

Merging and flowing: the metaphor in to the lighthouse



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From the invisible to the visible is but a step, and a very quick step at that. The task of the metaphor is to render concrete and palpable, through analogy, the abstract and unseen, and Virginia Woolf peppers *To the Lighthouse*, especially the largely interior “moments of being” dinner-party episode, with muscular metaphor and sinuous simile. Two artists here work with metaphor to unite the divided guests: Mrs. Ramsay, a social artist whose conversational gifts link people through a shared language, and Lily Briscoe, whose painting talent translates into a gift for an imaginative visual window into the minds of others. For Mrs. Ramsay, the metaphor resides within the oral present tense as an evanescent bridge between people. Her non-recordable (except by Woolf’s pen) art may not last, but it is still necessary. Lily’s metaphor is an instantaneous leap, as well, but her analogies freeze moments timelessly ~~the~~ the metaphor is a present action abstractly removed from temporal boundaries. Woolf’s strategy of indirect discourse extends Lily’s artistry and aids the heteroglot fusion; the present-tense interior voices become timeless and abstract through their confluence in the narrative pool. The dinner table is a corrugated arrangement of voices, external and internal ~~the~~ thought of person A to speech of person A directed at person B to thought of person B to speech of person B directed at person C ~~the~~ and a perfect forum in which to highlight the problems ~~the~~ and potential solutions ~~the~~ of social disharmony. In the first of many images relating to water, Mrs. Ramsay laments the fractured, hidden transitions that dominate the table: “They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her” (83). But Mrs. Ramsay, too, is a failure at merging and flowing and creating within herself. She observes the discrepancy between “what she was thinking” and “what she was doing”

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(83). Yet her metaphors remain in a solipsistic world of language and imagery, rarely bridging the gap between herself and another. When the opportunity arises to bond with someone else through metaphor, she returns to herself, as when she sympathizes with William Bankes: [A]nd in pity for him, life being now strong enough bear her on again, she began all this business, as a sailor not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea. (84) The solipsistic imagery continues in this double metaphor (or a hypothetical image within a simile); Mrs. Ramsay first imagines herself as a sailor, and then the sailor ("he") imagines himself in a fatal vortex. The metaphor is fueled by the present-tense movement of its image; the sailor is caught between fatigued anticipation of his journey and wistful longing for death through the past conditional. Mrs. Ramsay's artistry is useful, however, in combination with Lily's metaphors. Lily describes moments of being as "illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (161). The essence of the metaphor is captured here ~~in~~ instantaneous visibility. Her visual abilities suit the metaphor/moment of being: "In a flash she saw her picture" (84). Lily's metaphors are external from herself and enable sympathy with others, as when she advances Mrs. Ramsay's sailor simile: "Lily Briscoe watched her drifting...as one follows a fading ship until the sails have sunk beneath the horizon" (84). Despite Lily's observant and empathic eye, she does not have the same presence as Mrs. Ramsay and cannot produce the same physical effects she can. Mikhail Bakhtin, explaining Lessing, describes the temporality of the literary image: "Those things that are static in space cannot be statically described, but must rather be incorporated into the

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temporal sequence of represented events and into the story's own representational field." In this sense, Lily's metaphors, however dynamic and sympathetic, remain static and are incorporated into the temporal sequence of the scene through Mrs. Ramsay, the conversational proxy for Lily's metaphorical mentality. From the chaos around the dinner table, Lily creates mental, visual order, while Mrs. Ramsay creates social, linguistic order *五* "speaking French imposes some order, some uniformity" (90). What further separates Lily's metaphors from Mrs. Ramsay's is that those of the former clarify and illuminate the scene instead of merely ordering it. This ability to lay bare the hitherto invisible is summarized by her appraisal of Tansley: "Sitting opposite him, could she not see, as in an X-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself, lying dark in the mist of his flesh" (91). Water is again used in the image, but this time, in the form of mist, which recreates the haze of the x-ray. But the haze, despite being restricted to a still photograph, has history and movement, just as the mist is metamorphic, transitional, moving from liquid to air. Her temporally-inclusive vision allows for some empathy she would not otherwise have for the arrogant Tansley " [I]t was almost impossible to dislike any one if one looked at them" (85). For those without Lily's skill, Woolf's strategy of indirect discourse articulates for them and allows for sympathy and emotions without direct words. From, supposedly, Mrs. Ramsay's perspective of fighting birds, we are told that " the air was shoved aside by their black wings and cut into exquisite scimitar shapes. The movement of the wings beating out, out, out *五* she could never describe it accurately enough to please herself *五* was one of the loveliest of all to her" (80). Mrs. Ramsay's proclamation of inarticulacy is countered by the picture of " scimitar shapes" <https://assignbuster.com/merging-and-flowing-the-metaphor-in-to-the-lighthouse/>

