**To the Lighthouse**

**author**  · Virginia Woolf

**genre**  · Stream of consciousness

**language**  · English

**time and place written**  ·  1926, London

**date of first publication**  ·  1927

**publisher**  · Hogarth Press

**narrator**  · The narrator is anonymous.

**point of view**  · The narrator speaks in the third person and describes the characters and actions subjectively, giving us insight into the characters’ feelings. The narrative switches constantly from the perceptions of one character to those of the next.

**tense**  · Past

**setting (time)** · The years immediately preceding and following World War I

**setting (place)**  · The Isle of Skye, in the Hebrides (a group of islands west of Scotland)

**protagonist**  · Although Mrs. Ramsay is the central focus of the beginning of *To the Lighthouse,* the novel traces the development of Lily Briscoe to the end, making it more accurate to describe Lily as the protagonist.

**major conflict**  · The common struggle that each of the characters faces is to bring meaning and order to the chaos of life.

**rising action**  · James’s desire to journey to the lighthouse; Mr. Ramsay’s need to ask Mrs. Ramsay for sympathy; Charles Tansley’s insistence that women cannot paint or write; Lily Briscoe’s stalled attempt at her painting

**climax**  · Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party

**falling action**  · Mr. Ramsay’s trip to the lighthouse with Cam and James; Lily Briscoe’s completion of her painting

**themes**  · The transience of life and work; art as a means of preservation; the subjective nature of reality; the restorative effects of beauty

**symbols**  · The lighthouse, Lily’s painting, the Ramsays’ house, the sea, the boar’s skull, the fruit basket

**foreshadowing**  · James’s initial desire and anxiety surrounding the voyage to the lighthouse foreshadows the trip he makes a decade later.

**Context**

Woolf’s life was equally dominated by mental illness. Her parents died when she was young—her mother in 1895 and her father in 1904—and she was prone to intense, terrible headaches and emotional breakdowns. After her father’s death, she attempted suicide, throwing herself out a window. Though she married Leonard Woolf in 1912 and loved him deeply, she was not entirely satisfied romantically. Late in life, Woolf became terrified by the idea that another nervous breakdown was close at hand, one from which she would not recover. On March 28, 1941, she wrote her husband a note stating that she did not wish to spoil his life by going mad. She then drowned herself in the River Ouse.

Woolf's style allows the subjective mental processes of Woolf’s characters to determine the objective content of her narrative. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), one of her most experimental works, the passage of time, for example, is modulated by the consciousness of the characters rather than by the clock. The events of a single afternoon constitute over half the book, while the events of the following ten years are compressed into a few dozen pages. Many readers of *To the Lighthouse,* especially those who are not versed in the traditions of modernist fiction, find the novel strange and difficult. Its language is dense and the structure amorphous. Compared with the plot-driven Victorian novels that came before it, *To the Lighthouse* seems to have little in the way of action. Indeed, almost all of the events take place in the characters’ minds.

Although *To the Lighthouse* is a radical departure from the nineteenth-century novel, it is, like its more traditional counterparts, intimately interested in developing characters and advancing both plot and themes. Woolf’s experimentation has much to do with the time in which she lived: the turn of the century was marked by bold scientific developments. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution undermined an unquestioned faith in God that was, until that point, nearly universal, while the rise of psychoanalysis, a movement led by Sigmund Freud, introduced the idea of an unconscious mind. Such innovation in ways of scientific thinking had great influence on the styles and concerns of contemporary artists and writers like those in the Bloomsbury Group. *To the Lighthouse* exemplifies Woolf’s style and many of her concerns as a novelist. With its characters based on her own parents and siblings, it is certainly her most autobiographical fictional statement, and in the characters of Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe, Woolf offers some of her most penetrating explorations of the workings of the human consciousness as it perceives and analyzes, feels and interacts.

