

Rendering meaning
through the mind-
body connection: the
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In her novel *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf lavishly constructs the individual “realities” of multiple characters through a narration of their thoughts, impressions, perceptions, doubts, and the silent, self-questioning processes underlying the surface of human behavior. As a result, reality in the book exists only as it is perceived. There is no finite, singular definition of “right,” “true,” or “actual,” only a collection of distinct moments and experiences skillfully woven together to craft the rich tapestry of the novel’s interior. There is a sense that characters feel in *To the Lighthouse*, not that they actively live as in a traditional narrative. They are not defined by externals, or by oppositional categories of personality, unequivocally good or bad, altruistic or selfish, intelligent or simple. Because they are subject to the ambiguity, nuance and caprice of another’s interpretation, which itself varies along a continuum of mood and impulse, characters are not determinant, empirically “identifiable” forms. The mind, therefore, is the source of all-forward motion in *To the Lighthouse*, the guiding narrative agent. It exists both within and outside the confines of the novel, the purveyor of the subjective reality in which the “action” occurs, but also a character in its own right. If we regard the author as the ultimate puppeteer, and view the world of the book as an extension of her string-work (i. e. creative process), “the mind” is recast as the critical subject of her artistic experiment to craft a literature of consciousness. According to the *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, in its introduction to 20th Century literary modernism, Virginia Woolf’s new focus was to be “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The life that mattered most would now be a mental life...Some version of an interior flow of thought becomes the main modernist access to ‘character.’” This

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structuring of a subjective reality, the careful arranging and layering of “ reflections, momentary impressions, disjunctive bits of recall and half-memory,” is the primary artistic endeavor of *To the Lighthouse*.

However, therein lies the interesting paradox of Woolf’s “ modernist” tour-de-force. If, indeed, the only life worth understanding, the only questions or concerns of any real consequence, are mental, or rooted in subjective experiences, why do the characters in *To the Lighthouse* yearn to connect to elements of their physical world, maintaining an awareness of themselves in relation to the corporeal? Why does Lily Briscoe, one of the main characters (or more aptly, viewpoints) through which the novel is filtered, suddenly realize towards the conclusion of the novel that “ It was one body’s feeling, not one’s mind...To want and not to have sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain”? Moments later, Lily criticizes the very activity of consciousness she has been engaging throughout:

“ It had seemed so safe, thinking of her [Mrs. Ramsay]. Ghost, air, nothingness, a thing you could play with easily and safely at any time of day...and then suddenly [Lily] put her hand out and wrung her heart thus... Suddenly [her surroundings] became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness...for the whole world seemed to have dissolved in this early morning hour into a pool of thought.”

Although ostensibly contradictory, this shift in attention from the internal self to the external environment is actually in keeping with the novel’s pursuit of a subjective reality, its exaltation of the “ mental life.” If such a reality is one formed from within rather than from without, and varies according to

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whomever is tasked with the challenge of assigning meaning to the chaos of feeling, “ what” something “ is” in a subjective reality is more a definition of the perceiver than of the object being perceived. Therefore, the greater purpose or reward to this effort must be the acquisition of an acute sense of self. To this end, the most profound meaning and understanding is gleaned from incongruity. The realization that people and places, although unchanged in the objective sense, impress upon us in a radically different way, is the foundation of any fully-formed, mature identity. The physical, therefore, stands as a crucial point of reference to mark this difference, to recognize and measure the changes in one’s own character. One can see this process most clearly at play with James Ramsay, and his connections to both his father and the titular Lighthouse, and with Lily Briscoe and her profound link to the memory of Mrs. Ramsay. A comparative study of these two relationships will reveal the ostensibly contradictory, but nonetheless important—even necessary—ways in which the physical begets and then continuously fuels the subjective experience.

A fixture of the “ material” world in the most traditional, unambiguous sense, the Lighthouse is an example of how the physical both pervades and foundationally supports the novel’s subjective reality. As a youth, James Ramsay, his unbridled spirit of adventure, his vast, lively imagination, are captivated by the Lighthouse, mythic in its allure. The opening lines of the text immediately establish his desire to visit the Lighthouse as a major premise or focus of the book’s “ narrative of consciousness.” It will be the axle around which many of the characters’ internal debates and emotional struggles revolve:

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“ Yes, of course it’s fine tomorrow,” Mrs. Ramsay assures her son, “ to whom these words conveyed and extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail, within touch.”

