

Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse
Monthly Discussion Sections, chapters I-XIII, up to p. 73

1. Although the characterizations of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay arose from Woolf's memories of her father, the scholar Leslie Stephen, and her mother Julia, who died when Woolf was thirteen, the novel is more than a fictionalized memoir. Transmogrifying her memories, how does Woolf embody two radically different ways of seeing the world in Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay? How do these differences impact the Ramsays' marital relationship?
2. What does the reader learn about the internal, private consciousness of each of these parental figures? How self-aware is each? How multi-dimensional? What struggles does each one face?
3. Although "The Window" portrays a happy family on vacation, life's big questions intrude into their leisured lives—questions about the nature of truth, the wastes of time, the inevitability of death, the nothingness beyond. How do various characters wrestle with these questions?
4. How and why does Woolf use humor in her portraits of both the domestic and the academic worlds?
5. How do the Ramsays' guests (Lily Briscoe, William Bankes, Charles Tansley, Augustus Carmichael) see and judge Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and their marriage?
6. The novel arranges a group of characters without partners around a central married couple with their eight children so that the narrative foregrounds the issue of marriage in general. What varied perspectives does the novel train on the question of marriage?
7. How are gender roles defined in the world of the novel? How are these roles inculcated and sustained? Can they be transcended in this fictional world?
8. Although the setting for To the Lighthouse arose from Woolf's memories of many childhood vacations spent in Cornwall, the novel uses space and geography to signify more than the picturesque. In these early chapters of the novel, what resonances of meaning does Woolf draw from "the window," where Mrs. Ramsay sits with James; from the house; from the lighthouse on a nearby island; from the placement of Lily's easel on the lawn? (The significance of this symbolic geography expands and becomes increasingly complex as the story unfolds.)
9. Lily Briscoe's attempt to paint Mrs. Ramsay and James in the window is fraught with struggle. What struggles does she face? What is Lily trying to achieve? How would you categorize Lily's style of painting?