

RECONSTRUCTING INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL IDENTITY: A NEW LIBERAL READING OF AUTONOMY, PROGRESS, AND DOMESTIC SPACE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

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Abstract

This paper explores To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf through the critical framework of New Liberalism, a socio-political theory emerging in late 19th and early 20th century Britain that advocated for a balance between individual autonomy and collective welfare. Woolf's novel, written during the interwar period, reflects a conscious break from Victorian ideals and aligns with New Liberal notions that emphasize self-realization, ethical individualism, and the transformation of social institutions, particularly the family and gendered domestic roles. Through a close reading of central characters—particularly Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe—the paper analyzes how Woolf presents a nuanced negotiation between personal freedom and social constraint within the domestic sphere. Mrs. Ramsay's adherence to traditional femininity and her role as the emotional nucleus of the household contrast sharply with Lily's rejection of domestic expectations in pursuing of artistic autonomy. The novel's modernist narrative techniques, such as stream of consciousness and temporal fragmentation, further mirror the New Liberal ideal of subjective moral development over rigid societal conformity. Additionally, the paper examines how the physical and symbolic structure of the Ramsay home reflects broader debates around gender, identity, and social progress. By situating To the Lighthouse within the context of New Liberalism, this study reveals Woolf's implicit advocacy for a society that fosters both personal growth and ethical responsibility—a reimagining of domestic and artistic space not as sites of repression, but of potential transformation. Ultimately, this intersection of modernist literature and political theory highlights Woolf's contribution to a progressive literary redefinition of identity, community, and human development.

Keywords:

New Liberalism, Individual autonomy, Social reform, Domestic space, Gender roles, Ethical individualism, Modernism, Identity formation

Introduction:

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) stands as a seminal work in modern literature and it offers a profound exploration of individual and social identity within the domestic sphere. Set against the backdrop of early 20th-century Britain—a period marked by significant socio-political transformations—the novel delves into the complexities of autonomy, progress, and domesticity. This study seeks to examine *To the Lighthouse* through the lens of New Liberalism, a socio-political ideology that emerged in late 19th and early 20th-century Britain, advocating for a balance between individual freedom and collective welfare. New Liberalism, as articulated by thinkers like L.T. Hobhouse and T.H. Green, emphasized the role of the state in ensuring not just political freedom but also social and economic conditions conducive to individual development. This perspective marked a departure from classical liberalism's emphasis on laissez-faire policies, recognizing that true autonomy required positive intervention to address social inequalities. In the context of Woolf's narrative, this ideological shift resonates with the characters' struggles for self-realization within the confines of traditional domestic roles (Fernández Carbajal, 2014).

Woolf's narrative technique, characterized by stream of consciousness and temporal fragmentation, mirrors the New Liberal emphasis on subjective experience and moral development. The novel's structure challenges linear storytelling, reflecting the fluidity of time and consciousness a hallmark of modernist literature. This stylistic choice underscores the internal conflicts of characters like Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, who navigate the tensions between societal expectations and personal aspirations. Mrs. Ramsay embodies the traditional feminine ideal, anchoring her identity in domestic responsibilities and relational roles. Her character reflects the prevailing Victorian norms that New Liberalism sought to reform. In contrast, Lily Briscoe's pursuit of artistic autonomy and rejection of conventional domesticity align with the New Liberal vision of ethical individualism and the transformation of social institutions. Through these contrasting figures, Woolf critiques the limitations imposed by rigid gender roles and advocates for a reimagined domestic space that fosters personal growth and social progress (Sorum, 2022).

Furthermore, the physical setting of the Ramsay household serves as a microcosm for broader societal structures. The house, with its gendered spaces and symbolic significance, encapsulates the interplay between private life and public ideology. Woolf's portrayal of domestic space challenges traditional notions of the home as a site of female confinement, instead presenting it as a potential arena for self-expression and transformation (Koenigsberger, 2007). By situating *To the Lighthouse* within the framework of New Liberalism, this study illuminates Woolf's nuanced engagement with contemporary political thought. Her narrative not only reflects the ideological currents of her time but also contributes to the discourse on identity, autonomy, and the potential for societal reform. Through a critical examination of character dynamics, narrative structure, and spatial symbolism, this analysis reveals Woolf's implicit advocacy for a society that harmonizes individual fulfillment with collective responsibility (Wang, & Stevenson, 2025).

