Color in To the Lighthouse
Author(s): Jack F. Stewart
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According to Virginia Woolf, "painting and writing . . . have much in common. The novelist after all wants to make us see . . . . It is a very complex business, the mixing and marrying of words that goes on, probably unconsciously, in the poet's mind to feed the reader's eye. All great writers are great colourists . . . ."1 While "sound and sight seem to make equal parts of [her] first impressions," Woolf stresses their painterly quality.2

In To the Lighthouse, Woolf's search for spiritual essences is expressed in light and color.3 Johannes Itten's metaphysic of light and color illuminates the relation between creative source (Mrs. Ramsay/the Lighthouse) and creative artist (Lily Briscoe/the painting) in Woolf's novel.4 Itten (AC, p. 153) further affirms that "the end and aim of all artistic endeavor is liberation of the spiritual essence of form and color and its release from imprisonment in the world of objects." Woolf's art does not reach so far toward abstraction, but she does imply that the "luminous halo" of consciousness should be conveyed through equivalents of "plastic form," and notes that "fiction is given the capacity to deal with 'psychological volumes.'"5

Roger Fry thought literature should parallel painting: "The Post-Impressionist movement . . . was by no means confined to painting. . . . Cézanne and Picasso had shown the way; writers should fling representation to the winds and follow suit. But he never found time to work out his theory of the influence of Post-Impressionism upon literature"—as Woolf ironically remarks (RF, p. 149). She herself accepted the challenge of designing a literary art closer to the plastic values of painting. While Fry championed the post-impressionists' "attempt to express by pictorial and plastic form certain spiritual experiences" (RF, p. 154), Woolf urged novelists "to convey this varying, this unknown and uncir-
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cumscribed spirit. . ." Fry’s emphasis on formal relations merges fruitfully with Woolf’s pursuit of being, as her art advances from the fragmentary impressionism of Jacob’s Room to the luminous structure of To the Lighthouse. "There revolving lights and colors play on the reader’s sensibility like light waves on the retina, and characters come to be known by their auras.

The impressionists did not confine colors within the outlines of objects (as the rationalizing mind does), but observed how light spills over from one object to the next. Thus they gave objects a “luminous halo” or aureole of color. As a verbal colorist, Woolf desires “to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to confer by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring.” But in To the Lighthouse her art goes beyond impressionism and symbolism toward a flexible form that “does not shut out.” The consciousness of each character tends to overflow individual boundaries, mingling its colors with those around it, as it modifies the total pattern. These interactions recall the post-impressionism of Cézanne, who wished “to represent things in their interrelationship in space,” while still using “colour in its original significance.”

While color in the novel expresses individual qualities, color/character associations are not reducible to one-to-one symbolic equations. Woolf wanted to find literary equivalents for “that pleasure which we gain from seeing beauty, proportion, contrast, and harmony of colour in the things around us”—and which Delacroix considers the exclusive property of painting. Beyond the sensuous immediacy of impressionism lay the constructive color of Cézanne, whose art symbolized nothing in particular, but “turned all external appearances of real things into a symbol of ‘being,’ ‘which is eternal’ ” (C, p. 270). To the Lighthouse shares with Cézanne’s painting a vital duality of aesthetic image, that mirrors actual sensations and emotions, and symbolic form, that mirrors its own “process of construction.” When Badt (C, p. 72) speaks of blue as a “symbolic form,” he is concerned with a structural quality and not with symbolic meaning. Blue, in Cézanne’s painting, does not stand for something outside itself, but locks other colors together in harmony. The experience of color relations is more than an optical sensation: it is a complex experience hard to put into words, a stimulus and a revelation.

Color is a sensitive medium for expressing both individual and universal experience. While color in literature inevitably gravitates toward symbolic associations, Woolf manipulates rhythmic inter-
relationships to create an overall plastic design, inwardly mirrored in
the image of painting. Lily Briscoe is one of those post-impressionist
artists who “do not seek to imitate form, but to create form, not to
imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life” (Fry, as quoted by Woolf
in RF, p. 154). While the novel illuminates life, it completes its
significance within the magic circle of art. Woolf accomplishes this
condensation by seeking out “plastic equivalents” and constructing a
virtual space that incorporates many of the subtle properties of color
contrast. Color in the novel is not only an equivalent of feeling, it is
also a component of form. The variously tinted streams of conscious-
ness interconnect, so that “geometric colour” becomes a structural prin-
ciple as in Cézanne’s painting.11

What Cézanne says of shape and color applies to To the Lighthouse:
“The outline and the colors are no longer distinct from each other. To
the extent that one paints, one outlines; the more the colors harmonize,
the more the outline becomes precise. . . . When the color is at its
richest, the form has reached plenitude.”12 Merleau-Ponty’s comment
(p. 16) on Cézanne’s portraiture can be applied, with slight modific-
tions, to Woolf’s characterization: “One’s personality is seen and
grasped in one’s glance, which is, however, no more than a combination
of colors.” In the novel, the single “glance” becomes a series of subjec-
tive reflections, and “personality” a complex of sense perceptions,
memories, verbal rhythms, and color.

Just as white light refracted through a prism produces the seven
colors of the spectrum, so being refracted through self produces the
psychological spectrum of the novel. To the Lighthouse is built on a nexus
of light and color. Its Neoplatonic theme is the relation of the One to
the many, the noumenal to the phenomenal. What Itten (AC, p. 30)
says of his students’ “color combinations” applies to Woolf’s characters:
“Intrinsic constitution and structures are reflected in the colors, which
are generated by dispersion and filtration of the white light of life and
by electromagnetic vibrations in the psycho-physiological medium of
the individual.” Objects do not have colors, but for the eye all objects
exposed to light absorb some rays and reflect others. Only Mrs. Ram-
say, as she identifies with the light (TL, p. 97), or enters the “wedge-
shaped core of darkness” (TL, p. 95), transcends colorific diffraction
and becomes pure being. After “burning and illuminating” (TL, p. 58),
she sinks back through the violet end of the spectrum (Lily’s “purple
shadow” [TL, p. 81]) to achromatic invisibility (TL, p. 95). “If the light
which falls on a body is completely absorbed by that body,” says Chev-
reul, "so that it disappears from sight, as in falling into a perfectly dark
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cavity, then the body appears to us as black. . . . " Mrs. Ramsay's absorptive powers are seen in her withdrawal into darkness, but she is also a powerful reflector of light, who illuminates other lives (TL, p. 160). In this oscillation she emulates the lighthouse with its revolving beams. Her powers of absorption and reflection relate to a rhythmic embrace of light and darkness symbolized in the Tao, and ultimately to the "white light" of cosmic being.

If Mrs. Ramsay relates to Light as essence, Lily relates to Color as the contingent substance of reality and art (TL, p. 75). Part I, "The Window," is dominated by the transcendent symbol of the Light, Part II, "Time Passes," by darkness and silence, and Part III, "The Lighthouse," by the refraction of Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual light into action (the voyage) and form and color (Lily's painting). At one end of the spectrum, Mr. Ramsay's intellectual vision dissolves in infrared rays; at the other, Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual vision dissolves in a blue haze bordering on ultraviolet. In his discussion of "Coloured Spaces in the Prismatic Spectrum," Ogden Rood observes that "the space out beyond 0 is occupied by a very dark red... and outside of the violet beyond 1,000 is a faint greyish colour, which has been called lavender." Rood (MC, p. 106) adds that "the eye seems far more sensitive to changes of wavelength in the middle regions of the spectrum than at either extremity." A similar blurring at the ends and sensitivity in the middle can be observed in To the Lighthouse, where green and yellow are associated with the androgynous, aesthetic vision of Lily and Carmichael. A synthesis of blue and red extremes appears in the "triangular purple shape" on Lily's canvas, a momentary negation of the entire spectrum in James's close-up view of the lighthouse as a "black and white" structure.

Within a given band of the spectrum, the dominant color serves to express related qualities of several characters. In the novel, color permeates the various streams of consciousness and is also an element in the overall design. As in Cézanne's painting, "the whole canvas is a tapestry where each colour plays separately and yet at the same time fuses its sonority in the total effect." The various reds form a masculine complex including Mr. Ramsay's red-hot pokers, red geraniums, and reddish-brown hedge; the reddish-brown stocking that Mrs. Ramsay is knitting for the lighthouse-keeper's son; her image of James "all red and ermine on the Bench"; Paul Rayley's blaze of amorous passion; and Charles Tansley's red raucousness. The feminine/intuitive wavelengths are more flexibly varied than the dense red glow of male egotism. Blue and green are frequently combined—blue associated with
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sea, distance, transcendence; green with “flowing grasses,” green shawl, illusion, and imagination. Yellow—Mr. Carmichael’s eyes and opium, the “yellow eye” of the lighthouse, the “pure lemon” of its beams, the harvest moon—is associated with meditation and intoxication. As for specific auras, Paul is associated with “a reddish light” (TL, p. 261), Cam with a “green light” (TL, p. 272), James’s memory of his mother with “a blue light” (TL, p. 278), and Mrs. Ramsay with “the light of the Lighthouse” itself (TL, p. 94). In “Time Passes,” the shade of Mrs. Ramsay’s spirit is gray—which lies outside the spectrum. Physiologically, “neutral gray” is appropriate to this visionary, transitional phase, as it combines “dissimilation” and “assimilation,” “consumption” and “regeneration” of the optic substance.17 Thus, when Mrs. Ramsay’s spirit revives to reanimate the voyage and the painting, the “essence” of “that woman in grey” (TL, p. 266) is a paradoxical fusion of presence and absence, fullness and emptiness, color and colorlessness—just as gray is the “abstract” of all complementaries and of all colors combined.

Mrs. Ramsay discusses local artists with Charles Tansley, who infers that “the colours [aren’t] solid” (TL, p. 24). This is a clue to Lily’s art, which, like Cézanne’s, is a structuring of space through mass and color: “The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white since she saw them like that, fashionable though it was, since Mr. Paunceforte’s visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent” (TL, pp. 31–32). Lily’s X-ray eyes, that so easily anatomize Tansley, look for an underlying architecture in nature that can support the intensity of her color vision. She does not want “the colour [to be] thinned and faded; the shapes etherealised” (TL, p. 75); she has glimpses of a more constructive vision: “She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral” (Ibid.). This stereoscopic vision fuses surface and depths, color and form, impressionist radiance and post-impressionist structure. Its leading exponents are Cézanne in painting, and Proust in literature.18

For Lily, as she dips into luscious blue or glistening red, or squeezes thick green pigment onto her palette, “Color expresses something in itself . . . .”19 She does not analyze her emotions: she feels “some instinctive need of distance and blue” (TL, p. 270), and “dip[ping] into the blue paint, she [dips] too into the past there” (TL, p. 256). The antithesis of her sensuous vision is Mr. Ramsay’s abstract philosophy, symbolized by a kitchen table: “something visionary, austere; something bare, hard, nor ornamental. There was no colour to it; it was all edges
and angles; it was uncompromisingly plain” (TL, p. 232; my italics). Andrew first proposed the image to illustrate Berkeley’s theory of perception, but in Lily’s mind the table becomes a surreal emblem of Locke’s “primary qualities” of shape and extension, divorced from “secondary qualities” of color and feeling. She sees “a phantom kitchen table” (emblem of the “muscular integrity” of the male mind) grotesquely superimposed upon the sensuous reality of a pear tree, and reflects: “Naturally, if one’s days were passed in this seeing of angular essences, this reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver to a white deal four-legged table (and it was a mark of the finest minds so to do) . . . one could not be judged like an ordinary person” (TL, p. 38).

