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**Articulating the Questions, Searching for Answers: How *To the Lighthouse* Can Help**

Nancy Topping Bazin

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Approaches to Teaching  
World Literature

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see the last pages of this book.

Approaches to Teaching  
Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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Edited by

*Beth Rigel Daugherty*

and

*Mary Beth Pringle*

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## Articulating the Questions, Searching for Answers: How *To the Lighthouse* Can Help

*Nancy Topping Bazin*

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At Old Dominion University, English majors must take one of the following courses—Postcolonial Literature, Literature by Minorities, African-American Literature, or Women Writers. In each course, our majors encounter new materials and perspectives. I teach Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in Women Writers, a course in which students expect to explore feminist perspectives. Students range in age from nineteen to sixty, but most are in their twenties or thirties. Frequently the first in their families to attend college, many come from conservative homes where *feminist* is a derogatory word. Therefore I find that the best way into a feminist novel like Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is through biography and autobiography, and I point out that Woolf noted the autobiographical nature of this novel in her letters, diaries, and autobiographical fragments. Despite differences in class, national culture, and time period, most students can successfully relate to the concerns about marriage and work expressed by Woolf. Discovering links between and among her life, the novel, and their own lives helps them see, and empathize with, her feminist perspective.

Many students initially dismiss Mrs. Ramsay and the inner conflicts felt by Lily Briscoe as old-fashioned and thus irrelevant. For them, women are now liberated and can easily have a career and a family. Other students, subscribing to the beliefs of the local Christian Coalition, are unsympathetic to Lily Briscoe, who chooses work over family. A more feminist group tends to dehumanize the oppressive husband, Mr. Ramsay, thereby failing to perceive the extent to which Woolf admires his intellectual and emotional courage. Moving students beyond these initial reactions requires accuracy in reading but also occurs most readily when students connect what they read with their own lives. To become intellectually and emotionally involved with this book, students must care about its content. I have learned that I can encourage students to relate to the novel personally without promoting true confessions or group therapy, however; common sense tells me when our discussion should return to the text.

Indeed, many students make some general connections right away, such as when they relate Lily Briscoe's struggle to their own tensions between devotion to family and commitment to work. Through analyzing the text in their journals and in class, others begin to see how Woolf's insights apply to them. For example, several female students desiring to enter professions said they feared that getting married would mean giving up their ambitions and happiness for someone else's, and they could not imagine a time when having a baby would not interfere with their careers. Many male students in the class discovered they experience these work and family tensions, too, but usually not to the

same degree that women do. However, both a single father and a man who had chosen to be the primary caretaker for his child argued that the tension is, in fact, role-related rather than gender-related. This point enriched the discussion, for it allowed students not only to recognize the validity of the point but also to see these two men as exceptions to the still strong social rule that the principal caretaker be female.

Many students have told me that they understand *To the Lighthouse* better once they learn more about the situation of women during Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's lifetimes, so in my class of forty-five students, of which ten are usually graduate students, I ask two of them to report on the women's suffrage movement in Great Britain. I suggest they start with Emmeline Pankhurst's *My Own Story*, Christabel Pankhurst's *Unshackled: The Story of How We Won the Vote*, Ray Strachey's *The Cause*, and Patricia Branca's *Women in Europe since 1750*. Then the whole class reads (and sees the video of) Woolf's long essay *A Room of One's Own*. Discussing this essay prepares students well for reading *To the Lighthouse*.

As indicated in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf wanted women to commit to their own work. She wanted more women to be able to say, as Lily Briscoe did, "I have had my vision" (209). What Lily had seen was the hidden pattern (*Moments* 72), the essence; she had made contact with "reality" (*Room* 114). To create a masterpiece, artists must see human beings "in relation to reality," for great art must have this metaphysical dimension (*Room* 114). But not until women are freed from gender inequities, not until they have money and rooms of their own, will they gain "the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what [they] think," the foundations, in Woolf's view, for perceiving the metaphysical dimension (*Room* 113, 114). Therefore, as an artist, Woolf had urgent philosophical reasons for advocating gender equity.

