

# On the Ambiguity in Virginia Woolf's Novel *To the Lighthouse* from the Perspective of Dual Narrative Procession

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**Abstract:** The characteristic of ambiguity in the novels of the modernist, Virginia Woolf has always been a focus of attention, and the ambiguity in her works has achieved Woolf's aesthetic art and political concerns. This paper finds that the overt plot of Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* contains contradiction between anti-patriarchy and nostalgia for the Victorian era, while the incompatibility of the text hides the covert progression of modern nostalgia. The reasons for the emergence of the ambiguity of dual narrative dynamics are related to the writer's rich creative intentions, Woolf's reader concepts, and free indirect discourse and other ambiguous elements. At the same time, this paper points out that dual narrative progression is an important part of the ambiguity in Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*. It depends and promotes with other ambiguous elements. Therefore, re-examining the ambiguity in *To the Lighthouse* from the perspective of dual narrative progression can not only reveal the literary value of Woolf's works more deeply but also help to explore the poetics of ambiguity in modernist novels.

**Keywords:** dual narrative progression, ambiguity, nostalgia of modernity, *To the Lighthouse*

## 1. Introduction

Ambiguity is one of the significant characteristics of modernist works, which can be translated as vagueness, polysemy, uncertainty, or ambivalence. It is an inevitable and appropriate way for modernist works to express reality. The ambiguity in Virginia Woolf's works encompasses the seven classifications of ambiguity proposed by William Empson. These diverse ambiguities constitute Woolf's essential narrative strategies and render her as a feminist, modernist, and Marxist. Previous studies have often analyzed the characteristics of ambiguity in Woolf's novels from perspectives such as free indirect discourse and feminist narratology, but rarely from the perspective of dual narrative procession in Rhetorical Narratology. On one hand, this is because the theory of dual narrative progression, has been proposed by domestic scholars such as Dan Shen in the past decade and is still in the process of refinement; on the other hand, the close relationship between dual narrative procession and other factors contributing to ambiguity has yet to be fully explored. Therefore, there remains space for discussion on the relationship between ambiguity and dual narrative progression in Woolf's works.

In *A Study of Dual Narrative Progression*, Dan Shen points out: "From Aristotle's focus on plot in ancient Greece to contemporary scholars' exploration of 'narrative progression' the academic community has consistently centered on plot development (which itself may contain different layers and branches). However, I have found that in many fictional narratives, behind the development of the plot, there exists a narrative undercurrent. This undercurrent is neither a branch of the plot nor a hidden layer within it; rather, it forms a self-contained narrative process that runs parallel to the development of the plot from beginning to end. These two narrative movements present different, even opposing trajectories, creating contrasting or complementary relationships in terms of thematic significance, character development, and aesthetic value" (*A Study of Dual Narrative Progression*, 3). I argue that in Woolf's novels, especially in *To the Lighthouse*, there exists dual narrative progression, where the explicit development opposes patriarchy and reminisces about the Victorian era, while the covert progression embodies nostalgia for modernity. These two narrative procession correspond to various narrative modes and implied authorial stances, and the ambiguity in characterization and themes is particularly evident. The underlying reason for this ambiguity is Woolf's writing intention. Without examining the covert progression, readers cannot understand why these two contradictory explicit plots are juxtaposed. In other words, by exploring *To the Lighthouse* from the perspective of dual narrative progression, readers can detect this covert progression of nostalgia of modernity and fully comprehend the aesthetic and reasons for ambiguity in Woolf's novels.

This paper explores the phenomenon of textual ambiguity in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* by examining three aspects, namely the textual contradiction in *To the Lighthouse*, the covert progression—modern nostalgia, and the ambiguous expression of dual narrative procession. By investigating the phenomenon and reasons behind the textual ambiguity, it uncovers Woolf's covert progression. And by exploring the motivations behind dual narrative progression, the paper ulti-

mately sheds light on author's concept of writing and readership.

Dual narrative progression is inseparable from the interactions between elements of ambiguity. The effects of ambiguity can be reflected in syntactic rhetoric and free indirect style as representative discourse, extending to narrative structure, and ultimately to the narrative progression itself. The relationship between dual narrative progression and internal ambiguity can be glimpsed from the definition of ambiguity itself, which is fundamentally an aesthetic based on the author's intention and reader's response. Undoubtedly, dual narrative progression is the largest unit within the text, as well as the starting point of contextualization. It can even be argued that dual narrative progression not only synthesizes the ambiguous characteristics of rhetoric, discourse, character, and theme within the text, but also, through this mutually subversive or complementary narrative mode, guides more readers to delve deeper into the reasons behind them. This approach unfolds from the text, to the author, and to the historical context, providing a comprehensive and relatively objective understanding of Woolf's creative intentions, stylistic features, and political concerns. More importantly, dual narrative progression brings typological research value to the study of ambiguity in modernist authors and their works.

