

WORLD'S  CLASSICS

**VIRGINIA WOOLF**  
**TO THE LIGHTHOUSE**



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VIRGINIA WOOLF

*To the Lighthouse*



*Edited with an Introduction by*  
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## BIOGRAPHICAL PREFACE

VIRGINIA WOOLF was born Adeline Virginia Stephen on 25 January 1882 at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington. Her father, Leslie Stephen, himself a widower, had married in 1878 Julia Jackson, widow of Herbert Duckworth. Between them they already had four children; a fifth, Vanessa, was born in 1879, a sixth, Thoby, in 1880. There followed Virginia and, in 1883, Adrian.

Both of the parents had strong family associations with literature. Leslie Stephen was the son of Sir James Stephen, a noted historian, and brother of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, a distinguished lawyer and writer on law. His first wife was a daughter of Thackeray, his second had been an admired associate of the Pre-Raphaelites, and also, like her first husband, had aristocratic connections. Stephen himself is best remembered as the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and as an alpinist, but he was also a remarkable journalist, biographer, and historian of ideas; his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) is still of great value. No doubt our strongest idea of him derives from the character of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*; for a less impressionistic portrait, which conveys a strong sense of his centrality in the intellectual life of the time, one can consult Noël Annan's *Leslie Stephen* (revised edition, 1984).

Virginia had the free run of her father's library, a better substitute for the public school and university education she was denied than most women of the time could aspire to; her brothers, of course, were sent to Clifton and Westminster. Her mother died in 1895, and in that year she had her first breakdown, possibly related in some way

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to the sexual molestation of which her half-brother George Duckworth is accused. By 1897 she was able to read again, and did so voraciously: 'Gracious, child, how you gobble,' remarked her father, who, with a liberality and good sense at odds with the age in which they lived, allowed her to choose her reading freely. In other respects her relationship with her father was difficult; his deafness and melancholy, his excessive emotionalism, not helped by successive bereavements, all increased her nervousness.

Stephen fell ill in 1902 and died in 1904. Virginia suffered another breakdown, during which she heard the birds singing in Greek, a language in which she had acquired some competence. On her recovery she moved, with her brothers and sister, to a house in Gordon Square, Bloomsbury; there, and subsequently at several other nearby addresses, what eventually became famous as the Bloomsbury Group took shape.

Virginia had long considered herself a writer. It was in 1905 that she began to write for publication in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In her circle (more loosely drawn than is sometimes supposed) were many whose names are now half-forgotten, but some were or became famous: J. M. Keynes and E. M. Forster and Roger Fry; also Clive Bell, who married Vanessa, Lytton Strachey, who once proposed marriage to her, and Leonard Woolf. Despite much ill health in these years, she travelled a good deal, and had an interesting social life in London. She did a little adult-education teaching, worked for female suffrage, and shared the excitement of Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1910. In 1912, after another bout of illness, she married Leonard Woolf.

She was thirty, and had not yet published a book, though *The Voyage Out* was in preparation. It was accepted for

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publication by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth in 1913 (it appeared in 1915). She was often ill with depression and anorexia, and in 1913 attempted suicide. But after a bout of violent madness her health seemed to settle down, and in 1917 a printing press was installed at Hogarth House, Richmond, where she and her husband were living. The Hogarth Press, later an illustrious institution, but at first meant in part as therapy for Virginia, was now inaugurated. She began *Night and Day*, and finished it in 1918. It was published by Duckworth in 1919, the year in which the Woolfs bought Monk's House, Rodmell, for £700. There, in 1920, she began *Jacob's Room*, finished, and published by the Woolfs' own Hogarth Press, in 1922. In the following year she began *Mrs Dalloway* (finished in 1924, published 1925), when she was already working on *To the Lighthouse* (finished and published, after intervals of illness, in 1927). *Orlando*, a fantastic 'biography' of a man-woman, and a tribute to Virginia's close friendship with Vita Sackville-West, was written quite rapidly over the winter of 1927-8, and published, with considerable success, in October. *The Waves* was written and rewritten in 1930 and 1931 (published in October of that year). She had already started on *Flush*, the story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet dog—another success with the public—and in 1932 began work on what became *The Years*.

