
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gazing and Being Gazed at: An Analysis of the Construction of Subjectivity Manifested in Lily Briscoe's Painting Process in *To the Lighthouse*

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| ABSTRACT

This paper employs the theory of gaze to examine the construction of subjectivity of Lily and Mrs. Ramsay through Lily's painting process in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily's artistic pursuit lies in capturing the complexity of Mrs. Ramsay's existence rather than merely reproducing her external image. In her initial attempt, Lily adopts a confrontational gaze as a means of resisting the intrusion of the patriarchal gaze; however, this approach inevitably distorts her representation of Mrs. Ramsay. Through her later reflection, Lily recognizes the limitations of this oppositional perspective and develops a more mature sense of subjectivity, enabling her to reconsider her previous interpretation of Mrs. Ramsay. By overcoming this distorted perception, she finally completes the central composition of her painting and gains a deeper understanding of Mrs. Ramsay's choices, presence, and existential significance. This paper argues that both the alienating gaze and the confrontational gaze ultimately reduce others to objects that serve the subject's own desires. Genuine understanding of oneself and others can only be achieved through transcending these modes of perception and acknowledging the freedom and autonomy of each individual.

| KEYWORDS

To the Lighthouse; Virginia Woolf; alienating gaze; confrontational gaze; transcending gaze

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1. Introduction

In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe is an independent female painter who adheres to her own artistic vision and seeks to capture a genuine representation of Mrs. Ramsay. For Mrs. Ramsay, the meaning of life appears to be defined through various social identities, such as being a selfless provider for others, a devoted mother, and an advocate of marriage. Yet beneath these external roles lies her subjectivity, which, in this thesis, different from the Lacanian and Sartrean conception that emphasizes the subject's formation through lack and the recognition of the Other, highlights the individual's active engagement with life through choice and self-empowerment. It refers not merely to an individual's position in social relations, but to the capacity to determine the meaning of one's own existence. Therefore, Mrs. Ramsay's existential truth consists of two interrelated dimensions: her "Presence" or the way she exists through her chosen relationships and practices, and her "Meaning", namely, the values and purposes she actively assigns to her life. Neither is predetermined by external identities.

Lily's painting is likewise a process through which she articulates her own self-agency. The attempt to represent Mrs. Ramsay is therefore not merely an artistic pursuit but also a process of self-discovery. By gradually recognizing and respecting Mrs. Ramsay's autonomous existence, Lily overcomes the limitations of her own perception and completes the construction of her own subjectivity through the completion of the painting.

In her pursuit of unraveling Mrs. Ramsay's inner truth, Lily encounters the influence of patriarchal ideology embodied by Mr. Tansley, Mr. Ramsay, and Mr. Bankes. Although these male characters represent different forms of patriarchal assumptions, they are not presented as entirely one-dimensional figures. Rather, each contains internal conflicts that complicate their relationship with such assumptions. Through interactions with these figures, Lily gradually moves beyond simplistic oppositions. Their complexity encourages her to develop a more inclusive understanding of human experience, which ultimately enables her to perceive Mrs. Ramsay beyond social stereotypes and successfully complete her painting.

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As recorded in *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Woolf expresses her aesthetic aspiration not to impose an external standard of beauty upon her characters, but to recognize them in their intrinsic and unmitigated wholeness (132). This artistic credo is unfolded along Lily's painting process. By gradually assembling the fragmented impressions of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily reconstructs the complexity and integrity of her existence. The subjectivity of Mrs. Ramsay is thus progressively revealed through Lily's evolving gaze, and the completion of the painting marks not only an artistic achievement but also the realization of a deeper understanding of choice and existence.

In existing scholarship, the subjectivity of Mrs. Ramsay has often been overlooked or marginalized. Many critics interpret her primarily as a representation of patriarchal ideology, emphasizing her embodiment of traditional feminine roles while neglecting her individual agency. Studies based on theories of alienation, in particular, tend to examine characters through predetermined theoretical frameworks, highlighting aspects that correspond to alienation while overlooking the contradictory and multifaceted dimensions of their identities. Such approaches may provide valuable critiques of patriarchal structures, yet they risk reducing complex characters to fixed ideological categories.

In Li Zheng's dissertation, Mrs. Ramsay is categorized as an "angel in the house" whose identity is shaped by patriarchal expectations and therefore being deprived of autonomy (2023). However, testifying to its inadequacy, the analytical content develops with fragmented texts that fit in its prescribed design, leaving attended abundant details in the book that tells a different story. One of the most evident signs is Lily's flow of consciousness in the last chapter that overthrows the former image of Mrs. Ramsay and betrays a certain amount of enlightenment. The significance of this final revelation has received insufficient critical attention. International scholarship has paid greater attention to the question of subjectivity in *To the Lighthouse*, particularly in relation to Lily's artistic development. In "Lily Briscoe's Vision: The Articulation of Silence," Crater examines Lily's construction of subjectivity through a Lacanian framework (1996). Although the study provides valuable insight into her psychological and artistic growth, it does not offer a comprehensive cross-examination of Mrs. Ramsay's and Lily's reciprocal interaction. Its absence is obliged for making the analysis of Lily a bit flat and detached with elusive abstractions. Similarly, Harrington's dissertation, "The Central Line down the Middle of *To the Lighthouse*," interprets the novel through the symbolic significance of Lily's final brushstroke and provides a broader understanding of the novel's structure (1980). Nevertheless, Mrs. Ramsay's inner complexity and the process through which it is revealed remain insufficiently explored. Therefore, further investigation is needed into how Lily's evolving gaze enables the reconstruction of Mrs. Ramsay's autonomous existence.

Moving beyond existing reductive interpretations, this thesis seeks to explore the multifaceted subjectivity of Lily and Mrs. Ramsay through an examination of various forms of gaze. By doing so, it aims to challenge the conventional portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay as merely an ossified image of oppression and to reveal the fluidity of her existence beyond patriarchal definitions.

