

Spiritual Pain in to the Lighthouse

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with spiritual pain in Virginia Woolf's masterpiece *To the Lighthouse*. Only one meaning, "relating to people's religious beliefs", of this poly-semantic word "spiritual" has been used in this article. First, the article makes a distinction between the terms "atheism" and "agnosticism", and refers to the characters as agnostics. Though in the novel God is not accepted as a concept, the notions such as "divine" and "sacred" and some "sublime force" are well focused on. As the idea of God is closely connected with such eternal issues as truth, revelation and meaning of life, the characters try to answer them throughout the novel. Lacking religion and faith in God, the characters find life too complex to understand it. They try to get out of the chaos of life through art and the process of creation. Art is religion for them through which they try to find meaning in life. However, when in difficulty, they are not able to cope with problems not knowing where to turn for comfort and consolation.

Keywords: *Religion, agnosticism, atheism, the divine, the sacred.*

Deniz Feneri'nde Ruhsal Acı

ÖZET

Bu makale, Virginia Woolf'un başyapıtı *Deniz Feneri* romanındaki ruhsal acı konusunu ele almaktadır. Çok anlamlı olan "ruhsal" kelimesinin sadece "insanların dinî inançlarıyla alakalı" olan anlamı bu makalede kullanılmıştır. Makale, öncelikle tanrıtanımazlık ve tanrıbilinemezlik terimleri arasında bir ayrım yapar ve karakterlerini "agnostik" olarak tanımlar. Romanda Tanrı bir kavram olarak kabul edilmese de, 'ilâhî', 'kutsal' ve bazı 'yüce güç' gibi kavramların üzerinde yoğun olarak durulmuştur. Tanrı düşüncesi, doğruluk, vahiy ve hayatın anlamı gibi ölümsüz konularla yakından bağlantılı olduğundan, karakterler roman boyunca onları cevaplamaya çalışır. Tanrıya sadakat ve din yoksunluğu içinde karakterler, hayatı anlaşılamayacak kadar karışık bulurlar. Sanat ve yaratma süreci yardımı ile yaşamın karmaşasından kurtulmaya çalışırlar. Sanat, onlar için, yaşamın anlamını bulmaya çalıştıkları bir dindir. Ne var ki, zorda kaldıkları anda rahat etmek ve teselli bulmak için nereye döneceklerini bilemediklerinden problemlerle baş edemezler.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Din, tanrıbilinemezlik, tanrıtanımazlık, ilâhî, kutsal.*

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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. (Woolf, 2002, p. vii).

In the novel, the characters are considered to be agnostics. The name agnostic originally coined by Professor Thomas Huxley about 1869 to describe their less aggressive, less certain version of doubt later gained general acceptance.¹ Nowadays, “Agnosticism is the view that the truth value of certain claims about the existence of any deity, but also other religious and metaphysical claims—is unknown or unknowable.”² In other words, agnosticism is the belief that it is impossible to determine whether or not God exists.

The novel being semi-autobiographical, it is necessary that Virginia Woolf’s own life be referred to. In her own life, Virginia Woolf found no consolation in religion as she was brought up with an aggressive, humanistic atheism. In Chapter I of her seminal work *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf, while being eager to enter Oxbridge’s³ library (which was not easy to do without being “accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction), she “had no wish to enter”⁴ the chapel even if she had the right. She finds it only

[...] amusing enough to watch the congregation assembling, coming in and going out again, busying themselves at the door of the chapel like bees at the mouth of a hive⁵.

She goes on by making fun of religious people leaving the chapel

Many were in cap and gown; some had tufts of fur on their shoulders; others were wheeled in bath-chairs; others, though not past middle age, seemed creased and crushed into shapes so singular that one was reminded of those giant crabs and crayfish who have with difficulty across the sand of an aquarium⁶.

Later she criticizes people, among them kings and queens, and great nobles who had always provided the church with “an unending stream of gold and silver”⁷, but there was no money for women’s education. Her being skeptical about conventional religion is well known by critics. Kenneth Tighe devotes his article “Art and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*” to the characters’ faith or rather to the absence of their faith. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf presents us isolated characters.

