.' (n.d.) As Watanabe puts it, 'Historically, the origins of the Modernist movement reside in the scientific revolution dominated by a patent clerk named Einstein, who spent his leisure time writing up his ideas and submitting them to a scientific journal.' (n.d.) Einstein and his radical explanations of the gears and shifts behind the functioning of reality revolutionized western thought, as his theories invited philosophical insight in trying to understand the theoretical physical explanations on why reality is the way it is.

Einstein dared to say that we must now re-interpret how we view the world around us. Such a radical concept turned science on its head, and it became widely acknowledged that this discovery had somehow affected the lives of everyone on the planet- rather, the lives of everyone had always been affected by properties that had only just been discovered and acknowledged. (Arora, 2008)

He posited, through his outrageous contribution to science, the theories of special and general relativity, that reality is subjective, changeable, and its perception would vary from person to person. It gave way to the notion that the nature of reality depends upon its observer. Individual experiences and their relativistic nature gained precedence over collective knowledge.

Such radicalized stirrings in the field of science seeped into the common thought and culture of the age. And literature reflected it. Many modernist authors took active interest in contemporary scientific developments, and their implications to daily human life. Einstein's theories, especially, were understood in the context of daily life. Since, the perception of reality depended upon its observer, the world became a construction of one's

consciousness. Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) built their narratives in exploration of these new ideas. Her extensive use of the stream-of-consciousness technique, ‘which uses elliptical metaphorical language and psychological symbolism to represent fragmented, inchoate sensory and cognitive data’ (Watanabe, 2022, p.01), gave her the means to divulge into and experiment with the ideas of Einstein. Tolliver-Brown, in his *Relativity, Quantum Physics, and Consciousness in Virginia Woolf’s “To the Lighthouse.”* observes that, ‘it is perhaps not surprising that she would have found his theory of a non-absolute spacetime continuum of particular interest to the development of her own writing style. (2009, p.40)

Whether she agreed with Einstein’s theories is questionable. Nevertheless, her writing reflects her effort in trying to understand reality and its nature, as it evidently can be related with the newly discovered scientific discoveries of her time. Woolf’s novels such as *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931), all explore the relativistic nature of time. Her use of her characters’ consciousness to wander about with the idea constructs her narratives, and provides them a deeper dimension. In *The Waves*, where she experiments with six narrators, the majority of the plot moves forward through the conscience of the characters. The novel is set in the thought-dimension of the characters, where spacetime can be bent at the characters’ will. Therefore, the flow of time or ‘narrative temporality’, as Sheehan (2014, p.47) calls it in his *Time as a Protagonist in To The Lighthouse**, depends upon the consciousness of the individual characters. Tolliver-Brown notes the following about her novels:

... [in *Mrs. Dalloway*,] the relative nature of time is reflected by the contrasting chimes of St. Margaret’s and Big Ben, Clarissa feels the sense of being everywhere at once, Septimus experiences unity with inanimate objects such as trees, and many of the other Londoners seem to possess identical thoughts about the motorcar. However, in *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf brings these ideas to the thematic and philosophical forefront of her work.’ (2009, p.43)

This line of thought studying Woolf’s use of Einsteinian temporal relativity in her work requires further exploration. The novel of interest of the present study, *To The Lighthouse*, is where ‘[narrative temporality] is most pronounced and effectual ... where time is figured as an operational force, an agent of drama, a kind of protagonist.’ (Sheehan, 2014, p.47) Woolf portrays time as a byproduct of the mental processes of her characters, along with giving it an agency of its own. Time is seen set in the clutches of the characters’ minds, as well as all on its own, independently affecting the elements of the narrative. ‘In

this ... novel Woolf begins incorporating wavelike structures into the narrative, illuminating particular crests of action and plunging into a “trough” of time in which a decade contracts into a few moments.’ (Ettinger,n.d., p.04) It also experiments with the concept of multiple narrators, as the reader is taken from the mind of one character to another, from Mrs. Ramsay, to Lily, to William Bankes, to James. Between these jumps, or rather steps from one mind to another, time is forced to listen to and follow every thought. ‘In *To The Lighthouse*, ... her concept of space and time remains relative, and she melds Einstein’s theories with an additional sense of the permeable boundaries of consciousness between entities...’ (Brown, 2009, p.40) Time leisurely sits at the table during Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner in the presence of its human companions, and conforms and obeys their will. The characters serve as massive bodies in the presence of whom time falls short as a powerful force, and instead, falls in line with the flow of their consciousness.

II. ‘TIME’ AND *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

To The Lighthouse is sectioned into three parts, viz., The Window, Time Passes and The Lighthouse. The pace at which time flows starkly varies in each of these parts. The first part of the novel, The Window, features the Ramsay family with their guests at their vacation home in the Hebrides. The entire duration of the section spans the events of one day, despite being the longest out of all three. It opens with Mrs. Ramsay saying to her son James that they would visit the lighthouse the next day. Throughout the chapter, James is gripped with the anticipation, ‘he had looked forward [to visit the lighthouse], for years and years it seemed, [which] was, after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail, within touch.’ (Woolf, 1927/2016, p.09) Woolf built the entire narrative around this desire of James, which is eventually fulfilled after ten years.

