

## Virginia Woolf's *To the Light House*: Revelation of Sublime in Privileged Moments

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### Abstract

Woolf's narrator, in *To the Lighthouse* experiences the privileged moment in line with the sublime of Longinus, the epiphany of Joyce, and the Wordsworth's concept of spot of time. The closure of Woolf's fiction coincides with Lily's completion of the painting with a flash of vision, and with the family's arrival to the lighthouse, an ultimate destination of the excursion. The family excursion to the final destination of the lighthouse corresponds to the artist's final stroke and the novelist's closing line, and thus, marking an experience of the privileged moment of sublime that an individual can experience in his or her living process. The article qualifies the concept of sublime while exploring it in *To the Lighthouse*.

**Keywords:** Epiphany, experience, journey, privileged moment, sublime

### Introduction

Critics have established Virginia Woolf either as a quintessential modernist or a twentieth century feminist. In this proliferation of scholarship, Woolf reinvents the Longinus' sublime in the form of privileged moment, both as a rhetorical device and a moment of revelation of individual autonomy, however, remains unexplored. This paper explores the use of privileged moment in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* from the perspective of the sublime, a rhetorical device invariably posited in writings of Longinus and in those who, following Longinus, tend to theorize the tradition of reading and writing. This paper demonstrates Woolf's use of the sublime and Lily Briscoe's drawing in the line of Romantic tradition that posits the experience of the sublime as the liberation of the self or the assertion of the individual autonomy that inevitably problematizes Woolf's writing as modernist. Thus, this paper argues that Woolf exploits the concept of sublime postulated by Longinus in *To the Lighthouse* in terms of the privileged moments when the artistic revelation of Lily coincides with the novelist's narrative design.

With the completion of her artwork, Lily experiences a privileged moment, and thus, transforms herself from an ordinary woman into an illuminated artist. For example, Woolf's narrative ends with the completion of Lily's painting. In reading processes, readers experience the sublime in a rhetorical parallel between Lily's completion of the artwork and Woolf's formal closure of the narrative. Woolf's modernist fiction poses a rhetorical possibility of the Longinus' sublime to evoke a special aesthetic revelation.

*Oxford English Dictionary* categorizes 'sublime' as a revelation of a special moment or a splendid idea transcending time and space. In art, sublime means "affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power that is well calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur" (39). The sublime as an idea infers to "point out the highest regions of thought, reality, or human activity" (39). In writing, sublime indicates "the expression of lofty ideas in a grand and elevated manner" (40). In poetry and prose fiction, sublime connotes elevation, liberation, nobility, consciousness, privilege, and beauty. However, numerous writings, which revolve around Longinus's treatise "On the Sublime" (344-58), postulate an artist's experience of revelation at the immersion into a creative process. Longinus underscores a similar kind of experience in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, an echo of the noble mind (351-52). Homer's distinctive illustration of the hero's journey to the unknown, which transports the soul to the celestial sphere, configures in epic traditions of diverse cultural settings. Alfred Lord Tennyson in the nineteenth century and James Joyce in the twentieth century weave their narratives around Homer's *Odyssey* (352). Longinus's treatment of the sublime operates in heroic narratives and epical traditions of all times and cultures, and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* exemplify the concept.

In the opening of the treatise, Longinus squares sublimity as an excellence of discourse, a source of writing, and a means to eternity (347). In his presumption, the sublime passes from the writer to the audience and functions as the soul of writing. He reinforces that "real sublimity contains much food for reflection, is difficult or rather impossible to resist, and makes a strong and ineffaceable impression on the memory" (350). Longinus's treatment of the sublime focuses on the permanence of the reflection of memory in the audience's mind. The audience's impression of sublimity manifests the writer's experience of revelation in writing process.

In the line of Longinus, Immanuel Kant explains the sublime as an individual's expression of nobility, the liberation of the self, and an elevation of the mind. Kant points out the connection between the individual's experience of the sublime and reason that leads us to the reaffirmation of selfhood (Macksey 929). Macksey further adds, "the sublime is not a quality inhering in natural (or literary) objects, but is rather an experience that the contemplation on these objects evokes in the beholder – and a beholder, ... who must have some culture in order to recognize the sublime in an encounter with its provocation" (930). Kant postulates that, the sublime is an expression of a perceiver's consciousness that is considerably a noble thought in the writing of a great mind. Longinus credits a noble person's capacity to produce an elevated writing with the grand style that is directed to an elevated audience (344). An illuminating idea from a great mind brings audiences into the realm of a higher thought. A noble mind's writing on a serious topic establishes a communion between the audience and the artist. The sublimity, therefore, passes from the artist's mind to an elevated writing and from the illuminating idea in an artifact to the audience's elevated mind. Not the art itself evokes sublimity equally in the consciousness of every individual but the individual's power to contemplate enables him or her to experience the sublime. In the Kantian sublime, Lily's assertion of individuality through a

creative process invokes the liberation of the self. The young girl, in efforts to liberate the self in her painting, immerses herself into the process painting.