Isolation of individual characters in the novel is compounded by the absence of God. Without a Creator to lean on, one fend for oneself. Without a God to provide order in the universe, the task falls upon the individual⁸

¹ “An Agnostic’s Apology.” (n.d.)
<http://www.ratbags.com/rsoles/comment/lstephen01.htm> (10.01.2010)

² Agnosticism. (n.d.)
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnosticism> (04.02.2010)

³ Oxbridge is the abbreviation for Oxford and Cambridge universities.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, New York, 2005, p.8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, New York, 2005, p. 9.

⁸ Kenneth Tighe, “Art and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*,” p. 1.
<http://orlando.jp.org/~VWWARC/DAT/ken.html> (10.05.2010).

In Mrs. Ramsay's opinion, as there is no God, it is the concern of people to create a harmony and to bring order and meaning to this world.

Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, was regarded as one of the most famous rationalists and agnostics of his day. He "communicated a strong disdain for and disinterest in religion, from which he had recovered early in life"⁹. In 1865, he wrote "I now believe in nothing, to put it shortly; but I do not the less believe in morality, &c."¹⁰ And it can be clearly seen that Stephen's writings on agnosticism – most notably his essay "What is Materialism?" became a very important subtext for Woolf as she composed the novel¹¹. When writing *To the Lighthouse*, particularly "Time Passes", Woolf is apparently responding to what she met in her father's agnostic writings.¹²

Leslie Stephen's essay 'An Agnostic's Apology' was written in 1876 as an answer to the grief he had after the death of his first wife. In this writing, L. Stephen focuses on the issues Woolf explains with Mrs. McNab – "the need to be consoled for life's pain, the prospect of solace without religion."¹³ Although he is grieving, Stephen still claims agnosticism to be better. He informs us that "agnostics willfully simplify the world, seeking an anodyne for their pain by insisting the harmony beneath the discords is a reality not a dream" whereas agnostics like himself "have felt the weariness and pain of all".¹⁴

Virginia Woolf is more concerned with the structure of faith than with its true content.

She believed that the life would begin again, but not that she would ever be a part of it, even in her imagination. She did not wish to be a part of it, and her characters could not act for her [...]¹⁵

Pericles Lewis in his book *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* argues that "Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* hints at the complex modernist attitude towards Victorian and the Edwardian atheism."¹⁶ Although Mrs. Ramsay is described as a Victorian female, in other words, the Angel in the House, she does not believe in God and wonders "How could any Lord have made this world?" (98)¹⁷. On the other hand,

⁹ Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*, New York, 2002, p. 23.

¹⁰ Qtd in Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*, New York, 2002, p. 23.

¹¹ M. Gaipa, "An Agnostic's Daughter's Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism and Ancestry in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 26 (Issue 2, Winter), 2003, p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Gaipa does not trust Woolf's contention that she "specially refrained either from reading her [mother's] letters, or [her] father's life" when composing the novel. (Gaipa, 2003, p. 2).

¹³ M. Gaipa, "An Agnostic's Daughter's Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism and Ancestry in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 26 (Issue 2, Winter), 2003, p. 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Qtd in Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*, New York, 2002, p. 30-31.

¹⁶ Peril Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, New York, 2010, p. 86.

¹⁷ Throughout the article, all references to the novel are from Woolf, V. (2004). *To the Lighthouse*. London: Vintage. Parenthetic numerals indicate page numbers.

“Mr. Ramsay, a figure of Victorian patriarchy, denies the existence of God,” too.¹⁸ Mrs McNab’s character is used by Woolf ‘as a generic example’ to show that

[...] if rich people like the Ramsays can hardly bear the pain and injustice of life without resorting to the solace of religion, how can the poor, who have real grievances and burdens to shoulder?¹⁹

As Gaipa states, she has her own real sufferings and burdens; but she knows how to comfort herself. Mrs. McNab is an important character in the novel for Woolf in order to show that “she had her consolations, as if indeed there twined about her dirge some incorrigible hope.” (125). In “Time Passes” section, Mrs. McNab is questioning her seventy-year-old life. It was full of troubles and sorrows. “It was not easy or snug this world she had known for close on seventy years. Bowed down she was with weariness.” (124). However, despite all these “sorrow and trouble” (124), “she sang.” (124). V. Woolf seems to imply that, it is easier when you have God to believe in.

