

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE: WOOLF'S SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF LIFE THROUGH COLORS

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Abstract

Commonly discussed as a product of the emotional and spiritual pain, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* has been also observed to be a representational vehicle employed to discuss the meaning of life through Woolf's distinctive and subtle skill to use colors- which are external indicators of her inner realities, evoking various experiences and sensations. The connection between color and words is frequently addressed by Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* in which the size and movement of color shapes, explains, and intensifies the narrative. In the novel, the colors are perfect reflections of the eternal flux of time and life surrounding characters' inner thoughts to represent the uninterrupted continuity of human life and the meaning of life behind.

This paper aims to explore Woolf's representations of colors expressing her search for the meaning of life, and consider how Woolf incorporated words and colors into these representations. To answer the question "What is the meaning of life?" and to deepen the argument in detail, Terry Eagleton's *The Meaning of Life* will be taken as a reference shedding light on the colors employed by Woolf as a meaning of life.

Key Words: Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Meaning of Life*, Colors.

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE: RENKLER ARACILIĞIYLA WOOLF'UN HAYATA ANLAM ARAYIŞI

Özet

Genellikle duygusal ve ruhsal acıyı resmeden bir ürün olarak ele alınan Woolf'un *To the Lighthouse* adlı yapıtı, onun son derece belirgin ve usta becerisi sayesinde çeşitli deneyimleri ve hisleri uyandıran ve onun içsel gerçekliklerinin dış göstergelerini temsil eden renkleri kullanışıyla, yaşamın anlamını tartışmak için bir temsiliyet aracı olarak da görülmüştür. Romanda renk ve kelimeler arasındaki bağlantı Woolf tarafından sık sık ele alınır; *To the Lighthouse*'ta renklerin boyut ve hareketi anlatıyı şekiller, açıklar ve yoğunlaştırır. Romanda renkler, insan yaşamının kesintisiz sürekliliğini ve arkasında yatan hayatın anlamını temsil etmek üzere karakterlerin iç düşüncelerini çevreleyen zaman ve hayatın ebedi akımının mükemmel yansımalarıdır. Bu çalışma, Woolf'un hayatın anlamını arayışının bir ifadesi olarak onun renkleri resmedişini ve kelime ve renkleri bu resmedişe nasıl dâhil ettiğini keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. "Hayatın anlamı nedir?" sorusunu cevaplamak ve argümanı ayrıntılı derinleştirmek için, Terry Eagleton'ın *The Meaning of Life* adlı çalışması hayatın anlamının bir göstergesi olarak Woolf tarafından başvurulan renklere ışık tutan bir referans olarak alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf, Hayatın Anlamı, Renkler.

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Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another.

(Woolf, *Orlando* 13)

What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years.

(Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* 153)

INTRODUCTION

As reflected by Terry Eagleton in *The Meaning of Life*, the question of the meaning of life has been discussed by such philosophers as Aristotle, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer¹ etc. for many years; however, though Eagleton points out that there has been no exact response most of the time, the conclusions given have been with varying answers. To Eagleton, “meaning is a matter of language, not objects. It is a question of the way we talk about things, not a feature of things themselves, like texture, weight, or colour” (1). Taking this view as a standpoint, the meaning of life, therefore, varies from the perspective of an individual to the other by individually imposing a meaning on the object or entity. This idea is the same for the case of one of the foremost modernists of the twentieth century English literature: Adeline Virginia Woolf. Her exact purpose of life and her quest on what life meant was not observed to have a concrete reflection within her life; to her, life was sometimes a memory—which she explains as follows in her *Sketch of the Past* “If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills--then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory” (64)—sometimes life was within writing fiction or portraying the life as it is “for if she[a woman] begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his[a man’s] fitness for life is diminished” (Woolf *Room* 36), and for Woolf, the meaning of life laid sometimes in becoming a painter, for “if I[*she*] were a painter I[*she*] should paint ...

¹ See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power*, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will*. The works above are the major ones referred to in the book *The Meaning of Life* by Terry Eagleton.

first impressions[*of her life*] in pale yellow, silver, and green” (Woolf *Sketch* 66). Woolf’s urge to describe her life impressions via some colors brings into the open her psychological inner realities and her susceptibility in various experiences and sensations.

In this regard, this paper aims to explore such questions as what do colors mean and represent for Woolf, how do they express her search for the meaning of life, and how Woolf melt words and colors into the same pot in *To the Lighthouse*. To define colors and their psychological meanings, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Theory of Colors* and to answer the question “What is the meaning of life?” and to deepen the argument in detail, Terry Eagleton’s *The Meaning of Life* will be taken as references.

