

**“TRANSFORMING ORDINARY EXPERIENCE TO
AN ECSTASY”: VIRGINIA WOOLF’S
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL *TO THE
LIGHTHOUSE***

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ABSTRACT

In this study, Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* is examined as an autobiographical novel. Virginia Woolf’s autobiographical writings are formed by her diaries, her letters and by her *Moments of Being* which contains five autobiographical essays yet her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* is considered to be her most autobiographical writing. Autobiographical novel is a transformation of lived experience into fictionalized discourse and frequently involves introspective work geared towards self analysis. In Woolf’s autobiographical fiction, we can see Woolf’s attempts to negotiate her relationships with her parents, herself and her environment. Virginia Woolf uses her past and her parents as models in her novel but the final characterization of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay transcend their models. What she achieves is something universal, rather than the narrow, limited world of biography. A complete non-biographical approach *To the Lighthouse* might allow the reader to comprehend all the issues that are dealt with in the novel. Yet, in this case, comparing the facts of Virginia Woolf’s life and her fiction enables us to see her artistic skills at work, transforming individual experience into art.

Keywords: Autobiographical novel, experience, art, transformation.

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VIRGINIA WOOLF'UN OTOBİYOGRAFİK ROMANI: *DENİZ FENERİ*

ÖZET

Bu çalışmada, Virginia Woolf'un 1927 yılında yazdığı *Deniz Feneri* adlı romanı otobiyografik roman başlığı altında incelenmektedir. Virginia Woolf'un otobiyografik eserlerine baktığımızda günlüklerini, mektuplarını ve beş denemeden oluşan *Moments of Being* adlı eserini görmekteyiz ancak *Deniz Feneri* adlı romanı, eleştirmenlerce Woolf'un otobiyografisini en etkili şekilde yansıttığı eser olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Otobiyografik roman, yaşam deneyimlerinin kurgusal bir söyleme dönüştürülmesidir ve çoğunlukla bireyin kendi kendisini analiz etmesine yönelik içsel bir yolculuktur. Woolf'un otobiyografik romanında da yazarın, kendisi, ebeveynleri ve çevresindeki insanlarla olan ilişkisinin muhasebesini görürüz. Woolf, romanında geçmişi, anne ve babasını birer model olarak kullanır ancak onların kurgusal kişilikleri gerçek hayattaki modellerini aşar. Woolf, biyografinin sınırlı dünyasından yola çıkıp evrensel olana ulaşır. Bu romanın incelenmesinde, otobiyografik yaklaşımın dışında olabilecek yaklaşımlar da kullanılabilir ve yazarın tartışmaya açtığı bütün izleklere ulaşılabilir. Ancak Virginia Woolf'un hayatının gerçekleri ile yazdığı bir romanı karşılaştırmak, onun bir sanatçı olarak bireysel deneyimini sanata nasıl dönüştürdüğünü görmek açısından önemlidir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Otobiyografik roman, deneyim, sanat, dönüşüm.

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Pala Mull, Çiğdem. ""Transforming Ordinary Experience To An Ecstasy": Virginia Woolf's Autobiographical Novel *To The Lighthouse*". *İdil* 3.11 (2014): 147-156.

Virginia Woolf's autobiographical writings are formed by her diaries, her letters and by her *Moments of Being* which contains five autobiographical essays yet her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* is considered to be her most autobiographical writing. Autobiographical novel is a transformation of lived experience into fictionalized discourse and frequently involves introspective work geared towards self analysis. In Woolf's autobiographical fiction, we can see Woolf's attempts to negotiate her relationships with her parents and herself.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the similarities of the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey to Virginia Woolf's parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen have been duly noted by many critics. Virginia's sister Vanessa confirms this connection in the letter she sent to Virginia, after the publication of the novel:

