

The Sun's Eclipse and Fantasy of the Eye: Feminist Vision in Virginia Woolf's *The Sun and the Fish*

Eileen (Xiaoxi) Yu*

Abstract

Virginia Woolf's story essay *The Sun and the Fish* is based on her experience of witnessing the 1927 total solar eclipse in London. In this essay, Woolf fantasizes the visual experience as an adventure of the eye, through which she guides the readers into a dreamlike space and evokes the disembodied spectatorship of the cinema. In this article, I investigate Woolf's representation of the eclipse in analogy with the cinema. I suggest Woolf's account of the ecliptic scenes as a rivalry between the sun and the moon alludes to the unbalanced relationship between her parents and thus manifests her feminist concerns. In this vein, I will also examine the eclipse essay in tandem with Woolf's semi-biographical novel *To the Lighthouse*, in which she famously casts her parents as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. By doing so, I shall further contend the eclipse essay demonstrates Woolf's resolution with the past through visual imaginations.

In her story essay, *The Sun and the Fish* (1928), Virginia Woolf records her experience of the 1927 total solar eclipse in London. By describing the eclipse as an adventure of the eye, Woolf creates through her writing a dream-like space and evokes the disembodied spectatorship of the cinema. My interest in reading this essay within the cinematic context arises out of the inter-art analogy,¹ for the way Woolf represents the eclipse parallels modes of cinematic representation. Her account of the ecliptic scenes

*Eileen (Xiaoxi) Yu is a postgraduate in the English Department at the University of Otago, where she also works as a research assistant and tutor. Her research interest includes Virginia Woolf, modernism, feminism, literature and film studies. Her current thesis focuses on Virginia Woolf and visual cultures. Eileen can be reached at eileen.yu@otago.ac.nz.

¹ Dalia Neis also notices the parallel between Woolf's literary technique in this essay and the technology of the cinema. Specifically, Neis analyzes Woolf's juxtaposition of literary scenes in analogy with cinematic montage. See Neis, Dalia. "Disembodied Intercourse: Reflections on Virginia Woolf's 'The Sun and the Fish.'" *Close-Up*, <http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/library/documents/disembodied-intercourse/>. Accessed 16 June, 2016.

as a rivalry between the sun and the moon also alludes to the unbalanced relationship between her parents and thus further reflects her feminist concerns. In this paper, I examine Woolf's eclipse essay in tandem with her semi-biographical novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), in which Woolf portrays Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay based on her parents Leslie and Julia Stephen. I suggest Woolf's literary representation of the visual fantasy resonates with her family memories, especially those of her parents. In this vein, I shall further contend the essay demonstrates Woolf's resolution with the past through visual imaginations.

Before the eclipse starts, Woolf imagines a dialogic scene with the eye: "[...] when the real world has faded, let us see what the eye can do for us. Show me the eclipse, we say to the eye; let us see that strange spectacle again." (519) What Woolf envisions of the eclipse largely parallels the situation of the cinema. On the one hand, the faded real world resembles the cinematic space in darkness; on the other hand, they both privilege the dominant function of the eye. In addition, and perhaps more specifically, when Woolf describes the experience as "a few hours of disembodied intercourse with the sky" (520), she also evokes the cinematic spectatorship underlying the "apparatus theory". Central to 1970s psychoanalytic film theory, the "apparatus theory" was first proposed by Jean-Louis Baudry, who compared the cinema to an institution or apparatus and drew upon psychoanalytic theory in analyzing the cinema. Christian Metz later developed Baudry's argument in his remarkable monograph *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1982). For both Baudry and Metz, the cinema as a mechanical apparatus largely duplicates the Lacanian "mirror stage". It enters the spectators into the Imaginary register by creating the atmosphere where they are alienated from their lived-body experience and reduced to a disembodied eye.

