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The Lighthouse

Kyle Derkson

University of Toronto, kyle.derkson@mail.utoronto.ca

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Lighthouse* (2019), directed by Robert Eggers.



The Lighthouse (2019), dir. Robert Eggers

TIFF trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_cjvit9UEY

The Lighthouse is the second feature film by director Robert Eggers. Like his first, *The Witch*, his second film focuses on people living in isolation and the role religion plays to retain a semblance of normalcy. *The Lighthouse* focuses on the story of two men, Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson) and Thomas Wake (Willem Dafoe), who are lighthouse keepers on an isolated island. The film begins by showing Thomas and Winslow arriving at the island aboard a boat and swapping posts with the previous keepers. The two men are to be stationed at the secluded

lighthouse for four weeks. Thomas, the veteran, is training Winslow and giving him all the laborious duties around the lighthouse. When the four weeks is up, a large storm keeps them secluded on the island for an undisclosed amount of time. Isolated, cabin fever begins to set in.

During the four weeks, Thomas begins to encourage Winslow to partake in the rituals of lighthouse keeping: every meal begins with a toast, only Thomas is allowed in the Lighthouse, never kill a sea bird. It is the structure of these rituals, and a large amount of alcohol, that allows Thomas to make it through the four weeks. When sober, Winslow is a threat to Thomas' rituals. Winslow toasts, but not with booze. He's anxious to see inside the lighthouse. He kills a sea bird. This leads Thomas to be incredibly harsh on Winslow and only eases after a few dinner-time drinks. Becoming jovial in his intoxication, he lauds Winslow as a friend with a strong work ethic.

While unpacking his belongings, Winslow finds a carved mermaid stuffed in his mattress. He removes it and places it in his breast pocket. Like Thomas, Winslow is isolated on the island. Unlike Thomas, Winslow lacks the ritual structures to maintain sanity. His stoic mannerisms remain intact in front of Thomas, but sea gulls taunt him and hallucinations of mermaids ensue whenever he is left to his own devices. After told by Thomas to never kill a sea gull, one comes to taunt him during his work. In a fit of rage Winslow manages to grab it by the neck and beats its body upon the rocks long after its death. While Winslow works to bring oil to the lighthouse lantern, swab the floors, and shovel coal, Thomas becomes a panoptic figure atop the lighthouse whose presence becomes a constant reminder to Winslow that he is never working hard enough. Thomas' constant criticisms of Winslow's work are punctuated with his constant farts. These farts, along with the occasional blast of the foghorn, the gulls around the island, and the ticking clock, create an eerie and isolated auditory environment.

Each man finds intimacy through objects rather than each other. Thomas has found his salvation basking naked in the glow of the lighthouse's lantern. For Thomas this is something that is not only a spiritual endeavor, it is a moment of intimacy. Winslow, on the other hand, finds intimacy with the wooden mermaid, holding it while he masturbates. In turn, Winslow begins hallucinating, seeing a mermaid who has washed up on shore. During his hallucination, he has sex with her.

Four weeks pass. Thomas and Winslow wait upon the rocks for a ship to relieve them of their duties. No ship arrives. The men continue about their work. We watch as Winslow slowly follows suit in Thomas' drinking habits. The two drunkards begin by singing, then dancing around their circular dining table while holding hands. This leads to them embracing each other, swaying back and forth. Looking each other in the eyes, they lean in for a kiss only to shove the other back and put up their fists. After a brief fight we see Winslow cradling Thomas's head as they tell each other their deepest secrets.

According to Freud, religious behavior parallels behavior rooted in neurosis, as it is an attempt to control the sensory world by means of an imaginary world of our wishes that protect us from reality. Rather than an abstract father figure, as Freud suggests, *The Lighthouse* focuses on each man's rituals as fixated on objects that alleviate the temptation to love another man. Thomas sees the lighthouse lantern as salvation and sea birds as souls of sailors who died at sea. The predicament of becoming stranded on the island, according to Thomas, is because of Winslow's lack of respect for these rituals. It is a world wished into existence by Thomas to escape the clutches of isolation. Winslow's mermaid hallucinations serve a similar function. The one shared social norm between them is that they must not be intimate with one another. Only when the two men are drunk is this rule blurred.

As their supply of alcohol dwindles, so does their tolerance for one another. This leaves Winslow with no reprieve from Thomas' antagonism. Neither of the men can agree on what they've told each other or how long they've been on the island. No longer do we have any sense as to which of the things we've seen is 'true.' We, like the characters, are fully immersed in the complicated and conflicting myths being told. The conflicting myths threaten the stability and comfort of the rituals they have maintained and force them to confront one another.

The Lighthouse is, in a sense, a story about forbidden love. Rituals counteract their isolation and take the place of any meaningful connection between the men. The geographic isolation of Winslow and Thomas from the rest of the world parallels the physical isolation they have from each other while sober. Thomas' rituals, Winslow's stoic seclusion and mermaid totem, are attempts to remove the possibility of a certain type of intimacy. These rituals around intimacy and objects function to obviate the potential of any true relationship between the men outside of their drunkenness.