Literature Review:

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) has been extensively studied for its innovative narrative techniques and profound exploration of identity, gender roles, and domestic space. Recent scholarship has increasingly contextualized Woolf's work within socio-political frameworks, notably New Liberalism is a progressive strand of liberal thought that emerges in late 19th and early 20th-century Britain. This literature review synthesizes key academic discussions that inform a New Liberal reading of *To the Lighthouse*, focusing on themes of individual autonomy, ethical individualism, and the transformation of domestic spaces (Darvay, 2016). New Liberalism, as articulated by thinkers like L.T. Hobhouse and T.H. Green, emphasized the role of the state in ensuring not just political freedom but also social and economic conditions conducive to individual development. This perspective marked a departure from classical liberalism's emphasis on laissez-faire policies, recognizing that true autonomy required positive intervention to address social inequalities. The ideology posits that individual freedom is not merely the absence of restraint but the presence of conditions that allow for personal growth and ethical responsibility (Franck, 1997).

Woolf's writings exhibit a nuanced engagement with liberal ideologies, particularly concerning individual autonomy and social reform. In *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*, Anna Snaith explores how Woolf navigated the dichotomy between personal freedom and societal expectations, reflecting the New Liberal emphasis on balancing individual rights with collective welfare. Woolf's characters often grapple with internal desires and external obligations, embodying the tensions inherent in New Liberal thought. The domestic sphere in *To the Lighthouse* serves as a microcosm for examining gender dynamics and social structures. In *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place*, Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth analyze how Woolf's depiction of domestic spaces

challenges traditional gender roles and reflects broader societal shifts. The Ramsay household, with its gendered divisions and emotional undercurrents, becomes a site where characters negotiate their identities and roles within the family and society (Snaith, & Whitworth, 2007).

Woolf's modernist narrative techniques, such as stream of consciousness and temporal fragmentation, align with New Liberal ideals of subjective moral development. These techniques allow for a deeper exploration of characters' inner lives and ethical considerations. In *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History*, Angeliki Spiropoulou discusses how Woolf's narrative strategies reflect a modernist concern with individual perception and historical consciousness, resonating with New Liberal emphasis on personal growth and societal progress. The intersection of Woolf's literary work with political theory has been a focal point in recent scholarship. In *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace*, Jeanne Dubino examines how Woolf's engagement with contemporary political and social issues influenced her writing and publishing practices. Woolf's nuanced portrayal of characters who seek personal fulfillment while navigating societal constraints mirrors New Liberal ideals of ethical individualism and social responsibility. Understanding social factors are also considered important by Akram et al. (2021) and (2022). The convergence of New Liberal thought and Woolf's literary exploration in *To the Lighthouse* offers a rich framework for analyzing themes of autonomy, progress, and domestic space. By situating Woolf's novel within this socio-political context, scholars can gain deeper insights into her critique of traditional gender roles, her advocacy for individual ethical development, and her vision of a society that harmonizes personal freedom with collective welfare (Kelly, 2022).

Rationale

The early 20th century marked a profound shift in the socio-political and cultural landscapes of Britain, driven by the decline of Victorian moral absolutism and the rise of modernist thought. In this context, New Liberalism emerged as a pivotal ideological movement, advocating for a socially responsible form of individual freedom, one which emphasized ethical development, state intervention, and reform of traditional institutions such as the family. Virginia Woolf, writing during this transformative period, was acutely aware of these shifts and encoded their tensions into her fiction. *To the Lighthouse* is a particularly rich site for examining the interplay between evolving political thought and literary modernism. Previous criticism has explored its feminist and modernist dimensions, yet its potential alignment with New Liberal ideologies remains underexamined. This study addresses that gap by positioning Woolf's work in direct dialogue with New Liberal principles, offering a new lens through which to read the novel's treatment of autonomy, gender, and the domestic sphere.

