

Three Canons of Chinese Painting and Virginia Woolf's Painting Words in To the Lighthouse

Shuiqingyun Liu

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China
3210106070@zju.edu.cn

Abstract: Virginia Woolf has been writing with painting words. Based on the previous studies on Woolf's relationship with Chinese art and aesthetics, great similarities between Virginia Woolf's writing techniques and Chinese painting techniques are able to be identified. Her masterpiece *To the Lighthouse* has shown a strong resonance with the first three of the Six Canons of Chinese Painting: "Qi Yun Sheng Dong", "Gu Fa Yong Bi" and "Ying Wu Xiang Xing". This parallel research aims to further establish the resonances between these three canons and Woolf's way of writing in *To the Lighthouse*. "Qi Yun Sheng Dong" (rhythmic vitality) has found an echo in Woolf's rhythmic sentence pattern, rhythmic words and rhythmic images. The second canon, "Gu Fa Yong Bi" (bone-manner brushwork) finds similarities in the novel's long-short-long chapter organization and how each chapter is unfolded. "Ying Wu Xiang Xing" (conformity with nature in portraying forms) shows great resonances with Lily Briscoe's creative process and her final art creation. Surprisingly, Chinese painting aesthetics has found its resonance in Virginia Woolf's writing and a new critical perspective has come into being.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Qi Yun Sheng Dong, Gu Fa Yong Bi, Ying Wu Xiang Xing

1. Introduction

Being widely recognized as the pioneer of modernism and a master of stream of consciousness, Virginia Woolf has recorded and shaped "modern experience, modern consciousness" [1]. Besides giving inspiration to "gender, women's, and sexuality studies" [2], Woolf's creation is so multifaceted that there have been various studies, such as nature, war, historicism, postcolonialism, aesthetics, etc.

Regarding her masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*, various critical perspectives come into being. Apart from those from feminism, philosophy, myth and psychology, a few scholars have noticed the significance of art and aesthetics in this novel. For example, Stewart analyzes the colour in *To the Lighthouse* [3]; Cohn concludes that "[l]ife has given birth to both art and life" [4]. Slayton examines the painting techniques in the written sphere and Woolf's connection with post-impressionism [5]. Fan explores how impressionism and post-impressionism are combined by Woolf [6]. Patricia Laurence writes on Woolf's relationship with Bloomsbury and China [7]. A promising start has been made by these scholars because they have recognized that Woolf has been painting with words in *To the Lighthouse*, and noticed its aesthetic value and elements of oriental culture. However, a comprehensive study has not yet appeared, which leaves much space for further exploration.

In the early 20th century, shortly after the end of World War I, many Western scholars were immersed in the reflection of Western civilization and turned to the East. For instance, Bertrand Russell wrote *The Problem of China*; Ezra Pound published *Cathay* and two essays entitled “Chinese Poetry” in 1918. At the same time, Chinese art gained popularity in British society. The interaction between China and Britain in the field of culture and art was flourishing, and the aesthetics of Chinese painting began to gradually influence the aesthetic concept and artistic expression of Britain. As Ira Nadel stated Woolf’s initial exposure to the Orient was not through politics but through art, with Woolf focusing on “pictorial assembly” and “visual abstraction” [8], Woolf participated in a number of exhibitions of Chinese painting, including the Visual Art exhibition focusing on Japan and China at the Victoria and Albert Museum [8], and the Chinese and Japanese painting exhibition in 1910 [8]. Besides, Art critic Roger Fry, Woolf’s sister Vanessa Bell and the Chinese painter Ling Shuhua became the source of her Chinese aesthetic inspiration. Woolf was close friends with the sinologists Laurence Binyon and Arthur Waley. Woolf especially thanked Waley in the preface of *Orlando* for the contribution of his abundant knowledge of Chinese [9]. Both Binyon and Waley had translated the Six Canons of Chinese painting into English and Nadel believed that the first three canons evidently had something to do with Woolf [8]. Woolf believed that the “arts of painting and writing lay close together” [11] and her commitment to this creative ethos is indeed evident in her *To the Lighthouse*.

