



Objects, Symbols, and Their Thematic Roles in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract

In this study, we have attempted to study objects, symbols and their thematic roles that Virginia Woolf has quite generously applied to the delicate fabric of her masterpiece, To the Lighthouse. Since symbols are indelibly intertwined with this novel's main enterprise, that is, the delineation of the reality behind the appearances of the phenomena, concepts, or beings, their examination for a better appreciation of the work in its entirety becomes crucial especially as the ebb and flow of time bestow each symbol with new shades of meaning. However, since symbols are apt to yield various amount of meanings, we have decided to concentrate on the thematic functions of the symbols in this novel.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, theme, symbol, object.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf was one of the most symbolic writers of her age. She always tended to prefer obliquity because "[M]ore could be achieved by [it] than by directly speaking out"¹; it was the scale and tempo of her aesthetic achievement, and in the case of her novels, it is the key that determines the pace of its rhythm. Any direct reference to what things would actually mean annoys her. As she asserts in one of her letters, "whether it's right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me"². To her, as she postulates elsewhere, "everything was partly something else; . . . [E]very thing, in fact, was something else"³.

Symbolization is latent everywhere in her works. She gets a great pleasure in discovering what is hidden behind the very appearance of things. She believes that there is some real meaning behind this appearance and she calls this discovery a "shock":

It is the rapture I get in writing when I seem to be discovering what belongs to what . . . at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the works of art. Hamlet or Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; . . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock⁴.

It is in accord with this same rapture that Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the most symbolic of her works, presents a world full of symbols and mysteries. As Woolf herself consents, "I am

forced to be more direct and more intense. I am making more use of symbolism"⁵. In this symbolic world of objects, characters, phenomena and concepts, one has to detect every nuance of meaning in order to enjoy the aesthetic intricacies of work which would otherwise escape the grasp of his mind. However, this is not to claim that a complete comprehension of this artistic work is finally achievable and the present study is just one among the many attempts to reveal a fracture of the total meaning in this magnificent artifact. In fact, the novel trespasses the boundaries of a comprehensive grasp of its complete meaning, the quality that is needed for any masterpiece to attain its immortality.

Henceforth, we aim at enunciating the symbols that have thematic implications in the work. It is worth noticing that though there may be many symbols that function as themes, only the main ones, namely, *the lighthouse*, *the voyage to the lighthouse*, and *the sea*, will be discussed here in order to present the way Woolf presents her themes in and through them.

Methodology

This study is library research paper examining the symbolic structure of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* deploying a formalist approach. Objects, symbols and their thematic roles are studied in detail to show their significations in determining meaning in Woolf's masterpiece.

Results and Discussion

Results: Since the goal of this research is to discover the symbolic undertones of objects, and themes in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, our detailed elaboration makes it possible for the

readers to have an easier and comprehensive connection with the highly suggestive text of the novel.

Discussion: The Lighthouse and Its Symbolic/Thematic Implications: There are varied interpretations for the lighthouse and different critics offer different meanings to the extent that it is considered a mistake to find it "simply one thing"⁶: Guiguet believes that "the Lighthouse presents the symbol, at the peak of its development, as lodestar and distant guide, intermittent and yet enduring, identical with Being"⁷, and Daiches asserts: "The Lighthouse . . . standing lonely in the midst of the sea, is a symbol of the individual who is at once a unique being and a part of the flux of history"⁸. However, there are critics like Graham who believe that "what it means depends on who is looking at it: it has no single limited meaning, hence its power as a symbol"⁹.

One of the main themes, presented through the lighthouse, is the theme of the union of the contraries, or in Woolf's words, the theme of androgyny. Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* postulates that "some marriage of opposites has to be consummated [in the mind of the artist] before the act of creation can be accomplished"¹⁰. What is suggested here is that Woolf demands the artist to be androgynous, with the sensibility of a woman and the intellect of a man, and—this is an allied requirement so that sensibility and intellect may work freely together—with, of course, the prejudices of neither.