Locke’s assumption of the primacy of form over color puts him squarely in the masculine/intellectual tradition of Mr. Ramsay (who is planning a lecture on Locke, Hume, and Berkeley [TL, p. 70]). Lily’s task is not to reject such empiricism, but to marry it to Mrs. Ramsay’s mysticism: “One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately . . . to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (TL, pp. 299–300). Clearly this dual way of seeing, at once true to the object and expressive of the subject, combines two ways of looking represented by the two Ramsays. The artist’s imagination transforms the bare idea (“Think of a table when you’re not there”) into a sensory image, reversing the Lockean process whereby sense impressions are transformed into ideas.

Working counter to the mathematical/philosophical thought of Andrew and his father, Lily’s mind (like Cézanne’s) perceives the bare structure of reality, but clothes it in sensuous light. Similarly, James achieves double vision of the lighthouse as an achromatic structure and as “a misty-looking tower with a yellow eye” (TL, p. 276)—fusing daylight and nighttime vision, fact and fancy, yin and yang. Only the androgynous artist can reveal “the nature of reality” as a matter of shifting perceptions, at once objective and subjective, analytic and sensuous. This twofold grasp of reality is characteristic of Cézanne’s art, which achieves, in Denis’ words, “an equilibrium, a reconciliation of the objective and subjective,” in an effect “at once shimmering and forcible” (D, pp. 213, 279).

Unconsciously Lily strives to create an “androgynous form” that will be the equivalent of harmonious being:

Heaven be praised for it, the problem of space remained, she thought, taking up her brush again. . . . The whole mass of the picture was poised upon that weight. Beautiful and bright it
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should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses. And she began to lay on a red, a grey, and she began to model her way into the hollow there. (TL, p. 255)

Lily is tackling a fertile dilemma, for, as Anton Ehrenzweig remarks, "in the conflict between strong colour and strong form each adversary grows in stature and power through their mutual confrontation. . . . Strong form and space inhibit colour interaction while strong colour interaction obliterates form and space."²⁰ Lily brings this dialectic to a "razor edge of balance between two opposite forces" (TL, p. 287). The forces that have been released battle for domination of the picture space: Lily feels the plastic stress disrupt the flat surface of her canvas, and threaten her own psychic balance (TL, p. 236). The more she plunges into her painting and tackles the problems of color and form, the more she encounters the unconscious substructure of her personality.

Blue is the visionary color for Woolf. In her sketch, "Monday or Tuesday," "space rushes blue," while the narrator of "An Unwritten Novel," seeking spatial form, exclaims: "There's the vista and the vision—there's the distance—the blue blot at the end of the avenue . . . ."²¹ William Gaunt notes the importance to the impressionists of primary blue as "the atmospheric colour par excellence of sky and distance,"²² while Émile Bernard observes of Cézanne's aquamarine that "in fact, the atmosphere is this blue; in nature it is always found over and around objects and they merge into it the more they draw away towards the horizon."²³ Blue, in To the Lighthouse, is associated with sea, sky, a bird's plumage (TL, p. 45), shadows of the hedge (TL, p. 234), pigments on Lily's palette or canvas (TL, pp. 237, 238, 256, 308), a parental shadow (TL, p. 251), distance and vision (TL, pp. 270, 284), Mrs. Ramsay's aura (TL, p. 278), the reflecting surface of the sea (TL, p. 284), smoke and unreality (TL, p. 285), the microcosmic form of the island fading like memory in the distance (TL, p. 307), and the eyes of all the male characters except the poet Carmichael.

James encounters the shade of his mother "in a blue light" (TL, p. 278) associated with coolness, memory, and truth. The persistence of blue in memory—its spiritual power—would be greater than that of red, for, as illumination declines, "colors of long wave lengths (reds) will fade out sooner than colors of short wave lengths (blues)."²⁴ To
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James, his mother has become an aura, rather than a figure with clear outlines. The blue wavelength is naturally related to Mrs. Ramsay's Madonna role, for “blue light ... is very difficult for the eye to focus and will cause objects to appear blurred and surrounded by halos” (CFS, p. 45). As a colorist, Woolf's intuitions are remarkably close to optical phenomena. Even in a most lyrical description of Mrs. Ramsay's response to the light—“it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon ...” (TL, p. 99)—Woolf's color observation is accurate, for “an ultramarine blue surface does not reflect the yellow wavelengths, but only the blue.”25 The seaward-looking Mrs. Ramsay achieves ecstasy through an alternation of complementary colors, mediating a deeper interplay of light and darkness.

