

The Unity of *to the Lighthouse* Achieved by Sonata Form

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf is a master of language, and she is also very familiar with the rhythm of music. As the forerunner of stream of consciousness, she devotes herself to the innovation of the form, so as to achieve the beauty of a formal unity. The structure of *To the Lighthouse* coordinates the movement of sonata form, which fully expresses the conflict and harmony of the feelings and thoughts, and makes the whole novel develop smoothly. This paper is focused on the sonata form integrate into the narrative art, so as to show the way Woolf builds the wholeness out of the fragments in human mind.

Keywords

To the Lighthouse, Virginia Woolf, Unity, Sonata Form

1. Introduction

Woolf is an ardent music-lover. With youthful, excessively romantic energy, she writes in her famous 1901 letters to Emma Vaughan, one of her earliest friends, advocates life and thinks that the only thing in this world is music—music and books and one or two pictures (Nicolson & Joanne, 1980). However, music is not merely an elevating passive pastime for Woolf. Music for Woolf is also an inspiring force. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf integrates the music form into her art.

Concerning the form, Woolf says, “certain emotions have been placed in the right relations to each other; then that the novelist is able to dispose these emotions and make them tell by methods which he inherits, bends to his purpose, models anew or even invents for himself” (Woolf, 1967). The methods Woolf mentioned here refer to the other artistic forms a writer holds. In her work *To the Lighthouse*, the form she bends to her purpose is the music form. She intends to renew this form in her novel to make it work out a formal unity. When we read this novel by Woolf, we can see how she has orchestrated all the individual parts together. She tries to put all usual

things—life, death, art and human relations into *To the Lighthouse*. In her diary, Woolf conceives the design of this new effort as “It might contain all characters boiled down; and childhood; and then these impersonal things, which I am dared to do by my friends, the flight of time and the consequent break of unity in my design. That passage... interests me very much. A new problem like that breaks fresh ground in one’s mind; prevents the regular ruts” (Woolf, 1954). Woolf’s design goes along with the music form. The music form enables the artists to unite the relation of different elements, their contrast as well as interaction. Woolf intends to contain every aspect of life in this novel, and chooses the sonata form to build the wholeness out of the fragments in human mind.

As a music form, sonata contains three parts: exposition, development and recapitulation. Instead of the exhaustive use of one theme, sonata tends to combine two contrast themes into a unified whole. The sonata form is used to achieve the reconciliation of the opposite or discordant themes. In simple terms, the sonata form is described as a trilogy structure—A-B-A’. A stands for the exposition part, which consists of the statement of the first subject, a contrasting second subject and a closing subject. B represents the development part which is the new and surprising development of former thematic material. A’ is the recapitulation part which means the restatement of the subjects in the exposition part.

As it is in a sonata form, the novel *To the Lighthouse* is composed of three parts: The Window, Time Passes, and The Lighthouse. In the first part The Window, the writer presents the two contrasting themes—harmony and conflict around Mrs. Ramsay’s family, with a closing theme at the party at the end of this part, which can be analogized as the exposition part (A) in a sonata. In the second part Time Passes, the writer turns to a completely different angle from human world to non-human world to explore the themes presented in the first part, which can function as the development (B) in a sonata form. In the third part of the novel *To the Lighthouse*, the narrative returns to human world with all the characters solving the conflict they confront in the first part and deepens the theme, which represents the recapitulation part (A’) in a sonata form. I will make a further illustration of the sonata structure.

2. The Exposition Part

In the sonata form, the first section—exposition divides into a first theme which is the dominant in the tone, and a second theme which is relative in another key, often with a codetta to round the section off. The Window in *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf is the first part. As it is in a form of sonata, The Window, the first part of the novel contains two contrasting themes: harmony and conflict, and a closing theme at the party. The first theme harmony is the desire of Mrs. Ramsay for going to the lighthouse, which embodies Mrs. Ramsay’s desire for harmonizing the relationship in her family and between the friends gathering in her summerhouse. The second theme conflict is the frustration faced by different characters in their effort to communicate and understand the meaning of life. The closing theme is the temporary unity Mrs. Ramsay creates at her party at the end of the day. At the party the harmony out of conflict is within reach, all the characters seem to come to a certain understanding of life, yet there still prevails the despair and sense of loss.