In *The Waves* (1931), Woolf's most experimental novel, the protagonist Bernard addresses the disembodied experience in his final soliloquy. Interestingly, in this soliloquy revolving around "the world seen without a self" (186), Bernard repeatedly alludes to the sun's eclipse, an event that seems to be derived from *The Sun and the Fish*. Searching in vain for an expression through language, Bernard asks, "[H]ow [to] describe the world seen without a self? There are no words". (186) In the eclipse essay, Woolf seems to have provided the answer, that is, to resort to the visual, the picture-making power of the cinema.

For Woolf, visual media serve as an alternative literary trope where words fail. There often exists an interplay between literary and visual representations in her writing. In her memoir *A Sketch of the Past*

(1972), Woolf recounts a moment when she recalled her mother's death upon the sight of a blazing glass at Paddington Station:

It was glowing yellow and red and the iron girders made a pattern across it. I walked along the platform gazing with rapture at this magnificent blaze of colour, and the train slowly steamed into the station. It impressed and exalted me. It was so vast and so fiery red. The contrast of that blaze of magnificent light with the shrouded and curtained rooms at Hyde Park Gate was so intense. Also it was partly that my mother's death unveiled and intensified; made me suddenly developed perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant. Of course this quickening was spasmodic. But it was surprising – as if something were becoming visible without any effort (93).

The moment appears to Woolf as an exceptional moment that stands out from the “cotton wool of daily life” (72). It also brings about what she calls “sudden shocks” (72). Shocks as such, however, do not appear completely – if at all – negative to Woolf. As she observes, “it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances” (72). In this case, the shock is her mother's death and the revelation lies in the “suddenly developed perceptions” that Woolf did not realize until she came across the blazing glass. It is thus in her memories that Woolf develops the sudden perceptions of her mother's death. In other words, it is through recollecting the past scene that Woolf recognizes “some real thing behind the appearances”. In this regard, it also evokes Marcel Proust's famous *mémoire involontaire*. In his *Short Speech on Proust* (1932), Walter Benjamin elaborates on the concept from a visual perspective. He writes:

Concerning the *mémoire involontaire*: not only do its images appear without being called up; rather, they are images we have never seen before we remember them. This is most clearly the case in those images in which – as in some dreams – we see ourselves. We stand in front of ourselves, the way we might have stood somewhere in a prehistoric past [Urvergangenheit], but never before our waking gaze. Yet these images, developed in the darkroom of the lived moment, are the most important we shall ever see. (qtd. in Hansen 348)

For Benjamin, certain images only emerge out of our memories when we think back upon the past. Benjamin privileges the images in memory for they create the experience of dreams and thus allow us to separate ourselves from the “actual” experience. Likewise for Woolf, it is through the moments of recollection that she comes to sudden realizations of the past, as she observes in her diary, “The past is beautiful because one never realizes an emotion at the time. It expands later, & thus we don't have complete emotions about the present, only about the past.” (*Diary* 3 5) Woolf also alludes to the disembodied experience in her key essay *The Cinema* (1926): “We behold them as they are when we are

not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it.” (349) As Woolf indicates, the cinema alienates the spectators from their lived experience, or present reality. In this vein, it also echoes the situation in dreams, and further, the images in memory in Benjamin’s account.

As I said, Woolf’s representation of the eclipse is analogous to the disembodied experience in the cinema. To a certain extent, she seems to have duplicated a dream-like space of the cinema. But what is the “real thing” that underlies the surface representation of the visual fantasy? In pursuit of this issue, I shall return to the eclipse essay.

The eclipse in Woolf’s description manifests itself as “an amusing game” revolving around the sun (519):

The sun had to race through the clouds and to reach the goal, which was a thin transparency to the right, before the sacred seconds were up. He started. The clouds flung every obstacle in his way. They clung, they impeded. He dashed through them. He could be felt, flashing and flying when he was invisible. His speed was tremendous. Here he was out and bright; now he was under and lost. But always one felt him flying and thrusting through the murk to his goal. For one second he emerged and showed himself to us through our glasses, a hollowed sun, a crescent sun. Finally, he went under for his last effort. Now he was completely blotted out. The moments passed. (521)