## 2. The Contradiction of Text: Anti-Patriarchy and Nostalgia for the Victorian Family

"First, vagueness, while an age-old problem, pops up everywhere at the beginning of the twentieth century in both philosophical and literary texts" (Modernist Fiction and Vagueness, Quigley x). *To the Lighthouse* is one of Woolf's most ambiguous modernist works, and scholars have widely noted that the ambiguity in *To the Lighthouse* is related to her deployment of free indirect discourse and the confusion between the narrator's voice and the characters' voices. In the classic literary analysis work *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach emphasizes the way Woolf blurs the boundaries between the narrator and characters, arguing that ambiguity and uncertainty are shared thoughts and emotions among modernist writers. As he states in his book, "as a result one is never quite certain that what one hears is being said by the author as he stands outside his novel; the statements sound as though they came from one of the persons involved in the action, or at least from a passer-by who observes the incident" (*Mimesis*, Auerbach 482). "Common to almost all of these novels is haziness, vague indefiniteness of meaning: precisely the kind of uninterpretable symbolism which is also to be encountered in other forms of art of the same period" (*Mimesis*, Auerbach 487).

To explore the ambiguity of dual narrative progression in *To the Lighthouse*, it is essential to first examine the definition of ambiguity. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson classifies different forms of ambiguity, with the fourth, sixth, and seventh types relating specifically to authorial intent and reader response.

The fourth type of ambiguity is defined as, "An ambiguity of the fourth type occurs when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author" (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson 133). This type of ambiguity arises from the author's conflicting thoughts or emotions during the creative process, manifesting as a polysemy of authorial intent. For instance, in "A Sketch of the Past", Woolf's portrayal of her father is always ambiguous, representing her contradictory attitude towards him.

The sixth type of ambiguity, according to Empson, is: "An ambiguity of the sixth type occurs when a statement says nothing, by tautology, by contradiction, or by irrelevant statements; so that the reader is forced to invent statements of his own and they are liable to conflict with one another" (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson 176). This type of ambiguity requires different readers to derive varying meanings from a complex text. For example, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's blending of character dialogue and the narrator's voice demands careful discernment, as readers must differentiate between the perspectives to understand the layered meanings in the narrative.

The seventh type of ambiguity is described as, "An example of the seventh type of ambiguity, or at any rate of the last type of this series, as it is the most ambiguous that can be conceived, occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind" (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson 192). The seventh type is the most ambiguous, manifested as direct opposition within discourse, directly showcasing the author's internal conflicts. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's attitude toward the Victorian family and its values is inherently conflicted. This conflict may transcend the author and be determined by the era in which Woolf lived. While these three types of ambiguity in Empson's analysis focus on poetry, the principles are applicable to dual narrative progression in Woolf's work. The ambiguity of this progression is directly tied to the complexities and multiplicities of authorial intent and reader response.

At what level does ambiguity exist in the narrative mode of *To the Lighthouse*? Many critics have interpreted this work from a feminist perspective. For example, in "Feminism and Gender in *To the Lighthouse*", Gabrielle McIntire states, "With *To the Lighthouse*, then, Woolf generates a fictional autobiography that offers a multipronged feminist indictment of

cultural patriarchy and domestic tyranny while simultaneously beginning to map a poesis of healing from the wounds of the old world order” (The Cambridge Companion to *To the Lighthouse*, Allison 90). McIntire points out the autobiographical characteristics of *To the Lighthouse* and considers it a means for Woolf to heal her trauma. Alternatively, one can approach it from the perspective of nostalgia for Victorian values. “In Virginia Woolf and the Victorians, Steve Ellis argues that her commitment to yet anxiety about modernity coexists with a nostalgia and respect for aspects of Victorian culture threatened by radical social change” (Virginia Woolf and the Victorians, Ellis 2). However, how are these two contradictory themes—opposition to patriarchy and nostalgia for the Victorian era—juxtaposed within the text?

*To the Lighthouse* encompasses two indispensable narrative processes: Woolf’s nostalgia for the Victorian family and her opposition to patriarchy represented by Mr. Ramsay. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf expresses a strong anti-patriarchal tendency. As early as in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf called for the need to kill “the Angel in the House”, urging women to break free from traditional values that constrain them and become women of the new era. The contrasting depictions of father and mother figures in the novel starkly contrast; by negating the tyrannical image of the father, Woolf expresses sympathy for the mother’s endurance and repression, and the arrival at the lighthouse and Lily’s completion of her painting symbolize the mother’s victory.