To offer a more holistic understanding of Mrs. Ramsay, this study first examines Lily's artistic gaze in the process of painting, then incorporate the intrusion of alienating gazes from other characters, Lily's initial attempt to resist such objectifying perceptions, and the transformative perspectives that eventually enable her to move beyond confrontation. Through this gradual process of self-reflection and reorientation, she develops a more ethical mode of perceiving others. By breaking the shackle of her own gaze, she comes to both genuine self-recognition and Mrs. Ramsay's buried truth, thereby completing a representation that captures the latter's intrinsic wholeness.

2. Theoretical Framework of Analysis

Gaze has long been regarded as an important epistemological means. As a critical concept in literary and cultural studies, it refers not merely to the act of seeing but to a particular relationship between the observer and the observed through which meanings, identities, and power relations are produced. Unlike ordinary visual perception, gaze involves an interpretive position. The gazer does not simply receive information from the outside world but actively constructs an understanding according to specific desires, assumptions, and systems of knowledge. Therefore, while gaze enables individuals to approach and interpret others, it hardly can provide an objective representation.

The range of gaze is restricted by the spatial and physical conditions of vision, preventing a complete understanding of objects that exceed immediate visual presence. Fettered by inherent deficiency, this concept is inextricably correlated with social practices of fixing and stabilizing identities to understand them. By selecting certain characteristics and assigning meanings, gaze may transform a complex and changing subject into a fixed image. In this process, the observed risks losing its own agency and becoming defined through external interpretations. Since individuals inevitably understand themselves through interactions with others and existing symbolic systems, self-perception remains susceptible to external recognition.

These limitations reveal the ambivalent nature of gaze. On the one hand, gaze is indispensable for human beings to establish relationships with others and construct understanding. On the other hand, gaze is often concomitant with the possibility of reduction, distortion, and alienation. Genuine understanding requires not only an awareness of the limitations of gaze but also a reconsideration of how the self perceives and defines the Other. When such limitations remain unnoticed, gaze may cease to function as a means of understanding and instead become a mechanism of manipulation. It is precisely this alienating potential of gaze that has been extensively examined in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of subject formation.

For Lacan, subjectivity does not emerge as an independent and unified entity but is constituted through the subject's relationship with images, language, and the Other. The formation of subjectivity therefore involves a fundamental process of

alienation, as the subject comes to understand itself through external systems of representation. This account of subject formation can be examined through the three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. These registers do not refer to chronological stages of psychological development alone but represent different dimensions of human experience and subjectivity.

In Lacan's theory, the Imaginary is associated with the formation of the ego through identification with images. Before entering the mirror stage, the infant experiences a state of bodily fragmentation and lacks a stable awareness of itself as an independent subject. This stage marks a transformation in which the infant encounters its reflection and identifies with the seemingly unified image in the mirror. This recognition provides the infant with an illusion of bodily coherence and completeness, despite the fact that the image is only a skewed perception (Glowinski et al. 115). As Lacan argues, this identification constitutes a form of misrecognition, because the subject mistakes an external representation for its own true identity (Sarup 102). And this external counterpart through which the subject attempts to define and recognize itself is defined as the "little other" (*petit autre*) (Glowinski et al. 88), which also includes the image produced by others' gaze. This dependent pattern of subject formation does not end with the mirror stage but continues to operate within the Symbolic order, where the subject's identity is further shaped by language, social structures, and cultural meanings.

The Symbolic order does not provide a transparent representation of the signified. Interdependence of signifier makes meaning along the encoding chain partial and unstable. It mediates human experience through systems of signification that can never fully encompass the Real (Evans 159). The Real, in Lacanian theory, does not refer to ordinary empirical reality but to that which escapes symbolic representation. It indicates the limits of language, revealing the impossibility of achieving a complete correspondence between existence and its symbolic representation. Within this symbolic structure, the subject encounters what Lacan terms the "big Other" (*Autre*), which refers not to a particular individual but to the symbolic locus from which meaning, social norms, and systems of recognition emerge. As the embodiment of language, culture, and social conventions, the big Other provides the framework through which the subject enters communication and understands itself within a shared symbolic world. However, because subjectivity can only be articulated through this external system of meanings, the subject is inevitably dependent on the Other for recognition and identity formation. In this sense, the big Other functions both as a necessary condition for the construction of subjectivity and as a source of alienation, since the subject's self-understanding is always mediated by external symbolic structures rather than originating from a completely autonomous self (Du 165).

Although the subject is inevitably shaped by the Symbolic order, such dependence does not completely determine the subject's existence. In Lacanian theory, because self-understanding is coded by systems of representation, the subject remains a divided subject whose sense of self is constantly compromised. But this confinement also permits a maneuvering space of liberty in self-deconstruction. Once individuals become aware of the limitation of this coding system, they may begin to question imposed meanings and seek possibilities beyond fixed definitions. Therefore, the recognition of alienation does not merely result in passive acceptance. It may also become the starting point for resistance and the pursuit of a more autonomous form of subjectivity.

However, resistance against alienation contains its own limitations. This limitation can be further illuminated through Sartre's existential analysis of the "looking." In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that the encounter with the Other's gaze generates a fundamental conflict between the subject's experience of freedom and the objectifying power of the Other. When an individual becomes aware of being seen, he or she experiences the self as an object within the consciousness of another. This experience threatens the subject's sense of autonomy, yet it also reveals the unavoidable presence of others in the construction of self-consciousness. In response, the subject may attempt to regain freedom by asserting his or her own gaze against the Other's (270-75). However, such a counter-gaze does not necessarily overcome objectification. Drawing upon Sartre's analysis of the conflict between freedom and objectification, this study refers to such a mode of perception as the confrontational gaze. The subject escapes being defined by the Other only by assuming the position of the gazer. By reducing the Other to a fixed object of interpretation, the confrontational gaze paradoxically reproduce the same logic that originally caused alienation. Therefore, although it represents an important movement away from passive acceptance, it cannot ultimately achieve a relationship based on mutual recognition.

