

The Symbol Study Guide



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Summary

Summary

This brief story begins with a description of the mountain, the focal point of the alpine village in which the story is set. The mountaintop is like a crater on the moon, filled with iridescent snow whose color changes from dead white to blood red. The mountainside is a vast descent from pure rock and a clutching pine to the village and graves in the valley.

An elderly English woman sits on her hotel room balcony. She starts to write to her sister in England that the mountain “is a symbol,” but she pauses to observe the mountain, as if to think about its symbolic significance. While the woman is musing, the omniscient narrator comments on the theatrical nature of the alpine resort: The hotel balcony is like a box at a theater and human behavior appears as “curtain raisers.” From this omniscient perspective, life looks artificial and temporary: “Entertainments to pass the time; seldom leading to any conclusion.” When the English woman sees young men on the street below, she recognizes one of them as a relative of the mistress of her daughter’s school. She remembers that young men in the past have died climbing the nearby mountain and becomes again mindful of its symbolic presence and power.

Continuing her letter to her sister, the woman recalls the time that she spent with their dying mother on the Isle of Wight. This remembrance stirs her to disclose that she longed to hear the doctor say that her mother would die soon, when in fact she lived another eighteen months. She writes that she regarded the mother’s death as a symbol—a symbol of freedom. She goes on to say that “a cloud then would do instead of the mountain” as a sign of having reached the top. Her memory then turns to her Anglo-Indian uncles and cousins who were explorers, and she reveals her own great desire to explore, though marrying was a more sensible choice.

After turning her attention to a woman routinely shaking out a rug on another balcony, the woman resumes her letter to her sister. After mentioning the local villas, food, and hotel, she returns to the subject of the mountain and what a splendid view she has of it, as well as of everyone else in the village. She says that the mountain is always the center of conversation; people discuss whether it is clear and seems close, or it looks like a cloud and seems farther away.

Just the night before, she confesses, she hoped the storm would hide the mountain, and then asks if she is being selfish to want it concealed in the face of so much suffering. Admitting that this suffering afflicts visitors and native residents equally, she quotes the hotel proprietor as saying that only an earthquake could destroy the mountain and that no such threat exists there.

The woman again notices the young men, who are now roped together and climbing the mountain; she stops her letter midsentence: “They are now crossing a crevasse.” The pen falls from her hand as the men disappear.

Later that night the men’s bodies are uncovered by a search party. The story ends with the woman finding her unfinished letter and writing that the old clichés seem appropriate: The men tried “to climb the mountain”; peasants put flowers on their graves; and the young men have “died in an attempt to discover . . .” Because no conclusion seems fitting, the woman tacks on the conventional line, “Love to the children” and signs her pet name, closing the letter and the story.

Themes

Themes: Themes and Meanings

Virginia Woolf finished “The Symbol” less than a month before her death in 1941. The story explores the issues associated with her experimental interests in the novel—how to blend objective and subjective reality in ways that capture the sensuous and tangible qualities of experience, while suggesting its ephemeral and elusive nature. In essays such as “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf explores the new aesthetics involved in presenting a fiction reflective of modern behavior. For the twentieth century sensibility, as Woolf and other modernists perceive it, life is in a constant state of flux where nothing is stable and the mind constantly receives “myriad impressions.” Life, unlike its treatment by Edwardian novelist Arnold Bennett, is not a tightly plotted Aristotelian drama with a clean beginning, middle, and end. Instead, life—like character—is always in a state of becoming—a state of uncertainty and change in which decisive moments are internal and subjective, moving the individual upward in a spiritual quest of self-knowledge.

Woolf’s concerns lay the groundwork for understanding how “The Symbol” reflects themes characteristic of her experimental art. Her unnamed woman writer, an outsider in the alpine village who is removed from its street bustle, muses on what a symbol is and how it relates to the mountain—the recurring focus of her thoughts. The mountain becomes identified here with the human quest, the “longing” to reach the top and whatever the perceived goal suggests. For the protagonist, it is a desire to be free of traditional restraints—first her mother and then her sensible marriage. It is a longing to transgress conventional boundaries like the male explorers in her family—her Anglo-Indian uncles and cousins. This family is a blend of the West and the East, of British pragmatism and Indian spirituality, a mix conducive to successful exploration. The young alpine explorers, distinguished in the past by their valley graves and in the present by being roped in their upward climb of the mountain, are not so different from the woman’s own uncles and cousins in their quest for the unknown. The protagonist, through apparently limited by gender expectations, manages to eke out a life of adventure through her role as writer/observer—the onlooker who records the life and death of the young explorers as well as the ups and downs of her own emotional life.

Many of Woolf’s characters, particularly in her novels, are imaged as being on literal and symbolic journeys leading to something that continually beckons and eludes the human imagination. The symbol, like the quest, escapes definition and summary. The suggestive and abstract significance of a mountain, cloud, letter, or death depends on the changing context of the perceiver. When the protagonist is responsible to her dying mother, she says that a cloud signifies freedom as well as a mountain and that death itself becomes a symbol of release. For Woolf, the process of questing, of scaling the mountain, of writing the letter seems more important than the goal itself. Indeed, the process of discovery seems to take precedence over physical death as the protagonist closes her comments on the young male mountain climbers with the unfinished line, “They died in an attempt to discover . . .” This inconclusive ending reaffirms death as yet part of the discovery process that may continue beyond material life as humans know it.

Analysis

Analysis: Style and Technique

Woolf constantly experimented with style, searching for ways of presenting character that explore the unconscious self. Dissatisfied with the summary treatment of character in terms of external events, she was primarily interested in character as a fluctuating interplay of the mind in response to ordinary experience. Physical sensation, as described in her fiction, provokes thought and memory, and the latter also nudge each other, unfolding in a series of images. In “The Symbol” the protagonist is suggested largely by her thoughts and memories, which are spurred initially by the view of the mountain and the village life and subsequently revealed in the letter. For her, the past, present, and future clearly shape who she is. As she reflects on the mountain and the aspiring climbers, she remembers an earlier balcony on the Isle of Wight. There she entertained her mother by describing the travelers who disembarked on the isle after an ocean journey. Like a dutiful daughter, the young protagonist attended to the requests of her dying mother, perceiving death then as a symbol of freedom, of unlimited possibility to be explored.

The protagonist’s past and present experiences, subjective and objective reality, are connected by her musing on the symbol and trying to understand its significance. Woolf’s characteristic style is to shift the narrative back and forth between memory and present experience, as mediated through the protagonist’s perceptions and the omniscient narrator’s description. The shifting narration symbolizes Woolf’s notion of how to describe character in terms of a fluctuating play between external sensation and internal reaction. Ultimately, the story itself can be read as a symbol of how character depends on, and is shaped by, imaginative desire and longing.