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Search for the Source of Self-Worth in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is both a call to recognize the brevity of life and an inducement to find meaning in life. Woolf divides her novel into three sections, namely, "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse." The contents of each section and the contrasts between them clarify the theme of the novel: that one should strive to find a source of self-worth in response to the recognition that humanity and human accomplishments are all fleeting. "The Window" employs the stream of consciousness to make the characters' progress towards that realization palpable. "Time Passes" focuses on the changing setting and the loss of prominent characters to emphasize the transience of life and life's accomplishments. Lastly, "The Lighthouse" contrasts James's disillusionment with Lily's revelation, suggesting that Woolf encourages the act of finding meaning in life.

"The Window" is a drawn out explanation of the characters' thoughts and reactions to everyday happenings. Woolf delves into the minds of her characters in order to reveal how they come upon and cope with the realization of the transience of human life. Mr. Ramsay is the first character to do so. A successful philosopher, Mr. Ramsay compares his accomplishments to reaching Q in the alphabet. At first, he seems proud of the fact that he has achieved more than many people ever hope to achieve. But, as he begins to contemplate reaching Z, he questions what reaching Z really entails. It is here that Mr. Ramsay seems extremely insecure about his work. Even if his work lasted two thousand years, he asks, what does that really mean in the grand scheme of things? No matter how ground breaking Mr. Ramsay's work is, his accomplishments will not endure forever. Indeed, Mr. Ramsay laments the fact that even a stone will outlast Shakespeare.

In a similar manner, when Mrs. Ramsay's mind deviates from domestic concerns and she searches "into her mind and heart" (63), she resents the world. "How could any Lord have made this world" (64) she asks herself, bemoaning the lack of reason, order, and justice as well as the excess of suffering, death, and poverty. To Mrs. Ramsay, death is an omnipotent power that does not abide by the laws of justice. Instead, death strikes often untimely and unfairly and threatens, at least in her mind, Mrs. Ramsay and her family. Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay mourns over not being able to protect her and her family from death and seems to find solace in concerning herself with domestic affairs, marriages, and dinner parties. In any case, both she and her husband recognize the power that time and death have and the relative meagerness of human achievements.

"Time Passes" details the physical changes of the Ramsay's vacation home and contrasts them with the consistency of both the forces of nature and the light from the lighthouse beacon. The pall of darkness that fell over the house when the Ramsays left is inescapable. "Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness" (126) and, indeed, the house itself seems to deteriorate. "Flies wove a web in the sunny rooms; weeds... had grown close to the glass," (132) and the barren house is totally lifeless. While the house decays, the waves continue their methodical splash and retreat, the tides undergo their never-ending ebb and flow, and the lighthouse in the distance consistently shines its light upon the scene. All of nature is described in a cyclical manner: "the trees plunge and bend," "the sea tosses itself and breaks itself," and the "boat rocking" back and forth (128) all contribute to the eternal qualities of nature. It is precisely these eternal qualities that contrast sharply with the physical changes the house experiences. Thus, the scene reaffirms that time, and by extension death, are both all-powerful and inevitable causes of destruction.

The way Woolf manipulates time in *To the Lighthouse* is most apparent during the transition from "The Window" to "Time Passes." The first section is by far the longest of the three yet only covers the events of one day. In contrast, "Time Passes" sees the events of an entire decade elapse in less than twenty pages. Through this disparity, Woolf emphasizes how quickly time flies as well as underscores the overall insignificance of the seemingly important events that may have occurred during that period. Ten

years and what happens during them, in Woolf's mind, are trivial in the long run. Mrs. Ramsay's, Andrew's, and Prue's deaths are given less attention than the mundane matters of, say, James's reaction to being told he can visit the lighthouse if the weather permits.

Indeed, "Time Passes" includes the deaths of some of the novel's most promising characters. By doing so, the section emphasizes the brevity of life and the untimeliness of death. The first character mentioned is Prue Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay praises Prue for her beauty and has great expectations for Prue regarding marriage. In fact, Prue does marry, and the spectators comment on "how beautiful she looked!" (131). But, sadly, Prue dies the same summer giving birth, a tragedy considering "everything, they said, had promised so well," (132). It should be noted that Woolf only mentions Prue's death and the deaths of the other characters as well as mere side-notes set off in brackets. Woolf, as a result, accomplishes both the task of reaffirming the untimeliness of death as well as underscoring the insignificance of human life.

