

**V. Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*:
The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman**
Manuela Palacios González
Universidad de Santiago de Compostela

Aunque *To the Lighthouse* es la obra de Woolf sobre la que la crítica se ha volcado más, opino que se ha infravalorado a una de sus protagonistas, Lily Briscoe, en sus funciones tanto de personaje como de mujer artista. En este artículo demuestro que Briscoe es un personaje esencial para el estudio de los principios del arte moderno de principios del siglo XX, así como para el análisis de las modificaciones que dichos principios deben sufrir cuando se aplican al medio narrativo. Mantengo, además, que este personaje revela los conflictos personales de Woolf con respecto a las metas que se proponen las mujeres artistas y las limitaciones que les impone la sociedad.

Narrative that deals with characters who are artists has long called the critics' attention because there they expect to find an elaboration of the writer's own aesthetic concerns, principles and doubts, achievements and failures, as well as the struggle implied in the process of artistic creation. Expectations are heightened when the artist represented is a woman, because, in spite of the fact that artistic sensibility has traditionally been seen as an essential component of femininity, only very rarely in the history of literature have women been presented as professional artists. When the fictional woman artist is created by a real woman artist our curiosity mounts, as we shall necessarily want to search for the similarities or differences between them both. We would also expect some reflections upon the woman's role in society which in turn would raise questions about how that role has been traditionally represented in literature.

Lily Briscoe, the woman painter, is one of the two most important characters in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Her importance is equal to that of Mrs Ramsay, and her painting is one of the pillars in the

narrative structure. If Mrs Ramsay's consciousness predominates in part one, "The Window," it is mainly Lily's thoughts and feelings that we have access to in part three, "The Lighthouse." The subject that this woman painter introduces in the novel is that of the struggle in the process of artistic creation. It is the process, rather than the result, that interests Woolf, and this is the reason why the novel ends when the painting is finished. The painting, then, somehow resembles the novel, and the fictional artist is a reflection of the real one: Virginia Woolf struggles with her novel as Lily Briscoe does with her painting. Even their names are similar. The Christian names refer to the pure, virginal aspect of their personalities, whereas the family names, which are reminders of the patriarchal domination of women, refer to a less agreeable and more hostile trait in them, a potentially subversive dimension that is continuously repressed by social demands on the behaviour of women.¹

It is my belief that the importance of Lily Briscoe as a character, and that her role as a painter, her personality as a woman artist and her aesthetic concerns have all been underrated.² *To the Lighthouse* is not a documentary on a painter's work, and therefore, if some critics do not find Lily a convincing painter it is because they fail to understand Woolf's adaptation of the artist and her work to the narrative framework. Lily must, above all, be a convincing **character**, and as such, whether a painter or of any other profession, she must be tailored to suit the theme and plot of the novel. Attempts at describing the actual appearance of Lily's painting seem to me to be another mistake in the critics' approach to Woolf's non-realistic narrative.³ It is obvious that the writer is deliberately vague about the content of Lily's painting⁴ - a painting that exists only in writing - therefore, we must shift our attention to those aspects that Woolf does make quite clear and explicit.

There are three steps in Lily Briscoe's creative process: 1) Inspiration, 2) Transformation, 3) Completion. The inspiration is that sudden artistic intuition provoked by a certain scene at a given moment even before the painter visualizes the complete picture: "But what she wished to get hold of was the very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything" (p.297). The expressive capacity of the picture depends on the painter's ability to communicate this intuition, this subjective interpretation of reality. The transformation of vision into design,⁵ of the mental picture into the actual picture, is the most difficult step for Lily Briscoe: "She could see it all so clearly, so

commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed” (p.34). The difficulty reappears in part three, as Lily makes her second attempt: “But there was all the difference in the world between this planning airily away from the canvas, and actually taking her brush and making the first mark” (p.297). It is during this second step of transformation when the painter reveals the aesthetic guidelines which she follows and which we shall discuss below. Finally, the completion is not, in this case, as important as the process. It is necessary for the structure of the novel, since it provides an idea of fulfilment which runs parallel to the Ramsays’ arrival at the lighthouse. The novel, then, ends with a climax, and without resolution. Lily has solved the aesthetic riddle of her painting, but we do not know whether this painting is a successful one, or whether on the contrary, it will end up being put away in an attic, as she has often feared.⁶

Lily Briscoe is a formalist painter. While she is considering her painting formal aspects seem to take priority over those related to content. As a matter of fact, content is the result of the balance of formal relations:

Even while she looked at the mass, at the line, at the colour, at Mrs Ramsay sitting in the window with James, she kept a feeler on the surroundings lest someone should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at. (p.32)

The order in which the different components are mentioned is not a coincidence, and though they must all achieve a harmonious balance, structure occupies the highest position in the hierarchy. This is followed by rhythm, which in turn is followed by texture, and last of all by the subject matter: mother and child. The representation of Mrs Ramsay and James is important as form rather than as representation:

It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with one on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole thing might be broken. (p.86)

The equilibrium of masses, and the concept of the work of art as an independent whole that produces an aesthetic emotion in the observer, are the formalist tenets of Modernism which are also

enunciated by Stephen Dedalus with the terms *integritas, consonantia, claritas*. As a writer, Woolf could not do without content, since words, more than colours or sounds, always have a referent, otherwise they become nonsense. Her closest approach to abstraction was the short story "Blue and Green," where one can hardly differentiate description from action, and where colour becomes time, space, protagonist, and theme. In her biography of Roger Fry, Woolf acknowledges that both Cézanne and Picasso have shown writers a new path, and that, therefore, "writers should fling representation to the winds and follow suit."⁷

Like a fauvist painter, Lily Briscoe chooses bright colours for her painting. She disregards the fashionable trends of her time and opts for an expressionist application of colour. The "bright violet" jacmanna and the "staring white" wall contrast with the "pale, elegant, semitransparent" colours used by Mr Paunceforte (p.34). Her determination to use those colors does not result from a desire to offer a photographic representation of what she sees, but from an urge to express her inner vision of the picture.

In order to ascertain how innovative Lily is for her time, we must establish first the temporal background of the narrative. If we take the novel to be highly autobiographical, it is logical to place part one at the time of Woolf's childhood in the 1880s. This supposition could be confirmed by the reference to Mr Paunceforte, a painter whose seascapes are necessarily associated with those made fashionable by the visit of James McNeill Whistler, Walter Sickert and Mortimer Menpes to St Ives during the winter of 1883-1884.⁸ There was an Impressionist style that tried to reflect the fugitive changes of the weather and their effects on the colours of the sea. We would not expect to find a painter with Lily Briscoe's ideas in Britain at this time. However, the implied reference to World War I in part two, "Time Passes," and the lapse of ten years between parts one and three induce us to place "The Window" around 1910, the year of the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition organized by Roger Fry at the Grafton Galleries. In this case, Lily would be a member of the pictorial avant-garde in England. There is a conflict, then, between Woolf's imagined time and place - St Ives in the 1880s - and the actual time and place she chooses for her novel - The Hebrides around 1910. This discrepancy is probably due to the writer's wish for detachment, so as to avoid the pitfall of sentimentality when dealing with her own parents' lives.

Some of the reasons why Post-Impressionism reacted against Impressionism were because the latter's use of "semi-transparent," hazy effects blurred the underlying structure, and because the vibrant light broke the contours of figures and undermined the decorative disposition of volumes.⁹ Lily Briscoe's use of colours combines her delight in surface texture with a firm scaffolding that holds the design together: "Then beneath the colour there was the shape" (p.34); "she saw colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral" (p.78). Binary oppositions of this kind are recurrent in Woolf's writings and probably reflect her desperate need to find some coherence beneath the hustle and bustle of everyday life, to find the "hidden pattern behind the cotton wool," as she confessed in "A Sketch of the Past." This yearning for order is similar to that felt by Mrs Ramsay. As Lily remembers her success in achieving harmonious personal relationships, she employs a similar image: "In the midst of chaos there was shape, this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability" (pp.249-250).

The rippling Impressionist surfaces were replaced by the predominantly motionless Post-Impressionist figures, as stillness was considered essential for the decorative disposition of volumes. Woolf's moments of being resemble the Impressionist principle of grasping the ephemeral instant, but whereas paintings like Monet's *Nymphéas* produce an illusion of movement, Woolf seems to aspire to achieve total stillness, even if it is just for a brief moment. This explains Mrs Ramsay's exclamation, "Life, stand still here!" as well as her aesthetic pleasure during her contemplation of the dish of fruit, which could be regarded as a written **still-life**:

Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more serene. (p.168)

Mrs Ramsay's "reading" of the formal relations among the components of the dish of fruit is similar to Lily's contemplation of her painting. The eyes move, but the object of observation stands still.

The analogies between Lily Briscoe and Mrs Ramsay result from an interesting strategy, frequently used by Woolf, which consisted in making some traits in her characters overlap. It was probably this idiosyncrasy in the writer's narrative that puzzled her contemporary readers and led them to conclude that her characterization was imperfect. Lily's intimate knowledge of Mrs Ramsay brings about some similarities in the imagery associated with both female characters. In her musings, Lily compares Mrs Ramsay to the "shape of a dome," an image suggestive of the womb which is very relevant to the mother-daughter relationship they somehow represent; for her part, Mrs Ramsay identifies her self with a "wedge-shaped core of darkness" (p.99) in her moments of peace and quiet. Lily Briscoe, like other Post-Impressionist painters, opts for representing the essence of her figures, rather than their appearance, and her decision involves an effort to simplify Mrs Ramsay and her son by means of a geometric form, again a variation of the same image: a triangular shape.¹⁰ The subject of mother and child can be traced very far back in the pictorial tradition. It is one of the prototypical ways in which men have represented women. In this sense, Lily is not very innovative, but she does show originality in her adaptation of traditional iconography to modern art. Woolf could have easily chosen a different theme for Lily's painting, but it is rather obvious that this mother and child theme suits the content of the novel better, and so we have here another instance in which allusions to painting are affected by narrative requirements.

The references to Raphael and Michelangelo in the novel invite us to search for similarities between Lily's painting and the Italian Renaissance iconography. The triangle, which had been often used as a representation of divinity, was also employed at this time as an invisible frame for the Madonna and the Child.¹¹ This explains why Mrs Ramsay has to keep her head bent (p. 31), while Lily paints her picture. This position inspires the artist in her transformation of the traditional subject of the *Mater Amabilis*, who keeps both her head and eyes bent to show her humility and love, into an abstract painting. Mrs Ramsay, holding the book to read the story of the fisherman and his wife, represents an adaptation of the *Mater Sapientiae* figure by Woolf the agnostic writer. When James holds the Army and Navy Stores catalogue, the inevitable pictorial reference is Jesus holding the Holy Scriptures, however irreverent this may sound. Even Lily's name is part of the iconography related to the Virgin Mary. Julia Stephen, Mrs Ramsay's model, had

been chosen in her youth as the model for an Annunciation by Burne-Jones. The lily that Gabriel offers Mary is a symbol of her virginity, which suits the painter's option for celibacy in the novel.¹²

Woolf holds the polemical belief, which she defends in *A Room of One's Own*, that a committed attitude to the woman question on the part of women artists may damage their art. This is the reason why she makes Lily Briscoe forget about her sexual identity before the latter proceeds to continue with her picture: "She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner, subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general" (p.86). Curiously enough, the painter's experience cannot measure up to this ideal, and problems of self-esteem, family circumstances, and personal relations with other characters in the novel keep interfering with her work.¹³ Lily Briscoe, then, somehow gets out of the writer's control as far as this aspect of the autonomy of art is concerned. This happens for two reasons: on the one hand, Lily is more interesting and relevant as a character if she is presented with conflicts other than those which are exclusively aesthetic. This is another example of how narrative demands divert Virginia Woolf from her original conviction. On the other hand, Lily is the product of the writer's own contradictions. Few would believe that Woolf could ever subdue her own impressions as a woman when writing. Her representation of the male and female figures in *To the Lighthouse* is a direct consequence of her own experience as a daughter.¹⁴ The tension between Woolf's ideal of autonomy and her actual writing practice is the source of the riddle that the picture presents for Lily Briscoe. Even when the painter seems to find a solution for this riddle, she is really using her painting as a defensive weapon against the attacks made on her both as a woman and as an artist. Her determination not to marry and her self-protection against Tansley's scorn - "Women can't write, women can't paint" (p.134) - force her to find shelter in her painting, and to repair her battered self-esteem with the successful completion of her picture:

