

TREATMENT OF DEATH AND MOURNING IN *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE**

Esra İffet Aytaç**

Betüre Memmedova***

ABSTRACT

The article deals with Virginia Woolf's treatment of death and mourning in her modernist semi- autobiographical novel *To the Lighthouse*. She presents death without traditional funeral customs thus breaking up with Victorian conventions. The elegiac and anti- elegiac properties of the novel are pointed out. The article shows how the elegy as a genre has definitely undergone a considerable change since Milton's *Lycidas*. The characters in the novel are preoccupied with questions of death and immortality and the meaning of life. The death of the central character and her children are given in brackets. The possible reasons for that are explained in the paper. The characters try to get out of the chaos of life in different ways. They seek to bring order to their life by means of art, science and reunion of people. It is not death that is significant but its legacy. It is not the product of art that is important but the process of creation. Despite all the efforts of the characters to reach harmony, "it [the novel] breathes an air of vague and hopeless sadness." (Auerbach, 1946: 201).

ÖZET

Bu makale, Virginia Woolf'un modernist ve yarı - otobiyografik romanı *Denizfeneri*'nde ölüm ve yas kavramını ele alış biçimini irdelemektedir. Woolf, ölümü Victoria dönemi geleneklerinden uzaklaşarak gözler önüne sermektedir. Makalede romanın ağıtsal ve ağıt içermeyen özelliklerine dikkat çekilmektedir. Burada, edebi bir tür olan ağıtın Milton'ın *Lycidas* eserinden bu yana büyük ölçüde değişim geçirdiğini göstermektedir. Romandaki karakterler, zihinlerini ölüm, ölümsüzlük ve yaşamın anlamı sorularıyla meşgul etmektedir. Romanda ana karakterin ve çocuklarının ölümü parantez içinde verilmektedir. Bunun olası nedenleri de makalede belirtilmektedir. Karakterler hayat karmaşasından farklı yollarla uzaklaşmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu karakterler sanatla, bilimle ve insanların bir araya gelmesi yoluyla yaşamlarını düzene sokma arayışı içindedirler. Bu kapsamda ölüm yerine onun mirası ve sanat eseri yerine de onun ortaya çıkış sürecinin önemi vurgulanmaktadır. Karakterlerin uyuma ulaşmak için tüm çabalarına rağmen, "romanda belirsiz ve ümitsiz bir hüznün havası solunmaktadır." (Auerbach, 1946: 201).

*This article is based on the master's thesis "Analysis of the Concept of Death and Mourning in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*" written by Esra İffet Aytaç and supervised by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Betüre Memmedova in English Language and Literature Department, Süleyman Demirel University of Isparta.

**Suleyman Demirel University School of Foreign Languages English Instructor
aesra@sdu.edu.tr

***Suleyman Demirel University English Language and Literature Department Assoc.
Prof. Dr. azerbaijanca@hotmail.com

TREATMENT OF DEATH AND MOURNING IN *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

But can prose ...chant the elegy, or hymn the love, or shriek in terror, praise the rose, the nightingale, or the beauty of the night? Can it leap at one spring at the heart of its subject as the poet does? I think not. That is the penalty it pays for having dispensed with the incantation and the mystery, with rhyme and metre.

(Woolf, 1966: 226)

In “The Narrow Bridge of Art”, Woolf questions the term “novel”, calling it inadequate. “We shall be forced to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading [novel]” (Woolf, 1966: 224). She had always doubted the ability of the novel to express things in a subtle way as poetry does, though she proved to be successful in making her novel poetic to the degree that Leonard Woolf called the novel “a psychological poem.” (qtd. in Urgan, 2004: 126). Stella McNichol supports the definition by stating that even while writing her previous novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf kept reading poetry and realizing that “the way in which she responds to the world around her, and at a more abstract and mystical level to a sense of the mystery of the universe, is essentially poetic.” (McNichol, 1990: 91). Woolf’s experimentation skills are remarkable in blending prose and poetry into one poetic fiction.