The repeated use of the pronoun “he”, as Jane Goldman observes, “leaves no doubt that the sun is, here, masculine” (60). The inevitable defeat of the sun could thus be interpreted in tandem with Woolf’s feminist concerns.² Although Woolf does not mention the moon, as an oppositional power that blots out the sun, it is implied as a representative of the female. In *S/Z* (1970), Roland Barthes addresses the inferior status of the moon in comparison with that of the sun. He writes, “The moon is *nothingness* of light, warmth reduced to its deficiency: it illuminates by mere reflection without itself being an organ [...]” (24) The binary opposition between the sun and the moon constitutes an allegory of the relationship between Woolf’s parents. Like the moon that relies entirely on the sun for light and thus always resides in an inferior position, Woolf’s mother appears to her as largely overshadowed by her father.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf famously casts her parents Leslie and Julia Stephen as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Whereas Mr. Ramsay represents the patriarchal power in the family, Mrs. Ramsay assumes the

² For a feminist reading of this essay, see Goldman, Jane. *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism, and the Politics of the Visual*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. 39-106.

responsibility of a nurturing mother and wife, who lives under the dominance of her husband. Deeply in awe of her husband's masculine intelligence, Mrs. Ramsay feels "[s]he was not good enough to tie his shoe strings" (30). She also frequently feels subsumed in his actions and perceptions. As she heard Mr. Ramsay reciting a poem, although she did not understand their meanings, she felt "the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice" (60); when she perceived Mr. Ramsay watching her, "[s]he knew that he was thinking, You are more beautiful than ever. And she felt herself very beautiful." (104) In this regard, Mrs. Ramsay also resembles the nymph Echo in Greek mythology, who could never speak except for repeating that which was spoken to her. Woolf's representation of Mrs. Ramsay exemplifies the 19th century idea of an ideal woman, or "The Angel in the House",³ whom Mr. Ramsay largely relies upon. So when Mrs. Ramsay suddenly dies in "Time Passes" (the second part of the novel), she leaves behind a void for Mr. Ramsay, which would never be filled again: "Mr. Ramsay, stumbling a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty."(110)

The gloomy scene also reflects the situation of the Woolf's family, the Stephens' after her mother Julia died in 1895. Many years after Julia's death, Woolf was still obsessed with her mother. The obsession is also interwoven with her memories of her father, as she writes in her memoir:

[...] just as I rubbed out a good deal of the force of my mother's memory by writing about her in *To the Lighthouse*, so I rubbed out much of his [father's] memory there too. Yet he too obsessed me for years. Until I wrote it out, I would find my lips moving; I would be arguing with him; raging against him; saying to myself all that I never said to him. (108)

Like the Ramsays' youngest son James, Woolf resents her father for his tyranny, and this resentment constitutes part of her obsession with the past. As Woolf indicates in the above passage, it was not until she wrote *To the Lighthouse* that she seemed able to resolve with the past.

The idea of writing as resolution is more obviously reflected in one of her diary entry. Some 24 years after Leslie's death, Woolf recounted her father on the date of his birth:

Father's birthday. He would have been 96, 96, yes, today; and could have been 96 like other people one has known: but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; – inconceivable. I used to think of him & mother

³ Coventry Patmore uses the expression in his eponymous poem written in 1854. Woolf refers to the "Angel in the House" in her 1931 essay *Professions for Women*, in which she fiercely rails against the "angel" figure. I will return to this point later in this article.

daily; but writing *The Lighthouse*, laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this is to be true – that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; and writing of them was a necessary act.) He comes back now more as a contemporary. (*D3* 208)

In a way, the act of writing allows Woolf to revisit the past from a disembodied position as in cinema. By separating herself from the memories, Woolf makes her parents “an imaginary signifier” that makes present what is absent, as Metz theorizes it within the cinematic context, “it is the signifier itself, and as a whole that is recorded, that is absence” (43-4). In doing so, Woolf not only develops new perceptions of her father – viewing him “more as a contemporary” – she also reconsiders the relationship between her parents.

