

Buddhist Modernism Embodied in *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract: Buddhism's entry into the West was not presented in the original religious form, but in the form of what David L. McMahan called the concept of Buddhist modernism. Based on this theory, this article explores the Buddhist thoughts contained in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*. It believes that from the central image of Mrs. Ramsay, to the collapse of family order, to Lily's self-reconstruction, the mandala correspondence structure in Buddhism has been built. At the same time, Woolf's narrative skills and application make the concept of time in the novel dialogue with the discussion of impermanence and momentariness in Buddhism. This paper aims to analyze the Buddhist thoughts embodied in the narrative technique, character dynamics, theme expression and other aspects of the work, and examine how Woolf conveys the reference and innovation of oriental philosophy through these elements, so as to build a unique spiritual world.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; *To the Lighthouse*; Buddhist Modernism; Mandala.

1. Introduction

From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the religious concept of European and American society changed greatly. At that time, the rapid development of science impacted the authority of traditional Christianity. Coupled with the expansion of overseas colonies, exchanges between different cultures became frequent, and Buddhism was introduced to the West. However, the Buddhism spread to the West is not the original Asian traditional doctrine, but the translated, screened and reinterpreted version. Scholar David L. McMahan defines this brand-new modern Buddhism as an integrated ideological system, which combines the rational thinking of the European Enlightenment, the emotional expression of romanticism, the personal-based concept promoted by Protestants, the knowledge of modern psychology. And it's the generally recognized by the public and does not conflict with science [1]. This kind of Buddhist modernism attaches more importance to meditation practice, personal inner experience, rational thinking and self-inner transformation, and no longer attaches importance to traditional Buddhist religious rituals, myths and legends, monastic systems and ancient concepts of the universe. Therefore, modern improved Buddhism is not equal to the original Buddhism itself. It is just a new form of Buddhist thought that has evolved and reconstructed in a specific historical stage under the influence of modern society and modern knowledge system.

Although Woolf has not systematically studied and delved into the complete teachings of Buddhism, she can come into contact with Buddhist-related ideas everywhere in her era and literary circle. Although she is an atheist herself, many intellectuals around her are studying reincarnation, mysticism, Indian philosophy and various non-Christian spiritual ideas. At that time, G.L. Dickinson, J.M. McTaggart has made public speeches on the theme of reincarnation; Woolf's cousin Dorothea Stephen published the book *Studies in Early Indian Thought* in 1918; even T.S. Elliott, who was good friends with Woolf and belonged to the literary world and the publishing circle, and others have also studied Sanskrit and Pali [2, 3]. These situations can show that in the social and cultural environment at that time, Buddhism and Indian philosophy were very popular and easily accessible trends,

even if these ideas were not directly and deliberately integrated into Woolf's writings.

The academic community has conducted a lot of research on Woolf's novel, focusing on her artistic treatment of character awareness, time expression, sensory experience and daily plots. The stream of consciousness written by Woolf is not written by the coherent inner monologue of the character. She builds a unique stream of consciousness narrative effect with the help of free indirect quotations, switching narrative perspectives, using analogy rhetoric, and alternately presenting personal feelings and group feelings [4]. Many scholars have also analyzed the time setting, spatial layout, psychological time and intersubjectivity of the novel, and at the same time discussed the relationship between Lily's painting creation and the integrity of the narrative structure of the whole novel [5, 6, 7]. Ann Banfield interprets the novel in combination with the discussion text of the Bloomsbury School, mainly focusing on the cognitive mode of the characters, sensory feelings, and the relationship between people and the objective world [8]. Gillian Beale focuses on Woolf's creations and explores the relationship between his novels and science and various knowledge theories [9]. In addition, some scholars interpret Woolf from the perspective of phenomenology and religion. Relying on Heidegger's ontology, the concept of secular spirituality, the theory of quark's mysticism and modernism, they analyzed Woolf's moments of being. At the same time, it also explains why she prefers to write about daily life, and the deep thinking about the essence of life that has always existed in her works [10,11,12].

The above studies have basically clarified how Woolf portrays the consciousness of characters and expresses the deep connotation of time in the novel. However, the existing research still cannot completely answer a core question: Why does Woolf always innovate novel forms and do various narrative experiments? Why does it always revolve around a few fixed types of problems? Specifically, it can be divided into four points: things that seem to be stable and eternal are actually not stable; people are obsessed with their own identity and past inheritance, so they fall into pain; individual consciousness is not closed and independent; there is no eternal thing in the world, how can human beings give meaning to life?

Different research perspectives can explain the different characteristics of Woolf's creations. Psychological time research proves that human memory and current sensory feelings will blend and influence each other. William James's relevant theories can also explain the characteristics of Woolf's consciousness and attention flow well [13]. Phenomenological research allows us to clearly see the perception of human body and the cognitive relationship between different people. The study of secular mysticism explains why Woolf can always dig out the moment of epiphany from ordinary daily trifles. The theory of Buddhist modernism will not overturn or replace all the above research conclusions. On the contrary, it provides a new analytical vision. With the help of this set of theories, we can study Woolf's unique writing of time and consciousness, and the intrinsic connection between Buddhist ideas such as impermanence, selflessness and obsession.

