

Virginia woolf's to the lighthouse as the best modernist novel essay

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Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as the Best Modernist Novel

Literary modernism overturned the conventions of Victorian poetry and fiction, drastically challenging the mimetic or symbolist artistic form. The rise of modernism brought a multitude of innovations in terms of narrative structure or poetic form, shifting from the realistic and objective representation of reality to the subjective, impressionistic insight into existence. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is now considered a canonical work and one of the greatest instances of consummate modernist fiction. As it shall be seen, the novel impresses through a number of narrative features that promote it as a modernist masterpiece. It can be said that *To the Lighthouse* comprises most of the undertones of modernist fiction which make it emblematic for this literary current. A few of these modernist devices and the roles they play in the novel will be expounded upon in what follows. First of all, *To the Lighthouse* has a very effective narrative structure. The novel is divided into three sections, throughout all of which the narrative voice and the point of view shift continuously.

As all of Woolf's fictional writing, the novel is written in the stream-of-consciousness form, with the stream passing through various different points of view. The whole of the narrative is structured around the symbol of the lighthouse, which is deeply connected with the lives of the characters. In the first part, *The Window*, the point of view shifts frequently among the members of the company gathered at Mrs.

And Mr. Ramsay's house. Life is therefore pictured not as in realistic fiction in the form of a succession of events or plots involving a certain set of

characters, but rather as an overlapping of different forms of human consciousness. The modernist narrative enters therefore the private corners of the human consciousness trying to voice it from within and not to represent it from the outside. While in a Victorian novel, the narrative scheme is generally characterized by temporal progression, Woolf's narrative is curiously misfit.

The first part focuses more or less on a present time, rendered through the force of the stream of consciousness. In the second part however, *Time Passes*, Woolf gives voice to the inhuman forces that animate the deserted summer house. This unusual yet extremely effective device maintains the initial setting of the action, the shabby summer house of the Ramsays as the scene of the second section despite the fact that this scene is now deserted.

To this, another potent technique is added. Woolf not only chooses to focus on the voice of entropy itself, far from the balance offered by human life, but also includes here, between parentheses the main developments of the plot or of what the plot is supposed to be in traditional terms. Thus, what in the traditional novel would have been the essence of the 'action' or the 'plot' is in Woolf's novel enclosed between parentheses. Therefore, Woolf intentionally maximizes the spaces allocated for the human consciousness in her novels, while limiting action and even dramatically. Instead of following the characters throughout the rather significant lapse of time, the narrative remains keen on describing the aftermath of their existence in the empty house. It is only in the third part, entitled *The Lighthouse*, that the remainder of the initial company finally undertakes the projected trip to the lighthouse.

The lighthouse here seems to stand for the light of human consciousness itself, an ordering principle in the life of nature. As Ellison remarks, the three parts seem to cushion each other and to form an animate structure.

In his view, the second section is dedicated to the uncanny or to the way in which death is present in the midst of life: "One might say that the second part of the novel is like the highly-concentrated explosive device that must be contained within a large diffusion-box: the function of parts one and three is to cushion the force of part two, to contain the destructive quality of uncanniness as death-within-life, as the death that permeates life just as the mists and moisture of the sea invade the house." (Ellison 189) Ellison's statement can be corroborated by the way in which the parenthetical explanations give accounts of the death of various characters in the novel. The second section focuses simply on the emptiness of the house after its human inhabitants are gone, actually creating an impressive image of this reign of the inhuman: "Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, 'This is he' or 'This is she.' Sometimes a hand was raised as if to clutch something or ward off something, or somebody groaned, or somebody laughed aloud as if sharing a joke with nothingness." (Woolf 190) Here, the human consciousness which is so loudly voiced in the other parts is suppressed completely giving room to night and void. The lighthouse seems to be a symbol of consciousness, the principle which fights the disorder that manages with its invasion: "When darkness fell, the stroke of the Lighthouse, which had laid itself with such authority upon the carpet in the darkness, tracing its pattern,

came now in the softer light of spring mixed with moonlight gliding gently as if it laid its caress and lingered stealthily and looked and came lovingly again.”(Woolf 199 - 200) The lighthouse is intentionally described as ‘loving’ or capable of love in some way, to point to its connection to the human consciousness.

Another effective modernist technique is gender awareness. Freudian psychology had not only made the staggering discovery of the human unconscious but had also brought awareness regarding gender differences. In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. And Mr.

Ramsay are markedly different in their approach to life and even It can be observed thus that the gender division surges in the very opening scene, where Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay have their first dialogue about the Lighthouse expedition. From this first exchange, as well as from the reaction of their infant son James, we can already tell that Mrs. Ramsay tries to enliven the spirits of her family and of her guests and to announce a favorable weather forecast that would permit them to make the trip to the Lighthouse.

By contrast, Mr. Ramsay reacts coldly and rationally, disdaining his wife's lack of accuracy and her stubborn desire to make the others feel good: “The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women's minds enraged him. He had ridden through the valley of death, been shattered and shivered; and now, she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect, told lies.”(Woolf, 36) The attitude of the two characters towards the symbolic trip marks the gender delimitations.

The woman watches the light empathically, mingling with the beauty and the aspiration it inspires: "Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at—that light, for example." (Woolf 70) The way in which Mrs. Ramsay loses herself in the contemplation of the stroking light suggests her innate potential for mingling with everyone and everything that surrounds her.

What can be observed is that, unlike traditional fiction, Woolf's novel does not claim to discover or state universal truths or to gain knowledge. Its main focus is momentarily, impressionistic insight as a glimpse into the depths of the unknown. For example, when she is perturbed by the idea of difference, Mrs. Ramsay separates the 'real differences', as perceived by society, from the essential one that are related to certain aspects of human consciousness: "The real differences, she thought, standing by the drawing-room window, are enough, quite enough. She had in mind at the moment, rich and poor, high and low ..." (Woolf 33) Woolf's novel is a consummate modernist fiction therefore especially because it manages to capture human consciousness in its swift and shifting form, according to the Freudian discoveries.

More than other masterpieces of modernism, such as James Joyce's *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Woolf makes the human consciousness to be the main actor on the stage of human life. If Joyce's novel is a repository of innovation in terms of language and technique, Woolf's narrative seems to envision the actual role of subjectivity and consciousness in the scheme of the universe. Works Cited: Ellison, David. Ethics in

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