

A lighthouse stands on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean. A large, bright full moon is visible in the sky. The scene is set against a blue sky with scattered clouds.

To The Lighthouse

Virginia Woolf



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Virginia Woolf



Notes About the Author:

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was born in the 25th of January, 1882. She was an English author, essayist, publisher and short story writer. She is regarded as one of the most famous modernist figures in the 20th century. Her famous works include: *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*. She has a famous long essay called *A Room of One's Own*. She ended her life in the 28th of March, 1941.

(she kept looking at the house, hoping for an interruption) before it swept her down in its flow.

“Such expeditions,” said Mr. Ramsay, scraping the ground with his toe, “are very painful.” Still Lily said nothing. (She is a stock, she is a stone, he said to himself.) “They are very exhausting,” he said, looking, with a sickly look that nauseated her (he was acting, she felt, this great man was dramatizing himself), at his beautiful hands. It was horrible, it was indecent. Would they never come, she asked, for she could not sustain this enormous weight of sorrow, support these heavy draperies of grief (he had assumed a pose of extreme decrepitude; he even tottered a little as he stood there) a moment longer.

Still she could say nothing; the whole horizon seemed swept bare of objects to talk about; could only feel, amazedly, as Mr. Ramsay stood there, how his gaze seemed to fall dolefully over the sunny grass and discolor it, and cast over the rubicund, drowsy, entirely contented figure of Mr. Carmichael, reading a French novel on a deck-chair, a veil of crape, as if such an existence, flaunting its prosperity in a world of woe, were enough to provoke the most dismal thoughts of all. Look at him, he seemed to be saying, look at me, and indeed, all the time he was feeling, Think of me, think of me. Ah, could that bulk only be wafted alongside of them, Lily wished; had she only pitched her easel a yard or two closer to him; a man, any man, would staunch this effusion, would stop these lamentations. A woman, she had provoked this horror; a woman, she should have known how to deal with it. It was immensely to her discredit, to stand there dumb. One said – what did one say? – Oh, Mr. Ramsay! Dear Mr. Ramsay! That was what that kind old lady who sketched, Mrs. Beckwith, would have said instantly, and rightly. But, no. They stood there, isolated from the rest of the world. His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet. In complete silence, she stood there, grasping her paint brush.

Heaven could never be sufficiently praised! She heard sounds in the house.

My notes



James and Cam must be coming. But Mr. Ramsay, as if he knew that his time ran short, exerted upon her solitary figure the immense pressure of his concentrated woe, his age, his frailty, his desolation, when suddenly, tossing his head impatiently, in his annoyance – for after all, what woman could resist him? – he noticed that his boot-laces were untied. Remarkable boots they were too, Lily thought, looking down at them: sculptured; colossal; like everything that Mr. Ramsay wore, from his frayed tie to his half-buttoned waistcoat, his own indisputably. She could see them walking to his room of their own accord, expressive in his absence of pathos, surliness, ill-temper, charm.

“What beautiful boots!” she exclaimed. She was ashamed of herself. To praise his boots when he asked her to solace his soul, when he had shown her his bleeding hands, his lacerated heart, and asked her to pity them, then to say, cheerfully, “Ah, but what beautiful boots you wear!” deserved, she knew, and she looked up expecting to get it, in one of his sudden roars of ill-temper, complete annihilation.

Instead, Mr. Ramsay smiled. His pall, his draperies, his infirmities fell from him. Ah, yes, he said, holding his foot up for her to look at, they were first-rate boots. There was only one man in England who could make boots like that. Boots are among the chief curses of mankind, he said. “Bootmakers make it their business,” he exclaimed, “to cripple and torture the human foot.” They are also the most obstinate and perverse of mankind. It had taken him the best part of his youth to get boots made as they should be made. He would have her observe (he lifted his right foot and then his left) that she had never seen boots made quite that shape before. They were made of the finest leather in the world, also. Most leather was mere brown paper and cardboard. He looked complacently at his foot, still held in the air. They had reached, she felt, a sunny island where peace dwelt, sanity reigned and the sun for ever shone, the blessed island of good boots. Her heart warmed to him. “Now let me see if you can tie a knot,” he said. He pooh-poohed her feeble system. He showed her his own invention. Once you tied it, it never came undone. Three

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“What beautiful boots!” Comment.