However, an undeniable contradiction exists within the work. As mentioned earlier, Woolf expresses nostalgia and respect for the Victorian era in this piece. For example, in *Character and Mourning: Woolf, Faulkner, and the Novel Elegy of the First World War*, Erin Penner notes, “She addresses the deaths of her parents directly in *To the Lighthouse*, the 1927 novel that has prompted the most work on Woolf and mourning” (Character and Mourning, Penner 5).

In short, while the work expresses feminist themes, it also highlights Woolf’s longing for the idyllic image of her past family life. In the narrative, Mr. Ramsay is viewed as a great figure by characters like Tansley, Carmichael, and Mrs. Ramsay; however, from the perspective of more detached observers like Banks and Lily, Mr. Ramsay, although a narrow-minded and selfish tyrant, is also an admirable and graceful scholar. As Banks and Lily discuss at the seaside, “He was anxious that Lily Briscoe should not disparage Ramsay (a great man in his own way) yet should understand how things stood between them” (*To the Lighthouse*, 21).

This is why Lily expresses her feelings when she sees the Ramsay couple walking by the sea: “And suddenly the meaning which, for no reason at all, as perhaps they are stepping out of the Tube or ringing a doorbell, descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative, came upon them, and made them in the dusk standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife” (*To the Lighthouse*, 72). Research indicates that Mr. Ramsay’s various traits and Mrs. Ramsay’s “Angel in the House” image harmonize with her own values, constituting the traditional ideal couple in Lily’s eyes. It is their management of the household that creates a warm atmosphere among family and guests. The disintegration of the family following Mrs. Ramsay’s death results in a stark contrast between the house in the second part, “Time Passes” and the previously royal garden-like home, underscoring Woolf’s nostalgia for past life and values.

I observe the contradiction between these two overt plots, as I have mentioned. What’s more, I note that if this is an anti-patriarchal novel, the third part named “The Lighthouse” seems to be redundant, since the second part has already portrayed a fragmented family, where the mother’s death render the family scattered, and no matter how capable the father is, he cannot bring warmth to the family. Conversely, if the work is viewed solely as a reminiscence of parents and family, the satire of family values that runs throughout the piece becomes mere discordant note. Additionally, in “New Explorations in Narratology: An International Dialogue on the Theory of Dual Narrative Processes”, Dan Shen points out that Feng Duan’s discussion of different target readerships for literary fairy tales reveals an overlooked interpretive phenomenon: when sympathetic adult readers interpret *The Happy Prince* based on biographical sources about Oscar Wilde, or when adult readers read this work in a collection of “male homosexual literature”, they tend to see gay love as the central theme. As a result, the narrative undercurrents created by Wilde behind the plot are foregrounded in these readers’ interpretations (“New Explorations in Narratology”, 111).

Due to differences in knowledge background and identity, different readers may foreground different narrative processes in the same text. There exists overt plot contradictions in Woolf’s works, particularly *To the Lighthouse*. And the relationship between anti-patriarchy and nostalgia for the Victorian era may present different foregrounding cognitive patterns depending on different occasions and perspectives. This disharmony is one of the elements that Woolf employs to create artistic ambiguity, necessitating an exploration of the author’s creative intentions for deeper understanding.

In “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf expresses a love-hate relationship with her father: “and it was the tyrant father—the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centred, the self-pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternately loved and hated father—that dominated me then” (Moments of Being, 116). She loves her father because he is a knowledgeable and democratic figure who allows his children to pursue their interests, but he is also a volatile and authoritarian old

man. This contradiction in character aligns closely with the portrayal of Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. The novel cannot simply be viewed as an anti-patriarchal or nostalgic work.

Woolf mentions in her diary that her works are more akin to elegies than novels: “But while I try to write, I am making up ‘*To the Lighthouse*’—the sea is to be heard all through it. I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant ‘novel’. A new by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?” (Diary Three, 34, This disharmony is one of the elements that Woolf employs to create artistic ambiguity, necessitating an exploration of the author’s creative intentions for deeper understanding). The successive deaths of her family members indeed imbue Woolf’s writing with a nostalgic quality. At the beginning of her creation of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf often recalled the image and voice of her mother. The novel is largely a family biography based on her own family, yet it diverges from the conventional biography format. In her essay “The Art of Biography”, Woolf expresses her creative philosophy: “Micawber and Miss Bates we may be certain will survive Lockhart’s Sir Walter Scott and Lytton Strachey’s Queen Victoria. For they are made of more enduring matter” (The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, 196). In other words, Woolf believes that the imagination and artistry in biography surpass the facts themselves.

