

ANG 9247
Virginia Woolf as a Critic and a Novelist
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Symbolism in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

In this essay I would like to interpret the symbols in the novel and see how these correspond to Woolf's life.

Virginia Woolf was born on January 25, 1882. Almost from the beginning, her life was an insecure balance of extraordinary success and mental instability. Woolf descended from a prestigious Victorian literary family so she grew up among the most important and influential British intellectuals of her time and she had received free access to explore her father's library. The mark of both her literary ancestry and her struggle to find meaning in her own unsteady existence appears in her writings. "Her works reflect a probing examination of the structures within which human life exists, from the nature of interpersonal relationships to the experience of time in the individual consciousness. Yet her writing also addresses quite topical issues, issues relevant to her era and literary circle: throughout her works she celebrates and criticizes the Bloomsbury values of aestheticism, feminism and independence. Moreover, the stream of consciousness technique allows the subjective mental processes of her characters to determine the objective content of the narrative".

[/www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/ToLighthouse10.asp/](http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/ToLighthouse10.asp/)

Mental illnesses dominated Woolf's life and it made an impact on her novels as well. She was only twenty-two when both of her parents died and after she was prone to emotional breakdowns and to terrible headaches. By the time of writing *To the*

Lighthouse Woolf had been over a suicide attempt, she threw herself out of a window. Following the death of her parents she was suffering from hallucinations and fears created by the loss of her mother. “She declares herself guilty in losing her mother because she was an egoist, she failed to prove her love, she was lazy and gluttonous”. (Bécsy 27)

“The novel represents Woolf’s own struggle to find the message in her own existence by using the stream of consciousness method: reflecting the author’s attitude toward the reality of the world he represents”./www.uah.edu/woolf/stream.html/. For her, writing was a therapy because after completing this work, she got beyond the memories of her parents. She wrote *To the Lighthouse* in six months without stopping and it became a masterpiece and among literary critics it met with recognition. According to Agnes Bécsy, Woolf did not intend to call *To the Lighthouse* a novel, rather a kind of elegy, which concerns life from the perspective of time, death and human personality.(156)

To the Lighthouse on the one hand, is one of Woolf’s most experimental work, the events of a single afternoon constitute nearly two- thirds of the book; the events of the following ten years are compressed into the space of a single night; and on the other hand, this is Woolf’s most exemplary novel, with its characters based on her parents and siblings, it is certainly her most autobiographical fictional work.

In the novel one can find many symbols but it is quite difficult to guess their meanings. “For literary critics symbolism in *To the Lighthouse* was a challenge. They identified the lighthouse with many different things, like: God, Life, Death and Absolute – the aim or the end of every individual’s ambition. But she claimed that she did not want to illustrate anything, she needed a central element, which holds the structure together. She knew that all kinds of emotions could circumscribe the

lighthouse but she wanted to leave it to the reader to come across these and store it in their “emotion boxes””. (Bécsy 161-162)

One of the most important symbols in the novel is the *lighthouse*. It has a real and a symbolic meaning. For James Ramsay it means a real destination that is reached at the end of the novel. At the very beginning of the novel, going to the lighthouse would be a dream for the young James, for whom the bad weather prevents him to go there, but he blames it for his father.”‘Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow’, said Mrs Ramsay. ‘But you will have to be up with the lark’, she added. To her son these words conveyed an 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, (...) within touch.” (1) James reaches a conclusion that the lighthouse was only a childhood dream and as he grows older he understands that as a child he saw everything different, the lighthouse in his imagination meant something desirable, sensational object. At the end it turns out that the lighthouse has not changed, only his view changed towards it and his personality.

“The Lighthouse became immovable, and the line of the distant shore became fixed. (...) The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty- looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now – (...) he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the lighthouse, was it?” (135)

He is made to connect two contradictory images of the lighthouse – how it appeared to him when he was six-year-old and how it appears to him as a man. He understands that both images lead to the meaning of the lighthouse: “nothing was simply one thing.” (135) For most of the other characters the lighthouse is a symbolic destination. For Lily Briscoe the “lighthouse” represents the accomplishment of her painting, for Mrs Ramsay’s “lighthouse” is bringing people together, while for Mr Ramsay’s is his honour as a philosopher. The lighthouse stands for the unattainable throughout the novel. Each of the three characters has a different approach to establish the importance of his or her

life. Mr Ramsay represents an intellectual approach; as a philosopher, he relies on his work to secure his reputation. Mrs Ramsay is devoted to her family and friends, relies on her emotions to give meaning to her experiences. Lily Briscoe is hoping to capture and preserve the truth of a single instant on canvas, uses her art.

