



# To the Lighthouse

Virginia Woolf  
(1927)

## PLOT AND SETTING

*To the Lighthouse* **does not have a traditional plot** but consists of a series of experiences, memories, emotions and feelings that are held together by symbols. It starts **just before World War I**. Mr and Mrs Ramsay take their eight children to their **house by the sea**. Their six-year-old son James wants desperately to go to the lighthouse across the bay. Mrs Ramsay promises that they will go the next day if the weather is fine, but Mr Ramsay tells him coldly that the weather does not seem to improve. The Ramsays have some guests, including the botanist William Bankes, the poet Augustus Carmichael, Charles Tansley, who admires Mr Ramsay's work as a philosopher, Lily Briscoe, a young painter who begins a portrait of Mrs Ramsay, and two young lovers, Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle. Mrs Ramsay wants Lily to marry William but Lily decides to remain single. However, Mrs Ramsay arranges the marriage between Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle. In the afternoon Lily begins her painting, Paul proposes to Minta, Mrs Ramsay reads to disappointed James and knits a stocking, and Mr Ramsay worries about his failure as a philosopher, and turns to Mrs Ramsay for comfort. That evening, the Ramsays have a memorable dinner party. After dinner Mrs Ramsay joins her husband in the parlour where he asks her to tell him that she loves him. Mrs Ramsay is not one to make such pronouncements, but she agrees that the weather will be too rough for a trip to the lighthouse the next day. Mr Ramsay thus knows that Mrs Ramsay loves him.

Time elapses: the children grow up, war breaks out, Mrs Ramsay dies suddenly one night. Her eldest son, Andrew, is killed in battle, and her daughter Prue dies too (their deaths are recorded in parentheses). The summer house falls into a state of decay for ten years until the family comes back. Mrs McNab, the housekeeper, tries to set the house in order before Lily Briscoe returns.

Towards the end of the novel **time experienced**, and especially recaptured in memory, **replaces outer time**. Mr Ramsay declares that he and James and his daughter Cam will sail to the lighthouse. On the morning the Ramsays set off, Lily takes her place on the lawn, determined to complete the painting she had started but left unfinished on her last visit. Mr Ramsay praises James's skill as a sailor and the two of them experience a moment of connection. Lily succeeds in finishing her painting. She makes a definitive stroke on the canvas and puts her brush down because she has finally achieved her vision.

## CHARACTERISATION

*To the Lighthouse* is **autobiographical in the presentation of the characters**. As a matter of fact, the Ramsays are modelled on Woolf's parents and the setting on the summer house they had in St Ives, Cornwall. **Through the couple Woolf explores the relationship between male and female**, husband and wife, man and woman. **Mr Ramsay is**

**rational, intellectual**, his life revolves around philosophy, while **his wife is emotional and intuitive**. She is always busy with her house chores, while her husband is engaged in scientific speculation. Woolf's critical position on this subject is made clear when she attributes images of light and fertility to Mrs Ramsay, division and sterility to Mr Ramsay. Even the most important symbol of the book, the sea and the lighthouse, can be interpreted as feminine fluidity and masculine rigidity.

## MRS RAMSAY

Mrs Ramsay is a beautiful woman and loving wife who constantly provides her support to the other characters in the novel. As a mother, her main objective is to preserve James's sense of hope and wonder in relation to the lighthouse. Although she knows that Mr Ramsay's forecast about the weather is correct, she insists on considering the trip as a possibility. She does so because she realises that the beauty and pleasure of this world are ephemeral and should be protected. She shows the same kindness and tolerance towards her guests even if they do not deserve or appreciate her politeness.

As Lily Briscoe notes in the novel's final section, Mrs Ramsay feels obliged to protect the opposite sex because men carry the burden of ruling countries and managing economies and this leaves them vulnerable. Women can and should provide them with constant reassurance. Although this dynamic follows traditional gender boundaries, Mrs Ramsay never compromises herself. At the close of 'The Window', when Mr Ramsay asks her to tell him that she loves him, she does not say it with words but by acting. This scene shows Mrs Ramsay's ability to bring together different things into a whole. In a world marked by chaos, decay and war, in which everything falls apart, a sense of unity is perhaps the greatest gift, even if it is only temporary. After Mrs Ramsay's death, Lily and the other characters try to achieve this unity.

## LILY BRISCOE

Lily is a painter who fears her work will end up in attics or under a couch. She rejects the conventional image of the woman represented by Mrs Ramsay but her confidence is shaken by Charles Tansley's insistence that women can neither paint nor write. Her portrait of Mrs Ramsay embodies her doubts: at the beginning of the novel she cannot make sense of the shapes and colours that she tries to reproduce.

However, **throughout the novel she undergoes a drastic change** evolving into an artist who achieves her final vision. She manages to put into practice Mrs Ramsay's teaching, to paint something beautiful and lasting from the ephemeral things surrounding her: the changing light, the view of the bay. She achieves a larger sense of unity and completeness, her reason and intellect feel united with Mrs Ramsay (→ Text Bank 60).