Longinus's sublime operates against the Dionysian impulse since the latter emphasizes passion and emotion. The Longinus' sublime functions with an individual's enormous capability of the expression of the self. However, Longinus activates the Dionysiac rigor in the poetic intensity of "On the Sublime." According to D. C. Innes, Longinus reflects Caecilius's influence on his rhetorical art in considering definition of a figure as a deviation from the natural order in thought and expression. Unlike Caecilius, Longinus takes the example of the figures for the exploration of the interplay between art and genius. He credits to the Dionysian part of human psyche in giving prominence to emotion in the process of creating an artifact (Innes 259-83). When the process of expression is concerned, Longinus becomes Dionysian; when the content of a message is concerned, Longinus becomes a non-Dionysian figure. Precisely, the Longinus' sublime invokes both Apollonian and Dionysian poles of human mind.

Innes compares Longinus and Plato in the treatment of an invisible power on the audience's mind. Innes formulates a new model of the Longinus' sublime in postulating: "Demosthenes is the model for the sublimity with emotion, Plato for sublimity without emotion, and Homer for both kinds" (278). Whereas Longinus has a philosophical alliance with Plato, he is a Demosthenian in reflecting an uncontrolled thought in writing. An elevated writing embodies transference of an experience of sublimity from the writer to the reader, or the artist and the audience. In writing, the artist and the audience share a common experience of an elevation of the mind. Contrarily, Mats Malm gives prominence to the audience over the artist when the experience of elevated mind is concerned: "Longinus is the problem of the relationship between author, text, and audience, and the transgression of traditional rhetorical categories" (2). In the rhetoric of the sublime, the prime concern is the consideration of the audience. Discussing the persuasion of the audience, Malm enumerates five sources of the sublime: nobility of soul and thought, selection and organization of material, amplification, imitation, and visualization (3). Malm credits the process in which an artist tailors the message so as to effectively transmit the sublime to the audience's mind.

### Retracing the Revelation

In "Longinus Reconsidered," Richard Macksey retraces the practice of the sublime from the Renaissance to the twentieth century British fiction (913-35). Macksey reasserts Philip Sydney's rhetorical device of the sublime in instructing the Renaissance audience. In the seventeenth century, Paris Boileau-Despreaux maintains the Longinian idea of sublimity in the translation of *Peri Hupsous*. Like Sydney, he focuses on the aesthetic experience of poetry over Longinus's transportation of soul. The Longinian rhetorical concept of the sublime was handed down from Boileau in the seventeenth century to Dryden in the eighteenth century. Dryden later introduced this rhetorical concept in English literary criticism. Unlike Sydney, Dryden discusses the rhetorical device of the sublime in term of delight. In the line of Dryden's consideration of the sublime, Macksey remarks "the transmission of a noble spirit through figures and tropes to the audience, and the role of 'imaging' in communicating the 'enthusiasm' of inspiration" (927). In that sense, Macksey reiterates the process of transmission of the noble spirit from the artist to the audience. In responding such an elevated writing, the audience shares with the artist zeal and enthusiasm of the artist.

Similarly, Thomas Addison uses adjectives like "great," "stupendous," "unlimited,"

and “vast” to represent the sublime in *Spectator* in the eighteenth century (928). Responding Addison, Edmund Burke brings out “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime” that demonstrates the sublime and the interrelationship between the sublime and beautiful (929). Connecting the sublime in nature and art with the individual “self,” Burke connects the sublimity of existence to violence and beautiful. Responding to Burke’s radical presentation of the “self,” Kant associates an individual’s reasoning impulse with the sublime and affirmation of selfhood. Kant considers the socializing force of beauty as the sublimated form of desire (930). In the Germanic philosophical tradition, Hegel and Schopenhauer treat the sublime more in a Burkian empiricist line than in the Kantian idealistic one.

The British romanticists use the sublime in terms of style, intensity of fragmented bursts, and the transport of soul. William Wordsworth’s formulation of “the spots of time” and John Keats’s terminology of “negative capability” square the Longinian conception of sublimity. Around the same time, Coleridge’s works reflect the sublime in a mystical experience. In the next generation, Emerson writes of the reader’s sublime as a replication of the audience’s power in the rhetorical discourse. In the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold uses the touchstone system as a newer version of the sublime.

