

The window towards the lighthouse



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Much of Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* takes place within her characters' minds. Although, of course, their thoughts cannot stop external happenings, they can and do stop time in one way: through memory. Thus, throughout the novel, Woolf employs certain objects as symbols to instigate memory and transport the mind into the past. One example, in particular, is that of the drawing room window, which develops the story's theme that memory defends the mind against the strain of change. A prominent symbol, the window is referred to frequently; indeed, the first section of the book is named after it. It serves as the aperture that connects the ever-changing backyard space with the nearly still drawing room. The majority of the action of the first scene occurs in the backyard, but one main character, Mrs. Ramsay, remains in the drawing room with her son. Because of this arrangement, characters must look through the window in order to see the other party; as a result, many of the characters' internal monologues are instigated by the view that is framed by the window. For example, as Woolf writes, "Knitting... with her head outlined absurdly by the gilt frame... Mrs. Ramsay smoothed out what had been harsh in her manner a moment before... and kissed her little boy on the forehead" (30). This was the vision seen by all in the backyard: Mrs. Ramsay knitting in the drawing room, head haloed by a Michelangelo painting, with her small son making a collage at her feet. This image, framed by the window, epitomizes the character of the kind-hearted, motherly Mrs. Ramsay, emphasizing her attributes to those in the backyard, especially Lily Briscoe. This vision of mother and son becomes a scene that transcends the progression of time itself; even after Mrs. Ramsay's death, it is seared permanently into the minds of the onlookers. Thus, the window serves not only as a lens into the private, but into the past.

It is a barrier between the world of the outer-house, which will decay as described in *Time Passes*, and the immutable memory that originates from the scene in the drawing room. It serves as the edge of the changing world. The concept that the window acts as a barrier between the changing and static worlds is further underlined by its observers. Both Mr. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe see the composition of mother and son, and although they are two different viewers, their shared perspective symbolizes the scene's stasis. Lily even considers the scene as permanent as the house and its attributes. Woolf writes, " Even while she looked at the mass, at the line, at the color, at Mrs. Ramsay sitting in the window with James, she kept a feeler on her surroundings lest someone should creep up..." (17). Thus, Lily groups the immutable scenery with the scene within the window frame; stasis comforts her while she paints, but she is prepared for any changes in her surroundings. Although the scene inside of the window is immutable, outside, the possibility of change threatens. The first example of this happens as Mr. Ramsay denies James the trip to the lighthouse: "' But,' said his father stopping in front of the window, ' it won't be fine'" (4). Woolf includes the detail of Mr. Ramsay's location—in front of the window—because that just beyond the window symbolizes the family's possible change in routine. Mr. Ramsay stands in front of the window because he opposes the change and wants to protect James from any impending false hope. A more physical form of change via the window occurs later to Mrs. Ramsay: "... suddenly her search for the picture of a rake or a mowing machine was interrupted. The gruff murmur, irregularly broken by the taking out of pipes... (as she sat in the window which opened on the terrace)... had ceased" (15). The open window conveyed the change of ambient outdoor

noise to Mrs. Ramsay indoors. Once again, Woolf stresses Mrs. Ramsay's location near the window because it symbolizes the change in noise interrupting Mrs. Ramsay's state of mental equilibrium. Change can enter through the open aperture from the outdoors, disturbing the scene within the drawing room. In the next section, the window again appears as a symbol of the struggle between stasis and change. Mrs. Ramsay has died, rendering change inevitable; thus, the ever-changing outside world attempts to affect the window. Woolf writes, "weeds that had grown close to the glass in the night tapped methodically at the window pane" (132). Change has come. The window now serves only to preserve stasis within the memory. Even after a decade, the window still keeps its symbolic essence. At the end of the novel, the window forces Lily Briscoe to think of Mrs. Ramsay's death; it haunts her with the image of mother and son. As Woolf writes, "(A noise drew her attention to the drawing room window - the squeak of a hinge. The light breeze was toying with the window)". Thus, the window immediately instigates memories of Mrs. Ramsay despite the painfulness of the subject: "(Yes she realized the drawing room step was empty, but it had no effect on her whatever. She did not want Mrs. Ramsay now)" (195). Finally, when the window becomes obscured by a reflection, Lily is forced to face the memory of Mrs. Ramsay: "Some wave of white went over the window pane. The air must have stirred some flounce in the room. Her heart leaped at her and seized her and tortured her" (202). The physical change in the window forces Lily to progress past her memories, just as the room has progressed through time without Mrs. Ramsay. Little action occurs in Woolf's novel. Yet, by the end, characters have experienced a number of psychological, mental,

and physical changes—and it is the drawing-room window, an otherwise ordinary object, that symbolizes and epitomizes that change.