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Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a magnificent short novel but, for many readers, not an easy one. A complicated stream-of-consciousness style and an emphasis on subtle nuances in perceptions and in relationships require readers to be both attentive and patient. The rewards are great: nostalgic realization of the evanescence of everything; insight into the artistic process at work; understanding of the complexities of human relationships; gratitude for each small gift in one's life journey.

Woolf was unquestionably a woman of letters. Essays, short stories, novels—even one play for private performance—she not only attempted all of them, but also succeeded admirably. As a reviewer and critic for the *London Times Literary Supplement*, she scrutinized both contemporary fiction and works by the great writers of the past. She looked at what an artist is and how an artist reaches or does not reach the goal envisioned in the mind's eye. In her own writing, she worked unceasingly to produce that inner vision. All of this is reflected in Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*.

With her husband, Virginia Woolf founded and worked in a small publishing business that produced works of many noted authors of their era. During this time, she filled volumes of diaries with letters and entries in which, in informal style, she explored the sources of her own creativity and examined her ideas about writing and its functions. Photographs reveal a woman with large, expressive eyes, heavy eyelids, and a wide and generously shaped mouth, seldom captured in a smile. A shadow across her face reflects the deep melancholy that so often afflicted her.

Despite physical pain and mental anguish, Woolf—innovator, early feminist, critic, explorer of inner self—left an enduring legacy. Stylistically, she was a pioneer, and the characters she created seem timeless. Her works never fall into the category of period pieces. In *To the Lighthouse*, she portrays the sea ebbing and flowing, time ebbing and flowing, lives ebbing and flowing, all in a lyrical and uncontrived movement.

To the Lighthouse is about life, its joys and anguish, perpetual and universal questions. Like Lily, each human being has memories and must discover in the shifting scenes that the present and future link inextricably with the past. Woolf's intent was to explore the continuity of inner life through memories of childhood scenes, including a view of a lighthouse, always there, staunch against storms, its beacon a comforting sight. In an innovative style, stream of consciousness, she created a great piece of enduring art.