By seeing the long steady flash of the lighthouse in two different aspects—first as an image of expansion and release (life-love-hope), and then of contraction and confinement (death-destruction-terror)—Mrs. Ramsay has come up with an ultimate understanding of the nature of reality. One's happiness depends on both *subjective* involvement in and *objective* detachment from life; none can singly be effective in creating a sense of satisfaction. To achieve it, however, there is a need for a harmonious balance between the two.

Another implication of the lighthouse comes from an oriental and archetypal origin; it functions as Tao. Wilhelm describes the Tao as "the undivided, great One, which gives rise to two opposite reality principles, the dark and the light, yin and yang"¹¹. The permanent change in the light and darkness of the lighthouse accords with the Tao symbolism, i.e., the eternal cycle of light and darkness of yin and yang. The Ramsays are thus the embodiment of yin and yang whose unity is symbolized by the lighthouse. As Stewart consents,

By opening herself to Light-as-Eros, Mrs. Ramsay fills herself with a fountain of energy, from which she can reanimate her husband in his quest to Truth-as-Logos; her "fecundity" compensates for his "sterility". The Ramsays embody complementary principles of Eros and Logos, yin and yang that combine to make a whole human figure; their ultimate unity is symbolized by the revolving light-in-darkness of the Lighthouse¹¹.

The lighthouse, thus, symbolizes both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. This interpretation is confirmed by a passage in part III: James contrasts his early impressions of the lighthouse (which he recalls thinking of his mother) with those impressions he feels towards his father as they near the lighthouse sailing in the boat:

The Lighthouse was then [in his childhood] a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now—James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight . . . So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too⁶.

James is capable of making a balance between his two views of the lighthouse. Beside reminding the readers the similarity between the lighthouse and the individual traits of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, he reflects on the unity inherent in the complementary qualities of his parents, qualities such as courage and sympathy, intellect and intuition, endurance and fertility, which are also the underlying themes of the novel.

The lighthouse, thus, symbolizes both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay by androgynous representation of the masculinity and femininity of the two individuals at the same time contributing to their harmonious union. At the same time, these androgynous traits enable individuals to deal with chaos and time which are the other prevalent themes of the novel.

The method of dealing with chaos may be that of Mr. Ramsay, who used his intelligence to face the irrationality of external nature, or that of Mrs. Ramsay, who uses her intuition to control the chaos of personality and society. The escape from time occurs as the result of a subordination of or release from egoism in various ways: in unselfish concentration upon one's work (reaching 'z' for Mr. Ramsay), in an identification with an inanimate object, in a mystical contemplation, or in a harmonious merging with another individual or group. Finally, among the escapes from time and self is death, which, while frightening, occasionally suggests a desirable release to the eternal flux or, as Mrs. Ramsay's reveries imply, joining to a more stable eternity which defeats both time and change. Consequently, the lighthouse is of crucial importance to Mrs. Ramsay, for she sees in it the transfiguration of time by eternity.

Some critics attempt to stabilize and to delimit the position and symbolic function of the lighthouse. As an example, we can name Kaehele and German who consider the lighthouse simply as a measuring device, who believe that "Just as an actual Lighthouse functions to mark a fixed spot in moving waters, so the Lighthouse in this novel symbolizes fixed points or ways of creating fixed points in the flux of human life"¹². Nonetheless, the discussion of the androgynous nature of the lighthouse does not even reveal its full meaning and the limits of its abounding presence, since, as was mentioned earlier, it is also associated with ideas about time, flux, death and egoism. Thus, the

lighthouse possessing a multidimensional meaning plays the central thematic role in the novel and being the essential symbol of the work invites the readers to a multiple number of meanings. To make a long story short, the lighthouse, being itself controversially the symbol of time, steadiness, change as well as eternity, bestows upon the work the award of immortality. The novel will everlastingly elicit appreciation from its readers as long as the lighthouse sheds light to the vast ocean of human consciousness.