At present, a few scholars have discovered the relationship between Woolf's creation and Buddhist thought. Neil Catarano proposed that Woolf's self and world have been in a constantly changing state. Those characters in the novel who are willing to accept and are more able to face the fissileness of the world more calmly [14]. It combined and analyzed Woolf's writing on the identity of characters and the theme of death with the Buddhist concepts of selflessness and permanence with the three works *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* as the research object of research [14]. In response to the frequent switching of narrative perspectives in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Sawyer James Henry believed that this narrative broke the traditional perception of unique and fixed reality, allowing Eastern religious thought and Western scientific theory to form a dialogue and collision in the novel text [15]. Lawrence Normand and Alison Winch also found a fit: modernist creation emphasizes the flow of physical, breathing and psychological images, which is very similar to the core characteristics of meditation practice [3].

These studies can prove that it is feasible and valuable to interpret Woolf's creations with Buddhist thought. However, most of the existing studies only compare the similarity of text themes. The deep connection between Buddhist modernism and the overall narrative structure and creative form in the novel needs to be further discussed in depth.

This article takes Buddhist modernism in the historical context as the theoretical framework, and compares and analyzes the three-paragment narrative structure of the novel, the time scale of speed and slowness, and Lily's artistic creation practice, with the concepts of Buddhist impermanence, decentralized self-awareness and non-persistent life status. The concept of Buddhist modernism is a selective interpretation and reconstruction of the primitive teachings of Buddhism and the Western traditional knowledge system. Based on this background, this article uses two types of Buddhist terms at the same time to carry out research. One category is Pali terms, including selflessness and impermanence; the other category is Sanskrit terms, including moment, obsession and emptiness, and try to retain the original religious and doctrinal connotation of each term.

The argument analysis of the full text revolves around three interrelated dimensions. First, the narrative focus of the novel presents a complete dynamic change process. In the early part of the story, Mrs. Ramsay was the absolute core; in the second chapter, the original family order and the influence of the core characters completely collapsed; finally, Lily completed the reconstruction of art forms and spiritual order through

painting. With the help of Mandala framework, this is a dynamic narrative process that temporarily establishes the narrative core, dissolving the core, and reshaping the core. Second, Woolf gave special treatment to the time of the novel. She deliberately lengthens the narrative time of an afternoon, highly compresses the time span of ten years, and repeatedly switches the narrative perspective of memory and present perception. This unique way of time narrative forms a deep echo and dialogue with the core teachings of Buddhism about impermanence and momentariness. Third, Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily have completely different attitudes towards the world, self and obsession. At the same time, there are inherent contradictions between their life choices and inner state. This also clearly shows that the three people have completely different cognitions and states of obsession, impermanence and related self. Combining the above three dimensions, it can be seen that from the perspective of Buddhist modernism, Woolf's work can be sorted out from a new perspective. Her novel form is innovative, always in line with her core creative pursuit. With a unique narrative technique, she constantly explores a question that in a world without eternity and a fixed core, how human beings retain memories, create value, and give meaning to daily life.

2. Centers in Dissolution

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a novel built around absence and presence, dissolution and reconstruction. Its three-part structure—"The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse"—traces a movement from order to chaos and back to a new kind of order. In the first part of the novel, a group of characters who were originally alienated and unrelated to each other gathered around Mrs. Ramsay. She is like a gravity core, supporting the atmosphere and order of the whole family. The second part takes her sudden death as a turning point, describing the process of the dilapidated house, and also records the situation of the family's separation under ten years of war and separation. The third part is a return, but not a return to the old order of the past, but a new state: Lily Briscoe finished the painting that had been on hold for many years, and the children of the Ramsay family finally boarded the lighthouse with their father. The three-paragment narrative structure of novels is very similar to the sacred pattern mandala used for meditation and rituals in tantric Buddhism.

Martin Brauen explained in a systematic study on this subject that "mandala" is a "a strongly symmetrical diagram, concentrated about a centre and generally divided into four quadrants of equal size; it is built up of concentric circles and squares possessing the same centre" [16]. Mandala is not only a simple geometric pattern, but also "an aid to meditation, visualization and initiation" [16]. Its core meaning is to interpret the universe as an orderly whole. Everything is arranged around a core criterion, and all elements in the world are derived and extended from this center. In traditional ceremonies, people will spend days or even weeks to carefully pile up mandala patterns with colored sand. After completion, they will hold a ceremony to completely disassemble it, and finally throw these colored sands into the water as tributes. This cycle model of building first, then disassembling and returning to nothingness is not a coincidence, but just confirms the impermanence of Buddhism ("anicca"): all tangible things, no matter how beautiful and meaningful, will eventually disappear.

We can interpret the three-paragment structure of the novel

with the logic of “construction-disassembly-reshaping” of Mandala. In the part of “The Window”, Mrs. Ramsay, with her own presence, temporarily collected the scattered thoughts, desires and emotions of everyone in the family, and integrated the scattered interpersonal relationships into an orderly whole. And the part of “Time Passes” completely pulls away from Mrs. Ramsay’s core pillar, so that the family order that depends on her completely collapses, exposing the fragility of this human order. In the last part of “The Lighthouse”, through Lily’s completion of the painting and the family’s late journey to the lighthouse, a new life and spiritual order are re-established. This comparative interpretation of this article focuses on the core model of the novel of building relationships around the temporary core, disintegrating and reshaping, which does not strictly correspond to the ritual form and geometry of the mandala.

McMahan’s research on Buddhist modernism can prove the rationality and value of this interpretation. The collision and integration of Buddhist thought and Western academic traditions has given rise to a set of modern meta-language. People use this to translate and reconstruct Buddhist concepts, so that these ancient ideas can adapt to the cultural expression and creative needs of the new era [1]. Relying on this meta-language system, Mandala can accurately correspond to the core theme of the novel: the birth and disappearance of the core, the man-made order is fragile, and the meaning of life can still be reshaped after losing the past. Woolf transformed these Buddhist cores into the classic topics of modernist literature: the change of family relations, the rupture of the history of the times, and the reconstruction of aesthetics and spirit.

