

Anxiety, Dilemma and Transcendence

- The Case of Lilly's Drawing Process

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Abstract: In Virginia Woolf's classic work *To the Lighthouse*, although Lily is not the main character, the idea of bisexuality embodied in her makes her one of the most important objects in the study of feminist thought. This paper intends to start from the rough painting process of Lily in *To the Lighthouse* to discover the content of Lily beyond feminist thought. Through the study, it finds that Lily not only symbolizes the beautiful personality of bisexuality, but she is also full of anxiety and dilemmas: the dilemma of the mind when creating, the anxiety about the right of free choice, the anxiety about the meaning of life existence, and the dilemmas of communication between human beings and human beings, between human beings and the ego, and the book also puts forward the way of transcending anxiety and dilemmas. The book also suggests ways to transcend anxiety and dilemma. Through analyzing the process of Lily's painting, this paper uncovers the anxious and difficult side of Lily's image, which not only enriches the previous research on Lily's image (bisexual homoeroticism), but also further reveals her complex and varied inner spiritual world, and these discoveries provide us with a more comprehensive and in-depth perspective for understanding and interpreting this important character in this masterpiece of literature.

Keywords: Anxiety, dilemma, communication, bisexual homoeroticism, spiritual immortality.

1. Introduction

Previous studies on Lily in *To the Lighthouse* mainly focus on exploring the idea of bisexual homosexuality projected on her, for example, Wang Yinghong and Yang Baiyan's *On Virginia Woolf's View of Bisexual Femininity* [1], Chen Jing's *Bisexual Homosexuality and Woolf's Feminist Narrative* [2], Yao Simeng's *Virginia Woolf's Feminist Thought and Her Novel To the Lighthouse* [3], and many other papers explain the elimination of the dichotomy between the sexes and the construction of bisexuality projected on Lily. Woolf's *Feminist Thought and Her Novel To the Lighthouse* [3], and many other essays have explained the feminist thought of eliminating the binary opposition between the two genders and constructing a bisexual homoeroticism that is projected on Lily. However, the exploration of Lily's image in these studies is basically limited to the idea of bisexual homosexuality and lacks further excavation of Lily's image.

Therefore, this paper intends to start from the process of Lily's paintings and combine it with Woolf's own life experience and the special social conditions after World War II, in order to explore Lily's richer spiritual world, and probe into the anxieties and dilemmas embodied in her, as well as

the ways to transcend these anxieties and dilemmas. This study not only helps people understand more comprehensively Woolf's image of women, but also enables people to understand more deeply the complexity and richness of Woolf's ideology conveyed in *To the Lighthouse*, thus further promoting the development of literary criticism and Woolf's ideological research.

2. Creative Anxiety

Lily's anxious state of mind is a reflection of her traumatic experience under the oppression of a patriarchal society, as well as Woolf's own pathological state of mind under the influence of society, public opinion, and mental illness.

Lily is undoubtedly an anomaly in the context of patriarchy: she is plain-looking, unattractive, and still unmarried at the age of thirty, deviating from the male perspective of the ideal woman's precepts. At the same time, she is also a rebel in the male-dominated society, refusing to become an "angel in the room", refusing to enter the social role imposed by the male-dominated society, and even devoting herself to the art of painting, which belongs to men only. But Lily, an independent spirit who wishes to remain true to herself, is still skeptical and anxious, fearing that Mr. Taslay or Mr. Ramsey will see her paintings — a thing Lily Briscoe could not bear to see. Even as she gazed at the patches, the lines, and the colors on the canvas, and at Mrs. Ramsey and James sitting in the window, the tentacles of her nerves remained alert to her surroundings, lest someone should tiptoe up to her and suddenly stare at her paintings [4]. This abnormal anxiety and nervousness reflects that under the influence of the traditional concept that "women can't paint, women can't write" [4], Lily doubted whether women possessed artistic creativity, revealing the painful and anxious existence of awakened women under the oppression of male-centeredness. Lily's anxiety also reflects Woolf's own mental anxiety, and Virginia is very worried about whether she can succeed as a writer. From the writer's life situation, every time in the completion of a novel, Virginia Woolf will have a "mental breakdown". Perhaps she is going to face the pressure of criticism and public opinion [5]. Under the multiple influences of the social reality of women being squeezed and rejected, the psychological state of worrying about the pressure of public opinion, and the physical condition of suffering from mental depression, Lily's anxiety and nervousness when she was afraid that others would see her paintings also projected Woolf's own anxious and disturbed state of mind when she was creating her works.

