

The Lighthouse Within: A Study of Symbolic Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's Narrative

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" is a study of personality, of the relationship between time, death, nature, and art. Since the purpose of the novelist was to convey inner reality or psychological truths, extensive use of symbolism is made to increase the expressive range that implies an indirect suggestion of ideas. According to Woolf, a symbol should have some similarity to the thing symbolised which it should make splendid. Further she says, 'yet a symbol should not cease to be itself by becoming something else.' It should be 'one single whole and not appear to us two separate parts'. The most prominent symbols used by Mrs. Woolf are natural objects – the sea, the lighthouse, and the waves. Colours and characters as well as their actions are also exploited as symbols by the playwright.

The title of the book is "To the Lighthouse" which represents the quest for the values that are suggested by the lighthouse. The book opens with a sentence hinting at the two basic limitations to human fulfilment –

"yes, of course, if its fine tomorrow" (Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse, Part I, "The Window," Chapter 1)

Here, "If" points to the uncertainty and the insecurity of the human fate while "tomorrow" to its imprisonment in time. The final sentence however is –

"I have had my vision." (Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse, Part III, "The Lighthouse," Chapter 13)

Thus, to reach the lighthouse is to have a creative relationship.

Keywords – Symbolism, Time Imprisonment, Creative Relationship, Inner Reality, Psychological Truths

Declaration – This paper is original and unpublished

1. Introduction:

Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" is a study of personality, of the relationship between time, death, nature, and art. Since the purpose of the novelist was to convey inner reality or psychological truths, extensive use of symbolism is made to increase the expressive range that implies an indirect suggestion of ideas. According to Woolf, a symbol should have some similarity to the thing symbolised which it should make splendid. In the same context, Samuel Taylor Coleridge says "yet a symbol should not cease to be itself by becoming something else" (Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. The Statesman's Manual. 1816) It should be 'one single whole and not appear to us two separate parts'. The most prominent symbols used

by Mrs. Woolf are natural objects – the sea, the lighthouse, and the waves. Colours and characters as well as their actions are also exploited as symbols by the playwright.

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“yes, of course, if its fine tomorrow” (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, page 2, lines 13-14)

Here, “If” points to the uncertainty and the insecurity of the human fate while “tomorrow” to its imprisonment in time.

The final sentence however is –

“I have had my vision.” (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, page 2, lines 17-18)

Thus, to reach the lighthouse is to have a creative relationship.

Since the purpose of the novelist is to convey inner reality or psychological truths, she has made extensive use of symbolism to increase the expressive range of her language. Symbols are essentially words which suggest more than is conveyed by their literal meaning. It thus implies an indirect suggestion of ideas. ‘The lighthouse’ naturally represents the symbol at the peak of its development, as a distant guide and identical with being in “To The Lighthouse.” According to Daiches, the Lighthouse itself standing lonely in the midst of the sea is, a symbol of the individual who is at once a unique being and a part of the flux of history. As the whole in “Mobydick” means different things to different people and critics, so the lighthouse in “To the Lighthouse” means different things to different people and scholars.

On reaching the lighthouse one is supposed to abandon the uniqueness of one’s ego to an impersonal reality. On reaching the lighthouse, the characters are thus freed from their personal prejudices. Mr. Ramsay does not pose with his book now and James and Cam on their part are no longer resentful of their father’s way of bullying them into his expedition. The Lighthouse, then in part symbolizes both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. This is evident by a passage in Part III in which James contrasts his early impressions of the lighthouse, which he recalls in thinking of his mother. While, on the other hand, he sees the lighthouse and likens to his father as they near it in the boat –

“The Lighthouse was then [in his childhood] a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now.....he could see the white-washed rocks, the tower, stark and straight....So that was the lighthouse, was it?.....The other Lighthouse was true too.” (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Page 3, lines 31–37)

James’ ability to reconcile his two views of the Lighthouse reminds us, however, that it symbolizes not only the individual traits of Ramsays, but the harmonious union of their complementary qualities; for instance, courage with sympathy or intellect with intuition.

To Mrs. Ramsay, as she sits knitting in the window, the lighthouse seems at one moment the light of truth while at another moment an enemy of peace. However, according to Drew, ‘it always illumines and clarifies the human condition in some way.’

