



Lily Briscoe

Mr Ramsay and his children Cam and James finally set out on their expedition to the Lighthouse. Lily Briscoe stands in front of the empty canvas on the lawn wondering where to begin her portrait of Mrs Ramsay.

Virginia Woolf
To the Lighthouse
(1927)

Part III, Chapter 3

So they're gone, she thought, sighing with relief and disappointment. Her sympathy seemed to be cast back on her¹, like a bramble sprung² across her face. She felt curiously divided, as if one part of her were drawn out there – it was a still day, hazy; the Lighthouse looked this morning at an immense distance; the other had fixed itself

5 doggedly, solidly, here on the lawn. She saw her canvas as if it had floated up and placed itself white and uncompromising directly before her. It seemed to rebuke³ her with its cold stare for all this hurry and agitation; this folly and waste of emotion; it drastically recalled her and spread through her mind first a peace, as her disorderly sensations (he⁴ had gone and she had been so sorry for him and she had said nothing) trooped off the

10 field⁵; and then, emptiness. She looked blankly at the canvas, with its uncompromising white stare; from the canvas to the garden. There was something (she stood screwing up⁶ her little Chinese eyes in her small puckered face), something she remembered in the relations of those lines cutting across, slicing down⁷, and in the mass of the hedge with its green cave⁸ of blues and browns, which had stayed in her mind; which

15 had tied a knot⁹ in her mind so that at odds and ends of time¹⁰, involuntarily, as she walked along the Brompton Road, as she brushed her hair, she found herself painting that picture, passing her eye over it, and untying the knot in imagination. But there was all the difference in the world between this planning airily away from the canvas and actually taking her brush¹¹ and making the first mark. [...] Where to begin? – that

20 was the question at what point to make the first mark? One line placed on the canvas committed her to¹² innumerable risks, to frequent and irrevocable decisions. All that in idea seemed simple became in practice immediately complex; as the waves shape themselves symmetrically from the cliff top, but to the swimmer among them are divided by steep gulfs, and foaming crests¹³. Still the risk must be run; the mark made.

25 With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward¹⁴ and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke¹⁵. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it – a third time. And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related; and so, lightly and swiftly pausing, striking¹⁶, she scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines which had no sooner settled there than¹⁷ they enclosed (she felt it looming out¹⁸ at her) a space. Down in the hollow of one wave she saw the next wave towering higher and higher above her. For what could be more formidable than that space? [...] Why then did she do it? She looked at the canvas,

35 lightly scored with running lines. It would be hung in the servants' bedrooms. It would be rolled up and stuffed¹⁹ under a sofa. [...]

[...] Then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted²⁰, she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers²¹, moving her brush hither and thither²², but it was now heavier and went

40 slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life²³, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it²⁴ on its current. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult²⁵ white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues.

[...] But after all, she reflected, there was the scene on the beach. One must

- 1 Her sympathy ... her. Si sentiva sferzare dalla sua comprensione.
- 2 a bramble sprung. Un rovo gettato.
- 3 to rebuke. Rimproverare.
- 4 he. Mr Ramsay.
- 5 trooped off the field. Battevano in ritirata.
- 6 screwing up. Aguzzando.
- 7 cutting across, slicing down. Trasversali, oblique.
- 8 the hedge ... cave. La siepe con la sua cavità verde.
- 9 tied a knot. Legato un nodo.
- 10 at odds ... time. Talvolta.
- 11 brush. Pennello.
- 12 committed her to. Comportava.
- 13 steep ... crests. Profondi crepacci e creste spumose.
- 14 urged forward. Spinta in avanti.
- 15 decisive stroke. Pennellata decisiva.
- 16 lightly and swiftly pausing, striking. Tra pause e tocchi rapidi e leggeri.
- 17 which ... than. Che non appena comparse.
- 18 looming out. Profilarsi all'improvviso.
- 19 rolled up and stuffed. Arrotolata e stipata.
- 20 squirted. Spremuta.
- 21 precariously ... umbers. In maniera incerta ad intingere il pennello negli azzurri e nelle terre.
- 22 hither and thither. Qua e là.
- 23 quivered with life. Fremea di vita.
- 24 to bear her along with it. Da trascinarla.
- 25 a fountain ... difficult. Una fontana che zampillava su quell'abbagliante, esasperatamente difficile.



