

To the lighthouse:  
mind and body, dark  
and light



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In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf focuses in great detail on the workings of dark and light on the relationships between her characters. The presence of light or dark tends to govern certain scenes: light brings people together in a harmony based on the physical environment, while darkness instead symbolizes the isolated, interior consciousness. Twilight, of course, represents a balance between the two extremes: characters seem at once distant in their mental spaces from one another and connected in the environment they share, transcending the modern problem of isolation and also retaining individuality. At one instant of twilight, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay represent an ideal of marriage—the balance of light and dark outlines their figures as symbols of something more than their isolated selves, but allows them to maintain their individual solidity as well. In the moment of twilight, Woolf acknowledges the possibility of a balance of the interior and exterior that offers a counterweight to the modernist problem of the solipsistic, entirely isolated person. Woolf finds unity upon the ability of light to emphasize physicality, and it is through the physical environment that characters realize their connections, unifying their consciousnesses through the “real” space that they all share (rather than through their disparate mental spaces). At Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party, the lighting of the candles brings the group together against the falling darkness, illuminating the physical characteristics of the room and its inhabitants. The light of the candles drew with them into visibility the long table entire, and in the middle a yellow and purple dish of fruit... Thus brought up suddenly into the light it seemed possessed of great size and depth... and to [Mrs. Ramsay’s] pleasure (for it brought them into sympathy momentarily) she saw that Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom

there...looking together united them. (96-97)The light thus produces visibility of objects and people, whose physicality in turn facilitates the connection between characters. Here, Mrs. Ramsay and Augustus focus on the dish of fruit, and its emphasized physicality draws them both in, rather than simply its light. Mrs. Ramsay concentrates on the “ great size and depth” of the dish, which derives directly from the play of light upon it. Augustus “ feasts” on the fruit, and interacts with it in a physical way (albeit within mental space) by plunging in and breaking off a bloom. They connect to each other through their connections with the lighted, physical fruit-the illuminated external world thus mediates a harmony between two interior consciousnesses. Darkness, conversely, represents the isolation at the core of humans and the fundamental inaccessibility of one’s interior space, even in the form of one’s own thoughts. Unlike the light, darkness does not manifest itself through making physical things visible, but instead obscures any sense of the body, whittling people down to their ineffable centers. Mrs. Ramsay’s rare moment of separation from her family illustrates this point, as she thinks, For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of-to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others...(63)Mrs. Ramsay’s evaluation of her center as “ a wedge-shaped core of darkness,” neither thinking nor feeling, supports the idea that darkness represents the invisible, perhaps unreachable, aspects of human consciousness. She loses her physicality, evaporating from her daily identity, her “ being and...doing,” and thus focuses on her core, alone in the darkness

and apart from lighted human relationships. Contrasting to the unifying bowl of fruit, Mrs. Ramsay's core remains invisible and dark. Here, she gains a sense of deep selfhood and interior consciousness, but she loses the human connections present in the light. Woolf's depiction of twilight blends light and dark, allowing for both physical unity and a sense of interior space, thereby offering an alternative to the idea of the self as completely isolated, or, conversely, connected to others without the active mind. A transcendent moment results in twilight-Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay become silhouetted symbols of marriage without losing their status as individuals. As the day nears its end in "The Window," Lily watches the couple change in the fading light: And suddenly the meaning which, for no reason at all...descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative, came upon [Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay], and made them in the dusk standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife. Then, after an instant, the symbolical outline which transcended the real figures sank down again...still, for one moment, there was a sense of things having been blown apart, of space, of irresponsibility...In the failing light they all looked sharp-edged and ethereal and divided by great distances. (72-3)The meaning which descends upon Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay seems to derive from the dimly-lit circumstances that create around them a "symbolical outline" as if a silhouette against the setting sun. In the moment which combines light and dark, the couple becomes a symbol outside themselves, transcending their isolated consciousnesses. Woolf appropriately chooses marriage for this instant, since the term indicates a unity of two people, but as the discrete parts of "wife" and "husband." The couple's outline, of course, depends upon the real, physical figures of the Ramsays as the dark center (like Mrs. Ramsay's core

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of darkness) necessary to a halo. Lily's thoughts further corroborate the sense of the physical-the mention of things "blown apart" illustrates the seeming alteration of physicality to fit the transcendent moment in which people become symbols. The last sentence of this passage further supports the idea of physical-immaterial overlap, as characters appear both "sharp-edged" and "ethereal," a contradiction of sorts. Because the passage ends in characters divided by great distances as the transcendent moment fades, Woolf perhaps questions the ability of marriage to permanently maintain the balance of light and dark, body and mind.