The Rayleys, thought Lily Briscoe, squeezing her tube of green paint. She collected her impressions of the Rayleys. Their lives appeared to her in a series of scenes; one, on the staircase at dawn. Paul had come in and gone to bed early; Minta was late. There was Minta, wreathed, tinted, garish on the stairs about three o'clock in the morning. Paul came out in his pajamas carrying a poker in case of burglars. Minta was eating a sandwich, standing half-way up by a window, in the cadaverous early morning light, and the carpet had a hole in it. But what did they say? Lily asked herself, as if by looking she could hear them. Minta went on eating her sandwich, annoyingly, while he spoke something violent, abusing her, in a mutter so as not to wake the children, the two little boys. He was withered, drawn; she flamboyant, careless. For things had worked loose after the first year or so; the marriage had turned out rather badly. And this, Lily thought, taking the green paint on her brush, this making up scenes about them, is what we call "knowing" people, "thinking" of them, "being fond" of them! Not a word of it was true; she had made it up, but it was what she knew them by all the same. She went on tunneling her way into her picture, into the past.

Another time, Paul said he "played chess in coffee-houses." She had built up a whole structure of imagination on that saying too. She remembered how, as he said it, she thought how he rang up the servant, and she said, "Mrs. Rayley's out, sir," and he decided that he would not come home either. She saw him sitting in the corner of some lugubrious place where the smoke attached itself to the red plush seats, and the waitresses got to know you, and he played chess with a little man who was in the tea trade and lived at Surbiton, but that was all Paul knew about him. And then Minta, was out when he came home and then there was that scene on the stairs, when he got the poker in case of burglars (no doubt to frighten her too) and spoke so bitterly, saying she had ruined his life. At any rate when she went down to see them at a cottage near Rickmansworth, things were horribly strained. Paul took her down the garden to look at the Belgian hares which he bred, and Minta followed them, singing, and put her bare arm on his shoulder, lest he should tell her anything.

My notes



and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have – to want and want – how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again! Oh, Mrs. Ramsay! she called out silently, to that essence which sat by the boat, that abstract one made of her, that woman in gray, as if to abuse her for having gone, and then having gone, come back again. It had seemed so safe, thinking of her. Ghost, air, nothingness, a thing you could play with easily and safely at any time of day or night, she had been that, and then suddenly she put her hand out and wrung the heart thus. Suddenly, the empty drawing-room steps, the frill of the chair inside, the puppy tumbling on the terrace, the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a center of complete emptiness.

“What does it mean? How do you explain it all?” she wanted to say, turning to Mr. Carmichael again. For the whole world seemed to have dissolved in this early morning hour into a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality, and one could almost fancy that had Mr. Carmichael spoken, for instance, a little tear would have rent the surface pool. And then? Something would emerge. A hand would be shoved up, a blade would be flashed. It was nonsense of course.

A curious notion came to her that he did after all hear the things she could not say. He was an inscrutable old man, with the yellow stain on his beard, and his poetry, and his puzzles, sailing serenely through a world which satisfied all his wants, so that she thought he had only to put down his hand where he lay on the lawn to fish up anything he wanted. She looked at her picture. That would have been his answer, presumably – how “you” and “I” and “she” pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint. Yet it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa; yet even so, even of a picture like that, it was true. One might say, even of this scrawl, not of that actual picture, perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it “remained for ever,” she was going to say, or, for the words spoken sounded even to herself, too boastful, to hint, wordlessly; when, looking at the picture, she was surprised to find that she could not see it. Her eyes were full of a hot liquid (she did not think of tears at first) which, without disturbing the firmness of her lips, made the air thick, rolled down

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Why does Lily feel that thinking of Mrs. Ramsay is safe?

up from the grass. He settled into his chair again puffing and blowing like some sea monster. That was different altogether, because he was so near. And now again all was quiet. They must be out of bed by this time, she supposed, looking at the house, but nothing appeared there. But then, she remembered, they had always made off directly a meal was over, on business of their own. It was all in keeping with this silence, this emptiness, and the unreality of the early morning hour. It was a way things had sometimes, she thought, lingering for a moment and looking at the long glittering windows and the plume of blue smoke; they became unreal. So coming back from a journey, or after an illness, before habits had spun themselves across the surface, one felt that same unreality, which was so startling; felt something emerge. Life was most vivid then. One could be at one's ease. Mercifully one need not say, very briskly, crossing the lawn to greet old Mrs. Beckwith, who would be coming out to find a corner to sit in, "Oh, good morning, Mrs. Beckwith! What a lovely day! Are you going to be so bold as to sit in the sun? Jasper's hidden the chairs. Do let me find you one!" and all the rest of the usual chatter. One need not speak at all. One glided, one shook one's sails (there was a good deal of movement in the bay, boats were starting off) between things, beyond things. Empty it was not, but full to the brim. She seemed to be standing up to the lips in some substance, to move and float and sink in it, yes, for these waters were unfathomably deep. Into them had spilled so many lives. The Ramsays'; the children's; and all sorts of waifs and strays of things besides. A washerwoman with her basket; a rook, a red-hot poker; the purples and gray-greens of flowers: some common feeling held the whole.

