Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*
Bi-monthly Discussion Prompts

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 and their children?
   - What does the reader learn about the internal, private consciousness of each of these parental figures? What struggles does each one face?

2. 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 in section one?
   - How does section three transform the varied perspectives offered in section one?

3. How are gender roles defined in the world of the novel?
   - How are these roles inculcated and sustained?
   - Do they change fundamentally over the ten years of the novel’s trajectory?
   - Can they be transcended in this fictional world?

4. Although sections one and three of the novel portray a family and friends on vacation, life’s big questions intrude into their leisured lives—questions about the value of work, the nature of truth, the wastes of time, the inevitability of death, the nothingness beyond.
   - How does each of the central characters wrestle with these questions?
   - What answers does section two, “Time Passes,” offer to these questions?

5. During the dinner, which brings the Ramsay’s family and guests together around a table, Woolf allows us into the minds of some of her central characters.
   - How does each view the dinner?
   - Do the characters genuinely connect with one other, or do they remain isolated in their individual consciousnesses?
   - How does the narration in “Time Passes” respond to the following description of a moment during the dinner in section one?

   “Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight . . . into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass . . . here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land . . . Some change at once went through them all . . . and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there.” (97)

6. What happens to typical novelistic narration and characterization in “Time Passes”?
   - What is the story?
   - Who are the central characters?
• How does the Great War (World War I) intrude into the small speck of the natural world described in “Time Passes”?

7. In the third section of the novel, Mr. Ramsay has summoned family and friends again to the vacation home described in section one.
• To what end?
• How does section three reprise the day described in section one?
• How has that day ten years ago affected the lives of Lily and James in the intervening years?
• Do the vacationers rescue anything of the past from the flux and chaos described in “Time Passes”?

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.
• 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 Lily’s placement of her easel on the lawn?
• Do the meanings suggested by this symbolic geography develop and expand between sections one and three?
• What, ultimately, does the journey to the lighthouse mean in the lives of the characters, in Woolf’s own vision?

9. As the grieving widower, Mr. Ramsay is a dominating presence in section three, although Woolf does not bring us into his thoughts. Instead, she shares with us the thoughts of Lily, James, and Cam as they try to deal with Mr. Ramsay’s looming presence. What does he demand? What do they give? Do either the now-adolescent children or the old family friend ever achieve a genuine connection with Mr. Ramsay?

10. In section one Lily’s attempt to paint Mrs. Ramsay and James in the window is fraught with struggle, but at the end of section three she declares, “I have had my vision” (209).
• What struggles—artistic, personal, philosophical—does Lily face as she paints?
• What is she trying to achieve? What is her vision?
• What does her vision have to do with Mrs. Ramsay? With the journey of Mr. Ramsay, James, and Cam “To the Lighthouse”?
• What does Woolf’s dramatization of Lily’s creative process suggest about the nature of art?