STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

***To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf**

About This Book

Virginia Woolf was born on January 25, 1882, a descendant of one of Victorian England's most prestigious literary families. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was the editor of the Dictionary of National Biography and was married to the daughter of the writer William Thackeray. Woolf grew up among the most important and influential British intellectuals of her time, and received free rein to explore her father's library. Her personal connections and abundant talent soon opened doors for her. Woolf wrote that she found herself in "a position where it was easier on the whole to be eminent than obscure." Almost from the beginning, her life was a precarious balance of extraordinary success and mental instability.
As a young woman, Woolf wrote for the prestigious Times Literary Supplement, and as an adult she quickly found herself at the center of England's most important literary community. Known as the "Bloomsbury Group" after the section of London in which its members lived, this group of writers, artists, and philosophers emphasized nonconformity, aesthetic pleasure, and intellectual freedom, and included such luminaries as the painter Lytton Strachey, the novelist E. M. Forster, the composer Benjamin Britten, and the economist John Maynard Keynes. Working among such an inspirational group of peers and possessing an incredible talent in her own right, Woolf published her most famous novels by the mid-1920s, including The Voyage Out,Mrs. Dalloway,Orlando, and To the Lighthouse. With these works she reached the pinnacle of her profession.

However, Woolf's life was equally dominated by mental illness. Her parents died when she was still a young woman—her mother in 1895 and her father in 1904—and she was prone to intense, terrible headaches and emotional breakdowns. After her father's death, she attempted suicide by throwing herself out a window. Moreover, although she married Leonard Woolf in 1912 and loved him deeply, she seems not to have been entirely satisfied romantically or sexually. For years she sustained an intimate relationship with the novelist Vita Sackville-West. Late in her life, Woolf became terrified by the idea that another nervous breakdown was close at hand, one from which she would not recover. On March 28, 1941, she wrote her husband a note stating that she did not wish to spoil his life by going mad. She then drowned herself in the River Ouse.

Woolf's writing bears the mark of her literary pedigree as well as her struggle to find meaning in her own unsteady existence. Written in a poised, understated, and elegant style, her work examines the structures of human life, from the nature of relationships to the experience of time. Yet her writing also addresses issues relevant to her era and literary circle. Throughout her work she celebrates and analyzes the Bloomsbury values of aestheticism, feminism, and independence. Moreover, her stream-of-consciousness style was influenced by, and responded to, the work of the French thinker Henri Bergson and the novelists Marcel Proust and James Joyce.

This style allows the subjective mental processes of Woolf's characters to determine the objective content of her narrative. In To the Lighthouse (1927), one of her most experimental works, the passage of time, for example, is modulated by the consciousness of the characters rather than by the clock. The events of a single afternoon comprise over half the book, while the events of the following ten years are compressed into a few dozen pages. Many readers of To the Lighthouse, especially those who are not versed in the traditions of modernist fiction, find the novel strange and difficult. Its language is dense and the structure amorphous. Compared to the plot-driven Victorian novels that came before it, To the Lighthouse seems to have little in the way of action. Indeed, almost all of the events take place in the characters' minds.

Although To the Lighthouse is a radical departure from the nineteenth-century novel, it is, like its more traditional counterparts, intimately interested in developing characters and advancing both plot and themes. Woolf's experimentation has much to do with the time in which she lived: the turn of the century was marked by bold scientific developments. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution undermined an unquestioned faith in God that was, until that point, nearly universal, while the rise of psychoanalysis, a movement led by Sigmund Freud, introduced the idea of an unconscious mind. Such innovation in ways of scientific thinking had great influence on the styles and concerns of contemporary artists and writers like those in the Bloomsbury Group. To the Lighthouse exemplifies Woolf's style and many of her concerns as a novelist. With its characters based on her own parents and siblings, it is certainly her most autobiographical fictional statement, and in the characters of Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe, Woolf offers some of her most penetrating explorations of the workings of the human consciousness, as it perceives and analyzes, feels and interacts.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the main symbols in To the Lighthouse, and what do they signify? How does Woolf's use of symbolism advance her thematic goals?

2. If To the Lighthouse is a novel about the search for meaning in life, how do the characters conduct their search? Are they successful in finding an answer?

3. Compare and contrast Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. How are they alike? How are they different?

4. To the Lighthouse opens with a portrayal of the Oedipal struggle between James and Mr. Ramsay. This conflict resounds throughout the book. How does the family drama shape the book as a whole?

5. Conventional gender roles—and more broadly, conventional social roles—present a major subject of exploration in To the Lighthouse. Choose three characters and describe how each approaches this subject. Do gender roles play a part in the lives of the younger children?

6. What effect does the ocean have on different characters at different times in the novel? Why, for example, do the waves make Mrs. Ramsay sad?

7. What makes the "Time Passes" section of the novel so different from the rest of the novel? Why do you think Woolf chose such an unusual narrative approach for this section?

8. How does work function in the novel? For example, how does Lily approach what she sees as her work? How do Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley approach what they see as their work?

Extras

At SparkNotes you'll find more resources on To the Lighthouse:
www.sparknotes.com/lit/lighthouse/index.html