2.1. The First Theme of Harmony

At the beginning of this part, Mrs. Ramsay exclaims the joy that they can go to the lighthouse tomorrow. The desire of Mrs. Ramsay for going to the lighthouse can be seen as the first theme in the novel. This desire embodies that Mrs. Ramsay tries to give comforts to her children and set up harmony in the family. For Mrs. Ramsay, the lighthouse symbolizes peace and harmony in life. It is the vision of domestic harmony in her heart.

As a housewife, Mrs. Ramsay has no personal interests to care about. She devotes herself wholeheartedly to her family and guests in the summerhouse. She takes good care of her eight sons and daughters, worrying about their emotional feelings, especially James, her favorite son, who is the most sensitive child in her eyes. Mrs. Ramsay is also a caring wife for Mr. Ramsay. She is always ready to encourage her husband in his philosophical world. Whenever Mr. Ramsay demands her sympathy, she will assure him of his ability and make him feel confident in his career as a philosopher.

Mrs. Ramsay is instinctively to help and to give. Mrs. Ramsay generously gives care to her guests. She takes Charles Tansley, the student of Mr. Ramsay, with her to pay visits to some ill old women, talking domestic affairs with him. All these make the young dumb philosopher soothed.

Another way to show Mrs. Ramsay’s concern about harmonious human relation is that she considers that man

and woman should get married. Mrs. Ramsay insists “they all must marry... an unmarried woman has missed the best of life” (Woolf, 1996). There are two couples Mrs. Ramsay is eager to see their marriage. One is Minta and Paul. The other is Lily and Mr. Banks. Yes, it must! What an admirable idea! They must marry!” (Woolf, 1996). Mrs. Ramsay will be too happy to see they get married. As a housewife, domesticity is the focus in the life of Mrs. Ramsay. The triumph of the domesticity gives her a kind of soothing rhythm, which is the harmony she pursues in life.

Like the first subject in a sonata which always opens slowly and lightly, the first theme of harmony in *To the Lighthouse* also bears this characteristic. Mrs. Ramsay tries to build a harmonious domestic life through her tender love without bitterness. Then there follows discordant note, that’s the contrasting second theme of conflict. In a sonata, the second subject often plays vigorously. In this novel, the second theme forms the tension between characters.

2.2. The Second Theme of Conflict

Besides the first theme of harmony in the first part, there are a lot of disagreements and conflicts between the characters. It is the second theme that goes along with the first theme in the first part *The Window*.

The first conflict is between Mrs. Ramsay and her husband. They stand for different concepts of the world. For Mrs. Ramsay, the world is a sensitive one. She holds that people need love and understanding for each other. Mrs. Ramsay and her children’s desire to lighthouse are always rejected by Mr. Ramsay. Whenever Mrs. Ramsay gives hope to their children about the possibility to go to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay will announce a bad weather.

The conflict also exists between father and children, especially the youngest son, James. James is sensitive, and his hope is lighted up by Mrs. Ramsay’s promising to go to the lighthouse. As a sensitive child, he shares the same taste with his mother, tender, and loving. He hates his father’s egotism from the bottom of his heart, because he feels that Mr. Ramsay’s egotism disturbs the perfect simplicity and good sense of his relations with his mother.

As an artist, Lily also faces the conflict between her and other people, which fails her to present the balance and meaning through art.

This is the second theme of conflict between the characters in the first part *The Window*. It forms a contrast with the first theme of harmony Mrs. Ramsay endeavors to achieve in this part. These two contrasting themes serve as the two subjects in the exposition part (A) in a sonata form.

2.3. The Party as the Closing Theme

At the end of exposition part in a sonata form, there is often a closing theme. It is the summary and conclusion of this part, and intensifies the sense of ending. This closing theme often draws its material from the former two themes and is often very brief. At the end of the first part *The Window*, Mrs. Ramsay holds a dinner party in her house to all the family members and guests. In the party, all the conflicts between the characters seem resolved and all the characters reach the desirable harmony temporarily. This is the closing theme which ends up the first part with a peaceful atmosphere.