This narrative logic runs through the whole novel. The book repeatedly portrays Mrs. Ramsay with the characteristics of gathering people, regulating order, and maintaining temporary stability. Catalano pointed out that she “strives to bring others together through matchmaking” and tried to create “special moments and unities” in order to create the legacy of her life she expected [14]. In Lily’s eyes, Mrs. Ramsay is not only a symbol of authority, but also the connector and organizer of all people: “There she sat, simple, serious” [17]. Lily also compared Mrs. Ramsay to the “dome”, implying that she can shelter everyone, unite everyone, and be the absolute center of the whole family. At the family dinner, the outside world is turbulent and surging, and she creates “order and dry land” between the square table, gathering the alienated guests together, so that everyone can temporarily hold together, “common cause against the fluidity out there” [17]. The orderly and stable interior contrasts sharply with the turbulent outside world, highlighting the role of Mrs. Ramsay: she is the creator of the short-term stability of the family, temporarily curbing the trend of family separation and people’s looseness. The closed environment of the island has also further cut the boundary between the residence and the vast sea, strengthening this hard-won stable order.

The novel also binds Mrs. Ramsay to the light deeply, and the light is the most core symbolic image of Mandala. Brauen proposed that in Tantric Buddhism, “the body of the deity is indeed visible but does not consist of tangible, perceptible material, rather it is a body of light or rainbows” [16]. Entating the divine origin with light is the core foundation of the mandala visual image. In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay has been portrayed as a light source many times. In her husband’s eyes, she is “as if all her energies were being fused

into force, burning and illuminating” [17]; her beauty is dazzling, “like a torch” [17]; and in “Time Passes,” the lighthouse beam that sweeps through the empty house again and again has always been deeply bound to Mrs. Ramsay’s figure, becoming her exclusive image. The lighthouse in James’s memory is “a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening” [17]. This picture firmly integrates the physical light and shadow of the lighthouse with the gentle and powerful eyes of his mother. Judging from the symbolic meaning of mandala, the repeated light and shadow images prove that Mrs. Ramsay is the emotional core of the whole family and the root of the narrative coherence of the whole novel. Her existence is closely related to the core themes of guidance, perception and life continuation in the book.

The family dinner in the second part can best reflect Mrs. Ramsay’s core cohesion. The guests sat together in a room on the surface, but inside they were full of alienation and separation. Everyone was deeply immersed in their own anxiety, resentment and thoughts, and there was no intersection with each other. Tansley is sensitive and inferior in his heart, always defensive and out of place; Mr. Bankes is silent and has nothing to talk about; Lily is full of painting and creation, and has no intention of socializing at all. Even Mrs. Ramsay herself can clearly feel the dullness and failure of this dinner: “Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate” [17]. She has a strong sense of responsibility in her heart and knows that “the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her” [17]. Therefore, this dinner is essentially a crisis of interpersonal relationships. It is a critical moment when the core of the family is on the verge of collapse and people’s hearts are completely separated.

Yet it is precisely at this moment that Mrs. Ramsay’s centering power asserts itself. Through her silent efforts, her attention to each guest, her management of the conversation, her insistence on the beauty of the fruit and the food, she gradually draws the company together. The climax of the evening occurs not through any grand gesture but through the shared experience of Mr. Ramsay’s recitation of a poem. The voice of the poem, “floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves”, dissolves the barriers between the characters [17]. They listen “with the same sort of relief and pleasure”, as if the words were “their own voice speaking” [17]. The moment is one of unity, a collective experience of being gathered into a single, shared perception. It is, as Mrs. Ramsay reflects, one of those moments “of which the thing is made that remains for ever after” [17]. The dinner party therefore gives the mandala heuristic its clearest social form: dispersed private consciousnesses are temporarily organized around a shared center of attention.

The value of the mandala comparison lies in the tension between formal centering and narrative openness. Mrs. Ramsay creates a real but temporary coherence, while the novel repeatedly exposes the fragility of every arrangement she sustains. The mandala therefore makes visible the novel’s simultaneous need for order and resistance to permanence: its centers organize relation without achieving final closure.

The mandala’s impermanence is as crucial as its order. Brauen observes that in ritual practice, mandalas made of colored powder “are dismantled at the end of the relevant mandala ritual” [16]. Their construction is not meant to be permanent; the act of dissolution is itself a form of teaching. In *To the Lighthouse*, the dissolution of the ordered world Mrs.

Ramsay sustained is enacted in "Time Passes." Her death, reported in a brief parenthetical passage—"Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before"—is devastating precisely because it is so casual [17]. The center has vanished, and with it the organizing principle that held the household together. Henry, in his reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*, observes that the Buddhist conception of "emptiness" ("śūnyatā") is not "the complete non-existence of a phenomenon, but of the lack of a 'self'" [15]. Mrs. Ramsay's death reveals that the household's coherence was relational and contingent rather than secured by a permanent organizing self. Her absence exposes the changing conditions through which domestic order had been produced and sustained, placing the novel's treatment of loss in dialogue with Buddhist critiques of independent and self-sufficient identity.