Therefore, a more mature form of subjectivity requires moving beyond both passive submission to external gazes and oppositional resistance against them. This study conceptualizes such a possibility as a transcending gaze, which does not reduce the Other to a fixed identity determined by coded expectations, but recognizes the Other as a subject whose existence cannot be fully defined. Such a gaze acknowledges the deficiency of symbolic representations and allows space for the Other's self-definition. By allowing fluid openness beyond grasp, the gazer does not abandon understanding but approaches the Other through a more receptive mode of recognition. In this way, subject is less enslaved by dependence on external validation or domination over others through an acceptance of epistemological humility. And the relationship between self and Other moves beyond objectification and opposition toward mutual recognition. Only through acknowledging the autonomy (though limited) and irreducible complexity of the Other can individuals override alienating interpretations and achieve a more authentic construction of subjectivity.

3. Lily Briscoe's Painting Process

In Part One of the novel, during Lily's stay with the Ramsays, she attempts to portray Mrs Ramsay through painting. In this initial artistic endeavor, Lily's emerging sense of subjectivity is constrained by the alienating gaze of patriarchy, which operates through the symbolic authority of the "big Other" and is embodied by Mrs Tansley's repeated assertion that a woman cannot be an artist. In response to this intrusion, Lily attempts to resist patriarchal definitions by adopting a confrontational gaze. However, since the traits of caring and self-sacrificing are encoded as classical signs of traditional women in misogynistic order, Mrs. Ramsay's image is interpreted by Lily as an exposure of servitude. Influenced by this oppositional perspective, Lily connects Mrs Ramsay's visible presence with her existential meaning by placing a tree at the center of the painting. Yet, rather than revealing Mrs Ramsay's own subjectivity, this artistic choice primarily reflects Lily's own struggle for self-definition at the stage of confrontational gaze. The tree functions as an expression of Lily's subjective resistance rather than an authentic representation of Mrs Ramsay's inner complexity. Therefore, this first attempt remains incomplete, as Lily's interpretation continues to be shaped by her own desire to oppose the ideological framework she seeks to escape.

Part Two of the novel is relatively brief, focusing primarily on delineations of the abandoned house and surrounding landscape, without directly presenting Lily's artistic process. Her painting continues to develop in Part Three, where she undertakes a second attempt after an interval of ten years.

In Part Three, Lily gradually recognizes the limitations of her confrontational gaze and comes to understand that mature subjectivity cannot be established through the negation of others. Instead, it requires the recognition of mutual freedom and the acceptance of each individual's capacity to define his or her own existence. This realization enables Lily to reconsider the limitations of her earlier interpretation and to perceive Mrs. Ramsay beyond the restrictive categories imposed by either patriarchal expectations or her own resistant perspective. Through retrieving in reminiscence Mrs. Ramsay's choices, values, and relationships with others, Lily begins to recognize that Mrs Ramsay's life is not merely an embodiment of patriarchal submission but also a self-determined construction of meaning within her own circumstances. Furthermore, her interactions with other male characters also reveal the inadequacy of confrontational assertion, as their complexity challenges the simplified images of them as straitlaced chauvinistic surrogates.

After this spiritual pilgrimage, Lily reaches a more mature artistic vision. She transcends both the alienating patriarchal gaze and the confrontational gaze through which she initially resisted oppression. Mrs. Ramsay is no longer viewed as a passive recipient of patriarchal ideology or as an extension of Mr Ramsay's authority, but a subject capable of constructing her own meaning. Through this transformation of perception, Lily achieves a more authentic representation of Mrs. Ramsay's subjectivity in her painting. Finally, at the decisive moment when she completes the final stroke on the canvas, Lily's artistic fulfillment coincides with her achievement of a mature understanding of self and Other.

3.1 Lily Briscoe's Painting Principles

The ultimate aim of Lily's painting is not to reproduce the external appearance of Mrs. Ramsay but to apprehend her true self, an arduous task that involves a holistic understanding of her subjectivity to unravel the mystery within. To achieve this aim, Lily develops two related yet distinct principles of representation, one concerning the depiction of objective forms and the other concerning the representation of human consciousness.

In Part One, Lily's principle of representing external forms is introduced through her treatment of jacmanna. "She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white"(Woolf 19). Her artistic position is presented in contrast with that of Mr. Paunceforte, whose aesthetic preference emphasizes an idealized and artificial vision of nature "to see everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent" (19).

Different from Mr. Paunceforte's tendency to tamper with visible forms, Lily insists on preserving the immediate qualities through which things present themselves. She refuses to alter the vividness of color or impose an aesthetic harmony derived from the painter's subjective preference. For Lily, artistic representation should begin with an attentive encounter with the existence of the object rather than with the projection of preconceived ideals.

However, when the object of representation changes from a natural form to a human subject, Lily recognizes that faithful representation requires a further transformation. Unlike external forms, human existence is shaped by consciousness and dimensions that remain inaccessible to purely visual observation. Therefore, representing Mrs Ramsay requires not only fidelity to what is seen but also an awareness of what exceeds visibility. Lily's reflection on her vision of Mrs. Ramsay reveals this distinction. When Paunceforte's painting is still touched by "faded color" and "etherealized shape" with contrived feminine beauty, Lily conceives a contrastive image of vigor. "She saw the color burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral" (46). In Paunceforte's aesthetic approach, idealized stillness dominates both his treatment of physical things and human figures. His painting only preserves qualities that conform to an established ideal of beauty, transforming the living presence of the individual into a refined but static image. Lily's vision of Mrs. Ramsay departs from this aesthetic underplay. The image of "burning" suggests a dynamic and active existence, while the "framework of steel" implies a solid core that supports the myriad presence of grace. Lily refuses to reduce Mrs. Ramsay to a passive scene that entertains social conventions. Instead, she is embraced as a vivacious subject capable of self-agency in the extensive span of living.