Woolf and Colors

It is no doubt that the word ‘Lighthouse’ in the title *To the Lighthouse* mirrors a symbolic meaning. To Anne Marie Walsh, it symbolizes, on one hand, Mrs. Ramsay’s personification of the Lighthouse in which “she becomes the guiding beacon that illuminates life and draws people into her circle of energy, warmth and safety (1) and “potential goals and dreams to be realized for James and Mr. Ramsay” (2), on the other hand, it stands for Mrs. Ramsay and Lily “who truly connect to Light in a spiritual way” (3); however, according to Benjamin D. Carson it “provides something ‘steady’, an intimation of immutability” (21). Nevertheless, it is *light* that is here to be emphasized. “Light, by its very nature, is only visible by the shadows created by the things it doesn’t touch; this entwined duality represents the balance of life itself” (Walsh 1). Woolf does not necessarily intend to use the word ‘light’ for the sake of its electromagnetic radiation that is visible to the human eye, nor does she insist on ‘light-linked’ symbols. She, though indirectly, makes us aware of the colors which are natural reflections of the light itself. It is definitely light that provides the sense of sight to see the very distinctive colors. Beyond any doubt, there is a link between light and colors and in Goethe’s words “The colors are acts of light; its active and passive modifications: thus considered we may expect from them some explanation respecting light itself” (xvii).

So, as stated in *Theory of Colors*, "light and its absence, are necessary to the production of color" (Goethe xlii). The sense of sight helps us to distinguish between the colors and the sense of sight makes everything meaningful for us; that leads us to the unconditional outcome: "what you see is what you get" (Eagleton 16).

What we see is what we get. This is more in use when it comes to painting. But how do we perceive colors in a literary text? Comparing literary texts and paintings, it is inevitable to establish the conclusion that a writer is not as capable enough to appeal to human sense of sight as a painter. "Unlike the painter, however, the writer does need to explain color" (Skrbic 50). Virginia Woolf is an exception, for she has an amazing skill to use colors just like her prototype Lily Briscoe's struggle to complete her picture. Woolf's "struggle to give color physical form" (50) by just making every object meaningful with the attributed color lies within her philosophy of life and her unceasing ambition to colorize the words. That takes us to the center: "the meaning of life consists in the search for the meaning of life" (Eagleton 29). Her distinctive ability to employ the colors as 'meaningful mimesis in literature' is in these words of her own: "I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one sees to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling" (*Sketch* 93). The distinguishing style of Woolf to harmonize colors with feelings makes the reader feel the reality as though he/she took some photos, and colors are perceived to be "so intensified that one sees to experience them" (93) in *To the Lighthouse*. So what is the role of colors which are interpreter of emotions in Virginia Woolf's experiences? The answer to this question undoubtedly lies in Woolf's photographic use of colors and Lily Briscoe's color choices in *To the Lighthouse*.

The colors are represented in the subdivision of the novel, whose three parts reproduce the distinctive colors with their underlying meaning; in the first subdivision, the colors seem to reign over all the characters' psychology especially Mrs. Ramsay's who "robbed of color, she saw things truly" (*Lighthouse* 126-27); an interval of darkness in

the second subdivision in which "nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness" (188) and "when darkness is presented to the eye it demands brightness, and vice versa: it shows its vital energy, its fitness to receive the impression of the object, precisely by spontaneously tending to an opposite state" (Goethe 15). In the last part, Lily Briscoe—whom we refer to Woolf who captures what she sees around her in paints rather than in words—in an attempt to go through with Charles Tansley's pejorative statement that "Women can't paint, women can't write" (*Lighthouse* 75), she thinks "taking the green paint on her brush, this making up scenes about them, is what we call "knowing" people, "thinking" of them, "being fond" of them!" (255).

Green

As a beautiful woman "with stars in her eyes, veils in her hair" (23), as a beloved person—"a tribute to the astonishing power that Mrs. Ramsay had over one" (260), as a charitable organizer especially to unite people for the reason that "people must marry; people must have children" (93), and as the mother of many children, Mrs. Ramsay's insistently folding "the green shawl about her shoulders" (101) and always carrying it with her so as to surround her own body "thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of [a woman]" (*Room* 24), it all characterizes the power of the green color. Mrs. Ramsay's *green* shawl folded around her shoulders does not just signalize a natural sense of security, but also represents the direction of her chaste as a sign of purity and cleanliness, because "chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman's life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest" (49).