It was some such feeling of completeness perhaps which, ten years ago, standing almost where she stood now, had made her say that she must be in love with the place. Love had a thousand shapes. There might be lovers whose gift it was to choose out the elements of things and place them together and so, giving them a wholeness not theirs in life, make of some scene, or meeting of people (all now gone and separate), one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers, and love plays.

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How does Lily feel about Mr. Ramsay while he is faraway?

We're almost there."

"He's doing very well," said Macalister, praising James. "He's keeping her very steady."

But his father never praised him, James thought grimly.

Mr. Ramsay opened the parcel and shared out the sandwiches among them. Now he was happy, eating bread and cheese with these fishermen. He would have liked to live in a cottage and lounge about in the harbor spitting with the other old men, James thought, watching him slice his cheese into thin yellow sheets with his **penknife**.

This is right, this is it, Cam kept feeling, as she peeled her hard-boiled egg. Now she felt as she did in the study when the old men were reading *The Times*. Now I can go on thinking whatever I like, and I shan't fall over a precipice or be drowned, for there he is, keeping his eye on me, she thought.

At the same time, they were sailing so fast along by the rocks that it was very exciting – it seemed as if they were doing two things at once; they were eating their lunch here in the sun and they were also making for safety in a great storm after a shipwreck. Would the water **last**? Would the provisions last? she asked herself, telling herself a story but knowing at the same time what was the truth.

They would soon be out of it, Mr. Ramsay was saying to old Macalister, but their children would see some strange things. Macalister said he was seventy-five last March; Mr. Ramsay was seventy-one. Macalister said he had never seen a doctor; he had never lost a tooth. And that's the way I'd like my children to live – Cam was sure that her father was thinking that, for he stopped her throwing a sandwich into the sea and told her, as if he were thinking of the fishermen and how they lived, that if she did not want it she should put it back in the parcel. She should not waste it. He said it so wisely, as if he knew so well all the things that happened in the world that she put it back at once, and then he gave her, from his own parcel, a **gingerbread**

My notes



Post-reading Activities

Chapter 1

1. Which thought torments Lily Briscoe in the opening paragraph?
.....
2. Why is Lily unable to answer Nancy's question about what to send to the Lighthouse?
.....
3. How does she feel, 'Sitting alone ... among the clean cups at the long table'? Why is this?
.....
4. 'She pretended to drink out of her empty coffee cup so as to escape him – to escape his demand on her, to put aside a moment longer that imperious need'. Explain its meaning. Who is meant by 'him'? What is 'that imperious need'?
.....
5. Consider: 'Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together?' What are 'the parts'?
.....
6. Why does Lily feel she has to escape?
.....

Glossary

- as a matter of fact:** in reality
- bareheaded:** not wearing a hat
- blur:** confused shape
- born:** (here) very good, instinctive
- buoyantly:** lightly
- censer:** vessel in which incense is burnt in churches
- cricketing:** playing cricket
- dab:** small amount
- drowsily:** sleepily
- endure:** bear
- fading:** going slowly out of view
- flanks:** sides of a human being
- fluttering:** moving about in an irregular way
- frenzy:** wildly excited
- gingerbread:** cake flavored with ginger, a spicy root
- hovered:** remained in the air
- lapse:** go back to the previous state
- last:** be enough
- leapt:** jumped
- loomed up:** appeared as a large indistinct shape
- make a fuss:** become unnecessarily excited
- out of your reach:** so far that one cannot reach
- patter:** sound of quick, light taps
- penknife:** small knife carried in the pocket
- rough and tumble:** disordered state
- shabby:** in bad condition, poorly dressed
- shading:** sheltering
- shaggy:** rough and coarse
- shriek:** scream
- sprinkled:** threw in various directions
- spurred:** caused to come out suddenly
- stark:** looking severe without any color or decoration
- stump:** part of a tree remaining when the trunk has been cut down or fallen
- tacked:** changed direction, so that the wind blows into the sails from the opposite side
- thrill:** excited feeling
- filler:** handle fixed to the rudder (flat, broad piece of wood) used to steer the boat
- to the utmost:** to the greatest degree possible
- treasured up:** stored for future use
- tuff:** bunch of grass growing together
- vowed:** promised solemnly



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