To The Lighthouse Revisited: The Art Economy In Mary Gordon’s Spending

Abstract:

This article examines the legacy of Virginia Woolf to the Spending of Mary Gordon. More than a response to Woolf's vision of a monetary gift to facilitate the creativity of a woman, Gordon's novel also engages To the Lighthouse in her portrayal of a woman painter approaching her talent. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two plays is equally important, as unhappiness over her lost opportunities marks the creative impasse of the heroine in Woolf's book, while excitement over extravagant gifts characterizes the development of the female protagonist toward Gordon's text's success. Gordon's happiness story delineates the possibility opened up by her miserable predecessor by re-visiting Woolf's female artist in wanting England in the 1910s–1920s into a woman painter in fullness in consumerist America in the 1990s. The article was written as part of a gender study series.

Nevertheless, stemming from a desire to write a 'serious erotic novella' at the suggestion of her publisher (Schuessler, 1998: 46), Mary Gordon's Spending (1998) was described as a 'fantasy,' a function that prompted mixed reception. Notwithstanding the intention of the author, negative reviews focus primarily on his lack of seriousness. For example, Bell (1998: 28) reformulates this novel as ' The Unbearable Lightness of Being, ' in Milan Kundera's parody for its ' limited ambitions and effects, ' a formula that coincides with Corrigan's (1998) criticism that Gordon's ' vision of an earthly paradise ... gives us all the unbearable lightness we can bear’. Smith (1998), by contrast, appreciates his 'witty and graphic fantasy.' Under its levity façade, other sympathetic reviewers further discern its seriousness. In general, the reviewer for the Publishers Weekly (1997) praises Gordon for her willingness to be 'unfashionable' by creating a fortunate heroine through which she raises serious questions about music, money and sex.

Among other issues, this controversy points to a split attitude towards fantasy-related happiness: given its importance in human experience, it is considered suspect in contemporary serious literature. In general, a story surrounding a happy female artist is about the counterintuitive; it brings to mind Virginia Woolf's experience of frustration and anger arising in the writing of a woman in her critical essays. Nevertheless, as Hawley (1998: 20) indicates, Spending tends to react to Woolf's perception of an alternate society in which a large sum of money and a room of her own is given to the female artist so that she can create masterpieces equal to those of her male counterpart. Facilitate the creativity of a woman, I will argue, Gordon's novel specifically involves To the Lighthouse in her portrayal of a woman painter coming to terms with her talent and in her recourse to a fairy tale, a genre characterized by contingency celebrations, to express this concern. However, the difference between the two authors in style and cultural background is equally important. Given their difference in shared concerns and expressions, I argue that unhappiness about lost opportunities marks the artistic impasse of the heroine in Woolf's novel, while the pleasure of extravagant gifts characterizes the progress of the female protagonist towards success in Gordon's text. By revising Woolf's female artist in wanting England in the 1910s–1920s into a full-fledged female painter in consumerist America in the 1990s, Gordon's fantasy inscribes the possibility of a feminist triumph over patriarchal art tradition. In the course of exploring Woolf's legacy to Spending, as

the interactive dynamics between these two writers come into clearer focus when viewed through the gift's theoretical lens and affects, I will make references to these two theories of art.

Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay bring their eight children to their summer home in Hebrides (a group of western Scotland islands). Through their house there is a big lighthouse across the bay. James Ramsay, a six-year-old, desperately wants to go to the lighthouse, and Mrs. Ramsay assures him that if the weather allows, they'll go to the next one.

The Ramsays host a number of guests including the dour Charles Tansley, who admires the work of Mr. Ramsay as a philosopher of metaphysics. Lily Briscoe, a young artist who begins a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay, is also at the house. Mrs. Ramsay wants Lily to marry William Bankes, the Ramsay's old friend, but Lily is determined to stay single. Nevertheless, Mrs. Ramsay succeeds in arranging another marriage between Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, two of their relatives.

Paul proposes to Minta during the morning, Lily starts her art, Mrs. Ramsay soothes the resentful James, and Mr. Ramsay frets as a thinker about his shortcomings, turning to Mrs. Ramsay occasionally for warmth. The Ramsays host a seemingly ill-fated dinner party that night. Paul and Minta return late from their beach walk with two of the kids of the Ramsays. Lily bristles at Charles Tansley's outspoken comments, suggesting women can't paint or write. Mr. Ramsay responds rudely when a poet, Augustus Carmichael, asks for a second soup pot. But, as the night goes on, these errors are themselves correct, and the guests come together to make a memorable evening.

Nevertheless, the excitement cannot last, like the party itself, and as Mrs. Ramsay leaves her guests in the dining room, she reflects that the gathering has sunk into the past. She later joins in the parlor with her son. The couple remains together peacefully until their equilibrium is broken by the stereotypical insecurities of Mr. Ramsay. He wants to tell his mother that she loves him. Mrs. Ramsay is not one to make such pronouncements, but she accepts his point made earlier in the day when the weather will be too harsh for the next day's visit to the lighthouse. Mr. Ramsay knows that he is loved by Mrs. Ramsay. Night is falling, and one night is quickly becoming another.

