

AN EXPLORATION OF SYMBOLISM IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*.

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Abstract:

The use of symbols in a literary work is referred to as symbolism, which is a literary device. Symbols are things that stand for or imply something else; they represent ideas or concepts that go beyond their literal meaning. Being a Modernist writer, Virginia Woolf used many symbols in her works. In *To the Lighthouse* we may find many symbols but it is quite difficult to know their meanings.

To the Lighthouse is not a conventional story; it is written from several points of view, gracefully navigating between times and characters. Instead, it reads characters' minds and relates their many experiences as they happen through an intricate symbolic web. In this paper, the symbols that are employed in the novel and their significance will be interpreted. The major symbols that Woolf used in her novel are - the lighthouse, Lily's painting, Ramsay's summer house, the boar's skull, Rosei's arrangement of the grapes and pears, the sea, the storms, the rock, reefs, and shallow water, the window etc. Besides these, there are some minor symbols which are also important.

Keywords: Symbols, significance, modernism, Interpretations.

Introduction:

Virginia Woolf was one of the most symbolic writers of her age. *To the Lighthouse* is Woolf's one of the most experimental works. She wrote about this novel – "I suppose that I did this work for myself." The story of the novel is about Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their visit to the Isle of Skye in Scotland. The story takes place over a period of ten years which deals with the year - 1910 to 1920. The first section of the novel takes place on a day before World War I. In the middle part, all the action happens "off-stage" during the war. And the last section takes place on a day after the First World War.

In the novel, one can find many symbols. Symbolization is present everywhere in Virginia Woolf's works. She gets a great pleasure in discovering the hidden meanings behind the appearance of things. She believes that there are always some real meanings behind the outer appearances and she calls this discovery a "shock".

The novel was published in 1927. It is a significant piece of high modernism. Virginia Woolf spoke in terms of psychoanalysis in *To the Lighthouse*. While reading the book, we may come across a stream of consciousness also.

Symbolism is basically an artistic method of revealing ideas or truths through the use of symbols. It is a method which draws our idea in a particular way with the use of some images or symbols. In the symbol, the relation between the signifying item and what it signifies is not definite, but can be various. A word, item, event, character, or concept that encapsulates and invokes a variety of additional meaning and significance is known as a symbol in literature.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study are_

Firstly, to highlight the symbols and their thematic implications in the novel.

Secondly, to analyze the use of symbolism by Virginia Woolf.

Data and Methodology:

This study is based on primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the text entitled *To the Lighthouse*. The secondary source include journals, articles and reviews. Objects, symbols and their thematic roles are analyzed in details to show their significance in determining the meaning in the novel.

Symbol as a Psychoanalytic Process:

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the term 'symbol' refers to all indirect and figurative manifestations of unconscious desires like symptoms, nightmares, slips of the tongue etc. This conception of the unconscious symbol depends on a relation of general substitution where one thing takes the place of another; but unlike the term's conventional meaning, defined by the conjunction between the symbol and what is symbolized the unconscious symbol is defined by a disjunction between symbol and symbolized.

Sigmund Freud clarified this conception of the symbol following the "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1950c [1895]), describing it as a mnemonic symbol subsequent to his research into hysterical symptoms. In the case of a "standard" symbol, the connection between the symbol and what is symbolized remains. In this synecdoche of part for whole the conjunction of meaning is clear. With hysteria however, it is the loss of the connection between the symbol and what is symbolized that is noteworthy.

Use of Symbols:

Being a modernist writer, Virginia Woolf used many symbols in her work. With a normal interpretation, we cannot find an image for the use of particular symbols, but we have to see it from various perspectives to understand the use of those symbols. The novel *To the Lighthouse* is full of symbols; the symbols which are used in the novel can be interpreted in different ways or perspectives. The symbols in the novel are used properly, one or another way it reflects the idea

of the writer. In the novel there are many symbols. They all are giving glimpses of another idea. However, all symbols are woven with each other.

One of the most important and meaningful symbols of the novel is the Lighthouse itself. There are numerous interpretations of the lighthouse. Different critics offer different meanings. Jean 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". According to David Daiches, "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". However, there are critics like Graham Hough 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."

Light itself is the symbolism of the lighthouse. Light is the positive aspect of imaginative consciousness in "The Window," the negative aspect of deceased awareness in "Time Passes," and the reanimation of consciousness in "The Lighthouse" as it searches for the spiritual and aesthetic one. The Lighthouse is built as a towering, massive stand-alone on a rock or island. It is both light and dark. It provides light to ships and sea passengers at night. It is a focal point that represents power, direction, and a safe harbor. It is a spiritual hermit that leads all mariners which stands strong and alone in both light and gloom. If we apply it to the characters of the novel, each character has a different meaning of the lighthouse.

