

To the lighthouse by virginia woolf essay sample

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To the Lighthouse written in 1927 by Virginia Woolf is a perfect example of her experimental style of writing. She uses (overuses) semicolons, dashes, parenthesis to create “ stream of consciousness” writing technique that can be found in many of her novels. This approach demonstrates for the reader the randomness of human thought. In the text we are not just reading the characters’ thoughts, we are the characters thoughts- forcibly paced. The thoughts of these characters are rich and reflective spanning several decades of time. James, Mr. And Mrs. Ramsey are unique characters to the reader but quite familiar to Woolf.

Many critics believe that much of the design, dialogue, and characters are autobiographical.. Woolf does not limit herself to vivid characters she completely fleshes out the landscape- the sea and the lighthouse. They become central and unifying players. This intense personification of landscape makes the reader care for them just as much as the actual individuals in the novel. Virginia writes “ if you try to reform a moment into words, it breaks into a hundred contradicting notions,” as Lily, and certainly this is true when we closely examine the use of the lighthouse as a symbol in this novel.

Lighthouses are traditional symbols that can be observed throughout our culture. Lighthouses in dreams are often analyzed as a need or a seeking of guidance in hard and indecisive times. Lighthouses offer a light beacon that helps ships stir around danger. Lighthouses are also a symbol in Christianity, seen as a symbol of Christ. In To the Lighthouse, the lighthouse in a general sense symbolizes the same thing. It sheds light and offer comfort to the characters in the novel.

The lighthouse also mirrors the perspective of the narrative. Woolf does not write in a linear fashion. Ideas, thoughts, and especially time revolve around each character like the light of the lighthouse revolves. The lighthouse represents life itself. It shifts and changes like life. There are moments of great clarity much like the bursts of light from the lighthouse, and longer stretches of sadness and confusion similar to the long stretches of darkness. It is the light of truth and intelligence. It is in the location of the lighthouse that the characters resolved their issues and remember the past.

It is in the lighthouse that the family says their last goodbyes to Mrs. Ramsey, making the trip to the summer house just isn't worth it without her. On the way to the lighthouse, James and his father begin to heal their relationship. And it is in the final pages of the novel that Lily reflects on the lighthouse, and she finishes her painting she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.(224)

The general interpretation of the lighthouse and its themes cannot be extended to the characters in the novel. Through the progress of the novel it is clear that the lighthouse has different meanings to each of the main characters - James, Mr. Ramsey, and Mrs. Ramsey.

The lighthouse for James represents something that is unobtainable. Early in part I of the novel, James wants to go to the lighthouse. He is excited and overjoyed when his mother teased him with the idea. The narrator explains

To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail, within touch .(2)

His father tells him that " it won't be fine"(4). His mother, who is hesitant, offers hope to James, and tells him that he can reach the lighthouse if he puts his mind to it. The lighthouse becomes something that James can physically see but cannot reach on his own. He begins to romanticized the lighthouse and how wonderful it will be. The narrator describes James as follows

Since he belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, (2)

In part III when James finally reaches the lighthouse he is disappointed. The structure does not live up to his imagination. James thinks upon seeing the lighthouse for the first time

The Lighthouse one had seen across the bay all these years; it was a stark tower on a bare rock. It satisfied him...(219)

But it didn't satisfy him enough, he continues to think

The old ladies, he thought, thinking of the garden at home ...Old Mrs. Beckwith, for example, was always saying how nice it was and how sweet it was and how they ought to be so proud and they ought to be so happy, but

as a matter of fact, James thought, looking at the Lighthouse stood there on its rock, it's like that. (221)

The growth and development come full circle for James. At this point in the novel his mother has long since passed away. There are some that say that a child is never really an adult until their parents pass away. He confronts his childhood fantasy and is disappointed because his perception of what the lighthouse was and the reality of it were strikingly different. James becomes a man. Upon approaching the lighthouse his father praises James and tells him “ Well done! (220)” And in those words the conflict is resolved and the wound can begin to heal even though his anger still remains.

For Mr. Ramsey the lighthouse is a symbol of what is hopeless. Unlike his son who dreams of going to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsey will not even consider the idea. Mr. Ramsey is a man of reason and logic, and doesn't understand the silly day dreaming that people do. After Mr. Ramsey does not support James' goal of going to the lighthouse, the narrator comments about Mr. Ramsey's motives grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgment. (11)

Mr. Ramsey also recounts the story of the charge of the light brigade. He comments on the human condition. He believes that life and time can not be defeated. That people will always lose to life and why try. That our time and experience living is fleeting and almost not worth living.

For Mrs. Ramsey the lighthouse is a symbol of stability and light both literally and figuratively. The family spends their summers here, and the lighthouse always remains. It symbolizes for Mrs. Ramsey a time of innocence and freedom just like summer. It offers comfort to her because it is predictable and solid. It sheds light on the house and the surrounding areas offering protection from those things unknown. In the lighthouse and the present pulse of light and dark, Mrs. Ramsey sees the cycle of hope. In the text Mrs. Ramsey is awe struck by the lighthouse and comments upon seeing it

The whole bay spread before them and Mrs. Ramsay could not help exclaiming, " Oh, how beautiful!" For the great plateful of blue water was before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats (101)

She looks at the lighthouse for hope. But she also realizes that hope has a negative side too. She offers hope to James about his dream of going to the lighthouse. She states " Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow, but you'll have to be up with the lark. (1) " Even though she is unsure he can. She knows that while being close to her children and encouraging them, she will someday die and that strong bond will hurt her children deeply. She laments the following

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. It flattered her, where she was most susceptible of flattery, to think how, wound about in their hearts, however long they lived she would be woven. (113)

In the end the lighthouse also represents Mrs. Ramsey herself. She was beautiful, kind, and a good mother. Protector and ever present force in her families life. The lighthouse was a reflection of herself. Just as the lighthouse lived for others so did Mrs. Ramsey. The narrator describes her as follows

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.(3)

Virginia Woolf states freely that she isn't great at symbolism and she meant the lighthouse only to be a unifying design element in her novel. She writes to her friend Roger Fry, May 27, 1927:

I meant nothing by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions—which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalized way. Whether its right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.

She intentionally allows each of the characters to place their own meaning on the lighthouse which subsequently allows the reader to put their own meaning on the lighthouse. No can know for sure what the lighthouse meant to each of these characters. Just as Woolf states there is no right or wrong

interpretation. A common theme in her writing is the idea that nothing has a single meaning. That even if two interpretations contradict each other, they can both be true on their own. Virginia Woolf, the Ramsey's and the lighthouse teach us a very important lesson about life " nothing stays; all changes." (2004).

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. The Original Holograph Draft. Transcribed and ed. by Susan Dick. London: Hogarth, 1983.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Letters Volume 1*. : Harvest, 1975.