The second part of the novel documents the consequences of this loss. The house, once the site of order and meaning, falls into decay. The darkness that descends is not merely a physical condition but a symbolic one: "Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers" [17]. The passage describes a systematic dissolution of form, the objects that once constituted the ordered domestic world lose their definition and purpose. The darkness does not merely cover them; it "swallows" them, rendering them indistinct and without function. Within the mandala heuristic, the swallowing of distinct objects gives narrative form to the dissolution of an order previously organized around Mrs. Ramsay. The section's altered temporality reinforces this dispersal by withdrawing the stable human perspectives that had organized much of "The Window."

The decay of the house is accompanied by the decay of the human world it once sheltered. The deaths of Prue and Andrew, reported in similarly parenthetical asides, suggest that the dissolution extends beyond the physical structure to the family itself. The war, which kills Andrew and marks the decade with destruction, is figured as a force of random devastation, "something out of harmony with this jocundity, this serenity" [17]. The "silent apparition of an ashen-coloured ship" that appears and vanishes, leaving only a "purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea", evokes the hidden violence of submarine warfare and suggests that the peace of the island is fragile, always shadowed by larger forces of destruction [17]. The world Mrs. Ramsay once held together has been scattered by history, by death, by the relentless passage of time.

Yet "Time Passes" is not merely a chapter of despair. It is also, in its final pages, a chapter of recovery. The return of Lily Briscoe and Mr. Carmichael to the house signals the possibility of renewal. The cleaning and restoration of the house by Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast is presented as a labor of survival, a stubborn refusal to let the house sink into oblivion. The women's work is described as "some rusty laborious birth", an image that suggests not mere maintenance but a kind of rebirth [17]. The house is made ready, not for the return of the old order, but for the possibility of a new one. The final image of "Time Passes" is one of awakening: Lily, "sitting bolt upright in bed. Awake" [17]. The sleep of "The Window" has ended; a new day, and a new form of order, is about to begin.

The third part of the novel, "The Lighthouse," is concerned

with the reconstruction of meaning in the absence of the original center. Lily's painting is the vehicle of this reconstruction. She has been trying to complete it for ten years, but the problem she faces is not merely technical; it is structural. The painting has no center. As she works, she struggles with the question of how to connect the masses on her canvas, how to organize the space so that it coheres. She thinks, "It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left" [17]. The problem is one of composition, but it is also a problem of meaning, how to make sense of the world after the center has been removed.

The solution, when it comes, is not a return to Mrs. Ramsay as the subject of the painting but a different kind of centering. Lily does not paint a likeness of Mrs. Ramsay; she paints a composition that expresses her vision of what Mrs. Ramsay meant. She has "made no attempt at likeness", and when Mr. Bankes asks what she intends by a "triangular purple shape", she explains that it is Mrs. Ramsay reading to James [17]. The point is not to represent Mrs. Ramsay as an individual but to capture the relation between the figures, the mother and child, the light and shadow, the mass and the space between them. The painting is a formal structure, not a portrait. It organizes experience not by reproducing the lost center but by creating a new one, a center of form and meaning. Catalano reads this achievement in terms of Lily's recognition of the "nature of identity" after Mrs. Ramsay's death: "identity functions as a story, a 'structure of imagination'—not as the sort of essential truth Lily had supposed it was earlier on" [14]. The painting, like identity itself, is a construction, not a recovery.

The final stroke of the painting culminates a long process of looking, remembering, and formal experimentation. Lily sees "it clear for a second" and draws "a line there, in the centre" [17]. The gesture is sudden but not unprepared: its decisiveness condenses years of unresolved work into an action that reorganizes the canvas. The line she draws is ambiguous in meaning; it might represent the "weakness and suffering of mankind" [17], or the "arid scimitar of the male" [17], or the Lighthouse itself, "stark and straight" [17]. Its significance is multiple and cannot be fixed. What matters is not what the line means but what it does: it creates a center, an organizing principle around which the other elements of the painting can cohere. This moment of sudden resolution resonates with what McMahan, drawing on Charles Taylor, identifies as the modern "epiphanic" sensibility, in which meaning is found not in transcendent revelation but in the apprehension of ordinary experience [1]. Lily's final stroke is not a mystical vision but a practical insight, a resolution that emerges from her sustained engagement with the problem of her art.

Lily's achievement is significant not only because she completes her painting but because she accepts its impermanence. She knows that the painting "would be hung in the attics" and "would be destroyed" [17]. Yet this knowledge does not diminish the value of what she has done. On the contrary, it is precisely her willingness to create without the expectation of permanence that allows her to finish the work. Like a sand mandala, Lily's painting is completed with the knowledge that its material form will not endure. The comparison lies not in equating her final brushstroke with ritual dismantling, but in the willingness to create fully without making permanence a condition of value. Her final line therefore affirms artistic meaning within impermanence rather than attempting to overcome it.

Catalano observes that Lily, like other Woolfian characters who achieve this kind of insight, comes to recognize “the fallacy that lies in these limiting views of the self, both its temporality and its boundaries: the idea that death is an absolute end, or the notion that the self is a fixed entity with a core waiting to be ignited by the touch of another” [14]. Her painting is not a monument to Mrs. Ramsay but an expression of her own vision, one that acknowledges its own finitude.

The mandala framework thus gathers the novel’s shifting centers into a single formal pattern. Mrs. Ramsay brings dispersed relations into temporary coherence, “Time Passes” dissolves the domestic arrangement associated with her, and Lily’s painting establishes a new center without restoring the previous order. The novel transforms the pattern of construction, dissolution, and reconstruction into a modernist inquiry into how meaning may be created after apparently stable centers have disappeared.

This spatial and structural pattern forms only one dimension of the comparison. The following sections turn from the novel’s shifting centers to its variable temporal scales and its representations of attachment and relational selfhood. Structure, time, and character together reveal how *To the Lighthouse* connects the creation of form with the recognition that no form can remain permanent.

