

Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

Monthly Discussion Sections, pp. 73-143, “The Window” ch. XIV – “Time Passes” ch. X

1. During the dinner, which brings together the Ramsay’s family and guests, Virginia Woolf allows us into the minds of some of her central characters. How does each view the dinner: Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, Charles Tansley, and William Bankes?
2. Although the family and guests are on vacation on the Island of Skye, many characters are preoccupied with their work, even while they are dining together. What thoughts about work impinge on the dinner? How do Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, Tansley, Bankes, and Mr. Ramsay view their own work? What do they fear? Whose work is important? Whose work will endure?
3. As the family and guests are gathered around the table to share Boeuf en Daube, do the characters genuinely connect with one other, or do they remain isolated in their individual consciousnesses?
4. Woolf depicts Minta and Paul’s engagement, with its future promise, and Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s marriage, with its long past. How does Woolf represent the power that brings a couple together and sustains a marriage—convention, habit, intimacy, companionship, sexuality?
5. One of the most striking gestures described in the novel is Mrs. Ramsay’s winding her shawl around and around the boar’s skull hung on the wall of the nursery. What does this gesture signify in “The Window,” and to what end is it reprised in “Time Passes”?
6. How does the narration in “Time Passes” respond to the following description of a moment during the dinner in “The Window”?

“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)

7. What happens to typical novelistic narration and characterization in “Time Passes”? What is the story? Who are the central characters?
8. In “The Window” the family and their guests are on vacation; nevertheless, several are preoccupied with philosophical questions about the nature of truth, the wastes of time, the inevitability of death, the nothingness beyond. How does “Time Passes” respond to these questions, especially in the repeated passages describing “those who had gone down to pace the beach and ask of the sea and sky what message they reported” (133)?

9. How does the Great War (World War I) intrude in the remote speck of the natural world described in "Time Passes"? How does Woolf relate allusions to the man-made chaos of the war to descriptions of the natural world?