This pursuit of generative subjectivity becomes more evident when Lily attempts to penetrate into the inner spirit of Mrs. Ramsay. She imagines that within Mrs. Ramsay's mind stand tablets engraved with inscriptions. These carved words are assembled like manuals that articulate her existence, suggesting that if one could decipher them, one might gain access to the hidden treasures buried within the tomb. Yet what Lily seeks is not such a decipherable essence: it is "not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that would be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge" (48). Lily's gaze upon Mrs. Ramsay fundamentally differs from the patriarchal gaze embodied by male characters, which approaches her through an established symbolic order comparable to the inscriptions on the tablets. Male gazers tend to reduce Mrs. Ramsay to an object that serves their own emotional or social needs. Mr. Ramsay, for instance, repeatedly directs his sorrowful gaze toward his wife, seeking her sympathy and reassurance to alleviate his anxieties. By contrast, Lily's gaze does not attempt to appropriate Mrs. Ramsay as a means of fulfilling personal desires. Instead, it strives to encounter Mrs. Ramsay for her own sake. However, despite this aspiration, Lily's painting practice remains inevitably shaped by her own subjective and resistant stance. In order to achieve an understanding beyond preconceived assumptions, Lily must first become aware of the limitations embedded in her own artistic gaze. Only through a critical reflection on her own position as an observer can she gradually move toward a more genuine recognition of Mrs. Ramsay's subjectivity.

Though determined to pursue the revelation of unadulterated reality, the journey of her painting remains haunted by the persistent presence of the alienating gaze. Clinging to the fragments of Mrs. Ramsay's image preserved in her memory, Lily cannot ignore the distance between her perception and the reality she seeks to capture. She recognizes that what remains within her consciousness is only an incomplete vision, one that inevitably leaves certain aspects of Mrs. Ramsay's existence beyond the reach of her gaze and allows distorted interpretations to intrude upon her artistic creation. This awareness explains why Lily describes the transition from "conception to work" as "dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child" (19). The process of painting becomes a precarious journey in which she must constantly guard against the possibility of losing herself in her own assumptions. Unable to fully trust the reliability of her own vision, Lily is repeatedly overwhelmed by uncertainty regarding whether she has truly perceived the object before her. Her struggle is manifested in her desperate insistence "against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: 'But this is what I see; this is what I see'" (19). The repetition reveals not confidence but anxiety, suggesting that Lily's artistic vision is accompanied by a persistent fear of misrecognition. The very act of seeing therefore becomes an unstable negotiation between revelation and distortion. It gradually develops into a profound sense of insufficiency. The more she questions with self-doubt, the more she nourishes this learned anxiety. Her longing for Mrs. Ramsay is therefore accompanied by an almost childlike desire to "fling herself at Mrs. Ramsay's knee" (46). Mrs. Ramsay represents, in Lily's imagination, an idealized maternal presence that promises a state of emotional wholeness, a relationship without the intrusion of separation or lack. Yet such a complete unity remains unattainable, only intensifying spiritual interrogation of "her own inadequacy, her insignificance" (19).

This sense is further reinforced by the pressure of the surrounding gaze shaped by patriarchal evaluation. While painting, she remains constantly aware of the possibility that her work may be exposed to external scrutiny: "she kept a feeler on her surroundings lest someone should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at" (Woolf 18). Even her special trust in Mr. Bankes cannot alleviate her from this anxiety. When he approaches to examine her painting, Lily instinctively recoils "like a dog who sees a hand raised to strike it" (49), revealing how deeply the threatening power of the alienating gaze has been internalized. Lily is repeatedly haunted by the prediction that her painting "would never be seen" (Woolf 46), or that "it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa" (Woolf 168). More significantly, Mr. Tansley's assertion that "Women can't paint, women can't write" (46) continues to ruffle within Lily's consciousness, transforming patriarchal arrogance into a moral stigma. Before she can genuinely encounter Mrs. Ramsay with unadulterated lucidity, Lily must first confront these invisible forces that have skewed her way of seeing.

3.2 First Painting Experiment with Confrontational Gaze

Lily's first experiment of painting unfolds as she observes Mrs. Ramsay sitting by the window, reading a story to James. Within this experiment, the unresolved tension between the triangular shade, the hedge, and the absent center reveals the fundamental difficulty of approaching Mrs. Ramsay's subjectivity. The canvas contains two discernible masses: on one side stands the triangular purple shade formed by Mrs. Ramsay and James, while on the other stretches the hedge. These two elements suggest two dimensions of Mrs. Ramsay's existence that Lily attempts to bring together: her visible presence in the world and the deeper significance of her life. Yet the connection between them remains incomplete, for the element capable of mediating between presence and meaning, namely Mrs. Ramsay's own subjectivity, has not been genuinely perceived. Its absence leaves the two masses sprawling haphazardly under misinterpretation.