This article aims to explore *To the Lighthouse*’s resonance with Chinese painting aesthetics, mainly by applying the first three of the Six Canons of Chinese Painting to its analysis. The Six Canons are applicable to analyze Woolf’s writing because their highest pursuit is to present life with its original breath and spirit, which is exactly the core of Woolf’s writing theory. By finding out what the first three canons of Chinese painting are and how the similarities between Woolf’s writing techniques and the first three canons are shown, the article is going to provide a new parallel research approach to understanding the multidimensionality of Woolf’s works and the critical perspectives it adopts when understood within transnational contexts.

2. The First Three Canons of Chinese Painting

The Six Canons of Chinese Painting (“Liu Fa” in Chinese) cannot be separated when we trace back its origin, historical development and interpretations, even though this article focuses on the first three canons of Chinese painting. Therefore, this part will first examine the Six Canons of Chinese Painting as a whole and then delve into the explanation of the first three canons.

The Six Canons of Chinese painting were set down in writing in *Gu Hua Pin Lu (Classified Record of Ancient Painters)* by Xie He in the late fifth century. The Six Canons have twenty-four characters and each four of them explains one canon. A literal translation with auxiliary prepositions and articles in parentheses has been given by Lancaster: The first is “Qi Yun Sheng Dong”, which is “spirit resonance (producing) lifelike animation”. The second is “Gu Fa Yong Bi”, which can be translated as “bone manner (by) use (of the) brush”. The third is “Ying Wu Xiang Xing”, meaning “conformity (with) objects (in) portraying forms”. The Fourth, “Sui Lei Fu Cai”, is “follow characteristics (in) applying color”. The fifth is “Jing Ying Wei Zhi”, meaning “plan-design (the) place-position”. The last is “Chuan Yi Mo Xie”, being “transmit-propagate models (by) sketching”. “Qi Yun Sheng Dong” is the general requirement for works, and it is the highest state in painting. It requires that the inner spirit of the character be fully expressed in a vivid image. The other five of the Six Canons are the necessary conditions to achieve “Qi Yun Sheng Dong” [12].

Six Canons have remained considered the basis of criticism and practice of Chinese painting to these days. There have appeared various translations of this term. Starting from Kakuzo Okakura [1], who first translated the first two canons, to some well-known ones including Laurence Binyon [14,15], Herbert Giles [16], and Arthur Waley [17]. There is also debate on the translation. For example,

Lancaster argues that there is nothing in “Liu Fa” to “suggest the rigidity of canons” or “deadening restrictions”. He believes that principles, conditions, or laws are acceptable designations [12].

When it comes to “Qi Yun Sheng Dong”, it is shortly translated as “Rhythmic vitality” in English. It is the spirit through the rhythm of things, and rhythm is the manifestation of the harmonious law in which everything in the universe works. In China, from the Tang Dynasty to the Five Dynasties, people’s grasp of “Qi Yun Sheng Dong” has gradually shifted from the expression of the spirit and charm of the characters to the idea of describing charm with ink and brush in landscape painting. The Song and Yuan Dynasties continued to extend to landscape paintings, which expressed the author’s true temperament of life. At the time of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it was transformed from the previous subject’s spirit level into the application of brush and ink skills. It also continuously promoted its approach to the subject’s mind of state. This article holds that “Qi” refers to life-motion and spirit-harmony contained in the works. “Yun” covers the beauty of rhythm and harmony of the work. “Qi” is the noumenon of all things and the embodiment of the inner vitality, while “Yun” is the externalization of “Qi”. “Qi Yun Sheng Dong”, not only refers to the spiritual realm of the painter, the elegance of the characters and the overall taste of the picture but also includes the formal language of the painting, such as brush and ink, composition, etc., to show the vitality of life through art [18].

