

# Gifts of Art in *To The Lighthouse* of Virginia Woolf

**Song Suqing**

*Shanxi University Shanxi, Taiyuan, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *Woolf, a British modernist female writer, was one of the pioneers of western stream of consciousness novels and feminist literature at the beginning of the 20th century. She portrayed many female artists in the experiment of her stream of consciousness novels. To the Lighthouse, as Virginia Woolf's masterpiece, highlights the role of artists and art in the gift economy. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the gift-giving phenomenon of creative art in the novel from the perspective of economy, and to explore the gender relationship and class relationship in order to recongnize Woolf's understanding of commodity economy and interpersonal relationship. And expand the meaning space of this classic work.*

**KEYWORDS:** *to the lighthouse ; art; gifts; gender; class*

## 1. Introduction

In *Gifts: Erotic Life of Imagination and Property*, Lewis Hyde discusses the role of artists in detail from the perspective of gift economy. He stressed that the real business of art is a gift exchange. “(158) He claims that the role played by art and artists is essential to the social, emotional and spiritual survival of culture.” The time frame of *To The Lighthouse* crossing a very important decade, from the pre-war to the early postwar, which was determined by the great period of social, political and economic transformation in the postwar period[1]. From *To The Lighthouse*, we can clearly see the role of the artist and the importance of the art itself, as well as its internal relationship with personal experience and the broader economic, social and political system.

## 2. Women's Art and Gift Economy

The book is divided into three parts: window, time pass, and lighthouse. The first part describes the dinner hosted by Mrs. Ramsey, which was attended by ten members of the Ramsey family with five guests. Mrs. Ramsey is eager to reflect her success and pride as an “angel in a Victorian house” through a well-prepared dinner. Mrs. Ramsey painstakingly creates an atmosphere at the table; “Now eight candles were stood down the table...and in the middle a yellow and purple dish of fruit” The soft candlelight, at least visually, immersed the original mind in a peaceful and

harmonious atmosphere[2]. Candlelight and fruit platter are two of the great works of art Ramsey created in her life at the dinner party, which symbolize warmth, compassion and beauty, release the indifference and enmity of everyone in the house, share the joy of unity. It can be said that Mrs. Ramsey is an artist of life who is good at making relationships between people full of differences and chaos.

Besides, she gave gifts to the lighthouse out of obedience to traditional social norms, and her philanthropy was an aspect of her middle-class role. The silk thread she weaves also symbolizes a sincere desire to establish and maintain contact and consolidate the sense of friendly relationships brought about by her other food and social gifts. She plans to send surplus goods, sundries and waste from the Ramsey family to lighthouses for “entertainment” and happiness for men who work there. Of course, the trip itself was a gift to her son to realize James' longstanding wishes, as well as to bring him happiness and entertainment. She is used to her role as a wife to be consumed by her husband in order to maintain her social status and interpersonal relationships.

Lily, a female painter who visited Ramsey's house, pursued the true meaning of life and art. In the first part, Lily gave up the painting helplessly. In the third part, other members of the Ramsey family and Lily and other guests return to their holiday homes on the island for the rest of their postwar lives. Mr. Ramsey and his two children completed a lighthouse trip that had not been completed ten years ago, reminiscent of the late Mrs. Ramsey, while Lily returned to the old painting decade ago, adding a sum in the middle of the canvas to complete the painting. This coincided with Mrs. Ramsey's realization at the end of the dinner that her creation was “a sketch of the past”.

Both Mrs. Ramsey and Lily are artists who try to establish harmony and order in chaos and contradiction through their own creation. In addition, from the beginning, the lighthouse heralded a gift. In the end, Lily's painting can be interpreted as the return gift to Mrs. Ramsey. Her painting is both a contempt for Ramsey's conservatism and an expression of love for her generosity and creativity. Such gift of vision cycle shows the flow of social connections and economic status.

### **3. The Gender Relationship in Gifts**

In the first part of the story, however, the trip was delayed because, as Ramsey and James' main narrative perspective showed, male triumphed over everything and refused to take risks to prevent gifts from giving. It was not until the last few pages that Mr. Ramsey, Cam and James fulfilled this wish and came to the lighthouse to give the gift, which shows the patriarchal society's oppression of women. The deep-rooted patriarchal thinking of Mrs. Ramsey made her humble and belittled her talent; she believed that “gave” to the world is “negligible” compared to Mr. Ramsey ‘exquisite abandonment to exhaustion’, “the rapture of successful creation” “throbbed through her”(TTL, 36)[3]. Notably, compared with Ramsey, her inferiority complex has something to do with financial concerns. Her role is a generous goddess (as confirmed by the association of greenhouses), but her role is

limited because she does not have the money to repair the roof of the greenhouse. She was deprived of power in the monetary economy because she could not earn her own money. These run counter to her talent.