This brief account of her work during the first twenty years of her marriage is of course incomplete; she had also written and published many shorter works, as well as both series of *The Common Reader*, and *A Room of One's Own*. There have been accounts of the marriage very hostile to Leonard Woolf, but he can hardly be accused of cramping her talent or hindering the development of her career.

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*The Years* proved an agonizingly difficult book to finish, and was completely rewritten at least twice. Her friend Roger Fry having died in 1934, she planned to write a biography, but illnesses in 1936 delayed the project; towards the end of that year she began instead the polemical *Three Guineas*, published in 1938. *The Years* had meanwhile appeared in 1937, by which time she was again at work on the Fry biography, and already sketching in her head the book that was to be *Between the Acts*. *Roger Fry* was published in the terrifying summer of 1940. By the autumn of that year many of the familiar Bloomsbury houses had been destroyed or badly damaged by bombs. Back at Monk's House, she worked on *Between the Acts*, and finished it in February 1941. Thereafter her mental condition deteriorated alarmingly, and on 28 March, unable to face another bout of insanity, she drowned herself in the River Ouse.

Her career as a writer of fiction covers the years 1912-41, thirty years distracted by intermittent serious illness as well as by the demands, which she regarded as very important, of family and friends, and by the need or desire to write literary criticism and social comment. Her industry was extraordinary—nine highly-wrought novels, two or three of them among the great masterpieces of the form in this century, along with all the other writings, including the copious journals and letters that have been edited and published in recent years. Firmly set though her life was in the 'Bloomsbury' context—the agnostic ethic transformed from that of her forebears, the influence of G. E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles, the individual brilliance of J. M. Keynes, Strachey, Forster, and the others—we have come more and more to value the distinctiveness of her talent, so that she seems more and more to

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stand free of any context that might be thought to limit her. None of that company—except, perhaps, T. S. Eliot, who was on the fringe of it—did more to establish the possibilities of literary innovation, or to demonstrate that such innovation must be brought about by minds familiar with the innovations of the past. This is true originality. It was Eliot who said of *Jacob's Room* that in that book she had freed herself from any compromise between the traditional novel and her original gift; it was the freedom he himself sought in *The Waste Land*, published in the same year, a freedom that was dependent upon one's knowing with intimacy that with which compromise must be avoided, so that the knowledge became part of the originality. In fact she had 'gobbled' her father's books to a higher purpose than he could have understood.

*Frank Kermode*



## INTRODUCTION

*To the Lighthouse* is Virginia Woolf's most widely acclaimed novel. It stands, firmly and centrally, in her work and her life, shedding light on both her past and her future, as woman and as writer. It is more directly autobiographical than most of her fiction, as she herself makes plain in her comments on it in both letters and diaries, so no apologies are needed for introducing it initially in terms of her own history. It is rooted in family memory. It is an attempt at the exorcism of ghosts.

Indeed, it is so closely connected with recollections of her mother and her father that she herself wondered whether it was really a novel at all. Should not some new word be found for such an enterprise? On 27 June 1925, when she was planning the work, she wrote in her diary: 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel". A new—by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?' And *To the Lighthouse* is indeed an elegy—for both her parents, though, interestingly, it is her father that she mentions first: 'the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat reciting We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel' (14 May 1925). It is also a lament for her dead brother Thoby, for her dead half-sister Stella, for her own childhood.