Secondly, “Gu Fa Yong Bi” or “Bone-manner Brushwork” is about composition and line. Xie He used bone, “Gu”, to describe the force and structure that determines the vitality of the brushwork. The brushstroke must be accurate, poised and reflect the essence. According to Binyon’s interpretation, it is “[t]he art of rending [...] anatomical structure by means of the brush” [8]. Besides, Xie He inherited Gu Kaizhi’s theory, that “Bone-manner Brushwork” has an inherent connection with presenting the spirit. It is because of the need to grasp the essence that the artist paints in the bone-manner. This does not mean that, initially, the artist is guided by the realistic depiction of the bone and body. For Chinese painting, the highest realm is to show the spirit of the character, so one paints from the innate bone structure to grasp the basic spirit of the object. To conclude, the brush should be able to accurately depict the body of the object and present the vitality and force.

Thirdly, “Ying Wu Xiang Xing” means “conformity with nature in portraying forms”. It admits that there is an inevitable connection between nature and art, but it denies striving for realistic effects. “Chinese painting permits no sacrifice of other important values to realism. The subject is to be recognized by the onlooker through the shape recorded by the artist.” [12] There are three stages to realize this conformity: recognizing the object, observing and feeling the object, and merging with the object.

With the analysis above, one can identify the relationship between the first three canons. The first is to present spirit with rhythmic vitality. The second is to grasp spirit with an innate structure. The third is to present spirit through the unification between subject and object. Most importantly, the first canon is always the highest pursuit leading the other five. As Nadel pointed out, the first three canons are distinctly related to Woolf” [8], the following part will examine how these three canons are related to Woolf’s work.

3. The First Three Canons in *To the Lighthouse*

3.1. “Qi Yun Sheng Dong” and the Rhythmic Sentence Pattern, Rhyme and Images

The essence of the first canon, “Qi Yun Sheng Dong” (“rhythmic vitality”), is to present life-breath and spirit through rhyme. In *To the Lighthouse*, it can be seen from its rhythmic sentence pattern and the use of rhyme as well as images with rhymes in it.

First comes the rhythmic sentence pattern and rhyme. Stream of consciousness perfectly serves as a kind of painting word. In *To the Lighthouse*, the flowing consciousness resembles lines and brushstrokes in Chinese painting. Brush and ink can convey the vitality of life through the significant

form -- lines that vary in thickness, curvature, strength, softness, and weight to give form and express meaning. If each word is considered a brush stroke, a sentence becomes a line and a paragraph becomes a small piece of painting. Woolf deliberately designed the sentence pauses and repetition to make the painting words alive with breath. For example, one can easily grasp the jumping rhythm in Lily Briscoe's flowing consciousness. Starting with two words, then three words, it step by step reaches five words and ends with "this xxx" repetition: "They would, she thought, going on again, however long they lived, come back to this night; this moon; this wind; this house: and to her too" [10]. Another example could be seen in the following sentence, in which Woolf repeated "and this" three times: "[...] and this, and this, and this, she thought, going upstairs, laughing, but affectionately" [10]. And it is followed by repeatedly using "at" to start a phrase and end it with a /s/ or /z/ sound: "[...] at the sofa on the landing (her mother's); at the rocking-chair (her father's); at the map of the Hebrides" [10]. Additionally, in the second chapter, "how once" is used to form parallel sentences: "how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking-glass had held a face" [10], which describes the desolation of the Ramsay family's beach house. When it comes to the rhyme, it is well used to create a sense of vitality. Woolf repeatedly used alliteration and consonance, for example, there are "blustered in, brushed bare boards", "slumber and sleep", "lunged and plunged", and "[t]his, that, and the other" [10].