3. Time in Transition

To the Lighthouse is a novel in which time is never simply a matter of clocks and calendars. “The Window” expands a single afternoon and evening across more than half the novel, “Time Passes” compresses approximately a decade of war, death, and decay, and “The Lighthouse” returns to the scale of a single morning. These changes of narrative duration distinguish measurable chronological time from time as it is experienced through anticipation, memory, grief, and attention. Woolf’s temporal form can therefore be read alongside Buddhist accounts of impermanence and momentariness, but the comparison should not be treated as an exact correspondence.

Several Abhidharma traditions analyze conditioned phenomena as momentary events that arise and cease through causal conditions. Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, composed within debates surrounding Sarvāstivāda thought and its Sautrāntika critics, provides an influential account of these early Buddhist analyses [18, 19]. In this context, “kṣaṇa” refers to momentariness and to the absence of an enduring substance beneath conditioned change. Woolf’s narrative, however, often represents memory, sensation, and anticipation as interwoven within lived experience rather than as a sequence of philosophically discrete moments. The comparison is therefore limited but productive: Buddhist momentariness and Woolfian psychological time approach temporality differently, yet both unsettle the assumption that time is a homogeneous medium through which stable selves and objects simply persist.

Against this conceptual background, Woolf’s narrative continually blurs the boundaries between past, present, and future as characters move into memory without explicit transitions. Woolf represents lived time as a flow in which sensation, recollection, and anticipation interpenetrate. Henry similarly observes that, within Woolf’s narrative consciousness, “the brackish currents of the past and present flow into each other” [15]. Woolf’s temporal form does not reproduce the Abhidharma analysis of philosophically discrete moments; it transforms the problem of temporal

instability into the experiential language of memory, sensation, and anticipation.

The opening pages of “The Window” establish this fluid temporality. The novel begins with James Ramsay’s desire to go to the lighthouse—a desire that is both present and future-oriented, looking forward to an event that may or may not happen. His mother’s promise, “Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow,” releases in him “an extraordinary joy” that colors his perception of the present moment [17]. The refrigerator in the Army and Navy Stores catalogue, the sound of poplars, the rooks cawing, the dresses rustling—all these present sensations are “coloured and distinguished” by James’s anticipation of the future journey [17]. The narrative does not distinguish between present perception and future expectation; both are woven into the texture of his consciousness. This is not a flashback but a moment in which present sensation and future anticipation are woven together within James’s consciousness.

The most striking example of this temporal fluidity occurs in the scene where Charles Tansley accompanies Mrs. Ramsay into town. The narrative begins in the present, with Tansley insisting that the weather will be bad the next day. Mrs. Ramsay, annoyed, thinks to herself that “he was a sarcastic brute” and that the children laugh at him [17]. Then, without any explicit transition, the narrative shifts into a memory: “She could not help laughing herself sometimes. She said, the other day, something about ‘waves mountains high.’ Yes, said Charles Tansley, it was a little rough” [17]. The reader is not told that this is a memory; it is presented with the same immediacy as the present scene. Only gradually does it become clear that the narrative has moved into the past, and when Tansley’s voice returns—“No going to the Lighthouse, James”—the reader is jolted back to the present [17]. The passage enacts the fluidity of consciousness, moving between past and present without clear demarcation. Henry observes that in Woolf’s narrative technique, “time moves freely, where the brackish currents of the past and present flow into each other” [15]. This is precisely what happens in this scene: the boundary between past and present dissolves, and the reader experiences time as the characters do, as a continuous flow in which past and present are intertwined.

Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness operates in a similar temporal fluidity. As she sits knitting, she recalls “the Mannings’ drawing-room at Marlow twenty years ago,” and the memory is presented with such immediacy that it seems almost to replace the present [17]. She compares the experience to “reading a good book again,” whose ending is already known but whose events can still be re-experienced [17]. Within the same recollection, she imagines herself “gliding like a ghost” among the chairs and tables of the drawing room she had inhabited twenty years earlier [17]. The paired images of rereading and ghostly return present memory not as a fixed record but as a present act of reconstruction. The past persists by being repeatedly re-entered and transformed through the changing consciousness that remembers it.

McMahan’s account of modern Buddhist meditation helps clarify an affinity, but not an equivalence, between Woolf’s narrative technique and modern mindfulness discourse. Woolf’s shifting focalization asks readers to register perceptions, memories, anticipations, and emotional reactions as they arise and pass through different consciousnesses. The narration, however, is not wholly dispassionate or

nonjudgmental: the characters' perceptions remain shaped by attachment, resentment, gender expectations, intellectual rivalry, and unequal social relations. Woolf's narrative therefore does not reproduce mindfulness as a spiritual practice. Rather, it creates an intermittent formal affinity with modern mindfulness discourse by directing attention to the movement and instability of mental events while simultaneously exposing the judgments and attachments that structure consciousness.

The "Time Passes" section takes this temporal fluidity to its extreme. The narrative abandons the continuous flow of individual consciousness and adopts a more impersonal perspective, describing the decay of the house over a decade. The section is punctuated by brief, parenthetical announcements of deaths: "Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before he stretched his arms out. They remained empty" [17]; "Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth" [17]; "A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous" [17]. These announcements are remarkably flat and undramatic. They do not describe the emotional impact of the deaths; they simply record them, as if they were no more significant than the seasonal changes that the narrative describes in lyrical detail. The parenthetical deaths do not render loss insignificant. Rather, their formal compression creates a disturbing tension between the continuity of nonhuman time and the catastrophic finality of human loss. This tension may be read alongside *anicca*, but it should not be reduced to serene acceptance.