Much has been written about her relationship with both her parents, but nobody has disputed that they live again in Mr and Mrs Ramsay, although some have thought the portrait of her father unfairly harsh. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen (1832–1904), was, like Mr Ramsay, a well-known philosopher not of the first rank, but, unlike Mr Ramsay, he was also a literary critic and biographer, and the first editor

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of that huge monument to the famous dead, the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Like Ramsay, he would cry aloud to himself poetry both good and bad; he was a leader of men, a great walker, and a climber of mountain peaks; he was occasionally tyrannical, short-tempered, and unpredictable, grew impatient with guests, and groaned with boredom at the dinner table; he was precise and hated the female habit of exaggeration; he longed for praise and admiration; and, like Ramsay, he was greatly dependent on his wife. He married Julia Duckworth (née Jackson) in 1878, a second marriage for both of them, and was, like Mr Ramsay, profoundly affected, indeed shattered, by her sudden and unexpected death in 1895, when Virginia was thirteen.

There is no doubt that Julia, herself a famous Pre-Raphaelite beauty, was the model for the generous, hospitable, kind-hearted Mrs Ramsay (whose Christian name is never divulged). Virginia's older sister Vanessa Bell at once acknowledged this, in a letter dated 11 May 1927, in which she wrote: 'you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character . . . it was like meeting her again with oneself grown up and on equal terms.' This praise gave Virginia much pleasure, as she notes in her diary on 16 May. Of the portrait of her father, the original central character, Vanessa says merely: 'You have given father too I think as clearly but perhaps, I may be wrong, that isn't quite so difficult.' Virginia makes no reference to this response. Is there an implied hint of an accusation from Vanessa of caricature, of seizing on externals? Or did Vanessa's own hostile feelings about her father complicate her reaction?

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The setting of this novel is as important as its cast, and it too is deeply rooted in remembered reality. The action takes place in a spacious family holiday home in Scotland rented by the Ramsays, which they visit every summer, as the Stephen family visited St Ives in Cornwall. It is vain to look for a precise Scottish location: Skye and the Hebrides are mentioned in the text, and the local characters have Scottish names (McNab, Macalister), but the critic David Daiches, himself a Scot, has said that, although he amused himself trying to 'pin down the island' from internal topographical references, he failed to do so.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that Woolf has transposed St Ives to Scotland—a fact that she somewhat irritably admitted in her comments on a letter from Sydney Olivier: 'I don't defend my accuracy . . . Lord Olivier writes that my horticulture and natural history is in every instance wrong: there are no rooks, elms and dahlias in the Hebrides.'<sup>2</sup>

Virginia was happy at St Ives, and continued all her life to love Cornwall. These childhood holidays were, for her, as her nephew and biographer Quentin Bell has said, a taste of Earthly Paradise. The entire family would take the train there for the summer, which they spent at Talland House, on the hillside behind the station, overlooking the bay, with a clear view of Godrevy lighthouse. There they would be joined by 'cousins, uncles, nephews and nieces in great quantities'<sup>3</sup> and by friends, guests, and hangers-on,

<sup>1</sup> David Daiches, 'The Semi-Transparent Envelope', in *Virginia Woolf* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1942; rev. edn., New York: New Directions, 1963), 83 n.

<sup>2</sup> *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (6 vols.; London: Hogarth Press, 1975–84); Letter to Vanessa, 22 May 1927.

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (2 vols.; London: Hogarth Press, 1972), i, ch. 2.

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many of whom lodged in the little town (although Henry James stayed in the large castellated railway hotel just along the road). Guests and visitors included James Russell Lowell, Virginia's American godfather; the once brilliant opium-taking mathematician Joseph Wostenholme (known to the children as 'The Woolly One'); George Meredith (who also created a fictional portrait of Leslie Stephen as Vernon Whitford, 'Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar', in his novel *The Egoist*, 1879); and the infant Rupert Brooke. This ever changing group of characters is represented in *To the Lighthouse* by scholar Charles Tansley, painter Lily Briscoe, mathematician Augustus Carmichael, botanist William Bankes, and the young couple, Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, most of whom can be traced back to single or multiple models.