Opposing forces who attempt to thwart the dream, the destined mission, are the closest figures to villains the novel presents. James’ father, Mr. Ramsay, is preeminent in this capacity. His rigid, mechanical pragmatism is so implacable in its attempt to inappropriately regulate—rather than attend to or encourage—the realm of childhood fantasy, that the cruelty borders on tyranny. As a consequence, James loathes his father and the oppression exacted by his strident belief in his own “ accuracy of judgment.” After all, “ what [Mr. Ramsay] said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his children.” James’ consciousness boldly, in stark, unapologetic honesty and mature language, reveals the severity of his animosity towards Mr. Ramsay:

“ Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father’s breast and killed him...James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr. Ramsay excited in his children’s breasts by his mere presence.”

Clearly, both the Lighthouse and Mr. Ramsay, especially Mr. Ramsay’s attitude towards the Lighthouse mission, were the two major formative

influences on young James Ramsay. Together, they captured the essence of <https://assignbuster.com/rendering-meaning-through-the-mind-body-connection-the-importance-of-the-physical-and-its-relation-to-identity-in-the-subjective-reality-of-to-the-lighthouse/>

James' childhood, encapsulating his fantasies and his disdain for the pragmatic. To put another way, the perceived relationship between the Lighthouse and Mr. Ramsay was James' unique "version" of the first major psychological conflict faced by any child, that fearful moment when the child is forced to urgently defend (or ultimately renegotiate) the illogic of his playful imagination against an invading, dulling "real-world" mentality.

Above all else, however, the Lighthouse and Mr. Ramsay were simply powerful physical presences that aroused in James strong urges, disturbing feelings, and profound impressions. They served as the puzzle board onto which James could piece together his redefinition of the concrete forms once he reconciled them with his interiority. The process of inviting the objective into the subjective, reworking the disparate elements together, and then casting the result back into the external from within, is an exercise in identity-making. It is an organic, live exercise that will inevitably be called up again as time passes, circumstances change with age, and notions of identity require renegotiation to remain meaningful. James faces this challenge when presented with the Lighthouse, his father, and their relation to each other, later in the novel.

The second half of *To the Lighthouse* takes place about ten years since the close of the first "narrative" section ("The Window"). Life has changed along the picturesque Scottish seashore (the book's primary setting): war has descended upon Europe, the characters have aged, some have died (namely Mrs. Ramsay), and some have left to explore worlds beyond the Ramsay's estate. James is now a young man, no longer caught in the rapture

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of an idealizing, boundless and spirited imagination. He still has his Lighthouse; nature has not eroded it into oblivion, mankind has not razed it to the ground. Ironically, the “ action” of the second half of the novel focuses on the realization, finally, of the voyage to the Lighthouse James had been cruelly denied as a child. It is a wish-fulfillment come too late, however, as this unchanged physical structure no longer resembles the image of James’ childhood, no longer resonates in a familiar way. He observes:

“ The Lighthouse was [in his childhood] a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now...he could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see window in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?”

Despite the disappointing, sobering transformation of impression that has resulted from the passage of time, from the shift between childhood naiveté and adult-like realism, James acknowledges his earlier perception “ was also the Lighthouse.” In the subjective reality of Woolf’s novel, both images, although oppositional, coexist seamlessly. Their relationship of “ harmonious contradiction” serves a unifying purpose. Together, these disjointed fragments define the greater “ whole” of James’ adult self-concept.

Further emphasizing and contributing to the “ refreshed,” mature identity that James is realizing for himself, his consciousness (and thus the most accurate reflection or statement of his interiority) reveals strikingly new impressions and opinions about his father. James continues to view his father as a figure of oppression, against whom he must steadfastly commit to “
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carry out the greatest compact - to resist [Mr. Ramsay's] tyranny to the death." The figurative language of blades and knives (e. g. when contemplating his father, James articulates an eagerness to " strike him to the heart") persists, thematically linking the boy of the past with the young man of the present. However, the older James differs from his younger incarnation in that he allows himself the option of entertaining an alternative, more generous and rational view of his father's harshness. He reasons:

" It was not him, the old man reading, whom he wanted to kill, but it was the thing that descended on him—without his knowing it, perhaps: that fierce sudden black-winged harpy, with its talons and its beak all cold and hard, that struck and struck at you (he could feel the beak on his bare legs, where it had struck when he was a child) and then made off, and there he was again an old man, very sad, reading his book. That he would kill..."