While Mr. Ramsay is an authoritarian and emotional patriarch, who constantly demands sympathy from his wife, his feelings for Mrs. Ramsay are more complex. The relationship between the Ramsays is thus more than just unbalanced and dominated by the masculine power.

With equal complacency she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture. That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath? (114)

For Woolf, there seems to exist some mutual understanding, or tacit knowledge between her parents that she failed to recognize before. By writing this novel, Woolf revisits the past and explores the “nobler power” underneath. But what exactly is this power? To explore this point, I want now to analyze the Ramsays’ relationship in analogy with the ecliptic scene in the essay.

As Mr. Ramsay walks past his wife while she is knitting, he seems to be overwhelmed by her exquisite beauty:

Ah! She was lovely, lovelier now than ever he thought. But he could not speak to her. He could not interrupt her. He wanted urgently to speak to her now that James was gone and she was alone at last. But he resolved, no; he would not interrupt her. She was aloof from him now in her beauty, in her sadness. He would let her be, and he passed her without a word, though it hurt him that she should look so distant, and he could not reach her, he could do nothing to help her. And again he would have passed her without a word had she not, at that very moment, given him of her own free will what she knew he would never ask, and called to him and taken the green shawl off the picture frame, and gone to him. For he wished, she knew, to protect her. (57)

Like the eclipse of the sun, the silent scene between the Ramsays also marks a momentary defeat of the masculine power. In this moment, Mr. Ramsay does not demand anything from his wife. He even refrains from talking to her against his desire. As Martha Nussbaum suggests, “he attends to her more fully as a person separate from himself existing in her own right, rather than as an instrument of consolation for himself” (744). Instead of his patriarchal sovereignty, this scene demonstrates Mr. Ramsay’s respect and admiration for his wife, and thus illustrates a concealed aspect of their seemingly unbalanced relationship.

Similarly, in the final scene of “The Window” (the first part of the novel), when Mr. Ramsay “wanted her to tell him that she loved him” (104), Mrs. Ramsay found it difficult to fulfill his wish despite her knowledge of what he thinks:

Will you not tell me just for once that you love me? He was thinking that, for he was roused, what with Minta and his book, and its being the end of the day and their having quarrelled about going to the Lighthouse. But she could not do it; she could not say it. (104)

Instead of saying “I love you”, Mrs. Ramsay smiled and said, “Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow. You won’t be able to go.” (104) By acknowledging something that she was reluctant to admit in order not to disappoint their son, Mrs. Ramsay seemed to be conveying her love in another way by aligning herself with her husband. And although “[s]he did not say it [I love you], yet he knew” (104).

Mrs. Ramsay’s triumph is by no means one that is rebellious in nature. It arises out of love and makes the “nobler power” underlying their relationship emerge. In her verbal reluctance, we could perceive the love between them that transcends explicit communication. The tacit understanding is built upon the shared background of “years of intimacy and of daily life” (Nussbaum 749). The subtle moment also constitutes a “moment of vision”, to borrow the term Thomas Hardy deploys in his poem. In her diary dated August 2, 1926, Woolf expresses her view on relationships with reference to Hardy’s “moments of vision”. She writes, “the year is marked by moments of great intensity. Hardy’s ‘moments of vision.’ How can a relationship endure for any length of time except under these conditions?” (*D3* 105) Nevertheless, Woolf did not seem to recognize such moments between her parents until she recollected them through writing.

The “moment of vision”, which points to a hidden aspect of the relationship between her parents, also echoes the sun’s eclipse in the essay, for the defeat of the sun does not bring an end to the story.

After the fatal moment, there comes an unprecedented “sense of rejuvenescence and recovery” (522). The eclipse could thus be seen as a moment of revelation, which brings to our awareness the existence of the moon/ female power. To a certain extent, it also manifests itself as an immoral moment that imprints the time thereafter. Then what comes after the eclipse?

