

London Bridge Is Falling Down, My Dear Ramsays: Summer as Metaphor in *To the Lighthouse*

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Ring around Mrs. Ramsay, pocket full of pansy, ashes, ashes, we all fall down. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Virginia Woolf guides us through the twists and turns of a family, the Ramsays, who summer at a house in the Isle of Skye on the precipice of World War I. Woolf uses summer as an emblematic representation of the cycle of life, from infantile longings, through paced frolicking, and finally to summer's end, where we reflect upon our yesterdays once more. Essentially, this is a story of all the chaos, disarray, and complication that makes life so engaging: a story about life, centered around a house and the family who has committed to it, as well as to the lighthouse, the object of one son's desires. In narrating a family journey across time, space, and personal division, Virginia Woolf describes the cycles of life and death in a way that can be likened to a season of summer.

Through springs sill we seek softly upon summer's gaze. The first third of the book, "The Window," begins our passage into Woolf's summer adventure. We are introduced to the basic constituents of the family: James, who dreams of going to the lighthouse; his mother, Mrs. Ramsay; and his father, Mr. Ramsay. We are introduced to the lighthouse and, specifically, its attraction to Mrs. Ramsay and James. Additionally, we meet Mr. Ramsay, who, at least according to James, keeps pulling the lighthouse farther away from attainability, by regularly insisting the weather isn't good enough for the outing. Woolf uses a lot of rapid dialogue, in combination with foreshadowing and character psychology, to develop the characters' actions. This is evident in how we see Mr. Ramsay present as a stern authoritarian. "But," said his father, stopping in front of the drawing room window, 'it won't be fine,'" (4). Here we witness Mr. Ramsay handing down stern dogma, much to James' dismay.

However, Mr. Ramsay later admits, at least to himself, how vulnerable a fool he is and how he would be lost without Mrs. Ramsay. In one scene, Mr. Ramsay, feeling guilty about overreacting, wants to go and talk to Mrs. Ramsay. However, Mrs. Ramsay needs to initiate the conversation. "And again he would have passed her without a word had she not, at that very moment, given him of her own free will what she knew he would never ask, and called to him and taken the green shawl off the picture frame, and gone to him," Woolf narrates (65). This is significant, as we start to get the feel of Mr. Ramsay's dependence on Mrs. Ramsay. We see Mrs. Ramsay take the initiative in opening up the act and the conversation; we also see how James, a sweet young boy, has animosity towards his father's authoritarian nature. We meet Mrs. Ramsay, who seems

hopelessly rooted in wanting to please everyone, and who is everyone's favorite. Lastly, we are introduced to Lily Briscoe, a fiercely independent woman who ironically is attached to Mrs. Ramsay, whose views oppose her own. One portion reveals Lily's sense of devotion to Mrs. Ramsay, although she doesn't know what to do with it: "[Lily had to] control her impulse to fling herself (thank Heaven she had always resisted so far) at Mrs. Ramsay's knee and say to her—but what could one say to her? 'I'm in love with you?' No that was not true. 'I'm in love with this all,' waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children? It was absurd, it was impossible" (19). This quote not only leads us to the depth of the connection to Mrs. Ramsay that Lily Briscoe will struggle with, but also alludes to the obscure nature of these feelings. This part of the book gives us a chance to immerse ourselves in the characters and develop an attachment to their stories, while not keeping us too tied down to actual scenes or settings. In fact, when compared to the second section, "Time Passes," as well as the book's final third, "To the Lighthouse," we see very little progression of time in *The Window*.

Gallantly we frolic through the temporal tides. "Time Passes," the second section, is much like the height of summer. The narrative opens up to a point later in the story, where Andrew, Prue, Lily, and Mr. Bankes stumble into the house one evening. Sadly, life rushes by so quickly in this chapter, with Woolf employing shorter scenes in rapid succession to progress the narrative. We start first with Mrs. Ramsay dying suddenly, and then we are told the house is abandoned for some time, frequented only by the cleaning woman Mrs. McNab. At the beginning of the second chapter of "Time Passes," we are let into a moment where "Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty" Woolf writes (128). This quote demonstrates not only the pace, but also the impact of each succeeding event, like bombs exploding overhead. Almost as quickly as Prue is promised in marriage, she dies in some illness connected to childbirth, in what seems like an instant. In what will only be two pages, we see how quickly these events develop. "Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father's arm, was given in marriage that May," Woolf writes (131). Then, "Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said" (132).

The events surrounding Prue are significant not only for their speed of succession, but also for the stark contrasts Woolf lays out between events: one surprisingly joyful, and the other so horrific as to seize the reader's sorrow and empathy. Almost as quickly, we learn that Andrew had died during a bombing in the war, which, like the other deaths in this section, is written in brackets. Finally, we are told that Carmichael had success with a book of poetry he wrote, a positive footnote in the otherwise negative sea of events. Much like summer in full swing, the narrative in *Time Passes* progresses quickly, leading us in a mad scurry and offering a more obscured or blurred view of scenes as they whisk by. The methodology of rapid succession works well here, in that it allows Woolf to advance the main arc of the story without diverging into subplots. I also feel the form fits into a modernist interpretation. The idea from the beginning is that, as readers, we are outsiders. Outsiders may infrequently hear things in

gossip among common acquaintances, sometimes in what seems rapid succession. The style in which “Time Passes” is written somewhat mirrors this chaotic and passive form of receiving news.

So somberly we return to our chores at summer’s end. “The Lighthouse,” the final section, can be equated to the end of summer. Summer entails the end of longer days, the return to chores. Fittingly, in this section, Woolf prolongs the resolution of various narrative threads, as situations seem to progress at a more daunting or hindered pace when compared to “Time Passes,” and also describes more meaningful interactions. Here, we see the remaining family and friends gather once again, as ten years have passed. They are all a bit more mature. James, now 16, sees his father a more feeble person than before, and blames his authoritarian rants on an external force rather than on Mr. Ramsay himself. In one of the final scenes, on the boat ride to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay claps his book shut, reminding James of how his father used to rap him on the leg: “... [I]t was not him, that old man reading, whom he wanted to kill, but it was the thing that descended on him—without his knowing it perhaps,” James thinks to himself (184). This quote offers the sense of a more mature James, who sees his father compelled to his authoritarian nature by outside influences. We also see Lily at least partly resolve her strong feelings of attachment to Mrs. Ramsey. In the last scene, Lily, after witnessing the boat approach the lighthouse, finally finishes her painting. “Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision,” Lily concludes (209). From this one line, we can draw a lot. The quote essentially describes how Lily finally resolve, and presumably break, her attachment to Mrs. Ramsay. The extreme fatigue with which she lays down the brush may represent the amount of she has had to struggle with these feelings. Not only do we at last get to go to the light house, but we are also able to see Lily’s completed painting. Ironically, the painting is blurred and Ms. Ramsay is not visible. This mirrors Lily’s feelings by the end of the story.

To the Lighthouse uses summer as an analogy for the cycle of life. Beginning with early summer in “The Window,” days grow longer, and anticipation for the season builds. In “Time Passes,” summer is in full bloom and time flies by in a blur, leaving the knowledge of where we are without having the specifics of how we got there. At the end of summer, we are off “to the lighthouse,” where we experience a world undoubtedly changed by war and loss. We are immersed in a combination of reflection and resolution, as well as some form of equilibrium. We finally reach the lighthouse.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. 1927. Harcourt, 1981.