The Voyage to the Lighthouse and its Symbolic/Thematic Implications: The voyage to the lighthouse has various and sometimes contradictory meanings; it is a trip from intellect to intuition, a "transition from a former intellectual personality to a newly discovered intuitive view." It is a shift from time to the timelessness, "allegory of Christ's Ascension, involving a movement from the God of Wrath to the God of Mercy; a transition from egotism to selflessness"¹³. The journey to the lighthouse has even different meanings to different characters. For Mr. Ramsay, the journey is a rite in memory of the dead, but some of the details indicate that it is also a voyage into the future, perhaps to death itself, one of the states symbolized by the lighthouse. Mr. Ramsay's frequent repetition of the catchword from Cowper, "we perished, each alone"⁶, and his final farewell to Lily and the boat's departure "shrouded in profound silence"⁶, support this interpretation of the voyage. To Mrs. Ramsay, reaching the lighthouse is reaching nirvana. As Stewart contends, "Mrs. Ramsay comes to know an 'essence of reality' in which individual and universal are One. She is in love with the life that lies beyond self"¹¹.

The difficult voyage to the lighthouse is a symbolic act that bespeaks of the difficulty of judging others; it implies that there is a need for hardship to understand others and oneself. Eventually, as the voyage proceeds and the hardship increases, the travelers' understanding deepens and judgment changes because of the change in understanding. Both Cam and James begin the day hating their father for his past tyranny and for forcing them to make the trip, but during the journey their opinions of him change, and they become reconciled to him—just as Lily does in her meditations on the shore. At sea, Mr. Ramsay seems so much in his element that Cam comes to admire him for his bravery, "his oddity and his passion"⁶, and finds the feeling of security he emits overpoweringly. James's hatred for his father has been gradually eroding with his increased awareness of their similarities; it is obliterated when his father, after making "some mathematical calculation"⁶, praises his steering.

The voyage to the lighthouse also involves the theme of initiation in its archetypal sense; it is in fact a symbol of voyage from egotism to impersonality. As Daiches observes, "To reach the lighthouse is, in a sense, to make contact with a truth outside oneself, to surrender the uniqueness of one's ego to an impersonal reality"⁸. The egotist Mr. Ramsay, who desires the other people's admiration and encouragement, does not truly

appreciate his young son's interest in visiting the lighthouse. It is only many years later, after the death of Mrs. Ramsey, at his old age, that he is able to free himself from self from egotism; he becomes a selfless man with understanding exactly before the boat reaches the lighthouse. Consequently, the grudge between the father and his son end when they arrive at the lighthouse. He finally admires his son's steering and eventually his children start to forgive and forget their father's earlier mistreatment: "What do you want? They both wanted to ask. They both wanted to say. Ask us anything and we will give it to you. But he did not ask them anything"⁶. When they finally arrive at the lighthouse, there is a drastic change in everybody else as if their union with the lighthouse undoes a curse; old Mr. Carmichael, for example, suddenly show more forbearing and charity and Lily Briscoe is able to finish the picture she has been busy with for a very long time.

In fine, the voyage to the lighthouse, borrowing Stewart's idea, indicates "any activity of consciousness that reaches out toward the Light, follows a direction, seeks integration"¹¹. In the course of the novel, the reader is able to observe the lighthouse from many different perspectives; consequently, he desires to have his own understanding of it.

The Sea and Its Symbolic/Thematic Function: The sea in *To the Lighthouse* implies different symbols. Virginia Woolf uses sea as an image with varied meanings. In fact, it symbolically conveys contradictory themes, depending on how one looks at it. As Friedman consents:

The water imagery becomes now a symbol of the search for human contact and warmth, or of the brute force of the natural cycle, now a symbol of the search for intellectual stability and certitude, or of the bottomless ignorance of the race of men and the profound vanity of their puny knowledge¹³.