Similarly, Woolf’s concept of an elegy diverges from the traditional form, which typically celebrates and idealizes the greatness of the deceased, such as parents, nor does it indulge in sentimental outpourings. As Penner points out, “By challenging the role of the dead in public and national identity narratives, Woolf and Faulkner reclaim the elegiac subject from eulogy—which strips him or her of individuality—and from neglect, when his or her death merely serves as the occasion for others’ reflections. Woolf and Faulkner champion the significance of the dead, reconstructing the stories that link the dead to the world of the living” (Character and Mourning, Penner 3). In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay remains vividly present throughout the novel. Whether in the experiential perspective of the first part or in the retrospective perspective of the third part, she has a vivid image and personality, just like a real person in daily life. Furthermore, Woolf explicitly states in her diary that she dislikes the word “sentimental”: “The word ‘sentimental’ sticks in my gizzard (I’ll write it out of me in a story—Ann Watkins of New York is coming on Wednesday to enquire about my stories). But this theme may be sentimental; father & mother & child in the garden: the death; the sail *to the lighthouse*” (Diary Three, 36). Therefore, *To the Lighthouse*, this seemingly sentimental anti-sentimental novel, may not solely serve to commemorate parents and reminisce about the past, but rather to uncover the narrative undercurrents hidden behind this overt process, revealing Woolf’s deeper aesthetic philosophy and political concerns

### 3. The Covert Progression — Nostalgia of Modernity

As mentioned above, *To the Lighthouse* should not be simply regarded as an anti-patriarchal or familial biography. Instead, one needs to discover the covert progression running parallel to the plot development within the layout of the novel and the conflicting details. Only by revealing this narrative undercurrent can we explain the contradictions and disharmonies of the overt plot, which is also what Empson refers to as the fourth and sixth types of ambiguity. By exploring the layout of the novel and the details that float outside the plot, one can find that the covert progression hidden behind the overt plot is a nostalgia for modernity.

In “The Window” section, which occupies three-fifths of the entire text, describes in detail the typical Victorian family and marriage represented by the Ramsay family. This part appears so comprehensive that the continuation into the second and third parts may seem unnecessary. Thus, we can reasonably speculate that the roles of the latter two parts are related to Woolf’s creative intentions. Moreover, “The Lighthouse” section contains numerous details that conflict with the overt process. First, Mr. Ramsay no longer seeks sympathy and love from women. After failing to find comfort, he actively demonstrates his shoelace-tying technique under Lily’s guidance. This detail, seemingly in conflict with the entire overt plot, proves that Mr. Ramsay, can take on her role or has grown into a male figure independent of the domestic angel. After realizing his transformation, Lily wishes to express her affection for him and subtly criticizes the children’s attitudes towards their father. The text further describes Mr. Ramsay’s change during a conversation with a Spanish gentleman and a fisherman, where the father even praises James. The action of “going *to the lighthouse*” itself represents not just Mr. Ramsay’s first concession to his wife, but rather his nostalgia for her, indicating his acceptance of her self-expression. Through the passage of time, observing the conflicting details in the third part reveals that the Ramsay family reaches a reconciliation. In the eyes of Cam and James, the father before them can be separated from the tyrant (189-90). This reconciliation itself reflects Woolf’s reflective nostalgia for the past and her more nuanced view of her own family history, explaining the contradictory portrayal of the father figure and the simultaneous presence of anti-patriarchal themes and nostalgia for the past. Notably, Lily’s act of painting runs throughout the covert progression. The ten-year span corresponds to the distance of Lily’s painting, connecting Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, and the boat *to the lighthouse*, forming a stable triangular structure. Lily’s realization of this



connection allows her to complete her post-impressionist painting akin to Cézanne. Thus, the completion of the painting embodies the narrative progression of future-oriented nostalgia and conveys Woolf's Post-Impressionist vision of reality.