I give students the following quotations from Carol Christ, Simone de Beauvoir, and Woolf to help them understand why Woolf believes equality is a foundation for philosophical speculation. As Carol Christ points out in *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, when women question their designated roles, they also ask, "Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe?" (8). To consider such philosophical questions, people must feel confident about their right to do so. In other words, women cannot think creatively while being subjected to Charles Tansleys who remark, "Women can't paint, women can't write" (48). As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, "[W]e can count on the fingers of one hand the women who have traversed the given in search of its secret dimension [. . .]. Women do not contest the human situation, because they have hardly begun to assume it" (669). Woolf believed that real creativity and spirituality come from being in touch with what she called reality: "it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women" (*Room* 114). Undergraduate reports on chapters 1, 2, and 8 in Carol Christ's book and chapter 25, "The Independent Woman," in Simone de Beauvoir's enrich this discussion, and a report by a graduate student on Mary Daly's *Beyond God the*

*Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* demonstrates how a belief in equality radically changed not only aspects of Daly's philosophy but her entire worldview.

A similar transformation occurs in *To the Lighthouse* as Lily Briscoe experiments with various ways of seeing, for instance, the Ramsays, William Bankes, marriage, being single, the lighthouse, and her painting, until she is able to arrive at a new synthesis and sense of wholeness (however precarious) at the end of the novel. I begin Women Writers with *A Room of One's Own* and *To the Lighthouse* because together they present so well traditional roles and their consequences for women, challenges to the beliefs governing these roles and the kinds of changes necessary to dislodge them, and, finally, a vision of future possibilities.

I try not to give formal lectures. Instead, I inject information and relevant outside sources into the discussions in response to student comments or questions—for example, about Woolf's life, Bloomsbury attitudes, or what she might mean by "reality" and how that relates to aesthetics and spirituality. The class and I have an ongoing conversation in which I am, at times, a strong participant. However, I further subvert the students' inclination to depend on the teacher for interpretations by having a different student facilitate the discussion during each three-hour class. I choose as facilitators those who plan to be teachers—one for *A Room of One's Own* and two for the two weeks on *To the Lighthouse*. While other students give reports or do special projects, future teachers lead discussions on every work, long or short, assigned during the semester.

In advance, the student leader prepares questions that we discuss privately once or twice before class. I suggest that they first ask for student responses to the novel and then let general discussion develop as much as possible before they ask more specific questions. They know they have to be flexible, to pose questions out of what their peers have been saying, and to insert their prepared questions only when needed to move the discussion forward. Yet they also have to be ready to redirect the discussion to a neglected topic, particularly when omitting that topic may hinder the interpretative process. We also discuss how questions or answers about the meaning of Lily's painting or the lighthouse should be raised not in the beginning but late in the discussion, after students have analyzed how each character functions in the novel and have figured out the overall structure. Given this level of preparation by the facilitator, I intervene in the discussion only when necessary.

Through these conversations, students gradually seem to realize that Woolf raises fundamental questions about how to live, questions they themselves face: whether and whom to marry, what kind of work to choose, which commitments to make, what philosophy to live by, whether their decisions will encourage or discourage a spiritual life. Not just relevant to the nineteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, these issues also confront adults returning to school: they have begun rethinking their earlier decisions about mates, work, and the philosophy directing their time and energy. As Woolf demonstrates, neither

Mrs. Ramsay nor Lily Briscoe has found a perfect solution to the tension between freedom and responsibility, between self and family. Any solution is a compromise, and each individual must negotiate her or his own way.

Because *To the Lighthouse* is autobiographical, I ask students to outline how they might write their autobiographies. We discuss the ways we create meaning and develop a philosophy of life by selecting details from our lives and recollecting particularly significant (even symbolic) moments. We use Woolf's letters and diaries to enrich these discussions with autobiographical details about the writing of *To the Lighthouse*. Her letter of 15 May 1927 to her older sister, Vanessa, conveys how eagerly Woolf awaited Vanessa's response to her depiction of their father and especially their mother, who had died when Woolf was only thirteen (*Letters* 3: 374–77). When Vanessa answered that "it is an amazing portrait of mother" and that she "found the rising of the dead almost painful" (*Diary* 3: 135; see also *Letters* 3: 572), Woolf replied that she was "in a terrible state of pleasure that you should think Mrs Ramsay so like mother." Woolf also wrote: "I was in such a happy state, no tea kettle, no cat, not all the contented and happy creatures in the whole world, were a match for me" (*Letters* 3: 383). After successfully bringing their parents back to life, she concluded, "I was more like him than her, I think" (*Letters* 3: 374). Her kinship with her father was primarily a philosophical one: Woolf shared his "desire to look unflinchingly at life as it is" (Bazin 14).

