

[Article]

Between the Symbolic and the Semiotic:

D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Yumiko Sumitani

Introduction

A feminist psychoanalysis and philosopher of language, Julia Kristeva, established the concept of the “semiotic” in *Revolution in Poetic Language* in 1974, contrasting it with the “symbolic” which Jacques Lacan wrote of. The symbolic is dominated by the patriarchal sexual and social order, while the semiotic is closely connected with femininity, offering to deconstruct all the binary oppositions in society such as good/bad, sane/mad, norm/deviation, and authority/obedience. Terry Eagleton, in *Literary Theory* (1983), acknowledges that Kristeva’s aspects of the semiotic are evident in the writing of Virginia Woolf, “whose fluid, diffuse, sensuous style offers a resistance to the kind of male metaphysical world symbolized by the philosopher Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*” (189). Also, convinced that the language remains in the realm of what Kristeva terms the “semiotic” rather than the “symbolic,” Ingersoll demonstrates that the language of D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* is most importantly deconstructing the binary of traditional gender roles such as the mother, father and children (39-44). One of the key factors that drove these two English modernist writers into semiotic writing may have been the most remote English county, Cornwall. Cornwall is a special place in England for them; it is one of the few places for Woolf where her family gathered and spent happy times in her childhood, while Lawrence lived there during the First World War when he wrote *Women in Love* (1920) and was accused of being a suspected German spy. In addition to the fact that Cornwall is an unforgettable place for both writers in their lives, the literary influence of Cornwall can be detected in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* (1923). Considering their emotional involvement with this place, this paper would like to explore how their Cornish experiences influenced *To the Lighthouse* and *Kangaroo*, both of feature what is called “semiotic writing.”

I. Kristeva’s “Semiotic”

In contrast to the symbolic, Kristeva has attempted to represent the semiotic through references to child psychoanalysis, particularly at the pre-Oedipal stage. Pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges “connect and orient the body to the mother” and “drives”, and, she emphasizes, “are always already ambiguous, simultaneously assimilating and destructive” (Kristeva 27). At this stage, the child does not yet have access to language, but the semiotic can be referred to as a flow of unorganized drives. Though it is not yet meaningful, this rhythmic pattern can be seen as a form of language, and within language itself, contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, silence and absence

are included. Because in the semiotic, which stems from the pre-Oedipal phase, the mother's body is regarded as "what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*,"¹⁾ Kristeva expects this language of the semiotic to undermine the symbolic which is synonymous with "the social" (ibid.; emphasis in orig.).

As for *To the Lighthouse*, Eagleton finds that "Ramsay's world works by abstract truth, sharp divisions and fixed essence" and that Woolf's "semiotic" fiction challenges self-identical truth and a patriarchal world in which the phallus is the symbol of certainty (189). However, Kristeva's suggestive theories raise vexed questions: they cannot be considered exclusive of being "inherently" feminine and obvious political implication of femininity. In Eagleton's opinion, the woman, "both 'inside' and 'outside' male society" and as "both a romantically idealized member of it and a victimized it," is "between man and chaos" and "the embodiment of chaos itself" (190). That is why, he insists, women trouble the neat categories of such a regime, blurring its well-defined boundaries. Because they are the "negative" of that social order, there is always in them something which is left over, superfluous, unrepresentable, which refuses to be figured there (ibid.). The semiotic is deeply connected with the "inherently" feminine; therefore, it is self-evident that the feminine signifies a force which opposes society and leads to the women's political movement.²⁾

Furthermore, Eagleton is alert to Kristeva's formalistic argument: "she pays too little attention to the political *content* of a text, the historical conditions in which its overturning of the signified is carried out, and the historical conditions in which all of this is interpreted and used" (190-91; emphasis in orig.). There should be much "content" of a text which is hidden behind the rhythmic, lexical, syntactic, even psychological analysis. It is historical and social context which cause the author to mistrust government, political grievance and financial uncertainty, which adds depth to what the semiotic really means. What should be examined is how the author's rebellious spirit against society, in other words, anarchism, is connected with the "negative" and "denier," the social representations of the feminine from which the semiotic derives.

Kristeva's revolutionary idea is fraught with these gender and political challenges; however, in reading *To the Light House* and *Kangaroo*, they can be complemented by a consideration of the geography which inspired both authors to write. Cornwall, though not a main setting but a base of the two novels,³⁾ or the Celtic culture rooted there, may enrich understanding of Woolf's and Lawrence's semiotic writings.

II. Cornwall for Woolf

Talland house at St Ives in Cornwall, which the Stephens rented for thirteen summers from 1882 until Virginia's mother, Julia died in 1895, was a place for which Virginia retained nostalgic memories for the rest of her life. In the process of Woolf's completing her autobiographical novel, *To the Lighthouse*, the sea of Cornwall becomes part of her psyche, evoking nostalgia and romantic feeling in her. When returning to visit Cornwall at Easter in 1921, touching the energy of the ancient sea, she expresses her love for the place:

Why am I so incredibly & incurably romantic about Cornwall? One's past, I suppose: I see children running in the garden. A spring day. Life so new. People so enchanting. The sound

of the sea at night. And now I go back “bringing my sheaves” —well, Leonard [Virginia’s husband], & almost 40 years of life, all built on that, permeated by that: how much so I could never explain. And in reality it is very beautiful. I shall go down to Treveal & look at the sea—old waves that have been breaking precisely so these thousand years. But I see I shall never get this said... (*Diary* ii 103).

The sound of the wave seems to take her to another world which she “shall never get this said” at this moment (*ibid.*)⁴⁾ Some time after she got to work on *To the Lighthouse* in 1925, the whole picture of what captures her was eventually revealed. She wrote in her diary that she was “now & then haunted by some mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; & time shall be utterly obliterated” (*Diary* iii 118). These remarks suggest that whenever she contacts Cornwall, whether it is imaginary or physically, Woolf is drawn to what is meant by the semiotic—the old, profound and mystic life which is similar to the state of the pre-Oedipal, and this may explain why Woolf is often noted for her semiotic writings.

It is in *To the Lighthouse* that the “mystic and profound life of a woman” finally becomes substantial. The description of Mrs. Ramsey exemplifies Woolf’s most striking semiotic writing in the novel. Though a typical Victorian woman, never ignoring her duties as a mother and a wife at home, Mrs. Ramsey fleetingly assumes the aspect of a strong, manly and profound woman to subvert the Victorian gender role like a high wave suddenly emerging from the sea of Cornwall.

Mr. Ramsey, a metaphysical philosopher, acts as if he satisfies his wife’s philosophy regarding the gender of a man, burdened by the importance of his metaphysical work and himself. He is described as “lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically” and conceited about “his own accuracy of judgement” (4). He loves his family, but his son does not. Mr. Ramsey’s coming to his son and wife arouses hatred in the son against his father because of “the exaltation and sublimity of his gestures”, “the magnificence of his head” and “his exactingness and egotism” to disturb the perfect simplicity and good sense of his relations with his mother (36–37). Then, the next moment, Mrs. Ramsey’s masculine energy is overflowing:

Mrs. Ramsey, who had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. He wanted sympathy. He was a failure, he said. (37)

Mrs. Ramsey, described by phallic languages such as “erect,” “column” and “spray,” turns into the fountain and spray of life. Her masculinity replaces Mr. Ramsey’s represented by “the magnificence of his head” which implies the phallus. He is now emasculated, and is “barren,” nothing but a “failure” appealing for sympathy.

Although the study of Celtic mythology or religion in *To the Lighthouse* is less discussed than in *Mrs. Dalloway*,⁵⁾ Mrs. Ramsey, who abruptly appears on the fountain like a lighthouse, can arouse the image of an Irish war-goddess, Morrigan, for instance. In addition to her war-like attributes, possessing powerful sexual and fertility symbolism, Morrigan is said to ritually mate with the father-

god astride a river with a foot on either bank (Green 154). The Celtic influence on the novel should not be plausibly affirmed at this moment because it was right after *To the Lighthouse* was published in May 1927 that Woolf became attracted to the primeval world of druids at Stonehenge⁶⁾; however, it is not far-fetched to believe that the ancient wave of the Celtic sea intrigued her and prompted her to engage with the pre-Oedipal stage that can be explained neither by words nor reason, and that her sensory Cornish experiences contributed to her semiotic writing in which the voice of the symbolic and the logocentric is all drowned out.

In terms of subversion of gender role, Ingersoll explains that Mrs. Morel, in *Sons and Lovers*, takes the place of her husband by confirming her mastery over him through her use of the Queen's English, instead of Mr. Morell's Midland dialect. While Ingersoll examines the effect of Lawrence's semiotic writing through the control of language, this paper would like to reveal it in *Kangaroo* through analysing how Lawrence deals with his Cornish experience, which appears as a "fragment" of the novel.