By reinterpreting the characters and structure of *To the Lighthouse* through the ethical and social concerns of New Liberalism, this paper contributes to broader discussions in literary studies (Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024; Ramzan & Khan, 2019), political theory, and gender criticism, illuminating the novel's subtle advocacy for a reformed social and moral order.

Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive critical attention to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, much of the scholarship has focused on its formal innovations, feminist insights, or existential themes, often in isolation from concurrent political ideologies. While some critics have noted Woolf's engagement with social reform, there remains a lack of sustained analysis connecting *To the Lighthouse* with New Liberalism—a framework that emphasizes ethical individualism, the reconfiguration of domestic roles, and state-supported personal development. This oversight

results in an incomplete understanding of how Woolf's narrative reflects, critiques, and aligns with key social discourses of her time. Moreover, the symbolic significance of domestic space in the novel—especially its intersection with gendered identity and social progress—has not been fully explored through the lens of liberal reformist thought. Ahmad et al. (2022) and Amjad et al. (2021) also affirm this. This limits our capacity to see Woolf as a writer not only of personal liberation but also of collective ethical transformation.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons:

1. **Theoretical Innovation:** By applying New Liberal political theory to Woolf's modernist fiction, the paper bridges a gap between literary criticism and political philosophy, revealing deeper ideological undercurrents in the text that have been largely overlooked.
2. **Expanded Understanding of Modernism:** Situating *To the Lighthouse* within the socio-political context of New Liberalism allows for a more nuanced understanding of how modernist techniques—such as stream of consciousness and temporal fragmentation—are used not only to depict psychological interiority but also to model ethical and social evolution (Akram & Oteir, 2025; Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023, 2021).
3. **Gender and Space Reconsidered:** The study repositions the domestic space from a site of repression to a space of potential transformation, in line with New Liberal ideals. This reorientation offers new insights into Woolf's representations of female characters, particularly Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, as negotiating paths between traditional roles and self-determined identity.
4. **Interdisciplinary Contribution:** The research contributes to interdisciplinary conversations across literature, gender studies, history, and political theory. It encourages scholars to consider how literary narratives can reflect and shape evolving concepts of community, responsibility, and human development.
5. **Contemporary Relevance:** At a time when debates around the balance between individual freedom and social responsibility are once again foregrounded in political discourse, revisiting Woolf's alignment with early 20th-century reformist thought offers timely insights into the cultural roots of these enduring questions.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology, grounded in literary and ideological analysis, to explore *To the Lighthouse* through the theoretical lens of New Liberalism. The research is situated within the tradition of hermeneutic literary criticism, which prioritizes close textual reading and contextual interpretation to uncover deeper ideological and philosophical meanings embedded in the text.

1. Research Design

The study employs textual analysis as its primary method, focusing on narrative structure, character development, symbolism, and spatial dynamics within the novel. In particular, the research applies a New Liberal theoretical framework—with key concepts such as ethical individualism, autonomy, and social reform—to critically interpret character interactions, domestic space, and narrative techniques.

2. Theoretical Framework

The research draws on the political writings of T.H. Green, L.T. Hobhouse, and Leonard Hobhouse, whose ideas on liberty, moral development, and social welfare form the backbone of New Liberal ideology. These are synthesized with feminist and modernist critical theory

(e.g., Toril Moi, Jane Goldman) to situate Woolf's artistic intervention within her socio-political milieu.

3. Data Collection

The primary data source is the full text of *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Secondary sources include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles and books on Virginia Woolf, New Liberalism, modernist literature, and feminist literary theory, accessed via Taylor & Francis, Springer, SAGE, Brill, and Elsevier.
- Political theory texts contextualizing New Liberal values in early 20th-century Britain.
- Critical essays on Woolf's aesthetics, domesticity, and gender politics.

4. Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

1. Thematic Coding: Passages from the novel are thematically coded according to New Liberal principles: autonomy, social responsibility, ethical development, gender reform, and institutional transformation.
2. Character-Centric Analysis: Central characters—Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe—are analyzed as ideological figures representing differing responses to the tension between personal freedom and social constraint.
3. Symbolic and Spatial Reading: The Ramsay home is examined both as a literal and symbolic space, interpreted through feminist and political theories of domesticity and modernity.

5. Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure analytical rigor, the study employs:

- Triangulation of literary theory, political philosophy, and gender criticism.
- Peer-reviewed academic sources to frame arguments and validate interpretations.
- Thick description of textual evidence to support thematic claims.

6. Limitations

This study is interpretive and does not claim empirical generalizability. Its insights are rooted in textual and historical context, and its conclusions are designed to generate critical dialogue rather than measurable outcomes.

Analysis and Results

This section presents a detailed thematic analysis of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, structured around the conceptual pillars of New Liberalism: ethical individualism, autonomy within social responsibility, and the transformation of domestic space. Using close reading and interpretive coding, three key sites of ideological engagement emerge—character development, narrative form, and symbolic domestic architecture.

1. Ethical Individualism and the Interior Self

A central tenet of New Liberalism is the belief that personal development and social contribution are not mutually exclusive, but rather intertwined. This is clearly embodied in the characters of Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay, who offer contrasting models of ethical individualism.

Lily Briscoe's Creative Autonomy

Lily's resistance to marriage and her relentless pursuit of artistic truth represent an individualized ethical journey. Her famous statement, "*Women can't paint, women can't write,*"—though initially internalized—becomes a site of resistance. The act of completing her painting in the novel's final pages is not just a personal triumph but a symbolic reclaiming of space and voice denied to women under patriarchal structures.

Woolf uses Lily to illustrate a New Liberal ideal: the subject who seeks fulfillment not in isolation, but in the responsible pursuit of higher ethical ideals—here, art and truth. Her independence is not selfish but deeply moral, echoing T.H. Green’s claim that liberty means “a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying” (Green, 1881).

Mrs. Ramsay and the Moral Legacy of Traditional Roles

By contrast, Mrs. Ramsay, though deeply invested in traditional domestic roles, functions as a moral nucleus within the family. Her emotional labor sustains the household, and her “moments of being”—especially her concern for others’ happiness—align with the New Liberal ethos of self-realization through social contribution. However, her death marks a pivotal ideological shift. Woolf seems to question whether the sacrificial model of womanhood, though ethically grounded, is sustainable or even just. The novel invites a critical reflection on how ethical individualism might evolve when not anchored in self-erasure.

2. Autonomy and Constraint in Gender Roles

The gender politics of *To the Lighthouse* map closely onto New Liberalism’s dual commitment to reform tradition and preserve ethical community life.

Mr. Ramsay and Masculine Insecurity

Mr. Ramsay’s character exposes the limitations of patriarchal authority. Obsessed with intellectual legacy and plagued by emotional dependency, he represents a class of men destabilized by shifting social values. His dependency on Mrs. Ramsay’s emotional validation reveals the fragility of masculine autonomy when divorced from emotional literacy—a quality Woolf implicitly promotes as essential to a reformed liberal subject.

Narrative Technique as Social Critique

Woolf’s modernist style—particularly stream of consciousness and temporal fragmentation—mirrors the internal processes of ethical decision-making. Rather than offering fixed judgments, the novel foregrounds fluid, subjective consciousness, suggesting that moral growth is non-linear and deeply personal. This stylistic innovation resonates with New Liberal commitments to individual ethical evolution over societal conformity.

3. Domestic Space as Symbolic and Political Terrain

The Ramsay home functions as more than a setting. It is a spatial metaphor for ideological struggle and transformation.