The triangular shade first emerges from Lily's immediate visual impression. When a friend questions the origin of this unusual form, Lily explains simply that "it was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James" (50). Her decision appears almost instinctive. "In that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness" (50). The darkness she introduces into the painting is not merely a formal choice of composition but also reveals the emotional and interpretive framework through which she approaches

Mrs. Ramsay. Within Lily's first vision, Mrs Ramsay's presence is inseparable from James, whose position as her son inevitably invokes the social expectations attached to motherhood and femininity. Under the influence of confrontational gaze, Lily interprets the relationship between mother and son primarily through the lens of patriarchal constraint. The triangular form therefore becomes burdened with an implication of confinement, as if Mrs Ramsay's tenderness and devotion necessarily signify the loss of individuality. In this initial understanding, maternal care appears incompatible with autonomous existence. Lily's difficulty lies precisely in the dilemma that when she attempts to rescue Mrs. Ramsay from restrictive definitions of womanhood, she is also creating another fixed image that denies Mrs Ramsay's experience. This limitation becomes clearer when contrasted with the later scene in which Lily observes Mrs. Ramsay sitting alone on the rock and writing. In the absence of James, Lily suddenly recognizes a different dimension of Mrs. Ramsay, one marked by independence and inwardness. The possibility that Mrs. Ramsay could exist beyond her maternal role briefly becomes visible to her. Yet the return of James immediately alters Lily's perception of the scene. "It must have altered the design a good deal when she was sitting on the step with James. There must have been a shadow" (150). The "shadow" here reveals less about James's actual influence than about Lily's own interpretive framework. Because motherhood is associated with pliancy, she cannot yet imagine that care and selfhood might coexist within the same person.

A similar limitation detains Lily from fully understanding the connotation of the hedge. Throughout the novel, the hedge repeatedly appears at moments when characters confront questions of time, mortality, and existence. Its first appearance occurs through "that break in the thick hedge... between which the blue waters of the bay looked bluer than ever" (20). The opening in the hedge does not merely frame a landscape but creates a passage between the enclosed domestic space and the vastness of the sea, suggesting the relationship between individual life and the larger expanse of time. Later, when Mr. Ramsay gazes at the hedge, his reflection turns toward the fragility of personal achievement. "His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years. And what are two thousand years" (Woolf 34). When he encounters the hedge again, it evokes another awareness of limitation and mortality. "He slipped, seeing before him that hedge which had over and over again rounded some pause, signified some conclusion... seeing again the urns" (40). Across these moments, the hedge becomes a token of the human attempt to locate meaning within the conditions of time and finitude.

Yet Lily's first gaze cannot fully penetrate this intricacy of Mrs. Ramsay's existence. Domestic devotion is received as evidence of self-erasure rather than as a possible expression of her own will and values. Consequently, although Lily senses that the hedge contains a profound significance, she cannot decipher its connection with Mrs. Ramsay. The unresolved quality of the image remains a tantalizing puzzle, compelling her to resume this experiment years later because something in the mass of the hedge "had tied a knot in her mind... she found herself painting that picture... and untying the knot" (Woolf 148). In the second painting experiment, the hedge is observed from a transformed position of perception. Rather than imposing a predetermined interpretation upon Mrs. Ramsay, Lily attempts to reserve redundant speculations and allow Mrs. Ramsay to articulate for her own right. "She looked at the hedge, the step, the wall. It was all Mrs. Ramsay's doing" (141). The crucial word "doing" shifts the focus from the external image of Mrs. Ramsay to her capacity for action and creation, signifying the indispensable importance of subjectivity in deciphering "what did the hedge mean to her" (184).

The importance of this later realization also illuminates the failure of the first painting experiment. In the earlier composition, Lily is consistently harrowed by the problem of how to connect the triangular mass with the hedge by finding the right essence to fill the center, the marrow of artistic integrity per se. But this vacancy does not remain empty. Loaded with consumptive assertions, it is filled not by an absence of artistic ability, but by the premature emergence of Lily's own subjectivity. Unable to relate with Mrs. Ramsay, Lily unconsciously turns toward herself and places the tree at the center of the composition. It stands as a visible manifestation of Lily's attempt to establish her own independent position, but it also betrays the limitations of confrontation through which that artistic self is formed.

The symbolic significance of the tree can be traced to Mr Ramsay's recitation. "And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be are full of trees and changing leaves" (102). In this image, the tree and the leaves together suggest two relevant aspects of being. The falling and changing leaves evoke the endless transformations through which life unfolds, as individuals move through different experiences, relationships, and temporal moments. Yet beneath these fluctuations stands the tree itself, which remains rooted and enduring. It does not signify a fixed identity untouched by change, but rather an inner source of vitality that enables change to occur without the loss of coherence. The tree therefore suggests a form of subjectivity grounded in self-contained agency, a presence that does not depend upon external confirmation for its existence. Faced with the pressure of the alienating gaze and the threat of being defined by others, Lily instinctively turns toward the image of the tree as a way to secure a stable center for herself. Moving the tree toward the middle of the canvas becomes an attempt to establish an autonomous point of origin from which she can see and create. Nonetheless, the tension of this gesture lies in the displacement of the tree's artistic function. Instead of mediating between Mrs. Ramsay's presence and the existential meaning suggested by the hedge, it becomes a projection of Lily's own struggle for artistic autonomy.

This distortion is further revealed in Lily's interpretation of Mrs. Ramsay's relationship with others. When recalling Mrs. Ramsay's attempt to relieve Mr. Bankes's discomfort, Lily does not perceive the gesture as an expression of genuine care, but instead interprets it as evidence that Mrs. Ramsay derives her sense of worth from being needed by others. In doing so, Lily reduces the complexity of such care to a sign of dependence and self-effacement. Qualities traditionally associated with feminine

relationality are thus viewed exclusively through the framework of patriarchal constraint, leaving no space for the possibility that they may also constitute an active expression of selfhood. This same oppositional logic shapes Lily's attempt to affirm her own identity through artistic work. When she realizes that she "had her work" (Woolf 79), the recognition immediately translates into a visual decision: "In a flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid the awkward space" (Woolf 79). The simultaneity between claiming her work and relocating the tree is crucial. The tree's movement toward the center registers the pictorial enactment of Lily's urgent desire to secure solid self-confirmation. Descriptive words like "awkward space" she attempts to eliminate suggest an on-going tension inside. Its emptiness emerges because she cannot reconcile her own ideal of autonomous creation with the existence of another form of subjectivity embodied by Mrs Ramsay. Thus, while artistic work provides Lily with a necessary source of self-affirmation against external judgment, the very mechanism through which she protects herself also restricts her ability to encounter others beyond the categories she has established.