Lily Briscoe (Woolf's fictional self) studies the virtues and defects of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay (representing Woolf's parents) to depict the essence of each on her canvas. She begins, as young adults might, by deciding which aspects of her parents' personalities and behaviors to imitate, which to reject. Although Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse* in her forties, she was still working out, through Lily, how she felt about each parent. I ask the students to reflect in their journals on which parental virtues and defects have influenced their decisions about how they live and what they believe. Then they outline how they might organize an essay on this topic, an assignment that helps students relate to the novel in various ways. They come from a diversity of family structures and resultant influences, some of which include domineering, military-trained fathers; frustrated, unfulfilled mothers; grieving, depressed, or dysfunctional parents; and parents absent for reasons such as military service, alcoholism, mental illness, infidelity, divorce, or death. The loss Woolf suffered (and that Lily and the Ramsays suffer in the novel) becomes much more real when students with absent parents examine the effect of that absence in this ungraded writing exercise. (Of course, any student who is uncomfortable outlining a personal essay may outline a more formal discussion of the novel.)

Woolf clearly suggests that we must reexamine and reevaluate the past to make choices for the future. As Woolf notes in her diary, she was obsessed with her mother and father "unhealthily; & writing of them [in *To the Lighthouse*] was a necessary act" (3: 208). In writing this novel, she claims to have done for herself "what psycho-analysts do for their patients" (*Moments* 81). Abandoning

her adolescent love-hate relationship with her parents, she devises a more just and balanced way of seeing them.

Sometime during our discussion of the novel, I insert Woolf's concept of the "Angel in the House" (*Collected Essays* 2: 285–86) and note that in Queen Victoria's reign, when Woolf's parents grew up, strict gender roles prescribed devotion to family for females and a commitment to work for males. Women were admonished to acknowledge the superiority of their husbands simply because they were men (Lilienfeld, "Where the Spear Plants" 151–54). Middle- and upper-class women who chose to work usually had to abandon the possibility of marriage and children. Further, if a mother died, everyone expected the eldest daughter to remain single and devote herself to the family. After both the mother and older sister had died in Woolf's family, for example, Woolf described Vanessa's new role as "part slave, part angel" (*Moments* 125).

Forced to choose between family and work, women of Mrs. Ramsay's generation (and class) generally chose family, but influenced by the vigor of the women's movement between 1865 and 1919 (Branca 179–85), some English women of Lily Briscoe's generation decided to forgo family to devote themselves to work. Like our students, however, many would rather not have had to choose. Woolf, for example, wanted "everything—love, children, adventure, intimacy, work" (*Letters* 1: 496).

Woolf used the tension between devotion to loved ones and time for oneself as the central theme in four of her first five novels—*The Voyage Out* (1915), *Night and Day* (1919), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Only the trauma of her brother's death diverted Woolf to another topic for her third novel, *Jacob's Room* (1922). Since she did not center her novels after *To the Lighthouse*—*The Waves* (1931), *The Years* (1937), and *Between the Acts* (1941)—on this tension between family and self, Woolf evidently felt satisfied with how she had articulated and tried to settle the key questions about such tension in that novel.

Nearly all of today's students struggle with the same questions that Woolf addressed in *To the Lighthouse*. Although discussions of Mr. Ramsay, William Bankes, and Augustus Carmichael also reveal the family-work tension, Woolf focuses primarily on the effect marriage has on female ambitions. Whereas the aspiring artist Lily Briscoe chooses to stay single, Mrs. Ramsay has repressed her dream of being a social worker so that she can embody the Victorian ideal of being a wife and mother. Nevertheless, I ask, do some aspects of Mrs. Ramsay's character model rebellion for her daughters? After all, Mrs. Ramsay does withhold part of herself from her husband. She seizes moments for herself, thinks angry thoughts ("she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions" [32]), questions the wisdom of having children (since life was "terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you" [60]), and refuses to let go of her ambitions completely (she longed to be "an investigator, elucidating the social problem" [9]).

As Sigmund Freud has suggested, human beings need both work and erotic

love ("Fifth Lecture" 54–55). Forced to suppress her sexuality to be an artist, Lily denies herself the satisfaction that comes from intimacy. Like William Bankes, she feels "dried and shrunk" (21), yet she perceives that intimacy might be possible with men different from the extremely patriarchal Mr. Ramsay. Exploring how William Bankes differs from Mr. Ramsay (23–25), Lily dares to discuss her painting with him; she knows they have shared "something profoundly intimate" (53). With him she discovers "a power which she had not suspected—that one could walk away down that long gallery not alone any more but arm in arm with somebody—the strangest feeling in the world, and the most exhilarating" (54). Some students are relieved to note that Woolf's opposition is not to marriage but to patriarchal ones. Others wonder what effect Woolf's lesbianism (and her partial suppression of it) had on her view of marriage.