Andrew Ramsay's death is also mentioned in "Time Passes." Andrew was a promising mathematician before his death and even showed enough intellectual potential to match his father's achievements. Intermixed in the description of the decaying vacation house, Woolf merely mentions, once again in brackets, that "A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous," (133). Here, the mystery around death is illustrated. It seems unfair in that death struck such a promising character so early yet Woolf continues to describe death as "merciful." Death, then, seems to abide by its own, abstract set of laws; however, death in any case is inevitable and Andrew's curtailed life emphasizes how brief life can sometimes be.

Lastly, "Time Passes" reveals that Mrs. Ramsay, the treasure of nearly every character in *To the Lighthouse*, dies. According to Charles Tansley, "she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen," (14) and Lily Briscoe seems to find herself fighting off the impulse to "fling herself at Mrs. Ramsay's knee and say to her-but what could one say to her? I love you," (19). Mrs. Ramsay's children, as well, are especially fond of her: James Ramsay believes that she "was ten thousand times better in every way than he [Mr. Ramsay] was," (4). Woolf presents multiple characters as more deserving of death, including Mr. Ramsay, and doing so reaffirms that death is mysterious.

“The Lighthouse” is the culmination of the theme of the novel. After Woolf pessimistically presents the insignificance of human life and the untimely tendencies of death, she encourages her audience to find some way to cope with that inevitable fact. Lily Briscoe, for example, returns to the vacation house ten years after the events in “The Window.” In “The Window,” Lily struggles to complete her painting and feels threatened by the great historical artists. When Mr. Bankes tells Lily about all traveling the world and seeing the great artwork of international museums, Lily responds dejectedly saying that seeing the most praised works in history would probably make her feel inadequate. In “The Lighthouse” however, Lily has her “vision.” Although Woolf does not disclose the contents of this vision, evidence suggests that Lily has discovered what Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay knew in the first section: death is untimely, historical achievements are relatively insignificant, and finding meaning in life is necessary for happiness. Lily, in the final section, is finally able to complete her painting. She is no longer under the pressure of historically great artwork since she discarded its significance, and, instead of dejectedly accepting life’s brevity, she uses painting as a way to cope with her revelation. In fact, the final lines of the novel portray Lily as conquering her painting while simultaneously reaching her philosophical apex.

The focus on marriage and gender roles should not be ignored in *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay represents the typical, conservative, traditional household wife. She mourns the fact that her children are already debating complex topics and seems to prefer that every woman, not just her children, should be married. The Ramsay children “sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers [Mrs. Ramsay’s]; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other” (6). Woolf seems to express a dislike for marriage though, seeing it as binding and restrictive. Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay, who champions the institution, dies in the novel; Prue Ramsay, who is the first Ramsay child to marry, dies within a year of her matrimony; and Paul and Minta’s marriage is an utter failure after Paul’s adultery. Lily, on the other hand, for whom marriage is not particularly suited, emerges as the most successful character: she finishes her painting, has her “vision,” and seems to be content with her life and status. Thus, Woolf is encouraging freedom, especially for women. Her message is not only related to marriage but can be extended to imply that one should not restrict himself or herself

in life. Woolf's optimistic encouragement aligns with her call to find meaning in life. Marriage and restrictive agreements in general deprive rather than enhance the meaning in one's life, and one should actively try to avoid doing so.

"The Lighthouse" also sees the fulfillment of James's childhood wish to visit the lighthouse. The novel opens with James desperately hoping that the weather would allow him to sail to the lighthouse, and the novel closes with him finally doing so. Woolf's choice to end the novel this way is significant for two reasons. First of all, it reaffirms her call to find significance in everyday life. James values his trip to the lighthouse, a totally mundane event, above anything else. Thus, Woolf shows, in the most extreme case, that the source of life's meaning is dependent on the person, but, nevertheless, should not be chastised by others as foolish. Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay seems to be very supportive of James's wish. Secondly, James's disillusionment as he finally reaches the lighthouse is symbolic of how ephemeral life's desires truly are. James has finally fulfilled his dream yet feels conspicuously unsatisfied. His desires and his life as a whole have changed significantly since he was a child. Such is with everybody: as time progresses, life and life's desires become subject to change and the transience of life is, for a final time, reaffirmed by Woolf.

Thus, the three sections of *To the Lighthouse* collaborate to make the theme readily apparent. "The Window" exposes the inner workings of the characters' minds, illustrating their progression towards their revelation or, in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, their ambiguous feelings about their revelations. "Time Passes" emphasizes the brevity of life and the fleeting nature of humanity and its accomplishments. Lastly, "The Lighthouse" is where Virginia Woolf calls her audience to live life to the fullest, to find some source of meaning in life, no matter how insignificant or mundane, and to never impose limits on life.