If we see the lighthouse from the perspective of Mr. Ramsay, he sees the lighthouse as a source of stability and comfort. It stands as strong feelings of ownership. To Mrs. Ramsay, the predictability of the lighthouse is most important, implying that truth lies in the cycles that govern life. For Lily Briscoe, the lighthouse becomes a sort of fixation during her final artistic vision – she is watching Mr. Ramsay's boat reach the lighthouse as she approaches the solution of how to finish her painting. As the lighthouse is difficult to understand, just like that Lily Briscoe is finding problems in completing the picture of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Finally "The Lighthouse had become almost invisible, had melted away into a blue haze" (103). And with this, she is finally relieved, and her painting is finished. As the lighthouse disappeared, Lily got some ideas to finish her picture. Thus, this suggests that the lighthouse is also an inspiration to her and she got her vision. For James, the lighthouse also symbolized the strongest feelings. At the beginning of the novel, it was the ambition of James to go to the lighthouse. At the end of the novel, they reach the lighthouse and see that: "The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening." (92). James arrives only to realize that it is not at all the mist-shrouded destination of his childhood. Instead, he is made to reconcile two competing and contradictory images of the tower-how it appeared to him when he was a boy and how it appears to him when he is a man. He decided that both of these images contribute to the essence of the lighthouse.

And at the end of the novel, Mr. Ramsay admires the effort of James. And their relationship becomes stronger. Thus the lighthouse is a symbol of goodness. The lighthouse surrounded by the sea always describes and clarifies the human condition in some way. If we see from the perspective of the general way that the lighthouse is a symbol of something good. The lighthouse stands alone

on a rock with huge construction. At night it stands alone and at the tip of the lighthouse there is a ray of light. That light symbolized the ray of goodness, that light gives the direction to sea voyages. So at this debate, we can say that the lighthouse is symbolized and it gives glimpses of that it is the source of inspiration. It is symbolized like truth triumphing over darkness. Moreover, it has been said to represent a religious symbol by some critics, a phallic symbol by some others. Metaphorically, as the element of Water represents the emotions, the Lighthouse is a Symbol of Spiritual Strength and Emotional Guidance which is available to us during the times we feel we are being helplessly tossed around in a sea of inner turmoil. Mrs. Ramsay stands strong like the lighthouse amidst emotionally shattered beings; viz., Michael Ramsay, James, Lily, Carmichael, etc.

Lily's painting is another important symbol of this novel. Lily's painting represents a struggle against gender convention, represented by Charles Tinsley's statement that: "women can't paint or write." This symbol of the picture symbolizes the condition of women during those days. It shows woman's struggle in a patriarchal society. She desires to express Mrs. Ramsay's essence as an individual wife and mother in her painting. Lily's vision depends on balance and synthesis: how to bring together disparate things in harmony. The symbol is started at the starting of the novel and completed at the end of the novel when James and Mr. Ramsay reached the lighthouse. Perhaps the meaning of Lily's Painting is unclear and the process of making that painting is difficult. The reflection of Woolf's character can be found in Lily's character. It is often suggested that Lily Briscoe is a semi-autobiographical character representing Woolf herself and her artistic process. The process of Lily's painting throughout the novel can be seen as a symbol of the artistic dilemma faced by the modern artist, especially a female artist.

In life, as Mrs. Ramsay herself well knows relationships are doomed to imperfection and are the spot of time and change; but in art the temporal and the eternal unity in an unchanging form- through, as in Lily's picture, the form may be very inadequate. We cannot doubt that Lily's struggles with the composition and texture of her painting are a counterpart of Virginia Woolf's tussles and triumphs in her own medium, but she chooses poetry as the image that reminds mankind that the ever-changing can yet become immortal. Lily is a post-impressionist painter, a descendant of a poor family, and has spent most of her life taking care of her father. In many ways, Lily is the chorus figure of the book—providing the histories of the characters and commenting on their actions. The beginning and completion of her painting form the frame of *To the Lighthouse*, and her final line, "I have had my vision," is the final line of the novel, acting as Woolf's own comment on her book. The painting also represents dedication to a feminine artistic vision, expressed through Lily's anxiety over showing it to William Bankes. In deciding that completing the painting regardless of what happens to it is the most important thing, Lily makes the choice to establish her own artistic voice. In the end, she decides that her vision depends on balance.

Ramsay's summer house is also one of the important symbols of the novel. This is a crucial symbol to understand. This is the place where all deeds happen. Ramsay's House is a place where Woolf and her characters explain their belief and observation. During her dinner party, Mrs.

Ramsay sees her house display her own inner notions of shabbiness and her inability to preserve beauty. The house stands for the collective consciousness of those who stay in it. From the dinner party to the journey to the Lighthouse, Woolf shows the house from various angles. The section of the novel that this symbol is especially important is in "Time Passes". Here the house takes over the plot development, all references to the main characters are brief and made parenthetically, literally. Ten years pass during this section, and with Ramsay gone, the passage of time is conveyed through the house's gradual decay. There is a huge use of personification in this section, with light, dark, wind, air, and other forces of nature portrayed almost as spirits taking over the house. These forces are given action verbs usually reserved for more human beings - "creeping", "toying", "musing", "nosing", "rubbing" – finally these airs "all together gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied; swung wide; admitted nothing, and slammed to" (190-91).