The representations of colors change from a culture to another, though the *green* color stands for 'nature' all over the world. In *To the Lighthouse*, because of Woolf's great love for nature which she portrays as somewhere "uninhabited of men" (*ibid* 21), the *green*

color is frequently addressed. In Christianity, surprisingly, the *green* color also symbolizes 'money'². Though Virginia Woolf "was brought up with an aggressive, humanistic atheism" (Yünlü and Memmedova, 188), it is observed that she does not completely represent an anti-religious identity in *To the Lighthouse*. Her employment of the *green* color as an umbrella for Mrs. Ramsay reminds her motto that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (*Room 4*). The green color, here, does not just necessitate that a woman must have money but a room of her own; therefore, nature as a place "uninhabited of men" (*Lighthouse 21*- italics mine) is a shelter for women. The other detail stems from the meaning behind 'nature' itself. The word nature is derived from the Latin word *natura*, and literally means "heredity, birth, hereditary circumstance; essential qualities, innate disposition".³ Taking this definition into consideration, it is readily concluded that the *green* color circles Mrs. Ramsay from top to toe. I mean, she does not just give birth to many children and she, instinctively, also protects those around her. Thus considered, she can be likened to the nature as a whole.

Red-Brown

"Knitting her reddish-brown hairy stocking" (*Lighthouse 47*), Mrs. Ramsay had a color confusion which reflected her fragmentary mood torn between "the red light of emotion" (*Room 32*) and the brown light of "reliability and practicality"⁴. Then, some probable questions arise; does this duality or confusion of the colors have a symptom of bipolar disorder which Virginia reflects by giving color physical form through her severe mood swings; or is it an echo of Mrs. Ramsay's being color-graphemic synesthesia⁵, for Mrs. Ramsay

² <http://www.digitalskratch.com/color-psychology.php>. Accessed 25 Mar 2013

³ "nature". Online Etymology Dictionary. Accessed 25 Mar 2013

⁴ <http://newsourcing.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/psychology-of-color.pdf> Accessed: 18 Feb 2013

⁵ When discussing the psychology of color, a brief mention has to be made to the extreme cases in which disorders of color perception exist, one of the most interesting being synesthesia. Synesthesia is a condition most common in females with a rising precedence, probably due to an increase in

"was so short-sighted that she could not see"? (*Lighthouse 236*). These all have some meanings "behind the cotton wool [which] is hidden a part" (*Sketch 72*). Virginia Woolf's severe mood swings reveal her fragmentary point of view of life and "These two pieces [I mean mood swings and fragmentary point of view of life] document the flight of the soul through a language of sound and color" (Skrbic 51). This is more explicit when Woolf addresses this in *A Room of One's Own*:

Why do I feel that there are severances and oppositions in the mind, as there are strains from obvious causes on the body? What does one mean by 'the unity of the mind'? I pondered, for clearly the mind has so great a power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being. (96)

Then, the broken parts of the mind and its disunity lead us to what Eagleton utters: "the meaning of life is a question of the style in which you live it, not of its actual content" (53). Considering the reasons behind why Woolf addressed her mother through the persona Mrs. Ramsay, it seems that Woolf was in search of the meaning of life through the style, not through its actual content. In *Sketch of the Past*, she voiced that in *To the Lighthouse* "I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion" (81); it was somewhat the actual content of her life which she conveyed in *To the Lighthouse*, yet the colors she used were reflections of her style of life through which she expressed deeply felt emotion.

Grey-White-Black

Lily Briscoe, while she was trying to complete her picture after Mrs. Ramsay's death, she always dreamt her as usual "a lady in a grey cloak" (*Lighthouse 204*). The reason to portray Mrs. Ramsay in *grey* is to mirror her neutrality and objectivity through the entire lifespan of her own. To Goethe's *Theory of Colors*, "colors throughout are to understanding of the disorder. Often referred to as 'the mixing of senses' the disorder causes senses to be experienced together and in association, rather than as separate entities. (*The Psychology of Color: Can color really affect our mood?* May 2009 Issue 1)