III. Cornwall for Lawrence

Focusing on *Kangaroo*, Jane Costin has developed the precedent debates on the biographical details of Lawrence's stay in Cornwall into a study to illuminate the great contribution of this remote Celtic location to the formation of his lifelong philosophy of blood-consciousness with the primitive. Citing several of Lawrence's letters from Cornwall, Costin highlights that his initial reaction to Cornwall is its difference from England and its Celticity (par. 10). As his letter shows, he is obviously drawn by "the days before Christianity, the days of the druids, or of desolate Celtic magic and conjuring," which is later proved by his favourable remarks on the connection between the Cornish and pre-Christian religious in *Kangaroo* (*Letters*, ii. 493).

In *Kangaroo*, Lawrence admires the spirit of the Cornish, who "have never been Christian", and of "the ancient, pre-Christian world, which lingers still in the truly Celtic places, he could feel it invade him in the savage dusk, making him savage too" (238, 237). This appears in the chapter, "Nightmare," after the trouble with a lieutenant and his two soldiers who come to scrutinize James Sharpe's house at Trevenna where Somers and Harriet would stay for a week-end. Sharpe, a young musician from Edinburgh, is "the type of lowland Scotsman who is half an artist, not more" and "rebels against all the time, and yet can never get away from it or free himself its dictates" (232). Because of this, the authorities have been on the lookout for tell-tale signs in the movements of Somers and Sharpe that might indicate they are German spies. When Sharpe lights a cigarette for Harriet, this triggers the suspicion of sheltering someone in his house. The officers repeatedly insist that there is "a light burning" in his window facing the sea, which could not be possible (234). Despite Sharpe's and Somers' protest, after that, the police charge Sharpe under the Defence of the Realm Act and he receives a fine of twenty pounds. A "light" burning in a young rebellious Scotsman dies out.

The description of the awesome world of the ancient Celtic world quoted above follows such a series of unfortunate events, which leaves an impression that Lawrence portrayed authority as the symbolic and the Celts as the semiotic:

... And then the Cornish night would gradually come down upon the dark, shaggy moors,

that were like the fur of some beast, and upon the pale-grey granite masses, so ancient and Druidical, suggesting blood-sacrifice. And as Somers sat there on the sheaves in the underdark, seeing the light swim above the sea, he felt he was over the border, in another world. Over the border, in that twilit, awesome world of the previous Celts. The spirit of the ancient, pre-Christian world, which lingers still in the truly Celtic places, he could feel it invade him in the savage dusk, making him savage too, and at the same time, strangely sensitive and subtle, understanding the mystery of blood-sacrifice: to sacrifice one's victim, and let the blood run to the fire, there beyond the gorse upon the old grey granite: and at the same time to understand most sensitively the dark flicker of animal life about him, even in a bat, even in the writhing of a maggot in a dead rabbit. (237)

This passage expresses Lawrence's enthusiastic appreciation of the previous Celtic culture; however, in this context of the First World War, the solidity of the "pale-grey" or "old grey" granite is reminiscent of the army who represent authority. The terms "blood-sacrifice" and "the blood run to the fire" conjure up the image of the soldier's bloodshed in battle; the yellow of "the gorse" and "the dark flicker" suggest an image of an individual's passion to fight against authority. There is a vivid and beautiful contrast in colours between the passionate red and yellow and the cold inanimate grey. It is noteworthy that Lawrence ends this Celtic passage with "But they have been overlaid by our consciousness and our civilization, smouldering underneath in a slow, eternal fire, that you can never put out till it burns itself" (238). This may reinforce that Lawrence implies a connection between "the light" which the police spy on and "the fire" smouldering in the Celtic lands and people. Authority can extinguish Sharpe's light but can never put out the fire burning deeply within the Celtic spirit.