**Plot Overview**

*Note: To the Lighthouse is divided into three sections: “The Window,” “Time Passes,” and “The Lighthouse.” Each section is fragmented into stream-of-consciousness contributions from various narrators.*

“The Window” opens just before the start of World War I. Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay bring their eight children to their summer home in the Hebrides (a group of islands west of Scotland). Across the bay from their house stands a large lighthouse. Six-year-old James Ramsay wants desperately to go to the lighthouse, and Mrs. Ramsay tells him that they will go the next day if the weather permits. James reacts gleefully, but Mr. Ramsay tells him coldly that the weather looks to be foul. James resents his father and believes that he enjoys being cruel to James and his siblings.

The Ramsays host a number of guests, including the dour Charles Tansley, who admires Mr. Ramsay’s work as a metaphysical philosopher. Also at the house is Lily Briscoe, a young painter who begins a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay wants Lily to marry William Bankes, an old friend of the Ramsays, but Lily resolves to remain single. Mrs. Ramsay does manage to arrange another marriage, however, between Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, two of their acquaintances.

During the course of the afternoon, Paul proposes to Minta, Lily begins her painting, Mrs. Ramsay soothes the resentful James, and Mr. Ramsay frets over his shortcomings as a philosopher, periodically turning to Mrs. Ramsay for comfort. That evening, the Ramsays host a seemingly ill-fated dinner party. Paul and Minta are late returning from their walk on the beach with two of the Ramsays’ children. Lily bristles at outspoken comments made by Charles Tansley, who suggests that women can neither paint nor write. Mr. Ramsay reacts rudely when Augustus Carmichael, a poet, asks for a second plate of soup. As the night draws on, however, these mis-steps right themselves, and the guests come together to make a memorable evening.

The joy, however, like the party itself, cannot last, and as Mrs. Ramsay leaves her guests in the dining room, she reflects that the event has already slipped into the past. Later, she joins her husband in the parlor. The couple sits quietly together, until Mr. Ramsay’s characteristic insecurities interrupt their peace. He wants his wife to tell him that she loves him. Mrs. Ramsay is not one to make such pronouncements, but she concedes to his point made earlier in the day 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. Night falls, and one night quickly becomes another.

Time passes more quickly as the novel enters the “Time Passes” segment. War breaks out across Europe. Mrs. Ramsay dies suddenly one night. Andrew Ramsay, her oldest son, is killed in battle, and his sister Prue dies from an illness related to childbirth. The family no longer vacations at its summerhouse, which falls into a state of

disrepair: weeds take over the garden and spiders nest in the house. Ten years pass before the family returns. Mrs. McNab, the housekeeper, employs a few other women to help set the house in order. They rescue the house from oblivion and decay, and everything is in order when Lily Briscoe returns.

In “The Lighthouse” section, time returns to the slow detail of shifting points of view, similar in style to “The Window.” Mr. Ramsay declares that he and James and Cam, one of his daughters, will journey to the lighthouse. On the morning of the voyage, delays throw him into a fit of temper. He appeals to Lily for sympathy, but, unlike Mrs. Ramsay, she is unable to provide him with what he needs. The Ramsays set off, and Lily takes her place on the lawn, determined to complete a painting she started but abandoned on her last visit. James and Cam bristle at their father’s blustery behavior and are embarrassed by his constant self-pity. Still, as the boat reaches its destination, the children feel a fondness for him. Even James, whose skill as a sailor Mr. Ramsay praises, experiences a moment of connection with his father, though James so willfully resents him. Across the bay, Lily puts the finishing touch on her painting. She makes a definitive stroke on the canvas and puts her brush down, finally having achieved her vision.

**Analysis of Major Characters**

**Mrs. Ramsay**

Mrs. Ramsay emerges from the novel’s opening pages not only as a woman of great kindness and tolerance but also as a protector. Indeed, her primary goal is to preserve her youngest son James’s sense of hope and wonder surrounding the lighthouse. Though she realizes (as James himself does) that Mr. Ramsay is correct in declaring that foul weather will ruin the next day’s voyage, she persists in assuring James that the trip is a possibility. She does so not to raise expectations that will inevitably be dashed, but rather because she realizes that the beauties and pleasures of this world are ephemeral and should be preserved, protected, and cultivated as much as possible. So deep is this commitment that she behaves similarly to each of her guests, even those who do not deserve or appreciate her kindness. Before heading into town, for example, she insists on asking Augustus Carmichael, whom she senses does not like her, if she can bring him anything to make his stay more comfortable. Similarly, she tolerates the insufferable behavior of Charles Tansley, whose bitter attitude and awkward manners threaten to undo the delicate work she has done toward making a pleasant and inviting home.