be considered as half-lights, as half shadows, on which account if they are so mixed as reciprocally to destroy their specific hues, a shadowy tint, a grey, is produced" (xliv). This mixture unquestionably includes black and white; the mixture of both produces the grey color. So, Lily Briscoe—Virginia Woolf in a way—portraying Mrs. Ramsay neither totally in *black* as "bitter and black, half-way down, in the darkness, in the shaft which ran from the sunlight to the depths" (*Lighthouse* 45) were conjugates and when they came together "perhaps a tear formed" (45), nor totally in *white* as those around Mrs. Ramsay behaved "not in the white light of truth" (*Room* 32). Lily thought Mrs. Ramsay must be in *grey* because she was neither "so still" (*Lighthouse* 262) nor "so young" (262) nor "peaceful" (262). Representing the transition between black and white, and pleasing to the eye more transparent than these two colors, the *grey* color does not only note that the life is temporary for Mrs. Ramsay, but it also signifies that she is unable to keep up with the rapidly changing life. It is because of this point of view that Lily aspires to picturize Mrs. Ramsay totally in *grey*, because to Lily Briscoe "how "you" and "I" and "she" pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint" (265).

For Mrs. Ramsay, life was "all ephemeral as a rainbow" (26); it included in it all the colors together with its transience. The rapidly fleeting life was questioned by her: "why, she asked, pressing her chin on James's head, should they grow up so fast?" (90). This question was her search for her swiftly changing life. As children grew up, Mrs. Ramsay got older. Then what was life and the meaning of life for Mrs. Ramsay?

There it was before her—life. Life, she thought—but she did not finish her thought. She took a look at life, for she had a clear sense of it there, something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband. A sort of transaction went on between them, in which she was on one side, and life was on another, and she was always trying to get the better of it, as it

was of her; and sometimes they parleyed (when she sat alone); there were, she remembered, great reconciliation scenes; but for the most part, oddly enough, she must admit that she felt this thing that she called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance. There were eternal problems: suffering; death; the poor. (91-92)

Though, because of the dark bitterness of this color, not totally characterizing Mrs. Ramsay in *black*—"as the equivalent of darkness" (Goethe 103)—it seems that Mrs. Ramsay appears in *black* dress only once just when a dinner is organized for about fifteen people. Considering that Woolf narrates this through the end of the first subdivision, and before the depiction of the 'mourning' atmosphere of 'Time Passes', it is vital to put forth that Woolf subtly foreshadows Mrs. Ramsay's funeral by smartly portraying her in *black* and bringing together a group of people that night. Woolf longs for her mother and she creates an atmosphere in which all people come together; though it is a sign of 'mourning', she would like to bring all the people together, because "In death, at least, we come together" (Eagleton 81). Furthermore, it is not a coincidence that the same night, while Mrs. Ramsay prepares for the dinner, she unintentionally catches sight of rooks with "black wings" (*Lighthouse* 122) through whose *blackening* Woolf indirectly exemplifies "human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking" (65) as these two rooks, whom Mrs. Ramsay name Joseph and Mary, "were actually fighting" (122) as though they were Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay; Lily and Tansley, Mr. Ramsay and James, or Minta and Paul, etc.

Blue

In her diary, on 27 June 1925, while making up *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf intentionally states that "the sea is to be heard all through it" (34), and according to Janet Beer and Elizabeth Nolan "it is, there through all the weave of characters' shifting thoughts and feelings" (88); however, it is not just the waves of the sea that Woolf yearns for, but "the great plateful

of blue water" (*Lighthouse* 21), as well. Woolf's employment of *blue* color in a planned way is an indicator through which these shifting thoughts and feelings are observed to be the reminiscences of Lily Briscoe's longing for Mrs. Ramsay; because, Lily "as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past there" (254) wishing strongly to perfect her picture. Each of the "hillocks of the blue bars of the waves" (268) was going far as though it went back through the past and came back carrying with it the past. And "by some instinctive need of distance and blue" (268), Woolf continuously wanted to depict her mother and to keep her very much alive in a way to be able to withstand the ravages of her death agony. Her longing for her mother was not just an emotional expression; it was also a literary need which she always yearned for. Given her words that, "for we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help" (*Room* 75), this need turns out to be more concrete. In every way, she wanted to feel her mother next to her even though after Julia Stephen's death "she was one of the invisible presences who after all play[ed] so important a part in [Woolf's] life" (*Sketch* 80). "For most people, in practice if not always in theory, life is made meaningful by their relationships with those closest to them..." (Eagleton 88).

Alternatively, most commonly preferred by men, the color *blue* symbolizes calmness and serenity⁶. Mr. Ramsay, with "his little blue eyes" (*Lighthouse* 9) and as a man "incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being" (9), seems calm throughout the novel. Observing the life through his *blue* eyes, he summarizes the meaning of life through this statement: "one that needs, above all, [is] courage, truth, and the power to endure" (9).