Like Mrs. Ramsey, Lily is vulnerable to mainstream values that belittle and laugh at women's talents. Unlike Mrs. Ramsey, however, Lily sees her career as an artist as an escape from these norms. Although Charles Tansley's claim that "women can't write, women can't paint" when she fights to produce her painting, her identity as an artist gushes in her experience, art gift she "finds a treasure", it does not need to succumb to social, sexual and economic pressure to marry (TTL,79)[4].

#### **4. The Class Relationship in Gifts**

The harmony that Mrs Ramsay seems to create is also an illusion, for as Tratner said, 'the beautiful unity of the dinner party and of upper-class consciousness has actually been created by those who have been excluded from it' – 'Mrs McNab... washing the dishes' hidden away in the kitchen (1995, 53)[5]. The novel alludes to this change to make art as a gift, it must be linked to the political changes of the class. Although it is by no means a class political radical in Woolf's work, there is a feeling that the connection between the challenge of this novel and the class bias, Mrs. Ramsey, Mrs. McNab and Lily, offer socialist feminism and the challenge of war, both of which have a large-scale political and economic role in the European countries. The focus on the creative talent of these women is to provide a way of combating the destructive nature of the war and to record the social and political changes brought about by the war.

As soon as Ramsey leaves, "a collapse begins" (TTL, 104). The window was set during the period of socialist liberalism, during which, as Whitworth pointed out, welfare and support extended to the working class (2005, 36-9). Lily's art is coordinated with political change and, more obviously, with postwar women. She continued to fight with her personal efforts to achieve creative gifts, to solve the dilemma of becoming a professional painter and a woman. Tratner sees Lily's "painting as a political map of society" (1995, 68) and suggests that she move the tree to the middle to "avoid that awkward space" (TTL, 79). She revised the space in the painting, suggesting that the combination of values and qualities would enable her to "legally" become a professional woman and resist the middle-class marriage model.

However, just as the war interrupted Lily's inspiration and temporarily suspended her paintings, the focus of the novel shifted to the working-class character Mrs. McNab. The navigational image Mrs. McNab is generally associated with political and social change, as described by William Banks and Charles Tansley, who metaphorically "taking their bearings" as if "on the bridge of a ship" (TTL,104). Woolf's novel not only gave the working class women's voice, thought and experience to be privileged, but also shows the increasing power and impact of the working class and women in this period. Tratner was active in the view that Mrs. McNab was a "the model of the artist" and a "Mrs. Ramsey's replacement.", and

Lily could imitate her to complete Mrs. Ramsey's painting (1995,65)[6]. However, when you see the relationship between them and the gift economy, the relationship between the three authors is even more compact, so that Mrs. McNab is a gift-giving agent that kept her generous and creative fertility from Mrs. Ramsey and injected her body energy into it to make it shift in the course of passing to Lily.

## 5. Conclusion

It can be said that the link of vision gift deeply metaphors the awakening of women's consciousness of survival in commodity society and patriarchal society, and also shows Woolf's sadness about the deep-rooted power and class relationship in capitalist economic relations. In addition, if Woolf tries to deconstruct the dehumanized factors of capitalism through gifts in *To The Lighthouse*, the work itself is also a gift to readers. It shows readers the lasting charm of classical literature. By savoring the work carefully, readers can not only appreciate the writing skills of the novel, but also interpret the phenomenon of art and gift exchange. From different perspectives, we can see Woolf's grasp of the gender and class politics of the society at that time, and the rich and profound creative connotation of a superb artist.

## References

- [1]Abbott, R(1992).What Miss Kilman's Petticoat Means: Virginia Woolf, Shopping, and Spectacle. *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol.38, no.1, pp.193-216.
- [2]Hyde L(1979).*The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. Vintage: New York.
- [3]Laslett,B.&.B. Johanna(1989).Gender and social reproduction: a historical perspective. *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol.15, no.1, pp.381-404.
- [4]Mauss, Marcel(1990). *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. W.D. Halls. New York and London: W.W. Norton.
- [5]Tratner, Michael(1995). *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot and Yeats*. Stanford University Press.
- [6] Woolf Virginia(1992). *To the Lighthouse*. London: Vintage.