Catalano reads these parenthetical deaths in relation to *anicca*, arguing that "Time Passes" confronts the inevitability of change while also allowing change to become a condition of renewal [14]. His account helps connect the section's destruction with its later movement toward reconstruction. Seasonal processes continue, but Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew are not thereby rendered insignificant; Woolf's formal compression nevertheless preserves the violence of individual disappearance: impermanence here becomes the condition within which grief, historical destruction, and renewal coexist.

The "Time Passes" section also sets individual human time against seasonal, material, and historical processes. Its imagery moves from the decaying house to war, distant landscapes, recurrent weather, and the transformations of the natural world. This enlarged narrative scale unsettles the measure by which individual events are normally represented: human catastrophes occupy only brief textual spaces, while wind, darkness, and material decay unfold at length. Discussing modernist literature in relation to Buddhism, Normand and Winch observe that "the form of meditative experience" often involves moving "through a series of dissonant and fragmented images to brief moments of focus and understanding" [3]. Read alongside modern meditative discourse, this oscillation between fragmented human events and impersonal processes directs attention toward transience without cancelling the emotional and historical weight of loss. The section therefore holds continuity and catastrophe together rather than moving straightforwardly toward equanimity or acceptance.

The final part of the novel, "The Lighthouse," returns to the scale of individual consciousness, but it carries with it the expanded temporal perspective of "Time Passes." Lily

Briscoe, painting on the lawn, is acutely aware of the passage of time. She is forty-four years old, ten years older than she was in "The Window," and the memory of Mrs. Ramsay is both vivid and distant. As she paints, she moves between past and present, recalling the scene of Mrs. Ramsay writing letters on the beach and the moment, ten years earlier, when she herself was trying to paint. The narrative does not mark these temporal shifts; they occur as naturally as the shifts in "The Window." But there is a difference: in "The Lighthouse," Lily is aware of the distance between past and present. She knows that the past is gone, and her painting is an attempt to recover something of it, not by reproducing it but by expressing her vision of it.

Lily's painting is, among other things, an attempt to make "of the moment something permanent" [17]. This phrase echoes Mrs. Ramsay's reflection at the dinner party, that "of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after" [17]. Both characters are engaged in the same project: to create something that endures, that resists the erosion of time. But the novel makes clear that this project is inherently paradoxical. The moment cannot be made permanent; it can only be represented, and the representation is itself subject to time. But she completes it anyway, not because it will last but because the act of creation is itself meaningful. Catalano argues that Lily's achievement is a recognition that "the fact that there is no underlying essence beneath the self and our experience of life is not to be lamented," but rather "points to capacity for positive change, spontaneity, and creativity" [14]. Read through the comparative framework of Buddhist modernism, Lily's acceptance of the painting's possible destruction turns impermanence into a condition of creative possibility: value is relocated from the permanent survival of the object to the finite act through which experience receives form.

The novel's temporal organization thus places chronological measurement, lived duration, and historical change in sustained tension. Its movements among anticipation, memory, seasonal process, loss, and artistic recollection can be read alongside Buddhist modernism's emphasis on impermanence and attention. What this comparison clarifies is the relation between temporal form and attachment. To the Lighthouse repeatedly asks how memory, relationship, and creation can remain meaningful when neither persons nor forms can be secured against change.

4. Selves in Relation

The three main characters in the novel present three completely different but interrelated attitudes towards life. The core is how people face the impermanence of the world and how to establish their self-identity. Mr. Ramsay wants to rely on academic achievements to stand firm and prove his value. At the same time, he needs the understanding and recognition of others. While managing the interpersonal relationships around her, Mrs. Ramsay relies on marriage, family and past memories to make her existence have a long-lasting meaning. Lily slowly learns to accept reality: artistic creation can persist all the time, but the paintings she creates will eventually fade away and cannot last forever. From the perspective of Buddhist modernism, the novel shows how the three protagonists face clinging (*upādāna*), impermanence (*anicca*), and how to build self-identity in interpersonal relationships through the discussion of reputation, intimacy and artistic creation.

In most Buddhist concepts, the root cause of people's

suffering is often the persistence of the fixed and unchanging self. In fact, the self is never immutable, but is shaped by many factors such as physical state, psychological emotion, interpersonal relationships and so on. The novel does not make any character see through this truth thoroughly. On the contrary, all the characters are in conflict: sometimes they are unwilling to accept the uncertainty of themselves and life, and sometimes they can vaguely admit that their identity is inherently unstable and will constantly change.

Mr. Ramsay's initial pain came from his stubbornness as a scholar, but we can't simply regard him as a typical example who can only be persistent and completely negative. All his anxiety revolves around the recognition of others, the inheritance of academic ideas, and the academic status hierarchy represented by text symbols. In his cognition, reaching the "Q" level is already a very high academic achievement, but he still insists on sprinting "R" and even the "Z" height that top thinkers can reach [17]. This letter-level pursuit reveals his endless ambition: every time he achieves an achievement, he will immediately set a new goal, and then constantly feel that he is not good enough and has shortcomings. There is no problem with his philosophical research itself. What really hurts him is that he firmly binds his academic achievements and the creation of a permanent and stable self-identity.

