

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Virginia Woolf was born on 25th January 1882 in London. Her parents were wealthy and their home was comfortable. Virginia grew up surrounded by books and intelligent conversation.

Virginia Woolf had a tragic life. Many of the people closest to her died prematurely¹ and she suffered a number of nervous breakdowns² throughout her life. After her father's death in 1904, Virginia moved to the Bloomsbury area of London. Here, with her brother and friends, she helped form the Bloomsbury Group. The group was an intellectual circle of writers and artists who greatly influenced cultural attitudes in Britain in the early 20th century.



In 1912, Virginia married Leonard Woolf. He was the stable³ presence that Virginia needed.

Virginia Woolf is acknowledged as one of the greatest innovators in the English language and is a leading writer of the Modernist movement. She used a literary device called "stream of consciousness"⁴ to give voice to her characters' thoughts.

She wrote nine novels, two biographies, a volume of short stories, five volumes of collected essays and reviews, and a volume of selections from her diary. Her most famous novels are: *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One's Own*.

In March 1941, Virginia drowned herself⁵ in a river near her East Sussex home. In a letter to her husband she said that she felt she was going insane⁶ and she did not want to spoil his life, too.

- 1 **prematurely:** early; before the usual time
- 2 **nervous breakdowns:** periods of depression and mental illness
- 3 **stable:** calm and unchanging
- 4 **stream of consciousness:** a style of writing that describes the continuous flow of thoughts of a person
- 5 **drowned herself:** killed herself by going underwater
- 6 **insane:** mad

ABOUT THE BOOK

To the Lighthouse is Virginia Woolf's most autobiographical novel. When her sister Vanessa Bell, a painter like Lily Briscoe, read *To the Lighthouse*, she felt that their parents lived again in its pages. Her husband, Leonard, said it was a masterpiece.

Virginia and her family spent every summer until she was thirteen at a summer house in St Ives in Cornwall. Her mother, like Mrs Ramsay in the novel, invited friends from London to stay and the house was always full of guests. And as dusk¹ fell, they watched the beam² from Godrevy Lighthouse. After her mother's death in 1895, her father, like Mr Ramsay, didn't want to go there any more.



Godrevy Lighthouse in St. Ives Bay, Cornwall

The novel develops a series of thoughts rather than a plot, centering on themes like women's role in society, death and change. Virginia Woolf grew up in a time when women were wives and mothers and male domination in society was the norm³.

She rejected these attitudes and her novel punishes women who accept the roles of wife and mother. Marriages end in tragedy or boredom, childbearing⁴ ends in death and only independent single women survive.

Because she was deeply affected by deaths in her family, Virginia Woolf wanted the characters in her novel to defeat⁵ death. Mrs Ramsay wants to be remembered after her death, Mr Ramsay wants people to read his books after his death and Lily Briscoe would like to see her paintings hung for posterity⁶. All the characters are seeking a sense of permanence, and perhaps the author was, too.

- 1 **dusk:** the time of day just before night
- 2 **beam:** line of light
- 3 **norm:** standard rule
- 4 **childbearing:** the process of giving birth
- 5 **defeat:** win against
- 6 **posterity:** people, usually family, who live after you die

BEFORE READING


- 1** The lighthouse is a symbol of many things in the novel. Circle three words below that best describe the lighthouse for you.

calm
comforting
dangerous
distant
lonely
mysterious
peaceful
permanent
protective
tall



- 2** Complete the sentence with one of the words above. Check your answer after you have read the book.

"She looked at the long steady stroke of the Lighthouse, the last of the three, which was her stroke. She felt _____ again."

-  **3** Have you ever been to a lighthouse or seen a lighthouse? Describe your experience. Then tell the class.

- 4 Sometimes places hold special memories. The lighthouse is special to the characters in the novel. Is there a building that is special to you? It may be a house, a castle or a museum. Write a paragraph about it.

When did you visit it?

Who did you go with?

Why is it special?

- 5 Find these lines from *The Charge of the Light Brigade* in the novel. Decide on their meaning in the context of the novel.

A

Someone had blundered.

Who had “blundered” (made a mistake)?