Children often invest the tangible, that which is readily knowable, with unequivocal veracity. They feel no need to search beyond the immediate surface in order to arrive at an answer or conclusion that fits neatly within the parameters of their limited worldview. For James to demonstrate such an intimate (though perhaps nascent) understanding of human nature, for him to recognize his father as being somehow outside the elusive, powerful forces dictating behavior, are acts that indicate maturity of identity. More so, this moment of recognition epitomizes the reward, the completion of the rather exceptional aim inherent to life within a subjective reality.

James has successfully used his external environment to trigger the activity of his interior consciousness. His interpretations, informed by his unique personhood, are projected as finite definitions of the “real world.” But the only world of any value to James is the world of his impressions; within this context, the subjective is of supreme importance, and becomes objective and empirical. Therefore, both the Lighthouse and Mr. Ramsay, their concrete presences in James’ life, are the catalysts for the significant experiences and inner monologue by which he structures his subjective reality. By the end of *To the Lighthouse*, James Ramsay gains an awareness of himself, and a wise understanding of the differences his mature person has endured. However, without the function of core physical elements to awaken feeling, and to measure or illustrate the changes of a developing identity, the transformative, character-building process of the subjective reality would never occur. Lily Briscoe encounters this very obstacle, this kind of temporary abeyance of consciousness. Her struggles to arrive at a complete, well-defined sense of self later in her adult life, clearly reinforce the importance of the physical even within the “mental” sphere of the subjective reality.

As a consequence of the emotional and literal distance provided by separation of space and the passage of time, Lily Briscoe, at the start of the second half of *To the Lighthouse*, demonstrates a very weak, fragile and tenuous self-concept. Lily has come back to the Ramsay’s seaside home an older, slightly sadder woman, overcome by a vacancy of feeling she cannot comprehend. Once so “mentally” expressive, once so “articulate” by the

fluidity and conviction of her thoughts, Lily now finds that clarity of consciousness escapes her:

“ What does it mean?—a catchword that was caught up from some book, fitting her thought loosely, for she could not, this first morning with the Ramsays, contract her feelings, could only make a phrase resound to cover the blankness of her mind until these vapours had shrunk. For really, what did she feel come back all these years...? Nothing, nothing—nothing that she could express at all.”

Questions of relative meaning and personal purpose elude Lily. She feels bereft, yet cannot access the source of her longing, cannot isolate the beguiling feelings causing her such discomfort. Without the ability to “ contract her feelings” and provide order and substance to her confusion, to her fragments of thought (the “ blankness of her mind”), Lily feels incomplete. Without the facility of expression, Lily is fundamentally unanchored. Her capacity to engage in the process of crafting and existing in a subjective reality has been arrested; as a result, she has lost her sense of self.

An important question thus emerges: why, at this late point, does Lily stumble, caught at an impasse between mental sensation and meaning, between emotion and understanding? The reason behind Lily’s disconnect clearly illustrates the crucial function of the physical in any subjective reality, especially with regard to the cultivation and strengthening of identity. She has lost her footing within the framework of the novel precisely because she cannot forge an attachment to her surroundings. Immediately upon her <https://assignbuster.com/rendering-meaning-through-the-mind-body-connection-the-importance-of-the-physical-and-its-relation-to-identity-in-the-subjective-reality-of-to-the-lighthouse/>

return, the changed environment registers with Lily, and triggers feelings of confusion and alienation from the familiar. Acutely aware of her troubled relationship with external fixtures, Lily muses:

“ The house, the place, the morning all seemed strangers to her. She had no attachment here, she felt, no relations with it, anything might happen, and whatever did happen, a step outside, a voice calling...was a question, as if the link that usually bound things together had been cut...”

Without the ability to recognize the elements of her former surroundings, assume them into the tapestry of her subjective interpretation, and then reconnect in a unifying way, Lily feels estranged from the environment of her past.

More importantly, however, unlike James Ramsay, who still has the presence of both the Lighthouse and his father to stir him viscerally, and to stand as guideposts tracking the changes in his character, Lily is missing her equivalent “ beacon” in the form of Mrs. Ramsay. For Lily, Mrs. Ramsay had been such a powerful influence, the challenging figure at the forefront of her thoughts, because Lily identified in the older woman a certain essence that resonated with her artist’s sensibility. Lily’s main personal challenge throughout the course of *To the Lighthouse*, the goal underlying and shaping her subjective experience, was the completion of a painting. This picture, a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay and of the seaside landscape, when finished, would become the realization of Lily’s “ vision,” a celebration of her achieving a satisfactory sense of unity with the outside world. The completion of the

painting would be the defining moment of her character. In Mrs. Ramsay, Lily
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saw a woman already in possession of the qualities she hoped to access through her work; namely, the ability to render permanent the small instances that collectively comprise life:

“ But what a power was in the human soul!...That woman sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite...something... and there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art.”

