

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE:

AN INTRODUCTION

To the Lighthouse is not an easy novel to read. There are none of the standard novelistic signposts telling us where the action is located, when this all takes place, who is speaking, and what we should think of them. The novel begins, for example, with the answer to a question that hasn't been asked, spoken by a person who is not described, and addressed to a child who seems to be sitting on the floor near a "drawing room window" in an unspecified location. Nor is there much respect for the standard novelistic conventions of clock time or consecutive action. Just when we think we think we've established the sequence of events, Virginia Woolf seems to delight in confusing us by inserting a recollection or anticipating a reaction, so that past and present and future seem to flow into one another in an unbroken stream of consciousness. Why does she do this? What does it all mean? These are some of the questions I hope to answer in the course of this "introduction" to *To the Lighthouse*.

My introduction will consist of four parts: first, I'll provide some historical context for *To the Lighthouse*, some general background about the time when Virginia Woolf was living and writing. Second, using some of Virginia Woolf's critical essays, I'll try to explain the reasons for her departures from standard novelistic conventions, her "theory of the novel," so to speak. Next, I'll talk about some of the autobiographical background to the novel, its basis in Virginia Woolf's own experiences; and I'll also explain why Virginia Woolf felt that she had to write it. Finally, I'll offer some thoughts about the themes of *To the Lighthouse*, "what it all means," which probably translates to "what it all means to me."

General Background

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882. It's worth stopping for a moment to remind ourselves of what that means. For as a result of the radical nature of her style, not to mention her current

popularity because of *The Hours* (which, incidentally, was one of the working titles of *Mrs. Dalloway*), we are all too likely to think of her as somehow our contemporary, our companion in thought if not in fact. But as simple arithmetic will tell you, Virginia Woolf spent all her formative years under Queen Victoria. And she was a mature woman of 32 before the First World War destroyed what was left of Victorian England and ushered in what we now call “The Modern Age.” In a very real sense Virginia Woolf is a child of late-Victorian period who grew with the times into modernism. And in fact we see this transition in *To the Lighthouse* itself. For if the first part of the novel is based on Virginia’s childhood memories of summers spent at St. Ives in Cornwall in the 1880’s and 90’s, the last part reflects her awareness that the essence of that time is now dead and can only be recaptured through art.

So what was it like to grow up in England at the end of the 19th century? For a woman, it was a time of steady pressure for change. For women had very few rights. Until 1882, a woman could not own property. Until 1918, no woman could vote. And until 1919, women were barred from almost all the professions, except nursing, teaching and midwifery. The years between 1880 and 1920 were key years in the first (English) phase of the women’s movement.

Virginia herself never attended school; never went to the university. Although she had her mornings to herself for reading (she was taught by her mother), she had to be dressed by 4:30 and “at home” with her mother and sisters to preside at the ritual of afternoon tea and visitors. Later at 7:30, she would have to change clothes again for the formal Victorian “evening.” Virginia was lucky in many respects to have been born to parents who had money and sense enough to educate their daughters and encourage them to read, write, and paint; but she had none of the experiences of intellectual and social comradeship that her brothers had in school and university. And it was not until her father died in 1905, and she went with her brothers and sisters to live in Bloomsbury that Virginia became liberated from an essentially Victorian way of life and began to live and work on her own terms.

But it was not only Virginia Woolf's life that was changing. Society was changing; the arts were changing. Whatever illusions one might have had about the progress of human nature and civilization before 1914, they certainly suffered irreparable damage after four years of brutal fighting, 10 million deaths, and 20 million injuries. After this crushing blow to a belief in human rationality, it's not surprising that the writings of Sigmund Freud began to find their way into English translation, appearing first in the 20s and then in the "authorized" translation by James Strachey published by the Hogarth Press (founded by Leonard and Virginia Woolf). For Freud openly questioned whether human nature could be controlled by reason or the super ego, and talked about much more primitive forces at work in the human psyche.

Although less dramatic, there was a quiet revolution going on in the arts as well. In poetry, it centered upon the work of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, who insisted upon erudition, tradition, and an artistic formalism that focused attention away from the Romantic poet and the expression of feeling and directed it at the poem itself. In the visual arts, there was a similar emphasis upon formalism after the arrival of the Post-Impressionists —Picasso, Cezanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin. As Roger Fry would put it, the Post-Impressionist painters are not aiming at "the descriptive imitation of natural forms, but the creation of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life."

In the novel, there were radical experiments by James Joyce in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914) and even more importantly *Ulysses* (1922), which Virginia read when it was submitted to the Hogarth Press for publication in 1919.

Literary Background

Now I'd like to talk about the more specific literary background of *To the Lighthouse*. To keep the discussion even somewhat manageable, I am going to talk about this background from Woolf's point of view, that is, I'm going to try to explain how she saw the literary landscape of

her time, and how she talked about her work. To explain her point of view, I'll be quoting quite a bit from her essays and diaries.

The Novel of Consciousness

By the time Virginia Woolf began writing fiction (around 1910) the novel was, of course, well established as a genre. And though there were even then many varieties, the central novelistic tradition was built upon what Virginia Woolf would variously call, "truth-telling," "materialism," or what we would now call "realism." The most conspicuous contemporary exponents of this kind of novel included H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett. But it really included most of the English and American novelists of her day, many of whose books she found herself reviewing as part of her regular job at the Times Literary Supplement.

For the writer working in this tradition, the central task of the novel was to create the verbal equivalent of everyday "reality," to create a set of characters and incidents so ordinary and life-like, in surroundings so recognizably familiar, that their stories seem more like a record of current or historical events than a work of the imagination. Each of these novelists, Woolf says "assures us that things are precisely as they say they are. What they describe happens before our eyes." And since nothing is so eminently believable as physical objects, a certain materialism sets in. "Persistently, naturally, with a curious, almost unconscious iteration," Woolf says, "emphasis [in these sorts of novels] is laid upon the very facts that most reassure us of stability in real life, upon money, furniture, food, until we seem wedged among solid objects in a solid universe." (GR: 95)

Although Woolf would hardly dispute that great novels have come out of this tradition, the essays and novels that she began to write in the teens and twenties express a variety of dissatisfactions with it. One aspect of this dissatisfaction was her sense that so many of the novels in this tradition had become worn out shells, that truth telling had begun to

degenerate into perfunctory fact recording, the repetition of the statement that it was on Wednesday that the Vicar held his mother's

meeting which was often attended by Mrs. Brown and Miss Dobson in their pony carriage, a statement which, as the reader is quick to perceive, has nothing of truth in it but the respectable outside. (CE II: 64-5)

Another part of her dissatisfaction was with the sociological bent of novelists like Wells and Bennett, a bent that took them away from the novel as an aesthetic whole, as a work of art, and made it instead a tool for social reform. Wells, she says, “is a materialist from sheer goodness of heart, taking upon his shoulders the work that ought to have been discharged by Government officials” (CR: 152). And while this is a benefit to society and to the working poor, it is less than helpful to readers and other writers. For this relentless focus upon a reality outside the novel leaves the reader with “a strange feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction” (CDB: 105) so that in order to “complete [these novels], it seems necessary to do something—to join a society or, more desperately, to write a cheque.” (CDB: 105)

In essays like “Modern Fiction” written in 1919, and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” written in 1924, Woolf goes even farther. She wonders whether Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett aren’t in fact missing reality, or at least a more important and essential reality for modern times, by stressing only the physical, the external, the sociological aspects of it. For as Freud, Bergson, and others of the time were beginning to discover, reality is as much created by the mind as perceived as something outside of it. And if that is so, there is a whole uncharted realm to be explored in the record of the mind’s activities.