Domesticity as a Site of Repression and Potential

In the first section (*The Window*), the house is a site of stability and gendered expectation. Women serve; men philosophize. Yet even here, Woolf subverts: the characters’ inner lives often contradict their external roles. The domestic space, while confining, is also saturated with memory, beauty, and potential. In *Time Passes*, the house is abandoned and begins to decay, paralleling the erosion of Victorian ideals and the destabilization of conventional social structures. The intrusion of war and death literalizes the fragility of the world Mrs. Ramsay once held together.

In *The Lighthouse*, the restoration of the house coincides with a new vision of relational identity—one where autonomy, art, and responsibility coexist. Lily’s completed painting symbolizes not just personal closure but a reconfigured relationship to space and self.

Results Summary

The analysis yields several critical insights:

1. Woolf advances a New Liberal view of the self as morally autonomous yet socially embedded. This is evident in her portrayal of Lily’s independence and Mrs. Ramsay’s social contribution.

2. Gender roles are not rejected outright but reinterpreted. Woolf critiques both rigid masculinity and self-sacrificing femininity, proposing instead a fluid, ethical individualism grounded in care and creativity.
3. Domestic space is reimagined from a site of female oppression to one of ethical negotiation and symbolic rebirth. The house, like society, becomes a terrain where identities are reconfigured.
4. Modernist form mirrors political content. Woolf's fragmented, interior narrative form allows her to dramatize the subjective moral evolution that New Liberalism prizes.

This analysis demonstrates that *To the Lighthouse*, far from being a purely psychological or aesthetic novel, is deeply engaged in the ideological debates of its time. Through New Liberalism, Woolf envisions a model of ethical individualism that resists both authoritarian tradition and isolating individualism. She offers instead a vision of identity, community, and domestic life grounded in personal freedom, creative autonomy, and ethical interdependence.

Discussion

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, examined through the critical lens of New Liberalism, reveals itself as not only a modernist exploration of interiority and aesthetics but also a profound ideological intervention. The novel negotiates the interdependence of personal autonomy and collective responsibility as a core tenet of New Liberalism by reimagining characters, domestic roles, and spatial constructs. Through a deeply textured analysis of Woolf's characters and narrative form, this study underscores how modernist literature can encode complex political and ethical ideals without recourse to didacticism.

1. Reframing Autonomy: From Isolation to Ethical Agency

Traditional liberalism often portrayed individual liberty as freedom from interference; however, New Liberal thinkers such as T.H. Green (1881) redefined liberty as the ability to achieve self-realization through social participation and moral growth. This is vividly dramatized in Woolf's portrayal of **Lily Briscoe**, whose journey from self-doubt to artistic completion mirrors a New Liberal ethic of selfhood grounded in *responsible freedom*. Her final brushstroke is not only an aesthetic act but a political one—a subtle declaration of women's right to define themselves beyond domesticity and male validation.

This stands in stark contrast to **Mrs. Ramsay**, who embodies the traditional Victorian female ideal—selfless, domestic, and emotionally sustaining. However, Woolf complicates this portrayal by imbuing Mrs. Ramsay with spiritual depth and moral centrality. While she conforms to patriarchal expectations, her emotional labor keeps the family together. Thus, Woolf neither wholly idealizes nor condemns her. Instead, she reveals the ethical significance of her role while simultaneously suggesting its limitations under evolving liberal-humanist values. Mrs. Ramsay's death marks the decline of this sacrificial model, paving the way for an autonomous yet ethically attuned subject in Lily.

2. Gender and the Ethics of Transformation

Woolf's gender politics align with the New Liberal emphasis on institutional transformation rather than mere rejection of tradition. Through characters like Mr. Ramsay, Woolf critiques rigid masculinities dependent on authority and rationalism. His anxiety over intellectual legacy and need for emotional reassurance subtly indict the limitations of a patriarchal system that stifles emotional authenticity. Yet, he is not demonized. Like his wife, he is caught in a structure whose norms are becoming obsolete.