Conclusion

Even though Woolf and Lawrence had no contact with each other during their stays in Cornwall, their consciousness was synchronized by touching the Cornish nature including the sea, the granite and the gorse. In the words of *Kangaroo's* Cornish chapter, "Nightmare," they could connect "away from his own white world, his own white, conscious day. Away from the burden of intensive mental consciousness. Back, back into semi-dark, the half-conscious, the *clair-obscur*, where consciousness pulsed as a passional vibration, not as mind-knowledge" (238; emphasis in orig.). Their unforgettable Cornish memories and experiences are elaborately transformed into their biographical novels in the form of semiotic writing. The geographical influence on their works was enormous; Cornwall, not considered part of England and having its own religion and language, was literally an "otherworld" that Woolf and Lawrence encountered in their burgeoning years as writers. Affected by the Cornish semiotic world which was emotionally engaging and stirred up their minds, Woolf and Lawrence individually explored themes for their own novels and established their writing style—later to be called "semiotic." The semiotic language in *To the Lighthouse* can be predictable to an "inherently" female writer as Eagleton points out; meanwhile, it effectively functions as a means of undermining the symbolic social order and gender role, as Kristeva states. *Kangaroo*, when seen in the light of the political context, presents that the historical condition which overturns the signified is deeply connected with the First World War. A sharp contrast is shown between the symbolic authority

represented by the grey granite, and the semiotic dark but profound fire of the Celtic place and people. Cornwall, the tip of Great Britain, instinctively stimulated the dark and old part of Woolf's and Lawrence's mind. Oscillating between masculine and feminine, the geographically unique place of England functions to blur the line between the symbolic and the semiotic in Woolf's and Lawrence's Cornish novels.

Notes

This paper is a revised version of a verbal presentation given for the International D. H. Lawrence Conference held on 12-14 September 2016 at the Tregenna Castle Hotel, St Ives, Cornwall, U.K.

- 1) Borrowing the term, "chora," from Plato's *Timaeus*, Kristeva defines the term as to "denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation" (25). It indicates uncertain and indeterminate articulation.
- 2) Considering the semiotic is closely related to the mother's body and there are complex psychoanalytical reasons for holding that women retain a closer relationship to that body than men do, Eagleton implies that the semiotic is on the whole more typical of women (189).
- 3) *To the Lighthouse* is based on Woolf's memories of her childhood spent at St Ives in Cornwall, but the Ramsays' summer house in the novel is in the Hebrides, on the Isle of Skye (a group of islands off the west coast of Scotland). Lawrence's *Kangaroo* is generally regarded as an Australian novel in which he inserts his Cornish experiences during WWI.
- 4) Accordingly she inclined to read the classics such as Shakespeare's historical plays, Adolphe, Keat's letters, Thomas Hardy and Hudibras (*Diary* ii 104).
- 5) Keith Brown maintains that the design of Mrs. Dalloway comes into focus with remarkable sharpness when it is seen in the light—or darkness—of Celtic mythology or religion in his article "An offering to the Goddess" and his book, *Sightings: Selected Literary Essays*. See Brown.
- 6) A month after the publication of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf travelled to north Yorkshire to observe the total eclipse of the sun in June 1927. She wrote in her diary, "I thought how we were like very old people, in the birth of the world—druids on Stonehenge; (this idea came more vividly in the first pale light though:)" (*Diary* iii 143). Her vivid impression of the ancient world is reflected in her 1928 essay "The Sun and the Fish": "We were very very old; we were men and women of the primeval world come to salute the dawn. So the worshippers at Stonehenge must have looked among tussocks of grass and boulders of rock". Touching the previous Celtic spirit, Woolf's perspective of the human race and the nature (cosmos) in the same way as the Celtic experience altered Lawrence's one.

Works Cited

- Brown, Keith. "An Offering to the Goddess." *The Times Literary Supplement* 18 June 2004: 14-16. Print.
 ---. *Sightings: Selected Literary Essays*. Ed. Erik Tønning. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008. Print.
 Costin Jane. "Lawrence's 'Best Adventure': Blood-Consciousness and Cornwall." *Études Lawrenciennes* 43. (2012) : 151-172. 1. Web. Oct. 2016. <<http://lawrence.revues.org/95>>.
 Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 1983. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1987. Print.
 Green, Miranda J. *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*. 1992. London: Thames and Hudson, 1997. Print.

- Ingersoll, Earl G. *D. H. Lawrence, Desire, and Narrative*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2001. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. 1974. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia UP, 1984. Print.
- Lawrence, D. H. *Kangaroo*. 1923. Ed. Bruce Steele. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print.
- . *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence. Vol. 2*. Eds. George J. Zytaruk, and James T. Boulton. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Collected Essays. Vol. 4*. New York : Harcourt, Brace and World , 1967. Print.
- . *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol. 2*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. London: Hogarth, 1978. Print.
- . ---. *Vol. 3*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. London: Hogarth, 1980. Print.
- . *To the Lighthouse*. 1927. Foreword. Eudora Welty. San Diego: Harcourt, 1981. Print.

(2019年11月22日掲載決定)