In fact, Mr. Ramsay knows that the reputation of intellectuals will never last long. He knew that even a literary master like Shakespeare would one day be covered by secular success. Even if it was a thousand years, it would only be fleeting in the vast river of time. But this rational cognition did not really let him down and get rid of his obsession. On the contrary, he understands the impermanence of the world rationally, but still insists on his reputation emotionally. This contradictory gap makes his anxiety even stronger. Catalano proposed that the criteria for judging achievements are always changing, and no matter how high Mr. Ramsay climbs, he can't get rid of the trouble of this uncertainty [14]. To explain it with the concept of Buddhist modernism, his problem is not that he can't understand impermanence, but that he can't distinguish the essence of impermanence and always falls into upādāna. He always wants to stabilize his self-identity by relying on fleeting fame and sympathy from others.

At the same time, Mr. Ramsay's vulnerability also broke his own image of an independent, powerful and unreliable intellectual. His longing for the sympathy of others and the comfort of others bluntly reveals his dependence on others. And the lighthouse trip at the end of the novel fully shows his multifaceted nature: he has a tenacious side, a pragmatic sense of responsibility, hides the grief from the bottom of his heart, and rarely recognizes his son James's ability for a short time. At the moment he praised James's helm, he put down his strict and judgmental fatherly attitude and sincerely affirmed the child's brilliance. These moments did not let him completely get rid of his obsession, but it was enough to show that his self-identity was neither fixed nor completely isolated from others. Therefore, Mr. Ramsay is a person full of contradictions: he is rationally insightful and impermanent, and occasionally he can sincerely connect with others, but he has never let go of his obsession and repeatedly resists the emotional gap brought about by impermanence.

Lily Briscoe's life is in stark contrast to the persistent Mr. Ramsay. Of course, her growth is not a simple transformation from self-centered to selfless. For many years, she has been entangled in the problem of painting and creation, especially

after the death of Mrs. Ramsay, she has never been able to find a suitable way to draw her appearance with a brush, and she can't restore her feelings for her heart. Looking at the bay on the sea, she realized that distance has "extraordinary power": the figure on the boat has been "had been swallowed up in it," "were gone for ever," and "had become part of the nature of things" [17]. This passage does not mean that Lily herself has integrated into the scenery in front of her, but the distance has changed her cognition: travelers on the sea are no longer independent individuals with clear boundaries, but integrate into the vast sea, dusty memories, regrets of passing away and human perception, and integrate with everything in the world.

In the Mahayana Buddhist concept used in this article, śūnyatā (emptiness) does not mean non-existence and nothingness, but refers to the essence of all things in the world, including the human self, which is not fixed and independent. When interpreting *Mrs. Dalloway*, Sawyer James Henry also used emptiness to describe a similar self-untied state: people are no longer bound by the body, "the self is no longer restrained to her body" and they can feel that they and "the city, the earth, (and) other people" are spiritually connected and integrated [15]. Using emptiness to interpret Lily's perception, it can be clearly found that self-identity and human perception have never been isolated. Whether it is the distant people or Lily's own thoughts and cognition, they cannot be separated from the influence of memory, environment, spatial distance and interpersonal relationships.

Lily's last drop was the epiphany moment she ushered in after years of persistence in creation. This epiphany is not that she completely gave up her painting efforts, but that her expectations for creation and definitions of works have completely changed. She still has to face the technical problems of painting and still has to think about how to connect the color blocks on the canvas, but she no longer insists on drawing perfect products, and no longer expects that her paintings can be permanently passed down and recognized by posterity. When she calmly accepted the fact that all works will eventually be damaged and disappear, she no longer used eternity as the standard for judging the value of her work. Therefore, her last stroke is a kind of aesthetic relief. The core is to no longer cling to the future reputation and survival of the work. Catalano once proposed that human self-identity is the "structure of imagination" [14], which also confirms Lily's creative mood: she completed the painting not to pursue the core of some eternal truth and essence, but just to build a current and temporary art form.

When Lily created the painting, she felt "as if a door had opened" and entered "a high cathedral-like place, very dark, very solemn" [17]. This image associates the concrete physical movements of painting with the highly focused and quiet inner state. The same change of mood also occurred at the moment when she recalled Mrs. Ramsay: when she thought of her sitting under the reef and reading a book, her inherent impression of Charles Tansley also changed. The beautiful image of Mrs. Ramsay dispelled Lily's previous anger and sense of competition in the beach scene, and turned the past into a warm friendship, frozen in her memory "almost like a work of art" [17]. These two details show that memory will reinterpret and reshape past experiences based on the current state of mind and concentration.

In the process of creation, Lily has always been troubled by "the old question": "What is the meaning of life?" [17] But the answer to this question is not a set of rigid theories and a

straightforward conclusion, but hidden in “little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” [17]. Therefore, Lily’s ultimate insight and perception is not the unchanging ultimate truth, but a vivid perception and state of mind formed by memory, concentration and artistic form intertwined in the present.

Compared with Mr. Ramsay, who persists in fame, and Lily, who is finally relieved, Mrs. Ramsay’s state is more vague and contradictory, somewhere between the two. Instead of relying on academic fame to find the meaning of life like her husband, she relies on interpersonal relationships to realize her self-worth. She held a dinner party and made a match, so that the originally strange and alienated people had a brief connection; she even imagined that after her death, she could still integrate into the life of Paul and Minta and exist in another way. This way of living based on interpersonal relationships breaks the absolutely independent individual self, but she has not completely let go of obsession and attachment. She hopes to continue her existence through the Rayleys family, which is enough to show that she yearns for spiritual permanence: she does not seek the eternity brought by books and philosophy, but wants to rely on marriage, memory and other people’s lives to continue the meaning of her life.