From the very start, Woolf intended to write an elegy to her parents’ memory, her mother Julia Duckworth, in particular. However, it ended up becoming a quasi-autobiographical novel, as many critics accept. Today, it is considered the greatest elegiac novel in modernist literature. For the writer, it serves as catharsis. She writes in her *Moments of Being*: “When it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.” (Woolf, 1985: 81). Yet, we do agree with those critics who consider *To the Lighthouse* to be beyond autobiography. John Mepham, for example, argues against the book having only “purely personal significance.” (1983: 143). Stella McNichol’s calling the novel “an autobiographical novel, not autobiography” is also nearer to the truth (1990: 96). Landefeld quotes critics who consider the novel to be “a much more open text than simply a family triangle.” (2005: 10). To support this, McNichol states that “her family and her past became altered as she shaped them into a work of fiction.” (1990: 96). It is worth noting that Woolf herself got fed up with critics who insisted on reading “the Ramsays as direct representations of the Stephens (Woolf’s maiden name).” (Woolf, 2005, Introduction by Mark Massey, xlviii).

Critics agree on the elegiac properties modernized and modified by Woolf. Karen Elizabeth Smythe, in her article “Virginia Woolf’s Elegiac Enterprise” (1992a), emphasizes the difference between “elegiac fiction” and the term “fiction elegy”, the latter standing for “poetic elegy written for a fictional personage.” (1992a: 65). In this light, *To the Lighthouse* is a fiction elegy. Smythe also goes on to say that “A digressive

structure, the focus on the self (on the narrator - elegist or character – elegist as survivor), and a tendency towards self- reflexivity are characteristics of both modern and late modern fiction – elegies.” (1992b: 130).

Peter Knox- Shaw unambiguously defines the novel as elegy, drawing parallels with Milton’s *Lycidas* and *To the Lighthouse*, compares tragedy with elegy, indicating the difference between them as “the darkening slope towards death” in the tragedy and “the ascent from death” in elegy (1986: 32). He asserts that “by virtue of its relatively strict conventions it is the pastoral elegy that offers the only satisfactory paradigm of a highly variable literary form.” (1986: 32). The conventions of pastoral elegy suited V. Woolf in that she was concerned, like all elegists, with the problem and the mystery of death. The acceptance of the inevitability of death and hope for immortality, personified Nature’s grief have found their remarkable reflection in *To the Lighthouse*. However, though Shaw sees a number of parallels between the pastoral elegy and the novel, it is significant to note that elegy as a genre has undergone a considerable change since Milton’s *Lycidas*.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, reality became thoroughly personal, free from traditional values, due to the impossibility of finding absolute truth through the existing methods and values. The basic reason for such a quest of unchanging reality was man’s disappointment with modern civilisation. Man’s complete trust in civilisation and scientific progress for a happy, comfortable future was destroyed with the First World War in the early twentieth century.

(Gültekin, 2000: 172)

Sandra Gilbert goes further examining the Post War (World War I) mutations of the elegiac genre and the emergence of a new poetics of grief. She quotes Wallace Stevens’s famous poem “The Death of a Soldier” where the poet formulates a view of bereavement in which traditional funerary customs have been annihilated as definitively as the dead soldier (1999: 180). She quotes a very striking statement from Lermecier:

Nothing new from our hilltop which we continue to organize... From time to time the pickaxe hits a wretched corpse that the war torments even in the ground.

(qtd. in Gilbert, 1999: 181)

As seen from the quotation, Lermecier is terrified at the image of death, dying, and the dead during the war. His expression “wretched corpse” means that dead do not receive the homage (burial, mourning, and lament) they deserve. All the rituals performed during death are violated and become outworn images. Wallace Stevens wants the writers and poets to “take this new phrase/ of the truth of Death-“ (qtd. in Gilbert, 1999: 181). In her article, Gilbert introduces such word combinations as “modern death, monsters of elegy, and death modernity.” (1999: 180).

However, *To the Lighthouse* shows, alongside with pastoral features, anti-pastoral elements as well. To Sandra Gilbert, modernist elegies are more anti- elegies than near traditional ones:

*But how and why did such elegies - or rather, anti- elegies-
replace the pastoral? And equally to the point, how did the
relatively hopeful view of death on which the pastoral elegy
is founded metamorphose into our more nihilistic, indeed
monstrous visions?*

(Gilbert, 1999: 183)

Though *To the Lighthouse* is far from “monstrous visions”, it shows some elements of anti- elegy in the unsympathetic and cold announcement of characters’ death in square brackets.

Part II, the shortest of the three sections of the novel, reveals Woolf’s artistic brilliance at best though she called this part of the novel as “the most difficult abstract piece of writing.” (qtd. in Gaipa, 2003: 1). Contrary to Mina Urgan, who considers the “Time Passes” as “uninteresting for the absence of characters”, many critics agree on its being particular and unique (2004: 130).