In this way, Lily projected onto the blank canvas of Mrs. Ramsay her own need to preserve the ephemeral components of life through her art, “ to make of the moment something permanent.” She further reflects:

“ In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (of intangible thought)...was struck into stability. Life stands still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. “ Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay” she repeated. She owed it all to her.”

At this point in the novel, however, Mrs. Ramsay has died. Her concrete presence, the currency she supplied to the transactions between mood and thought within a subjective reality, has disappeared into the ether of Lily's vague memories. Without a physical form to lend shape to these recollections, or to stand as a marker of contrast by which to redefine her past perceptions, Lily is floating aimlessly within a void of her own identity. I would now like to return to the passage that originally precipitated my investigation:

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“ It had seemed so safe, thinking of her [Mrs. Ramsay]. Ghost, air, nothingness, a thing you could play with easily and safely at any time of day...and then suddenly [Lily] put her hand out and wrung her heart thus... Suddenly[her surroundings]became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness...for the whole world seemed to have dissolved in this early morning hour into a pool of thought.”

In this agonizing, moving moment, Lily is struggling to reconcile within her mind something irrevocably outside herself, outside her intellectual reach. She is up against the permanence of the life cycle, of death, which are corporeal inevitabilities. “ Mrs. Ramsay!” she calls out in desperation, a futile endeavor because she will never find her response. And she is crying for a response, for confirmation, for the comfort of knowing and feeling the existence of humanity around her. By demanding an organic, somatic reaction, Lily is trying to supply herself with that palpable source of both inspiration and incongruity the physical world has removed. And it is not until she lowers the myth of Mrs. Ramsay to the rank of the material mundane, so that she too “ became part of ordinary experience, was on level with the chair, with the table,” that Lily regains the clarity and intensity of her active thought-process: “ Her mood was coming back to her...so full her mind was of what she was thinking, of what she was seeing...”

In the end, the painting that had been the launching pad for countless impressions and internal deliberations within Lily, reaches fruition with a single, impulsive bodily act. This is a stunning turn, for it essentially celebrates the supremacy of the physical by undermining (or simply

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negating) the years of exhaustive mental activity that preceded the picture's culmination. With a quick stroke of the hand, with a line drawn abruptly fragmenting the meticulously-crafted background landscape, Lily is able to proclaim, " I have had my vision." Therefore, it is only when Lily feels once again connected to the concrete, grounding elements of her subjective reality, that she achieves completeness of self.

Although deeply rooted in the realm of consciousness, concerned with the mind's ability to rework the intangibility of feeling, the ambiguity of impression, into a knowable reality, To the Lighthouse paradoxically remains under the persistent, weighty influence of the material world. Rather than be a statement solely on how the only life that matters is the one felt, not the one lived, where the experience of the mind takes precedence over the functions of the body, where mental fulfillment is valued over corporeal satisfaction, To the Lighthouse also isolates and emphasizes the physical as a key component in the grander scheme of a subjective reality. Like a crucial element in a complex formula, a person's " actual," tactile connection to his immediate setting is the basis from which perceptions are formed, and the agent through which they are reinforced.

Because signification in a subjective framework is the product of the complex, unique interiority of the signifier, engaging the " mental milieu" is truly an exercise in identity-building. And without a concrete guidepost by which to track the changes in one's character, without a source of pronounced incongruity to serve as the point of entrée into the renegotiation of identity, the strength of a mature self-concept is vulnerable to the

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intangibility of feeling. As evidenced by the solid self-concept portrayed by James Ramsay in the second half of the novel, as opposed to the tenuous, fragile, confused notion of identity tormenting Lily Briscoe, a notion that requires further reconfiguration in the absence of an accessible, concrete frame of reference, physical elements are integral to the formation of a firm sense of self. If intimate familiarity with the nuances of one's own personhood is the goal, the "pay-off," to the pursuit of a subjective reality, connection to the physical is essential not only to the book and the life of its characters, but also to the overall concept of humanity the novel, the art form, wishes to mirror.