The family itself was large, though not quite as large as the Ramsays. Leslie and Julia had four children (Vanessa, b. 1879; Thoby, b. 1880; Virginia, b. 1882; and Adrian, b. 1883), and Stella Duckworth, Julia's daughter by her first marriage, was always in attendance. Many of the small incidents that make up the texture of the novel also find their counterparts in real life: the games of cricket on the lawn (Virginia was known as 'the demon bowler'), the match-making and charitable visits of Mrs Ramsay, the fishing expeditions, the hunting for bugs and moths and crabs—and, of course, the trip to the lighthouse. As the family magazine recorded, after describing a voyage taken to Godrevy by Thoby and Virginia 'with a perfect tide and wind', 'Master Adrian Stephen was much disappointed at not being allowed to go.'<sup>4</sup>

St Ives was already an artist's colony, and, although the

<sup>4</sup> *Hyde Park Gate News*, 12 Sept. 1892.

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musings of painter Lily Briscoe have more relevance to Virginia Woolf's own artistic struggles than to art history, the Stephen children must have been aware of the recent 'discovery' of the region by Whistler and his two young assistants, Walter Richard Sickert and Mortimer Menpes. Leslie Stephen had little feeling for the visual arts, but Julia came from a family with many artistic connections, had modelled for Burne-Jones, and had received proposals of marriage from Holman Hunt and sculptor Thomas Woolner; like Mrs Ramsay, she watched with a semi-professional interest as Sunday painters set their easels for views of the harbour and the bay. An informal artists' club was founded in 1888 and no doubt the fictitious and trend-setting Mr Paunceforte (who worried Lily by seeing everything as 'pale, elegant, semi-transparent') would have been an associate member.

Woolf, in 1925-7, was of course writing with hindsight, after the dramatic impact of Post-Impressionism championed in 1910 by her friend the painter and critic Roger Fry; but the conflict between traditionalism and modernism, which still rages at St Ives, is foreshadowed in Lily's lonely search for an art of space and mass and bright colour—a search which obviously echoes Woolf's own quest for a new medium, a new novel.

There is a temptation to spend time looking for more and more correspondences between life and art, for they certainly exist, but of course they exist on a level deeper than mere factual identification. This novel is also a profound work of the redeeming imagination, in which the urge to transform embraces and transcends the urge to record. This is Virginia Woolf's attempt to understand and accept not only her own past and its great sorrows but also the nature of time and immortality. Like Mr Ramsay,

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Woolf is obsessed by the perishability of fame and the menacing oblivion of death. She too coveted an enduring reputation. The novel is structured round a series of images which suggest the strife between permanence and evanescence (the lighthouse itself, the lost brooch, the boar's skull, the body preserved in peat, the work of art, the dinner table), and Woolf's prose captures the extraordinary pulsing and momentary vacillations and vibrations between stability and flux, the momentary and the eternal, the trivial and the grave in daily life.

The story itself is very simple, so simple that it almost vanishes, but those who do not wish the minimal plot to be divulged should read the novel first, then return to this Introduction. In the first section, 'The Window', we are introduced to the Ramsays on vacation, and to their guests. James, the youngest, longs passionately to go to the lighthouse the next day; his mother encourages him in his hope, but his father and the lower-middle-class 'little atheist' apprentice philosopher Charles Tansley say it will rain. The fluctuating relationship of Mr and Mrs Ramsay is further explored, and male and female attitudes are contrasted. Lily Briscoe works at her painting in the garden. The children play cricket. The charming but not very bright Paul Rayley proposes to Minta Doyle, encouraged by Mrs Ramsay's approval, and is accepted. The family and guests meet for dinner, and harmony is struck as they enjoy a *bœuf en daube*. In this section (in length, more than half the book) we see Mrs Ramsay in her domestic role, knitting a stocking; we see her as mother, reading a story to James, comforting the younger children when they go to bed; we see her as hostess, presiding at her own table (and planning a match between Lily Briscoe and Mr Bankes); and we see her as wife, yielding to but simultaneously

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triumphing over her husband. The entire action takes place in the space of one afternoon and evening.

In the second and shortest section, 'Time Passes', we visit the house in the absence of its owners, and note the effects of time upon it. We learn, in abrupt parentheses, that Mrs Ramsay has died suddenly, that the eldest daughter Prue has married, and, a paragraph later, that she has died. The most promising son, Andrew, has also died, blown up by a shell in the First World War. Time passes, until the old charwoman Mrs McNab hears that at last the family is coming back. She cleans and tidies the house. In the closing paragraphs Lily Briscoe and Mr Carmichael return. This section spans ten years.