Time passes quicker as the book reaches the chapter 'Time Moves.' War is breaking out throughout Europe. One night, Mrs. Ramsay suddenly dies. Andrew Ramsay, her eldest son, is killed in battle, and Prue's sister dies from a child-related illness. The family is no longer on vacation in their summer house, which is in a state of disrepair: Weeds take over the house's lawn and shelter spiders. Ten years have passed before the return of the family. The housekeeper, Mrs. McNab, hires a couple of other women to help put the house in order. They rescue the house from oblivion and decline, and when Lily Briscoe comes back, everything is in order.

Time returns to the slow detail of shifting points of view in the 'The Lighthouse' section, similar in style to 'The Window.' Mr. Ramsay says he and James and Cam, one of his daughters, are going to travel to the lighthouse. Delays send him into a temper fit on the morning of the trip. The Ramsays set off, and Lily takes her place on the lawn, determined on her last visit to complete a painting that she began but abandoned. James and Cam are bristling at the blustering attitude of their father and humiliated by his constant self-pity. The kids still feel a passion for him as the ship reaches its destination. Even James, whose ability as a sailor

praises Mr. Ramsay, is experiencing a moment of connection with his father, though James resents him so willingly. Lily puts the final touch on her painting across the river. She's making a definite stroke on the canvas and putting down her brush, finally achieving her dream.

Divided into three sections (' The Window, ' ' Time Passes ' and ' The Lighthouse '), the novel may then attempt to remind us of the Victorian era's triple-decker novels (which quickly died out during Woolf's childhood in the 1890s). But if we expect a linear, teleological story with a clear goal and conclusion, our hopes will be reversed, as To the Lighthouse is all about pause, repetition, and inaction. Note that the title, To the Lighthouse, might suggest a journey progressing steadily towards an end goal (compare Woolf's earlier use of the travel motif in The Voyage Out), but what the novel actually gives us is a narrative in which the journey ' to the lighthouse ' is delayed until the end of the novel (and that final section, pointedly titled ' The Lighthouse; ' the preposition was dropped, But was the lighthouse trip really accomplished? After all, it is years later and Woolf3's kids have grown up). Thus the novel remains ostensibly a novel with a linear narrative (as implied by its title and three-part structure), while at the same time it seems to strain against the limits or expectations of such a narrative.

Remember how the novel ends with the lighthouse being reached, and Lily Briscoe finishes her painting (which can be read as a self-reflective touch on Woolf's part, as Woolf, the literary ' actor, ' finishes her portrait of Mrs Ramsay, namely the book, at this moment). Remember how the novel ends with the lighthouse being reached, and Lily Briscoe finishes her painting (which can be read as a self-reflective touch on Woolf's part, as Woolf, the literary ' actor, ' finishes at this moment her portrait of Mrs Ramsay, namely the book).

We can see clearly that subjective experience and viewpoint are key elements of Woolf's book. Mr Ramsay has a very different view of the world from his mother. The two, however, are not as different as they may seem first. For example, Mr Ramsay seems to represent the masculine, patriarchal, linear, and teleological view of the world often followed by the novels of the nineteenth century (where we find out who the killer is, the man and the woman come together, and the final page conveniently ties all loose ends together): He sees ' thought ' as something to be understood linearly, like working through the alphabet from A to Z (there is also an autobiographical suggestion here, as Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, who was Mr Ramsay's model, was the first editor of the National Biography Dictionary, now the ODNB). He also spends part of the early portion of the novel reciting Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade,' which is interesting because it is a Victorian poem by the pre-eminent Victorian poet (Tennyson was a 42-year-old poet laureate), but also because it is a poem about charging, going forward, attacking, advancing. It's also ironic, though, because the' charge' memorialized in Tennyson's poem was a futile and self-destructive military action that resulted in hundreds of men being killed: the light brigade charged to their deaths. But the linear, progressive, masculine quality of Mr Ramsay's reference to this poem is also undermined by the fact that he repeats the same phrase constantly (saying,' and is thus caught in a cyclical world of repetition and return which is at odds with the linearity he ostensibly embodies. Mr Ramsay’s best work also appears to be behind him, and he seems doomed to repeat the same ideas in his later work. He is caught in an ideology of teleological development but cannot develop to any precise ‘end’.

Similarly, the narrative of Mrs Ramsay may embody more ' feminine ' qualities with a focus on cycles, return, nurturing, and selflessness, but these same qualities also point to her complicity in her husband's Victorian patriarchy: She is a traditionalist who thinks that women should be

married, that women should represent their husbands, and that unmarried men and women should not live together too late. In other words, those who are searching for a clear distinction in which Mr Ramsay= linearity and progress and Mrs Ramsay= cycles and return are certainly disappointed.

Work Cited:

1. Bell RH (1998) All expenses paid. Review of the Spending by Mary Gordon. Commonwealth, 10 April, pp 28–29.
2. Bennett A (1996) Mary Gordon. Twayne: New York.
3. Bromberg J (1999) Money, art and sex … Gordon’s novel has it all. Review of Spending by Mary Gordon. National Catholic Reporter, 7 May, p 33.
4. Cooperman JB (1999) The Broom Closet. Peter Lang: New York.
5. Corrigan M (1998) Monica gets it all. Review of Spending by Mary Gordon. The Nation, 10 March, pp 29–31.
6. Derrida J (1992) Given Time; translated by P. Kamuf. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL.
7. DuPlessis RB (1985) Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN.
8. Emerson RW (1997) Gifts. In: Schrift AD (ed). The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity. Routledge: New York, pp 25–27.