In the late nineteenth century, the Longinian sublimity reappears in Walter Pater’s impressionist theory. In *Studies in the History of the Renaissance Conclusion*, Pater associates the beauty of an artifact with the perception of audience. He argues that an individual responds to an artifact and gets impressions in terms of space and time. In Pater’s formulation, the individual perceiver captures the intense moments of the artifact in fragments of time to realize sensibilities of life (833-841). The audience’s experience of the discrete impressions in moments reinforces the Longinian sublimity. Both Longinus and Pater focus on the audience’s impression of the sublime moment of transmission of the spirit from the artist to the text, and from the text to the audience.

In the twentieth century, James Joyce reflects the sublime in a term of epiphany. In Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus experiences epiphanies at the sight of a whore, a sea, and a mountain. Breaking away from the family, state, and church, the Joycean modern hero dedicates himself to the aesthetic revelation (Philip 191-207). In the Joycean aesthetic revelation, Stephen develops himself into an amateur artist in a series of epiphanies. Every single chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* ends with a series of moments of the hero’s epiphanies. British modernists, including Joyce and Woolf, in efforts to depart from their precursors of the Romantic tradition, evoke affinity with the rhetorical device of the sublime. The current paper examines Woolf’s “privileged moments” in Lily’s aesthetic revelation in equivalence with the Longinian sublime.

Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* revolves around Lily Briscoe’s experience of privileged moments. The completion of Lily’s painting coincides with Woolf’s closure of her novel. Lily captures a rare moment at the completion of her painting at the moment Woolf’s narrative closes. Similarly, Woolf introduces James Ramsay in the opening of the novel, and Lily toward the closing of the novel. In the opening, James is engaged in the cutting of the pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, and Lily in running brush and strokes for drawing at the end of the novel (Woolf 9). In the first case, the event is set in the window section of the novel; in the latter, Lily appears in the lighthouse section. In the first section Mrs. Ramsey is overwhelmingly present; in the final one, she is only a perpetual memory of other characters. Bringing together Lily’s narrative and Lily’s drawing gives readers experience of privileged

moments as well.

Woolf's writing reflects Lily's experience of privileged moments with the completion of her drawing. She recounts Lily's performance art in the language of fiction. Whereas Woolf uses language as a medium of her fictional narrative, Lily uses color and brush to express her artistic impulse. Both Woolf and Lily articulate their passions and feelings through visual arts, such as writing and painting. Lily gives a final stroke to her painting at the moment the Ramsay family arrives at the destination and Woolf closes her narrative. Lily's experience of the sublime corresponds with the family's arrival to the lighthouse and Woolf's completion of narrative design. In reading processes, readers respond to these three instances of the sublime revolving around Woolf's narrative. In *To the Lighthouse*, the Longinian sublime operates in a triangular configuration of the character, the artist, and the audience. The following excerpt from the novel exemplifies this rhetorical design:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was – her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (Woolf 310)

Woolf treats minor incidents as great moments of artistic revelation. These illuminating trivial events like Lily's taking up brush or looking at the steps are the privileged moments of joy and liberation. Woolf, in efforts to demonstrate the character's experience of sublimity, exploits the rhetorical device of repetition. The sublime parallels with the repetition replicated in the ending of Woolf's novel, Lily's painting, and the Ramsays' journey. A similar kind of repetitive structure can be seen in aesthetic revelations of the female: the female novelist, Woolf; the female artist, Lily; the female leader of the excursion, Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf makes an attempt to recapture the privileged moments through the medium of writing, bringing together the female figures in their aesthetic sublimation.

### **The Privileged Moment: Woolf's Revelation in *To the Lighthouse***

In 'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Lily Briscoe, Mrs. Ramsay, and the Postmodern Sublime," Tonya Krouse examines Woolf's transformation into a cyborg figure through the medium of writing. In the postmodern aesthetic of the sublime, a human is transformed into a cyborg, a hybrid construct of machine and organism. Unlike Krouse's supposition, Lily becomes more an androgyny than a cyborg figure in *To the Lighthouse*. When her artistic revelation is concerned, she is more an androgynous individual than a cyborg figure in contemporary gendered-society. In patriarchy, she is more a product of social reality and a character of fiction. In reading processes, readers experience a transformation of consciousness from Lily's experience of the sublime. Relating the reader's realization of the character's experience of the sublime, Krouse remarkably concludes: "Thus, through her own aesthetic theory and in fiction through the artist-figure, Lily Briscoe, Woolf revisions the sublime by rejecting its traditional modes in favor of a postmodern, post-gender, post-feminist conception of it" (299). Lily is more an artist than a woman, and her portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay is more an embodiment of real life than a representation of an ordinary housewife. In the novel, Woolf

presents Lily as an artist at performance of painting in which she sketches the body of Mrs. Ramsay.