Peter- Knox Shaw claims that “of the novel’s three parts, “Time Passes” is the most concentratedly lyrical.” (1986: 34). To Nicola Bradbury, the second section is “the most adventurous and mysterious movement of the work,...carrying the rhythm of poetic symbolism.” (Woolf, 1994, Introduction to *To the Lighthouse*, Wordsworth Classics, xiv). Mark Gaipa labels it “as the most daring element in the novel.” (2003: 2). To Eudora Welty, it is “so seducing in its beauty.” (2009: 183).

“Time Passes” seems to be the silent requiem for the dead. Andrew’s innocent remark at the very beginning of the section “It’s almost too dark to see”, gives us a premonition of what is to come soon (Woolf, 1994: 93). Darkness symbolizes the approach of death. The empty house seems to be “dead” too, with no inhabitants with “the doors locked”, “wood that cracked”, and “the nights full of wind and distraction.” (Woolf, 1994: 95). Virginia Woolf tells of the deaths of the characters in brackets. It is noteworthy to mention that “this bracketed information about the family is a late addition to ‘Time Passes’”. When Woolf drafted ‘Time Passes’ in May 1926, and then revised it for independent publication in the French journal *Commerce* later that winter, the only mention of the absent family came from what Mrs. McNab thought about them.” (Gaipa, 2003: 4). In her diary, Woolf describes her bracketed technique as “the flight of time and the consequent break of unity in my design.” (Woolf, 2003: 264) Helen Storm Corsa observes that the deserted house embodies the typical “phenomena” of mourning, “despondency, depression, detachment from the world, withdraw of interest from reality.” (qtd. in Benefiel, 2003: 5). At this point, it is really hard to disagree with Corsa’s perspective. The empty, desolate house is a symbol of what is happening to the characters during this time. Just as “one by one the lamps were all extinguished”, we learn one by one about the death of the three characters in the novel (Woolf, 1994: 93). In a way, it gives us the feeling of loneliness, disorder, desolation, and chaos.

Furthermore, “Time Passes” is a literary experiment of Woolf’s conception that takes us through ten dark years. The family departs for the summer and certain circumstances prevent them from returning. Their house is left to the forces of time; darkness covers the house. “Dust settles, books yellow, and silence ascends, filling the rooms with emptiness.” (Woolf, 1994: 96) The desolate house foreshadows the deaths in the family. We feel the gloomy atmosphere and abandonment after Mrs. Ramsay’s death in the following passage:

When darkness fell, the stroke of the Lighthouse, which had laid itself with such authority upon the carpet in the darkness, tracing its pattern, came now in the softer light of spring mixed with moonlight gliding gently as if it laid its caress and lingered stealthily and looked and came lovingly again. But in the very lull of this loving caress, as the long stroke leant upon the bed, the rock was rent asunder; another fold of the shawl loosened; there it hung, and swayed.

(Woolf, 1994: 98)

Though Mrs. Ramsay’s death is the central event in the novel, it is announced in parenthesis. There are a number of interpretations of this technique. One of the reasons for Virginia Woolf’s using such an unusual presentation of death can be her wish to avoid speaking about death. It is well-known that Virginia Woolf’s life was shadowed by death from an early age. In the years between 1895 and 1904 she lost her mother, her sister, her brother and her father. Less than a decade later, Europe was consumed by war, and public mourning became a part of her life. Attempting suicide twice, and finally succeeding in 1941, Woolf was acutely aware of the shadow of death in her life.

The second reason might be the rejection of Victorian rhetoric of death though in section III, Virginia Woolf seems to make up for her bracketed death. The profound difference between Leslie’s and Virginia’s bereavements was both gendered and generational. Woolf’s rejection of her father’s Victorian bereavement is characteristic of her generation’s wholesale rejection of things Victorian, but to her family and to many of her critics Virginia’s grief was a disease; Leslie’s was normal. On the other hand, death in the Stephen family causes a kind of gendered grief. That is, no one suggests that Adrian or Thoby were traumatized by the deaths in the family, but Stella, Vanessa, and Virginia were, some argue, tragically affected. “Critics’ failure to examine the boys’ reactions to the deaths reflects the bias that women are more likely to suffer from pathological grief than are men.” (Smith, 1995: 312).

