

Orange Inheritance Reading Guide

To *The Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf

Chosen by Helen Dunmore

'More beauty and penetrative characterization than can here be described resides within this book' *Spectator*

'One of the finest novels in the English language' Helen Dunmore

'Thrillingly introspective' *Independent*

About To The Lighthouse

Using Virginia Woolf's distinctive stream-of-consciousness approach, the narrative of *To the Lighthouse* wavers between members of the Ramsay family and their guests on two separate occasions, at their remote holiday house in the Isle of Skye. Flitting lightly over major events, the book focuses intensely on the internal life of the characters. The immediate experience of each moment, and the changing atmosphere between a group of human beings and within individual minds, are vividly explored. At the heart of the novel is the matriarch Mrs Ramsay, an enigmatic and saintly figure, to whom the others look for the achievement of the perfect, if temporary fulfilment that transcends the transient nature of day-to-day life.

About the Author

Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, first editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, and sister of the artist Vanessa Bell. In 1912 she was married to the writer Leonard Woolf, and moved in advanced, bohemian circles for most of her life. An influential member of the Modernist movement, her contemporaries included T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence and Roger Fry. Besides founding the Hogarth Press with her husband in 1917, Woolf was a prolific writer, a thinker and an essayist, author of the progressively feminist *A Room of One's Own*. Having suffered from a series of mental breakdowns throughout her life, on the 28th of March 1941 she killed herself.

Points for Discussion

Which characters did you most sympathise with?

What could the lighthouse represent in the novel?

What is the effect of Mrs Ramsay's death, both on the other characters and the atmosphere of the book?

How do you react to the revelations in the section, Time Passes?

How is artistic ambition treated in various characters in the book?

What is the nature of Mrs Ramsay's female power? In what ways is her evening meal similar and different to the artistic endeavours of those around her?

How much do working class characters come into the book? Is its middle-class focus a failing, or an accurate representation of the social world that the Ramsays live in?

Do the shifts in time and narrative focus create a feeling of restlessness? How does this reflect the way Woolf's characters experience the world?

Does each character tend to find an icon or symbol of some sort, like James' obsession with the lighthouse, or Mr Ramsay's lines of verse? How does this affect our understanding of the characters?

How effectively do the different viewpoints co-exist within the novel?