Kenneth Tighe shows how different the characters are in their agnosticism. The Ramsay children like mocking Charles Tansley calling him “little atheist”²⁰ (5). Tighe describes Tansley as:

[...] an insecure and ambitious scholar capable of flaunting his beliefs. If he is the “little atheist”, his intellectual mentor, Mr. Ramsay, is most likely a larger one²¹.

For Tansley and Mr. Ramsay, denying God “seems more of an academic position, part of an intellectual ambition.”²² Mr. Ramsay with his passion for facts, views religion as something unfounded.

From the novel, we learn that though the children are also atheists, the issue is being discussed in the family, and, it is Mr. Ramsay who is consulted on such a sensitive issue as religion. Cam would come to her father and says “all in a muddle about something someone had said about Christ, or hearing what Napoleon was like” (180). Here, the readers are not informed about the response of the father. According to Kenneth Tighe, this shows us that the family live a “secular life”²³. Tighe also gives the answer to the question “What is atheism for Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay?”

For Mrs. Ramsay, atheism is part of a rugged self-reliance, strength of character; while for Mr. Ramsay, it is more of an intellectual posture associated with insecurity and weakness. Either way, the Ramsay household survives handily without benefit of a God²⁴.

Jane Schaberg quotes from Woolf’s book-length pamphlet *Three Guinnes* :

¹⁸ Peril Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, New York, 2010, p. 86.

¹⁹ M. Gaipa, “An Agnostic’s Daughter’s Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism and Ancestry in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 26 (Issue 2, Winter), 2003, p. 23.

²⁰ Atheism is commonly defined as “the position that there are no deities. It can also mean the rejection of belief in the existence of deities. A broader definition is simply the absence of belief that any deities exist” (Atheism, n.d.). For agnosticism see page 2.

²¹ Kenneth Tighe, “Art and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*,” p. 2. <http://orlando.jp.org/~VWWARC/DAT/ken.html> (10.05.2010).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Kenneth Tighe, “Art and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*,” p. 2. <http://orlando.jp.org/~VWWARC/DAT/ken.html> (10.05.2010).

What we may ask, is 'religion'. What the Christian religion is has been laid down once and for all by the founder of that religion in words that can be read by all in a translation of singular beauty; whether or not we accept the interpretation that has been put on them, we cannot deny them to be words of the most profound meaning. It can thus safely be said whereas few people know what medicine is, or what law is, everyone who owns a copy of the New Testament knows what religion meant in the mind of its founder²⁵.

As seen from the statement, V. Woolf does not deny the beauty of the religious book; moreover, she is aware of its "profound meaning". Therefore, it can be suggested that as an agnostic, Woolf gave much thought to religion while questioning it.

The second section of the novel "Time Passes" in our opinion, is the most painful part of the novel. It is also the most sacred part of the novel. The following lines from Katie Gemmill's article prove this:

Much modernist literature charts writers' various attempts to express and explore religious impulses – senses of the sacred – outside of the framework of traditional Christianity and its corresponding rites and ceremonies of worship. Virginia Woolf, for example, proposes alternative avenues through which to commune with the sacred in the middle section of her novel *To the Lighthouse*, entitled "Time Passes." Specifically, in this section of the text, Woolf enlists an innovative conception of time to create windows of opportunity for profound spiritual meditation. In doing so she opens the possibility of feeling the sacred in everyday events and experiences, and in turn the possibility of connecting more intensely with existence²⁶.

In this section, we can see the pacers on the beach are stirred from their sleep with the struggle between belief and doubt. They are questioning the purpose of life and asking themselves some questions to understand life and to comfort themselves.

[...] the mystic, the visionary, walked the beach, stirred a puddle, looked at a stone, and asked themselves "What am I?" "What is this?" and suddenly an answer was vouchsafed them (what it was they could not say): so that they were warm in the frost and had comfort in the desert (125).

At the start of "Time Passes", 'the restless spirits'²⁷ are troubled by 'the anguish of life, its concealed pain'²⁸.

We see "the divine goodness" (121) mentioned by the narrator in the second section of the novel "Time Passes".

It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them, should be ours always (121).

²⁵ Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*, New York, 2002, p. 22.

²⁶ Kate Gemmill, "Time and Sacred in *To the Lighthouse*," p.1. <http://qspace.library.queensu.ca/bitstream/1974/1066/1/Gemmill> (01.08.2010).

²⁷ M. Gaipa, "An Agnostic's Daughter's Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism and Ancestry in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 26 (Issue 2, Winter), 2003, p. 4.

²⁸ Qtd in M. Gaipa, "An Agnostic's Daughter's Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism and Ancestry in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 26 (Issue 2, Winter), 2003, p. 4.

Further, in the same chapter, the narrator again refers to God. “God seems to be angry with people on earth thinking them not worth things given by Him. And he draws the curtain” (121).

Interestingly, this mentioning of “divine goodness” (121) and “divine promptitude” (122) does not seem to attract critics’ attention. “Divine goodness” and “divine promptitude” are translated into Turkish as “Tanrı” and “Tanrı buyruğu”²⁹, therefore it can be suggested that Virginia Woolf by “the divine force” implies some sublime force, not exactly God.

Again in the same chapter, Woolf uses the terms like “the sunset on the sea, the pallor of dawn, the moon rising, fishing-boots against the moon, and children pelting each other with handfuls of grass” (127) which she regards as “the usual tokens of divine bounty” (127). Despite being an agnostic, she knows that she cannot deny the bounty of God.

In the first section of the novel “The Window”, Mrs. Ramsay almost acknowledges the existence of God. But immediately she regrets having mentioned God. After having put her children to bed, Mrs. Ramsay finds herself in a mystical atmosphere. While she is sitting and looking and thinking that the third stroke of the Lighthouse is hers, some little phrase, which is lying in her mind comes back:

“Children don’t forget, children don’t forget” – which she would repeat and begin adding to it, it will end, it will end, she said. It will, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord (58, 59).

She thinks that “Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean.” (59). In Kenneth Tighe’s opinion, it is easy to understand why Mrs. Ramsay has said so and how she has been “trapped.” As she has just made her youngest son sleep, he gets into “a peculiar transcendental state in which words and phrases moved ungoverned about her mind.”³⁰ And Mrs. Ramsay sets about “purifying out of existence that lie” (59).

She returns to her knitting wondering what made her say “We are in the hands of Lord.” The insincerity slipping in among the truths roused her, annoyed her.’ (59).

She thinks that there is “insincerity” (59) in her words because she does not believe in God so she says these words just from habit.

Sometime later she is still angry at her own words. Mrs. Ramsay seems to have her own reasons for her agnosticism:

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 (98).

She refuses to believe and trust in things she does not understand. She is convinced that “There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that” (98). According to Kenneth Tighe, her disbelief shows “a point of honor, a matter of personal pride”³¹.

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Deniz Feneri* (Çev.: N. A. Öncül), İstanbul, 2000, p.156, 157.

³⁰ Kenneth Tighe, “Art and Atheism in To the Lighthouse,” p. 1. <http://orlando.jp.org/~VWWARC/DAT/ken.html> (10.05.2010).

³¹ Kenneth Tighe, “Art and Atheism in To the Lighthouse,” p. 1. <http://orlando.jp.org/~VWWARC/DAT/ken.html> (10.05.2010).

We learn from *Moments of Being* that Virginia Woolf's mother, Julia Stephen had had faith before her second marriage, and it was not something to get over easily.

What is known, and is much more remarkable, is that during those eight years spent, so far as she had time over from her children and house, 'doing good', nursing, visiting the poor, she lost her faith.³²

We see that the Stephens were the first in their family history to lose faith. Their parents were deeply religious people.

The climax of the novel, the dinner scene, gives important clues about how Mrs. Ramsay thinks about the atmosphere of that evening. She thinks that "Transformed into a cathedral, the dining room fills with prayer-like verse" (102). She is reminded "of men and boys crying out the Latin words of a service" (102) in some Roman Catholic Cathedral. Sitting at the head of the table, her husband was as if beginning to recite poetry. "But the verse speaks not of "God and Heaven, sin and redemption, but of the garden, the rose, the buzzing bee, and of romantic love."³³ Kenneth Tighe comments on this scene, saying: "The simple life; secular yet sacred"³⁴. Even though divine issues are not discussed at table on that night, Mrs. Ramsay gets into that sacred mood and simulates the atmosphere a holy place.

Erich Auerbach assumes that at times Virginia Woolf, the author, replaces the narrator, and presents things from her own perspective³⁵.

One is obliged to assume that it contains direct statements of her own. But she does not seem to bear in mind that she is the author and hence ought to know how matters stand with her characters.³⁶

For a thinking, intelligent person it does not seem to be easy to deny God. As the characters in the novel are doubters, not strict atheists, they know the beauty and unbelievable side of the great nature but if they are asked about their creator, they withdraw themselves:

It was impossible to resist the strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree, man and woman, and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules; or to resist the extraordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure (126).

When Lily gets exhausted of her work, the same question makes her confused:

What is the meaning of life? That was all -- a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with the years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark [...] In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked

³² Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, London, 2002, p. 101.

³³ Kenneth Tighe, "Art and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*," p. 6. <http://orlando.jp.org/~VWWARC/DAT/ken.html> (10.05.2010).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Erich Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking," *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Williard R. Task. 1946. <http://www.fac.staff.bucknell.edu/rickard/Auerbach.pdf> (01.08.2010)

³⁶ Ibid.

at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here [...] (154).

Cam is also meditative through the journey, full of reservations:

Would the water last? Would the provisions last? She asked herself, telling herself a story but knowing at the same time what was the truth (195).

James Wood places Woolf in the company of Melville, Flaubert, and Joyce, all writers “great enough to move between the religious impulse and the novelistic impulse, to distinguish between them and yet, miraculously, to draw on both”³⁷. For Woolf, he says,

[...] there is no formal agony of religious belief. The hard work had been done. For her, a kind of religious or mystical belief and a literary belief softly consorted – and yet, for her, the novel still retained its skeptical, inquisitorial function.³⁸

Lily, when she laid her head on the lap of Mrs. Ramsay, “laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand.” (46-47). Most critics agree that it is Lily who represents Virginia Woolf in the novel. With this sentence, Woolf implies that there is a concept called ‘destiny’ in real life, even though she herself cannot understand it.

While Nancy and Andrew are out with the loving couple, Paul and Minta, Nancy crouched low down and thought while touching the smooth rubber-like sea-anemones:

Brooding, she changed the pool into the sea, and made the minnows into sharks and whales, and cast vast clouds over this tiny world by holding her hand against the sun, and so brought darkness and desolation, like God himself, to millions of ignorant and innocent creatures, and then took her hand away suddenly and let the sun stream down (70).

According to Kenneth Tighe, Virginia Woolf shows that “if there is no God, there are other things to worship, to hold sacred”³⁹. In his article, he claims that art has become “holy” as the novel progresses⁴⁰ and Woolf uses art as “a bridge over the anarchy of atheism”⁴¹.

Woolf presents us, in *To the Lighthouse*, with an irreligion of her own, replete with mystical unions, ritual ceremonies, lofty incantations, life after death (Mrs. Ramsay), and the reverence, most emphatically, of the earth and of his life. At the center of it all are men and women – fallible and imperfect creators⁴².

Conclusion

Religion can be defined as a strong belief in a divine power that holds the sole authority to control human destiny. It is an institution that helps to express our belief

³⁷ Qtd in Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*, New York, 2002, p. 25.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kenneth Tighe, “Art and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*,” p. 9. <http://orlando.jp.org/~VWWARC/DAT/ken.html> (10.05.2010).

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴² Ibid., p. 9.

in a heavenly power. There is common knowledge that religious people take life more easily and religion helps to sympathize people in grief. At the time of sadness and loneliness, faith of God can play an important role in consoling our grievances. Yet it is not easy to agree wholly with Kenneth Tigue's conclusion. According to him, it is lack of religion that makes the characters in the novel feel insecure and discontented. It cannot be claimed that all the atheists or all the agnostics are supposed to be unhappy for the lack of faith. V. Woolf herself, as well as her characters in *To the Lighthouse*, is too preoccupied with details to be happy. Art is religion for them through which they try to find meaning in life. However, when in difficulty, they fail to cope with problems not knowing where to turn for comfort and consolation.

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