For at any rate, she said to herself, catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern, she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle. (p.159)

The fact that Lily Briscoe can only have her vision when she adjusts her interpretation of the Ramsays is further proof that her

formalist approach and its autonomy from ideology is merely wishful thinking both on her part and on that of her creator.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the fact that Lily Briscoe's part in *To the Lighthouse* is essential for a discussion of the aesthetic tenets of modern art at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her role also provokes some novel reflections upon the modifications these principles must undergo when applied to different artistic media. Besides, Briscoe exposes Woolf's own conflicting attitudes with respect to women's roles as artists: the tensions between their goals and the limitations imposed on them by society.

NOTES

1. Mark Spilka believes that Lily Briscoe is Woolf's *alter-ego*, and that it is for this reason that Briscoe has such strong reactions towards Mr and Mrs Ramsay, who, as we know, are fictional representations of Woolf's parents (p. 100).
2. According to Josephine O'Brien Schaefer "Lily Briscoe on the shore is the one real weak spot in the novel." In her opinion, the reader cannot take the painter's work seriously because she herself does not seem to be able to concentrate on what she is doing. Schaefer maintains that Lily's importance in the novel results from her thoughts rather than from her work as a painter (p. 134). Peter and Margaret Havard-William compare Lily and Septimus Warren Smith, and they contrast the former's struggles as a craftswoman with the latter's intuitive vision (pp. 114-115).
3. Henry R. Harrington even goes to the extent of drawing a sketch of Lily's painting. His identification of the central line at the end of the novel with the lighthouse leads him to conclude that Lily decides to place the image of the lighthouse in the middle of the garden, which, in his opinion, confirms the non representational quality of Lily's painting (pp. 363, 372)
4. This vagueness explains the confusion on the part of some critics about whether Lily paints one or two pictures in the novel. I agree with those who believe that Lily starts a new painting in part three. See Henry R. Harrington (p. 363), Ruth Z. Temple (p. 98), Ralph Freedman (p. 237), David Dowling (pp. 155-156), and Michael Rosenthal (p. 114).

5. I borrow the term "transformation" from Roger Fry's art criticism: "By the word 'Transformations' I wish to suggest all these various transmutations which forms undergo in becoming parts of aesthetic constructions" (p. v.).
6. In her article on the art critic and painter Roger Fry, Virginia Woolf also highlights the process of painting rather than the finished work: "He knew from his own experience what labours, joys, despairs, go to the making of pictures. A picture was to him not merely the finished canvas but the canvas in the making. Every step of that struggle, which ends sometimes in victory, but more often in defeat, was known to him from his own daily battle" (p. 91).
7. Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry* (p. 149).
8. For a discussion of Whistler's influence on the painters of St Ives see Peter Davies (pp. 6-9).
9. For an analysis of Post-Impressionism see Lewis Hind, Richard Shone, and Simon Watney.
10. "What did she wish to indicate by the triangular shape, 'just there?' It was Mrs Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection - that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said" (p. 84).
11. See Heinrich Wölfflin (pp. 52-53, 62-66, 104-109).
12. For a detailed analysis of the iconography related to the Virgin with the Child see James Hall.
13. "And it was then too, in that chill and windy way, as she began to paint, that there forced themselves upon her other things, her own inadequacy, her own insignificance, keeping house for her father off the Brompton Road, and had much ado to control her impulse to fling herself [...] at Mrs Ramsay's knee and say to her [...] 'I'm in love with you?'" (pp. 34-35).
14. Miglena Nikolchina calls our attention to the fact that *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* are two projects that embody "the incompatible (and equally unsatisfactory) alternatives of feminism as outlined by Kristeva in 'Women's Time'" (p. 37).

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