Second, it is the "rhythmic vitality" in natural elements, sensory details and symbolic and metaphorical imagery. Woolf frequently uses natural elements and phenomena to create vivid and dynamic imagery that evokes a sense of rhythm. For example, the imagery of "the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach", "wave after wave shedding again and again smoothly", and that "[i]t was windy, so that the leaves now and then brushed open a star, and the stars themselves seemed to be shaking and darting light and trying to flash out between the edges of the leaves" [10], all contribute to a rhythmic backdrop throughout the novel. These natural images embody a sense of movement, flow, and cyclical patterns, enhancing the overall rhythmic vitality of the narrative. Additionally, Woolf employs symbolic imagery, which often carries a sense of rhythm, reflecting the characters' spirit. For example, the lighthouse itself becomes a powerful symbol of longing, aspiration, and a guiding force. The recurring image of the lighthouse pulsating with light creates a rhythmic motif that symbolizes the characters' desires and the passage of time.

3.2. "Gu Fa Yong Bi" and the Bone-like Composition

The second canon, "Gu Fa Yong Bi" ("Bone-manner Brushwork") focuses on structure and composition, meaning that the brush should be able to accurately depict the body of the object and present the vitality and force. When it is applied to writing a novel, the chapter arrangement is like the bones of the characters. It is the key to grasping the spirit of the novel.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the chapter arrangement is chronological in a general view. However, as there will be changes in the thickness or density of the brushstroke when capturing the skeleton to convey the spirit, Woolf deliberately designed the length and content of the three chapters. "The Window", "Time Passes" and "The Lighthouse" together formed a long-short-long structure. The changes in length are in line with the "Bone-manner Brushwork". The first long chapter captures the essence of living with our loved ones: the one-day time seems to be longer than it is supposed to be, and the momentary experience seems to be extended. "The Window", being the longest chapter, is suitable for grasping the complexity of family, friends, and philosophical questions that emerge from the conflicts of a single day. The second part, "Time Passes" is the shortest one but covers the longest period. The use of bone-manner can be seen clearly: the pain and shock of the death of loved ones are conveyed through the compressed time. Noticeably, there are parenthetical asides about death to strengthen the revelation. This effect is just like depicting the character's pain in painting with only several lines but accurately capturing the curvature of the eyebrows and the bones near the corner of

the eyes. When loss and death come, people hope to shorten the length of the painful experience. The shortest second chapter not only grasps this feeling but also shows the sense of passing and inability to stop time with its shortness: people can only grasp very few periods facing the rapid passing of time. The third chapter, “The Lighthouse”, is longer than the second chapter but shorter than “The Window”. It adopted a proper length to grasp the sense of relief, reconciliation and fulfilment. The satisfaction extends the moments and epiphany brings more thinking in the same second. Therefore, “The Lighthouse” returns to longer.

Apart from applying bone-manner in chapter organization, Woolf also successfully captures the “bones” when unfolding each chapter. In “The Window”, the window serves as the key image, through which one can observe the outside world. In the beginning, the window represents the transparency between knowing oneself and knowing the world. For example, Mr. Ramsay was so rational that he believed that “[w]hat he said was true. It was always true” [10]. He was unable to lie and believed himself never tampering with the facts and never changing an unpleasant word to please or make it convenient for anyone. However, the window lost its transparency in the later part: “for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving an accurate view of the outside world” [10]. Therefore, in the second chapter, Woolf uses the mirror as a successive “bone” to continue the connection of the novel. The mirror is never transparent but always reflects the inner desire. It indicates that truth is something built on subjective reflection, which is in line with Mrs. Ramsay’s stance. However, the war crashed Mrs. Ramsay’s subjective world. The mirror could not reflect the truth as “the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath” [10]. The mirror was broken and Lily’s canvas was there in the third chapter, which resembles the truth born from a unity between subject and object. With these three images, Woolf lets readers successfully see the bone as well as the spirit of the novel: the highest realm is the unification between subjective reality and objective reality.

3.3. “Ying Wu Xiang Xing” and Lily Briscoe’s Conformity with Nature in Creating

The third canon, “Ying Wu Xiang Xing” means “conformity with nature in portraying forms”. It revolves around three stages, including recognizing, observing while feeling and merging with the object. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe’s creative process indeed follows these stages.