This limitation becomes more pronounced in her confrontation with Mr. Tansley's assertion that women can't paint and write. Although Lily discerns the self-serving nature of his claim, "since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him" (80), her response remains shaped by the same confrontational structure she seeks to resist. "There's my painting; I must move the tree to the middle; that matters, nothing else" (80). The tree once again becomes the visual center through which Lily asserts her position against the alienating gaze. Her later debasement of Tansley is undoubtedly a necessary rejection of patriarchal imposition, but it also reveals the incompleteness of her emerging subjectivity. In order to maintain dignity, she reduces Tansley as a rigid misogynist against whom she defines herself. The same binary logic shapes her understanding of Mrs. Ramsay's emotional responsiveness. This dynamic reaches its culmination when Lily refuses to offer Tansley the tenderness requested by Mrs. Ramsay. To her, such an act would mean surrendering her own independence and reproducing the very submission she rejects. She therefore insists on maintaining a distance between herself and Tansley. "She would never know him. He would never know her... and she remembered that next morning she would move the tree further towards the middle" (86). The recurring image of the tree demonstrates how closely her artistic choice is tied to her struggle for self-definition. However, the center she creates remains a defensive position rather than a space of genuine encounter. Her first experiment fails not because she lacks the capacity for perception, but because her gaze remains confined by the same structure of the Symbolic order that she devotes to overcome. Only by moving beyond confrontation can she rediscover a way of seeing in which her own autonomy and Mrs Ramsay's Subjectivity are no longer mutually exclusive.

3.3 Second Painting Experiment with Transcending Gaze

As demonstrated in Lily's first painting experiment, the tree moved to the center does not promise an achieved artistic vision, but project her own self-awareness. Although it prepares her to resist the alienating gaze imposed by patriarchal structures, this liberation is still predicated on confrontational framework. The completion of her artistic quest therefore requires a further transformation, through which Lily must move beyond the confrontational gaze and develop a more inclusive understanding of both herself and others.

Ten years after Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily returns to her unfinished painting in the final section of the novel, once again confronting the absence that had troubled her earlier attempt. She is faced with "this formidable ancient enemy of hers, this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her" (149). What unravels in front of her is not simply the difficulty of completing a painting, but the unfathomable distance between her perception and the reality she seeks to grasp. The "other thing" that eludes her precisely alludes to the living complexity of Mrs. Ramsay's existence that lures behind the veneer of compliance. Before untangling this secret, Lily must first recognize how her own vision has been shaped by the very conflicts she tries to escape.

The persistence of this mental plague is far from being purged. "Can't paint, can't write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously considering what her plan of attack should be" (149). The repetitive whisper reveals a haunting cycle in which alienating denouncements continue to resurface and overwhelm her artistic confidence. Faced with recurring anxiety, she instinctively seeks another defensive act, as suggested by the combative metaphor of a "plan of attack." But this time, rather than getting mired in the feud of unrelenting opposition, Lily proffers a different response. The turning point arrives when Lily recalls the scene on the beach shared by herself, Tansley, and Mrs. Ramsay. Looking back across the span of ten years, she gradually apprehends the quiet yet profound wisdom Mrs. Ramsay's gaze conveys. It resolves "everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags... and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite... this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking which survived, after all these years, complete, so that she dipped into it to refashion her memory of him" (151). What distinguishes Mrs. Ramsay's way of seeing is not that it denies conflict, but that it refuses to allow accumulated resentment to become the final truth of a person. Her gaze loosens the rigid judgments and systems through which individuals are habitually understood and evaluated, enabling human relationships to recover their complexity and fluidity. Under this gaze, Lily and Tansley are no longer confined to the antagonistic roles they have unconsciously assigned to each other. Lily begins to recognize that her earlier perception of Tansley as merely an agent of oppression was itself a partial conclusion produced by her defensive consciousness. His presumptuous declaration does reveal

the influence of patriarchal ideology, yet it does not exhaust the complexity of his character. Memory exposes that he is also willing to encourage his younger sister's education. What she had interpreted as the expression of an essential hostility is, in fact, entangled with the social expectations that shape both masculine authority and feminine limitation. The significance of this realization lies in Lily's discovery that genuine understanding does not require the elimination of difference. Her earlier gaze was shaped by the belief that she had to choose between autonomy and relationship, independence and tenderness. Mrs. Ramsay's presence reveals another possibility, a form of existence where the self does not need to defend its boundaries by resisting others. In this non-attached perception, the ability to let go of rigid distinctions allows each person to appear in the fullness of their changing reality. Under this new understanding, both Lily and Tansley are released from the narrow definitions through which they had previously construct each other. It challenges Lily's former assumption that interpersonal relationships are inevitably governed by concealment and mutual misunderstanding. She finally confesses that "her own idea of him was grotesque" (184), realizing that "half one's notions of other people were, after all, grotesque. They served private purposes of one's own" (184).

This recognition catalyzes Lily's departure from the confrontational gaze. She comes to understand that perception is never a neutral reflection of reality, but is shaped by personal desires, fears, and conflicts. By confronting the caricatures generated by her own vision, Lily develops a more mature understanding of subjectivity, one that does not require the rejection or simplification of others in order to affirm itself. Her liberation therefore lies not in achieving complete withdrawal, but in gaining the freedom to encounter another existence without transforming it into an extension of her own struggles. Only through this transformation can she return to Mrs. Ramsay and resume the unfinished painting with a vision capable of revealing, rather than replacing, the complexity of another life.

However, this transformation does not mean that the traces of earlier ways of gaze can be immediately erased. Lily must transcend the interpretive frameworks that have diversely mediated her perception of Mrs. Ramsay and examine how each has concealed different expressions of her being. These frameworks take the form of three distinct gazes: the confrontational gaze through which Lily herself once approached Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Bankes's aestheticizing gaze, and Mr. Ramsay's manipulating gaze. While the first two primarily reshape Mrs. Ramsay through externally imposed meanings, the third reaches further into the very circumstances that condition her experience of selfhood.

