

Literary theoretical analysis of virginia woolf's to the light house



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Woolf's novel was a ground breaking work at the time of its publication in 1927. It broke away from the literary tradition of narrative, plot based storytelling. Instead the work experimented with impressionistic and modernist methods of art, borrowing from their successful implementation in the visual arts. In his insightful essay, Jonathan Culler enlists five observations on the nature of literature. It makes for an interesting scholarly exercise to examine which of these points apply to Virginia Woolf's novel. This essay will argue that the presence of both the properties and consequences of the language of Woolf make it a characteristically literary.

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longing. But the overall experience of the novel is far from tragic. To the contrary, the reader is taken on an intimate journey into the most personal and most inaccessible reaches of the character's inner churnings. A successful cathartic effect is experienced by the reader through the linguistic virtuosity of Woolf.

According to Culler one of the features of the nature of literature is its use to 'foreground' language. In his own words,

“ Literariness is often said to lie above all in the organization of language that makes literature distinguishable from language used for other purposes. Literature is language that 'foregrounds' language itself: makes it strange, thrusts it at you – 'Look I'm language!' – so you can't forget that you are dealing with language shaped in odd ways.” (p. 28)

Woolf's prose style is exemplary in achieving this form of foregrounding. She accomplishes this through various stylistic and thematic features. Through lyrical exposition of inner monologues, Woolf deliberates on subjects as profound as 'the meaning of life. The foregrounding of language in general and English in particular is evident from how it is made the only possible medium of communication. Moreover, one can see how the literary form of the novel itself is foreground even if not intended by the author. For example, the following is an illustration of a stream of consciousness which only works on the novel form, thereby making it distinguishably literary.

“ What is the meaning of life? That was all- a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years, the great revelation had never come.

The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily
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miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one.” (p. 69)

In terms of the equation between properties and consequences of the text we can identify both within the text. For example, the passage is made distinct as a philosophical monologue by its property of interrogative and ponderous constructions. On the other hand, the author’s intent of philosophical deliberation is the consequence. Moreover, in the novel at large we also see the ‘ foregrounding’ of the author’s own personality as it were. For, beyond the acknowledged fact of biographical elements in the novel, Woolf is interpreting her own transient consciousness as she formulated sentences.

Culler’s identifies the second characteristic of literature thus:

“ Literature is language in which the various elements and components of the text are brought into a complex relation. When I receive a letter requesting a contribution for some worthy cause, I am unlikely to find that the sound is echo to the sense, but in literature there are relations –of reinforcement or contrast and dissonance – between the structures of different linguistic levels: between sound and meaning, between grammatical organization and thematic patterns. A rhyme, by bringing two words together (‘ suppose/knows’), brings their meanings into relation (is ‘ knowing’ the opposite of ‘ supposing’?) (p. 29)

In other words, for a text to be classified as Literature, it is not merely enough that certain arguments and points of views are conveyed. While coherence, logic and sense are essential qualities, they are by no means all.
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Form is as important as function when it comes to literature, for after all, it is primarily an art. A point of view, however lucidly explained, will not be effective without the accompaniments of rhyme, rhythm, tone and structure. Literature is distinguished from other written texts in its sustenance. It endures and continues to be relevant across generations and centuries. To be able to achieve this, the various elements and components of the text should be made to resonate. This explains the lasting relevance of *To the Lighthouse*.