Purple

Associated with royalty, nobility and prestige throughout history⁷, the *purple* color

⁶<http://newsourcing.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/psychology-of-color.pdf> Accessed: 18 Feb 2013

⁷<http://www.digitalskratch.com/color-psychology.php>. Accessed 25 Mar 2013

is another hue frequently referred by Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*. When Mr. Bankes calls in question that "What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, "just there"?" in her picture, Lily Briscoe answers "It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James" (*ibid* 81). But why does Lily prefer the *purple* color for that designation? The answer lies in the fact that Woolf does not hint that reading is prestigious; but the prestige of a woman reader. When Woolf, in her *A Room of One's Own*, makes up an imaginary girl as Shakespeare's sister called Judith, she reveals the difficulty women had during that time and she brings forward the traditional tendency toward not letting the women read anything in no way (46). On the other hand, as a sign of royalty, many kings wore purple robes and perhaps because of this, the *purple* color gained also the meaning of 'success' and 'wisdom'.⁸ As "a miserable specimen, the children said, all humps and hollows" (*Lighthouse* 13), as "a failure" (58) and as a man who wanted "to be assured of his genius" (58), Charles Tansley "was always carrying a book about under his arm—a purple book" (235). Woolf, by colorizing the book in *purple*, ironically undervalues Tansley's (a man's) success and wisdom; because, according to her, man gained the success of writing only by not allowing her (a woman) to achieve this success.

As perfect reflections of the everlasting flux of time and life, the colors surround the entire novel; the colors through vitalizing each character turns out to be micro cosmos while the outside world a macro cosmos. The novel, as a reflection of the colors of a micro-cosmos, expresses that "the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art" (*Sketch* 72), and continues "we are the words..." (72). Then, colors are not just the reflections; they are human beings. *Green* is Mrs. Ramsay's security and chaste, her proliferation and money and a room of her own; while *black* is her departure from the real world to the hereafter. *Grey* is the transience of the rapidly altering world while *blue* is the past we left behind us and *purple* is the dignity and success and wisdom. They are all the meanings of life for Woolf and she harps all these through a single work. "On this

⁸<http://newsourcing.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/psychology-of-color.pdf> Accessed: 18 Feb 2013

theory, we can make life meaningful by our talk about it" (Eagleton 1); by colorizing the words, or by intending a meaning covering under its surface. As Kekes defines:

...we are born, mature, age, and die; we have children and lose our parents; we graduate, find a job, get married, divorce, fall in and out of love, set up house; succeed at some things, fail at others; make friends and have fights; move house, change jobs, get fired or promoted, fall ill and recover, save for retirement and retire. So life goes for me, you, and just about everyone, allowing for small individual and cultural variations that affect the form but not the fact of routine. (Kekes 17)

Then, the colors Virginia chose for illustrating her masterpiece *To the Lighthouse* were anything she very much would like to convey her opinions related not only with her birth, mature, age and death periods, but they were also some vehicles which were bridges between her mind and her outer world. Because she strongly believed that "... there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my [her] mind" (*Room 75*).

CONCLUSION

It is no coincidence that Virginia Woolf as a well-known writer, Lord Byron as a leading poet, and Vincent van Gogh as a distinguished painter⁹ were all having manic depressive psychosis (bipolar disorder). The main point here is that they all address to the human emotion and they all portray their swinging inner realities. Virginia Woolf, from the very beginning of her writing career to the very end of it, echoed her inner facts without a need to conceal her changing mood, though unintentionally. The result was outstanding.

To the Lighthouse was Woolf's meaning of life; the colors in the narration represent a quest for values, and the establishment of personal relationships with those around Woolf. The portrayal of life is seen to be reflected on Lily Briscoe's white canvas which is seen to reveal 'nothing' when there is no paint on it; while the colors on the brush mirror Woolf's search for the meaning of life. Mrs. Ramsay's effort to create order out of chaos, Lily's longing for the past, Mr. Ramsay's serenity and calmness, Charles Tansley's dehumanizing attitudes are all Virginia Woolf's inner mood swings which she reveals through the colors.

Impressions of her life, which unite Woolf's internal thoughts with the disordered world, shed light on actual content of her life but unable to change it. So, the answer to 'what was the meaning of life?' and 'what for did she live?' was everything in *To the Lighthouse*. Virginia Woolf, through her colorfully reflecting personae Lily Briscoe, imitated her purpose of 59 years of life; the meaning of life is in *To the Lighthouse: A brief generic overview of why she was there, what her experiences were all about and what they all meant.*

⁹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_with_bipolar_disorder Accessed 25 Mar 2013

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