At the beginning of the party, here and there, prevails some conflicts between the characters, which echo the former themes. Mrs. Ramsay feels annoyed with her guest Minta for her being late for dinning with her boyfriend Paul. Mr. Banks considers the party a real bore and a waste of time. Lily still feels unpleasant about Mrs. Ramsay’s tyranny that all men should marry. She also holds resentment towards Mr. Tansly about his saying, “Woman can’t write. Women can’t paint” (Woolf, 1996). All the inhospitality disappoints Mrs. Ramsay, and she keeps exhausting her effort to light up their desire to break into conversation. Finally, all the disagreements are resolved; they get into the coherence. Mrs. Ramsay is satisfied with all the people joining the harmonious party; Mr. Ramsay gains his sublimity and superiority through his learned talk; Mr. Tansly becomes relieved by his asserting himself when he gets a chance to be encouraged to speak out his emotion; Lily feels confident because she realizes that she is very lucky to be able to keep independent. In this momentary order, Lily seems to know the whole arrangement of the painting in her mind, “I shall put the tree further in the middle” (Woolf, 1996). This is the first step towards her vision.

It seems that the two themes—harmony and conflict are unified at the end of the first part. But the closing theme is only the end of the exposition part, not the end of the whole novel. In a sonata form, a closing theme is

also a preparation for the development part. The confrontation between the two themes will be more violent in the development part.

Up until now, the first part *The Window* ends, the two contrasting yet close related themes have been presented in this part with a peaceful closing theme. It is analogized as the exposition part (A) of a sonata form. In a sonata form, there is no fixed number of themes in the exposition part. Some have no closing theme and some have connecting parts. However, there must be two contrasting themes. The first to present is the dominant theme; the second is the subordinating theme. These two themes are two separate groups in music. But in the novel, these two themes are interwoven. The harmony is the dominant theme in the whole novel contradicting with the second theme. They are presented in the first part of the novel just as exposition part in the sonata form. And in the following parts, they will be developed and elevated.

3. Time Passes Functions as the Development Part

The second part *Time Passes* in the novel *To the Lighthouse* can be seen as the equivalent of the development part (B) in a sonata form. In a sonata, after presentation of the two themes in the exposition part, the music begins to develop and change based upon them. This is called the development part. The development part is a free expression of the two former themes which reappear with a new effect. It has a sense of instability both in its tone and structure. In this way, the development part explores the potential elements of the two themes and highlights them. The two themes—harmony and conflict presented in the exposition part are preceded from an entirely new angle in the development part in the novel. Different from the narrative tone about the efforts made in the human world in the first part *The Window*, the second part *Time Passes* is a poetic interlude dealing metaphysically with the indifferent non-human world.

In the second part of *To the Lighthouse*, ten years is condensed into one night. The house which used to be filled with people and animated is empty now. What are left around the house are winds and waves. Echoing with Mrs. Ramsay's awareness that "no happiness lasted" (Woolf, 1996), the winds and waves continue to pursue the question—Can things last? "Loveliness and stillness clapped hands in the bedroom, and among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs even the prying of the wind, and the soft nose of the clammy sea airs, rubbing, snuffling, reiterating their questions—'Will you fade? Will you perish?'" (Woolf, 1996). In fact the winds and waves are not in need of an answer, because they are sure that they will perish. In contrast, humans are not as certain as nature about the mortality of this world. Nothing can withstand time. The themes of harmony and conflict of human world in the first part is elevated with the note that humans are insignificant in face of nature. This is another angle to demonstrate the deeper meaning of the two themes presented in the exposition part.

The development part (B) in a sonata form is often very brief, not intending to extend the material but to advance freely the two themes presented in the exposition part (A). Similarly, the second part *Time Passes* in the novel *To the Lighthouse* displays the two themes—harmony and conflict presented in the first part *The Window* from a different angle. The perspective turns from human world to non-human world, manifesting the potential meaning of the two themes: humans are insignificant and their sufferings are universal. Without depiction of the characters, the themes are enhanced with a universal truth against the setting of nature.

4. The Lighthouse as the Recapitulation Part

The recapitulation part (A') is the ending part of the sonata form with an obvious sense of climax and conclusion. After stating the two contrasting themes in the exposition part (A) and their violent development in the development part (B). A new relationship between the two themes appears in the recapitulation part (A'). In this part, the subordinating theme begins to return to the dominating theme. They become approached to each other and finally unified.

The third part *The Lighthouse* of the novel functions as the recapitulation part (A') of a sonata. The narration turns from the non-human world again to the human world. The dominant theme of this part is how the characters overcome their conflicts and achieve harmony; this is in coherence with the return of the second theme to the first theme in recapitulation part (A') of a sonata.

As an insistent memory in the thoughts of Lily, Mr. Ramsay and the children, Mrs. Ramsay still dominates the third section. Mrs. Ramsay's ability to endure the passage of ten year's time confirms her understanding that "There is a coherence in things, a stability; something she meant, is immune from change, and shines out... in the fact of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral...remains forever. This would remain" (Woolf, 1996). Mrs.

