VIRGINIA WOOLF

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

In an era when women were fighting to gain recognition for their role in society, Virginia Woolf emerged as one of the finest writers in the language. Unlike most writers, she had managed to enter the inner depths of characters with subtlety and delicacy. She follows the stream of consciousness or thought patterns of her characters so that the reader feels he can see inside their minds. This approach to writing, which was also used by James Joyce, was to revolutionize novel writing.

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

- **Characters**: Mr and Mrs Ramsay, their eight children, Lily Briscoe- a painter, Mr Carmichael-a poet.

- **The story and structure**: The book is divided into three parts.
  
  In the first, “The Window”, The Ramsays are on holiday with their children and some friends, including Lily Briscoe. All the action takes place over one day and much of it is seen through the eyes and mind of Mrs Ramsay. Although there are many digressions, as in common when the stream of consciousness technique is used, the main unifying element in the plot is the children’s desire to go to the lighthouse the following day and their father’s objection to going because the weather will not be good.

  The second part, “Time Passes”, takes place after the WWI. Mrs Ramsay is dead and Lily and Mr Carmichael come to stay in the abandoned holiday home.

  In the last section, “The lighthouse”, Mr Ramsay and two of his children join Lily Briscoe and Mr Carmichael. They realise their long-awaited dream of going to the lighthouse while, on the shore, Lily paints and thinks of her dead friend, Mrs Ramsay.

  **Examples**: “Why must they grow up?” Mrs Ramsay is with one of her children, James, and is thinking about how sad it will be when all her children have grown up- (Chapter X - “The window”)

  “The formidable ancient enemy” The WWI is over and Mrs Ramsay is dead. Lily Briscoe, Mr Carmichael, Mr Ramsay and two of his children are staying in the holiday home. In this passage, Lily is painting beside the sea.

Virginia Woolf

Some information about her life, divided into the points which got more influence in her literary works:

- **Family background**: She was born in London in 1882. Her father was a good literary critic and a friend of many writers. Virginia was educated at home from the resources if her father’s impressive library. During her youth, she suffered from some emotional shocks: the deaths of her mother, her half sister and the long agony of her father.

- **Bloomsbury Group**: After her father’s death, Virginia moved to a house in the Bloomsbury area of London.
London with her sister and brothers. The house became a meeting place of a circle of intellectuals which were against the constraints and taboos of Victorian times.

**Lyric critic:** In 1904 Woolf took to writing book reviews. She also gave some contributions to *The Times Literary Supplement*.

**Nervous Breakdown:** When brother Thoby died in 1906, Woolf had a severe mental breakdown. During all her life, she suffered from nervous illness.

**Marriage, attempted suicide and first novel:** In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf, a social reformer. The following year she finished her novel *The Voyage Out*, but its publication was delayed because of an attempted suicide.

**Hogarth Press:** In 1917 the Woolfs bought a small printing company, Hogarth Press and began to publish own novels (*Two Stories*) or other authors’ works (K. Mansfield, T.S. Eliot...)

**Novels:** After experimenting with short stories, she wrote novels using innovative literary techniques: *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *Orlando*...

**Feminist works** were lectured at Cambridge in 1928: *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*.

**Suicide:** After her novel *Between The Acts*, she suffered another attack of mental illness and downed herself in a river near her home in 1941. She was fifty-nine years old.

Some literary information:

**An innovative force:** Virginia Woolf was one of the leaders of the literary movement known as *modernism*. Other poets and writers who belonged to this were Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot.

**Interior monologue:*** Virginia Woolf’ main emphasis is not on events or characterization but on characters’ emotions or feelings. For doing that, she uses the stream of consciousness technique called **interior monologue**. This literary device represents an attempt to capture in words the workings of human consciousness by recording the characters’ thoughts, feelings, impressions and memories. An example of it is her novel *Mrs Dalloway*.

**To the Lighthouse** (1927): It her most celebrated novel. She explores the creative and intuitive consciousness of Mrs Ramsay, the central figure in the Ramsay family. The novel highlights the differences between the male perspective as represented by the tragic and self-pitying philosopher Mr Ramsay, and the female perspective as represented by the warm and maternal Mrs Ramsay. They were probably modelled on Woolf’s parents, and the novel contains many autobiographical references.

**Further experimentation:** In *The Waves* (1931), her most difficult work, can be appreciated the **steam of consciousness** technique where soliloquies of the lives of six characters from childhood to old age can be read.

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1 *Interior monologue*: stream of consciousness: the description of the flow of inner experience thought the mind of a character.
**Feminist writings:** She was an activist in the campaign for women’s suffrage and, as a result, she wrote a series of feminist essays. In *A Room of One’s Own* (1928), she examines the prejudices and financial disadvantages that have held women writers back through the centuries. She criticizes the male domination of society and urges women to gain economic independence in order to pursue their own goals.

**Reputation:** Virginia Woolf is today considered to be one of the most innovative novelists of the 19th century. Her experimental techniques are now widely used. She is also highly acclaimed as a literary critic and feminist writers.