

Time, Tides and Travel: Elevated Epic Conventions in Woolf's Novel *To The Light House*

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Abstract

To The Light House is the fifth novel of Virginia Woolf. She had recreated a novel which bears and follows the impressions of the conscious mind. The novel, segmented into three sections, attempts to portray the journey of the family of Ramsay to the lighthouse. Just as the wind blows and passes through the doors and windows of the house, so is time which passes and also ravages the plans of the family to journey into the Lighthouse.

The paper attempts to showcase the epic conventions which Woolf has employed in her novel as a method to challenge the conventions of novel writing and also bring about a change in the narration through the stream of consciousness techniques. Just as, all the grand epics have a war to state, the novel has also a domestic war to confront. All the characters in the novel express the impressions of the readers and Woolf becomes a mute narrator and a spectator to the plot of the novel.

Key Words: Epic conventions, Stream of Consciousness, Psychological impressions

The decline of art forms, the increase in flippancy and profligacy created an imbalance in the literary travesty during the late Victorian period. A lot of moral reforms were introduced by the queen Victoria during her time at the helm of affairs. She wanted the people to be more accountable, humane and genteel. On the flip side, the Industrial revolution in England had brought about a widening gap between the rich and the poor making the latter more oppressive. After the fall of the Victorian Empire and the demise of the Queen Victoria, England suffered from a state of creative delinquency and the years that followed gave rise to a modern form of writings which were devoid of the classical prescriptions and romantic inclinations.

The most important influence during the Victorian period was the reflection of skeptical attitude of the people and therefore the primary purpose of art and its creation was at stake. A group of writers with Oscar Wilde at the centre wanted the artistic endeavors to manifest the fact that art existed within its own limited frontiers and must exist to entertain and not enlighten. The famous dictum, Art for Art's Sake meant that the people of England must rejoice art for mere sake of its existence and nothing more. This was because, the people of England were slowly but steadily receding away from the well knit and well established institutions of religion, and politics.

On the other hand, authors like John Ruskin aimed at producing pieces of literature that would guide and enlighten the readers rather than merely make them pass their time with these works. Ruskin therefore came up with a more comprehensive and elaborate definition of art calling it, Art for Life's Sake. The quote below reflects the insight of Oscar Wilde who felt that art was meant to stand alone as a form of pleasure and must offer nothing more. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Wilde emphasizes the aforesaid idea and says,

The Artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artists is the art's aim. Vice and Virtue are to the artist's materials. Art shall have no other aim than being art and it should be protected from subordination to any moral, didactic, social or political purpose. Art should be an end in itself and have no specific use in terms of utilitarian philosophers. (2)

The fag end of the Victorian era gave rise to the modern period which found art not as a reflection of the society but rather a manifestation of the poet's mind. The years 1904 to 1914, were the most

important in the English literary history because, it was the time when the writers began to harp of the idea that the world in itself is a mess and therefore the works of art must not reflect the optimistic side of an artist and the society but rather project the moral and psychic degradations which had resulted in the outbreak of a long conflict in the name of the world war. Virginia Woolf, along with her brothers had bought a home at Bloomsbury, London following the death of their parents. It was in this house that a lot of intellectuals, friends, peers, artists and writers met to discuss and explore their own self. The name Bloomsbury group surfaced after the group met at the house of the Bloomsbury to discuss and liberate their sexual, emotional and political freedom. It was one of the first groups across the history of England to declare with a candid concern that homosexuality was absolutely normal and there was nothing to be perturbed about it.

Virginia Woolf began to write at a very early age and after having become a journalist at the beginning and a novelist at a later phase of her life, she wanted to write the way women were seen by the rest of the society and question the oft quoted conviction that women's writing concerned itself with triviality like fashion and other menial ideas and therefore need not necessarily be considered as a piece of serious writing. The quote below from the work, *A Room of One's Own* reflect the ways by which a male writer looks at the writings of a woman and more importantly, the ways by which a woman is demeaned in the profession of writing by calling her as someone who was not able to think more clearly and therefore the writings of women lacked a sense of having abstract thoughts. Woolf observes

Alas ! A Woman that attempts to pen,
such a presumptuous creature is esteemed.
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed
They tell us we mistake our sex and the way
Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play
Are the accompaniments we should desire. (55)

One could find that Woolf was obsessed with the world for making a woman as someone who knew nothing more than fashion and breeding. She wanted to bring out her creative genius and therefore experimented with new forms of writing and one of her writing innovations was the employment of the stream of consciousness technique. She did not want to write on the mundane things which would not bring about any sea change in her literary milieu. She wanted to write on something which was grander and had the grandeur of having lofty ideas and thoughts.

Woolf felt that the thought processes are not connected and coherent and therefore she began to single out all the thoughts which went on to her consciousness and wrote a novel titled, *To The Light House* which not only showed her genius as a writer but also made her one of the distinguished writers of her age. The term stream of consciousness was borrowed from William James, a pragmatist. The school of pragmatism believed that the human mind can only perceive ideas which are generated by the consciousness.

A problem or an idea can be understood only by looking at the calculable or incalculable consequences it would bring in case it is applied. To be more precise, the pragmatics believed in experimentation of the thoughts that surfaced in the human mind and there was nothing termed as the absolute truth. Virginia Woolf wanted to write a unified plot that dealt with the problems in a family. She was of the opinion that no man can think on any thought constantly and therefore the novel embodied the idea of impressions which she imprinted on a character which was perceived after a series of observations made by the reader on the specific character. Woolf began to writing the novel in August 1925 and almost completed it in the January of 1927. Being her fifth novel, the ideas which the plot embroiled were difficult to comprehend and interpret. The novel had gained popularity in France and the difficulties in comprehending the idea and the problems of its translation to French was an uphill task. Robin Mazumdar in his work, *The Critical Heritage to Virginia Woolf* quotes the letter written by Robert Fry to his wife on the thought process of Woolf and the difficulties he encountered to bring the book in French.

Good Lord, how difficult she is to translate, but I think Charles has managed to keep the atmosphere marvelous. To tell the truth, I do not think, this piece is quite of her best vintage. I have noticed one peculiarity. She is so splendid as soon as a character is involved. She tries to give impressions of the inanimate objects. She exaggerates; she underlines and poeticizes a little bit. (19)

One of the reasons the novel is difficult to understand is because, it does not follow the traditional narrative style which had been followed by many novelists, who give a very formal and monotonous introduction and begin their novels with the tone as, once upon a time, or my name is or even the other style of writing which concerns the third person narrative stating, they used to call me Ismail or so on and so forth. On the contrary, *To the Lighthouse* begins in the middle popularly called, in medias res. This is one of the difficulties which the readers faced when they first began to read the novel. When a book begins in the middle, the audience or the readers are not expected to know what had happened in the beginning. The novel has tactfully employed the technical convention of the epic to begin with. When Homer wrote the *Iliad*, the epic began with the episode of how Achilles striking a war for the tenth time with Troy. It was expected that the audience would have known the back story of the epic which had an underlying meaning of the incidents which the epic had not mentioned like the abduction of Helen and other background information. An epic is usually a long tale with a moral but Woolf had employed the epic conventions in the opening lines of her novel. She wanted to tell a lofty tale of a commotion which cropped up in a family. To be more precise, she was attempting to write a domestic epic. The usual convention in *Iliad* is the outbreak of a war and in this novel is the outbreak of a verbal violence between Mr and Mrs. Ramsay as to whether or not they would take their son James to the lighthouse in case the weather is fine. The excerpt below bears the opening lines of the novel which began in the in medias res

“Yes, of course, its fine tomorrow”, said Mrs. Ramsay. “ But you will have to be up with the lark”, she added. To her son, those words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled the expedition were bound to take place and the wonder to which he had looked forward for years and years it seemed was after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail within touch. (1)

Virginia Woolf was eight when she taught herself to read the *Iliad* in Greek. When she turned sixteen, she began to tour Greece and Turkey with the epic in her handbag. All the techniques and flamboyant language of the epic conventions were seeped into her mind. Her close aide, James Joyce wrote a remodeled version of *Iliad* by naming his novel as the *Ulysses* she was not appreciative of the work because, to her the novel must have a more lofty idea and an exalted truth. Another fascinating feature of the novel is that, it does not follow the archetypal conventions of the novel where the characters move but the narrator stands still. When one reads the novel, *To The Light House*, one finds that the characters are the fictional creation of the author and therefore it is not required that the characters move but rather the narrator must move the plot of the novel. When one reads the novel it becomes more clear that the impressions a reader gets on reading about the character in a novel, makes him understand the same. The impressions which one gets to understand Mrs. Ramsay are the results which a reader has formed after continuous readings of the novel.

The second epic convention which Woolf employs in the novel is the long journey which the character in an Epic employs. One could find that the Satan in the *paradise Lost* undertakes an arduous journey from the hell to the garden of Eden. Similarly in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, one could find the hero, Dante himself undertakes a long journey a visits the heaven, hell and the purgatory. Similarly, one finds the same convention in the *Light House* where the family of Ramsay undertake a journey to the light house. Woolf wanted to establish the idea that women are not given importance in any work of art by written by men. She finds that the abduction of Helen is not important but what is important is the fact that the war which went on for years. As a writer, she wants to reflect the idea that men imbibe their culture and their masculinity into any of the epics they write and all the women characters take a back seat. When Penelope waits for her husband Odysseus what matters the most is the war and not her wait for the husband. Woolf wants to address the problem of giving lesser importance to the women in the

texts of male writers and therefore she has written the novel adhering to the epic traditions and conventions. On the whole, the structure of the novel is more akin to the wings of a butterfly sitting on a cathedral. The wings denote the two isles and the middling segment of the wings denote the connections between these two isles with the passage of time. On the whole, the novel wants to project the fact that a woman can also employ more of epic grandeur to the novel. *To the Light House* employs the picture perfect image of the family of Woolf. Mr. Ramsay is modeled on her father who how much ever tries hard, could not pronounce the alphabet Z. The character of Mrs. Ramsay is a replica of her mother who died at a very early age. James is the brother of Woolf and the character Lily Briscoe is the author herself. The novel is experimentation into the autobiographical elements which lingered in the inner psyche of a woman written in the form of an epic.

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