The most convincing reason seems to be Virginia Woolf’s attempt to fight grief. Spilka, as Naremore writes in her review of his book “Virginia Woolf’s Quarrel with Grieving”, suggests that “the evasiveness, the prudery and reticence which

sometimes mar Virginia Woolf's novels, is characteristic of our age. Despite our apparent liberation from various kinds of Victorian repression, we are no better than she was at expressing our grief over death." (1982: 84).

Strange as it is, it was her mother's death that Virginia Woolf was not able to lament. "When she was thirteen years old, she was led into a family bedroom to view the dead mother's body. She broke into compulsive laughter and hid her face behind her hands. Only thirty years later she recalls it in an autobiographical essay." (qtd. in Naremore, 1982: 84).

Mrs. Ramsay's death, to use Vladimir Nabokov's definition, is a "functional death". According to him, functional death "affects the development of the novel and is introduced for structural purposes, purposes of development." (1980: 19). Though Mrs. Ramsay dies behind the scene, so to say, we, readers, are greatly affected by it. So are the characters. It was only after her death that James's life-long dream to visit the lighthouse comes true. During the journey to the lighthouse, James and Cam come to realize that they were hard on their father, and an understanding between them is established.

Surprisingly, it is not Cam, Mrs. Ramsay's daughter who deeply mourns her mother but Lily Briscoe. She finds it hard to express what she really feels:

For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing – nothing that she could express at all.

(Woolf, 1994: 145)

"The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her on the morning without Mrs. Ramsay." (Woolf, 1994: 146). Lily decides to complete the painting she had left unfinished ten years ago. And it is through work that she overcomes her grief. "She knew now what she wanted to do." (Woolf, 1994: 148).

Much of the final section is devoted to Lily's difficult acceptance of Mrs. Ramsay's death and her subsequent mourning for a woman whom she admired and loved, but at times criticized. In some of the most profound passages in the novel, Lily reveals this deep love. She cries out "Mrs. Ramsay!" in agony. Before the survivors of death may continue living, they must first mourn and distance themselves from the events.

For one moment she felt that if they both got up, here, now on the lawn, and demanded an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexplicable... "Mrs. Ramsay!" she said aloud, "Mrs. Ramsay!" The tears ran down her face.

(Woolf, 1994: 131)

Lily's grief at the loss of Mrs. Ramsay gets more intense as she vividly remembers her:

"MRS. RAMSAY!" Lily cried, "Mrs. Ramsay!" But nothing happened. The pain increased. That anguish could reduce one to such a pitch of imbecility, she thought!... Heaven be praised, no one had heard her cry that ignominious cry, stop pain, stop!...

(Woolf, 1994: 132)

However, in Lily's case there are extra details of the process of mourning. Perhaps what is most striking in Lily's case is that she experiences the sudden effects of grief as shocking and surprising (Mepham, 1987: 33). So, Lily, painting in the yard, cannot simply overcome this feeling. She searches for a way to put upon the canvas 'the shape' which is blurry in her mind. But gradually looking at "the step where she used to sit." (Woolf, 1994: 112), Lily remembers her vividly. The character struggles with the reality of death, and learns to accept it through art. "The moment of revelation occurs when the non-sense of loss and grief begins to be replaced by some sense, or intellectual acceptance of death." (Smythe, 1992: 66). While struggling with the reality of death, Lily accepts it through art. We witness her epiphany as a result of her revelation of death. In this sense, she completes the stage of mourning when she puts the final brush stroke on her canvas. Thus, putting herself into her characters, Woolf deals with death through art. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe, the artist, has similar moments of clarity when she sees things through a different light. Her painting reflects this change in perspective. "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought... I have had my vision" (Woolf, 1994: 151). Dealing with death in her own life, Lily has an enlightening epiphany that allows her to complete the work of mourning, and physically complete the painting.

Cam also mourns her mother. From the very start, she is unwilling to go to the lighthouse. "Cam screwed her handkerchief round her finger." (Woolf, 1994: 124). On the way to the Lighthouse, she keeps thinking about her mother. "She was thinking how all those paths and lawn, thick and knotted with the lives they had lived there, were gone; were rubbed out; were past; were unreal..." (Woolf, 1994: 124), and she silently quotes William Cooper's "The Castaway": "*We perished each alone, for her father's words broke and broke again in her mind.*" (Woolf, 1994: 125).