Lily transforms into a cyborg without gender. She becomes an artist, but not a male or female, and thus, losing her gendered-identity. In this light, Woolf presents an artist who remains above the social construct of the masculine or the feminine. Furthermore, Woolf presents an artist beyond the domestic settings of house and family.

The narrator recounts the moment Lily has her vision as the moment of elevation. Lily cannot retrieve the moment when she gets that vision, but Woolf's narrative, in efforts to recapture the exact moment of sublimity, poses a sublime experience through performance of painting.

The concluding paragraph of *To the Lighthouse* provokes the moment of the sublimity, which Virginia Woolf calls the privileged moment. To know how the moment becomes unique, she brings together the terms associated with painting: canvas, picture, blues, greens, lines, center, and brush. These words ultimately lead to the last word of the novel, "vision" (310). In reading processes, readers share the same experience with the character and the artist simultaneously. Relating readers' experiences of reading with the character's experience of the vision, Woolf combines the real and the fictional. Readers' experience of joy and elevation transports them from the mundane world to the fictional world of aesthetic revelation. Woolf brings together the central characters and the significant events of the novel to provoke the experience of sublime, which in Woolf's expression is privileged moment. An instance of the moment of the sublime can be seen in the opening of *To the Lighthouse*. At this point, Woolf presents the conversation about the excursion to the lighthouse in the Ramsay family.

At the beginning of the novel, Woolf shows James Ramsay's experience of the sublime moment with his mother's consent to the proposed trip. The novel begins with the family conversation about the expedition *To the Light House*:

"Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," said Mrs. Ramsay. "But you'll have to be up with the lark, she added. To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail, within touch... "But," said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, "it won't be fine". Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it ... "But it may be fine – I expect it will be fine," said Mrs. Ramsay, making some little twist of the reddish brown stocking she was knitting, impatiently. (9-11)

The central line of thought passes through a tension between "if" and "but" in the conversation of the family, including James Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and Mrs. Ramsay. The narrative begins with the conditional marker, "if," which is eventually opposed by the contrast marker "but" in the latter part of the passage. The former embodies hope and condition, and the latter represents conflict and opposition. Then, the narrative designs proceeds with the conditional marker "had," which is immediately followed by the contrast marker "but" in the last line the narrative gradually progresses with Mrs. Ramsay's consent to her son's proposition, "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow" (9), and this is followed by her husband's opposition: "But...it won't be fine" (10). Mr. Ramsay's note of dissent is further followed by James Ramsay's emotional reaction: "Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon" (10). Then proceeds Mrs. Ramsay's optimism about the weather: "But it may be fine – I expect it will be fine" (11). In this way, the

initial conversation in the family evokes the sublime moments for James Ramsay, which the readers experience in the process of reading of the lines of *To the Lighthouse*.

Similarly, Woolf's writing on the family of her own is another example of the sublimity. She experiences the privileged moments to be in the literary tradition of her own family that links her "A Sketch of the Past" to "The Memories of James Stephen". Readers realize that truth comes from within the perceiver. It seems Woolf cannot physically go back to the past, but she can recapture the moments of being with her great-grandfather through "A Sketch of the Past," an autobiographical writing. She cannot retrieve the moment in the past that gives her the privilege moment, but she can transform her personal feeling of the past moment into her writing. She can experience privileged moments in specific fragments of time that transform her personal life into a public literary one.

In *Moments of Being*, Woolf mentions that individual identity is always in flux with the changing moments in response to the forces around. She further notes that the invisible moments emerge, man's consciousness changes with the new moments. In Woolf's perception, the past alters with the changes in the present. In that case, every moment becomes a new moment, every experience turns out to be a unique experience, and thus, expanding the privileged moments of all times (28-59). In this literary writing, she flashes an individual's ability power to expand the duration of the privileged moment for a greater experience of unique life. In connection with the privileged moment, she reiterates the moment of being which can be expanded for the maximum pleasure of the audience.

In the middle of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf creates the situation in such a way that the reader can respond to the intense feeling in the writing of the noble mind. Right words are chosen, specific sentences constructed, and appropriate thoughts provoked, which give greater sensibilities of life. The following excerpt from the middle section of the novel, *Time Passes*, provokes the sublime through the tension of sound and silence:

So loveliness reigned and stillness, and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted; solitary like a pool at evening, far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pale in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen. Loveliness and stillness clasped hands in the bedroom, and among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs even the prying of the wind, and the soft nose of the clammy sea airs, rubbing, snuffing, iterating, and reiterating, and reiterating their questions – "Will you fade? Will you perish?" – Scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity, as it the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer: we remain. Nothing it seemed could break that image, corrupt that innocence, or disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week, in the empty room, wove into itself the falling cries of birds, ships hooting, the drone and hum of the fields, a dog's bark, a man's shout, and folded them round the house in silence. Once only a board sprang on the landing; once in the middle of the night with a roar, with a rupture, as after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing into the valley, one-fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro. Then again peace descended; and the shadow wavered; light bent to its own image in adoration on the bedroom wall; and Mrs. Mc Nab, tearing the veil of silence with hands that had stood in the wash-tub, grinding it with boots that had crunched the shingle, came as directed to open all windows, and dust the bedrooms. (195-96)

Woolf deals with the sublime through a rhetorical device of repetition of the words, such as loveliness, stillness, etc. In this passage, readers can experience the sublime in the contrast of sound and silence. Along the tension of sound and silence, Woolf reinforces the intensity of her writing in the words, such as loveliness, stillness, solitude, solitary, and indifference on the one hand, and cries of birds, ships hooting, the drone and hum of the fields, a dog's bark, and a man's shout on the other. The vibration is between the terms "stillness" in the opening sentence and "silence" in the closing sentence. With these terms about peace, the narrative reiterates the experience of rupture, using the words, such as adoration, pure, integrity, and innocence. In the tension between sound and silence, readers can get the transference of sensation from the textual world to the human world, from aesthetic revelation to the real-life representation in the artwork.

Readers, while rejoicing the poetic intensity of the passage, become parts of aesthetic representation in these lines. The poetic passion and the desire of beauty and the love for the art for art's sake give sensation to life. In reading processes, readers can intensely experience the objects and the events, which renew his perception moment by moment. Another influential twentieth-century critic, Walter Pater treats such a rare moment in his impressionistic criticism, using a metaphor of hard gem-like flame. We can successfully burn like the hard, gem-like flame and capture the ecstasy of life. In Pater's formulation, we are concerned with the process of living moment by moment, but not the product for which every moment gives thrill and vibration to life. He argues that the experience of the pleasant moments of physical life burns like a gem in which we participate to rejoice life. Pater further reinforces the rhetoric of the sublime in his maxim: "Not the fruit of experience, but the experience itself is enough" (Pater 150-53). In the Pater's view, humans have the capacity to experience the forces of life and live in the present. In the reading process, the reader gets chances to capture the moments, which provides him pleasant impressions. The impressionist tone of the passage brings together the audience and the artist through the medium of writing. The impression in the Pater's sense can be personal at the present moment. Readers respond to the intense moments of the characters in the lines of the novel.

The two balancing paragraphs of the excerpt, which are taken from "Time Passes" of *To the Lighthouse*, retrace tension between peace and violence, and private life and public life. Readers feel that their "selves" are elevated from a tension of the opposites. With the terms "indifference" and "remain," the first part of the passage indicates passivity and indifference, whereas "sound" and "silence" in the latter half invokes the Longinus' conception of movement in an incessant quest of truth.

## Conclusion

The experience of the sublime for Longinus is an enactment of the transformation of consciousness of the audience. The single thought of the characters in *To the Lighthouse* involves the readers in the process of the realization of the sublime. The moment of the beginning of the excursion and the moment of the completion of the journey correspond to the novelist's experience of the sublime in her writing process. The moment of the sublime is also the moment of the past, which an artist attempts to revive in an elevated writing on a serious topic. Woolf, throughout her writing, attempts to capture such pleasant moments that transcend her from the material realities of existence while giving artistic sensibilities. Woolf looks back to her past life to revive the privileged moments into her artifact, and so does Lily in her *To the Lighthouse*. Different artists and writers over the course of the history of intellectual history



have elucidated an aesthetic sensibility of revelation in multiple terms. Woolf's privileged moment corresponds to Joyce's epiphany, Pater's moment of ecstasy, Wordsworth's spot of time, Kant's transcendence, Longinus's sublime. Precisely, this is the moment of revelation with transformation of consciousness that transcends an individual from the profane to sacred, and terrestrial to celestial.

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