Lily's confidence and uncertainty also reflect Woolf's own anxieties. While painting, Lily's state of mind changed in a moment from being full of certainty to one in which all sorts of distractions came to her, and she even developed the negative emotion of doubting her own self, "her own lack of ability, how small and pathetic she was" [5]. This is also the reproduction of Woolf's own morbid psychology, Woolf's early years several times experienced the impact of the death of loved ones, her mother died in 1895, triggering the first collapse of her spirit, in 1897, her sister, Stina, died in 1897, leading to the second collapse of her spirit, her father's death in 1904, so that she was again struck by a blow to the third collapse of her spirit, the heavy psychological trauma of repeatedly facing death, making her She suffered from mental depression. The disease had a double effect on her: on the one hand, the irrationality of the disease provided her with a rich source of creativity, but on the other hand, when the depression struck, she would fall into pain and despair, and she would become reticent to speak, and in severe cases, she would even resort to suicide as an extreme measure. Lily's sometimes-confident and sometimes-distressed state shows Woolf's anxiety: she sees writing as a way to give vent to her emotions, full of enthusiasm and confidence, but under the influence of mental depression, she will fall into the extreme mood of negative depression and self-denial.

3. Freedom Anxiety and Existential Anxiety

Lily is in a dystopian world full of confusion and strife, and the dystopia brings her painful life experiences, making her resistant to the right of free choice and anxious about the meaning of life's existence.

To the Lighthouse was written in 1927, when the world was filled with emptiness and irrationality. With the development of capitalism and the gradual abundance of material things, the world created by human beings became an alien and confrontational existence, and people were plunged into an alienated state of existence, with their spiritual selves being slowly eroded. The outbreak of the war intensified the absurdity of reality. After the war, people's spiritual world was full of doubts and loneliness, and the whole world was shrouded in a depressing mood. In that dark, dirty and crazy era, the shadow of war was everywhere under the surface prosperity. The declaration that God is dead reflects that people's original ideals and beliefs have been destroyed, and new ideals and beliefs have not yet been established, and people's spirits have been plunged into a perplexed state of not knowing where to return to, just as Woolf wrote in her diary that the present situation is very strange, and that the existing answers do not apply, and that a new answer has to be found. And when the new answer is not yet established, it is a bit sad to throw away the old in a hurry [6]. With the occurrence of alienation, the aftermath of war, and the lack of faith, people are plunged into a situation of emptiness, confusion, loneliness, and despair in the context of this era.

Lili's resistance to freedom and her existential anxiety in the process of painting reflect the tragic experience of being in a dystopian world. She raises her hand and lifts the brush. In a state of agonizing and euphoric intoxication, her hand trembles in the air for a moment. Where to paint? At what point on the canvas would the first color be applied? That was the question. A single line on the canvas meant that she had taken countless risks and made many irreversible decisions [4]. Lily's hesitation after lifting the brush reflects her resistance to freedom. Human existence is destined to be tragic, even though Sartre said that human beings have the "freedom of choice". This freedom is also the source of human troubles and loneliness, because of the consequences of choices [7]. When facing the canvas, Lily is free, everything is under her control, but she hesitates because once she makes the first stroke, it will have an irreversible effect on her entire painting, and once she makes a choice, she has to take responsibility for her own behavior. The resistance to freedom reflects Lili's tragic experience of existence: in this world full of nothingness and loneliness, people are thrown into the absurd, with freedom, to be responsible for all their own behavior, and Lili's anxiety about freedom reflects her resistance to the responsibility behind the freedom and her fear of the future, she is unwilling to make choices, unwilling to face this absurd world. At the same time, Lily is also anxious about the meaning of existence: "So why did she paint? She looked at the canvas, which had been gently smudged with many flowing lines. It would be hung in the servant's bedroom. It would be rolled up and tucked under the sofa. So what's the use of painting it?" [4] She feared for the fate of her paintings, worried that they would gather dust and not see the light of day, and then questioned the meaning of her paintings. The world is changing rapidly, and all life will pass away. The worry about the fate of her paintings triggers Lili's anxiety about the meaning of life, and her questioning of why she still paints is in fact her questioning of why life still exists.

4. Communication Dilemmas

Lili vividly demonstrated the human mind dilemma: people are alienated from each other, there is a gap, it can not be successfully communicated; and people and the self are also divided between people who can not really recognize the self, and can not reach communication with the inner self.

In Lily's painting, Mrs. Ramsey is simply condensed into a purple triangle, which has a kind of stability and symbolizes the family structure consisting of mother, father and children, and Mrs.