In The Window, time flows through the consciousness of the characters. Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, Mr. Ramsay, William Bankes, all act as bodies with mass and gravity, with the ability to stretch time. Time becomes a subjective element. The first part of the novel owes its length to its characters and their perception of their reality. Woolf masterfully uses the stream-of-consciousness technique to reveal the deep inner recesses of the minds of her characters, through their thought processes. When her characters ruminate over their thoughts and reactions to their reality, time expands and stretches to accommodate their mental processes. Time, which is often looked at as an objective metric of measurement, is influenced by the mental workings of the characters, and bows to their will. Woolf ‘[invites] consideration of the psychological characteristics, motivational social and economic factors, and cultural surroundings that energize them.’ (Watanabe, 2022) It is because she represents the characters experiencing time in a subjective manner that she is

able to portray the inner lives of the characters prominently, the working of their psychology, and the processing of their emotions. The first part of the novel, therefore, objectively spans just one day, but is the longest part of all three as the characters influence the flow of time. Time slows down, dilates. The narrative's connection with Einstein's general theory of relativity is thus apparent, as, in the vicinity of bodies with a greater mass (characters in the novel), the pace of time recedes.

When the Ramsays and their guests finally come together for the dinner that Mrs. Ramsay planned, their coming together creates a huge body with a great mass that influences time. Some characters understand that the dinner is taking longer than it should, that it is a waste of time, but time, nevertheless, goes on glacially. Mr. Bankes, during the dinner, reckons that 'if he had been alone dinner would have been almost over now; he would have been free to work. Yes, he thought, it is a terrible waste of time.' (Woolf, 1927/2016, p.96) A similar thought arises in Mr. Ramsay's conscience too, rather intensely, when he thought 'it was detestable (so he signalled to [Mrs. Ramsay] across the table) that Augustus should be beginning his soup all over again ... He hated everything dragging on for hours like this.' (1927/2016, p.103-104) He was increasingly impatient as he resented sitting at a dinner table for long when others had to finish their food. Every minute that they had to spend sitting there felt like an hour. For Augustus Carmichael, though, who enjoyed his food, time went by with the snap of a finger, and he had to ask for more soup to savor the moment. The characters experienced the pace of time differently than the others. Their vantage point on the events happening govern at what rate time would flow for them.

As the second part of the novel, *Time Passes* begins, the difference is apparent. The chapters in this part are far shorter than the ones in *The Window*. Though it is the shortest part of the novel, it spans ten years. The Ramsays' vacation home is deserted, and time takes its toll on it. The space, the house, previously occupied by humans with the ability to dilate time in their vicinity is empty. Time is left unchecked and its destruction is set loose upon the house. Mrs. Ramsay passes away in the night after the dinner. As opposed to the hold she had on time in the first part of the novel, here, her passing is noted as one of the happenings along with the others. It is time that takes up the stage. During the first part of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay's knitting establishes the presence of objective time as well. Xiaoshan Hou notes,

That persistence is not a mere background detail. It establishes the knitting as a temporal constant in a scene otherwise characterized by emotional fluctuation. Where James oscillates between hatred and longing, and Mr

Ramsay slides between self-pity and display, the knitting neither accelerates nor stalls. Its continuity offers a counter-rhythm to the scene's psychological eddies. (2026, p.02)

Time falls back in line, complies to the conscience of the characters again, once they assemble back at the house after ten years. The final part, *The Lighthouse*, features the events of a single day, but is longer than the previous one. Once the characters, except for Mrs. Ramsay and a few others arrive back at the vacation house and occupy its space, their presence governs the pace of time. Time's return to its compliance can be noted when at breakfast, Lily puts off dealing with Mr. Ramsay's demands on her by pretending 'to drink out of her empty coffee cup so as to escape him ... to put aside a moment longer than imperious need' (Woolf, 1927/2016, p.156-157). The absence of Mrs. Ramsay puts Lily in charge of looking after Mr. Ramsay's need for validation. While he waits for his children, James and Cam to join him for their trip to the lighthouse, he exerts his want of total attention on Lily as 'he had assumed a pose of extreme decrepitude; he even tottered a little as he stood there' (1927/2016, p.162). Every second they have to bear in each other's presence elongates, and seems never ending. Lily is ridden with the heaviness of responding in an appropriate manner to Mr. Ramsay, while he waits for her reply in malaise.

Woolf never explicitly presents a clear image of Lily's painting, but as Lily resumes working on it after ten years, she is swayed by the emotions that her memories of Mrs. Ramsay invoke. She remembers the 'long rigid silences' (Woolf, 1927/2016, p.210) that fell between their conversations. Their states of mind so differed from each other that they at times were trapped in these prolonged and tempestuous moments of silence.