As Lily Briscoe notes in the novel’s final section, Mrs. Ramsay feels the need to play this role primarily in the company of men. Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay feels obliged to protect the entire opposite sex. According to her, men shoulder the burden of ruling countries and managing economies. Their important work, she believes, leaves them vulnerable and in need of constant reassurance, a service that women can and should

provide. Although this dynamic fits squarely into traditional gender boundaries, it is important to note the strength that Mrs. Ramsay feels. At several points, she is aware of her own power, and her posture is far from that of a submissive woman. At the same time, interjections of domesticated anxiety, such as her refrain of “the bill for the greenhouse would be fifty pounds,” undercut this power.

Ultimately, as is evident from her meeting with Mr. Ramsay at the close of “The Window,” Mrs. Ramsay never compromises herself. Here, she is able—masterfully—to satisfy her husband’s desire for her to tell him she loves him without saying the words she finds so difficult to say. This scene displays Mrs. Ramsay’s ability to bring together disparate things into a whole. In a world marked by the ravages of time and war, in which everything must and will fall apart, there is perhaps no greater gift than a sense of unity, even if it is only temporary. Lily and other characters find themselves grasping for this unity after Mrs. Ramsay’s death.

**Mr. Ramsay**

Mr. Ramsay stands, in many respects, as Mrs. Ramsay’s opposite. Whereas she acts patiently, kindly, and diplomatically toward others, he tends to be short-tempered, selfish, and rude. Woolf fittingly describes him as “lean as a knife, narrow as the

blade of one,” which conjures both his physical presence and suggests the sharpness (and violence) of his personality. An accomplished metaphysician who made an invaluable contribution to his field as a young man, Mr. Ramsay bears out his wife’s philosophy regarding gender: men, burdened by the importance of their own work, need to seek out the comforts and assurances of women. Throughout the novel, Mr. Ramsay implores his wife and even his guests for sympathy. Mr. Ramsay is uncertain about the fate of his work and its legacy, and his insecurity manifests itself either as a weapon or a weakness. His keen awareness of death’s inevitability motivates him to dash the hopes of young James and to bully Mrs. Ramsay into declaring her love for him. This hyperawareness also forces him to confront his own mortality and face the possibility that he, like the forgotten books and plates that litter the second part of the novel, might sink into oblivion.

**Lily Briscoe**

Lily is a passionate artist, and, like Mr. Ramsay, she worries over the fate of her work, fearing that her paintings will be hung in attics or tossed absentmindedly under a couch. Conventional femininity, represented by Mrs. Ramsay in the form of marriage and family, confounds Lily, and she rejects it. The recurring memory of Charles Tansley insisting that women can neither paint nor write deepens her anxiety. It is with these self-doubts that she begins her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay at the beginning of the novel, a portrait riddled with problems that she is unable to solve. But Lily undergoes a drastic transformation over the course of the novel, evolving from a woman who cannot make sense of the shapes and colors that she tries to reproduce

into an artist who achieves her vision and, more important, overcomes the anxieties that have kept her from it. By the end of the novel, Lily, a serious and diligent worker, puts into practice all that she has learned from Mrs. Ramsay. Much like the woman she so greatly admires, she is able to craft something beautiful and lasting from the ephemeral materials around her—the changing light, the view of the bay. Her artistic achievement suggests a larger sense of completeness in that she finally feels united with Mr. Ramsay and the rational, intellectual sphere that he represents.