“Sights marry [...] and so keep each other alive,” (519) Woolf writes in the opening paragraph of the eclipse essay. Following this statement, Woolf presents us with two lizards in the Zoological Garden: “One lizard is mounted immobile on the back of another with only the twinkle of a gold eyelid or the suction of a green flank to show that they are the living flesh, and not made of bronze.” (523) The image of lizard is bizarre enough. It nevertheless also appears in the novel. When Mr. Ramsay gets stuck in thought upon the letter R, he uses the alphabet ranged in 26 letters as an analogy of philosophical thoughts, “A shutter, like the leathern eyelid of a lizard, flickered over the intensity of his gaze and obscured the letter R.” (32) As he contemplates the letter, “The lizard’s eye flickered once more.” (32)

Here, the fantastic image of the lizard could be interpreted as an allegory of Mr. Ramsay’s limited perception. In this vein, the pair of mating lizards in the essay could be further analogized with the Ramsays’ united vision, as Woolf writes in the novel, “That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them.” (83) The two lizards which represent this unity also appear as a “perfect effigy” that seems to have revolutionized the world after the eclipse, as Woolf writes in the essay, “Time seems to have stopped and we are in the presence of immortality.” (523)

As if to enhance the sense of immortality, Woolf subsequently marries the sight of the lizards to that of the fish. These three sights – the eclipse, lizards and fish – combine to make “a triangular montage sequence, creating a delirious cinematic affect” (Neis). In this respect, it also evokes Woolf’s account of cinematic collision, which largely presages Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of montage (Humm 223). As she writes in her cinema essay, “We should see violent changes of emotion produced by their collision. The most fantastic contrasts could be flashed before us with a speed which the writer can only toil after in vain.” (352)

Not only does the sight of the fish – along with those of the eclipse and lizards – create the cinematic effect of montage, it further resonates with Woolf’s feminist vision as reflected in the novel. Like the moon that Woolf alludes to in the ecliptic scene, the fish here also marks a feminist symbol, which is

meanwhile echoed in Woolf's other works. Goldman opposes the manly sun and the womanly fish, through which she observes that Woolf "completes her overhaul of patriarchal imagery with a feminist revival of the fish" (98). In doing so, she also examines the sun/ fish (mermaid) opposition in Woolf's later short fiction *The Shooting Party* (1938), which, according to Goldman, develops the idea of the crisis of the masculine sovereignty in *The Sun and the Fish*. The image of the mermaid – half woman, half fish – also evokes Horace's famous statement with regard to the monstrous conjunction in poetry and painting: "A beautiful woman that tails off into a fish."⁴ Elsewhere, Woolf also posits the woman-fish connection in *Freshwater, a Comedy* (1923, 1935), Woolf's only play based on her great aunt, the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. In this play, Woolf parallels the female virtue of Modesty with the fertility of fish through the voice of the painter character George Frederick Watts.

Here, let us return to the fish in the eclipse essay: "The fish themselves seem to have been shaped deliberately and slipped into the world only to be themselves. They neither work nor weep. In their shape is their reason." (523) While Woolf does not explain the reason, she does establish the fish as an independent existence regardless of the male sovereignty. By doing so, she also separates the fish from the male-female unity represented by the lizards. In this regard, the fish could also be seen as a symbolic counterpart to Lily Briscoe, the spinster painter in *To the Lighthouse*. Unlike Mrs. Ramsay who exemplifies a typical "Angel in the House", Lily cares nothing about domesticity and pursues her artistic vision against men's censorious judgment: "Women can't paint, women can't write [...]" (43) "If Mrs Ramsay endeavours to preserve the spectacle of the composure of feminine and masculine relationships," Rachel Bowlby writes in her feminist criticism, "Lily Briscoe is placed outside this structure, fascinated by it but resisting incorporation into it [...]" (63) Her defiant and indifferent attitudes towards patriarchy thus make her an opposite of the domestic "angel".