Hence, the sea stands for contradictory forces: it is "both destroyer and protector; it engulfs the individual elements and brings them together, it threatens the ordered world and creates harmony" (Pishkar et al. 2013)¹⁴. "To the assertive self," Irene Simon explains, engulfment can mean nothing but annihilation: that is probably the reason why the sea associates the concept of the enemy to Mr. Ramsay. To those, however, who attempt to merge, who dread separateness, it is a relief to be carried away by the flood. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay feels 'outside that eddy' when things remain separate. Yet to her, also, order appears as a victory won over the waters. When the candles are lit, the party round the table is 'composed' and seems 'to be order and dry land'; they all make a party on an island, having 'their common cause against that fluidity out there'. If life is the flux, significance and permanence can only be achieved by such creation of order. Therefore, when the link 'that bound things together ha[s] been cut, they float up there, down there, of anyhow'; floating at random becomes an image of chaos, and the sea is once more the symbol of disintegration. The sea, also, releases the unknown powers in the characters, makes them

expand beyond the limitations of the self. When Lily tries to grasp her vision, she turns repeatedly to the sea in the third part of the novel. She can see things in their proper relation¹⁵.

Nonetheless, the main theme, presented symbolically by the sea, is the theme of the eternal and indifferent natural forces. This is highlighted in part II, "Time Passes", when the force of time and flux upon man and his works are emphasized. Within a few years, Mrs. Ramsay, Prue and Andrew are dead. Uninhabited for ten years, the Ramsay home in the Hebrides enjoys a brief period of loneliness and stillness, but this reign is broken by the noisy visits of Mrs. McNab and soon by the unlovely deterioration of the house. The lighthouse beam watches with equanimity the invasion of thistle, rat and swallow and protects the house no more effectively than does Mrs. McNab's recollection of Mrs. Ramsay in her grey cloak stooping over the flowers.

The indifference of the lighthouse to the ravages of time upon the Ramsay household is shared by all nature. As the torn leaves and tumultuous seas show, nature itself is vulnerable to the assaults of time and flux, but nature's fertility opposes and resists the passage of time. It is also dominant over man. When confronted with the elements in their more beautiful phases, however, man ignores nature's encroachments; he longs for believing that the different parts of nature have been purposely assembled to reflect his inner vision and to prove that "good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules"⁶. But Mrs. Woolf makes clear that nature looks on man's misery, meanness and torture "with equal complacency"⁶ and that his optimistic inferences reflect only his own hopes and beliefs. There is a transient harmony between man and nature; this harmony is attainable only through man's desire to give order to the elemental chaos in the nature. Unlike the ravages of time, what Woolf dramatizes is "not the victory of natural chaos over human order, but rather the reverse: the forces of destruction are defeated by man's power and will to live"¹³. This is a part of the overall truth that Virginia Woolf wants to relate to her readers; the desire to live on the part of man and the natural forces ranged against this desire, embodied symbolically in the shape and form of such opposing entities like the island and the sea, the darkness of the separate existences in the universe against which the lighthouse works, the will to stay on the island and the force that invokes the voyage to the lighthouse. The story, therefore, presents, through symbols, the world that includes opposite entities for which Woolf seeks reconciliation by a mutual understanding and an orderly cohabitation with the desire to move towards perfection and unification.

Conclusion

Symbolism is vital to Virginia Woolf's artistic achievement. Her philosophy and/or meaning is presented by this inexhaustible mine of ideas. A symbol, as demonstrated in this study, exceeds the limits of being a mere trope in Woolf's tour de force, *To the*

Lighthouse, and functions as something the work itself attempts to achieve, something that becomes the object of its own pursuit. Accordingly, it becomes crucial to study the symbolism in this novel in order to keep pace with the rhythms of this very pursuit, the thing that we hope to have relatively accomplished here.

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