Ramsey is the indispensable existence to maintain this family, and the stable triangle reflects Lily's affirmation of Mrs. Ramsey's gender role as the "angel in the room". The stable triangle reflects Lily's recognition of Mrs. Ramsey's gender role as the "angel of the house". In her painting, however, Mrs. Ramsey is a somber purple, a shadow, a bright color here that needs to be complemented by a shadow over there [4]. Lily's view of Mrs. Ramsey as a shadow and a foil reflects the female communication dilemma: Lily does not really understand the rich inner world of Mrs. Ramsey; on the one hand, she clings to Mrs. Ramsey like a child and tries to restrain her impulse to fall at Mrs. Ramsey's feet, on the other hand, she resents Mrs. Ramsey's controlling attitude and considers her capricious and tyrannical, and she sees Mrs. Ramsey as a "wrinkled glove", which is a kind of "shadow" that is not a shadow, but a shadow that needs a shadow over there. "wrinkled glove" and "twisted fingers". This is because under the influence of male-centeredness, women are not able to communicate effectively using a masculine discourse, and Lily senses that she sees Mrs. Ramsey differently from that perfect image, but she does not know what the difference is, and her paintings show her respect for Mrs. Ramsey, for example, through a shadow here and a bright color there. That was the form in which she expressed her homage, if, as she vaguely believed, a picture must pay homage [4]. But this homage is also vague and hazy, because she does not really understand the soul of Mrs. Ramsey hidden under the appearance of the angel in the room. Due to the prevalence of male-centeredness, women's understanding of women can only be through male eyes, which is extremely limited and biased [8]. The dilemma of communication between women leads to the fact that, in the view of Lily, as an independent woman, Mrs. Ramsey is only a victim of the male-dominated society, and only an "angel in the room" to be disciplined. In her paintings, Mrs. Ramsey is marginalized, vague and gloomy, and she is a companion in the male-centered society, a repressed and obscured existence.

Lily's repeated thoughts of putting the tree in the center of the picture during the party reflect Lily's avoidance of constructing communication and her loss of her true self. Communication is the pursuit of harmony under the premise of recognizing differences, which rejects the clarity of language and other symbols and connects different minds through multiple meanings [9]. In the exchange between Mrs. Ramsey and Banks, Lily wonders why Mrs. Ramsey should pity Banks, and she thinks that he is not pitiful at all. He has his work cut out for him [4]. At this point Lily remembers her painting and remembers moving the tree to the middle of the picture; and when she finally speaks to Mr. Taslay at Mrs. Ramsey's urging, she remembers moving the tree to the center of the picture, because to her the exchange with Mr. Taslay is just a polite, perfunctory gesture, and she will never understand him. He would never understand her. This is true of all human relationships, she thought, and especially of men and women (with the exception, perhaps, of Mr. Banks). No doubt about it [4]. This shows that Lily's thoughts and feelings are never fully integrated into the party, and the repeated thought of moving the tree to the center of the frame in the face of communication reflects Lily's absentmindedness, reveals Lily's resistance to communication, and highlights the depth of the divide between people. Lily's actions also represent her rebellion against the patriarchal society, as in those times, at least in certain circles and circumstances, the conventions of talk made speakers of men and listeners of women [10]. She does not want to be a passive listener, so she refuses to engage in conversations. What's more, emphasizing placing the tree at the center of the picture reflects Lily's rebellious spirit and strong self-awareness. Lily once questioned, "Why did her whole body bend like a corn stalk in the wind, needing great, quite painful effort to straighten up from this humble state?" [4] She refuses to be an oppressed, humble corn stalk in a patriarchal society; she wants to be a firmly standing, upright tree. Her fight against patriarchy and its ministering figure of the 'Angel in the House' will be long and full of pitfalls [11]. She aims to resist the patriarchal system and the traditional female role of the "Angel in the House". She does not want to fall into the trap of marriage like Mrs. Ramsey and become a hidden and marginalized existence in the male-dominated society, so she uses the tree as a reminder to keep her independence, to resist the discipline of the male-dominated society,

and to be the master of her life. However, Lily's way of pursuing self-independence is too extreme, she despises Mrs. Ramsey's pity and sympathy, resists her own sensual emotions, emphasizes the tree in the center of the picture in an overly rationalized way, and excludes all exchanges and emotional communication. Such an extreme way of manifesting the sense of independence obscures Lily's inner sensual self, and makes her a withdrawn and furious person, who structures herself with overly rational male standards. This prevents Lily from recognizing her true self and communicating effectively with her inner self.

5. Transcendence of Anxiety and Dilemmas

While raising various anxieties and dilemmas, the book also reveals the ways to transcend them: the way to transcend the anxiety of creation is to seek solace by venting one's emotions through art; the way to transcend the anxiety of freedom and the anxiety of existence is to realize that life will eventually pass away but the spirit will always live on; the way to break the dilemma of communication is to construct a bisexual and homogeneous persona, to replace the gap between human beings with harmony, and to discover and rediscover the complete self.