Virginia Woolf is far from idealizing death in her novel. She does show in detail how her characters are concerned about this last journey and the question of immortality and she devotes a number of pages to it after death musings not only of the Ramsays but Mr. Bankes, Mr. Tansley and, Lily in particular question the meaning of life and wonder whether it is worth living if everything ends in death. They try to find the ways to remain in the memory of the posterity though their ways to achieve

immortality vary. Mrs. Ramsay's death is a sort of revelation for Lily. She reassesses her attitude to her and at the end of the novel, she approves of things she used to disapprove about Mrs. Ramsay. She is more mature now, she learned some lessons and now she is ready to use them. That is the legacy of Mrs. Ramsay's death. She resurrects to remind Lily of the meaning of life and its worthiness. So, it is not death itself but its legacy that is important for Lily.

To conclude, the presentation of death and mourning reflects modernist features though not rejecting the previous literary legacy. However, we think that despite its optimistic tone (reaching to the lighthouse, Lily's completion of her painting, and Lily's vision), it does not reach a definite conclusion. Some questions such as "What's the meaning of life?", "What does it mean?", "What did it mean?" are unanswered in the novel. And it is not Woolf's aim to give unambiguous answers. "Have I power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself?" She asks herself in her diary. And Woolf herself considers them to be "insoluble" (Woolf, 1994: 5). The whole novel is a doubt about man's significance and his values. We, together with Woolf, begin doubting things, too.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AUERBACH, E. "The Brown Stocking", **Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature**, 1946.
- BENEFIEL, S. "Life and Death in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse", n.p., 2003.
- BRADBURY, N., "Foreword", Virginia Woolf's **To the Lighthouse**, Wordsworth, Hertfordshire, 1994.
- GAIPA, M., "An Agnostics's Daughter's Apology": Materialism, Spiritualism and Ancestry in Woolf's To the Lighthouse", **Journal of Modern Literature**, 26.2 (Winter 2002 – 2003) Indiana University Press, 2003, p.1.
- GILBERT, S. "Rats' Alley": The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti) Pastoral Elegy." **New Literary History**, Vol. 30, Poetry and Poetics, (Winter), 1999, 179-201.
- GÜLTEKİN, L. **A Short History of English Literature (Lecture Notes)**, Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi Yayınları, Sivas, 2000.
- KNOX- SHAW, P. "To the Lighthouse: The Novel as Elegy.", **English Studies in Africa**, 29:1, 1986, 31-52.
- LANDEFELD, R. R. **Becoming Light: Releasing Woolf from the Modernists Through the Theories of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari**, Virginia Polytechnic State University, Master's Thesis, Virginia, 2005.
- MCNICHOL, S. "To the Lighthouse: An Elegy" in **Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction**, Routledge, London, 1990. 91-116.
- MEPHAM, J. "Mourning and Modernism.", **Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays**, Ed. Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy, London, Vision Press Ltd, 1983, 137-56.
- MEPHAM, J. **Macmillan Master Guides To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf**, Macmillan, Hampshire, 1987.
- NABOKOV, V. **Lectures on Literature**, Edt.Bowers F., Harcourt, NY 1980.
- NAREMORE, J. "Virginia Woolf's Quarrel With Grieving" by Mark Spilka (Book Review), **Criticism**, 24:1, (Winter), 1982, 83- 87.
- SMITH, S. B. "Reinventing Grief Work: Virginia Woolf's Feminist Representations of Mourning in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse.", **Virginia Woolf and Grief Work**, Twentieth Century Literature, Vol. 41, No. 4, (Winter), 1995, 310-327.
- SMYTHE, K. "Virginia Woolf's Elegiac Enterprise", Woolf's Elegies, A Forum on Fiction, Vol. 26, No. 1, The John Hopkins University Press, (Autumn), 1992a, 64-76.
- SMYTHE, K. Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro and the Poetics of Elegy, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1992b.
- URGAN, M. **Virginia Woolf**, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2004.

- WELTY, E., "Occasions: Selected Writings", Edt. Mc Haney P.A., University Press of Mississippi, 2009.
- WOOLF, V., "The Narrow Bridge of Art", **Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf**, Vol. 2, Hogarth, London, 1966, 218-229.
- _____, **To the Lighthouse**, Introduction by Mark Massey, Harcourt, Orlando, 2005.
- _____, **Moments of Being**, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, New York, 1985.
- _____, **To the Lighthouse**, Wordsworth, Hertfordshire, 1994.