Lily's defiance against women's traditional roles demonstrates Woolf's own feminist stance. In her 1931 essay *Professions for Women*, Woolf describes an almost violent act of killing the "Angel in the House". For Woolf, the "angel" inhibits her ability to develop "a mind of [her] own" and constrains her voice to express her own opinions. As a "domestic(ated)" figure who "preferred to sympathize

⁴ Michel de Montaigne cites the sentence in the opening section of his essay *On Friendship*. See Montaigne, de Michel. "On Friendship." *Montaigne Essays*. Trans. J.M. Cohen. London: Penguin, 1958. 91. While it is not clear whether Woolf has read the critique of Horace, given her familiarity with Montaigne's works, she might be aware of the statement and has deployed the woman-fish image in her own works. I am grateful to Rochelle Simmons for directing my attention to Horace.

always with the minds and wishes of others” (150),⁵ she discourages Woolf from “expressing what [she] think[s] to be the truth about human relations, mortality, sex” (151). Woolf thus defends her act as a necessary act of “self-defence”, which also appears to her as “part of the occupation of a woman writer” (151). The idea is similarly demonstrated in many of Woolf’s other works, especially her feminist manifesto *A Room of One’s Own* (1929).

In the novel, Woolf describes Lily’s action of “self-defence” in “The Lighthouse” (the third and final part of the novel). Ten years after the beginning of the story, when Lily returned to the Ramsays’ summerhouse, she met Mr. Ramsay, who again showed his demand for sympathy: “[W]ithout being conscious what it was, to approach any woman, to force them, he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy.” (129) Despite “[h]is immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy [that] poured and spread in pools at their feet” (131), Lily did not give him the solace that he so eagerly desires. Instead, “[i]n complete silence she stood there, grasping her paint brush.” (131) In a way, the act of “grasping her painting brush” could be seen as a symbolic gesture, a triumph in her battle against the sympathetic “angel”. Although “[t]he sympathy she had not given him weighed her down. It made it difficult for her to paint” (145), it seems to be an inevitable stage that she had to go through in order to achieve her artistic vision. In the same way that Woolf embraces Lily’s pursuit and projects part of herself in the woman artist, in the eclipse essay, Woolf celebrates the fish’s virtue and imagines herself to be turned into a fish: “Under our tweed and silk is nothing but a monotony of pink nakedness, Poets are not transparent to the backbone as these fish are. [...] if we were to be turned naked, into an Aquarium – but enough.” (524)

Through the image of the transparent fish, Woolf seems to be recapitulating the opposition between the eye and the body, or the idea of disembodiment. Interestingly, Metz deploys the same metaphor of the aquarium/ fish in analyzing the cinematic spectatorship. Metz likens cinematic spectators to fish in the aquarium, “taking in everything with their eyes, nothing with their bodies” (96). If we consider Woolf’s description of the fish within this visual context, we might as well sense her identification with the fish in terms of point of view. By imagining herself as a fish in the aquarium,

⁵ I am borrowing the expression “domestic(ated)” from Gabrielle McIntire. See Gabrielle, McIntire. “Feminism and Gender in *To the Lighthouse*.” *The Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse*. Ed. Allison Pease. Cambridge University Press, 2015. 80-91.

Woolf seems to take its disembodied position like that of the cinematic spectators. And it is with the disembodied eye that she revisits and develops new perceptions of the past.

Nevertheless, Woolf does not complete her imaginary picture as a fish. With a single wink of the eye, Woolf brings the essay to an end: “The eye shuts now. It has shown us a dead world and an immortal fish.” (524) Here, Woolf foreshadows Franz Kafka in the metaphor of shutting the eye: “We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes.” (qtd. in Barthes 1981, 53). Through her fantastic representation of the eclipse as an adventure of the eye, Woolf creates a dream-like space as in cinema. Her account of the sun’s eclipse also demonstrates her feminist vision that resonates with her portrayal of the relationship between her parents. Like Kafka who resorts to stories to drive things out of mind, it is through writing that Woolf disengages herself from the past and resolves with her reminiscent obsessions.

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