**James Ramsay**

A sensitive child, James is gripped by a love for his mother that is as overpowering and complete as his hatred for his father. He feels a murderous rage against Mr. Ramsay, who, he believes, delights in delivering the news that there will be no trip to the lighthouse. But James grows into a young man who shares many of his father’s characteristics, the same ones that incited such anger in him as a child. When he eventually sails to the lighthouse with his father, James, like Mr. Ramsay, is withdrawn, moody, and easily offended. His need to be praised, as noted by his sister Cam, mirrors his father’s incessant need for sympathy, reassurance, and love. Indeed, as they approach the lighthouse, James considers his father’s profile and recognizes the profound loneliness that stamps both of their personalities. By the time the boat

lands, James’s attitude toward his father has changed considerably. As he softens toward Mr. Ramsay and comes to accept him as he is, James, like Lily, who finishes her painting on shore at that very moment, achieves a rare, fleeting moment in which the world seems blissfully whole and complete.

**Themes & Symbols**

**Themes**

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

**The Transience of Life and Work**

Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay take completely different approaches to life: he relies on his intellect, while she depends on her emotions. But they share the knowledge that the world around them is transient—that nothing lasts forever. Mr. Ramsay reflects that even the most enduring of reputations, such as Shakespeare’s, are doomed to eventual oblivion. This realization accounts for the bitter aspect of his character. Frustrated by the inevitable demise of his own body of work and envious of the few geniuses who will outlast him, he plots to found a school of philosophy that argues that the world is designed for the average, unadorned man, for the “liftman in the Tube” rather than for the rare immortal writer.

Mrs. Ramsay is as keenly aware as her husband of the passage of time and of mortality. She recoils, for instance, at the notion of James growing into an adult, registers the world’s many dangers, and knows that no one, not even her husband, can

protect her from them. Her reaction to this knowledge is markedly different from her husband’s. Whereas Mr. Ramsay is bowed by the weight of his own demise, Mrs. Ramsay is fueled with the need to make precious and memorable whatever time she has on earth. Such crafted moments, she reflects, offer the only hope of something that endures.

**Art as a Means of Preservation**

In the face of an existence that is inherently without order or meaning, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay employ different strategies for making their lives significant. Mr. Ramsay devotes himself to his progression through the course of human thought, while Mrs. Ramsay cultivates memorable experiences from social interactions. Neither of these strategies, however, proves an adequate means of preserving one’s experience. After all, Mr. Ramsay fails to obtain the philosophical understanding he so desperately desires, and Mrs. -Ramsay’s life, though filled with moments that have the shine and resilience of rubies, ends. Only Lily Briscoe finds a way to preserve her experience, and that way is through her art. As Lily begins her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay at the beginning of the novel, Woolf notes the scope of the project: Lily means to order and connect elements that have no necessary relation in the world—“hedges and houses and mothers and children.” By the end of the novel, ten years later, Lily finishes the

painting she started, which stands as a moment of clarity wrested from confusion. Art is, perhaps, the only hope of surety in a world destined and determined to change: for, while mourning Mrs. Ramsay’s death and painting on the lawn, Lily reflects that “nothing stays, all changes; but not words, not paint.”

**The Subjective Nature of Reality**

Toward the end of the novel, Lily reflects that in order to see Mrs. Ramsay clearly—to understand her character completely—she would need at least fifty pairs of eyes; only then would she be privy to every possible angle and nuance. The truth, according to this assertion, rests in the accumulation of different, even opposing vantage points. Woolf’s technique in structuring the story mirrors Lily’s assertion. She is committed to creating a sense of the world that not only depends upon the private perceptions of her characters but is also *nothing more than* the accumulation of those perceptions. To try to reimagine the story as told from a single character’s perspective or—in the tradition of the Victorian novelists—from the author’s perspective is to realize the radical scope and difficulty of Woolf’s project.

**The Restorative Effects of Beauty**

At the beginning of the novel, both Mr. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe are drawn out of moments of irritation by an image of extreme beauty. The image, in both cases, is a vision of Mrs. Ramsay, who, as she sits reading with James, is a sight powerful enough to incite “rapture” in William Bankes. Beauty retains this soothing effect throughout the novel: something as trifling as a large but very beautiful arrangement

of fruit can, for a moment, assuage the discomfort of the guests at Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party.