that the narrator conjures up, which seems to feed into Mrs. Ramsay's emotions. Or perhaps the conjurer is not solely the narrator: "Look at that, she said to Rose, hoping that Rose would see it more clearly than she could. For one's children so often gave one's own perceptions a little thrust forwards" (80). The linguistic transmission (Rose would probably not know the word "scimitar," but perhaps her image of the birds as swords led to the narrative description) from the inarticulate to the articulate by means of metaphor is captured by another simile for Mrs. Ramsay: "[L]ike some queen who, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them...she went down, and crossed the hall and bowed her head very slightly, as if she accepted what they could not say: their tribute to her beauty" (82). That vocalization can occur only through simile (and here through another type of image, beauty) privileges the simile as the essential component of language, that which gives vibrant voice to the muted thought. Furthermore, indirect discourse can demonstrate mental and linguistic differences in far subtler ways than outright perspectival switches can. At first, Tansley's and Lily's progressions of thought seem similar. Tansley's thought runs in steps of semicolons: "He liked her; he admired her; he still thought of the man in the drain-pipe looking up at her; but he felt it necessary to assert himself" (86). The initial statement, the precise revision, the use of evidence, and the conclusion ~~and~~ all the structures of rigorous logic are present. In the next paragraph, Lily responds by thinking in similar steps, albeit separated by commas and directed toward the body: "He was really, Lily Briscoe thought, in spite of his eyes, but then look at his nose, look at his hands, the most uncharming human being she had ever met" (86). Yet the thought is not as unified (in a reductive sense) as Tansley's. The elliptical framing of the <https://assignbuster.com/merging-and-flowing-the-metaphor-in-to-the-lighthouse/>

thought 主” He was really...the most uncharming human being” 主 has a delayed resonance that turns the progression of the idea from a scientific one (the steady accumulation of facts into an incontrovertible thesis) into an artistic one (the recognition of contradictory emotional facts which leads to a somewhat ambiguous conclusion, one linked structurally to the origin). Lily moves to a more poetic form soon after, and the separation between her and Tansley’s thoughts is evident: “ Why did her whole being bow, like corn under a wind, and erect itself again from this abasement only with a great and rather painful effort?” (86) The simile of passivity and stereotypically masculine verb of “ erect” collide; this forces Lily to return to Tansley’s step-thought afterward: “ She must take it once more. There’s the sprig on the table-cloth; there’s my painting; I must move the tree to the middle; that matters 主 nothing else” (86). Her art, presumably the area least subject to this conventional mode of consciousness, is goaded into the reductive masculine logic of necessity and assertion (“ necessary to assert himself”/“ that matters 主 nothing else”) by Tansley’s echoing taunt, “ Women can’t write, women can’t paint” (86). When Lily’s x-ray vision fails to merge with another’s, or merges only in an unhealthy way, as here, the indirect discourse again roots the reader in an ambiguous position of judgment; two paragraphs later the sentence “ She was telling lies he could see” (86) is rendered indirect by the absence of the comma. Reworded with a comma as “ She was telling lies, he could see,” the sentence is from Tansley’s point of view, separating thought (“ She was telling lies”) from action (“ he could see”). Read without the comma in a different way, the sentence is “ She was telling lies that he could see,” implying that Lily is directing the action (the lie-telling is the action, rather than the thought) and, consequently, the <https://assignbuster.com/merging-and-flowing-the-metaphor-in-to-the-lighthouse/>

narrative. Additionally, this last view could be the omniscient narrative point of view. In any case, the narrative returns to Tansley's voice with "He felt very rough and isolated and lonely" (86), but this seeping narrative control by Lily infects him and he starts learning or feeling what the others are thinking: "[S]he despised him: so did Prue Ramsay; so did they all" (86). Although this community feeling is clearly not a positive one, at least Tansley is removing himself from invulnerable egotism. In a scene dominated by surveillance and the emotional access this provides z "(they looked at each other down the long table sending these questions and answers across, each knowing exactly what the other felt)" (96) z the lighting of the candles seems to symbolize the benefits of the metaphor: Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily. (97)The metaphor (candle-lighting) takes place in the "Now," just as the candles light up, and composes a disparate idea into a unified one (from people into a party) while creating internal order at the expense of the external (since the metaphor transcribes the physical and concrete, or the external, into the mental and abstract, the internal), bonding the guests: Lily Briscoe... compared it with that moment on the tennis lawn when solidity suddenly vanished, and such vast spaces lay between them; and now the same effect was got by the many candles in the sparsely furnished room, and the uncurtained windows, and the bright mask-like look of faces seen by <https://assignbuster.com/merging-and-flowing-the-metaphor-in-to-the-lighthouse/>

candlelight. Some weight was taken off them; anything might happen, she felt. (97-98) The contradictions of “ uncurtained windows” and “ mask-like” faces help carve out this space, but rather than it being a hollow and unbridgeable space, the metaphor, or candle, illuminates its potential energy. This energy extends and expands, touching everyone, and allows its chaotic force to become universal and timeless, a true moment of being that flows backward and forward in time without ever vacating its slot in the present. Mrs. Ramsay’s conversational metaphors order reality in Aristotelian mimetic fashion, and alter only the shape of reality ~~to~~ birds into scimitars ~~to~~ rather than stamping reality permanently, which explains her pre-emptive mnemonic storage of the evening: “[I]t had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past” (111). Mrs. Ramsay wants the momentary metaphor to gain a foothold in time and forces an order upon them; she turns them from “ moments of being” to “ moments of having been.” The artist, on the other hand, already has a recordable medium in which to work; she can represent mimetic realities, not just her own reality. Lily is a painter whose changing artistic sensibilities are historical: “ She took up the salt cellar and put it down again on a flower pattern in the table-cloth, so as to remind herself to move the tree” (85). She is a painter ~~to~~ here, very nearly, a writer of prose ~~to~~ whose mark is left on the world. Her metaphors, as with the indirect discourse, flow through others, baring them, clarifying them, and creating sympathy. The metaphor as a representation of multiple realities is an apt description for Woolf’s own Modernist legacy, which some consider a “ normalization” of the chaotic modes of Joyce and Faulkner. The whole of the effort of merging does not rest on Mrs. Ramsay, but through her.

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