

The use of light in "to the lighthouse" by virginia woolf



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Virginia Woolf's novel "To the Lighthouse" the author explores the theme of light through her characters Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Both women identify light differently in their lives, figuratively and metaphorically, and use light as a means of connection and inspiration. Both characters are affected by the lighthouse's strokes of light and its rhythm of motion. Mrs. Ramsay connects to the strong guiding light of the lighthouse and finds fulfillment in channeling its light through her own actions. Lily pursues the balance of light through her painting of Mrs. Ramsay, creating a beautiful piece of meaningful art that allows her to express herself while she preserves Mrs. Ramsay's memory. Each character has a different interpretation of light and how it affects her throughout the novel. Mrs. Ramsay is seen as the embodiment of light in the first section of the novel when she comforts her husband before the dinner party. Mrs. Ramsay uses her keen sense of intuition when her husband approaches her after interacting with their children. The Ramsay children do not care for their father as much as they do their mother, and this often leaves Mr. Ramsay feeling sorry for himself. When Mr. Ramsay stands behind his wife, as if demanding her empathy, Mrs. Ramsay knows, "it was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life" (37). Mrs. Ramsay acts as a source of light in this scene through the way that she uses her energy to help restore her husband. Mrs. Ramsay prepares herself to console Mr. Ramsay: "(she) had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of

<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-light-in-to-the-lighthouse-by-virginia-woolf/>

spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating" (37). Mrs. Ramsay helps her husband in some of the same ways a lighthouse would help guide a sailor to shore. The image this scene creates is similar to the description of a lighthouse through the use of words and descriptions. Mrs. Ramsay "raises" herself into an "erect" position, creating an image of a tall and unwavering lighthouse for the reader to visualize. The "rain" and "spray" in the air emphasize the nautical setting and the lighthouse's ability to stand up to the elements as it guides sailors to shore. Mrs. Ramsay uses her energy and "illuminates" the scene, allowing the reader to visualize a beam of light emanating from the lighthouse coming through Mrs. Ramsay. After Mrs. Ramsay pours all of her love and devotion into restoring her husband's sense of security, Mrs. Ramsay is exhausted. The author writes: "So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent" (38). Yet just as the lighthouse illuminates the shore, Mrs. Ramsay uses her energy to give light and life to her husband, her children, and her dinner guests. When she is alone after the party Mrs. Ramsay even identifies herself with the lighthouse as she watches its beam of light circle the shore while she sits alone knitting: "pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at—the light for example" (63). This shows the reader

<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-light-in-to-the-lighthouse-by-virginia-woolf/>

that Mrs. Ramsay identifies with the lighthouse and uses it as a source of inspiration and rejuvenation. Lily Briscoe admires Mrs. Ramsay tremendously, and it is no coincidence that Lily feels the effects of light during the course of the novel. Lily is not an embodiment of light but rather an observer or student of light. Lily sees Mrs. Ramsay as a mother figure and is drawn to her internal light, often wondering how she can obtain or duplicate it. Lily also tries to learn about light and recreate it in her painting. Just as Mrs. Ramsay loses herself in the rhythm of the lighthouse's beam, Lily loses herself in the rhythm of her brush strokes as she paints and tries to capture the light's essence. As Lily paints she is " precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and went slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw, so that her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its currents. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things" (p. 159). Just as Mrs. Ramsay in tune with the rhythm of the lighthouse beam, Lily feels the same rhythm when she tries to bring her vision to life on her canvas. Light acts as an inspiration and a guide for both women as they carry out what they believe to be their true purpose in life. The way Lily paints also shows the reader how she puts her life and the world around her into perspective. Lily painstakingly tries to capture the balance of light in her painting and feel the rhythm of each of her strokes in order to bring her vision to life. Lily looks at the world as a series of opposites with checks and balances as she attempts to perfect her painting. The author writes: " And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-light-in-to-the-lighthouse-by-virginia-woolf/>

strokes another, and all were related" (p. 158). Lily truly begins to let her creativity flow onto the canvas as soon as she is able to let the rhythm take over. Lily lets go of her insecurities and inhibitions once she feels connected to the source of her inspiration. She is able to add a shadow or a line in just the right place after she feels close to the strokes of the lighthouse's beam and the strokes of her brush. Lily allows the reader to see that there cannot be light without dark; shadows exist just as much as vivid brilliance. Lily helps the reader understand this when she thinks about Mrs. Ramsay's life after she has died. Lily always admires Mrs. Ramsay and thinks fondly of her even after her death several years prior. When Lily thinks about all that Mrs. Ramsay had done in her life, she realizes that Mrs. Ramsay lived a fairly simple life. When Charles Tansley asks Lily to explain the meaning behind her painting, she begins to question the meaning of life and comes to the conclusion that Mrs. Ramsay's ability to bring people together and share her warmth and inner light with them was something amazing. Lily stops and thinks of when she, Mrs. Ramsay, and Charles Tansley were all together on the beach several summers ago. She muses to herself: "The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark. Here was one" (p. 161). Even though Mrs. Ramsay was not outstanding and spectacular in everything she did, Lily appreciates that Mrs. Ramsay still brings light into people's lives even after she was passed away. Once Lily completes her painting, she preserves the memory of Mrs. Ramsay and captures her internal light through her own artistic expression and interpretation of light. Both women have a unique relationship with light. Lily seeks to understand it and portray it in her artwork while Mrs. Ramsay lives through it and uses it to

<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-light-in-to-the-lighthouse-by-virginia-woolf/>

guide her daily actions. The lighthouse represents the connection among all of the characters that come to spend the summer there or are guided ashore with its illuminating beam. Lily's interpretation of light creates permanence in the way that it captures Mrs. Ramsay's spirit. Mrs. Ramsay's internal light is also long-lasting in the way that Mrs. Ramsay often sees the unique inner light in all of her children and friends throughout the novel. Light seems to give all of the characters a sense of purpose and a way to balance their internal energy with the external environment.