Lily later complicates the notion of beauty as restorative by suggesting that beauty has the unfortunate consequence of simplifying the truth. Her impression of Mrs. Ramsay, she believes, is compromised by a determination to view her as beautiful and to smooth over her complexities and faults. Nevertheless, Lily continues on her quest to “still” or “freeze” a moment from life and make it beautiful. Although the vision of an isolated moment is necessarily incomplete, it is lasting and, as such, endlessly seductive to her.

**Symbols**

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

**The Lighthouse**

Lying across the bay and meaning something different and intimately personal to each character, the lighthouse is at once inaccessible, illuminating, and infinitely interpretable. As the destination from which the novel takes its title, the lighthouse

suggests that the destinations that seem surest are most unobtainable. Just as Mr. Ramsay is certain of his wife’s love for him and aims to hear her speak words to that end in “The Window,” Mrs. Ramsay finds these words impossible to say. These failed attempts to arrive at some sort of solid ground, like Lily’s first try at painting Mrs. Ramsay or Mrs. Ramsay’s attempt to see Paul and Minta married, result only in more attempts, further excursions rather than rest. The lighthouse stands as a potent symbol of this lack of attainability. James arrives only to realize that it is not at all the mist-shrouded destination of his childhood. Instead, he is made to reconcile two competing and contradictory images of the tower—how it appeared to him when he was a boy and how it appears to him now that he is a man. He decides that both of these images contribute to the essence of the lighthouse—that nothing is ever only one thing—a sentiment that echoes the novel’s determination to arrive at truth through varied and contradictory vantage points.

**Lily’s Painting**

Lily’s painting represents a struggle against gender convention, represented by Charles Tansley’s statement that women can’t paint or write. Lily’s desire to express Mrs. Ramsay’s essence as a wife and mother in the painting mimics the impulse among modern women to know and understand intimately the gendered experiences of the women who came before them. Lily’s composition attempts to discover and comprehend Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty just as Woolf’s construction of Mrs. Ramsay’s character reflects her attempts to access and portray her own mother.

The painting also represents dedication to a feminine artistic vision, expressed through Lily’s anxiety over showing it to William Bankes. In deciding that completing the painting regardless of what happens to it is the most important thing, Lily makes the choice to establish her own artistic voice. In this respect, her project mirrors Woolf’s writing, which synthesizes the perceptions of her many characters to come to a balanced and truthful portrait of the world.

**The Ramsays’ House**

The Ramsays’ house is a stage where Woolf and her characters explain their beliefs and observations. During her dinner party, Mrs. Ramsay sees her house display her own inner notions of shabbiness and her inability to preserve beauty. In the “Time Passes” section, the ravages of war and destruction and the passage of time are reflected in the condition of the house rather than in the emotional development or observable aging of the characters. The house stands in for the collective consciousness of those who stay in it. From the dinner party to the journey to the lighthouse, Woolf shows the house from every angle, and its structure and contents mirror the interior of the characters who inhabit it.

**The Sea**

References to the sea appear throughout the novel. Broadly, the ever-changing, ever-moving waves parallel the constant forward movement of time and the changes it brings. Woolf describes the sea lovingly and beautifully, but her most evocative depictions of it point to its violence. As a force that brings destruction, has the power to decimate islands, and, as Mr. Ramsay reflects, “eats away the ground we stand on,” the sea is a powerful reminder of the impermanence and delicacy of human life and accomplishments.

**The Boar’s Skull**

After her dinner party, Mrs. Ramsay retires upstairs to find the children wide-awake, bothered by the boar’s skull that hangs on the nursery wall. The presence of the skull acts as a disturbing reminder that death is always at hand, even (or perhaps especially) during life’s most blissful moments.

**The Fruit Basket**

Rose arranges a fruit basket for her mother’s dinner party that serves to draw the partygoers out of their private suffering and unite them. Although Augustus Carmichael and Mrs. Ramsay appreciate the arrangement differently—he rips a bloom from it; she refuses to disturb it—the pair is brought harmoniously, if briefly, together. The basket testifies both to the “frozen” quality of beauty that Lily describes and to beauty’s seductive and soothing quality.

[**Themes, Motifs & Symbols**](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/lighthouse/themes.html)