Einstein's theory is aptly exemplified by the interactions between James and his father. Woolf exposes the dynamic of their relationship right in the beginning of the novel, when James, at the age of six, thinks 'had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it' (Woolf, 1927/2016, p.10). The dream of visiting the lighthouse that he wanted fulfilled is hampered as Mr. Ramsay declares that the weather would not be fine the next day. It is after ten years since the day of Mrs. Ramsay's dinner, that this desire of James finally comes to fruition. Ironically, James shows signs of growing up to be like the man he so despises. When James steers their boat 'like a born sailor' (1927/2016, p.217), he receives that which he waited for. Mr. Ramsay praises him. The seemingly never-ending moments of internal angst that James endured for years, end. As his sister Cam notes,

There he sat with his hand on the tiller sitting bolt upright, looking rather

sulky and frowning slightly. He was so pleased that he was not going to let anybody share a grain of his pleasure. His father had praised him. They must think that he was perfectly indifferent. (1927/2016, p.217)

Woolf's characters definitely possessed the might to bring time to obey their whims. They create fields of gravity around themselves, strong enough to dilate time.

III. MRS. RAMSAY'S GRAVITATIONAL PROWESS

Who the real protagonist of Woolf's novel is, is up for debate. As the novel begins, Mrs. Ramsay is introduced as a character around whom the story revolves. She is the whole and soul of the house, she looks after the chores, her children, her husband's whims, and her guests. It can be noticed too, that the thoughts of the other characters also revolve primarily around her. Little James looks up to her, Mr. Ramsay seeks her validation, and the guests admire her and her mellowed beauty. She occupies space.

James, her son, is also often considered as the protagonist of the novel, as it is his desire to go to the lighthouse which finds fulfilment at the end. Another prominent character who tries to move towards a certain goal, along with James, is Lily Briscoe. 'Although Mrs. Ramsay is the central focus of the beginning of *To The Lighthouse*, the novel traces the development of Lily Briscoe to the end, making it more accurate to describe Lily as the protagonist.' (SparkNotes, n.d.) Her act of painting is an attempt against time, an attempt to freeze a moment, to extend it to eternity. Both James and Lily's aspirations are brought to completion by the end of the novel. James visits the lighthouse, and Lily declares, having concluded her painting, that she has 'had [her] vision.' (Woolf, 1927/2016, 220)

Nevertheless, it is Mrs. Ramsay out of all three of these characters who holds her space in the house, and also in the minds of other characters. Her being reflects the gravity of a massive body dictating the flow of time in its vicinity. The first part of the novel is set primarily around the dinner scene at the Ramsays' house, which Mrs. Ramsay planned for her guests. As the scene ends and as she prepares to leave the scene behind, she:

[waits] a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she took Minta's arm and left the room, it changed, shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past. (Woolf, 1927/2016, p.120)

Woolf describes the room changing itself, transforming, as Mrs. Ramsay departs. She governed how time moved when she occupied the room. Time crept slowly through the conscience of the characters in the dinner scene. The dinner, of which Mrs. Ramsay was the host, was evidently very long for many of the characters. Mr. Banks chooses his

words carefully as she sparks up a conversation with him.

‘He [feels] rigid and barren, like a pair of boots soaked and gone so dry that you can hardly force your feet into them. Yet he must force his feet into them. He must make himself talk. Unless he were very careful, she would find out this treachery of his ... So he bent his head courteously in her direction.’
(Woolf, 1927/2016, p.97)

Like a massive body with a great mass slowing down time in its vicinity, her character's monumental presence influences the characters to endure the seemingly long dinner. Lily notes too that ‘she put a spell on them all...’ (Woolf, 1927/2016, p.109) Her gravity has authority over time, it expands and contracts. Mrs. Ramsay is but one of Woolf’s characters that broke through the barriers of traditional storytelling, setting the age of modernism in stone.

IV. CONCLUSION

Einstein’s relativity, quantum theory, and such scientific discoveries, which gave the 20th century its character, transformed society from the inside-out. Its after-effects are seen even today. These advancements shaped modern thought and brought answers to the dilemma of an age of turmoil. The philosophical underpinnings of Einstein’s theories made them approachable in the eyes of the common masses. Artists, especially literary figures explored these theories in an attempt to understand the changing scenes of their time.

To The Lighthouse is Virginia Woolf’s contemplation on Einstein’s theory of relativity. She produces a profound understanding of the nature of time, and its dependence on the consciousness of individuals. Even though she integrates scientific phenomena in her novel, it strays far from science fiction. Her ideas are far from being fictitious, they are realistic, based on scientific explanations of the nature of reality. She explores the real-life manifestations of these scientific theories. The perceived omnipotence of time, which was generalized and conventional in understanding reality, was discarded. The novel is an apt example of the ability of human consciousness to influence and control the perceived omnipotence of time. Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* is but a reflection of these scientific advancements. Rather, it is the reflection of the volatile temporal reality.

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