The first obstruction Lily must reconsider is her own confrontational gaze. Her resistance to patriarchal structures has led her to regard marriage not as a possible form of human connection, but primarily as a mechanism through which female freedom is compromised. Within this framework, Mrs. Ramsay's affirmation of marriage inevitably appeals as an unconscious accommodation to patriarchal values. Lily therefore turns to the failed marriage of Paul and Minta as evidence against Mrs. Ramsay's belief, attempting to confirm that marital relationships inevitably result in disappointment, dependence, and loss of individuality. Through the lens of oppression, Mrs. Ramsay's generosity is also mistaken for a desire for control. Habitual confrontational gaze prevents her from recognizing that Mrs. Ramsay's attentiveness does not necessarily originate from dependence, but may also express a deliberate and self-possessed way of engaging with others.

The second lure Lily must overcome originates from Mr. Bankes's aestheticizing gaze. Although his scientific rationality appears to distance him from conventional prejudice, his perception of Mrs. Ramsay remains shaped by an idealized conception of femininity. Within his vision, she is elevated into an image of grace and beauty with downcast eyes, a figure whose charm lies precisely in her contrived obedience to stereotypical feminine virtues. However, Lily gradually recognizes that this idealization is no less restrictive than overt judgment, because it smooths away the contradictions and complexities that constitute Mrs. Ramsay's actual existence. As Woolf writes, "One forgot... some queer distortion... which made the face unrecognizable for a moment... It was simpler to smooth that all out under the cover of beauty" (166). The significance of this passage lies in the paradox of idealization. What appears to preserve Mrs. Ramsay's beauty simultaneously conceals the very irregularities through which her individuality becomes visible. Under Bankes's gaze, she is not rejected or diminished, but she is nonetheless enclosed within an image that allows admiration while denying full recognition of her inner life.

The final and most intricate gaze Lily must tackle with is Mr. Ramsay's manipulating gaze. Unlike Lily's and Bankes's interpretations, Mr. Ramsay's gaze operates within the intimate fabric of their shared life and influences the very conditions under which Mrs. Ramsay negotiates her own existence. His continual demand for reassurance places upon her the burden of emotional maintenance, raising the troubling possibility that her identity has been gradually absorbed into the role of the devoted wife and supporter. This creates the most difficult question for Lily: whether Mrs. Ramsay's apparent devotion represents a conscious and meaningful mode of existence, or whether it has been gradually shaped by the demands imposed upon her by the role of caretaker.

To resolve this uncertainty, Lily returns to her memories of Mrs. Ramsay, searching not for evidence of resistance in the conventional sense, but for moments in which her own will, judgment, and creative force become perceptible. Through these scattered recollections, Lily begins to understand that Mrs. Ramsay's inner life cannot be measured by the degree to which she separates herself from others. Nor can her relational commitments be simply equated with self-erasure. Rather, her individuality emerges through the distinctive manner in which she responds to, shapes, and gives meaning to the world around her. By recovering these subtle expressions of agency, Lily finally moves beyond the competing images that have confined Mrs. Ramsay and approaches the depth of a life that cannot be contained by any single interpretation.

Within this renewed awareness, Lily circles back to the image of the hedge that had long resisted her understanding. It is no longer an isolated symbol awaiting interpretation, but a gateway to the correlation between her life orientation and controversial presence. This enlightenment has altered Lily's vision, she is met by a scene of Mrs. Ramsay "putting her wreath to her forehead and going unquestioningly with her companion, a shadow, across the field" (169). The return of the shadow recalls the earlier image of Mrs. Ramsay and James, yet the scene is no longer governed by the same implications. Previously, it is considered to denote the weight of patriarchal expectation and the disappearance of female individuality beneath domestic obligations. Here, however, James is no longer present. Mrs. Ramsay appears not as a figure compelled by external demands, but as one who consciously embraces the role she assumes and proceeds within the path she has chosen. The gesture of placing the wreath and proceeding "unquestioningly" reveals not resignation to an imposed role, but a quiet confidence in her own orientation toward life. Lily begins to learn that Mrs. Ramsay's devotion does not originate from a lack of selfhood, but from a deeply rooted assurance toward connection and responsibility. This moment provides Lily with the first authentic glimpse of the inner coherence she has long attempted to capture, an insight that will ultimately crystallize in the final stroke of her painting.

Looking back on her earlier judgments, she recognizes that her suspicion toward Mrs. Ramsay's generosity was shaped less by Mrs. Ramsay's actual intentions than by her own inability to share such kind inclination. This altruism drives Mrs. Ramsay to send help to the poor everyday. But it also unsettles Lily's belief that individuality must be protected through distance, callousness, and self-sufficiency. By dismissing such generosity as self-serving, Lily was not uncovering Mrs. Ramsay's hidden desire, but defending her own detachment from the suffering and vulnerability of others. Through this dissection of her psychological manoeuvre, Lily comes to shed her abusive preconceptions in self-obsession. She comes to understand that for Mrs. Ramsay, existence is inseparable from responsiveness to others. The world appears to her as a place marked by "eternal problems: suffering; death; the poor" (56), and her impulse is not to escape these burdens, but to alleviate them through acts of care and connection. Attention to others does not entail the loss of self. Rather, this alternative mode of fulfillment constructs her own way of attributing meaning to this world.