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday.... Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (CR: 154)

If life, if reality, is as much a matter of mind, of states of mind, then the conventional novel of the materialists, the Edwardian novelists like Wells and Bennett, and Galsworthy is at best severely limited, or, at worst, a fundamental distortion of reality.

This is the territory that Woolf began first to chart for herself in *Jacob's Room* (1922), and continued, even more successfully in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) where again and again, we are struck by the discrepancy between what a character says and what he thinks, between the simplicity of the action, and the richness and complexity of the “stream of consciousness.” We can see this very clearly in the opening of *Mrs. Dalloway* (where Clarissa buys flowers for her party) and in the “Brown Stocking” section of *To the Lighthouse* (where Mrs. Ramsay measures the stocking she is knitting against her son's leg).

In this latter scene (TL: section V, pp. 26 – 30) Mrs. Ramsay happens to look up as she is measuring the stocking, and sees Lily Briscoe and Mr. Bankes walking in the garden. That starts the thought of how nice it would be if they were to marry, and causes her to smile. But James's fidgeting then recalls her to her measuring task and leads to another glance, this time to the room, which has grown fearfully shabby. This thought opens into a series of thoughts, about the difficulty of maintaining the house, the benefits of it for her husband and children, the difficulty of organizing eight children, a husband, and a staff of cooks and maids, one of whom has a father dying of cancer. The sadness provoked by this thought leads her to be harsher than she intended with James's fidgets. But she immediately recognizes this and smoothes out that rough edge by kissing him and helping to find another picture for him to cut out.

As Erich Auerbach points out in a superb analysis of this scene¹, the physical actions that take place could not have occupied more than thirty seconds. But the thoughts recorded are much more extensive; and they not only help us understand Mrs. Ramsay (her naïve trust in marriage, her sympathy for the sick and dying, her struggles with her husband and family), but also reinforce the major themes of the novel—the inevitable ravages of time, the ruthless indifference of nature, and the human struggle to endure.

Woolf realized, of course, that she was not alone in wanting to explore this new territory of the mind. In some of her essays at this time, she makes a distinction between the Edwardians or Victorians, and the Georgians or Modernists. In the Georgian or “Modernist”

camp along with herself, she recognized E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, Dorothy Richardson, but most of all, James Joyce, as writers who were questioning the conventions of the past and feeling their way towards a new definition of reality and a new form for the novel.

Woolf's relationship with Joyce was always complex. In many ways he was an ally, a fellow explorer, and she clearly recognized that he was trying to do some of the same things she was. It's hard to imagine that *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), a novel set entirely on a single day, and following the thoughts of two seemingly unrelated characters--Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith—could have existed in quite the same without *Ulysses* (1922), a novel set on a single day and following the thoughts of two seemingly unrelated characters—Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus.

In contrast with those whom we have called materialists, [says Woolf] Mr. Joyce is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain; and in order to preserve it he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious, whether it be probability, or coherence, or any other of those signposts which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader.... (CR: 155)

Here then was someone like Woolf, who was willing to follow the “stream of consciousness” in a novel, to put his primary emphasis upon the states of mind, not the actions of his characters. And who was willing to throw away the typical conventions of traditional fiction—strong plot, clear resolution of conflict, for something more radical. But though Woolf clearly admired Joyce's courage, she was put off by a number of things. First, by what she would variously call his “masculinity” or his “indecent,” a reaction that probably had more to do with Woolf's personal history than any real literary assessment. But then there was the stylistic bravado and vanity, the sense that he could “do it all” and was not shy of showing it. “A first rate writer,” she comments in her diary after finishing *Ulysses*,

respects writing too much to be tricky; startling; doing stunts. I'm reminded all the time of some callow board-school boy, full of wits and powers, but so self-conscious and egotistical that he loses his head, becomes extravagant, mannered, uproarious, ill at ease, makes kindly

people feel sorry for him, and stern ones merely annoyed..." (AWD: 9/6/1922)

But there was another reason that she felt put off by Joyce; and it worried her more because it had to do with the method as well as with Joyce himself. "Is it due to the method," she asks herself in an essay on Modern Fiction, "that we feel neither jovial nor magnanimous, but centered in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond." (CR:156) If you focus your attention on the inner life of one or two "ordinary" characters as Joyce and Woolf do, how do you avoid the sense of "being in a bright but narrow room, confined and shut in, rather than enlarged and set free" (CR: 156)? How do you arrive at anything approaching the impersonality, the "universality" of the classics when you are stuck inside the minds and personalities of an ordinary tradesman or an upper class society woman?

The Poetic Novel

As one way of answering that question, I'd now like to turn to a second, major literary context for *To the Lighthouse*. And that it is her desire to bring to the novel the beauty and what she would call the "impersonality" of poetry. In essays written between 1919 and 1925, Woolf talks mostly, as we have already seen, about extending the novel to embrace human consciousness, to provide a more accurate record of the flickering emotions of everyday life. In the essays that she began to write after *Mrs. Dalloway*, and while she was planning and writing *To the Lighthouse*, however, a new theme emerges—poetry. The kernel of this new theme and perhaps of *To the Lighthouse* itself can be traced to a diary entry of 1923 that I've already alluded to. Here's the full text.

...I went to Golders Green and sat with Mary Sheepshanks in her garden and beat up the waters of talk, as I do courageously, so that life mayn't be wasted. The fresh breeze went brushing through the thick hedges, which divide the gardens. Somehow extraordinary emotions possessed me. I now forget what. Often now I have to control my excitement—as if I were pushing through a screen; or as if something beat fiercely close to me. What this portends I don't know. It is a general

sense of the poetry of existence that overcomes me. Often it is connected with the sea and St Ives. Going to 46 continues to excite. The sight of two coffins in the Underground luggage office I daresay constricts all my feelings. I have the sense of the flight of time; and this shores up my emotions. (AWD: 6/13/1923)

In this somewhat strange and disconnected passage, we can see the Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf trying to save a party by beating up the waters of talk. We can see the emerging setting of *To the Lighthouse* in the thick hedges, which divide the garden, and the connection with St Ives and the sea. And we can see the themes of the novel in the flight of time, the two coffins, and the poetry of existence.

Perhaps as early as 1923, then, Woolf began to meditate on the possibilities of poetry and the novel. And it is associated in her mind with her childhood memories of St. Ives, and those two formidable presences who would need to be resurrected to bring it all to life. But it was not until after the completion of *Mrs. Dalloway* that the notion comes to the surface again in an essay called "Impassioned Prose" on Thomas De Quincey, best known as the Romantic author of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. De Quincey's work, Woolf points out, is filled with passages of remarkable prose, prose that has the rhythm, the sonority, the elevation of poetry. And it is for these patches of poetry amid the prose that we remember De Quincey and come back to his work. The problem is that these "patches" upset the artistic whole. Again and again, she says, it is in returning to earth that De Quincey is undone. How is he to bridge the "horrid transition" between these flights of poetic prose and the "prosaic" nature of the rest of the work? There must be, she says, "some medium in which its ardours and ecstasies can float without incongruity, from which they receive support and impetus." (G&R: 35)

This is the same problem faced by the novelist who would try to inject poetry into the novel. For of all writers, Woolf says, "the novelist has his hands fullest of facts. Smith gets up, shaves, has his breakfast, taps his egg, reads the Times. How can we ask the panting, the perspiring, the industrious scribe with all this on his hands to modulate beautifully into rhapsodies about Time and Death." (G&R:33)

But then she notices that when De Quincey succeeds, it occurs most often when he is writing about his own past, as in the *Autobiographic Sketches*.

For here it is fitting that he should stand a little apart, should look back, under cover of his raised hand, at scenes which had almost melted into the past. His enemy, the hard fact, became cloudlike and supple under his hands. He was under no obligation to recite the 'old hackneyed roll call, chronologically arranged, of inevitable facts in a man's life.' It was his object to record impressions, to render states of mind without particularizing the features of the precise person who had experienced them. A serene and lovely light lies over the whole of that distant prospect of his childhood. (G&R: 37)

Here, then, was one hint at how to merge poetry and fiction--by stepping back from the hard facts of the traditional novelist or biographer to gaze from a distance with the soft focus of recollection. I am not saying that Woolf chose to write about her past because she wanted to create a more poetic novel, but I do think that De Quincey's example helped her realize what she was feeling her way towards.

This becomes even clearer in another essay, "The Narrow Bridge of Art," written in 1927, the same year that *To the Lighthouse* was published. Here she is bemoaning the complete failure of poetic drama in the 20th century. She predicts that it will be "that cannibal" (G&R: 18), the novel, which will devour aspects of the poetic play and absorb them into itself. This new kind of novel, she says,

will differ from the novel as we know it now chiefly in that it will stand further back from life. It will give as poetry does, the outline rather than the detail. It will make very little use of the marvelous fact recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction. It will tell us very little about the houses, incomes, occupations of its characters; it will have little kinship with the sociological novel or the novel of the environment.... It will resemble poetry in this that it will give not only or mainly people's relations to each other and their activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. ...The psychological novelist has been too prone to limit psychology to the psychology of personal intercourse.... We long for some more impersonal relationship. We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry." (G&R: 18-19)

She goes on to say, however, that you can't have it all. If you want poetry, you have to give up the meticulous attention to fact and physical detail. If you want sociological accuracy,

you will necessarily give up poetry. Some “renunciation is inevitable. You cannot cross the narrow bridge of art carrying all its tools in your hands” (G&R: 22). *To the Lighthouse*, then, goes beyond creating a novel of consciousness. It is Virginia Woolf’s attempt to bring the beauty and formality of poetry into the novel.

To see *how* she does this, it’s worth stopping to think for a minute about the differences between *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. First of all, *Mrs. Dalloway* is set in the present. *To the Lighthouse* is set in the past. So there is already a kind of distancing in the very setting of the later novel. Next, *Mrs. Dalloway* is situated in a city bustling with people and activity. *To the Lighthouse* is set in the country where nature is more prominent, and human activity is necessarily diminished by comparison (think of the presence of the sea in the novel, or of those far flung sand hills which seem to outlast the gazer by a million years “and to be communing with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest.” (TL: 20)

Both novels, of course, explore the minds of their characters, and both contain passages that recall the past. But in *Mrs. Dalloway* the focus is much more social or interpersonal aspects of the past. On her walk to buy flowers, for instance, Clarissa thinks about Peter Walsh, about Hugh Whitbread, Lady Bexborough, Miss Kilman, and her interactions with them. The very presence of so many people now, this day, in London, gives a sense of excitement and immediacy to the novel that is indeed one of its pleasures.

To the Lighthouse, by contrast, often captures its characters in reverie, either alone or with enough space between them that thinking takes on a more impersonal character. Examples abound: Mrs. Ramsay in the dining room after her children have disappeared to their rooms (TL: 8-9); Lily Briscoe and Mr. Bankes walking by the sea (TL: 20 –25) ; Mrs. Ramsay listening to the distant conversation of the men while knitting in her rocking chair (TL:15-16); Mr. Ramsay thinking about the value of Shakespeare 42-45; Mrs. Ramsay sitting alone after James has been taken to bed (TL: 62 –65); and Lily Briscoe, throughout the third section of the novel when she is painting her picture and thinking back over the past, trying to make sense of it all.

Both novels make use of the stream of consciousness. But in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the presence of Big Ben, tolling off the hours until Clarissa's party, the passage of the airplane and the Prime Minister's car, all provide a clear, physical, and chronological framework. We always "know where we are" in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *To the Lighthouse*, on the other hand, one of the things that makes it difficult for readers is that Woolf has dispensed with many of these convenient external signposts and has opted for a more thematic and associative relationship among passages. For a simple example of this, let's go back for a moment to the "Brown Stocking" section, where Mrs. Ramsay is measuring the stocking and thinking about Lily and Mr. Bankes, the state of the room, and other things. In talking about it earlier, I purposely ignored the section that begins "But was it nothing but looks, people said" (TL: 28). This passage flows thematically and emotionally from Mrs. Ramsay's sadness in thinking about the Swiss girl and discovering that the stocking is too short. But it takes us into the minds of unnamed "people" at unspecified times, and to an occasion when Mr. Bankes called Mrs. Ramsay on the telephone, which is again completely unspecified in time or location. In the first section of the novel, this technique can get downright confusing as we try to compose what are fundamentally thematically related events into a chronological pattern that simply won't accept them. [For example, TL: 3-14]

The result of all these distancing techniques, however, is the creation of the medium she described in her essay on De Quincey, one that allows her to modulate more easily between the present and the past, between "fact" and interpretation, and between the prosaic and poetic. And it is because she has already loosened our hold on all of the typical conventions of the sociological novel that she can move her readers from the simple fact of characters returning from a walk on the beach and turning out the lights to one of the most stunning, and successful pieces of poetry in this novel or any novel.

The "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* is the most conspicuous example of how far Virginia Woolf was able to depart from the traditional novel. For much of it, the focus is

not on a character, but on a house, and on its slow destruction at the hands of time and nature. Indeed, we are now so distanced from the characters like Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, or Andrew, that their fates are only recorded as parentheses in the larger sweep of the changing seasons. All the fact recording and psychological analysis of the traditional novel have been subjugated: *To the Lighthouse* is nothing if not the embodiment of that poetic novel that Woolf predicted.

Autobiographical Background

But now, having established something of what Woolf was trying to do from a literary standpoint, I'd like to talk about the autobiographical context of the novel. For *To the Lighthouse* is a deeply personal novel, a novel in which Woolf comes to terms with her past in a way that I believe liberated her to speak and write about the subject of women in a way that she could never have done before.

Every year from 1882, when Virginia Stephen was born, until 1895, when Virginia's mother died, the Stephen family spent the summer in a large, somewhat ramshackle house overlooking Carbis Bay and the Godrevy Lighthouse. It was called Talland House (show pictures of the house and the bay with lighthouse). And though it was (and still is) located in Cornwall on the outskirts of St. Ives, (not on the Isle of Skye), it is unmistakably the model for the house in *To the Lighthouse*.

It had to be a large house, because it needed to accommodate the entire Stephen clan, which (like the Ramsays), included father (Leslie), mother (Julia), and eight children—Stella, George, Gerald, Laura, Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and (their mother's youngest and favorite) Adrian. During these summers, the Stephens often invited visitors to come and see them, some of them staying in guest rooms in the house (like Mr. Carmichael); others a few miles away in town (like Lily Briscoe and Mr. Bankes). So it was not unusual to find 15 people sitting down to dinner.

Like the Ramsays house, Talland House was comfortable, but somewhat shabby. When she visited the house some years later, Virginia was surprised to find how much smarter the new owners had made it look—"very unlike what it was in our day," she remarked. (VW: 29).

The back of the house like the Ramsay house featured French windows that opened out onto a terrace where someone could have sat and knitted. Just below the terrace was a series of separate lawns and gardens, divided by thick hedges of *escalonia* (among which Leslie Stephen would often walk and read, or recite poetry). On the flatter of these lawns, the Stephens, like the Ramsay children, played cricket. Julia, like Mrs. Ramsay, was particularly fond of the flower and vegetable gardens.

But it is not only the basic setting of *To the Lighthouse* that owes so much to Virginia's recollection of her childhood. There are incidents and general recollections that also find their way into the novel. Like the time that one of the Stephen's guests (like Minta Doyle in the novel) lost an expensive brooch on the shore; or the summer when two of their guests, (like Paul and Minta) became engaged while they were visiting. Or when Whistler visited St. Ives and (like Mr. Paunceforte in the novel) started a tradition of painting beach scenes with delicate pastel figures in them (VW: 27). Or when Virginia and Adrian would lie awake at night and her mother would come to see if they were asleep. "Then she told me to think of all the lovely things I could imagine. Rainbows and bells..." (M of B: 82)

But perhaps the most important of the childhood incidents that made their way into the novel occurred in the summer of 1892 (when Virginia was ten). And it was duly recorded in the Stephen family newsletter (often written by Thoby, Vanessa, or Virginia).

On Saturday morning Master Hilary Hunt and Master Basil Smith asked Master Thoby and Miss Virginia to accompany them to the lighthouse. ...Master Adrian Stephen was much disappointed at not being allowed to go. (VW: 33)

If this isn't "the" source for the thwarted expedition of the novel, it is certainly one of them. For it is hard to imagine that a sensitive child of ten such as Virginia would *not* identify

with her barely younger sibling, and consequently feel and remember his pain and disappointment.

But if many of the incidents of the novel have a foundation in remembered experiences of her childhood, the characters, even more, are based on Virginia Woolf's family. James is clearly based on her mother's favorite, Adrian. Prue is just as clearly based on Virginia's oldest (half) sister, Stella, who died just a scant three months after her marriage. Andrew is based on Thoby, who had a gift for mathematics, and died at 26 (though not in the First World War). Rose owes something to Vanessa, who seemed from the cradle to be clearly an artist. And Cam, the youngest of the Ramsay girls, is closest to Virginia, who, in spite of her father's tyrannical behavior, can still find him lovable and charming.

But the most important characters drawn from life are Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, who are, by contemporary accounts, uncanny portraits of Virginia Woolf's parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen. Indeed when her sister Vanessa read *To the Lighthouse* upon its publication in 1927, she could hardly attend to its artistic merits in her wonder at meeting those parents again.

It seemed to me in the first part of the book you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character, which must be the most difficult thing in the world to do. It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up & on equal terms & it seems to me the most astonishing feat of creation to have been able to see her in such a way. You have given father too I think as clearly, but perhaps, I may be wrong, that isn't quite so difficult. There is more to catch hold of. Still, it seems to me to be the only thing about him which ever gave a true idea. So you see as far as portrait painting goes, you seem to me a supreme artist, and it is so shattering to find oneself face to face with those two again that I can hardly consider anything else.
(VW: 474)

Leslie Stephen can without exaggeration be called an "eminent Victorian." A literary critic, philosopher, historian of ideas, biographer, editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*, and later, of the multi-volume *Dictionary of National Biography*, Leslie Stephen was well known in literary and philosophical circles both in England and America. He could number among his friends and

acquaintances George Meredith, Henry and William James, George Eliot, James Russell Lowell, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Herbert Spencer. His first marriage was to Minny Thackeray, the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray, the author of *Vanity Fair*. Indeed so distinguished was his career that he was knighted for his contributions to literature and biography in 1902 when Virginia was twenty.

Virginia's mother, Julia Jackson Duckworth Stephen, was also a formidable presence. From an early age, she was considered the most beautiful daughter of a woman whose family of seven daughters (the Pattle sisters) was renown for its beauty. Born in India where her father made his fortune as a Doctor, Julia spent most of her early years with her uncle, Thoby Prinsep, who seemed to have been a patron of the arts. There she grew up in the company of writers like Tennyson, Meredith, and Coventry Patmore; painters and sculptors like Edward Burne-Jones, Holman Hunt, G.F. Watts, and George Woolner (several of whom used her as a model); and her aunt, the great Victorian photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron.

Similarities to the Ramsays abound. Like Mr. Ramsay, Leslie Stephen taught philosophy and lectured all over England. Like, Mr. Ramsay he was an ardent hiker, well known for frequent trips to the Alps in his younger days, and famous among his children, even in his sixties, for his strenuous walks all over Cornwall. Although extraordinarily successful, Leslie Stephen thought himself a failure. In words that echo those in *To the Lighthouse* itself, Stephen wrote:

I think that I had it in me to make something like a real contribution to philosophical or ethical thought. Unluckily, what with journalism and dictionary making, I have been a jack of all trades; and instead of striking home have only done enough to persuade friendly judges that I could have struck....I do feel that if, for example, the history of English thought in the nineteenth century should ever be written, my name will only be mentioned in small type and footnotes... (MB: 93)

And in the same memoir, he admits to professing

a rather exaggerated self depreciation in order to extort [from his wife] some of her delicious compliments. They were delicious, for even if I could not accept her critical judgment as correct, I could feel that it was distorted mainly by her tender love. (MB 93)

And like, Mr. Ramsay, after the death of his wife, Leslie Stephen would wring from his children and the women in his life the sympathy, the flattery he needed to sustain his fragile ego.