Whether it is Lily or Woolf herself, when facing the anxiety of creation, their choice is to seek solace in art. Lily conveys her feelings through painting, whether it is the purple shadow in the painting or the tree she wants to put in the middle of the picture, both of them express Lily's dissatisfaction with the others and marginalization of women in the male-dominated society, conveying her high self-consciousness. Woolf, on the other hand, vented her anxiety through literary creation. She once described her writing of *To the Lighthouse* as what psychoanalysts do to their patients, in which she expresses and explains her own feelings, releases her anxiety and depression, and calms down her inner complexity of emotions.

The way to transcend anxiety about freedom and existence is to realize that the spirit lives on: although Mrs. Ramsey has passed away, under the influence of her spirit, the relationship between Mr. Ramsey and the children improves, Lily succeeds in completing her painting, and the unfinished trip to the lighthouse ten years ago is finally accomplished, which shows that although Mrs. Ramsey has passed away, her spirit of fraternity and harmony still remains, and she still acts like a lighthouse for This shows that although Mrs. Ramsey has passed away, her spirit of love and harmony is still alive, and she is still like a lighthouse lighting the way for everyone. Lily realizes that life passes, but the spirit lives on. In this chaotic, ever-changing world, Lily is afraid of the freedom to paint and confused about the meaning of painting, but through Mrs. Ramsey's example, she realizes that life disappears, but the spirit does not. The freedom to paint gave her the space to project her thoughts and consciousness, as if a spring from within had filled the terribly intractable, pale space that stared back at her as she shaped the image on the canvas with greens and blues [4]. And her paintings preserve her thoughts, and therein lies the meaning of freedom, the meaning of painting - the realization of spiritual immortality.

In the face of the communication dilemma between man and man and man and self, Woolf proposes that the way to transcend lies in the construction of the beautiful personalities of bisexuality and homosexuality. Ten years later, Lily finally understood the soul of Mrs. Ramsey hidden in the room under the appearance of the angel - all things from the complexity of the contradictions into a simple harmony; she makes the anger, irritability of the mood of the ice; she puts together a variety of factors, and from the poor stupidity and loathing (she and Charles often argue and quarrel, very stupid, hate each other) distillation of the poor and disgusted. She put all sorts of factors together, and out of that poor stupidity and disgust (she and Chiles had often argued and quarrelled, very foolishly, and hated each other), she distilled something - this scene on the beach, for example, this moment of friendship and good feeling - that had survived all these years and was still intact [4]. Mrs. Ramsey's deepest quest is to bring order to the chaos of life, to build bridges between people in the spirit of

fraternity, and to bring everyone into a world of harmony and stability. After truly understanding Mrs. Ramsey's spiritual core, Lily finally let go of her anger and established communication with Mr. Ramsey. She realized that Mr. Ramsey's selfishness and hypocrisy were unconsciously formed under the influence of a patriarchal society, and no longer restrained herself from her own female sentimental feelings. She expressed her sympathy and understanding for Mr. Ramsey's predicament, and found a complete self that combines the two sexes and successfully completed her painting. She has succeeded in completing her painting, which is a vision that has haunted her for many years.

6. Conclusion

Lily's painting process is not only a part of her personal artistic creation, but also a mirror reflecting her social and psychological state. Through analyzing Lily's painting process, we can find that her anxiety in creation reflects the traumatic experience brought by the male discourse, and projects Woolf's own anxious mental state under the influence of society, public opinion and illness; her anxiety about freedom and existence reflects the tragic experience of existence brought by the dystopian world: the times are chaotic and irrational, making it difficult for people to obtain a sense of stability, the right to free choice makes people panic, all life will pass away, and the meaning of existence makes people confused. People are panicked, all life will pass away, and the meaning of existence is confusing; the purple shadow in her paintings and the tree to be placed in the center of the picture reflect the communication dilemma between people and themselves: under the influence of the patriarchal society, women are unable to reach effective communication with each other, and the overly extreme sense of independence has led to Lily's relationship with others being full of barriers, making it difficult for her to discover her true self. Lily's anxieties and dilemmas not only point to her own inner world, but also reflect the oppressive and restrictive atmosphere of society at that time, and Lily's anxieties become a universal symbol of the traumatic experiences suffered by women in the male-dominated social structure. At the same time, the book also reveals the ways to transcend anxiety and dilemmas: to vent spiritual anxiety through artistic creation, to liberate oneself from the constraints of reality through the pursuit of spiritual eternity, to transcend anxiety about freedom and existence, and to break the communication dilemmas between human beings and human beings and egos through the construction of a beautiful bisexual personality. This paper analyzes Lily's painting process from the perspective of the text, combining Woolf's life experience and the social reality after World War II, but this paper mainly focuses on the text level, lacking more in-depth research, and can be followed by more in-depth discussion with existentialism or other related schools of thought.

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