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British Modernism

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To the Lighthouse: Distance is the Key

Woolfe presents competing impressions of people and things throughout *To the Lighthouse*, reconciling them with the final realization that the key to harmony of perception is distance. The third person narrative and fractured use of time create a richly descriptive psychological realism that ultimately reveals modernist themes of transience, restoration, and beauty in art, life, work and how we perceive all three.

A distinctly modernist technique Woolfe uses most obviously throughout the novel is the third person narrative. The two longest sections of the novel, The Window and The Lighthouse, are told from the thoughts of the characters. Woolfe includes extensive detail, covering the smallest amounts of time represented in the novel with the largest amount of writing. By subjectively displaying their true thoughts and feelings, mostly about one another, Woolfe creates the psychological realism we see often in modernist fiction. By emphasizing the thoughts of the characters, Woolfe makes their internal realizations the realizations of the novel as a whole.

Woolfe creates this realism by showing us how contradictory, judgmental, selfish, and boring her character's thoughts can be- in addition to all the thoughts that are moral, traditional, and expected. The first section of the novel includes the perspectives of many characters, the lengthiest of which are from Mrs. Ramsay. This first section takes place during the course of one

day in Mrs. Ramsay's life, in which (like any normal person) she changes her mind about Lily, thinks judgmental things, and feels insecure in addition to feeling traditionally accepted things like how proud she is of her children or how happy she is with her life.

For example, Mrs. Ramsay first considers Lily and decides that she will never marry. "With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face, she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously" (Woolfe 17). The next time she thinks of Lily, she changes her mind. "...[T]hinking that Lily's charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face, but it would take a clever man to see it" (Woolfe 26). Eventually, she changes again to think that not only could anyone potentially want to marry Lily, but at the dinner, that "William must marry Lily" (Woolfe 104). By showing this evolution of thought and refusing to show a falsely refined and content picture of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolfe has the opportunity to show how domineering Mrs. Ramsay is. In the novel, Mrs. Ramsay tries to compensate for her marriage by arranging marriage for others. Mrs. Ramsay's failing marriage and insecurity over her controlling ways wouldn't have been shown in a Victorian novel, but in *To the Lighthouse*, allow Woolfe to show that evolving opinions alter our perception of things. In the novel, distance causes this shift in perception, so this modernist technique greatly helps Woolfe achieve that end.

Secondly, the broken chronology Woolfe uses contributes to the theme of the subjectivity with which we understand others, which happens in the novel when we see the read event from the varying perspectives of multiple characters. These different perspectives are usually later unified by something that symbolizes beauty, creating another theme throughout the novel that beauty is redemptive and restorative. For example, at the dinner table, we get the perspective of many of the fifteen guests throughout chapter seventeen. During dinner, for

example, Mrs. Ramsay is “waiting passively,” Mr. Tansley is annoyed, and Lily feels obligated to comfort Mr. Tansley. Mrs. Ramsay thinks, “the room (she looked round it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere” (Woolfe 83). However, when candles join the table, “Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together” (Woolfe 97). Lily considers Mrs. Ramsay’s greatest artistic talent to be the ability to join people together and create social harmony. “By the end [of the party], however, she prevails in her gift, which Lily considers to be almost an artistic talent, for creating social harmony. If Mrs. Ramsay is an artist, the dinner party is her medium; indeed, if the purpose of art for her, as it is for Lily, is to break down the barriers between people, to unite and allow them to experience life together in brief, perfect understanding, then the party is nothing less than her masterpiece” (Sparknotes). The subjective viewpoints and bond over beauty are other ways Woolfe uses modern realism in *To the Lighthouse* to further these motifs.

Woolfe shows the passage of time in two distinctly different ways throughout *To the Lighthouse*. During *The Window*, there is no chronological order to the events, and many of the different chapters happen at the same time as characters are perceiving the same events (for example, we read about Mr. Ramsay’s reciting poetry on the lawn from his perspective, Mrs. Ramsay’s perspective, and Lily and Mr. Bankes’s perspectives as well). “Sometimes without warning, the narrative darts into the past. Woolf did not believe in traditional exposition and we learn little about the history of most of the characters. Rather, she plunges us into the sensations of their lives” (Livesey 4). When the house is left to chaos in *Time Passes*, “time begins to run together into lumps and finally has become one conglobulate mass with no part of it distinguishable from any other. This lasts until Man, or Humanity, restores the house to life when

it again falls under Humanity's system of divisions in time. Time, therefore, is a purely artificial concept imposed by Man on Nature, one not naturally inherent in things.” (Derbyshire 357). “The closer the house was to Death, for example, the closer it was to true timelessness” (Derbyshire 358). This theory of time looks very similar to Einstein’s theory of relativity, a revolutionary modernist theory at the time.

Discussing the specific use of this technique, “In "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf wrote, "The present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else." She does not have time for conventional plots that require the passage of days and weeks. For her the excitement and importance of the novel is the depth to which it can allow us to enter into the consciousness of a character, and to see the world through that consciousness. How can prose, which is linear, hope to convey that everyone, at almost every moment, is experiencing simultaneously so many things?” (Livesey 5).

Breaking many conventions of the victorian novel, Woolfe writes *To the Lighthouse* in a way that creates a sense of the world that depends upon the inner thoughts of her characters for all of its depth and meaning. Lily’s realizations at the end of the novel are illuminated across the many minds of the rest of the Ramsay family and guests to their summer home. Lily comments in the novel that she would need fifty pairs of eyes to clearly understand Mrs. Ramsay. “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought.” Woolfe provides the reader with access to an abundance of character’s inner thoughts as a technique to guide readers to realize that this is true.