remember that. It was a windy morning. They had all gone down to the beach. Mrs Ramsay sat down and wrote letters by a rock. She wrote and wrote. 'Oh,' she said, looking up at something floating in the sea, 'is it a lobster pot²⁶? Is it an upturned boat?' She was so short-sighted²⁷ that she could not see, and then Charles Tansley became as nice as he could possibly be. He began playing ducks and drakes²⁸. They chose little flat black stones and sent them skipping over²⁹ the waves. Every now and then³⁰ Mrs Ramsay looked up over her spectacles³¹ and laughed at them. What they said she could not remember, but only she and Charles throwing stones and getting on very well all of a sudden³² and Mrs Ramsay watching them. She was highly conscious of that. Mrs Ramsay, she thought, stepping back and screwing up her eyes. (It must have altered the design a good deal when she was sitting on the step with James. There must have been a shadow³³.) When she thought of herself and Charles throwing ducks and drakes and of the whole scene on the beach, it seemed to depend somehow upon Mrs Ramsay sitting under the rock, with a pad on her knee³⁴, writing letters. (She wrote innumerable letters, and sometimes the wind took them and she and Charles just saved a page from the sea.) But what a power was in the human soul! she thought. That woman sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags³⁵; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite³⁶ (she and Charles squabbling, sparring, had been silly and spiteful³⁷) something – this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking – which survived, after all these years complete, so that she dipped into it to re-fashion³⁸ her memory of him, and there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art.

'Like a work of art,' she repeated, looking from her canvas to the drawing-room steps and back again. She must rest for a moment. And, resting, looking from one to the other vaguely, the old question which traversed the sky of the soul perpetually, the vast, the general question which was apt to particularise itself³⁹ at such moments as these, when she released faculties that had been on the strain⁴⁰, stood over her, paused over her, darkened over her. What is the meaning of life? That was all – a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years⁴¹. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs Ramsay saying, 'Life stand still here⁴²'; Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability⁴³. Life stand still here, Mrs Ramsay said. 'Mrs Ramsay! Mrs Ramsay!' she repeated. She owed it all to her⁴⁴.

All was silence.

- 26 **lobster pot**. Nassa per le aragoste.
- 27 **short-sighted**. Miope.
- 28 **ducks and drakes**. Rimbazello.
- 29 **skipping over**. A rimbazzare su.
- 30 **Every now and then**. Ogni tanto.
- 31 **spectacles**. Occhiali.
- 32 **getting on ... sudden**. Che andavano d'accordo all'improvviso.
- 33 **It ... shadow**. Aveva dovuto cambiare molto la composizione della signora e James seduti sul gradino; proiettare un'ombra in quel punto.
- 34 **a pad on her knee**. Un blocco di carta sulle ginocchia.
- 35 **made ... old rags**. Faceva cadere come stracci vecchi la rabbia e lo sdegno.
- 36 **made out ... spite**. Li tirava fuori da sciocche animosità e dispetti.
- 37 **she and Charles ... spiteful**. Lei e Charles, bisticciando e beccandosi, erano stati sciocchi e meschini.
- 38 **she dipped into it to re-fashion**. Vi si immergeva per rimodellare.
- 39 **was apt to particularise itself**. Tendeva a specificarsi.
- 40 **she released ... strain**. Rilassava le sue energie dopo la tensione di uno sforzo.
- 41 **to close in on one with years**. A non dare tregua col passare degli anni.
- 42 **Life ... here**. La vita qui è tranquilla.
- 43 **struck into stability**. Trasfigurato nella stabilità.
- 44 **She owed ... her**. Doveva tutto a lei.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the first part of the text (lines 1-36) and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 tenaciously | 5 remained on the surface |
| 2 without expression | 6 indefinite |
| 3 alleviation | 7 cavity |
| 4 achieved | 8 appeared quickly and briefly |



➤ **COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT**

2 READ the first part of the text again and answer the following questions.

- 1 How does Lily feel when the three Ramsays leave?
- 2 What does she try to remember?
- 3 What does she find extremely difficult?
- 4 What does she finally start doing and how does she do this?
- 5 Does she feel confident? What does she speculate about?

3 READ the second part of the text again and note down

- what happens to Lily suddenly;
- what day she remembers;
- what Mrs Ramsay, Lily and Charles Tansley were doing;
- the effect Mrs Ramsay had on people;
- the crucial question Lily asks herself;
- what she realises at the end.

➤ **COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

4 EXPLAIN the meaning of the symbol of the Lighthouse at the beginning of the text.

5 READ lines 5-11 again and write down the words referring to the canvas. Then answer the questions below.

- Verbs:
- Adjectives:
- Nouns:

What device does the author use? What are Lily's feelings towards the canvas? What does white symbolise?

6 READ lines 22-24 again and explain the simile employed to describe the condition of the artist in front of the empty canvas. What is the significance of the sea and the waves? Do they represent transience or permanence?

7 EXPLAIN how Lily approaches her work in lines 25-33.

8 READ lines 37-47 and explain the process described.

9 REFLECT. Memory is a vital step towards harmony. Who lives in Lily's consciousness? Underline the phrases which indicate how this character affects the scene recalled by Lily.

10 SAY how Lily carries out her search for meaning in life. Is she successful in finding an answer?

11 DISCUSS. In this text is art seen as permanent or as something that can express permanence?

12 DECIDE whether Woolf represents time in a traditional way.

➤ **COMPETENCE: CONTRASTING AUTHORS**

13 DISCUSS. Compare Woolf's view of art in this text with the concepts of art by John Keats (→ 4.15) and Oscar Wilde (→ 5.14).