Various opinions have been expressed on the symbolic value of Mrs. Ramsay by different critics. According to a literary critic, Overcash, Mrs. Ramsay is – “the central figure in an elaborate allegory of the Bible in which she plays the parts of Eve, the Virgin Mary, and Christ.” While Hadey says – “she is the representation of the truth of intuition as opposed to the truth of reason.” In short, she is a symbol of order, essential energy, and the fickle beauty.

With this respect, Hafley says, “To the Lighthouse” is really the story of a contest between two kinds of truth – Mr. Ramsay’s and Mrs. Ramsay’s.” For him, truth is factual truth; for her, the truth is the movement towards truth. This becomes evident when Mr. Ramsay says –

“If thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into as many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order,’Z’ is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach ‘R’ it would be something.” (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, page 4, lines 18-22)
Thus, “here is a logical, scientific, procedure towards truth.” (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, page 4, lines 19-23).

Mr. Ramsay, says a critic, stands as the symbol of the sterile, destructive barriers to relationship whereas Mrs. Ramsay stands for creative vitality.

On the other hand, Lily Briscoe is the representation of Mrs. Virginia Woolf herself; she is the novelist’s spokeswoman. It is she who analyses Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s characters. We thus, witness their characters through her.

While painting the image of Mr. Ramsay she thinks:

“That man...never gave; that man took.” (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, page 4, lines 29-30)

The above quote resembles a central theme of the novel that explains the imbalance of power and the unequal emotional consistency during that era. It acts as a critique of a society where patriarchal figures like Mr. Ramsay focus solely on their work and ego; with a complete lack of empathy towards others; especially women. While women are expected to nurture and manage the emotional lives around them at the expense of their own identity. Also, Mr. Ramsay is modelled on Woolf’s own father, Leslie Stephen. In the same context, Mr. Ramsay is perceived as an emotional vampire. He believes that life should be governed by logic, reason, and objective facts rather than emotions or illusions. His famous analogy of progressing through the alphabet—from A to Z—illustrates his view that intellectual achievement is gradual and that only a few exceptional individuals ever reach true greatness. Through Mr. Ramsay, Woolf demonstrates that intellectual brilliance alone cannot provide emotional fulfilment; genuine human connection and compassion are equally essential to a meaningful life.

Lily Briscoe thinks of Mrs. Ramsay, how she spreads happiness around her. Lily thinks of the multiplicity of Mrs. Ramsay’s personality and says:

“One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that woman with.” (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, page 4, lines 36-37)

Thus, Lily Briscoe represents a chronic figure who comments on the activities and actions of other characters. She is thus the representative of the new woman who refuses to remain oppressed by men. Lily finally figured out, unlike Mrs. Ramsay, that a woman can be independent in the society if she has a profession and a way of living of her own. Thus, the brush in Lily's hand is a path to get liberation from the patriarchal society of that era.

Also, the frequent use of window in the novel, shows that it has a symbolic value. It is shown from the window that we have the title of the first part of "To the Lighthouse". It is not a transparent but a separating sheet of glass between reality and Mrs. Ramsay's mind. Thus, the window acts as a screen between reality and consciousness. And finally this window is the very symbol of the imperfection of our knowledge. The sea with its waves is to be heard entirely in the novel. It represents the eternal flux of time and life. To Mrs. Ramsay, it sounds soothing while for others, "like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beating a warning of death."

Thus, sometimes it renders enthusiasm while other times it reduces the individual to nothingness. The waves have been employed as the symbol of the movement of life. They can be identified with both; the human race in general and the individual personality.

As mentioned by Daiches, there is a color symbolism mentioned throughout the novel. Red and brown appear to be the colors of individuality and egotism; while blue and green are the colors of impersonality. Lily works with blues and greens; Mrs. Ramsay is indicated on Lily's canvas as a triangular purple shape. While Mr. Ramsay's color is red or brown.

All the above examples clearly denote that Mrs. Woolf is a symbolist par excellence. Her symbols are remarkable for their rich suggestiveness, clarity, and understanding. She is thus, able to reveal her characters' consciousness with the help of symbols and is also, able to reveal the luminous halo, the mystery of life.

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