Lily Briscoe not only had “Chinese eyes” but also adopted an approach similar to Xie He’s third canon to create her painting. During the whole novel, she was trying to finish a perfect portrait of Mrs. Ramsay. In the beginning, Mrs. Ramsay in Lily’s eyes was the object of her painting and she recognized this female object as a great but terrible mother. Mrs. Ramsay was so charming, gentle and with strength that almost everyone loved her. Mr. Ramsay relied much on her and Lily realized that he “[wore] Mrs. Ramsay to death” [10]. Mrs. Ramsay struck her as a moon, full of beauty and strength but shrouded in mystery, as plain as the space that the clouds finally reveal. But as she asked herself, “[w]as it wisdom? Was it knowledge?” [10], she failed to find out the spirit and essence of Mrs. Ramsay, thus, she was unable to paint her object. After the death of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily started to feel her object. She felt loss, emptiness and pain. She felt empathetic with Mrs. Ramsay, feeling sorry for Mrs. Ramsay being forced to give. “Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died -- and had left all this.” [10] She realized that Mrs. Ramsay was never a perfect character as she used to believe. She sought to reach unification with her painting object, Mrs. Ramsay; she sought to break up the limit between subject and object. She questioned whether loving is able to unite her and Mrs. Ramsay, “for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired” [10]. Finally, Lily became one with Mrs. Ramsay as she said to herself, “[...] she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay’s heart”. [10] She was able to “[subdue] all her impressions as a woman to something much more general” and “[...] she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance” [10]. She was able to create now. “[A]s if she were urged forward

and at the same time must hold herself back [...]", "[a]nd so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement as if the pauses were one dancing rhythmical movement as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related" [10]. So, "lightly and swiftly pausing, striking, she scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines" [10]. She felt the rhythmic vitality in it "as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her [...] by what she rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current" [10].

Additionally, Lily Briscoe's final creation is also in line with conformity with nature in portraying forms. Her final painting had a triangular purple shape, to capture the aura when Mrs. Ramsay was reading to James, and she completed her artwork by painting "a line there, in the centre" [10]. Because she was in a state of subject-object unity and reached unification with Mrs. Ramsay, she understood Mrs. Ramsay's spirit and grasped the momentary essence. Mrs. Ramsay "brought them together" and "made of the moment something permanent", so "[l]ife [stood] still here" "as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent" [10]. "This was of the nature of a revelation", as Lily realized [10]. "In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing [...] was struck into stability" [10]. Her painting was exactly what Mrs. Ramsay was: Life stood still here. That is why she repeated "Mrs. Ramsay!" twice at the end and felt that she owed it all to Mrs. Ramsay. Lily finished her painting in unity with Mrs. Ramsay, in a proper form balancing "of masses, of lights and shadows" [10].

4. Conclusions

To conclude, the first three canons of Chinese painting have their echoes in *To the Lighthouse*. "Qi Yun Sheng Dong" ("rhythmic vitality") finds resonance in Woolf's use of rhythmic sentence patterns, the use of rhyme and images with rhymes in it. The second canon, "Gu Fa Yong Bi" ("Bone-manner Brushwork") has a similar pursuit to Woolf's design of long-short-long chapter organization and how each chapter is unfolded. The third canon, "Ying Wu Xiang Xing" ("conformity with nature in portraying forms") resembles Lily Briscoe's creative process and is in line with the artistic effect of her final creation. Surprisingly, Chinese painting aesthetics has found its resonance in Virginia Woolf's writing, a Western modernist writer. A new parallel comparative perspective to explore the multi-dimensionality of *To the Lighthouse* has come into being. However, much space is left for further exploration as this article only examines the first three canons following Iran Nadel's step and it only focuses on Woolf's representative work, *To the Lighthouse*. Further parallel studies or even influence studies on her other works and other aspects of Chinese painting aesthetics are still there to be carried out.

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