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Virginia Woolf - To the lighthouse - Themes, Imagery and Symbols

Letteratura inglese (Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia)

MAIN THEMES:

- Emotions → it is more important to see the emotions and reflections of the characters rather than their actions. Virginia Woolf creates a reality that is completely constructed by the collection of the multiple subjective perspectives of the characters. She creates a fictional world in which no objective, omniscient narrator is present.
- Subjectivity of reality and language → everything is subjective, everything is seen differently according to the different character's point of view. Moreover characters have different ways of expressing themselves, they are aware of what they are doing or how they say things. They even reflect on how they could have said things better.
- Contrast between experimental and nostalgic → this can be seen in different forms: the novel is experimental, themes are traditional, but used in an experimental way. Lily experiments with her art, but she has moments in which she is nostalgic of the past and of Mrs Ramsey; the children want to go out and want to see the Lighthouse, then they see how things were in the past, so there is the arriving and returning represented by the Lighthouse, which is not exactly how they remember it.
- Dread of mortality and oblivion → Mr Ramsey is afraid of oblivion, he feels this burden. Mrs Ramsey also knows that time passes and things change. At the end of the dinner party she is about to leave the room, she turns back and thinks that the party had already become the past. She realizes that things can change from one moment to another.
- Different ways of giving worth to life in time → Mr Ramsey through intellectualism, Mrs Ramsey by creating connections and emotions, Lily thanks to her Art, in the end she has a vision.
- Forms of opposition to male tradition of patriarchy → the male tradition is represented by Mr Ramsey, who controls things, represents the Victorian man, a tyrant, but the novel wants to overcome this and there are different ways to do it: one of them is the **language of matriarchy** (he wants Mrs Ramsey to tell him she loves him, she does it, but without using the word "love"), also through **art** (Lily's art creates a different kind of tradition, bc she is a female artist), **science** (Banks is a botanist and a widower and is very different from Mr. Ramsey, bc he is more gentle), **poetry** (Carmichael is a poet who creates obscure poetry, he becomes famous after WW1, where this kind of poetry is more appreciated) and finally **future generations** (especially Cam and James, who want to provide a new way of doing things and a new way to treat one another, but at the end they acknowledge he is not that bad).
- Relationships between men vs women → Charles vs Lily, Mr Ramsey/Charles vs Mrs Ramsey → there is always some sort of contrast between them, for example bc they do not understand Mrs Ramsey.
- Marriage → there are different ways of seeing marriage: Mrs Ramsey sees it as something women have to do, in fact she encourages Minta and Lily to get married: Minta does, but she's not happy; Lily's unconventional, she resists this convention and in the end she feels empowered and realized.
- Beauty → beauty has a restorative, but simplistic effects and is seen as something that has to be protected, especially for Mrs Ramsey.
- Necessity for women to overcome external and internal fears to attain feminine → be able to create something important and memorable, like Lily does at the end.

Imagery and Symbols

- Elegy, sorrowful poem = the writer wants to celebrate all those who have passed away
- Shapes = everything is presented in shapes, everything is geometrical, like a modernist painting. The lighthouse is a shape, painting as well. They are all focal points for strong emotions
- Distance = it allows to see things clearly
- Time = based on characters' consciousness, it is relative. In the second part 10 years pass in a few pages, where as in the first just a day takes a lot of pages.
- Sea, waves = the constant forward movement of time and the changes it brings.

- Art = as a source of certainty and a mean of preservation in a world that is destined to change, a tool that allows to find a truth. “Nothing stays, all changes; but not words, not paint.”
- Painting = represents a struggle against gender and art convention, represented by Charles Tansley’s statement that women can’t paint or write, which is not true, bc Lily paints. It is also a mean to understand others, in order to finish the painting, she needs to understand Mrs Ramsey, who at the end appears like a sort of ghost she needs to face and control to finish the painting. It also indicates balance and synthesis.
- Brackets = separate complex inside world from short and brutal outside world
- Lighthouse = is faraway, it means something different and intimately personal to each character, and it is at once inaccessible, illuminating, and infinitely interpretable/multiple.
- House = reflects the family’s condition. In the “Time Passes” section, the destruction of war and the passage of time are reflected in the condition of the house.
- Boar’s skull = ater her dinner party, Mrs. Ramsay retires upstairs to find the children wide-awake, bothered by the boar’s skull that hangs on the nursery wall. The presence of the skull acts as a disturbing reminder that death is always at hand, even (or perhaps especially) during life’s most blissful moments.
- Fruit basket = object of beauty. 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 is brought harmoniously, even if briefly, together. The basket testifies both to the “frozen” quality of beauty that Lily describes and to beauty’s seductive and soothing quality.