- ☐ Mr Ramsay, because he didn’t pursue his studies to the full.
- ☐ Mrs Ramsay, because she only liked domestic life.

B

Attacked by gunshot and shell, bravely we rode and well, through the valley of Death.

What does this picture of bravery under gunshot and shell bring to mind?

- ☐ Facing life and daily events in a heroic way.
- ☐ Standing still and watching everyday life go by.

The Charge of the Light Brigade is a poem by Alfred Tennyson about an episode of the Crimean War. On 25th October 1854 near Balaclava, because of an error, either from the high command or from bad communication, more than one hundred men of the British cavalry were led to their death against Russian forces down a narrow valley.



I. THE WINDOW



"Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," said Mrs Ramsay. "But you'll have to get up very early," she added.

These words made her six-year-old son very happy. It was settled¹. The expedition² was going to take place. He had looked forward to this adventure for years and years. And after a night's darkness and a day's sail³, it was finally going to happen.

James Ramsay, sitting on the floor, cutting out pictures from a catalogue, was very happy. His mother watched him cut neatly⁴ round the refrigerator. "He looks very serious," she thought. "I can imagine him as a judge, dressed in a red robe with white fur, or helping the country through a crisis."

"But, it won't be fine," said James's father, as he stopped in front of the drawing room⁵ window.



¹ **settled:** decided

² **expedition:** adventurous trip or journey

³ **a day's sail:** one day in a boat

⁴ **neatly;** in a tidy, ordered way

⁵ **drawing room:** formal living room



At that moment, James wanted to kill his father. Mr Ramsay always provoked¹ strong emotions in his children. He stood there, thin as a knife. And he was smiling with the pleasure of disappointing² his son and ridiculing³ his wife, who was ten thousand times better than him (James thought).

Mr Ramsay was always right, and he knew it. What he said was true. It was always true. He never changed a disagreeable⁴ word to make somebody happy, least of all his own children.

"They should be aware⁵ from childhood that life is difficult," he thought.

"But it may be fine," said Mrs Ramsay, as she was knitting⁶ the brown sock.

If she managed to finish the sock and if they did go to the Lighthouse, she wanted to give it to the Lighthouse keeper for his little boy. She also wanted to give him some old magazines and some tobacco. She would take all the things lying about the house that were not really wanted. She wanted to give those poor people something to amuse them. They must be bored to death⁷ sitting all day with nothing to do except polish⁸ the lamp.

"How would you like to be shut up for a month in stormy weather, on a rock the size of a tennis court? How would you like to see nobody? How would you like to see the same boring waves week after week? How would you like that?" she asked her daughters. "We must take them whatever comforts we can."

1 **provoked:** caused

2 **disappointing:** taking away the hope of something good

3 **ridiculing:** making her seem stupid

4 **disagreeable:** unpleasant; not nice

5 **be aware:** know

6 **knitting:** making clothes with wool and needles (see page 12)



Alone

- Do you like being on your own or do you prefer being with other people?
- Imagine what it is like to be a lighthouse keeper. Share with a friend.



"The wind is due west⁹," said the atheist¹⁰ Tansley.

A due west wind was the worst wind for landing at the Lighthouse.

Yes, he did say disagreeable things, Mrs Ramsay thought. Now James was even more disappointed. But she did not let the children laugh at Tansley. "The little atheist," the children called him. Rose made fun of him. Prue made fun of him. Andrew, Jasper and Roger made fun of him.

Mrs Ramsay hated incivility¹¹ to her guests, especially to young men. She had invited lots of poor but very talented¹² young men to stay with them on holiday on the Isle of Skye. Indeed, she had the whole of the male sex under her protection; for their chivalry¹³ and bravery, for the fact that they made treaties¹⁴, ruled India and controlled finance.

⁷ **bored to death:** very bored

⁸ **polish:** clean

⁹ **due west:** blowing directly from the west

¹⁰ **atheist:** person who doesn't believe in God

¹¹ **incivility:** not polite behavior

¹² **talented:** with skills; who were very good at doing some things

¹³ **chivalry:** good manners towards females

¹⁴ **treaties:** agreements between countries