The similarities between Julia Stephen and Mrs. Ramsay are just as striking. Like Mrs. Ramsay, Julia Stephen was considered astonishingly beautiful. Burne-Jones painted her as the Virgin Mary in his "Annunciation." Sir Henry Taylor wrote a poem after meeting her in the company the poet Tennyson and the patriot Garibaldi in which he says in effect that her beauty made more of an impression on him than the poetry of one or the strength of the other. Leslie Stephen described her using an image that Virginia clearly read and remembered when she wrote about Mr. Bankes's "rapture." (TL: 47) Her beauty, he said,

"...was just the perfect balance, the harmony of mind and body which made me feel when I looked at her, the kind of pleasure which I suppose a keen artistic sense to derive from a masterpiece of Greek sculpture (MB: 32)

According to Virginia, Julia, like Mrs. Ramsay "held herself very straight....[she was] very quick, direct, practical, and amusing....She could be sharp, she disliked affectation....Severe; with a background of knowledge that made her sad." (M of B: 82) For like Mrs. Ramsay, there had been an earlier lover (TL: 28), her first husband, George Duckworth, whom she had lost after only three years of marriage when she was twenty four.

But again like Mrs. Ramsay, Julia was more than simply beautiful. She was extraordinarily caring so that people from all walks of life, but especially the weak and downtrodden, sought her out. When she was dead, Virginia wrote,

I found a desk shut when we left St. Ives with all the letters received that morning freshly laid in it to be answered when she got to London. There was a letter from a woman whose daughter was betrayed and asked for help, a letter from George, from Aunt Mary, from a nurse who was out of work, some bills, some begging letters, and many sheets from a girl who had quarreled with her parents and must reveal her soul, earnestly, diffusely. (M of B: 38)

Years after her death, Leslie Stephen wrote, the poor of St Ives remembered her as "an Angel" who never stinted in her care for them.

With parents as formidable as these, it is no wonder that they left a lasting impression on their daughter. But before we talk about why Virginia chose to write about them, I'd like to talk about one more character, a character who is not a portrait per se, but a vehicle—Lily Briscoe.

In the third part of *To the Lighthouse* when Lily Briscoe has set up her canvas and is trying to begin again the painting that she had left unfinished so many years ago, she is prevented by the presence of Mr. Ramsay.

Let him be fifty feet away, let him not even speak to you, let him not even see you, her permeated, he prevailed he imposed himself. He changed everything. She could not see the colour; she could not see the lines.... (TL: 149)

This is particularly galling to her because here she was “at forty four, wasting her time, unable to do a thing, standing there, playing at painting, playing at the one thing that one did not play at...”. But then the sentence goes on in a revealing but unexpected way: “and it was all Mrs. Ramsay’s fault.” (TL: 149-50).

When Virginia Woolf wrote these words, she was, like Lily Briscoe, forty-four years old (she finished the first complete draft of the novel in 1926). She was working, as her sister Vanessa recognized, on a family “portrait.” And she was struggling to find an authentic voice for her art, struggling, as it were, to have her vision. As she came to realize with increasing clarity later, partly, I believe, as a result of writing this novel, she was locked in this struggle not just with her father but with her mother. For as Lily sees clearly here and the Ramsay daughters feel somewhat tentatively earlier in the novel (TL: 6-7), Mrs. Ramsay is as much to blame for this state of affairs as her husband is. They are co-conspirators in the suppression of women.³

It is Mrs. Ramsay who insists to her daughters that they must put up with the egotism of Charles Tansley and not make fun of him (TL: 5-6) It is Mrs. Ramsay who so skillfully flatters and encourages his ego on their trip to town (TL: 10-11). It is Mrs. Ramsay who insists that women, Prue, Minta Doyle, Lily Briscoe—all must marry (TL: 49). It is Mrs. Ramsay who forces, Lily, against her better judgment, to come to her aid at the dinner party, when the egotism of the

males at the table has brought conversation to a halt. And it is Mrs. Ramsay who has so spoiled her husband over the years that he expects every woman to be at his beck and call when he needs flattery and sympathy.

But as Virginia Woolf certainly understood, and the novel makes clear, Mrs. Ramsay is not unique in this attitude towards men. It is part of whole code of behavior that Victorian women passed on from generation to generation and which was only beginning to change as a result of the women's movement in England at the end of the 19th century. In a critical essay, "Professions for Women," that Virginia Woolf wrote soon after *To the Lighthouse*, she described this code in the form of an archetypal Victorian woman called the "Angel of the House." The Angel of the House, Woolf says,

was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the arts of family life.... She was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.

She is in fact much like Mrs. Ramsay, who doesn't even have a name apart from her husband. But in order for her to write, Woolf says, she had to take this Angel of the House by the throat and kill her. "Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing." (CE II: ax)

When Lily blames Mrs. Ramsay for Mr. Ramsay's behavior, then, she is expressing what Woolf and women of her generation had begun to feel about their mothers, that, as much as they might venerate and love them, they had to get beyond them, they had to be able to carve out a new life for themselves, to create a new vision, different from theirs.

To the Lighthouse was, I believe the turning point for Virginia Woolf in this transition. And late in life (1939), I believe, she recognized this.

Until I was in the forties...the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could here her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings.... Then one day walking around Tavistock Square, I made up...*To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary rush...I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed...I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-

analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it, I explained it and then laid it to rest. (M of B:80-81)

Nearly all of Virginia Woolf's explicitly "feminist" writing occurs after *To the Lighthouse*.

In Lily Briscoe, then, Virginia Woolf created a character who could look at the her parents from the perspective of someone who loved them, but was not their child; someone who was an artist, but not a novelist; someone with whom Woolf could identify, and yet who was not simply a portrait of the artist. It freed her to criticize them directly without guilt.

But it is also important to note that Lily is not Virginia Woolf. Woolf did, after all, marry. And though she could not have known how successful she was about to become after the publication of *To the Lighthouse*, she was already a distinguished literary critic and the author of four respected novels. If anything, perhaps, Lily is Woolf's projection of what she might have become had her father lived, and if she had been forced to take care of him-- a part time artist, feeling mainly "her own inadequacy, her insignificance, keeping house for her father off the Brompton Road" (TL: 19). For Woolf realized that with her Victorian upbringing, she had, in fact, only narrowly escaped. Had her father *not* died in 1895, leaving Vanessa, Toby, Virginia, and Adrian free to "sport with infidel ideas" (TL: 6), things might have been very different. On her father's birthday in November of 1928, Virginia contemplated just that possibility:

Father's birthday. He would have been 96, 96, yes, today; and could have been 96, like other people one has known: but mercifully was not. His life would have ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books—inconceivable."(AWD: 135).

