



INSPIRE ME

To the Lighthouse

Virginia Woolf's modernist masterpiece *To the Lighthouse* was certainly inspired by a vast ocean of influences. But the primary influence behind the novel's second part, entitled *Time Passes*, was good old-fashioned competition—literati style.

Woolf belonged to a wildly talented but intellectually snobbish group of English modernist writers, which included James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence, and E. M. Forster, all of whom sought to stretch language to its limits by representing reality as it is really experienced. One of the hallmarks of modernist literature is a technique called *disjointed time*. Time, as humans experience it, is illogical. Sometimes a single moment feels like a lifetime, while several years seem to pass in the blink of an eye. How can a writer use language to accurately capture this peculiarity of the human experience?

Virginia Woolf's diaries reveal that she was in competition with other modernists to depict the experience of time. Mansfield often experimented with time, and Woolf deemed her "the only writer I have ever been jealous of." Woolf was determined to take up the ultimate challenge: To represent the passage of time in the absence of humans. While other modernist writers succeeded in highlighting the paradoxical lengthiness of short periods of time—James Joyce's epic novel *Ulysses* takes place during a single day—Woolf sought to alternate the human experience of time with time as it really passes. Woolf once wrote, "The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being. . . . I have never been able to do both."

But eventually she succeeded. *To the Lighthouse* is composed of three sections. The first covers one day in the life of a family. The third covers another day in the life of the same family. But the second section, *Time Passes*, represents the ten years that elapse between these two days. The section takes place inside a house that gradually decays in the absence of its previous inhabitants. There is no plot or action in the traditional sense. Yet the section is unexpectedly beautiful and captivating. Only by contrasting "human time" with "real time" could Woolf successfully reveal the magnificence and strangeness of time as we know it. Or, in the words of Woolf herself: "Suddenly one hears a clock tick. We who had been immersed in this world became aware of another. It is painful."