To the Lighthouse: Crash Course Literature #408

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi, I'm John Green. This is CrashCourse Literature, and today, we're letting Virginia Woolf take us *To the Lighthouse*. Well, assuming the weather holds, and we don't get lost in our endless, spiralling contemplation of the ephemerality of all human life. We're going to explore *To the Lighthouse* as a modernist novel, examine its form and style, discuss its philosophy, and also its thrilling plot. So, get that rowboat ready!

[Intro Music]

So, Virginia Stephen was born is 1882 to Julia Jackson Duckworth, a member of a publishing family, and Leslie Stephen, a literary critic and the founder of *The Dictionary of National Biography*. They were English, if you can't tell from their names and the idea of a dictionary of national biography. Both her parents had been married before. Virginia had three full siblings and four half siblings, and her most treasured childhood memories were of holidays spent in Cornwall, conveniently near a lighthouse.

In 1904, she and her sister, Vanessa, moved into a house in Bloomsbury, London, and became the center of a social circle of artists, and writers, and thinkers, known as the Bloomsbury group. Stephen began to write for *The Times Literary Supplement*, and in 1912, she married the political theorist, Leonard Woolf. In 1915, Virginia Woolf published her first novel. She also struggled with mental illness throughout most of her life, even as she became an acclaimed writer of fiction and non-fiction. And, during the second World War, she loaded her pockets with stones and walked into a river, drowning herself.

OK, so that's a bit about the author. Before we explore the form and themes of *To the Lighthouse*, let's review the plot. The Ramsay family and a few friends spend a day at their vacation home. They talk about going to the lighthouse, but don't. 10 years pass, and then they do go to the lighthouse. And then, the book is over. No real need to go to the thought bubble for that plot, but even though not much happens, a lot is happening in *To the Lighthouse*.

So, this is a modernist novel. Broadly speaking, modernism was a philosophical and cultural movement that got going in the late 19th century, and reached its apex just after World War 1. Modernism encouraged the questioning and dismantling of institutions and concepts that were long thought to be stable- government, the church, social hierarchies- but also artistic concepts like the chromatic music scale and figurative painting. With 40 million people dead on the World War One battlefield, it was hard to go back to the same old pictures and tunes, but also, changes in technology were reshaping the role that different forms of art could play in human life. I mean, who needs to read a book to experience a thrilling, moving picture that takes place inside your mind, when you can just, like, watch an actual movie? So, modernism sought to break with the past in search for new forms, both because art needed to and because the old forms felt an insufficient response to a world that, machine guns to electricity, seemed very new.

Modernism was anti-enlightenment in its rejection of certainties, but it was also anti-romantic, in that there was no great belief in nature or spirit to explain everything. Instead, modernism embraced subjectivity and fragmentation. It suggested that there's not one right way to see or know things, but a multiplicity of legitimate narratives. You can literally see this fragmentation in modern art, I mean, look at *Guernica.* And like *Guernica*, the great works of modernist literature suggest that if you put a lot of fragments and perspectives together, you can begin to better understand the complex truths of the world. And with its shifting points of view and refusal to privilege any one character, *To the Lighthouse* really exemplifies, and also help to define, the modernist novel.

Here's another way of thinking about it, if *To the Lighthouse* were a pre-modern novel, one that had stable narration and none of this radical subjectivity, it would be, you know, like even shorter than it is because nothing happens. And, the one section where stuff does happen, like a bunch of characters get killed off, it's tucked away in brackets and written from the perspective of a house, which is quite modernist. And, I think quite interesting.

But, before we get into that, let's take a look at three of the human characters in this story with our two eyes. Take it away, thought bubble. First, we have Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, the parents of eight children: Andrew, Prue, Jasper, Roger, Nancy, Rose, Cam, and James. I hope you got that, because there will be a quiz later. Mrs. Ramsay has kind of a mother/goddess aura, even when she's worrying about how much it will cost to fix the greenhouse and whether her guests will like the beef stew. Actually, liking the beef stew is one of the real nail-bitters in this novel. Mrs. Ramsay is loving, and sympathetic, and an acute observer of her family and guests. Sometimes, her work as a mother and wife and hostess exhausts her, but she does it anyway because that's what women are suppose to do. Mrs. Ramsay embraces conventional gender roles, believing that marriage and childbirth are the only really appropriate path for a woman to take.

Mr. Ramsay, her husband, is a professor of metaphysical philosophy, and he can be tyrannical in his moods and, unlike his wife, he doesn't typically notice the wants and needs of the people around him. But, he needs his wife's love desperately, even more than she needs his. He's anxious about his achievements as a philosopher and worried that his work won't last.

And then, there's Lily Briscoe, a friend of the family who lives with her widowed father. Mrs. Ramsay keeps trying to set her up with this guy, William Banks, but Lily doesn't much want to get married. She wants to paint, and, along with the journey to the lighthouse, it's her efforts to finish a painting of Mrs. Ramsay and James that draws the novel together. Lily isn't always certain about her choices, personal and artistic, but she comes to realize that making art, even if no one ever sees or likes or buys her artwork, is reward enough.

Thanks thought bubble. So, Virginia Woolf described the form of this novel as two blocks joined by a corridor. The blocks are, of course, the first and last sections, the window and the lighthouse, and the corridor is the middle section, time passes, which we'll get to in a minute. The story is written in the third person, but it takes on the tone and thinking of the character that it's focusing on, which is constantly shifting. Spoiler alert: you will see more of that in our Jane Austin episodes in a couple weeks, also see, William Faulkner.

But, in the middle section, this style of narration, which is often know as free indirect discourse, is at its most radical, because the character driving the narrative isn't a Ramsay or a guest, it's the vacation house. The house has been left empty during and after the first World War, and the war is described as a terrible storm surrounding the house: "The nights now are full of wind and destruction; the trees plunge and bend and their leaves fly helter skelter until the lawn is plastered with them and they lie packed in gutters and choke rain pipes and scatter damp paths." People do appear in this section, but only briefly; and, like I've mentioned, their triumphs and deaths are discussed only in brackets. Probably, because what happens to individual humans doesn't really matter to a house.

To the Lighthouse can also be described as a stream of consciousness novel, because it records the flow from one thought to the next, along with the emotions that go with those thoughts. And, there's sometimes really intense emotions, even in response to very minor plot points, like when 6-year-old James feels a murderous hatred for his father just because his dad thinks that it'll

probably rain the next day. The critic Erich Auerbach wrote that the novel captures "nothing less than the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment to which we surrender ourselves without prejudice."

This combination of stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse is what gives the novel its sense of fracture and fragment. When you read it, the switch from head to head and thought to thought can feel sort of destabilizing. But, it also makes the few moments of real communion among the characters that much more marvelous, like when they all come together at dinner and, wonder of wonders, they all like the beef stew. Also, the novel argues that this constantly shifting perspective is the only way to really understand the characters and their world comprehensively. In a Lily passage about Mrs. Ramsay we read, "one wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with. ...Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman."

The novel also explores time and what it does to memory and houses and life: What is ephemeral and what is eternal, what we lose to time and the ways that we can, or something of us can, endure. A lot is lost to time in the story, but there are a few moments in which time seems to be suspended. The main one is at that beef stew dinner party, when Mrs. Ramsay finally achieves a sense of peace. She feels "there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights" in the the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures." Mrs. Ramsay's genius is in bringing and holding people together, so that for a few moments they feel that they are part of something greater than themselves. In that instant, they can surrender their loneliness and their sorrows to sense an intimacy and a community that feels eternal. Mrs. Ramsay also makes a stand against the ephemeral by having so many children. Even after her death, her children remain, well, most of them anyway, which is a kind of immortality.

Oh, it's time for the open letter? An open letter to immortality, but first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Ah, look! It's my bobblehead. I'm going to live forever as a bobblehead, unless people mistake this for ugly Justin Timberlake. Dear immortality, is there a noun in English that is more overrated? Look, I want to live for a very, very long time, but nobody wants to live forever. Have you ever read the literary classic, *Tuck Everlasting*? Doesn't work out great. Being a vampire, kind of a bummer. So I think the whole problem with immortality is that there is a huge difference between an extremely large number and an infinite number. And extremely large number, at least you know it will some day end. With an infinite number, what, are you going to somehow survive the heat death of the universe? That sounds like a terrible life. Oh yeah, I'm still here many billions of years later. I don't have a lot of friends. I don't just mean that I, like, don't have any, like, human friends. I mean that there is, like, nothing left in the universe. So, may you live a long, fascinating, and fulfilling life, and may it not last forever. Best wishes, John Green.

Right, so the novel suggests there is one other path to immortality, which is through making art. Lily is haunted by the words of another arty guest, who says, "women can't write. Women can't paint." And, she worries that her painting will probably just be rolled up under a sofa somewhere. But, first off, she proves the critic wrong just by painting, and also, the painting itself, even if it isn't very good, even if it's just a purple triangle and a line in the middle, endures. It brings the novel full circle, and because it is a portrait, a very abstract one but still a portrait, it's also capable of bringing Mrs. Ramsay back after she is gone, if only on canvas.

Whether it's Mrs. Ramsay's party or Lily's painting or having a child, they are all make-of-the-moment, something eternal. We've all know the feeling, or at least I hope you have, of being in a moment that felt infinite, whether you got there by art or by accident. And, that's also what a novel does, the novel lasts. It says, in the words of Mrs. Ramsay, "life stands still here." And, to that end, I want to leave you with one more passage from the novel. A passage that argues that maybe we're never going to create a great work of art or even host the perfect dinner party, but we can all look for moments when we feel touched by the eternal and part of something greater than ourselves. Here's Lily Briscoe, "the great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark." In short, go play with matches, metaphorical ones. Thank you for watching. I'll see you next time.

[Outro Music]

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