Critiquing patriarchy and reminiscing about the Victorian family are treated as overt plot, because readers can easily discern these two narrative processes at the plot level. However, the covert progression of modernity nostalgia, exemplified by the completion of Lily's painting, has rarely been pointed out by scholars, as it does not operate within the plot itself. No matter how deeply one digs into the underlying meanings of the plot, one cannot uncover this independently running the covert progression. As Dan Shen points out, "In works with dual narrative dynamics, if one cannot perceive the covert progression, no matter what methods are employed or how deeply and meticulously the analysis is conducted, one is bound to misunderstand or completely misinterpret the thematic connotations, character portrayals, and aesthetic values of the work, which past literary studies have often overlooked" (Research on Dual Narrative Processes, 67). Woolf's expression of nostalgia in *To the Lighthouse* is both a forward-looking nostalgia towards the future and a reflection on her own family, imagined as an object of critique, creating a new home that differs from past realities.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym states, "Nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (*The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym XIII). "Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales" (*The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym XVI). The nostalgia in *To the Lighthouse*, on the level of the overt plot, represents a yearning for the past, which is retrospective nostalgia; however, the nostalgia within the covert progression is prospective, as it aims for a better future. As scholar Xian Zhou posits, modernity encompasses both nostalgic and innovative dimensions: "Modern nostalgia is a product of modernity; this is the most essential and straightforward dialectic of modern nostalgia" (Zhou Xian 6). Nostalgia, while a shared sentiment, represents a personalized, imaginative act of creation and reflection. For Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* is partly a reflection on past idyllic times, yet as an experimental modernist writer, her creative vision aligns more with using nostalgia as a vehicle for envisioning the future. Events such as Mrs. Ramsay's death and the outbreak of war lead Mr. Ramsay to alter his views on family and marriage and to reassess a series of values—changes that Woolf wished to see. Therefore, Woolf states in several diary entries that this is a novel written for her father: "But the center is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished, each alone*, while he crushes a dying mackerel—However, I must refrain" (Diary Three, 18-19).

To better understand the covert progression in *To the Lighthouse*, one must reflect on the connotation of modernity nostalgia. Boym defines this nostalgia-laden modernity as, "There is in fact a tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia, which I will call off-modern. ... Off-modernism offered a critique of both the modern fascination with newness and no less modern reinvention of tradition. In the off-modern tradition, reflection and longing, estrangement and affection go together" (*The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym XVI-XVII). This explains why Woolf's novels are often seen as elegies for loved ones, but this elegiac form is also an objectively detached modernist elegy. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf seeks to guide readers to reflect on the imagery of the Victorian era through this repetitive imagination. In "The Window" section, most of the time, the image of the mother is portrayed as submissive, enduring, and self-sacrificing. However, subtle conflicts in the narrative reveal another dimension to her character: she is capable of launching into lengthy monologues about dairy policies and even recognizes that Lily, by the age of forty, may be more attractive than Minta. Mrs. Ramsay embodies a feminine quality that differs from John Ruskin's description in *Sesame & Lilies*, a quality suppressed by Victorian values—a suppression that contributes to Mrs. Ramsay's gradual decline. It is precisely aware of the reason why Mrs. Ramsay faded away and resenting the suppression that leads Woolf to design the subsequent sections, "Time Passes" and "The Lighthouse" to critique the limitations and obsolescence of Victorian marriage ideals. In "Time Passes" through the marriage of Minta and Paul, as well as the deaths of Paul and Andrew, readers observe that the values of the past are unable to adapt to the new era, with underlying issues erupting over the course of this decade of change. The changes in the father's image in "The Lighthouse" represent Woolf's vision for future marriages and families. It is precisely for this reason that Mr. Ramsay gains the understanding and respect of his children and Lily. Just as James suddenly realizes, his resentment is not directed toward Mr. Ramsay himself but toward the "tyrant" aspect of his character—the figure that exploited his mother. It is the "tyrant" James imagines killing with a knife. Through James's perspective, readers grasp Woolf's vision of a future grounded in the traditions of the past. The covert progression of modernity nostalgia not only expresses Woolf's views on family, biography, and feminism but also conveys a post-impressionist the concept of reality, influenced by the Bloomsbury Group through Lily's artistic process.

In a letter to Roger Fry, Woolf explicitly states that *To the Lighthouse* is a work dedicated to him: "I am immensely glad that you like the Lighthouse. Now I wish I had dedicated it to you" (Letter 3 385). Fry, in his reply, also notes that the

post-impressionist artistic approach aligns with Woolf's novelistic creation: "I see, now that I have done it, that it was meant for Mrs. Virginia Woolf — that Surriage is almost precisely the same thing in paint that Mrs. Virginia Woolf is in prose" (Virginia Woolf, *The Echoes Enslaved*, McLaurin 208). From the very beginning of *To the Lighthouse*, the question of whether Lily will paint is raised, and her painting process runs throughout the novel. As a conscious outsider, Lily explores the notion of reality through experience and retrospection; her recollections of Mrs. Ramsay and understanding of the Ramsay family are inseparable from the act of painting. In other words, Lily's reflections on reality encompass her thoughts on ideal marriage and on the nature of artistic authenticity in literary and visual art.