Ramsay's persistence makes clear that, however powerful the flux, a certain order and permanence can be obtained through man's ceaseless efforts, which is the restatement of the first theme in a more profound sense.

In the third part *The Lighthouse*, the first theme of harmony gains the manifestation. The second theme of conflict loses its effect. It is as that in the recapitulation part (A') of a sonata form: the subordinating theme returns to the dominant theme.

5. Wholeness Achieved by a Sonata Form

Virginia Woolf always considers the idea of a whole as the aim of her artistic work. She takes wholeness as the aim of her writing through which reveals the relationship between individuals. This is what she means by reality behind appearances, just as Mr. Ramsay realizes in the end when he successfully lands onto the lighthouse that it is his relation with his deceased wife, with his children, and with his friends around him that leads him to another kind of truth of the world. She wrote to Clive Bell in 1908, "I think a great deal of my future, and settle what book I am to write—how I shall reform the novel and capture multitudes of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, and shape infinite strange shapes" (Bell, 1982). The understanding of the relation between the characters and between the significant moments is the key to see whether Woolf has created a whole in her writing.

By adopting sonata form, Virginia Woolf divides the novel *To the Lighthouse* into three parts: the exposition part (A), the development part (B) and the recapitulation part (A') in the form of a sonata. The first part *The Window* is the exposition part. Two contrasting themes are introduced in this part. One is the dominant theme of harmony represented by Mrs. Ramsay's effort of creating a moment of oneness by uniting the self-centered and indifferent individuals including her husband, her children and her guests around her. The other subordinating theme is the conflict between the characters. At the end of *The Window*, there is a closing theme that is the temporary harmony out of conflicts at Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party. This closing theme rounds the section off with a peaceful atmosphere, which is also a preparation for a renewed performance of the two themes in the development part (B).

The second part *Time Passes* is equivalent to the development part (B) of a sonata. This part is a free expression of the two contrasting themes from a new angle. Compared with the first part in which the author carefully constructs the personal interaction of a few hours, the second part compresses ten years' passage into a night. Man's efforts are set against the indifferent and devastating nature. The permanence of the moment at the dinner party of the first part forms a sharp contrast with the flowing and fleeting of ten years in the second part in which the author presents the despotic power of Time and Nature and its devouring of the mortal lives. The harmonious moment when human beings show their love to each other puts on a universal sense of man's painstaking effort for unity in life. Although Woolf admits the weakness of a human life in front of the indifferent power of Nature by delivering death news from the Ramsay family, she believes that human spirit will survive. This naturally introduces structural climax in the recapitulation part (A').

The third part *Time Passes* functions is the recapitulation part (A') of a sonata. The conflicts between the characters disappear, and harmony is finally achieved. In this way, the main theme of harmony is intensified, which is the same as the double return of the second theme to the main theme in recapitulation part (A') of a sonata. By completing her painting, Lily understands Mrs. Ramsay's self-sacrifice for the harmonious relationship between people. Mr. Ramsay starts the trip to the lighthouse in memory of his wife. This opens the way for him to reconcile with his children. They are moved by their father's heroic manner, his loneliness and his offering of love to them when he praises James as "a born sailor" (Woolf, 1996). Their landing onto the lighthouse provides Lily with an inspiration which helps to complete her harmonious vision to embrace all the varied elements into a whole. This is the restatement of the main theme of harmony in the first section at a higher level.

The tripartite structure of *To the Lighthouse*, wisely borrowed by Virginia Woolf from the sonata form, not only embodies the structure's well-balanced aesthetic sense of beauty, but also greatly helps to convey the themes of the novel. William Fleming points out that, "time and movement are inextricably interwoven, since all time is measured by movement and change of relative positions, and all mobility has, of necessity, duration. Hence the degree of the mobility can serve as a criterion for another type of classification" (Mittal, 1985). So the conventional recognized boundaries between the arts of time and space mean much less now than they used to. All forms of art are directly related to the aesthetic beauty they have created. Virginia Woolf does not unify her novel through depicting the plot and character, but to get the organic wholeness by arranging the structural elements from music form. To this point, Mitchell A. Leaska comments well, "*To the Lighthouse*... stands as con-

firmation of her mastery of a complex and disciplined form... She achieved a unity of design which crowns her triumph in it" (Leaska, 1964).

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