Mrs. Ramsay's peculiar combination of radiance and somberness—at one extreme, “blue is darkness made visible”26—agrees with the tonal range of blue from height to depth, sky to sea, “bright steel to soft purple” (TL, p. 45), and blue-white to blue-black. “[Blue] is the only colour which can be seen as a close neighbour to and essentially akin to both dark and light ...” (C, p. 58). The fluctuating intensities of blue relate it to the rise and fall of Mrs. Ramsay's animating energies. For Kandinsky, “the tendency of blue to deepen is so strong that in fact it becomes intrinsically more intense and characteristic in deep tones,” while for Goethe blue “at its highest degree of purity ... is like a stimulating negation” (cited in C, p. 59). The dual extremes of palest and darkest blue relate to the light/darkness duality of Mrs. Ramsay's being. Despite her strong affinity with the stern, searching, beautiful light—“it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes ...” (TL, p. 97)—she alternately finds her true being in the “wedge-shaped core of darkness” (TL, p. 95), which gives freedom, peace, and stability. With rhythmic oscillations, like those of the lighthouse beam, she plunges into ecstatic or contemplative moods that are equally impersonal—as if fusing life and death in a single rhythm. While these states lie beyond the spectrum, with its individual chromatic differences, it is a fact that blue, above all colors, is capable of diffusion or condensation into light or darkness, day or night—being, as Denis says, the very color of the atmosphere.

Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual experience is mediated by images of light and darkness, but her sensory response to the lighthouse is keyed to color contrast: the “blue” of the waves in daylight is succeeded by the “pure lemon” of the beams in darkness (TL, p. 99). Behind this interaction of colors lies a fluid interchange of opposites27—waves of
darkness in light and light in darkness—that stimulates Mrs. Ramsay's ecstatic moment of being. Just as she sinks her being in darkness or expands to meet the light, so she is associated with a whole range of color—that is, the reader's response to blue in various contexts and degrees of saturation merges with his response to the character's stream of consciousness, so that chromatic sensations are progressively fused with spiritual equivalents. This fusion of color and being matches the actual fusion of color and form that Lily strives for in her painting.

The “total effect of blue” involves “a complete reconciliation of the opposing qualities of ‘excitement and repose’” (C, p. 59). This makes blue the color of creative imagination. James and Lily seek integration (psychological and aesthetic) through memories of Mrs. Ramsay steeped in ideal or actual blue. Their unconscious needs are transposed into color sensations, and this process works for the reader too. Lily's sense of time, for instance, is related to the vertical range of blue. The present moment is “like a drop of silver in which one dipped and illumined the darkness of the past,” while the past itself is identified with her “blue paint” (TL, p. 256). Lily's need of blue parallels Cézanne's, for “it is blue . . . the colour with which it is possible to blend most other colours in harmonious and rich conjunctions (unlike brown, to which it is infinitely superior from the colourist's point of view), which gives definition to this existence based wholly on colour . . .” (C, p. 81). Nietzsche says that “in books there are blue shades of colour with which their author seeks to steady his taut sensitivity” (quoted in C, p. 60), and this may be true of Woolf herself in To the Lighthouse.

Considering Mrs. Ramsay's energizing role in her marriage, it is ironic to note that “cool hues such as blue and violet, being passive, make ideal backgrounds.” However, her encouraging attitude toward her husband, children, and protegés makes her at least a potential source of harmony. Blue may be used as a background to show off other colors. Thus Van Gogh aimed to “paint infinity, [as] a plain background of the richest, intensest blue” (CL, pp. 3, 6), and Cézanne told Bernard: “Blue gives other colours their vibration, so one must bring a certain amount of blue into a painting” (quoted in C, p. 57). Mrs. Ramsay provides the visionary “background” of Woolf’s novel, its sense of spiritual space and depth, but her wavelike outpourings of energy in support of others exhaust her individual “chroma,” leaving her to seek light and darkness beyond the human spectrum.

Red and blue are often found in conjunction in the novel. Itten (AC, p. 68) describes the conjunction of red and blue in “La Belle Verrière,” a stained-glass window in Chartres Cathedral: “This
Madonna is the Queen of Heaven, born of the primeval cosmic blue. She shines like a young star with cold energy, surrounded by the red light of matter. The Child, the incarnate Son of God, is garbed in dark red. This contrast parallels that of mother and son in To the Lighthouse, where Mrs. Ramsay imagines James, with “his fierce blue eyes,” growing up to be “all red and ermine on the Bench” (TL, p. 10), while she herself, a Madonna figure who “[has] the whole of the other sex under her protection,” is associated with “the great plateful of blue water . . .” (TL, p. 23). Under her tutelage, Charles Tansley, whose life lacks grace or pleasure, watches a man posting a circus bill in “glistening reds and blues” (TL, p. 21). These separate intensities of hue caricature the clash of opposites embodied in the Ramsays. With red and blue there must either be conflict or chromatic marriage resulting in some shade of purple. Tansley, despite his “purple book” (TL, p. 238), fails to achieve integration between the restless red of his ego and the tranquilizing blue of Mrs. Ramsay’s spirit, and so remains dehumanized at one end of the spectrum, with the “red, energetic, shiny ants” (TL, p. 293). But Lily, who synthesizes spiritual rays of mother and son into a “triangular purple shape” (TL, p. 81), is “moved”—after an outburst of imaginary red (TL, pp. 261–62)—“by some instinctive need of distance and blue” (TL, p. 270) that helps her to harmonize her painting. Her synthetic view of Mrs. Ramsay and James merges their auras, and integrates their figures in a pyramidal structure characteristic of Renaissance religious art. The resultant purple triangle is also, in its tripartite form, a plastic abstraction of the fictional shape that Woolf creates from her own experience.

