

Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

Monthly Discussion Prompts, "To the Lighthouse," pp. 145-end

1. 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"?
2. 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?
3. Whereas Mrs. Ramsay, the mother and wife, was the central figure in section one, with the other characters defined by their relation to her, Lily, the spinster artist, is central to section three. At the end of the novel, she finishes her painting and says, "I have had my vision" (209). What was Lily's vision? What does it have to do with Mrs. Ramsay? Why, when Lily thought she had solved her artistic problem ten years ago, is the process of creating so fraught with emotion and struggle for Lily?
4. How is our understanding of the symbolic geography introduced in section one (window, house, lawn where Lily places her easel, and lighthouse) expanded in section three? Lily is trying to paint "the window" and what she sees there. But why does she continually leave her painting to walk to the end of the lawn and gaze out to sea, trying to identify Mr. Ramsay's boat? Does her vision include his journey "to the lighthouse"?
5. Augustus Carmichael is a mysterious figure throughout the novel. Why does he seem immune to Mrs. Ramsay's formidable charm in section one? Why does the death of Andrew cause him to lose all interest in life (194)? Why does Woolf place him at the novel's end, standing beside Lily as a Poseidon figure (208), while both realize that, at last, the journey to the lighthouse has been completed?
6. In the end, what does the journey "To the Lighthouse" mean in the lives of these characters, in Woolf's own vision?