

# To The Lighthouse

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# Historical Context - Woolf

- Virginia Woolf (January 25, 1882 – March 28, 1941) was a British writer born raised in London
- Transition from the Victorian to the modern world
- Industrial revolution had made Britain the ‘factory to the world’ and solidified its economic power
- Between the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, when Woolf was 19, and the end of the Second World War, almost every aspect of British life changed
- Britain had lost its global pre-eminence, and witnessed radical social, cultural, and political changes
- Virginia and her sister Vanessa rejected the idea of a home presided over by a woman like their mother, the Victorian ‘angel in the house’
- She was a famous writer in the modernist era and wrote many books such as *To The Lighthouse*
  - Novels written with the stream-of-consciousness: focuses on the character’s inner thoughts
- Bloomsbury Group
  - Intense salon of ideas, philosophy, and theories on art and politics

# Historical Context - TTL

- The novel *To The Lighthouse* was released after World War I
  - Woolf wrote the novel in part as a reaction to the violence and horrors of WWI
  - These reactionary concepts culminated in the idea of Modernism
- Modernism
  - Moving away from being bound to a strict sequence of events
- Künstlerroman
  - “Artist Novel”
  - An artist’s growth to maturity
- emerges from the period of painful recovery from the war
- Woolf began writing *To the Lighthouse* partly as a way of understanding and dealing with unresolved issues concerning both her parents
- Focuses on loss, subjectivity, the nature of art and the problem of perception

# Themes

## **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 inherent 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."

# Motifs

## **The Differing Behaviors of Men and Women**

As Lily Briscoe suffers through Charles Tansley's boorish opinions about women and art, she reflects that human relations are worst between men and women. Indeed, given the extremely opposite ways in which men and women behave throughout the novel, this difficulty is no wonder. The dynamic between the sexes is best understood by considering the behavior of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Their constant conflict has less to do with divergent philosophies—indeed, they both acknowledge and are motivated by the same fear of mortality—than with the way they process that fear. Men, Mrs. Ramsay reflects in the opening pages of the novel, bow to it. Given her rather traditional notions of gender roles, she excuses her husband's behavior as inevitable, asking how men can be expected to settle the political and economic business of nations and not suffer doubts. This understanding attitude places on women the responsibility for soothing men's damaged egos and achieving some kind of harmony (even if temporary) with them. Lily Briscoe, who as a single woman represents a social order more radical and lenient than Mrs. Ramsay's, resists this duty but ultimately caves into it.

## **Brackets**

In "Time Passes," brackets surround the few sentences recounting the deaths of Prue and Andrew Ramsay, while in "The Lighthouse," brackets surround the sentences comprising Chapter VI. Each set of sentences in brackets in the earlier section contains violence, death, and the destruction of potential; the short, stabbing accounts accentuate the brutality of these events. But in Chapter VI of "The Lighthouse," the purpose of the brackets changes from indicating violence and death to violence and potential survival. Whereas in "Time Passes," the brackets surround Prue's death in childbirth and Andrew's perishing in war, in "The Lighthouse" they surround the "mutilated" but "alive still" body of a fish.

# Themes

## **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

## 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 a 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 the end, she decides that her vision depends on balance and synthesis: how to bring together disparate things in harmony. 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. At times the characters long to escape it, while at other times it serves as a refuge. 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.

# Symbols

## 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 almost 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.