...Anyhow it seemed to me in the first part of the book you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character, which must be the most difficult thing in the world to do. It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up & on equal terms & and it seems to be the most astonishing feat of creation to have been able to see her in such a way—You have given father too I think as clearly, but perhaps, I may be wrong, that isn't quite so difficult. There is more to catch hold of. Still it seems to me to be the only thing about him which ever gave a true idea. So you see as far as portrait painting goes you seem to a supreme artist & it is so shattering to find oneself face to face with those two again that I can hardly consider anything else. In fact for the last two days I have hardly been able to attend to daily life. (Bell vol. II 128)

Virginia Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse* based on her childhood memories at Talland House on the coast of Cornwall where the Stephen family used to spend their summers. Although Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are portrayed very close to the actual parents, Virginia Woolf deliberately changed some of their characteristics in order to convey the larger themes of the novel. *To the Lighthouse* is not about Virginia's childhood, her parents, and her surrounding even though the novel offers a lot of information of this kind. It is about life and death, about the passage of time, about creation of art, order and chaos, reconciliation of the opposites, man and woman, transformation of the self:

A book has to be an experiment on yourself. I think that a book is part of your own life, of your own transformation, and

of course a book is addressed to other people, it's supposed to be read by other people. It's hard to write a book. Why do you do that? I think the reason is that, first there is pleasure in discovering new things, and also there is the fact that you work on yourself, you metamorphose, you transform yourself by writing. (Michel Foucault qtd. in Sheringham 5)

We can argue that to a certain degree every piece of fictional writing has an autobiographical quality because when creating characters, writers tend to go back to personal experience as the basic source. Born from actual people in life, the characters are shaped into their roles in the writer's imagination. It is this final stage in their development that make them fictional characters in an art work rather than mere portraits of people. A writer's imagination transforms a living character into a fictional one in such a manner that it becomes impossible for the reader to trace the sources of that character. On the other hand, there is no escape from subjectivity. In *Moments of Being*, Virginia Woolf comments that "[...] people write what they call 'lives' of other people; that is, they collect a number of events and leave the person to whom it happened unknown" (69) But "[...] one's life is not confined to one's body and to what one says or does; one is living all the time in relation to certain backgrounds and conceptions" (73) Woolf mentions that:

it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words, we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock." (72)

This is Virginia Woolf's moment of being. It is a moment when an individual is fully conscious of her experience, a moment when she is not only aware of herself but gains an understanding of herself in relation to a larger pattern hidden behind the superficial appearances of daily life. We can find these moments of being in her autobiographical fiction. These are moments of self awareness that allow her characters to see life in general more clearly and more thoroughly. For example for Mrs. Ramsay, presiding over her dinner guests, thinks:

Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment while they were talking about boots) just

now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of pure joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose...like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was all around them...Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures.

Such moments of being help the characters and the writer to look at their lives from a certain distance, separate it from a particular life story and see it as a part of a larger pattern that connects all human beings. This is what Woolf wanted to achieve in her autobiographical novel. Virginia Woolf openly declares the sources of *To the Lighthouse* in her diary on Thursday, May 14th, 1925:

This [*To the Lighthouse*] is going to be fairly short; to have father's characters done complete in it; and mother's; and St. Ives; and childhood, and all the usual things I try to put in—life, death, etc. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel.

Woolf also mentions the therapeutic role of this novel in her life: “I used to think of him [father] and mother daily; but writing *the Lighthouse* laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true—that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; and writing of them was a necessary act)” (A Writer's Diary 135). So creating the images of her mother and father in her fiction helped her reconcile with the memories of them. She lost her mother when she was ten years old, before she could show her appreciation for having a devoted, loving mother. Her father, already an island, turned away from people altogether after the death of his wife on whom he was emotionally dependent. Writing the novel gave Woolf a chance to understand and appreciate her father for what he was.

In “‘The Synthesis of My Being’: Autobiography and the Reproduction of Identity in Virginia Woolf,” LuAnn Mc Cracken comments that:

By the end of her career, Woolf has approached a balance between past and present; her sense of self admits both identification with the central mother-figure and separation from her. ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ begun about two years before her death, reveals the result of Woolf's struggles for an identity of her own: here she is the woman who defines identity through relationship and the writer who, having

become more comfortable with this self –identity, may even merge with the identities of others through imagination.” (60)

By looking at biographical facts presented in Bell’s biography, we can see that Mrs. Ramsay has much in common with Julia Stephen. They are loving, devoted wives and mothers. They have the same views on the role of women and both view marriage as the only desired end for women. They are both known for their interest in matchmaking. Both of these women adore and support their husbands’ intellects. Although they both consider giving happiness to others as their mission, they suffer from a pessimistic view of life. Julia Stephen lost her happiness after her first husband’s death, and decided to live only for the happiness of the others. Similarly Mrs. Ramsay has a pessimistic look on the world:

How could any Lord have made this world? She asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that. (64)

Virginia Woolf presents Mrs. Ramsay as a typical Victorian woman but she makes the character strong by giving her the power to feel, to intuit, to create. Mrs. Ramsay entertains typical patriarchal views of womanhood which is probably a deliberate twist on Julia Stephen. Julia Stephen was full of emotions yet she also played a great role in the education of the Stephen children. Unlike Mrs. Ramsay, she was an intellectual woman who enjoyed literature, knew different languages and understood math. In the novel, however, Mrs. Ramsay is puzzled by the root of a number. In reality it was Woolf herself that couldn’t count without using her fingers. In the novel, we always see Mr. Ramsay losing himself in his reading of Sir Walter Scott. Biographical information shows that it was Julia, rather than Leslie, who was a true Scott fan. These changes were deliberately made by Woolf to adapt these characters into the world of her fiction.

The character of Mr. Ramsay has also gone through a transformation. Leslie Stephen was a well-known critic, writer, and thinker of his time. He was the patriarch of the family yet nevertheless dependent on his wife for emotional support. He was also Woolf’s mentor. Virginia Woolf had conflicting feelings towards him: she respected his intelligence but was upset at his inability to show affection towards his children. In the novel, Mr. Ramsay is portrayed as the emblem of reason and intellect; he is “incapable of untruth.” The transformation that this character went through in Woolf’s mind from Leslie Stephen to Mr. Ramsay can be seen in their attitudes after the wives’ deaths. Leslie Stephen, after the death of Julie, sinks more deeply into solitude and refuses further contact. Mr. Ramsey, on the other hand,

becomes a more lovable character, communicates with Lily, and at the end is able to show his appreciation to James. This change was also made to make this character fit into the larger scheme of the novel. Virginia Woolf places Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in the novel not as mere portraits of her parents but as characters in her fiction.

Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay display contradictory attitudes towards life. While Mrs. Ramsay tries to keep hope alive in their children, Mr. Ramsay always offers the bare truth even though it hurts their feelings. When Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay argue about the trip to the lighthouse because of the weather, Mr. Ramsay cannot control his anger:

The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of the women's minds enraged him. He had ridden through the valley of death, been shattered and shivered; and now, she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect told lies. He stamped his foot on the stone step. "Damn you" he said" (32).

On the other hand, Mrs. Ramsay's feelings toward his attitude are shown as:

To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that, without replying, dazed and blinded, she bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked. There was nothing to be said.

Although Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay represent two opposite poles, their marriage is a happy and harmonious one. Mr. Ramsay adores his wife's beauty and the ease with which she communicates with other people. She is an artist of human relationships. She is extremely talented in creating occasions to bring people together and directing them in an orderly, harmonious manner as if they are the players in the play she is writing. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, admires her husband because of his capacity of reason and intellect. She needs the solid facts of life that he offers to her. She respects his "splendid mind."

Very little action goes on in *To the Lighthouse*. Throughout the novel Woolf allows us to go into the characters' minds with her multiple view-point method. From the beginning of the novel, James, the youngest child of the family, wants to go to the lighthouse. The trip is postponed till the last part of the book. His desire is constantly encouraged by his mother's affectionate approach and disappointed by

his father's factual obstacles. James likes his mother "ten thousand times more" than his father. Yet at the end of the novel, on the way to the lighthouse, he feels relieved when his father praises his skills in directing the boat. James's feelings towards his father resemble Woolf's feelings for Leslie Stephen. She also likes her mother more than her father yet she finds any kind of appreciation from her father extremely valuable. In fact, she loves her parents for their very distinct qualities.

Another, perhaps the most important character in the novel, is Lily Briscoe, the painter. She spends her summer with the Ramsays and their eight children and friends. Mrs. Ramsay thinks that: "With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face, she [Lily] would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; she was an independent little creature, and Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it;" (17). As a woman who refuses to get married and always devoted to her art no matter how badly she is criticized, Lily is a kind of woman with whom Mrs. Ramsay cannot identify. Lily tries to represent reality on her canvas as she sees it. At the end of the novel, Lily comes back to the summer house only to find the painful passage of time on the house and the people. Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Adrian all die one after the other. Lily starts thinking about Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Ramsay; and goes back to her painting. On the autobiographical level, Lily Briscoe is based on both Vanessa, Virginia's sister who was an artist painting non-representational works like Lily, and also on Virginia Woolf herself, a writer considering the problems of art and creating. Similar to Virginia Woolf's writing this novel in order to come to terms with her parents and also make a statement of art at the age of 44, Lily comes to a sudden understanding of both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, achieves an order in her mind by bringing the opposites together, and completes her painting when she is 44.

Martha C. Nussbaum, in "The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*" argues that many philosophical questions of great complexity about the ethics and politics of humanity cannot be discussed without dealing with human desires and emotions. Nussbaum comments that:

the mysterious grand problem of other minds thus has, here, a mundane humble tentative answer or rather answers, whose meaning can only be fully grasped in the context of a narrative as complex as this novel: by working patiently to defeat shame, selfish anxiety, and the desire for power, it is sometimes possible for some people to get knowledge of one thing or another thing about some other people; and they can sometimes allow one thing or another thing about themselves to be known. (752)

The presence of Lily Briscoe brings out the issues that free the novel from its autobiographical context. Tackling “the mysterious grand problem of other minds” as an artist, Lily tries to create order out of a seeming disorder. When she comes back to the summer house, after ten years, she reevaluates both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s characters. She finds out that it is possible to love and respect them both regardless of their contrary attitudes. The artist’s task is to bring contradictory forces together and create moments of order out of chaos. Virginia Woolf uses the idea of the marriage of opposites in art in her other works, especially in *A Room of One’s Own*. For her, an artist’s mind should be androgynous, having the qualities of both male and female minds. Feelings and ideas from both minds are equally important in the process of creating.

Lily Briscoe begins her painting and tries to understand Mrs. Ramsay in the first part of the novel, “The Window,” while she is one of the guests at Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s summer home. Ten years after, in “Time Passes,” Lily returns to the summer home and begins her painting once again. She finishes it only at the end of part 3, “The Lighthouse,” and the painting and the novel are thus completed simultaneously. (212)

Lily’s finishing of her painting coincides with the Ramsays’ arrival at the lighthouse. The connection between the two is important in establishing a final context of order. When they finally reach the lighthouse, James comes to an understanding of both of his parents. The two different world views, the magical vision that his mother offers, and the solid, bare truth of his father, reconcile in his mind:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening.
Now—

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was also true, too.
(186)

Virginia Woolf uses her past and her parents as models in her novel but the final characterization of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay transcend their models. She comments on the art of living and the nature of art in her fiction. What she achieves is definitely something universal, rather than the narrow, limited world of biography.

A complete non-biographical approach *To the Lighthouse* might allow the reader to comprehend all the issues that are dealt with in the novel. Yet, in this case, comparing the facts of Virginia Woolf's life and her fiction enables us to see her artistic skills at work, transforming "ordinary experience" to a "miracle," an "ecstasy." (202)

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