Many students are also fascinated by Woolf's intense desire for children and with her grief at not having any. Concerned for her mental stability and her art, her husband, Leonard, prompted doctors to tell Virginia that she should not have children because of her periods of mental illness (Q. Bell 2: 8). She envied her sister Vanessa, who was an artist and yet had children. Down deep, Woolf felt herself a failure for not being a mother; but, worse yet, when she completed her books, she feared failure in her primary area of commitment—her work. As she was writing *To the Lighthouse*, for example, she wrote in her diary: "Is it nonsense, is it brilliance?" (3: 76). Her fear of failure (which she shared with her father and Mr. Ramsay) caused deep depressions. After completing *To the Lighthouse*, she described in her diary one of these spells: "Oh [ . . . ] the horror—physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart—tossing me up. I'm unhappy unhappy! Down—God, I wish I were dead. [ . . . ] I watch. Vanessa. Children. Failure. Yes; I detect that. Failure failure" (3: 110). If she could not succeed at being both the "Angel in the House" and the artist, she *had* to succeed as the artist. Thus, her breakdowns occurred or threatened to occur after nearly every novel.

This additional reading is done not for its own sake but to enhance the students' interest in and understanding of *To the Lighthouse*. I place the relevant volumes of Woolf's diary (1 and 3) and her letters (3), the collection of her autobiographical writing (*Moments of Being*), and several biographies on reserve, and I suggest that students read as much of them as possible before we discuss the novel. At the beginning of the semester, students choose among these readings (as well as others) for their reports, and they select and reproduce relevant quotations to share with the rest of the class, always with this primary goal in mind—to illuminate the text of the novel.

Many conclude, for example, that by December 1927, Woolf could, at least intellectually, shed her envy of her mother's gift for nurturing men and children and her sister Vanessa's ability to be both mother and artist. After a party for Vanessa's children, Woolf could finally say, "[O]ddly enough I scarcely want children of my own now. This insatiable desire to write something before I die [ . . . ] make[s] me cling [ . . . ] to my one anchor" (*Diary* 3: 167). Writing *To the*

*Lighthouse* evidently reduced the tensions between devotion to family and commitment to work. She now saw her mother less as a promoter of marriage and motherhood and more as an artist and rebel (like herself). She saw her scholarly, self-centered father less as a domestic tyrant, demanding female attention, and more as a hero (like herself), boldly and hopelessly trying to capture "Z," the truth about human existence. We discuss how the changes in Cam's and James's feelings toward Mr. Ramsay in part 3 might represent Woolf's ambivalent feelings about her father and her similar progression from less hatred to more love, from less anger to more admiration as she worked on the novel. Older students frequently share with younger ones their growing tolerance for parental attitudes and flaws they once could not abide. Most are still struggling, however, to harmonize their ambition with their role as primary caretaker. Like Lily Briscoe, Woolf resolved the tensions she felt between her roles as woman and artist; she discovered just how intensely committed she was to her art. In conjunction with this discussion, I use material from Tillie Olsen's essay "Silences" about how few women writers married, that if they married they married late and had few (if any) children, and that all had household help (16–17).

*To the Lighthouse* illustrates how choices about family interact with those about the type or the quality of work a person does and how both relate to one's spiritual life. Many students care about these issues but often find them difficult to articulate. In the process of writing in their journals, outlining their responses to their parents, reading the autobiographical and biographical materials, and discussing *A Room of One's Own* and *To the Lighthouse*, however, most of them develop and express a greater understanding of their parents' sacrifices for family and work and begin to discuss structural solutions to the conflict between time for working and time for parenting. (They even begin to replace the word *mothering* with *parenting*, recognizing that gender should not determine roles or privileges!) Many realize, some for the first time, that they can make decisions consciously instead of automatically conforming to the norm. Despite social pressures to the contrary, for example, they can remain childless or choose not to marry. A close analysis of *To the Lighthouse* helps them ponder the questions they should ask ("Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe?"), how those questions interrelate, and to what extent gender may still determine their answers.