

An analysis of chapter 17 in to the lighthouse



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Chapter 17 sees all members of the Ramsay family and their guests at dinner. The interaction of these characters in this chapter allows for themes such as challenging expectations and, more importantly, the theme of communication to be explored. These themes in particular are concerns of the novel as a whole, meaning that Chapter 17 can be explored as a reflection of the entire novel. The nature of the event occurring within the chapter also allows Woolf to exercise the stream of consciousness style, making each character extremely realistic as the reader follows a constant flow of one thought going onto the next.

There is a definite lack of communication in Chapter 17, made particularly evident through the internal thoughts of the individuals at the dinner table. As the chapter opens, the lack of communication in the relationship between Mrs Ramsay and the rest of the family is immediately brought into the mind of the reader. The dinner party shows Mrs Ramsay make the most sincere effort to get people speaking, to involved them and create something of the time they have together. This shows that communication is important to her and this seen also in other areas of the novel in her desire to match people together for marriage. She believes that communicating with another is essential. However, there are definite moments within chapter 17 that show a lack of successful communication with others. Tansley in particular does not communicate with the others present at the dinner party. He intentionally distances himself from the rest of the company as he feels incredibly out of place, meaning that he does everything he can to avoid communicating with the others. He is established as an outsider as a result of this, with the effects of being from a different social background becoming

evident. The importance of class and social position are featured throughout the book, mainly through Tansley and Mrs MacNab who appears during the second section of the novel, Time Passes.

There is a certain amount of telepathic communication between Mrs Ramsay and other characters within the novel. Mr and Mrs Ramsay do at points appear to understand each other despite there being no dialogue between them. Mr Ramsay is angered by Carmichael's second helping of soup and Mrs Ramsay is able to observe this reaction without any exchange between them. There are many points throughout the novel as whole that the couple are able to understand and mirror the others emotions or thoughts, such as in chapter 12 of *The Window* where Mr Ramsay 'pretended to admire the flowers' in an attempt to please his wife. However, she 'knew quite well that he did not admire them, or even realise they were there. It was only to please her...' Their ability to communicate in this way, particularly the ease at which they do it, captivates Lily. Despite being a study of contrasts, Mr and Mrs Ramsay are considered 'the symbols of marriage, husband and wife' by Lily Briscoe. Their strength as a couple stems from this undeniable ability to understand one another so naturally. There is also a sense of telepathic understanding between Lily and Mrs Ramsay, seen in chapter 17 mainly through Mrs Ramsay's wordless appeal to Lily to engage Charles Tansley in conversation. Not wanting to disappoint, Lily does as Mrs Ramsay silently asks for. Their communication is also seen in their references to the sea. It is first Mrs Ramsay who's mind we see compare William Bankes to 'the ship' and its 'sail'. Only a few lines onward does Lily repeat this imagery of the 'ship...and its sails again'. This connection between Lily and Mrs

Ramsay in chapter 17 is extremely evident throughout the entirety of *To The Lighthouse* as Lily progresses from the position of the outside at the start of the novel, to standing at the centre of a 'vision' and therefore taking over the central role from Mrs Ramsay.

There is no doubt that there is a sense of expectations being followed and also challenged in this chapter. Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe are seen to do both in the dinner party setting. Mrs Ramsay opens the chapter by pushing aside her own emotions in order to successfully create a 'merging and flowing' atmosphere at the table. She does so as 'if she did not do it nobody would do it'. It was expected that a woman should be responsible for putting together an event such as a dinner party and Mrs Ramsay can be seen conforming to that belief. Lily Briscoe is seen to also follow expectations at a point within the chapter as she becomes increasingly repelled by Charles Tansley's attitudes to women's abilities and yet continues to engage him in conversation, 'quickly, kindly' purely as it is expected of her. The two women are later forced out of the conversation happening at the table as the men 'argued about politics', leaving Mrs Ramsay and Lily to fall silent and watch the male figures around the table speak - 'Lily was listening; Mrs Ramsay was listening...but already bored'. Tansley is also seen to be following the exceptions of the period as he feels uncomfortable in the setting of the dinner party, resenting the social conventions to which he must defer. He is seen to blame women for forcing men to conform to social trivia - 'he was not going to be condescended to by these silly women'. Social expectations are important in Woolf's novel as it contributes a great deal to the character of Mrs Ramsay. She continuously strives to fulfil the

expectations that come with being a mother, wife and hostess and tries to force others to do the same. This is evident particularly in her encouraging Lily Briscoe to marry, believing that becoming a traditional woman of the period is where true happiness lies.

However, following Woolf's desire to portray realistic characters, there are definite points within chapter 17 where Lily and Mrs Ramsay defy expectations. Mrs Ramsay takes 'her place at the head of the table' opposite Mr Ramsay sitting at the 'far end'. The couple are shown as equals in this moment with Mrs Ramsay taking a place at the table with dominant connotations as she rules over the domestic home. Lily defies the expected attitude of young women during the period as she initially interacts with Tansley. She remains irritated by his earlier comments concerning women and their achievements and begins to 'tease' and 'annoy him'. It is clear that Lily does not have any of the expected desire to impress men, shown throughout the novel in her struggles with no wanting to marry. She only speaks to him at the dinner party in order to satisfy Mrs Ramsay who is trying to create the atmosphere of the setting. The women at the table going against the ways they are expected to behave is present throughout the entire novel, particularly in Mrs Ramsay's ability to control 'the opposite sex' and the daughters beginning to defy their mother's wishes of marriage.

Disagreeing with the static way in which characters were commonly written, Woolf creates a new type of character in *To The Lighthouse*. Each individual within the novel is seen to follow the true thought process of a person, constantly changing focus and their opinion on the people around them. This makes *To The Lighthouse* a study of the ways and means by which

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satisfactory human relationship might be established with those around them. This is highlighted particularly in chapter 17 as it allows the reader into the minds of Mrs Ramsay, Lily Briscoe and Charles Tansley as they sit around the table. The chapter opens with Mrs Ramsay's internal thoughts of the dissatisfaction of her marriage being overshadowed by her needing to create a comfortable atmosphere at the dinner party. The way in which her thoughts sharply turn from one thing to the next creates an extremely realistic sense to her character, with the stream of consciousness style continuing throughout the novel. The characters are observed in action, or reflected in consciousness of themselves and others and their perspective on reality serves to define them. Woolf therefore makes it difficult to make a clear cut distinction between the characters in the novel and the narrative mode. This effect is an important aspect of *To The Lighthouse* in both chapter 17 and in its entirety.