Artists like Woolf have long been exploring what constitutes reality. Woolf is dissatisfied with the materialists led by Arnold Bennett and is also critical of the conservative attitudes of the psychological novelists of the George era. In her essay "Modern Fiction," she asserts, "but centered in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond?" (*The Common Reader*, 151). Lily's "painting of the mother and child" remains unfinished in the "The Window" section, which aligns with Woolf's rejection of both Impressionist and materialist portrayals of surface detail. Instead, Woolf's narrative suggests a search for deeper meaning. Lily grapples with how to connect Mr. Ramsay and her image of the mother and child, exploring how to create a composition that encapsulates not just visual likeness but the emotional truth behind these figures. In other words, Woolf's conception of reality is neither the trivial life of materialists nor the accumulation of consciousness by psychological novelists. In December 1910, following the post-impressionist art exhibition, Woolf concluded that "human character changed" and *To the Lighthouse* is a masterwork created under the influence of post-impressionist realism. So, what does this literary conception of realism entail? Roger Fry's advocacy for post-impressionism inherits the tradition of impressionism, emphasizing momentariness; unlike impressionism, post-impressionism stresses significant moments, that is, sense-data expressed in the brain through a certain aesthetic form. In simpler terms, post-impressionist emphasizes moments and the expression of "significant form" in relation to corresponding aesthetic emotions. Therefore, the mother-child portrait painted by Lily in "The Window" section cannot be completed — which aligns with Woolf's rejection of both Impressionist and materialist portrayals of surface detail. Lily contemplates in the novel: how to connect Mr. Ramsay with the mother-child portrait, "For whatever reason she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary. There was something perhaps wrong with the design?" (193). In fact, after experiencing "Time Passes" the answer emerges. The reminiscence of the Ramsay family, represented by Mrs. Ramsay, is transformed from a temporal perspective into Lily's spatial depiction of them. The boat Mr. Ramsay takes to the lighthouse serves as a vertex, with Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay as the other two vertices, forming a triangular structure that results in a Cézanne-like post-impressionist painting. Thus, the settings of "Time Passes" and "The Lighthouse" are not merely critiques of patriarchy or simple nostalgia for deceased loved ones and Victorian values; they represent a more complete form. By combining experiential perspectives with retrospective perspectives, Lily and others, including Mr. Ramsay, achieve a modern transformation in their memory of Mrs. Ramsay. Above all, the covert progression allows readers to critically examine the Ramsays' family views and the values of the Victorian era, and achieves the will of the idyllic nostalgia for the past and modernity nostalgia.

In summary, the covert progression of modernity nostalgia in *To the Lighthouse* reflects Woolf's future-oriented nostalgia based on the past, serving as an important means of expressing her literary conception of reality. Together with the overt plot, they constitute a rich thematic and aesthetic depth. This study will next examine why Woolf presents dual narrative progression in the novel and the relationship between dual narrative progression and other factors of narrative ambiguity.

#### 4. The Ambiguity of Dual Narrative Progression

*To the Lighthouse* is one of Virginia Woolf's most ambiguous modernist works, and dual narrative progression embedded in the text is not accidental. First, the covert progression in the novel is modernity nostalgia, conveying Woolf's literary conception of reality. Modernity nostalgia is a recurring theme in Woolf's expression, and *To the Lighthouse* serves as a modernist work that mourns the Victorian tradition, similar to her other novels. Biographical and elegiac literature commemorates family and the past while creating imaginative and reflective historical works, akin to Walter Benjamin's notion of "angel of history" who "remembers the catastrophes which have occurred and keeps the past alive in the present" (Virginia Woolf, *Modernity and History Constellations with Walter Benjamin*, Spiropoulou 90). It is important to note that modernity nostalgia itself carries ambiguity; the content depicted in the works often pertains to the past or the deaths of loved ones, and the commemoration of the past is perceived by readers as an explicit plot, yet it is challenging to recognize this past as a creatively artistic one, akin to the differences in "return home" Woolf's genuine expression of nostalgia is a kind of "future nostalgia" as Penner describes: "In Bakhtinian language, Woolf and Faulkner write 'novelized' elegy, elegies that contain 'an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality'"

(Character and Mourning, Penner 18). Elegies not only mourn the past but also embody a sense of futurity. This compels modernity nostalgia to be realized within the covert progression.

Secondly, Woolf's reader ideology aims to cultivate critical thinking skills in readers during the reading process, which contributes to the formation of dual narrative progression. Woolf opposes patriarchy and didactic propaganda, contrasting with the political figures and nationalist poets of her time, who often employed oratory and incitement to lead ordinary people into battle with overly romantic chivalric ideals, particularly during World War I. As described in *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*, Cuddy-Keane Melba illustrates how a night school student, like Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is lured to the battlefield by national poetry: "Woolf's Septimus Smith takes Leonard Bast's victimization to the next stage. If reading for Leonard produces a distanced, abstract worship of beauty, for Septimus, the ideal of beauty becomes wedded to an equally abstract ideal of England, with the terrible and ironic result that spiritual, cultural abstraction draws him into an all-too-physical field of war" (*Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*, Cuddy-Keane 84). This kind of inducement through political propaganda is precisely what Woolf detests and hopes readers will resist. Therefore, in "How Should One Read a Book?", Woolf emphasizes, "The only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions" (*The Second Common Reader*, 234). Woolf desires readers to engage independently with the task of reading and thinking, rather than being influenced by preconceived notions or others' comments. To cultivate this critical thinking in readers, Woolf not only employed essays and critiques but also infused her novelistic creation with a dialogical approach.

Thus, it is evident that Woolf believes impactful contemporary art is not achieved through a omniscient narrator but through a multifaceted presentation of truth via multiple perspectives. Moreover, she perceives truth as a dual reality, and during the creation of *To the Lighthouse*, she particularly explores consciousness novels. The concurrent use of free indirect discourse and dual narrative progression was timely. This inevitably results in ambiguity and uncertainty, yet such ambiguous works can always persuade readers. The positioning of readers in her works varies greatly, reflecting Woolf's attempt to engage a larger readership and actively cultivate their reading styles, particularly through the typical work *To the Lighthouse*.

From the overt plot perspective, as an anti-patriarchal novel, *To the Lighthouse* attracts feminists; as biographical literature, it appeals to readers interested in Victorian culture. More importantly, from a covert progression perspective, Woolf created a more authentic post-impressionist work, one that resonates with contemporary readers, thereby inevitably attracting more elite audiences. Hence, different readers can position themselves behind various implicit authors, uncovering unique ideological connotations. Woolf's potential readers encompass both genders and all classes, offering diverse reading pleasures. Through ambiguity, Woolf differentiates and attracts traditional readers, striving for the largest readership possible. This writing intention necessitates Woolf's adoption of free indirect discourse and the strategy of dual narrative progression. However, Woolf's writing intentions extend beyond this.

The existence of works characterized by the ambiguity of dual narrative progression serves as excellent material to guide readers' interpretations. As a democratic intellectual, Woolf seeks an egalitarian, dialogical exchange with the public rather than a didactic approach. However, she also aims to guide readers to achieve autonomy and get critical thinking abilities. Dual narrative progression requires readers to engage with a "turn & turn about" reading method: "The sentence thus encapsulates a distinctive feature in Woolf's 'turn & turn about' technique: she adopts a focalization only to disrupt it, and this disruption alters the positioning of the reader in relation to the text" (*Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*, Cuddy-Keane 139). Through her narrative strategies, Woolf hopes to enable her ordinary readers to experience this critical thinking, thereby fostering self-education among the general populace and further promoting the development of a democratic society. Thus, Woolf emerges as a modernist, feminist, and Marxist figure.

Finally, it is crucial to examine the interactions among the elements of ambiguity to understand the causes of dual narrative progression. Dual narrative progression are often found in modernist works, specifically in texts characterized by discursive ambiguity or uncertainty. This contradiction or ambiguity stems from the simultaneous presence of both the narrator's narrative and the character's narrative due to free indirect discourse. Readers can clearly perceive character voices in the work, yet sometimes these are undermined by the authority of the narrator, whose detached stance diminishes their impact. Taking *To the Lighthouse* as an elegiac novel, it asserts, "Neither narrator nor elegist is given a privileged position; instead, both authors invest in character as a means of reestablishing the significance of social and historical context" (Character and Mourning, Penner 18). The weakening of the narrator's authority and the multiplicity of characters' voices increase the ambiguity and uncertainty; ambiguity arises from the antagonism between the narrator's and character's voices or from the unreliability of the narrative, indirectly leading to various textual contradictions in the plot's development and corresponding the covert progression. In summary, the ambiguity present in dual narrative progression is largely the result of the meticulous design of the implicit author, which reduces the authority of the narrative voice and enhances character discourse instead, re-

flecting a power tension among different character voices. The following section will analyze the potential of dual narrative progression from the discourse perspective using *To the Lighthouse* as an example.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the voices of characters and the narrator are nearly indistinguishable, making it difficult for readers to discern and differentiate them. Almost in every section of “The Window” part, the Ramsay children express their dissatisfaction with their father and Tansley who repeat, “There’ll be no landing at the lighthouse tomorrow” (*To the Lighthouse* 7), even though their mother always comforts them with, “Perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing” (*To the Lighthouse* 15). This stark contrast makes it easy for readers to identify the anti-patriarchal plot. For instance, the depiction of Mrs. Ramsay as a beautiful domestic angel emerges from multiple characters’ consciousness, making it a convincing image that leads readers to perceive her as gentle, patient, and self-sacrificing. However, readers often overlook Mrs. Ramsay’s greater refinement and insight compared to Mr. Ramsay, particularly her eagerness to comment on societal issues. For example, when Mr. Ramsay angrily scolds Mrs. Ramsay for telling the children it might rain tomorrow, her internal thoughts reflect, “To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people’s feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that” (*To the Lighthouse* 32). Mrs. Ramsay silently resists her husband’s tempestuous temperament and narrow-mindedness. Readers who only recognize Mrs. Ramsay as the domestic angel find it challenging to access such nuances, highlighting the reading obstacles and ambiguity of the text.

Similarly, readers identifying the anti-patriarchal plot may consciously ignore Mr. Ramsay’s virtues — his love for children, erudition, good upbringing, and sacrifices for the family. In other words, those characters critiquing Mr. Ramsay often overshadow the narrator’s portrayal of his other qualities. Consequently, readers might find themselves struggling with the inconsistency of the plot. Questions arise: What kind of person is Mr. Ramsay? Why is he considered the greatest man? Readers often fail to arrive at definite answers to these questions because the narrator’s authority diminishes while the character’s voices manifest multiplicity, producing an effect of ambiguity. This relates to Empson’s sixth type of ambiguity, where readers’ understanding and interpretation of meaning are contradictory and unable to unify.

It is evident that the application of free indirect discourse, the blending of narrator and character voices, and dual narrative progression are mutually reinforcing. The ambiguity within the work, from rhetorical units like irony and symbolism to larger stylistic units such as free indirect discourse, as well as themes and characters, is all indicative of the ambiguity within Woolf’s texts, which is inseparable from her creative philosophy and reader guidance philosophy. In other words, the author’s concept of writing and the ideal reader’s readership she espouses determine the ambiguity of her works and the necessity of employing dual narrative progression. In brief, ambiguity expression requires the completion of dual narrative progression which serves as an intermediary unit for ambiguity expression. The use of techniques like irony, symbolism, free indirect discourse, and the juxtaposition of narrator and character voices significantly contribute to the realization of dual narrative progression while dual narrative progression itself better reflects the ambiguity effects of other smaller units.

## 5. Conclusion

The introduction of dual narrative progression has liberated rhetorical narrative studies from merely static or dynamic investigations focused on plot, creating a new theoretical pathway and mode of thinking. By focusing on narrative’s smaller units and integrating textual and contextual analysis, this approach breaks free from the limitations of previous studies, infusing narratology with multidimensional vitality. On one hand, dual narrative progression enriches the meanings of concepts such as implied author, ideal reader, unreliable narration, and narrative modes within classical narratology, which making the concepts present features of polysemy; on the other hand, with the path of contextualization, it deepens intricate connections with the research methods and theoretical objectives of Cultural Materialism and New Historicism.

This paper reexamines the ambiguity in *To the Lighthouse* through the lens of dual narrative progression. It first reveals the textual contradictions within the overt process, and then seeks the covert progression— modernity nostalgia behind these contradictions between anti-patriarchal sentiments and nostalgia for the Victorian era. Finally, by elucidating the author’s intentions behind the emergence of dual narrative progression, it becomes evident that Woolf not only actively practices her literary conception of reality in her writing but also successfully conveys her ideals of pacifism as democratic intellectual by embedding methods that cultivate readers’ autonomy and critical engagement. It is essential to acknowledge that Woolf’s dual narrative progression is inseparable from the interactions among various elements of ambiguity. The ambiguity of dual narrative progression and its bilateral cooperation and multifaceted interaction with other ambiguous elements ensure that the aesthetics of ambiguity permeates multiple fields, including stylistics, narratology, and cultural studies, and holds immense exploratory value and academic significance. Thus, it can be concluded that dual narrative progression not only contributes to the field of narratology by providing new perspectives, but also serves as a typological approach for studying



the works of modernist marked by ambiguity and the authors behind them.

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