In the third and last section, 'The Lighthouse', Lily Briscoe, who is still single and now aged forty-four, completes her painting, and Mr Ramsay and the two youngest children, Cam and James, now sixteen and seventeen, set off for and reach the lighthouse.

And that is the whole of the action, although we learn of other matters through interior monologue: we learn, for instance, that the marriage arranged between Paul and Minta has not been happy, and that the unpromising and elderly Mr Carmichael has had a modest success as a poet—thanks, it is said, to the war, which has revived interest in poetry. But it is clear that most of what happens, happens internally. This is an inner, psychological drama, told in a modernist manner, employing with great control and facility Virginia Woolf's adaptation of the 'stream of consciousness' technique, which allows her to present the eddies and shifts of her characters' thoughts and feelings—most intimately, those of Mrs Ramsay and Lily, though most of the others (even the sketchily drawn Mrs McNab) are also given, less expansively, their own interior life. We

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may note here particularly the extraordinarily rapid and extreme shifts of attitude of both Lily Briscoe and Mrs Ramsay towards Charles Tansley, which mirror the reader's own responses to him: at one moment judging him a graceless pedant and a bore, at the next condemning oneself for this judgement and opening up to him in sympathy.

Virginia Woolf was very consciously a modernist—which is in part to say that she had divorced herself, after her earliest novels, from attempts at conventional plot-filled narration in the mode of John Galsworthy or H. G. Wells, and from detailed realistic descriptions of material objects and social background in the manner of Arnold Bennett. She had deliberately distanced herself from the older generation of successful Edwardian novelists, whom she labelled 'materialists', and had struck out, with her third novel, *Jacob's Room* (1922), towards a form of poetic impressionism and indirect narration which became a hallmark of her most distinctive work. (*Jacob's Room* reads in many ways like a first draft for *To the Lighthouse*: it has many of the same motifs, including the seascapes, the fishing expedition, the skull, the lost brooch, the sudden barely announced death in action, the empty room.)

What was to be the material of the 'new novel', if novel it was to be called? In her essay 'Modern Novels' Virginia Woolf states that 'for the moderns . . . the point of interest lies very likely in the dark places of psychology and continues: "The proper stuff of fiction" does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon . . .'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *TLS*, Apr. 1919; revised as 'Modern Fiction' for *The Common Reader* (1925).



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She explores these dark places of psychology in *To the Lighthouse*. She is willing here to examine both the happiness and the unhappiness of her own past, and her troubling relationship with her father; it is perhaps surprising, in view of this dangerous material, that she seems to have written much of the book with so little anguish and so much sense of ease and fluency. The book clearly has Freudian resonances, which remind us that she was writing at a period when Freud's work was very much in the general literate consciousness. She tended to joke dismissively about Freud and his theories in her letters, but as he was published by her own Hogarth Press, and in translations by James Strachey (brother of her close friend Lytton Strachey), she can hardly have evaded his influence. Some of the imagery of the novel is overtly Freudian: in the fourth paragraph of the opening section, for example, we come across a classic example of the Oedipus complex in young James: 'Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it' (p. 8).

The dry, hard imagery associated with Mr Ramsay,—the Alpine peaks of abstract thought, the alphabetic linear mode of progress, the 'fatal sterility of the male . . . like a beak of brass, barren and bare' (p. 52)—are throughout contrasted with the 'delicious fecundity' of Mrs Ramsay—her vagueness (and her short-sightedness), her fluidity and flexibility of temperament, her rapid leaps from anxieties about life and death and the nature of great men to anxieties about rabbits, dinner, and the cost of a new greenhouse. He is 'a beak of brass'; she is a hive, a dome, 'a wedge-shaped core of darkness' (pp. 71, 85).

One must beware, however, of interpreting all references