But in emphasizing only the critical aspects of Virginia Woolf's portrait of her parents, we do a disservice to the novel and to Woolf's vision. For when we walk away from *To the Lighthouse*, I don't think we feel like we've been reading a satire on Victorian sexual relations. Indeed, for all her criticism of the Ramsay's, the novel feels more like what Virginia Woolf provisionally planned to call it--an elegy. In my final section, then I would like to step back from the autobiographical aspects of the novel and from the characters as portraits, and to look at it

as a work of art whose form is dictated not by the origins of its subject but by the inner logic of its own intention. In the process, I think we'll see that Virginia Woolf's final vision not only criticizes her parents, it redeems them through art.

What Does It All Mean?

As I said in my introduction, any interpretation of a work of literature, especially one as complex as *To the Lighthouse* is bound to be somewhat subjective—not what it means but what it means to me. In fact, it's not unhelpful to think of the act of interpretation as the equivalent of the production of a play. It is simply one (more or less coherent) instance of the meaning that can be derived from a particular set of words.

But having said that, one of the principles I try to remember in interpreting literature is to keep a sense of perspective, that is, to make sure that my interpretation accounts for the most important aspects of the work, its fundamental feelings or movements.

The Quest

With that in mind, let's begin with what may or may not be obvious--that *To the Lighthouse* is a kind of quest. For although it may include an examination of the roles of the sexes in 1910, all of the action within the novel is subsumed within the framework of a trip to the lighthouse. In the first part of the novel James wants to get to the lighthouse, and that quest is thwarted. In the last part of the novel, James succeeds in reaching the lighthouse, but not in the way he intended. Indeed, James is forced to go to the lighthouse by Mr. Ramsay who has taken over the quest for his own purposes. At the same time, especially in the last part of the novel, we begin to feel that Mr. Ramsay's quest is tied in some way to Lily's attempts to understand the past and to finish her painting. And finally, since Lily is in some sense a vehicle for Virginia Woolf, we also feel that Lily's attempt to capture the real Mrs. Ramsay is related to Virginia Woolf's quest to understand both of her parents. So, on the final page of the novel, when Lily finishes her painting and thinks, "I have had my vision," (TL: 209), it's hard not to hear Virginia

Woolf, at that moment, speaking through her. If the central action of the novel is a quest, then, any comprehensive interpretation of the novel has to try to explain what getting to the lighthouse is all about and how all of these things are related.

Let's start with James. For James, to get to the lighthouse is to realize a dream, to fulfill a desire. So when his mother says that they will go the lighthouse, he feels an extraordinary joy, as if "the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years, it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail, within reach." (TL: 3) On one level, then getting to the lighthouse can mean achieving your heart's desire, whatever that is.

In most quest literature, the first stage of the quest pits those who support the quest against those who oppose it. In *To the Lighthouse*, we can see this opposition develop from the very first page. Mrs. Ramsay encourages her son to hope to expect that they will go to the lighthouse. "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," said Mrs. Ramsay. "But you'll have to be up with the lark," she added" (TL: 3). And even after Mr. Ramsay has contradicted her, she says, "But it may be fine—I expect it will be fine" (TL: 4). Mr. Ramsay, of course, disagrees. Stopping as he walks with Mr. Tansley by the drawing room window, he declares categorically. "But... it won't be fine." (TL: 4). After that, there is a passage that is easy to overlook or misread, but which helps us realize that the disagreement about going to the lighthouse is not simply about the state of the weather, but a fundamental difference in perspective.

Mr. Ramsay's Perspective

Here's what it says:

What [Mr. Ramsay] said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being least of all his own children who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness (here Mr. Ramsay would straighten his back and narrow his little blue eyes upon the horizon) one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure. (TL: 4)

When we read the passage quickly, we are likely to think that Mr. Ramsay believes that his children should not underestimate the difficulties of life, they should know, if they are to succeed, that a rough road lies ahead of them. But, in fact, the message is more bleak. For the passage we make in life is never to success in this formulation, but to where “our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness,” in other words, to failure and death. There is no possibility of success here. Facts are uncompromising. And the ultimate fact for Mr. Ramsay is that human effort is futile, doomed to be swallowed up by time. What is required is simply courage and endurance.

If this is Mr. Ramsay’s view of life, it is perhaps not surprising that he should find a certain grim satisfaction in reciting *The Charge of the Light Brigade* during the first part of the novel. For Tennyson’s poem presents a similar view of life. It celebrates the heroism (some would say the stupidity) of the British cavalry brigade that rode obediently “Into the Valley of Death” in spite of the fact that they faced almost certain annihilation. In words that are *not* quoted in the novel, but certainly implicit in Woolf’s use of the poem: “Their’s not to make reply/Their’s not to reason why/Their’s but to do and die.” And finally, it is the same sense of courageous but essentially passive endurance represented when we find Mr. Ramsay imagining himself as the leader of a “doomed expedition” which

has climbed high enough to see the waste of the years and the perishing of stars, [but who] before death stiffens his limbs beyond the power of movement...does a little consciously square his shoulders, so that when the search party comes they will find him dead at his post, the fine figure of a soldier. (TL: 35- 36)

Associated with this passive endurance is another aspect of what I believe is Mr. Ramsay’s point of view, and again it is perhaps best expressed by what he chooses to read and recite. In the final third of the novel, Mr. Ramsay is reading from a poem by William Cowper called “The Castaway.” Based on a true event, it tells the story of a sailor who is washed overboard during a storm, and whose friends are powerless to turn the ship around to help him. Of “friends, of hope, of all bereft,” he drowns. Like the earlier passage we quoted, this one also

seems to suggest that life is a voyage, in this case one that we make with friends. But what is stressed and what Mr. Ramsay's chooses to focus on is the loneliness of the sailor's fate, that we all ultimately perish, "each alone." James also recognizes this about Mr. Ramsay. As they near the lighthouse, James thinks that his father

looked as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both their minds—that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things. (TL: 202-203)

And in a passage earlier in the novel, we find Mr. Ramsay thinking that

It was his fate, his peculiarity, whether he wished it or not, to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away, and there to stand like a desolate sea bird alone... and it was in this guise that he inspired in William Bankes...and in Charles Tansley...and in his wife...reverence, and pity, and gratitude too, as a stake driven into the bed of a channel upon which the gulls perch and the waves beat inspires in merry boatloads a feeling of gratitude for the duty it is taking upon itself of marking the channel out there in the floods alone.(TL: 43-44)

Both these passages are interesting, not only for what they tell us about Mr. Ramsay's perspective, but because they also suggest or allude to another symbol of lonely endurance—the lighthouse itself.

Mrs. Ramsay's Perspective

Mrs. Ramsay's perspective is very different. If Mr. Ramsay's perspective stresses isolation, passivity, endurance, Mrs. Ramsay's emphasizes community, activity, imagination. For her, the world is not something to be endured, but fashioned into something better. Her little idiosyncrasies, her habit of moving "with an indescribable air of expectation, as if she were going to meet someone around the corner" (TL: 10), her penchant for exaggeration, both suggest an unconscious dissatisfaction with "fact" with the way things are. And her projects for social improvement—her aid to the men at the lighthouse, her visits to the poor, her crusade for better milk and hospital care all indicate, in however small a way, her desire for something better.

The something better that Mrs. Ramsay wants, however is almost always seen in terms of a quest for unity: the unity of subject and object when the outer world is made to meet our inner expectations and we possess what we most desire (a trip to the lighthouse, for instance), and the unity of subject with subject when there is fellow feeling, a moment of intimacy and communication that bridges our essential loneliness. If Mr. Ramsay's attitude can perhaps be symbolized by his knifelike bearing, hard, cold, and cut off, Mrs. Ramsay's attitude is suggested by the fact that she spends much of the first part of the novel knitting, bringing people and things together to promote human happiness.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Ramsay deplores the growth of the critical faculty in her children.

Strifes, divisions, differences of opinion, prejudices twisted into the very fibre of being, oh that they should begin so early, Mrs. Ramsay deplored. They were so critical, her children.... It seemed such nonsense—inventing differences, when people, heaven knows, were different enough without that. (TL: 8)

And it is also understandable that she should value the child-like faculty of the imagination, for children are still capable of making the objective world conform to their own subjective desires, turning a tenpenny tea set into a whole social world, and a rag doll into a loving companion. (TL: 58-59)

There are, of course, dangerous limitations to this perspective. Mrs. Ramsay believes all too readily that for women the only happiness in life is to be found in the unity of marriage. And indeed there are clear indications that it is this unexamined assumption that leads Minta and Paul into an engagement for which they may not have been ready.

But though there is something quixotic about Mrs. Ramsay's vision, we can't help noticing how often she succeeds. It is the power of her vision, for instance, which makes Charles Tansley on their walk to town begin to see himself and everything he has known in a new way. (TL: 13). It is her power of simple desire, which, Lily recognizes, makes the dinner party a success.

“She was irresistible. Always she got her own way in the end, Lily thought. Now she had brought this off—Paul and Minta, one might suppose, were engaged. Mr. Bankes was dining there. She put a spell on them all, by wishing so simply, so directly. (TL: 101)

Indeed the more we look, the more we begin to realize that however “nearsighted,” or occasionally misguided, she is, Mrs. Ramsay represents something extraordinarily powerful and creative, something that sets her completely at odds with her husband--the simple belief that human desires can and will ultimately be fulfilled, the indomitable sense that human spirit will prevail against death, that loneliness is not the only truth about things.

The first and most obvious result of Mrs. Ramsay’s vision is of course the successful dinner party, where communion takes place in perhaps more ways than one. After a shaky start where Mrs. Ramsay, indeed seemed to be “drowning” in the chaos of the moment and life seemed about to “run upon the rocks” (TL: 92), the mood changes with Lily’s help and the arrival of the candlesticks. At that moment,

Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (TL: 97)

As if by magic spell, Paul and Minta arrive—engaged, the Boef en Daube is a masterpiece, conversation flows, people begin to enjoy themselves, indeed *everything* works. This feeling of joy, of stability, of communion fills them and surrounds them, “holding them safe together.”

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was all around them. It partook [Mrs. Ramsay] felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity. (TL: 105)

In this passage, Mrs. Ramsay is only one comma away from being the celebrant of a special ritual in which her communicants are granted pieces of eternity. But even if we don’t make Mrs. Ramsay any more than an ordinary woman, we can see that she has done something special. Like a moment in the theater, brought about by the skillful hands of the director, the moment that she has created is different from the rest of everyday life; it has “coherence,” “stability.” It

shines out “in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby.” Of such moments, Mrs. Ramsay thinks, “the thing is made that endures.” (TL: 105)

Time Passes

Throughout the first part of the novel, these two perspectives on life are elaborated and the resulting tensions between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay continue to flare culminating in the scene where Mr. Ramsay says, “Damn you.” (TL: 32) Mrs. Ramsay continues to think about it even as she and her husband walk together in the garden.

What had he wanted to tell her, she asked, thinking it was about going to the Lighthouse; that he was sorry he had said “Damn you.” But no. He did not like to see her look so sad, he said. (TL: 68)

Mr. Ramsay still recalls it ten years later on his way to the lighthouse. Thinking about the “vagueness” of women’s minds, he admits, that “he had been wrong to be angry with her.” (TL: 167)

In the second phase of most quest literature, these skirmishes between the two opposing forces of the quest eventually lead to a life and death struggle, and sometimes the protagonist dies in the process. In *To the Lighthouse*, this second phase corresponds to the “Time Passes” section of the novel where Prue, Andrew, and Mrs. Ramsay herself--all die. But if *To the Lighthouse* is indeed a variety of quest, I think we can now see it is only partially correct to view Mr. Ramsay as the antagonist to Mrs. Ramsay’s perspective. For though Mrs. Ramsay has to struggle against the egotism of her husband to bring about a sense of communion at the dinner party, and his passivity in the face of problems with the house (she can’t discuss the greenhouse bill with him), he is only an accomplice to the real antagonists, the ones that have been there as a subtext throughout the novel (TL: 59) but become fully revealed in the “Time Passes” section—time, death, and the utter indifference of the natural world, of life in general, to human happiness.

Perhaps the most potent symbol of this on-going struggle between human effort and imagination and the natural world is the skull in the children's bedroom. To prevent Cam from being afraid and to enable her to fall asleep on the night of the dinner party, Mrs. Ramsay wraps her shawl around the skull of a pig that is hanging in the children's bedroom. She then tells Cam a story about it, saying it now looked like a beautiful mountain, with gardens and flowers and antelopes leaping. (TL: 115) Here, as elsewhere, Mrs. Ramsay does her best to preserve happiness, giving up her own shawl, protecting Cam. But the skull is still there; death is still there at the heart of life.

In the "Time Passes" section, as Nature ravages the house and makes us realize that all human efforts are fabrications, the shawl slowly unwinds; Mrs. Ramsay's efforts are undone. And, with the death of Mrs. Ramsay herself, it seems that Mr. Ramsay is right: time, death, and loneliness *are* the ultimate facts of life. Nothing can prevent them. The house and all its civilizing influences are doomed to be "pitched downwards to the depths of darkness" (TL: 138).

But just at that moment, with the house itself on the verge of collapse, the narrator asks, "What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature? Mrs. McNab's dream of a lady, of a child, of a plate of milk soup?" (TL: 138) The answer, I think, is "yes, yes it can." For it is the memory of Mrs. Ramsay, the memory of her vision of going to the lighthouse that saves the house, that "[stays] the corruption and rot; [rescues] from the pool of Time that was fast closing over them now a basin, now a cupboard; [fetches] up from oblivion all the Waverly novels" (TL: 139). And in the most striking proof that her vision does transcend time and even her own death, it is the memory of Mrs. Ramsay that brings the family back to the house, and sends Mr. Ramsay to the lighthouse.

To the Lighthouse

After Julia Stephen's death in 1895, Leslie Stephen never brought the family back to St. Ives. There were too many memories he could not face. By all accounts, he never stopped

mourning Julia's loss; and to make matters worse, he could never completely allay the suspicion that he had hastened her death (she was 49) by being the difficult husband he clearly was.