The novel also focuses on the contradictions of Mrs. Ramsay: she knows that there is a trace of vanity behind her kindness and generosity. She will secretly think about whether she is also eager to be needed and respected by others, hoping that she can be remembered by others and leave an important mark in other people’s lives. She also frankly admitted that her care for others and her obsession to occupy a place in his life have always been inseparable. But at the same time, she felt that the wall between people was slowly thinning, and all emotions and experiences converged into a river, which also confirmed that her self was relational and not independent. Therefore, Mrs. Ramsay neither calmly accepted death, completely let go of attachment, nor defended her isolated self. She has always wavered in two states: on the one hand, her fragile and small self, and on the other hand, she has a strong desire to maintain her self-worth by relying on family, marriage and social relations. And the meaning of her life is hidden in this contradiction: she sees through the limitations of her independent self and knows how to realize value by connecting with others, but she is deeply attached to and wholeheartedly maintains these interpersonal connections.

In summary, the life choices of the three protagonists have no distinction between high and low. Mr. Ramsay understands the impermanence of the world, but always resists the emotional pain brought by impermanence; Mrs. Ramsay relies on interpersonal relationships to find the meaning of the continuation of life, but she is also deeply vulnerable to interpersonal bonds; Lily has always insisted on artistic creation, but slowly let go of her obsession with the eternity of the work and the recognition of the outside world. The different states of the three people prove that the self is never a two-choice of stubbornness and complete detachment, but a dynamic process full of persistence and ever-changing. By portraying these three states of life, the novel points out the root of human suffering: what really hurts people is never the change of the world itself, but people’s persistent demand that identity, interpersonal relationships and artistic achievements must be stable and never fade away.

The last stroke of Lily’s painting just transformed this life

perception into artistic expression. This painting does not forcibly retain the appearance of Mrs. Ramsay, nor does it resist the passage of time and pursue eternity. It just builds a current and limited connection between memory, loss, perception and artistic form. The precious thing about this work is that it breaks the inherent cognition of completion is eternity, so that artistic creation is no longer a way to escape impermanence, but faces and accepts impermanence’s gentle interpretation.

5. Conclusion

This article interprets *To the Lighthouse* in combination with the relevant concepts of Buddhist modernism. In the novel, the structural design of the establishment and collapse of the center, the flexible and changeable time writing, and the description of people’s emotional dependence and the self-state of interdependence between people are all reinterpreted by Buddhist modernism. The concepts of impermanence, non-self, and nonattachment are highly similar. These similarities are not an attempt to show that Woolf deliberately applied Buddhist theory, but borrowed the perspective of Buddhist modernism, which can explain the characteristics of this novel very well. While the novel innovates the narrative form, it explores the spiritual dilemma of modern people: people have no eternal identity, and there is no absolute and fixed meaning of life.

Borrowing the concept of mandala, it can be clearly seen that the novel repeatedly appears the structure of establishing the center and disintegrating the center. Mrs. Ramsay barely maintained the stable order of the family by emotional efforts and housework; but the second part of the novel wrote that under the washing of death, war and time, this stability was completely overwhelming; in the end, Lily rebuilt a new relationship and order by painting, but she could never return to the complete family state of the past. This process is very similar to the characteristics of forming and dissipating of mandala, but the two are not completely equivalent. Woolf’s narrative does not copy the fixed template of religious ceremonies, and the ending is also open, without giving the ultimate and stable order. Likewise, the unique way of time-writing in the novel is not simply copying the Buddhist concept of time. However, it echoes the impermanence and transience of Buddhism by stretching, compressing and intertwining memories and current feelings, and jointly overturns an inherent cognition: the human self is stable and unchanging, and time is uniform and fixed.

The three core characters in the book make the interpretation of this modernist Buddhist perspective more complex, rather than simply corresponding to the theory. Mr. Ramsay understands the impermanence of the world rationally, but he has always wanted to rely on fame, academic achievements and the sympathy of others to stabilize himself and prove his value. Mrs. Ramsay is good at getting closer to people and dispelling the distance between each other, but she insists on relying on others and marriage to be remembered, which is a kind of obsession that she can’t let go of. And Lily’s final transparent state is neither passively accepting her fate nor giving up creation. While insisting on creation, she calmly accepts that her works may be forgotten and destroyed. Her success is a kind of relief at the artistic level: she creates meaning with her heart, but does not force this meaning to remain forever.

The introduction of Buddhist modernism in this article is not to replace the previous interpretation of Woolf’s novels,

but to supplement and enrich these studies. Previous studies have focused on human psychological continuation, change of consciousness, interpersonal interaction and momentary epiphany of modernism, while Buddhist modernism can combine these text form characteristics with people's psychological state, such as human obsession, impermanence of the world, focusing on the present, and learning to let go. The various Buddhist concepts used in this article come from different branches of Buddhism and are not a set of unified and fixed ancient philosophies. This selective reference itself also reflects the modernization process of Buddhism being reintegrated, transformed and integrated after it was introduced to the West.

Therefore, the most core fit between this novel and Buddhist modernism is not to copy Buddhist doctrines, but to focus on the unstable and uncertain state of life. What Woolf sets in the novel does not teach people to completely transcend and cut off emotions, nor does it dilute loss and sadness. It truly describes the difficulty of letting go of people's inherent identity and obsession, and also tells readers that the impermanence of the world does not mean that the meaning of life, emotions and art will completely disappear. When Lily finished the painting, she knew clearly that the painting would eventually be put on hold and damaged. However, the value of the work is not that it can remain forever and resist time, but that it gives form and meaning to the short life experience.

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