



[To the Lighthouse](#), by Virginia Woolf

In A Nutshell

Published in 1927, *To the Lighthouse* is sandwiched between Virginia Woolf's other two most famous novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *Orlando* (1928). In our opinion, Woolf is totally at her best here, as she engages with her ongoing themes of memory, family, and fiction.

To the Lighthouse takes on some elements of Woolf's own life: she felt stifled by her father in much the same way that Mr. Ramsay squeezes the life out of his children. And the sudden deaths of her mother and her sister Stella left her in deep mourning (echoes of Mrs. Ramsay and Prue's deaths in *To the Lighthouse*).

But, Woolf herself got fed up with critics who insisted on reading the Ramsays as direct representations of the Stephens (Stephen was Woolf's maiden name). *To the Lighthouse* is also an extended meditation on the relationship between art and life, and on late Victorian family structures. (Source: Mark Massey, "Introduction," *To the Lighthouse*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Books, 2005, xlviii.)

What makes *To the Lighthouse* important in literary terms is Woolf's ambitious formal experimentation. She's really working her signature style in this novel, as she takes two days, separated by twenty years, to evoke a whole picture of the Ramsay family life. Her run-on sentences and meandering paragraphs work to replicate what her characters are *thinking* in addition to what they're doing. Woolf is a great example of the Show Don't Tell School of

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Narration. Instead of sketching us a stiffly realistic portrait of her characters, Woolf goes for the emotional impact of their internal landscapes.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 What is the effect of multiple voices narrating the story?
- 2 Is Mrs. Ramsay a net positive, negative, or neutral force?
- 3 What is the effect of the passage of time in the novel? Sometimes time goes by agonizingly slow, other times (like in Part Two) it just speeds by. What 's the deal with this?

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