Lily Briscoe's character thus occupies a crucial transitional space between ideological binaries. Her rejection of marriage and choice of artistic solitude do not signal antisocial detachment, but rather a higher form of participation—through creativity, perception, and ethical witness. Woolf's nuanced construction of gendered roles aligns with the New Liberal

belief that social reform must begin with individual consciousness but ultimately aim for collective transformation.

3. Domestic Space as Political Allegory

The **Ramsay home** functions not only as a domestic setting but also as a metaphor for the evolution of the liberal self and society. In *The Window*, the house is vibrant but constrained by Victorian gender roles. In *Time Passes*, it becomes a site of decay and silence, symbolizing the erosion of old certainties and the disruptive force of history (particularly war and loss). In *The Lighthouse*, the house is renewed—not restored to its former state, but reconfigured as a space where memory, art, and personal growth can coexist.

This spatial transformation reflects a key insight of New Liberalism: that institutions (like the home, family, or state) must adapt to new ethical imperatives. The novel's structure itself—shifting temporally and narratively—mirrors this ideological evolution. Domestic space, often seen in Victorian literature as a site of containment, becomes in Woolf's hands a laboratory for social and moral reimagination.

4. Modernist Form and Liberal Ethical Vision

Woolf's experimental form—particularly stream of consciousness and temporal disjunction—supports the New Liberal idea that ethical development is neither linear nor uniform. Rather, it is contingent, deeply personal, and unfolding in private reflection as much as public action. These techniques allow Woolf to explore the ethical interior: the realm where individuals confront loss, love, insecurity, and hope—not as passive recipients of tradition, but as active moral agents.

Moreover, the novel resists closure in a conventional sense. Lily's painting is complete, but not in a way that finalizes meaning. Instead, it gestures toward possibility as a key New Liberal concept. Autonomy is not the endpoint, but the capacity to continually engage, reflect, and act within a moral community.

Synthesis with New Liberal Theory

This study reveals that *To the Lighthouse* can be read as a literary enactment of New Liberal principles:

- **Ethical individualism** is embodied in the characters' personal quests for self-definition and meaning.
- **Social reform** is suggested through the critique of rigid domestic and gender roles.
- **Autonomy and progress** are advanced not through radical rupture, but through a reimaging of inherited spaces and responsibilities.

In this light, Woolf emerges not only as a literary innovator but also as a political thinker—engaging implicitly with the ideologies shaping her time. Her fiction does not preach reform but performs it, inviting readers to participate in the construction of new moral and social possibilities.

Conclusion:

This study has sought to reframe Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* through the ideological lens of New Liberalism, revealing the novel as both a literary and political intervention into the evolving discourses of autonomy, ethical individualism, and domestic reform in early 20th-century Britain. By applying a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual reading and political theory, this research demonstrates how Woolf's modernist aesthetics are deeply embedded in a vision of progressive social and moral development. Through the contrasting arcs of Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe, Woolf interrogates the limitations of Victorian gender roles while offering new, ethically grounded models of personhood. The domestic space—traditionally a symbol of repression—is transformed into a site of ethical reflection and artistic realization, mirroring New Liberal

commitments to institutional transformation and social progress. Woolf's use of stream of consciousness and temporal fragmentation by not only innovating narrative technique but also serving as a formal enactment of subjective moral evolution as a core tenet of New Liberal ideology.

Ultimately, *To the Lighthouse* advocates not for the abandonment of social bonds but for their reconstitution on the basis of freedom, empathy, and shared moral responsibility. Woolf's quiet radicalism lies in her ability to redefine identity and domesticity not through dramatic revolt, but through subtle reimagining. Her work thus contributes to a progressive literary redefinition of the self, in which private reflection and public transformation are inseparably linked. In bridging the gap between literary modernism and political thought, this study affirms Woolf's role not merely as a chronicler of consciousness but as a theorist of ethical subjectivity and liberal modernity. Future scholarship might expand upon these insights by applying similar ideological frameworks to Woolf's other texts or to contemporaneous modernist writers navigating the intersections of aesthetics, gender, and political reform.

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