## THEMES

The idea that nothing lasts runs through the novel. Mr Ramsay regrets compromising his successful academic career through marriage, Mrs Ramsay does not want her children to become adults, the house falls into decay and death unexpectedly ends life. The novel deals with the theme of loss in various moments: Minta loses her brooch on the beach, the family loses some of its members. The ambition to stop the flux of time is embodied by the artist Lily Briscoe in her struggle to give order and form to her emotions and ideas. However, Mrs Ramsay believes that also love can create durable memories making moments permanent.

Lily's painting represents a rejection of gender convention: her desire to portray Mrs Ramsay's essence as a wife and mother in the painting stands for the impulse of the modern woman to know and understand the experiences of the women who came before her. The painting also represents the **belief in a feminine artistic vision**. Lily establishes her own artistic voice when she decides that her vision depends on balance and synthesis: how to bring things together in harmony.

## THE USE OF COLOUR

Being a novel concerned with painting, the use of colour is distinctive. White, the absence of colour, symbolises the uncolourful, definite meaning of science and abstract thought. Red and brown appear to be colours of individuality and egotism, while blue and green are the colours of impersonality. In her use of yellow Woolf is trying to come close to the 'pure' colour of a painting; yellow is simply yellow, it is a positive avoidance of logical meaning, in contrast with white, which is a negative lack of colour.

## STRUCTURE AND STYLE

The novel develops over a **period of ten years** and is divided into **three parts**: 'The Window', which takes place during a summer afternoon and evening in a summer house on the Isle of Skye in the Hebrides; 'Time Passes', which covers about ten years and 'The Lighthouse', which lasts less than one day.

The first-person narrative is used in the first and last sections to convey the uneasiness that many felt as a result of the war. In the middle section Woolf briefly switches to an impersonal third-person narrative to describe the deaths.

*Key idea***Symbolism**

The sound of the sea is constantly heard, suggesting the fullness of life and the imminence of death, to symbolise uncertainty in contrast with the idea of shelter and stability represented by the land and the house.

Two of Woolf's recurring symbols are present. First, the window, which is the dividing and connecting point between the self and society. In Part I the window divides and connects Lily and Mrs Ramsay, framing for Lily her portrait and for Mrs Ramsay the lighthouse. The second major symbol is the lighthouse lying across the bay and meaning

something different to each character. On the one hand, it is a positive symbol linked to light, comfort, hope and enthusiasm, a reference point in a changing world. On the other hand, it is the inaccessible destination leading to frustration and threatening danger.

Only at the end of the novel James realises that it has two competing and contradictory images. He decides that both of these images contribute to its essence – that nothing is ever only one thing – an awareness that objective reality does not exist but differs from moment to moment.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** the texts and answer the following questions.

- Does the novel have a traditional plot?
- How does Woolf represent the opposition between male and female?
- What are the main features of Mrs Ramsay's character? What does she represent in the novel?
- How are Lily Briscoe and Mrs Ramsay related?
- How is the theme of transience developed in the novel?
- What is the symbolical meaning of colours?
- What is the structure of the novel?
- What are the most important symbols in the novel and what do they stand for?



## My dear, stand still

*Mrs Ramsay is sitting at the window of her summer house trying to reassure her son James about a trip to go to the lighthouse the next day in case the weather allows them to go. She measures the stocking she has been knitting for the lighthouse keeper's son and thinks about her children and her house.*

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Part I, Chapter 5

'And even if it isn't fine tomorrow,' said Mrs Ramsay, raising her eyes to glance at William Bankes and Lily Briscoe as they passed, 'it will be another day. And now,' she said, thinking that Lily's charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant<sup>1</sup> in her white, puckered<sup>2</sup> little face, but it would take a clever man to see it, 'and now stand up, and let me measure your leg,' for they might go to the Lighthouse after all, and she must see if the stocking<sup>3</sup> did not need to be an inch<sup>4</sup> or two longer in the leg.

Smiling, for it was an admirable idea, that had flashed upon her this very second – William and Lily should marry – she took the heather-mixture<sup>5</sup> stocking, with its criss-cross of steel needles at the mouth of it<sup>6</sup>, and measured it against James's leg.

'My dear, stand still,' she said, for in his jealousy, not liking to serve as measuring block for the Lighthouse keeper's little boy, James fidgeted purposely<sup>7</sup>; and if he did that, how could she see, was it too long, was it too short? she asked.

