

Doubt in to the lighthouse: virginia woolf's use of symbolism and tone

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Virginia Woolf's use of several literary devices, most especially tone and symbolism, can be seen in *To The Lighthouse* by dissecting important passages and analyzing how certain phrases connect with the work as a whole by enhancing the overall theme. The passage that Woolf best utilizes to convey both symbolism and tone can be found in her second chapter of the final section. Here she says, " He must have had his doubts about that table, she supposed; whether the table was a real table; whether it was worth the time he gave to it; whether he was able after all to find it.

He had had doubt, she felt, or he would have asked less of people" (155). It is interesting to note that the theme of doubt and the subjectivity of feelings as they relate to material and nonmaterial objects continues throughout the text and the previous passage highlights this along with Woolf's literary techniques by using the table as a symbol and the tone of introspection and guessing. This work is especially important and significant as a work of literature due to these important aspects used throughout. The previous passage should be understood in context with the events and the characters that are involved.

Mr. Ramsey is a central figure of the piece, who serves as the host along with his wife of many guests to their summer house. His troubled marriage and his own doubts about his perception of how his life really is in contrast to how others may see it. His appraisal of the table, therefore, confuses one of his guests, Lily who is an aspiring artist or more specifically a painter. It is her voice in the passage that conveys the tone of the novel and that is one of subjectivity and the illusion that one person can understand another.

Mr. Ramsey, on the other hand, helps to support the symbolism in this passage by simply using the table as a type of symbol to what constitutes what is important or beautiful in life as compared to what may be seen by others as unimportant or plain. The fact that the table is a solid object is also interesting in that this implies that even solid objects can be viewed differently by different people and it is not only relationships and all in life that is not static that is subject to deep thought and contemplation.

While Lily contemplates that Mr. Ramsey has doubts about the reality of the table and believes that his doubts give way to his continual demands from others, it may be quite the opposite. Mr. Ramsey as the head of the household and the central figure and host of many dinner parties may see the table as the place where he is most comfortable and in charge of others, rather than in doubt of himself. Since the reader is only getting the point of view from Lily, Mr. Ramsey's appraisal of the importance of or even the reality of the table is myopic.

This ties in with the theme of doubt and the subjectivity of constructed reality that changes from individual to individual that permeates the passage, the chapter, and the novel as a whole. Lily, herself as an artist, presents her views from the eyes of an aesthetic and she has been influenced by this time by the late Mrs. Ramsey. But the philosophical ponderings of Mr. Ramsey among other events have given her doubts as to her ability to create anything of real meaning in her art and in her life.

The final section of the work is the most sentimental and philosophical. By the time this passage has been uttered many deaths have occurred and the bridges that separate the remaining Ramseys and Lily are becoming more pronounced. The tone that Woolf uses has, to this point, been filled with confusion and foreshadowing and there is reason to believe that consonance might be found with the family when the remaining members, Mr. Ramsey and his son and daughter, finally do set out to see the lighthouse.

There is some hope that with all the confusion and altered realities of the main characters at the close of the novel, that maybe all of them will see this lighthouse in the same way. For the entirety of the text, Woolf presents her characters as only guessing about the feelings and thoughts of others by how they view static objects, like the table in the passage. In the beginning of the book, the subject of the table comes up in terms of philosophy when Lily asks to have explained Mr. Ramsey's thoughts on philosophy by his son Andrew. 'Subject and object are the nature of reality', Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens, she had no notion what that meant. 'Think of a kitchen table then', he told her, 'when you're not there'" (23). The fact that there are many missing people from the table towards the piece's ending is what fashions the interactions between the characters to make meaning of their existence and to weave all of this together with the subjective realities that each character has toward both the living and the deceased.

This illustrates Woolf's theme and her intentions for her audience to understand how the table is tied into the philosophy of Mr. Ramsey, who has become worn and saddened over the years, just as the table has been worn

by time. As well, this illustrates Woolf's use of the character Lily as a person, who is able to create objects that are new and subject to a redeeming action if her art is viewed by others to be important.

As well, even if her art cannot save or redeem others in the end, she can by her own subjective reality, redeem herself in a deep and lasting fashion by discarding her doubts about herself. Certainly, Mr. Ramsey, Andrew and Cam all have doubts about the strength of their relationship and the value that is placed on visiting the lighthouse. What comes to be on this trip is not a singularity of vision between the Ramseys and Lily, but instead warmer feelings toward one another and the final realization that the only thing that can be shared is solitude. That dream of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath" (134). To be truly noble then, Woolf suggests that this singular vision without doubt or regret that each man or woman has is not something that can be shared, but instead it is to know that everyone is alone is their vision for perfection within themselves and others.

Everything else is subject to change or even the static objects like the table can be viewed differently, only we can know what we want and how casting off doubts imposed by others is what can essentially set us free. Woolf effectively utilizes the table as a symbol for the static in the world that can be seen as beautiful or ugly just as she uses objects like the mirror as a

metaphor for solitude. The lighthouse, as well, is a beacon of light in the darkness, a darkness that is felt in loneliness.

However, it is discovered by Lily that loneliness is noble when accepting it and discarding doubts about what is underneath the subjective surface of all things. Woolf's introspective tone, used especially by Lily and the overall them of doubt and confusion in a world filled with change, both in the passing of time and even in the moments shared with others that may have different views illustrate how not even time changes the nature of the soul of men or women.