Beyond Mrs. Ramsay's philanthropic commitments, Lily is also troubled by other dominant aspects of her life as a wife, a mother, and an advocate of marriage. Through another shard of reminiscence, Lily revisits this question that whether Mrs. Ramsay's devotion to domestic life was merely the consequence of accommodation to Mr. Ramsay's authority, or whether it arose from a purpose she consciously embraced. The scene involving the earwig in the milk offers Lily a crucial insight into the nature of their relationship. When Mr. Ramsay discovers the insect in the cup prepared by his younger daughter, he reacts with immediate fury, throwing the plate out of the window and withdrawing in anger. His outburst threatens the fragile harmony of the household, yet Mrs. Ramsay does not immediately intervene to restore his emotional equilibrium. She remains silent until he reflects on himself and returns with a softened manner, approaching her for mercy "like a famished wolfhound" (186). Only after this change does she walk with him among the pear trees, allowing reconciliation to occur. Her silence in this moment is significant, for it demonstrates that her role as a source of comfort does not arise from unquestioning compliance. Her capacity to offer comfort is accompanied by her own moral judgment, and her care emerges not from the abandonment of self, but from a conscious commitment to sustaining the emotional bonds that give meaning to human relationships. The same quality is revealed in her response to the daughter. When they return to dinner, the child remains troubled by the incident, but Mrs. Ramsay quietly restores her sense of security, "assuring her that everything was well" (187). Through these intertwined moments of resistance and consolation, Lily begins to perceive the coherence behind Mrs. Ramsay's actions. For Mrs. Ramsay, motherhood and marriage are not merely inherited obligations, but ways through which she participates in the creation of meaning. In her desire to preserve harmony, she wishes to shield those around her from the loneliness and harshness that accompany human existence. Even her insistence on the value of marriage emerges from this same impulse. When she hopes that her children and others may avoid "being wretched alone in dreary places" (56), she is not simply endorsing a social institution, but expressing her faith in the possibility of companionship as a source of comfort and fulfillment. Having struggled through her own limitations of perception, Lily finally apprehends the principle that unites Mrs. Ramsay's many acts of care. Her life is not defined by what she gives up for others, but by the meaning she actively creates through her connection to them.

In the second painting, Lily finally arrives at an image of Mrs. Ramsay that is no longer overshadowed by alienating or confrontational preoccupations. She sees Mrs. Ramsay sitting alone by the window, her figure casting a shadow upon the steps in holistic integrity. It becomes the trace of a self-directed life shaped by her own values and choices. Mrs. Ramsay is revived not as an emblem of social limitation, but as a person who constitutes a meaningful expression of her own will. At this moment of recognition, "she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done... Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (194). The long-sought center is finally retrieved. Although the final stroke is merely a line connecting the triangular mass on one side with the hedge on the other, it establishes the vital relation between Mrs. Ramsay's visible presence and the larger meaning that the hedge evokes. What had previously remained fragmented and disconnected is brought into a coherent whole, not because Lily has reduced Mrs. Ramsay to a single defining image, but because she has learned to perceive the meaning in Mrs. Ramsay's own terms. The completion of the painting therefore marks more than the achievement of an artistic form. In transcending internalized order of objectification, Lily redefines the very foundation of her own subjectivity. Relinquishing the inertia to reduce others into reflections of her own desires, she embraces a more mobile and generative format

of being that exceeds the capture of any determined order. The final stroke thus completes not only the painting, but also Lily's journey from a vision governed by opposition toward a form of perception grounded in receptivity, and mutual recognition.

4. Conclusion

Though frequently reduced to the image of a self-sacrificing woman confined by patriarchal expectations, Mrs. Ramsay embodies a throbbing vitality emerges through her conscious devotion to others and her unwavering pursuit of a meaningful life. Lily's attempt to apprehend this hidden dimension of Mrs. Ramsay's being is, therefore, also a process of transforming her own vision. In her first encounter with the canvas, Lily's resistance to patriarchal objectification remains entangled with the very logic of opposition that sustains it, leading her to replace one reductive interpretation with another. The image she produces ultimately reveals not the fullness of Mrs. Ramsay's life, but the limitations of a gaze still shaped by conflict, defensiveness, and the desire for self-affirmation.

The completion of the second painting marks Lily's departure from such a restrictive pattern of perception. By confronting the inadequacy of her judgments toward both Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Tansley, she comes to recognize that another life cannot be apprehended as an extension of her own convictions, anxieties, or struggles. Through a more receptive vision, Lily finally understands that Mrs. Ramsay's fidelity to others does not arise from self-betrayal, but from a pondered realization of the values through which she chooses to live. This recognition of Mrs. Ramsay's self-directed will enables Lily to make the decisive final stroke. With the completion of this line, she restores the unity that had remained beyond her grasp throughout the painting process. Mrs. Ramsay's outward presence and the deeper significance of her life are revealed as organically interconnected dimensions of a unified existence, rather than fragmented elements awaiting reconciliation.

Ultimately, Woolf's portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay unsettles the assumption that subjectivity can only be secured through the establishment of fixed boundaries. Both the alienating gaze and the confrontational gaze remain bound to the same symbolic order, for each depends upon the act of defining the self and the other through rigid codes. While the former confines the individual within externally imposed meanings, the latter attempts to recover autonomy through negation of those meanings; yet such resistance remains indebted to the very oppositional structure that sustains alienation. Lily's transcending gaze arises from her recognition of this paradox. It discloses a different possibility of subjectivity, one that is continually formed through a spontaneous encounter, where engagement with others does not diminish individuality but becomes the very condition through which the self realizes its possibilities. In this sense, Mrs. Ramsay's subjectivity does not reside in a fixed essence that can be possessed, but in the living process through which she creates meaning, responds to others, and allows her own being to unfold. It is through acknowledging this self-generating and irreducible quality of Mrs. Ramsay's being that Lily fulfills her own highest artistic aspiration. She learns to create not by enforced proposition, but by allowing that life to disclose itself beyond the limits of definition. In recognizing Mrs. Ramsay's subjectivity, Lily finally arrives at a more mature realization of her own, one grounded in the capacity to encounter and illuminate the spontaneity of another existence.

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