She looked up – what demon possessed him, her youngest, her cherished<sup>8</sup>? and saw the room, saw the chairs, thought them fearfully shabby<sup>9</sup>. Their entrails<sup>10</sup>, as Andrew said the other day, were all over the floor; but then what was the point, she asked herself of buying good chairs to let them spoil up here all through the winter when the house, with only one old woman to see to it, positively dripped with wet<sup>11</sup>? Never mind: the rent was precisely two-pence halfpenny; the children loved it; it did her husband good to be three thousand, or if she must be accurate, three hundred miles from his library and his lectures and his disciples; and there was room for visitors. Mats, camp beds, crazy ghosts of chairs and tables whose London life of service was done – they did well enough here: and a photograph or two, and books. Books, she thought, grew of themselves. She never had time to read them. Alas! even the books that had been given her, and inscribed by the hand of the poet himself: 'For her whose wishes must be obeyed...,' 'The happier Helen of our days...' disgraceful to say, she had never read them. And Croom on the Mind<sup>12</sup> and Bates on the Savage Customs of Polynesia – My dear stand still, – she said – neither of those could one send to the Lighthouse. At a certain moment, she supposed, the house would become so shabby that something must be done. If they could be taught to wipe<sup>13</sup> their feet and not bring the beach in with them – that would be something. Crabs, she had to allow<sup>14</sup>, if Andrew really wished to dissect them, or if Jasper believed that one could make soup from seaweed<sup>15</sup>, one could not prevent it<sup>16</sup>; or Rose's objects – shells, reeds, stones<sup>17</sup>; for they were gifted, her children, but all in quite different ways. And the result of it was, she sighed, taking in<sup>18</sup> the whole room from floor to ceiling, as she held the stocking against James's leg, that things got shabbier and got shabbier summer after summer. The mat was fading; the wall-paper was flapping<sup>19</sup>. You couldn't tell any more that those were roses on it. Still, if every door in a house is left perpetually open, and no lockmaker<sup>20</sup> in the whole of Scotland can mend a bolt<sup>21</sup>, things must spoil.

What was the use of flinging a green Cashmere shawl over the edge<sup>22</sup> of a picture frame? In two weeks it would be the colour of pea soup. But it was the doors that annoyed her; every door was left open. She listened. The drawing-room door was open; the hall door was open; it sounded as if the bedroom doors were open; and certainly the window on the landing was open, for that she had opened herself. That windows should be open, and doors shut – simple as it was, could none of them remember it? She would go into the maids'<sup>23</sup> bedrooms at night and find them sealed like ovens<sup>24</sup>, except for Marie's, the Swiss girl, who would rather go without a bath than without fresh air, but then at home, she had said, 'the mountains are so beautiful.' She had said

- 1 aslant. Obliqui.
- 2 puckered. Raggrinzito.
- 3 stocking. Calzino.
- 4 an inch. Un pollice.
- 5 heather-mixture. Color dell'erica.
- 6 criss-cross ... of it. Incrocio d'aghi d'acciaio all'imboccatura.
- 7 fidgeted purposely. Si dimenava di proposito.
- 8 cherished. Prediletto.
- 9 shabby. In cattivo stato.
- 10 entrails. Viscere.
- 11 dripped with wet. Gocciolava per l'umidità.
- 12 Croom on the Mind. L'opera di Croom sulla mente.
- 13 wipe. Pulire.
- 14 Crabs ... allow. I granchi doveva permetterli.
- 15 seaweed. Alghe.
- 16 prevent it. Impedirlo.
- 17 shells, reeds, stones. Conchiglie, canne, sassi.
- 18 taking in. Abbracciando con un solo sguardo.
- 19 The mat ... flapping. La stuoia si scoloriva, la carta da parati si scollava.
- 20 lockmaker. Fabbro.
- 21 mend a bolt. Riparare un chiovisello.
- 22 What ... edge. A cosa serviva gettare uno scialle di cachemire verde sullo spigolo.
- 23 maids'. Delle domestiche.
- 24 sealed like ovens. Sigillate come forni.



that last night looking out of the window with tears in her eyes. [...]

50 At the recollection – how she had stood there, how the girl had said, ‘At home the mountains are so beautiful,’ and there was no hope<sup>25</sup>, no hope whatever, she had a spasm of irritation, and speaking sharply, said to James: ‘Stand still. Don’t be tiresome<sup>26</sup>,’ so that he knew instantly that her severity was real, and straightened<sup>27</sup> his leg and she measured it.

55 The stocking was too short by half an inch at least, making allowance for<sup>28</sup> the fact that Sorley’s little boy would be less well grown than James.

‘It’s too short,’ she said, ‘ever so much too short.’

25 no hope. Nessuna speranza (il padre della ragazza sta morendo per un cancro alla gola).

26 tiresome. Noioso, seccante.

27 straightened. Raddrizzò.

28 making allowance for. Tenendo presente.

## VISUAL ANALYSIS

**1 READ** the text and identify its four parts. Then write a heading for each.

- Part 1 (lines 1-9): .....
- Part 2 (lines 10-38): .....
- Part 3 (lines 39-48): .....
- Part 4 (lines 49-56): .....

**2 LOOK** at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents.

- .....
- .....
- And  .....
- .....
- .....
- thinking  .....
- .....

**3 DISCUSS** the following questions in pairs.

- 1 How are the characters presented? What information are you given about them?
- 2 Focus on the house and the objects Mrs Ramsay sees. How are they connoted? What are the reasons why the house suits the family?
- 3 How much action can you find in the passage? Try to trace Mrs Ramsay’s train of thoughts.  
William Bankes and Lily Briscoe → ..... → ..... → ..... → .....  
→ ..... → ..... → ..... → .....  
→ ..... → .....
- 4 How is the passage narrated? To what effect?

## COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

**4 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph to explain how Virginia Woolf’s attitude towards the reality of the world she represents differs from that of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelist.