

The inaccurate glass: method and theme in to the lighthouse



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The method of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is intensely related to its story. The two are so conflated that the novel is almost about itself. Every character struggles to find a balance between elucidation, creation and representation, trying to fix the rush and flux of everyday life into a thesis or an artifact, something static that can be held and examined. Woolf had stated the modernist goal of finding honesty through new forms, and in *To the Lighthouse* she uses techniques honed in two prior novels to make a handleable, readable, reprintable document that describes a flowing world while acknowledging the impossibility of capture without freezing. There is a crystalline moment in the first part of the book- at a dinner party, of course- where Woolf presents these issues and sews them up with the human relations of her characters: Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily. -83

The verb *compose* recalls Lily Briscoe's composition, the painting in which she struggles to recreate the relationships between form, light and shadow in a way that accurately portrays her vision. The composition or work of art here is, like *Mrs. Dalloway*, a social event that brings faces and people together. Grammatically, the subject/composer is *the candle light* but logically and symbolically it is the luminous Mrs. Ramsay. But outside the ordered circle, the *party round the table*, there is an overwhelming fluidity. The night is *shut off* by panes of glass, but it is really the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-inaccurate-glass-method-and-theme-in-to-the-lighthouse/>

party that is shut in, like a museum collection. The placement of the glass is ironic, for something seen through a glass should be contained and classified, or else the glass should focus it. But the windows here are far from giving any accurate view of the outside world. Like some parody of the parable's spectacles, which stand for the systems that twist the world yet make it comprehensible, the panes of glass offer a rippled incomprehensibility, which in its uncomposed vagueness may be the most accurate view yet. Still, statements of the impossibility of truthful composition are of limited use to the working artist or philosopher, and the guests at the dinner know where their loyalties must lie: they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there? (83). But fluidity, or a simulacrum of it, is a large part of what Woolf is trying to convey. The wateriness of the night beyond the glass is an aspect not only of the literal and metaphorical seas that flood this novel, but of the watery images that run through and, in the case of *The Waves*, structure her modernist works. There is even a light foreshadowing of the framing device of *The Waves* in the intermittent quotes from the story of the Fisherman, where Mrs. Ramsay's musings are punctuated by her reading aloud descriptions of a gradually darkening sea. Woolf's model for art is eminently watery, in the way it presents an indistinct, fluid mass of impressions that can nonetheless be animated by some force into making a strong, distinct impression: And, what was even more exciting... how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it, and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach? (To the Lighthouse, 42). Indeed, <https://assignbuster.com/the-inaccurate-glass-method-and-theme-in-to-the-lighthouse/>

Woolf's diction is surpassingly wavelike. From the very opening of the novel, the simplest sentences are followed by descriptions and emotions that can only be described as torrential, rushing. "Yes, of course, if it's fine to-morrow?" (7) says Mrs. Ramsay, and six year old James is transfigured by nearly a page of tenderness and joy. "But," says Mr. Ramsay, "It won't be fine." and James floods us with an equal measure of hatred. Both of these paragraphs, at their ends or crests, curl over and away from the impressions of the little boy, and into those of the parent he is reacting to, so that subject and object are reversed, occasionally within a sentence (7). Later, Lily Briscoe has a wave of impressions of William Bankes that encompasses both his nobility and his pettiness; she mentions the nobility first, then the pettiness, and then insists that they happen at the same time. Later still, Mrs. Ramsay alternately despises and adores her husband on the hinge of brief words or slight changes in his demeanor. These techniques are part of Woolf's strategy for getting around the pesky linearity of language, the fact that one word must go after another, from a to z, when they need to happen all at once: she heightens the contrast between successive states, she compresses the space between them, she uses the imagery and the force of a wave: To follow her thought was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil, and the voice was her own voice saying without prompting undeniable, everlasting, contradictory things. -24 This sentence uses the absolute qualities of language to undermine its linearity. The tyranny of a to z can be escaped first by exaggerating a statement's authority, "undeniable, everlasting" and then by directly contradicting it in equal "undeniable, everlasting" terms. These musings, Lily's on <https://assignbuster.com/the-inaccurate-glass-method-and-theme-in-to-the-lighthouse/>

Mr. Bankes and Mr. Ramsay are something of a rebellion against the tyranny of Mr. Ramsay himself. One of the most provocative aspects of Woolf's mode of description is how explicitly she genders it. The representatives of logic and linearity, of science and deducting, are all male. The oceanic qualities of impression, of fluidity and inducting, are all female. Woolf can wrap these dichotomies into what appear to be essential truths of man or womanhood. The interaction between the two can be explicitly, frighteningly sexual, as in James's perception of a conversation between his parents: "into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life [Mrs. Ramsay], the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare" (34). This metaphorical rape (the brass beak plunges and smites) is both a hallucinatory dramatization of an emotional marriage, and a depiction of Mr. Ramsay's approach to the world at large. Mr. Ramsay, when he is not a frightening brass beak, is usually mocked by the narrator. The notion of getting from A to Z is not his own, but a satiric imposition by the narrative voice. While we see him imagining himself the leader of a perilous expedition, we are imagining him trying to parse the first letter of his own name. The first metaphor of his mind is respectable, but ludicrous. "Think of a kitchen table... when you're not there" and Lily does, placing it in the limbs of a pear tree she is looking at (23). It is a respectable, solid table, with muscular integrity, still, it is perched legs up in a pear tree. Like Mr. Ramsay, it is diligent and internally correct, but utterly wrong. His days are passed in "this seeing of angular essences, this reducing of lovely evenings... to a white deal four legged table" (23). The preferred mode then, is almost certainly the feminine. But as the rape/conversation

<https://assignbuster.com/the-inaccurate-glass-method-and-theme-in-to-the-lighthouse/>

demonstrates, the feminine mode can be entrapping. Are these philosophical, linguistic and artistic dichotomies as gendered as Woolf seems to make them? Or is she, again through exaggeration, calling them into question, making them appear poses or compositions, not natural, but created? This question is crucially important to Lily Briscoe, who struggles more than anyone else in the novel with the limitations of gender. Women, Charles Tansley tells here, 'Can't paint, can't write?' (78). She wishes to deny and refute him, but social pressure, and the exalted desires of Mrs. Ramsay, force her to play the woman in a worryingly sexual interaction with him: On occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself. -78 Then, after admitting to herself that she would expect a male to help her out of a flaming Tube car, she thinks 'How would it be... if neither of us did either of these things?' (78). But the purely feminine Mrs. Ramsay makes a request with her eyes, and 'for the hundred and fiftieth time Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment' (78). By making the gendered modes of depiction and philosophy so explicit, so exaggerated, and so applicable to situations having nothing to do with the business of sex, Woolf raises the idea that the experiment, if tried, might work. There is a distinct awareness of the strictures of gender, two Ramsay children are disturbed by the sight of an engagement and its confirmation of the traditional roles: 'It irritated Andrew that Nancy should be a woman, and Nancy that Andrew should be a man' (66). But the escape from that trap, for Lily at least, comes from the very methods and problems of depiction that Woolf has gendered. Lily

<https://assignbuster.com/the-inaccurate-glass-method-and-theme-in-to-the-lighthouse/>

refutes Mr. Tansley by disregarding her own disadvantages and synthesizing the masculine and feminine modes: with awareness and concentration, she composes a static picture of a fluid world. "I have had my vision," she says, ending the book. But the single line that fills the empty steps, Mrs. Ramsay, died years ago. The final vision is only depictable once it is gone; Mrs. Ramsay, the consummate feminine, would not stay still for her picture until she was no longer alive.