The vivid contrast of red and blue in painting goes back at least to Titian, who “intensified the blue of the horizon beyond all natural verisimilitude, and intensified the colours of the sky and the sea to such a degree that they acquired completely equal status with the reds” (C, pp. 69–70). In balancing her foreground and background colors, Woolf is also balancing the “psychological volumes” of the Ramsays. Their marriage brings into contact opposite wavelengths of red and blue that, in ideal synthesis, would create the impersonal illumination of white light. The color red is associated with effort and excitation. Mr. Ramsay’s vision is blocked, giving more heat than light: “[the] break in the thick hedge, [was] guarded by red hot pokers like braziers of clear burning coal, between which the blue waters of the bay looked bluer than ever” (TL, p. 33). The point of view is that of Lily and Bankes, but they are looking at the color tones of the Ramsays, who form the spiritual axis of the novel. In To the Lighthouse, mental and
spiritual, personal and impersonal energies are polarized in juxtapositions of red and blue.

Mr. Ramsay's ego conflicts (red tonality) emphasize the desirability of impersonal vision (blue). Blue, the maternal/visionary color, is associated with liberation and expansion: "First, the pulse of colour flooded the bay with blue, and the heart expanded with it and the body swam . . ." (TL, p. 33). For Lily and Bankes, this glimpse of transcendence is quickly "checked and chilled by the prickly blackness" (Ibid.)—suggesting their personal limitations. Similarly, the infrared blur that obscures the alphabet from the letter R on suggests the limits set by Mr. Ramsay's identity. Instead of a "pulse of colour" that signifies a response to light and life, there is a hectic pulse of blood that signals forcing of the will: "The veins on his forehead bulged. The geranium in the urn became startlingly visible . . ." (TL, p. 54). The bloodred blur is a symptom of self-blinded ego, for one sees red if one closes one's eyes against the light. The prominence of geraniums and veins implies a consciousness suffused and overheated with itself. The geraniums provide an objective correlative of Mr. Ramsay's thought patterns, but when he "[lowers] his gaze" to the flowers around him, he notices only "something red, something brown" (TL, p. 102). The lighthouse itself is glimpsed "between the two clumps of red-hot pokers" (TL, p. 104), as the blue bay had been through the hedge. Thus the hyperintense quality of volition is thrown into relief against the cool blue of spiritual vision. Even Mrs. Ramsay's sympathetic assertion of fantasy in the face of fact—"'Perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing'" (TL, p. 26)—is consistent with color interactions, for "blue on red-orange retains its dark figure, yet becomes luminous, asserting and maintaining its strange unreality" (AC, p. 136; my italics). Mrs. Ramsay's imagination ultimately has the power to modify her husband's actions—just as his actions are destined to fulfill her unrealized dream.

Optical imagery occurs in the contrast between farsighted Mr. Ramsay and his nearsighted wife. Woolf's accuracy appears again, for "the eye focuses differently to different colors (farsighted for red, nearsighted for blue) . . ." (CFS, p. 60). As L. Moholy-Nagy explains: "Red makes the eye 'far-sighted,' by causing the lens to grow thicker. This action will give red a nearer position than blue which causes the eye to grow 'near-sighted' as it flattens the lens." Mrs. Ramsay's vision is linked with the euphoric "pulse of colour [that] flooded the bay with blue" (TL, p. 33), yet she is so "short-sighted" (TL, pp. 21, 48, 109) that she cannot distinguish between "a lobster pot" and an "upturned boat"
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( *TL*, p. 239). In the color-coding of the Ramsays, blue is associated with distance, imagination, shortsightedness; red with closeness, rationality, farsightedness. Mrs. Ramsay gazes out through the window, taking a long view over the bay; Mr. Ramsay gazes into the intricate detail of the hedge. Both kinds of looking have their drawbacks. The long view is free of complexity but unfocused—"Blue and purple become hopelessly lost to blur in darkness and distance" ( *CFS*, p. 45)—while the short view is accurate but unsynthesized. If one thematic pole of the novel is *merging*—which dissolves individual outlines—the other is *separating*, which defines outlines in painful detail, while losing sight of the whole. In a balanced vision, these two modes of seeing—one *synthetic*, fusing the alphabet into a unity, the other *analytic*, breaking thought into a sequence of letters—must reinforce each other. The eye of the artist strives to see the object two ways—as a structure of parts and as a luminous whole.

Mrs. Ramsay knits a "reddish-brown" stocking for the lighthouse keeper's boy, and ten years later Mr. Ramsay sets off for the lighthouse "carrying brown paper parcels . . ." ( *TL*, p. 231). His masculine ethos is associated with brown things, from earth and hedge to books and boats, causing a series of interactions between brown and blue. Lily needs Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual blue frequency, but she also needs Mr. Ramsay's close earthy quality: the question is how to combine these opposites. She switches her attention from Mr. Ramsay in the boat to "the mess of the hedge with its green cave of blues and browns . . ." ( *TL*, p. 234); her brush "flicker[s] brown over the white canvas" ( *TL*, p. 235); "she [begins] precariously dipping among the blues and umbers" ( *TL*, p. 237); then, "moved . . . by some instinctive need of distance and blue, she look[es] at the bay beneath her, making hillocks of the blue bars of the waves, and stony fields of the purpler spaces, [and] again she [is] roused . . . by something incongruous. There [is] a brown spot in the middle of the bay. It [is] [Mr. Ramsay's] boat" ( *TL*, p. 270). Itten ( *AC*, p. 136) notes that dark brown and blue juxtaposed "excite" and "awaken" each other, and that "the brown . . . is resurrected by the power of the blue." Mr. Ramsay is certainly resurrected from sterility by his wife's animating energy, which finally sends him on his voyage.

Merging opposite ends of the spectrum produces the color purple, which is therefore a direct sign of integration. According to Rood, "this sensation cannot be produced by one set of waves alone, whatever their length may be; it needs the joint action of the red and violet waves, or the red and blue" ( *MC*, p. 107). Thus spiritual integration cannot be achieved either by Mr. Ramsay's intellect or by Mrs. Ramsay's intuition.
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working separately; the two extremes must meet in a complete circle, just as masculine and feminine components must mingle in a fully creative (androgynous) self. Indeed, “the spectrum really has no ends . . . for red and violet are adjacent, psychologically—their mixture results in purple, which lies outside the spectrum but fills the gap between red and violet in a spectrum which we might imagine bent into a ring.”

In To the Lighthouse, red (and the energies of fire) becomes constructive only under the aegis of Mrs. Ramsay, who gives the order to “‘Light the candles’” (TL, p. 145). The “flames [stand] upright,” illuminating the microcosmic fruitbowl, and conjuring up a festive image of Bacchus “among the leopard skins and the torches lolling red and gold” (TL, p. 146). Minta “[wears] her golden haze” (TL, p. 148) and Mr. Ramsay likes such “golden-reddish girls” (TL, p. 149), but Lily feels “scorched” by “the heat of love” in Paul. Mrs. Ramsay, a maternal goddess who has the power to ignite human energies, is “fire-encircled” by her children’s laughter. She presides over the “yellow and purple” cornucopia of fruit and the brown-and-yellow dish of meat, bestowing the blessings of sun and fire. She herself is a fountain of energy, “burning and illuminating” (TL, p. 58), as she dispenses heat and light. Her emblem of radiant integration is the ruby that “shines out” (TL, p. 158).

Fire that burns more than it illuminates is destructive, and here such consuming fire is associated with the red light of a dangerous sexual passion. While Lily struggles to harmonize colors in her painting, “suddenly . . . a reddish light seemed to burn in her mind, covering Paul Rayley, issuing from him. It rose like a fire sent up in token of some celebration by savages on a distant beach . . . . The whole sea for miles round ran red and gold. Some winey smell mixed with it and intoxicated her” (TL, p. 261). This ritualized, atavistic image of sexuality (burning, drowning, drunkenness) is the negative counterpart of Mrs. Ramsay’s civilized fertility rite. Lily is fascinated by the raw force of sexuality—directly expressed to her painter’s sensibility as reddish light and crackling fire—yet it seems to threaten not only her psychic balance, but the very fabric of a culture based on sublimation.

The threat is valid aesthetically, as well as psychologically, for “red light, placed against a green surround, would ‘flare’ over the green and neutralize it” (CFS, p. 118). Baudelaire took a perverse “delight in the combination of red and green,” which suggested to him “the fusion of violence and peace.” and Van Gogh, in his “Night Café,” “tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green,”
projecting into this “clash and contrast of the most alien reds and greens” the shock waves of his own psyche (CL, pp. 3, 28). Lily, however, is striving for equilibrium. She needs to deal with the counterforce of the masculine ego, as she needs to balance the colors and masses in her painting. When colors call forth their complementsaries, the result may be either conflict or harmony. Itten notes that “two such colors [i.e., pigments] make a strange pair. They are opposite, they require each other. They incite each other to maximum vividness when adjacent; and they annihilate each other, to gray-black, when mixed—like fire and water” (AC, p. 78). When Lily thinks of the Rayleys’ marriage, she “squeez[es] the tube of green paint” (TL, p. 257) in an act of self-assertion, then arms herself by “taking the green paint on her brush” (TL, p. 258). It is the dominance of green on her palette that incites the blaze of red in her imagination.

But the tendency of red to annihilate green (or of Rayley or Tansley to destroy Lily’s confidence) is countered by the tendency of “a green areola” in vision to surround any “red circle” placed on canvas (LCC, p. 92). Moreover, “Red and Green are of all complementary colours the most equal in depth” (LCC, p. 51), and green is intensified by proximity to red. Thus Lily’s reflections on her masculine opposites stimulate, rather than inhibit, her color sense and vision. Goethe points out that “single colors affect us, as it were, pathologically. . . . However, the need for totality inherent in our [optical] organ guides us beyond this limitation. It sets itself free by producing the opposites . . . and thus brings about a satisfying completeness.” The “reddish light” Lily encounters while concentrating on her painting may be seen as a composite of everything outside her normal wavelength, and therefore as antagonistic to the limits of her self. For, “if we isolate one hue from the prismatic spectrum, for example green, and collect the remaining colors . . . with a lens, the mixed color obtained will be red, i.e. the complementary color of the green we isolated” (AC, p. 18). In her life, as in her painting, Lily is committed to a search for integration, and thus has to face the opposing self—an interaction that Woolf dramatizes in terms of color.

Cam, in the boat, is associated with green, providing another link with Lily on the lawn. She looks into “green cascades” (TL, p. 246), and green light saturates her mind, as she penetrates the luminous underworld of the unconscious: “Her hand cut a trail in the sea, as her mind made the green swirls and streaks into patterns and, numbed and shrouded, wandered in imagination in that underworld of waters . . . where in the green light a change came over one’s entire mind and
one's body shone half transparent in a green cloak” (TL, p. 272). This is the underworld of Marvell's oceanic mind that creates other seas, “Annihilating all that's made / To a green thought in a green shade.” Cam's enchanting green sea is the imaginative counterpart of the rougher existential seas of Cowper's “Castaway,” as recited by her father. The green sea also has “a purplish stain . . . as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath” (TL, p. 201). The complementary green and purple, brought together, imply a continuum of experience ranging from ecstasy to suffering, and from creation to destruction.

The color green is also associated tangentially with Mrs. Ramsay, and directly with Lily. Green and blue are frequently juxtaposed, suggesting affinities between aesthetic and spiritual modes of vision. According to Rood, “positive green” is particularly difficult to incorporate into a painting without disrupting the chromatic balance. “The ability to solve this problem in a brilliant manner,” says Rood (MC, p. 241), “is one of the signs which indicate an accomplished colourist, and, when the green is combined with blue, the task becomes still more difficult and success more praiseworthy.” Cézanne successfully harmonizes blues and greens in such paintings as “The Great Pine” (1892–96) and the lyrical late “Mont Sainte-Victoire” (1904–06), in which “the sky . . . bursts into . . . an explosion of clouds of blue and green, as deep and strong as the blues and greens of the earth. . . .”36 In Lily's painting green and blue are consistently linked (TL, pp. 234, 238, 241, 309). As she “[loses] consciousness of outer things . . . her mind [keeps] throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues” (TL, p. 238). The unconscious aim of Lily's art is to strip herself bare and remodel the blank space with the greens and blues of imaginative and spiritual reality. Like Cézanne, she constructs a space in which things exist, through rhythmic alternations of color, and this space is an extension of herself.

“Green is the intermediate between yellow and blue” (AC, p. 136), which clearly reflects Lily's position in the color scale between her fellow artist, Carmichael, and her spiritual mother, Mrs. Ramsay. At the same time, “red, as regards its brilliancy, is midway between yellow and blue; and in green these two extremes are united” (LCC, p. 51). By analogy, Mr. Ramsay's vibrant egotism (red) can be seen as midway between Mr. Carmichael's detached illumination (yellow) and Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual density (blue), while the green paint that Lily squeezes onto her canvas may signify her attempt to combine aesthetic
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and spiritual qualities (yellow and blue) in opposition to disturbing passions (red). Lily models the "hideously difficult white space" of her canvas "with greens and blues" (TL, p. 238). Her strong impulse toward blue (the color of spiritual distance) is an inner necessity inspired by her craving for Mrs. Ramsay, while her need for aesthetic distance is implied by Carmichael's quiet presence. Placed between the primaries yellow and blue, "green finds no simple complementary color in the spectrum; it requires a mixture of red and violet, or the color called purple" (MC, p. 158). Thus Lily's search for integration (green/red; green/purple) is matched by her need to join opposite ends of the human spectrum in her painting (red/blue). Her purple plays a key role as the chromatic signifier of integration.

Yellow is the motif of contemplative, catlike Augustus Carmichael, whose "otherwise milk white" beard is stained with a "vivid streak of canary-yellow" (TL, p. 19). His addiction to opium is a token of his rejection of outward reality in favor of an inner sun of mystic/poetic illumination. "In China," observes Itten (AC, p. 17), "yellow, the most luminous color, was reserved to the emperor, the Son of Heaven. None other might wear a yellow garment; yellow was a symbol of supreme wisdom and enlightenment." Mr. Carmichael's poetry is imagined to be oriental and majestic in flavor (TL, pp. 289–90). A venerable figure dressed in yellow slippers (TL, p. 65), he assumes a godlike role as he casts his blessing on the voyage and the vision. Phenomenologically, "yellow is the most light-giving of all hues. . . . Golden yellow suggests the highest sublimination of matter by the power of light, im palpably radiant, lacking transparency, but weightless as a pure vibration" (AC, p. 132). The centrality of Carmichael, his closeness to both earth and sun, sense and spirit, is supported by data of color perception. Birren (CFS, p. 47) notes that "yellow will be seen as the nearest and largest of colors": Augustus, "drinking soup, [is] very large and calm in the failing light, and monumental and contemplative . . ." (TL, p. 145). The passivity of yellow, often used as a luminous background in painting, relates to Carmichael's lethargy; his presence, however, is subliminally helpful to Lily, as she wrestles with her painting on the lawn, and he seems to "[crown] the occasion" with "a wreath of violets and asphodels . . ." (TL, p. 309). Asphodels have "white or yellow flowers like lilies," while the color violet is the complement of greenish-yellow—a mixture of motifs associated with Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, and Carmichael. The fact that "yellow is the lightest and violet the darkest hue" (AC, p. 64) further suggests an aesthetic synthesis.

Yellow and blue-violet (which approximates purple) are also
complementaries—that is, combined they produce white light. Mr. Carmichael and Mrs. Ramsay are united by “looking together” at the “yellow and purple dish of fruit” (TL, p. 146), whose pyramidal structure recalls Cézanne’s still lifes. Their unity once more signifies integration of aesthetic and spiritual modes of vision. “Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes . . . putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene . . .” (TL, p. 163). Aesthetic bliss here has a basis in the science of optics, for visual purple and visual yellow are mutually transforming agents: “[The] purplish pigment in the rods of the retina, bleached to visual yellow by the action of light [is] considered a factor in transforming light rays into the sensory impulses of vision . . .” (WNWD). Thus Mrs. Ramsay’s intuitive combination of colors exactly renders the physical basis of spiritual vision.

In the geometry of the Color Circle (AC, p. 64), the yellow/violet axis (with its “light-dark contrast”) stands at right angles to the green-blue/red-orange axis (with its “cold-warm contrast”). Similarly, in the color geometry of “The Lighthouse,” aesthetic and emotional axes are based on similar color contrasts—yellow/violet: the glow of Carmichael/the shadow of Mrs. Ramsay’s spirit; red/green: the passionate warmth of Mr. Ramsay, Tansley, Rayley/the coolness of Cam and Lily. The formal geometry of Part Three creates a continual oscillation between the predominantly aesthetic and psychological spheres of lawn and boat, until, with a single stroke of her brush, Lily resolves the opposition into harmony.

Allen McLaurin’s discussion of yellow focuses some of the problems of dealing with color in literature. McLaurin (EE, p. 194) says that “in her use of yellow . . . Woolf is trying to come close to the ‘pure’ colour of a painting—colour without any literary meaning.” Yet when he adds that “yellow is a positive avoidance of logical meaning,” and that the quality of autonomy “rubs off on to the colour” from Carmichael, he comes perilously close to assigning negative meanings. At the same time, McLaurin cites G. E. Moore in support of his contention that “yellow means simply yellow . . . [and] cannot be translated into other terms.” The critical difficulty of distinguishing between plastic and symbolic values in the novel may be a sign of Woolf’s success. In transposing color into words, she exploits a field of subtle interrelations between sensation and idea.

As Itten (AC, p. 36) notes, “our sense organs can function only by
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means of comparisons... Color effects are ... intensified or weakened by contrast.” For Van Gogh, “there is no blue without yellow and without orange” (CL, pp. 3, 491) while Badt (C, pp. 37–38) claims that “every touch of paint” that Cézanne laid on his canvas was aimed at “intensification of the relationships within the picture.” Especially relevant is Rudolf Arnheim’s observation (AVP, p. 62) that “the identity of a color does not reside in the color itself but is established by relation. We are aware of this mutual transfiguration, which makes every color dependent on the support of all the others, just as the stones of an arch hold one another in place.” This is exactly the kind of construction with color that Lily practices in her painting, and that Woolf attempts to match in To the Lighthouse.

In tracing Woolf’s use of the four visual primaries, blue, red, green, and yellow, I have, in each case, discovered patterns of reaction and integration that function aesthetically as well as psychologically. Instead of being tied to fixed symbolic meanings, Woolf’s colors vibrate together, causing dramatic tension before achieving what Fry calls “a harmonious plastic unity.” McLaurin (EE, pp. 73, 80) suggests that “some sort of keyboard of colours can be constructed, some ‘system of relations’ as in Cézanne’s art,” and that “language might be able to create a relation similar to that established by colours in a painting.” The sense of interaction is particularly significant in literature, where direct effects of light and color on the retina must be replaced by imagined responses. In To the Lighthouse, each character has, as it were, its own frequency, and is known by its own range of color associations. Moreover, each character modifies and is modified by a complex “system of relations”—involving virtual color, mass, and line—that helps to unify the novel as “a psychological poem” (AWD, p. 104) and as a self-reflexive work of art. The language of color is integral to Woolf’s vision and design, as she explores the interface between fiction and painting. Only through color interactions—complementing, but transcending, psychological relationships—can Woolf’s reader pass beyond printed words and experience that “luminous silent stasis,” in which aesthetic contemplation and human understanding become one.

3 Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (1927; rpt. New York: Harcourt, n.d.). Subsequent references in my text are based on this edition, abbreviated as TL.

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See Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color*, trans. Ernst van Haagen (New York: Van Nostrand, n.d.), p. 13: “Color is life.... Colors are primordial ideas, children of the aboriginal colorless light and its counterpart, colorless darkness. As flame begets light, so light engenders colors. Colors are the children of light, and light is their mother.” Subsequent references in my text are based on this edition, abbreviated as AC.


Fry, *Cézanne*, p. 77, finds color, as well as form, to be “geometric,” and in “Plastic Colour,” *Transformations*, p. 220, he defines “the central idea of Cézanne’s later work” as “the construction of clearly articulated plastic wholes by means of the interplay of coloured planes....”


See my article, “Light in *To the Lighthouse*,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, 23 (1977), 377–89.


evolution of Fry’s views on Cézanne. Subsequent references in my text are abbreviated as D.


18 See Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), p. 72: “The thing about Proust is his combination of the utmost sensibility with the utmost tenacity. He searches out these butterfly shades to the last grain. He is as tough as catgut and as evanescent as a butterfly’s bloom.” Subsequent reference in my text is based on this edition, abbreviated as AWD.


23 Quoted in Badt, *The Art of Cézanne*, p. 57. According to Badt (p. 72), the impressionists “succeeded in fusing their pictures into unity in a blue-hued space,” but he contrasts their atmospheric blue with Cézanne’s compositional use of the color.

24 Faber Birren, *Color, Form, and Space* (New York: Reinhold, 1961), p. 96. Subsequent references in my text are based on this edition, abbreviated as CFS.


29 Experiments in color fusion show how purple light can be generated from red and blue: “If a red card is exposed to one eye and a blue card to the other eye (simultaneously), perfect fusion in the center of the brain will result in a mixture of the two (a purple)” (Birren, *Color, Form, and Space*, p. 44).

30 According to Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), trans. Michael Sadleir et al. (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947), p. 45, chromotherapy has shown that “red light stimulates and excites the heart, while blue light can cause temporary paralysis.”


definitions of Chevreul's Laws: "Simultaneous contrast means that two colour-areas placed side by side will tend to exaggerate their differences, and, if complementsaries, they will acquire an unusual brilliance. . . . Successive contrast means that one colour-area will fatigue the eye after a moment and induce an after-image or surrounding halo of the colour-opposite."


37 Purple and green are sometimes juxtaposed (TL, pp. 33, 286) as, implicitly, in Lily's vision of Mrs. Ramsay "stepping . . . across fields among whose folds, purplish and soft, among whose flowers, hyacinths or lilies, she vanished" (TL, p. 270). (Here the purple of integration merges with the green-and-white of Lily's emblematic flower.)


39 Cf. Denis, "Cézanne—II," p. 275: "Every work of art is a transposition, an emotional equivalent . . . Cézanne taught us to transpose the data of sensation into the elements of a work of art." Woolf had to adapt this lesson to fiction, taking valuable hints from Cézanne and Fry, as well as from Proust.