One can think of several questions concerning the book: "What is signified by a trip to the lighthouse? "Why is it that different characters at different times want to go there?" Eventually the arrival to the lighthouse occurs at the moment when James receives the word of praise from his father, is not a coincidence, nor is the way that the arrival brings the end of the book. The purpose of the lighthouse is to warn ships away from the rocks around it, effectively to point the way travellers should go. That aspect of the lighthouse is not really mentioned in the book; the characters are more concerned by the difficulty of getting there and the isolation of those who live there. The only significance between the lighthouse and the plot of the novel gives way to a better relationship between James and his father, which can only be attained when the influence of Mrs Ramsay is overcome. That fits in with the way that James wants to go in the first part, encouraged by his mother but prevented by circumstances, and with his father wishing to go in the third part while James and Cam no longer want to. Throughout the novel the lighthouse serves as both a literal and a symbolic sign: as it casts light in the darkness, lighting the way for ships lost at sea, so too does it stand ever – present before the eyes of the characters, keeping them on course in their search for truth. "Because of Woolf's stream of consciousness narrative prioritizes the subject content of each character's mind over any objective portrayal of events; the lighthouse means different things to different characters at different times".
./www.uah.edu/woolf/stream.html/

Besides the lighthouse, there are other symbols which we can distinguish in the novel for example Lily's painting. It stands for gender convention, represented by Charles Tansley's statement that "Women can't write, women can't paint"...(59) and a struggle for appreciation as Lily's wish to express Mrs Ramsay's role as a wife and a mother. The composition attempts to discover and understand Mrs Ramsay's beauty as Woolf's construction of Mrs Ramsay reflects her attempts to access and portray her own mother. The painting also means a dedication to feminine art. Lily appears at the beginning of the novel, painting on the lawn: Mrs Ramsay sees her in the garden and remembers that she should keep her head still for her, who is making a portrait.

Lily's picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered – up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; but she was an independent little creature, Mrs Ramsay liked her for it, and so remembering her promise, she bent her head. (10)

In the first part of the novel Lily did not finish her painting, it is only in the last part that she suddenly remembers the painting and decides to finish it. Mrs Ramsay's appearance lives now in her memories.

She fetched herself a chair. She pitched her easel with the precise old maidish movements on the edge of the lawn, not too close to Mr Carmichael, but close enough for his protection. Yes, it must have been precisely here that she had stood ten years ago. There was the wall, the hedge, the tree. The question was of some relation between those masses. She had borne it in her mind all these years. It seemed as if the solution had come to her: she knew now what she wanted to do. (108 – 109)

The painting has a symbolic meaning: when Lily is painting, Mr Ramsay with the children go to the lighthouse. A parallel comes into being between the rhythm of the boat in the sea and how Lily makes a stroke on the canvas. As Lily watches the boat approaching the lighthouse, she thinks about the importance of distance. It helps people to understand the significance of the other. So much depends then, thought Lily Briscoe, looking at the sea which had scarcely a stain on it, which was so soft that the sails and the clouds seemed set in its blue, so much depends, she thought, upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us; for her

feeling for Mr Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further across the bay. (139) The novel has a dual ending: Mr Ramsay reaches the lighthouse and completes his promise toward James, Lily Briscoe finishes her paintings and has a sense of relief.

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was – her picture. Yes, with all its green and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps, they were empty, she looked at her canvas, it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I had my vision. (151)

For a better understanding of the symbols it is important to mention that the book is a tripartite novel, it consists of three parts: “The Window”, “Time Passes” and “The Lighthouse”. “The most enigmatic element of human experience is the passage of time, including this novel, it undertakes to dramatise the subjective experience of time in the mind of the individual”. [/www.uah.edu/woolf/stream.html/](http://www.uah.edu/woolf/stream.html/) The first large section of the book, “The Window”, presents a single afternoon as experienced by those in the Ransays’ summerhouse on the Island of Skye; this section concentrates on minute detail. The second part, “Time Passes”, comprises the novel’s most experimental and abstract section because the narrative comes from the minds of the characters; and it compresses ten years into a single night. The third section, “The Lighthouse”, tells the story of a single forenoon.

The title of the first part, “The Window” has a symbolic meaning. According to Agnes Bécsy characterisation is made by representing the characters’ impressions about the world and about Mrs Ramsay. Every character has a window to the world through which they can find unity in life and in existence for example Lily Briscoe by painting, Mr Ramsay in his philosophy, Mr Carmichael in poetry, Mr Bankes in his laboratory

and finally Andrew in mathematics. (157) The window symbolizes Mrs Ramsay's "art", which means creating and controlling everyday human relationships.

The novel takes place on an island, namely on the Island of Skye, in the Hebrides, which has a significance. "*The island* is an encircled, stable point, which is surrounded by ever – flowing waves. It is constant amidst change and it surrounds by the characters into a world of self - consciousness. The centre of this is Mrs Ramsay, the mother, the wife". (Bécsy 157) It is an "island" of the inner thoughts of the characters who freely express their feelings and a place to which they return to reach their destinations.

References to the *sea* and its *waves* have an important significance, namely that they constitute to the characters' relation to life and existence. The movement of the waves parallels the forward movement of time and the changes it brings. At the beginning, Mrs Ramsay is shocked by the sound of the waves. Usually, the waves seem to calm and support her, but occasionally it makes her think of death, passage of time and destruction.

..." the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, 'I am guarding you – I am your support,' but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her (...) – this sound suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror". (10)

In the eight chapter of the first part it is Mr Ramsay who is wandering across the lawn, looking towards the lighthouse and meditating upon the fate of civilisation and great man. The sea and the waves make Mr Ramsay realise that the encroaching waters are a metaphor for human ignorance and it eats away what little is known with certainty:

“It was his fate, his peculiarity to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away ... (...) and so to stand on his little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance, how we know nothing and the sea eats away the ground we stand on – that was his fate, his gift.” (30) At the same time the ever – flowing waves of the sea remind Mr Ramsay of human fame and mortality. Then turning to a different sight he sees the image of his family, his wife and his eight children, he realises that after all he is a happy man. “It was true; he was for the most part happy; he had his wife, he had his children ...” (30). The poem he recites serves as a meditation on immortality and the anxiety about the remembrance of him and his work by future generations. He is a very clever man who almost knows the world through words but he is anxious about his approval by other people. Even from his wife he needs a relentless desire for sympathy and understanding. After the dinner party Mrs Ramsay joins her husband in the living room where he is reading a book by Sir Walter Scott. Mrs Ramsay thinks that her husband reads Scott in order to be remembered for it in a world, where “people don’t read Scott anymore”. (82) “He was always uneasy about himself. That troubled her. He would always be worrying about his own books – will they be read, are they good, why aren’t they better, what do people think of me”. (82) Mr Ramsay, who is obsessed with understanding and advancing the process of human thought, reveals the novel’s concern with knowledge. “The fact that Mr Ramsay, who is probably one of the eminent philosophers of his day, doubts the solidity of his own thoughts suggests that a purely rational, universally agreed – upon worldview is an impossibility. Indeed, one of the effects of Woolf’s narrative method is to suggest that objective reality does not exist. The ever – shifting viewpoints that she employs construct a world in which reality is merely a collection of subjectively determined truths.” /www.classicliterature.com/essays/woolf/

As I have already pointed out the passage of time has a crucial role in the novel. The first section begins on a pre-war September afternoon and ends with the dinner party.. The second section “jumps” ten years and describes the destruction of the war

and the house. The second part transforms the novel's development. Many of the characters from the first section disappear and we only get to know about them in brackets, including the death of Mrs Ramsay, his son Andrew and one of her daughters Prue. Woolf puts an emphasis on the destruction of the war, the characters and the events are at the background. The last section takes place on a September day ten years later, from morning till noon.

The passage of time is the most observable when children suddenly grow up, childhood is over and they become adults. For Mrs Ramsay, childhood means something happy, oblivious, pleasant time of life. Looking out of the window she says "Why, she asked, pressing her chin on James' head, should they grow up so fast? Why should they go to school? She would have liked always to have had a baby. She was happiest carrying on in her arms. And, (...) she thought, (...) why must they grow up and lose it all? Never will they be so happy again". (40)

For Woolf it caused a rupture due to her mother's sudden death. The passing of time saddens Ms Ramsay as well because at the end of the first section he regrets that the best period of his life is coming to an end: "Years ago, before he had married, he thought, he had walked all day. He had worked ten hours at a stretch ..." (47).

According to Agnes Bécsy, the main point of the novel is that reaching the lighthouse can only be accomplished if one has the harmony of quest and union in Life itself, which realises it and in the work of art, which expresses it. The novel is an "untranslatable" symbol. Its meaning can only be grasped if its meaning is destroyed. (161)

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