During the dinner party, Mrs. Ramsay sees her house display her own inner notions of shabbiness and her inability to preserve beauty. The way nature is portrayed as an intruder, invading the house, causing its eventual decay, symbolizes the impermanence of man and his constructions - the question is explicitly posed in this section: "Did Nature [with a capital "N"] supplement what man advanced?" (201). The fact that the house is the primary image through which the effects of time are conveyed, even though time has a profound effect on the Ramsay's - Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew all die - represents the irrelevance of humanity on the grand scale of time and how nature alone ultimately persists, which is yet another common modernist theme.

The house stands in for the collective consciousness of those who stay in it. At times the characters long to escape it, while at other times it serves as a refuge. Furthermore, its structure and contents mirror the interior of the characters that inhabit it.

The Boar's Skull is one of the important and mysterious symbols of the novel. It shows the reality and universal truth. It leads toward the right way of life that death is the ultimate reality. After the completion of the dinner party, children went upstairs to play some games. Then Mrs. Ramsay went upstairs to find the children wide-awake, bothered by the boar's skull that hangs on the nursery wall. The presence of that skull is something unpleasant and disturbing. This skull reminds us that death is always at hand, even during the blissful moments of life. It explains that if we are so happy at any time, we should keep in mind that we have to die at some moment in life. We have to leave all things here. This symbol shows the ultimate reality of this cruel life.

If we see in the play 'Hamlet' we can find that there is also a scene of Grave Digging. We can see that there is also a symbol of the ultimate reality of life that a great person was dead and their body was converted into ashes. Thus we can say that death is the ultimate truth, no one can avoid it. Thus, the symbol of the boar's skull is symbolized with death. Boar's skull points out the futility of life and death.

Rose's arrangement of the grapes and pears (the fruit basket) is another example of symbolism. The arrangement of fruits in the basket by Rose, symbolized some truth of life and death. Metaphorically it gives the message. This is a very important symbol of the novel. Rose arranges a fruit basket for her mother's dinner party that serves to draw the partygoers out of their

private suffering and unite them. Although Augustus Carmichael and Mrs. Ramsay appreciate the arrangement differently—he rips a bloom from it; she refuses to disturb it—the pair are brought harmoniously, if briefly, together. The basket testifies both to the “frozen” quality of beauty that Lily describes and to beauty’s seductive and soothing quality. The absence of a fruit basket in the third part signifies the transitory nature of beauty, art and truth.

The symbol of the sea appears throughout the novel. The sea shows the instability of time and life. The water of the sea is a symbolic one. The sound of waves of the sea can be heard throughout the novel. It symbolizes the eternal flux of time and life, in the midst of which we all exist; it constantly changes its character. To Mrs. Ramsay at one moment it sounds soothing and consoling like a cradlesong, at others, “like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beating a warning of death it brings terror. Sometimes its power “sweeping savagely in, “seems to reduce the individual to nothingness, at others, it sends up a fountain of bright water” – which seems to match the sudden springs of vitality in the human spirit. Woolf describes the sea lovingly and beautifully, but her most evocative depictions of it point to its violence. As a force that brings destruction, has the power to decimate islands, and, as Mr. Ramsay reflects, “Eats away the ground we stand on,” the sea is a powerful reminder of the impermanence and delicacy of human life and accomplishments. Sometimes Sea is beautiful but it may also be dangerous and also can become violent to destroy everything.

The storm symbolized something horrible about life and death. In the storm, there is an element of air and wind. It contains both the things in it. Both are the constructive elements of life. Air is representing the mind, and water is representing the emotion of life. The storm symbolized agitated thoughts and emotions. Metaphorically, storms are our inner demons that torment both our mind and subconscious.

The rock, reefs, and shallow water: these symbols are showing certainty of life. The rock shows that life is too hard to live. It gives suffering, as Mrs. Ramsay survived her life. The rocks, reefs, and shallow water symbolized the final danger and miseries which seem to accompany the end of any turbulent voyage. Just as the saying goes “it always seems always darkest before the dawn”, things always seem the most dangerous and hopeless as we reach the end of emotional turmoil. This is the point when we feel like tossing up our hands and giving up.

The Window, a view to oneself: it is from the window that we have a little of the part-I of *To the Lighthouse*. It is not transparent but a separating sheet of glass between reality and Mrs. Ramsay’s mind. Mrs. Ramsay experiences such moments of revelation and integration at watching the window.

Conclusion:

To conclude, while finding symbols in the novel, it is still a subject of debate. Still, critics are interpreting the symbols in different ways. Hopefully, this brief overview of some of the major images throughout the novel can help in giving an idea of their basic symbolism while reading this novel. *To the Lighthouse* is a masterpiece of construction through symbolism. It is an organic whole.

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