In 1905, ten years later, and three years after their father's death, Virginia, Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian returned to St. Ives on their own. They went to the house, now owned by another family, and snuck around the grounds.

There was the house, with its two lighted windows; there on the terrace were the stone urns, against the bank of tall flowers; all so far as we could see was as though we had left it in the morning. But yet, as we knew well, we could go no further; if we advanced the spell was broken. The lights were not our lights; the voices were the voices of strangers. We hung there like ghosts in the shade of the hedge, and at the sound of footsteps we turned away. (VW: 21)

In the third part of *To the Lighthouse*, which occurs, significantly, ten years after the first section (TL: 192) , I believe Virginia rewrites this part of her family history to achieve a different outcome, the resolution she wanted for both her father and for herself. She returns through art to her house, to her family; but this time she gives her father the chance at forgiveness that he never got in real life, and in the person of Lily, she finds a way to recover her mother's identity without losing her own.

Unlike, Leslie Stephen, then, Mr. Ramsay decides to return with his family to the summer house. And from several references in the novel, it seems likely that the day Mr. Ramsay has chosen for the expedition is, in fact, the tenth anniversary of the day they would have gone to the lighthouse had the weather been fine. It is September again (TL: 19, 141). And we are told of James's resentment in having to "take part in these rites [Mr. Ramsay] went through for his own pleasure, in memory of the dead." (TL: 165). Even if the trip is not accomplished ten years to the day of the first, it is certainly clear enough that, for Mr. Ramsay, the trip to the lighthouse is a kind of atonement; a way of making up with his wife for their argument, a way of reaching out to her again by fulfilling her wishes. Indeed, when he arrives at the island, and leaps out onto the rock "lightly like a young man" (TL: 207), I can't help but feel that we are meant to recall the moment when Mr. Ramsay *was* a young man and stepped

ashore from another boat, and then held his hand out to his wife. “Yes, she would say it now. Yes, she would marry him.” (TL: 198)

But if Mr. Ramsay’s quest is to reach out, to reconnect with his wife, we can now see why it is associated with Lily’s painting. For Lily too is trying to reach Mrs. Ramsay, trying to understand what she meant to her, and trying to capture her essence, as Virginia Woolf herself is doing, in a work of art. And just as the trip to the lighthouse initially stalls as the wind dies and sails slacken, Lily seems at first unable to find any connection between herself and Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay is dead; the steps remain empty; life has changed; and Mrs. Ramsay seems irrelevant.

But as the morning proceeds and Lily tunnels back into the past, she returns over and over to a scene with herself and Charles Tansley, playing ducks and drakes while Mrs. Ramsay writes letters on the beach. She wonders

Why, after all these years had that survived, ringed round, lit up, visible to the last detail, with all before it blank and all after it blank, for miles and miles? (TL: 171)

She realizes that it was because of Mrs. Ramsay.

What a power was in the human soul! [Lily] thought. That woman sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite...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-fashion her memory of him, and there it stayed in the mind, affecting one almost like a work of art. (TL: 160)

In our discussion of the autobiographical elements of *To the Lighthouse*, we emphasized the way Virginia Woolf needed to distance herself from aspects of her mother in order to achieve an identity as an artist. No doubt she thought, as Lily does, that in so doing, she could simply leave her mother behind. The dead, Lily says,

one pitied them, one brushed them aside, one had even a little contempt for them.... Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone, she thought. We can over-ride her wishes, improve her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further away from us.

But as Lily finds out, and as Virginia admitted in her “Sketch of the Past,” the dead do not go away so easily. “Women think through their mothers,” Virginia Woolf said elsewhere. Simply rejecting Julia, or rejecting Mrs. Ramsay then was not enough. She had to find a way of accepting her. In giving to Mrs. Ramsay the power of artistic creation, Woolf goes beyond simply criticizing her. She provides a basis for redeeming her mother and enables Lily (and herself) to see her as a fellow artist, and their own work as building upon her vision.

But what about James? His was the original quest. And it was to make him happy that Mrs. Ramsay so wished to bring it about. What does it mean for him now that he has been forced to make the journey. The answer, I think, is that it means more than one thing. For as the little boat sails to the lighthouse, James thinks about his parents, especially about his father. And for most of the voyage, he hates him. But as they near the lighthouse, James does something very similar to what Lily does with Mrs. Ramsay, he gets past the simple rejection of his father and begins to see him whole. And this process seems to be associated with his understanding of the lighthouse itself. For initially he saw it through his mother’s eyes.

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now—

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight.... So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other lighthouse was true too. (TL: 186)

Without rejecting his mother’s or his own initial vision, he now begins to see the lighthouse as his father had always seen it. And in doing so, he begins to separate the tyrant father from the simple, lonely old man, and in fact to appreciate the subtle connections between himself and his father.

So it was like that, James thought, the Lighthouse one had seen across the bay all these years; it was a stark tower on a bare rock.... He looked at his father reading fiercely with his legs curled tight. They shared that knowledge. “We are driving before a gale—we must sink,” he began saying to himself, half aloud, exactly as his father said it. (TL: 203)

For James, then, the voyage planned by his mother turns out to arrive at an understanding of his father.

So what finally *does* the lighthouse mean?

As you might expect, I think it has several meanings. In fact, one of the things that I've always liked about the novel is that the lighthouse seems to attract more and more meanings to it as the novel proceeds.

As a destination at the start of the novel, the lighthouse is the goal, the object of James's desire, the thing which, when obtained, would make him happy. As the stark tower that Mr. Ramsay sees, the lighthouse is the lonely self, out in the floods alone, bearing out life until the edge of doom. And as a light shining out in the darkness, the lighthouse symbolizes what Lily Briscoe calls those "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck in the dark" (TL: 161) those moments that happen unexpectedly for all of us, that stand out amid the waste of time.

These are the moments that Mrs. Ramsay tries so hard to create, and that I believe Virginia Woolf herself took as the goal of her art. For the world in which Virginia Woolf lived and which she envisions in her novels is one where human happiness, and indeed civilization itself, is extremely fragile. These "moments of being," as she called them, where things come together and one finds a brief respite from care are what finally sustain and inspire us. And I believe it is of the happiness of these moments that Woolf is writing in the extraordinary passage when Mrs. Ramsay gazes at the lighthouse.

She had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough.

Notes

1. "The Brown Stocking," *Mimesis*, pp. xx-xx, 1939.
2. Augustus Carmichael is probably based on a man named Joseph Wolstenholme. Leslie Stephen had known him as a brilliant mathematician at Cambridge. According to Stephen, when Wolstenholme left Cambridge, he married "an uncongenial and rather vulgar Swiss girl." He became "despondent and dissatisfied and consoled himself with mathematics and opium....His friends were few and his home life wretched. Julia could not help smiling at him; but she took him under her protection, encouraged him and petted him, and had him to stay every summer with us in the country. There he could at least be without his wife." (MB: 79)
3. My analysis of Woolf's relationship with her mother is based on the wonderful chapter on *To the Lighthouse* in Phyllis Rose's *Woman of Letters*, pp. 153-173.

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