

The concept of time in Virginia Woolf's to the lighthouse



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The word 'romantic' is derived from the medieval romaunt, which was a tale of chivalry, written in a romance language, that often took the form of a quest. In the 18th and 19th centuries, this idea of romance became an intellectual or artistic quest which focused strongly on the individual's personal search for the meaning and the essence of human existence. Modernism, on the other hand, is characterized by a rejection or and reaction against romantic ideas in order to establish a pure and original way of thinking. Modernists saw themselves as overthrowing traditional techniques to create revolutionary new artforms, a replacement of what they perceived to be a stale worldview with a novel, progressive social and artistic identity. Virginia Woolf, a key figure in Modernist literature, writes in her essay "Modern Novels" that modern art is "art is somehow an improvement upon the old" because it manages "to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves [people] by discarding most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelists." According to Woolf, "what we might venture to call life itself" is "the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end," and "the chief task of the novelist [is] to convey this incessantly varying spirit with whatever stress or sudden deviation it may display, and as little admixture of the alien and external as possible." For Woolf, the novelist's duty is to reveal the "consciousness" of individuals and to restrain from using antiquated literary forms which distracted from this higher purpose. However, though Woolf wrote many landmark works of Modernist literature, she not only uses, but relies upon several romantic conventions in her works. The notion of the individual, subjective human experience, that private mental world of characters which fascinated Woolf so much, is a <https://assignbuster.com/the-concept-of-time-in-virgina-woolfs-to-the-lighthouse/>

characteristic Romantic idea. In William Wordsworth's poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," he reflects on subjectivity by stating, "with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things," and, "Of eye, and ear, — both what they half create, / and what perceive..." In *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, Woolf's portrayal of Lily Briscoe's artistic enterprise employs the distinctive Romantic paradox between the subject and the object, between subjectivity and objectivity. She must try to get a hold of something that evaded her... it evaded her now when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything." Lily Briscoe is at an impasse because she cannot seem to reconcile her inner vision of her painting with what she manages to put on the canvas, lamenting, "She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed." The idea of the spiritual realm of art, the subjective inner vision of a landscape, greatly interested Romantic German artists. Caspar David Friedrich, for instance, paints with his "'bodily eye' closed and his 'spiritual eye' open" and invites viewers into his subjective inner world while at the same time making them aware of the boundary between the personal and the actual space in his paintings. Friedrich's paintings also show a deep awareness of Romantic Irony, and while he inserts human figures into breathtaking landscapes, there is always an impenetrable void between the subjective human and the objective world at large. "The Wanderer above the Mists" shows a man who, while having attained the heights of a great mountain peak, appears even more

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insignificant when he sees the immensity of the world around him. Lily Briscoe feels a similar insufficiency when she paints, and Woolf writes, “ And it was then too, in that chill and windy way, as she began to paint, that there forced themselves upon her other things, her own inadequacy, her insignificance.” She paints the mother and child, “ objects of universal veneration,” as purple shapes on a painting, “ shadows” merely cast by the light, for “ a light here required a shadow there.” Like Friedrich, Lily wants immortalize the individual figures, the “ shape... in the midst of chaos,” while at the same time revealing their obscurity, anonymity, and equivocality in relation to the “ masses... of lights.” The paradox of the painting is not resolved until the very end of the novel, after ten years worth of revisions. Before Lily finishes her painting, she must find a way to connect this paradox in a cohesive manner; she must resolve the subjective dream in her head with the tangible canvas, paint, and picture. The question, Woolf implies, is whether this is possible: “ no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul.” In “ Miscellaneous Observations,” Novalis writes, “ We dream of traveling through the universe-but is not the universe within ourselves? The depths of our spirit are unknown to us-the mysterious way leads inwards. Eternity with its worlds-the past and future-is in ourselves or no where.” *To the Lighthouse* is very much a book about the “ past and the future” in people, spanning a course of ten years in the lives of the Ramsays and their friends. Lily Briscoe is the passive observer of the Ramsay family’s path across time, but she attempts to capture one solitary moment in her painting. She struggles with capturing a singular, momentary consciousness because her own awareness of her painting is so influenced

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by the passing of time. " And as she lost consciousness of outer things... her mind kept 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 modeled it with greens and blues." Woolf and her characters grapple with the idea of objective and subjective time: the external, systematic time that passes and the ineffable ways it affects us internally. From the beginning of *UTo the Lighthouse*] until the end, time is continually flowing over the Ramsay family, and they often endeavor to control it — to make it stop, speed up, or wait as they struggle to catch up — but always without even the slightest chance of success. The actual passage of time versus the feeling of time as it washes over us are, according to Woolf, two completely distinct things, " for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together... it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself." Woolf questions: " But what after all is one night? A short space, especially when darkness dims so soon, and so soon a bird sings, a cock crows, or a faint green quickens...Night, however, succeeds to night. The winter holds a pack of them in store and deals them equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers." Time is experienced, as Novalis states, within ourselves. The notion of subjective time is a very Romantic idea. In " The Prelude," an autobiographical poem by Wordsworth, he discusses his philosophy of " spots of time," the unification of significant moments in an individual's life and the development of his mind that led to a truth " outside of time." In *To the Lighthouse*, people and things can change in an instant, or they may take years — decades even — to progress, alter, or amend. " Lily's search for unity among disparate, warring elements of subject and object, self and

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others, demands continuous effort as well as intuition,” concurs Jack Stewart, “ While she attacks her canvas, another part of her mind relives the past, so that images from the two dimensions overlap, seamlessly fusing space and time.” Woolf’s characters often find themselves conflicted because they have to adjust to the times, despite their desire for stasis. James begins to resent his father when he is six years old, and ten years later, little seems to have changed. All of Woolf’s characters profoundly miss Mrs. Ramsay after she has died, and many attempt to evoke her figure as a ghost. Yet reality is always at hand to make the memories fade and ghosts depart. People desire to control time because they desire a sense of security which stasis brings. In those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted, and it was impossible to resist the strange intimation... the white earth itself seemed to declare... that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules; or to resist the extraordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good... single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure.