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THREE WORLDS OF EXPERIENCE--
THE SOCIAL, THE SOLITARY, THE VISIONARY--
IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

by

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B.A., University of Arizona, 1950

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

1952

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Date August 19, 1952

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to express my gratitude to Mr. Walter Brown for his generous help and understanding without which this thesis would never have been written.

F. C. M.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I shall endeavor to isolate and describe three worlds of experience which Virginia Woolf continually explores in her fiction in order that she may approach some kind of statement about reality. Though Virginia Woolf is not a didactic novelist, she does use her fiction to explore certain fundamental questions about human experience--questions like the ones Lily Briscoe, in To the Lighthouse, repeatedly asks herself: what is the meaning of life, what is truth, what is reality? However, one cannot say that Virginia Woolf ever came to any final conclusions about reality; for, as she states in A Room of One's Own, reality "would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable--now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun."¹ Nevertheless, if we are to read and to understand her fiction, we must come to some kind of recognition and some kind of conclusion about the nature of Virginia Woolf's exploration.

One finds that three recurrent worlds--the social world of men and women, the world of isolated individuals, and the world of vision--emerge in her approach toward a

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London, 1931), p. 165.

statement about reality. Mrs. Woolf, without attempting to construct a completed philosophy of life, gives partial insights which she believed expressed her personal vision about reality.

In her social world of men and women, she describes a group of people who loosely accept most of the traditional social conventions of a settled upper-middle class society in order that they may free themselves from these conventions to speculate about the meaning of life and the nature of reality. Virginia Woolf reflects the attitudes of the "Bloomsbury" group--painters and writers who tacitly acknowledged her as the guardian of their social, artistic, and political values. About the social attitudes of this group, Stephen Spender comments: "They were class-conscious, conscious even of a social gulf which divided them from their most talented contemporaries--D. H. Lawrence, the miner's son."¹ Because she believed that a particular society with carefully defined conventions was a means to an end, Virginia Woolf describes or implies in the social conventions of her artistic society those closely resembling the "Bloomsbury" group's.

In her world of isolated individuals, Mrs. Woolf describes the necessity for the solitary mind; she believed that only the solitary mind could make meaningful and worthwhile responses to material things and to spiritual speculation.

¹Stephen Spender, World Within World (New York, 1951), p. 128.

To the women students of Fernham College, Oxford, she said:

"Above all you must illumine your own soul with its profundities and its shallows, and its vanities and its generousities."¹

Stephen Spender writes about Virginia Woolf's own solitariness:

Her strength and her limitations were that she didn't really know how it felt to be someone else. What she did know was how it felt to be alone, unique, isolated, and since to some extent this is part of universal experience, to express this was to express what many feel. . . . What bound people together escaped her. What separated them was an object of wonder, delight and despair.²

It is this "wonder, this delight and despair" which Virginia Woolf describes in her world of the isolated individual.

In her world of vision, Virginia Woolf describes her direction toward reality. She considers such questions as the instability of a world in the continual flow and flux of time, the attempt of the individual to impose stability upon a world of instability, the individual's intuitive grasp of momentary reality, and "the common life which is the real life."³ Generally, the questions remain spreading and growing. Ironically, perhaps, her questions--though they have been dusted and polished by the mind--are finally unanswered.

In describing Virginia Woolf's exploration, I have limited my discussion to one novel, To the Lighthouse, because

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 135.

²Stephen Spender, World Within World, pp. 141-142.

³Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 171.

this novel provides an approach to reality affirmed again and again in her fiction. In such a limitation, I am able to describe in considerable detail these three worlds of experience which are basic to an intelligent reading and understanding of all of Mrs. Woolf's fiction. However, I hope that later the method I have used may be expanded into a complete study of all the novels.

In dividing the thesis into three chapters which paralleled the three worlds of experience, I have devised a parallel which is in To the Lighthouse but which is not immediately apparent. The respective worlds of society, the solitary individual, and vision are blended into one another, a blending in which the impressions of the characters are continually growing, continually shifting from one world to another world of experience in the present, the past, and the future.

I have included in the first chapter of the thesis a discussion of Virginia Woolf's suppression of the setting and time of To the Lighthouse as well as a discussion of the social tradition. Mrs. Woolf believed that a literary tradition was analogous to a social tradition; as the individual frees himself from social convention, Virginia Woolf freed her own writing, by a different and to her a less acceptable method, from previous literary conventions which she believed imposed

upon her artistic vision of presenting life. Finally, I have used materials from Mrs. Woolf's critical essays and feministic writings whenever they have served to clarify the discussion.

CHAPTER I

THE MATERIAL FRAMEWORK

The reader whose literary tradition has been conditioned by the discursive descriptions of such writers as Fielding, Hardy, and Bennett is impressed with, perhaps even disturbed by, the lack of material specificity in a Virginia Woolf novel. In each of her novels, she consistently fragments external descriptions of setting and character by using generalized detail and by emphasizing a few specific details rather than a mass of details.

In order to achieve generalized detail Virginia Woolf obscures the precisely detailed landscape and character descriptions so characteristic of a Hardy or Bennett novel-- obscures preciseness of detail so that the reader may receive one total impression rather than several separate and distinct impressions. By using a few concise and overt statements, many overtones, implications, and suggestions, Virginia Woolf outlines the setting and the characters in her novel. The reader of a Hardy novel always knows that the setting is Egdon Heath, knows even that he is at the extreme north end of the Heath or that he is in the southwestern area; the reader of To the Lighthouse knows vaguely that he is somewhere in the

Isles of Skye, an island in the Hebrides. And whereas Hardy describes in precise detail the features which make Eustacia Vye a beautiful woman, Virginia Woolf only has her other characters silently comment that Mrs. Ramsay is a beautiful woman.

. . . she [Mrs. Ramsay] went down, and crossed the hall and bowed her head very slightly, as if she accepted what they could not say: their tribute to her beauty.¹

In order to further emphasize the total impression, Virginia Woolf selects certain salient aspects of the topography of her setting, certain identifying physical features and personality traits of her characters. For example, we know little about Lily Briscoe's appearance except her "Chinese eyes;" little about Mr. Ramsay's thinking except that it is like "a kitchen table when you're not there." (29, 38)² Mrs. Woolf shatters the Hardy mirror of Egdon Heath, the Bennett mirror of Hilda Lessways, and the Fielding mirror of Tom Jones' country home. Then she picks up several pieces of this shattered mirror so that she may use these pieces as recurrent images throughout the novel. These recurrent images become the specific details which luminate and unify a novel composed primarily of generalized details fused together. Because Mrs. Woolf fragments rather than masses details, the reader finishes a Woolf novel without a large collection of objective, material

¹All quotations are from Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse (New York, 1927). This quotation is from page 124.

²Numbers after quotations are the numbers of pages.

facts about the setting and characters. Unlike Arnold Bennett, Virginia Woolf never writes a detailed guide-tour about the setting of the novel or a case-history of the characters' physical features, manners, dress, and social background; for one may finish a Woolf novel knowing almost nothing about the houses and physical aspects of the setting, knowing nothing about the color of a character's hair or eyes, or whether a feminine character wore a pink dress or blue dress or any dress at all.

Further, Virginia Woolf usually suppresses long, interruptive passages which describe material objects. When she occasionally writes a long passage describing a character or a landscape, she carefully interlocks the descriptive passage with the character's thoughts or actions and with the development of one of the ideas of the novel. Seldom is Virginia Woolf interested in material description as a thing in itself. For she believed that description of material things smothered the character unless it contributed to an understanding of the soul of the character. In her essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Mrs. Woolf severely criticizes Arnold Bennett because he does not describe his character Hilda Lessways but rather the view from Hilda's bedroom window. About Mr. Bennett's description she writes: "One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description."¹ Elsewhere

¹ Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," The Captain's Death Bed and other Essays (New York, 1950), p. 108.

in the essay,¹ Virginia Woolf explicitly states that by the standards of the Georgian writers (a group to which she belonged) the earlier Edwardians used the wrong method in novel-composition:

. . . the Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use. They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there. To give them their due, they have made that house much better worth living in. But if you hold that novels are in the first place about people, and only in the second about the houses they live in, that is the wrong way to set about it.²

Always, in her critical writings, Virginia Woolf insists that "the fabric of things" is of lesser importance than character. Let us consider some of her statements about the modern novelist's purpose, statements found in her literary manifesto, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Here she defines the novel's function: to "describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs. Brown,"³ to capture the spirit of life. At considerable length, Mrs. Woolf tells us what she means when she says that the novel should describe Mrs. Brown, who is her symbolic example of human nature or life itself.

You [the readers] should insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress;

¹Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," The Captain's Death Bed and other Essays, p. 114.

²Ibid., pp. 112-113.

³Ibid., p. 118.

saying anything and doing, heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself.¹

In another essay, "Modern Fiction," we discover that to describe Mrs. Brown is to describe the spirituality of life, not the materiality;² and when Virginia Woolf says that the modern novelist must find a new way to record life she means that he must describe the spiritual perplexities of life which reveal Mrs. Brown. Consequently, the modern novelist must reject the Edwardian novelist because he described the body, not the spirit; the Edwardian novelist never focused his attention upon Mrs. Brown, never at life, never at human nature. Rather he looked out of the window of the carriage in which Mrs. Brown sat and what he described was "something outside, some trivial and transitory" material thing which he made appear "the true and the enduring."³ Thus Virginia Woolf necessarily fragmented all intrusions of the material framework which threatened to impinge upon Mrs. Brown; because if the novelist does not concentrate upon Mrs. Brown "life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worthwhile."⁴

¹Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," The Captain's Death Bed and other Essays, pp. 118-119.

²Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," The Common Reader, Series One (New York, 1948), p. 209.

³Ibid., p. 210.

⁴Ibid., p. 211.

In our examination of the material framework in To the Lighthouse, we shall observe that three things--place, time, and society--have been fragmented by Virginia Woolf. The characters, intensely conscious of place, time, and ~~space~~ as symbolical, sink factual and literal place, time, and society into the subconscious where they become "a rest and a forgetting."

In To the Lighthouse there is almost no description of the locale; following the composition principles of Virginia Woolf the critic, Virginia Woolf the artist emphasizes the characters, not the setting. David Daiches discusses the vagueness of the setting description of this novel:

. . . in To the Lighthouse . . . Virginia Woolf reduces the particularizing details of the setting to a minimum. We know, from one fleeting reference, that we are on an island in the Hebrides¹ but that is all the information we get. For the rest, we learn that the Ramsay house is within walking distance of the "town" and situated on a bay. It is clear that Virginia Woolf is here more concerned with conveying a general impression of sea, sand and rocks than with describing any particular place.¹

In a footnote² Mr. Daiches notes that there are "precisely three indications of the locality of the setting in To the Lighthouse." He speculates at considerable length as to what particular island Mrs. Woolf could be using for her setting. He concludes that "Virginia Woolf's

¹ David Daiches, Virginia Woolf (Norfolk, Conn., 1942), pp. 83-84.

² Ibid., pp. 83-84.

scene is either a composite one (with perhaps some suggestions from Cornwall) or largely imaginary."¹ However, on page fourteen (Harcourt, Brace edition) of To the Lighthouse a specific reference is made to a particular island-- the Isles of Skye.² Though it is quite understandable how Mr. Daiches overlooked this single reference to the setting, it is perhaps significant that Mr. Daiches, a well-informed reader and critic of Virginia Woolf, did overlook the reference to the Isles of Skye; such an error by Mr. Daiches indicates that Virginia Woolf has so thoroughly fragmented description of locale that even the most careful and acute reader did not remember the exact location of the setting.

Not only does Virginia Woolf dismiss the locale, but she also generalizes briefly about the Ramsay's summer home. A typical example of the generalized information the reader is given about the Ramsay home is found in the first division in which Mrs. Ramsay thinks about the shabbiness of the house, shabbiness caused by the carelessness of her children.

And the result of it was, she sighed, taking in the whole room from floor to ceiling, as she held the stocking against James' leg, that things got shabbier and got shabbier summer after summer. (44)

¹David Daiches, Virginia Woolf, p. 84.

² In the Encyclopedia Britannica there is a description of the Isles of Skye which factually parallels Mrs. Woolf's fiction description and which fulfills the requirements for the island Mr. Daiches does not believe exists in Scotland. See "Skye," Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. XX, 14th edition.

Except for such vague details as the shabbiness of the house, the reader knows very little else about the Ramsay home; for Mrs. Woolf has discarded the minute description of architecture, furniture, and landscaping so characteristic of a Bennett or Galsworthy novel.

However, in "Time Passes" Virginia Woolf includes several detailed descriptive statements about the house such as "the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper," "saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked," "shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs." (194-195) But while she does describe certain external details about the house, she never attempts to give a completed picture of the house. In this chapter she is rather concerned to emphasize, with certain specific details, the decay of the house during the Ramsay's long absence, a decay which takes place in the flux of time. "If the feather had fallen, if it had tipped the scale downwards, the whole house would have plunged into the depths to lie upon the sands of oblivion." (209) In controlling the emphasis of her description, Mrs. Woolf fixes the reader's attention upon time-flux, which is one of the central ideas of the novel, instead of diverting his attention to "the fabric of things."¹

In "Time Passes," we also note the indefiniteness of the time. Virginia Woolf never gives a date, never explicitly specifies how many years elapse from the time the Ramsay's leave their home until the time they return to it; and it is

¹Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," The Captain's Death Bed and other Essays, p. 112.

only by a two-sentence reference that we vaguely know that part of this passage of time occurs sometime during World War I. Mrs. Woolf writes in a bracketed interlude: "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay,]" (201)

However, if we remember that James Ramsay was six years old in the first division and that he is sixteen in the third division, we can ascertain that the length of the passage of time of the second division is ten years. But we must figure this out for ourselves. For again Virginia Woolf wishes to direct the reader's attention to the significance of the passage of time as ideational rather than factual.

Although it is significant that Virginia Woolf fragments by generalized detail both the locale and the time, it is more significant that she reduces, by generalized detail and controlled emphasis, the society of her material framework--significant because it is her fragmentation of her society which reveals her genuine revolt against Edwardian materialism. Her Edwardian predecessors wrote so learnedly and extensively about the social backgrounds of their characters that their novels are almost as exact and factual as sociological treatises. In her essay "Modern Fiction" Virginia Woolf protests against the sociological materialism of the Edwardians.

So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced The writer seems constrained . . . to provide . . . an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button in the fashion of the hour.¹

Though Virginia Woolf places her characters within a particular social group, she is only concerned secondarily, unlike the Edwardians, to describe the cultural tradition or the social values of this group. Primarily she is concerned to describe each character's private experience within this group and his rejection or acceptance of group values. Always, the Woolf society is merged into half-shadows while the individual is disclosed in modulated light.

But though Virginia Woolf the artist rejected the literary devices used by the Edwardians, she never ceased to lament in her essays that her own writing as well as that of her Georgian contemporaries suffered from the lack of an acceptable and settled literary tradition in which to work. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf reveals her belief that the literary convention is analogous to the social convention.

A convention in writing is not much different from a convention in manners. Both in life and in literature, it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand,

¹Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," The Common Reader, Series One, pp.211-212.

the writer and his unknown reader on the other.¹

Thus Mrs. Woolf always restricts the private experiences of her characters within the confines of a larger social framework, a social framework in which there are rather carefully defined though loosely accepted values. Virginia Woolf's characters too believe that there must be a social code which is an accepted prelude to their more pressing inquiries about the spiritual life; and having been trained as to what is the right thing to do and the right thing to say, the characters are at ease with their group's social conventions--so much at ease that they may forget the conventions and consequently interest themselves in something more enduring and more exciting than the weather, the subject which is the penalty for having no code of manners.²

In To the Lighthouse, we find this individual-group relationship. In "The Window" the unifying element is the group, a group of six guests who center around Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their eight children. And with the exception of Charles Tansley, the socially gauche young scholar, all the people of this group are familiar with and consequently at ease with certain social conventions, conventions largely derived from a traditional and settled upper middle-class society.

¹Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," The Captain's Death Bed and other Essays, p. 110.

²See Virginia Woolf's excellent explanation of why the modern writer has broken so many literary rules in her "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," p. 115.

Virginia Woolf's characters, unlike the characters in a D. H. Lawrence novel, do not realize the self at another level of society; their social conventions are largely derived from the usage-polished patterns of a traditional Victorian upper middle-class society, which gives them economic-cultural security. Within the group unity of the characters, certain social attitudes recur. Most of the characters insist upon economic independence and security, an independence which gives them leisure for reading, thinking, and pleasure. Also, they maintain certain traditional conventions of a conservative upper middle-class dignity which was composed of an awareness of noblesse oblige, which assumed breeding, social and intellectual decorum, refined tastes, and a classical education a la Oxford-Cambridge. However, although these characters share most of the Victorian social values, they have rejected a few. They replace religious orthodoxy with agnosticism or atheism, political Liberalism with Liberalism with Socialist leanings.

The characters reflect the social attitudes of a group of writers and artists called the "Bloomsbury" group in which Virginia Woolf was publicly one of the best-known members. In his autobiography, Stephen Spender labels the "Bloomsbury" group as "the last kick of an enlightened aristocratic

tradition,"¹ and he sums up the social attitudes of this group when he writes:

Their attitude towards an easy-going conventionality masquerading as traditionalism was critical; at the same time, they were deeply concerned with traditional values which they studied and restated with a vigor which made the old often have the force of the revolutionary. They insisted on the necessity of expressing past values in the imagery and idiom of today.²

Like the "Bloomsbury" group, the predominant tone of the social group of this novel is a tone which one may call "civilized;" for the characters are sensitive, tolerant, refined, and informed about ideas and people.

In examining the Woolf society we shall observe two characteristic Woolf treatments of the social framework: one, how fragmentary descriptions integrate the individual character into the texture of a particular social environment; and two, how the social values of the Woolf society are revealed by the individual's reaction or non-reaction to these values. It is important for us to understand the social attitudes of the Woolf society, because we cannot become unconscious³ of the Woolf society, and that is what Virginia Woolf wishes us to do, until we have first become conscious of that society.

¹Stephen Spender, World Within World, (New York, 1951), p. 128.

²Ibid., p. 127.

³In her writings, Virginia Woolf consistently uses the word unconscious rather than the word subconscious. Therefore, I have used the same word throughout the thesis.

As we examine To the Lighthouse, our conscious mind is preoccupied with the principal communication: the private experience of each character. But our unconscious mind, the mind which records but does not articulate, unifies the whole of the novel's pattern--that is, unifies the private experience within its human context. Always, the private experience of the Woolf character is described in relationship to other people, a group of people who share ideas and who, within a common appreciation of similar values, are deeply loyal to one another.

Because the Woolf society rests upon an economic foundation, perhaps the most important, certainly the most consistent, social pattern is the character's unquestioned acceptance of the necessity for economic independence and security. The problem of money, of earning one's living is not made much of by Virginia Woolf. Mr. Ramsay's income depends upon the sale of an original philosophical treatise, other philosophical writings and criticisms, and upon lectures delivered at many famous British and European universities. About the Ramsay income Mrs. Woolf writes: "The Ramsay's were not rich, and it was a wonder how they managed to contrive it all. Eight children! To feed eight children on philosophy!" (36) However, Mr. Ramsay frets more about the permanence of his fame than he worries about the sale of his book; for it is Mrs. Ramsay who has had to assume the financial worries of the family. Throughout the first chapter, Mrs. Ramsay recalls ^{several times} that she must tell her husband about

"the fifty pounds for the greenhouse repairs." (62) But Mrs. Ramsay is more concerned with her fear that the bill for the greenhouse repairs will disturb her husband than she is concerned about the bill itself. And it is only during her idle moments that she fleetingly recalls the "bill"; for, like her husband, Mrs. Ramsay spends most of her time thinking about problems which have nothing to do with the family finances. For, although they are not wealthy, the Ramsays have an economic independence which largely enables them to free themselves from the problem of money.

Like Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, none of their guests have large fortunes; yet, with the exception of Charles Tansley, they too are unconcerned about money or a profession. William Bankes is a scientist; Lily Briscoe has "five-hundred pounds a year and a room of her own."¹ Both have incomes which enable them to live comfortably and leisurely, incomes which are larger than the incomes of the other guests; for both Lily and William Bankes live in the village rather than with the Ramsays. Further, both have lived and travelled extensively abroad; and Mr. Bankes keeps a man who can cook vegetables properly.

The three minor characters--Augustus Carmichael, Minta Doyle, and Paul Rayley--seem even less concerned with money or a job than Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, and William

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London, 1931), p. 142.

Bankes. ~~For~~ Although Virginia Woolf tells us only a few vague things about the incomes and positions of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, and William Bankes; she tells us nothing about the incomes and positions of the three minor guests. It is not until the last chapter that we learn one single fact about the profession of one of these minor characters, the fact that Augustus Carmichael has, sometime during the passage of ten years, become a famous poet.

We observe that Virginia Woolf reduces any discussion of money and earning one's living to a minimum; for we are told nothing about the kind of philosophical books Mr. Ramsay writes, the exact name of the scientific profession in which Mr. Bankes is engaged, the exact income of any of the characters. Except for a few specific references like "feeding eight children on philosophy," (36) or Mrs. Ramsay's recurrent thought-image of "the bill for the greenhouse repairs," (68) we hardly know that financial worries exist for these characters. Virginia Woolf gives us a few generalized details, a few specific details about incomes and professions--nothing more.

However, Virginia Woolf writes rather specifically and detailedly about Charles Tansley's concern for income and profession because she wishes to emphasize the social value of the Ramsays and their other guests by contrasting an outsider's regard for the opposite social value. ~~For~~ Among a group of people who are unconcerned about money and

profession, Charles Tansley is conspicuous because he stresses these things as values worthy of discussion and pride. He not only alienates himself from the Ramsays and the others, but he also resents these people because he cannot impose his income and profession values upon them, values he assumes they ought to admire him for possessing. Charles Tansley must constantly remind himself and others how hard he has had to work and save in order to realize his scholarly ambition. He enjoys telling Mrs. Ramsay about his economies and hard work, both of which reveal him as a self-made man. *Thomas good good*

It was a large family, nine brothers and sisters, and his father was a working man. "My father is a chemist, Mrs. Ramsay. He keeps a shop." He himself had paid his own way since he was thirteen. Often he went without a greatcoat in winter. He could never "return hospitality"...at college. He had to make things last twice the time other people did; he smoked the cheapest tobacco; snag; He worked hard--seven hours a day. (21-22)

Because he likes Mrs. Ramsay Charles Tansley wishes her to admire him. "He would like her to see him, gowned and hooded, walking in a procession. A fellowship, a professorship, he felt capable of anything. . . ." (20) But while he admires Mrs. Ramsay, he scorns the society she and her husband their other guests represent, scorns them because he is awkward and ill-at-ease in their cultivated society and because they do not properly appreciate him. Charles Tansley thinks at Mrs. Ramsay's dinner-party:

But in that one sentence lay compact, like gunpowder, that his grandfather was a fisherman; his father a chemist; that he had worked his way up entirely himself; that he was proud of it; that he was Charles Tansley--a fact that nobody there seemed to realize; but one of these days every single person would know it. . . . He could almost pity these mild cultivated people, who would be blown sky high. . . one of these days by the gunpowder that was in him. (138)

Virginia Woolf indicates that Tansley cannot free himself material considerations because he has not grown up economically secure and independent. Therefore, he allows his social attitudes toward money and profession to impinge upon his mental freedom, one of the social impingements which prevents him from enjoying a relaxed interchange of ideas with the Ramsay's and their other guests, all of whom have been reared in a society of both economic independence and cultivation. For Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and the other guests, whatever their financial status may be, do not discuss financial worries.

We may conclude then that in general money and earning one's living remain dispersed overtones in the background of the novel, overtones occasionally disquieting but never pressing; always, the foreground of the novel is kept intact for expression of problems of the soul, the intellect, and reality.

Virginia Woolf minimizes discussion of religious attitudes even more than she reduces her discussion about monetary and professional attitudes. There is never any overt discussion among the characters about religion; and there are only a few indirect references made to it. One of the few references to religious orthodoxy is made by Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay muses idly:

What brought her to say that: "We are in the hands of the Lord?" she wondered. The insincerity slipping in among the truths roused her, annoyed her. . . . How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. (98)

Mrs. Ramsay's attitude toward religious orthodoxy is an attitude shared by most Woolf characters. For in the other novels in which religious attitudes are more fully described by Mrs. Woolf, we discover that Mrs. Woolf's characters, having only a vague awareness of any orthodox religion, are not religious. If her characters have any religious convictions, those convictions, like Mrs. Ramsay's, are usually either agnostic or atheistic.

It is perhaps significant that the characters in this novel do not discuss religion or seldom refer to it either in their conversation or in their thinking. For, since we know that the Woolf character is generally non-religious, perhaps we may infer that the characters are in such complete agreement against religious orthodoxy that there is no need for any discussion. Certainly, we may infer

that religious orthodoxy contributes almost nothing to their positive thinking about reality, the nature of the universe, and man's place in the universe.

Though Virginia Woolf's characters as a group discard the traditional value of religious orthodoxy, they reaffirm another traditional upper middle-class value-- the necessity for independence and leisure for reading and thinking. The Ramsay's and their guests, without exception, respect knowledge and believe in wisdom; and at Mrs. Ramsay's dinner-party, the dinner conversation reveals that these people are familiar with many intellectual subjects.

that was what they were talking about now; on Voltaire and Madame de Staël; on the character of Napoleon; on the French system of land tenure; on Lord Rosebery; on Creevey's Memoirs:(159)

However, though all of these people acquire and respect knowledge, some of them are not satisfied with knowledge simply as information; for some of these characters have a passion for transforming information into wisdom.

Attempting to formulate a complete philosophical system, Mr. Ramsay dedicates himself to wisdom in his incessant, though unsuccessful, striving to get from Q to R in his understanding and explanation of his metaphysics.

But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q. He dug his heels in at Q. Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then

is Q--R--Here he knocked his pipe out with two or three resonant taps on the handle of the urn, and proceeded. "Then R. . ." He braced himself. He clenched himself. (53-54)

Like her husband, Mrs. Ramsay also has a passion for wisdom; but, unlike her husband, Mrs. Ramsay's passion for wisdom is intuitive and creative rather than rational and analytical. And though she respects the information and cleverness of men like her husband and Charles Tansley, information contributes little to her intuitive passion for wisdom. "Books She never had time to read them. Alas! even the books that had been given her and inscribed by the hand of the poet" (43) Mrs. Ramsay's wisdom is the creativeness of her personality, a creativeness which draws people together and imposes harmony upon them. At her dinner-party she uses her wisdom to create harmony among her guests.

They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it,(126)

In his study of Virginia Woolf's novels, Bernard Blackstone comments upon Mrs. Ramsay's creativeness.

. . . and Mrs. Ramsay was really an artist--an artist in life. Her creations were happiness and security, her materials men and women and children, her frame the house on Skye.¹

Lily Briscoe, in her passion for wisdom, resembles

¹ Bernard Blackstone, Virginia Woolf: A Commentary (New York, 1949), p. 125.

Mrs. Ramsay. But she combines the intuitive and creative with the rational and analytical; for Lily Briscoe has a double-passion for wisdom: a passion for painting and a passion for feminine rights. In her painting, she most fully realizes the intuitive and creative portion of her personality because she attempts to express in the content of her painting her vision of Truth and reality; however, in her painting, she also exercises her rational and analytical qualities because she must plan and execute the proportions of her painting in order to harmonize content and form.

However, in her feminism Lily Briscoe most fully utilizes the rational and analytical portion of her personality because as a woman she must defend her rights of independence and equality against intellectual males like Charles Tansley who insists that "women can't write, women can't paint." (130) Yet even in her feminism Lily intimately blends the two portions of her personality; for her intellectual feminism is a means to an end--that is, Lily Briscoe insists upon her rights as a woman in order that she may express her essentially intuitive and creative personality. For after she has insisted upon her rights as a human being, she can forget her feminism to become absorbed in her genuine passion--the expression of her vision of life in painting.

She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner,

subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general; becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among the hedges and the houses and mothers and children--her picture. (82)

Like Lily Briscoe, William Bankes integrates his intellectual learning into the expression of his personality. William Bankes' wisdom is his acceptance of himself and consequently his enjoyment of self. He enjoys and praises Carlyle and the Waverley novels in spite of the fact that it is intellectually suspect to enjoy either Carlyle or the Waverley novels. And when Tansley, representing the voice of current intellectualdom, criticizes the Waverley novels,

William Bankes . . . laughed, and said he attached no importance to changes in fashion. Who could tell what was going to last--in literature or indeed in anything else? . . . "Let us enjoy what we do enjoy," he said. His integrity seemed to Mrs. Ramsay quite admirable. He never seemed for a moment to think, But how does this affect me? (161)

In contrast to Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, and William Bankes, Charles Tansley has no passion for wisdom because he cannot free himself from his "moi." For though Charles Tansley has immense information (more information than Mrs. Ramsay, Minta Doyle, or Paul Rayley), he cannot transform his information into wisdom because he cannot forget material things--his old flannel trousers, his rough laboring-class manners, his laboring-class virtues of economy and ambition. Consequently, he must compensate for his social gaucheness by imposing his opinions upon others.

He wanted somebody to give him a chance of asserting himself. He wanted it so urgently that he fidgeted in his chair, looked at this person, then at that person, tried to break into their talk, opened his mouth and shut it again. They were talking about the fishing industry. Why did no one ask him his opinion? What did they know about the fishing industry? (136-137)

Charles Tansley cannot achieve disinterestedness; and if one wishes to graduate from the Woolf society with a passion for wisdom, one must fulfill the Woolf prerequisite of disinterestedness. Indirectly commenting upon this disinterestedness, Mrs. Ramsay compares Charles Tansley's discussion of books to Paul Rayley's remarks about Tolstoi's Anna Karenina:

books were not in their Mrs. Ramsay's and Paul's line. No, Charles Tansley would put them both right in a second about books, but it was all so mixed up with, Am I saying the right thing? Am I making a good impression? that, after all, one knew more about him than about Tolstoi, whereas, what Paul said was about the thing, simply, not himself, nothing else. (163)

Charles Tansley shares the group's respect for knowledge and wisdom; but he shares this respect only because he has an Oxford education and scholarly ambitions. Actually, he remains a blinded Oedipus among the Ramsay's and their guests; for he never understands that the people have a disinterested attitude toward knowledge in that they acquire knowledge either to satisfy their intellectual curiosity or to contribute to their individual understanding of things in themselves.

Further, Charles Tansley does not understand that because the Ramsay's and their guests accept learning as casually as they accept manners, they often regard learning as simply a prelude to their personal passion for wisdom. But because he is trying to bridge two classes--his laboring class and the Ramsay's upper middle-class--Tansley has no social code. He cannot share in the speculations of the Ramsay's and the others. In fact, he can barely share with them in discussing purely informational subjects. He is analogous to what Virginia Woolf calls the "modern" writers,¹ because, like these writers, he wishes to compensate for his chaotic uncertainty by asserting himself, even if asserting himself means that he must destroy both the niceties of social convention and the easy interchange of speculative ideas.

One of the principal themes of To the Lighthouse is love and marriage. Consequently, one could discuss this theme at considerable length as Bernard Blackstone does in his book, Virginia Woolf: A Commentary. However, we shall be concerned with this theme, not as a subject in itself, but only as it contributes to our understanding of another social pattern in the Woolf society.

Restating the traditional acceptance of love and marriage as necessary and sound customs, Virginia Woolf's

¹See Virginia Woolf's discussion of the modern writer as an icon-breaker of literary tradition. Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," The Captain's Death Bed and other Essays, pp. 115-116.

characters seldom find conflict in their attitude toward love and marriage. They assume that marriage necessitates similar intellectual and social milieus. Because they do not seek social position, money, or intellect in marriage, they are free to marry for love. But while as a group they remain within the codified pattern of the love-and-marriage tradition, they often step outside this tradition as individuals to ask these questions: what is love? how many kinds of love are there? what place does love hold in a man's life and in a woman's life?

Because of Mrs. Ramsay's match-making, Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle discover love for each other and become engaged in the first chapter. In the third chapter, Paul and Minta have been married for several years; however, the happy and carefree love-relationship they had in the first chapter exists no longer. In the first chapter Virginia Woolf gives over a considerable portion of the chapter to describing the actions of Paul and Minta; but she uses the lovers only as examples of two people fulfilling their group's acceptance of the love-and-marriage tradition; for Paul and Minta do not comment upon love and marriage; they perform, like puppets, the actions of a young man and a young woman who are in love and about to become engaged. Virginia Woolf never tells us why Paul and Minta have fallen in love, what exactly they expect in a love-marriage relationship. It remains for Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe to articulate the love-and-marriage pattern.

Because she has found love and marriage to be the summum bonum of her life, Mrs. Ramsay vigorously restates her belief in the traditional love-and-marriage custom. She is a weary mother, yet happy in the lives of her children; she is an exhausted wife who must bear with her husband's moodiness and irritable temper; yet she knows that love is good because love is the understanding she gives her husband, an understanding which thus supports and sustains Mr. Ramsay:

And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness)--(185-186)

However, love and marriage mean more to Mrs. Ramsay than simply conventions within which she discovers her own personal happiness. Because she is "an artist in life," she wishes to create harmonious and enduring works of art; and because she knows that her own work of art, her marriage, cannot endure forever she wishes to extend her art form by creating marriages for others. For in love and marriage Mrs. Ramsay finds both an expression for her creative personality and for her passion for wisdom, the desire to impose harmony upon life. Never satisfied with pairing off people, Mrs. Ramsay perpetuates her match-making. Having finished with the Rayley-Doyle engagement, she then decides that William Bankes ought to marry Lily Briscoe.

Ah, but was that not Lily Briscoe strolling along with William Bankes? . . . Yes, indeed it was.

Did that not mean that they would marry?
Yes, it must! What an admirable idea!
They must marry! (109)

Sometimes, however, Mrs. Ramsay questions her match-making. "she was driven on too quickly she knew, almost as if it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry; people must have children." (92-93) During moments of uncertainty she is uneasy about Paul and Minta's suitability for one another, uneasy because she fears that her creation may not have the right materials to make it last.

Was she wrong in this, Marriage needed--
oh, all sorts of qualities. . . . ; one--she
need not name it--that was essential; the thing
she had with her husband. Had they that? (93)

Like Mrs. Ramsay and the other members of her group, Lily Briscoe accepts the love-and-marriage custom as good and necessary. Lily thinks, "there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman . . . has missed the best of life." (77) But in accepting her group's custom, she frees herself from it as an individual by refusing to marry, refusing because she believes that it does not suit her vision of life. ". . . she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself;" (77)

Unlike Mrs. Ramsay, Lily does not find her raison d'être in love and marriage. Her passion for wisdom is different from Mrs. Ramsay's. Both women wish to impose artistic unity upon life; but while Mrs. Ramsay imposes that unity by using people for her materials, Lily uses colors for her materials. Lily discovers that she can best express her vision of Truth

and reality by removing herself from people, removing herself in order that she may acquire the artist's impersonal perspective which allows her to see people as symbolic forms expressing reality. Speculating about love and marriage,

Lily decides:

. . . she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move ~~thetree~~ rather more to the middle.

Lily suggests above that the artist is apart from ordinary social customs because he seeks a higher kind of Truth and reality and because he wishes to impose harmony upon life, a harmony of coherence and beauty which life possesses only as it is formed, translated, and distilled by the artist. Lily holds to the Proustian doctrine that the artist must remove himself from life if he is to express the essence of life. And like Virginia Woolf herself, Lily concludes that her relationship is "to the world of reality not only to the world of men and women;¹ and because the world of reality is of more consequence to her as an individual she rejects for herself the social custom of her group.

In spite of the individual questioning of and occasional rejection of the love-and-marriage custom, there is no attempt to undermine the goodness and necessity of the custom. The custom itself remains intact. Neither Mrs. Ramsay nor Lily Briscoe questions the worthwhileness of the custom itself; their concern is to see how the custom affects themselves and other people. Mrs. Ramsay finds it a good

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London, 1931),

custom for herself; therefore, she wishes other people to participate with her in her happy discovery. Pragmatic Lily Briscoe concludes that although love and marriage have their drawbacks, it is a good custom because it frequently works well for others. Never does the Woolf character confuse the social frame with the individual frame. In accepting the social frame, he does not pledge himself to extending the social frame into an individual frame.

In looking at the social framework of the Woolf society, we have already discovered some of the divergent attitudes held by the different characters toward that framework. But while most of Virginia Woolf's characters have firm, inquiring minds, their inquiries are never directed into active conflict with their fellows.

In the first section of the novel, the dominant arena of conflict is reserved for two strong-willed characters, Charles Tansley and Lily Briscoe. Tansley, with his aggressive and personal masculine egotism, scorns women's intellectual abilities.

They never got anything worth having from one year's end to another. They never did anything but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat. It was the women's fault. Women made civilization impossible with all their "charm," and all their silliness. (129)

Lily Briscoe, with her defensive feminist hatred of men's attitudes, resents Tansley's sneering contempt for women's intellectual attainments; especially she resents his contempt

for her painting.

. . . why did she mind what he said? Women can't write, women can't paint--what did that matter coming from him, since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it? Could she not hold fast to that her painting, she asked herself, and not lose her temper, and not argue; and if she wanted revenge take it by laughing at him? (130)

At the Ramsay dinner-party, Tansley's scorn and Lily's resentment threaten to break into mongrel quarreling, a quarreling which would reveal the violent emotions hidden amidst old china and tinkling glass. But Mrs. Ramsay, the perceptive and conciliatory hostess, intervenes; and Lily Briscoe, the well-bred and devoted guest, responds to her hostess' request.

"Will you take me, Mr. Tansley?" said Lily, quickly, kindly, for, of course, if Mrs. Ramsay said to her, as in effect, she did, "I am ~~drowning~~ my dear, in seas of fire. Unless you apply some balm to the anguish of this hour and say something nice to that young man there, life will run upon the rocks--indeed I hear the grating and the growling at this minute. (138)

Having successfully muzzled Charles Tansley's wounded masculine bite by letting him talk, Lily reflects:

She had done the usual trick--been nice. She would never know him. He would never know her. Human relations were like that, . . . and the worst were between men and women. . . . Then her eye caught the salt cellar, . . . and she remembered that next morning she would move the tree further towards the middle, and her spirits rose so high at the thought of painting tomorrow that she laughed out loud at what Mr. Tansley was saying. Let him talk all night if he liked it. (139-140)

From this example of conflicting attitudes, we observe that avoidance of active conflict is achieved in two ways: first, decorum and good breeding prevent Lily Briscoe from indulging her desire to openly snarl at Charles Tansley who has not been reared a gentleman; second, Lily Briscoe is much too concerned with her personal vision of life to sustain any petty bickering with a young man she knows does not share her genuine regard for wisdom.

Lily Briscoe, a spinster and an amateur painter, is one of the most singular examples of Virginia Woolf's women of inquiring sensibilities. She has directed her inquiry into learning how to paint Truth with brush-strokes. Like a watchful Homeric goddess, Lily Briscoe broods over this novel because, from the beginning to the end, she is painting a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay--a portrait which she finishes at the close of the novel when she has her vision. Like most Woolf women, Lily is inquisitive and perceptive to the emotions and ideas of others. She knows that Mrs. Ramsay, whom she loves and admires, would like her to marry William Bankes. But Lily refuses to be insinuated into marriage. Yet Mrs. Ramsay and Lily do not argue about marriage, a subject which is never directly spoken of; but while Mrs. Ramsay tacitly insists, Lily tacitly resists:

she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself;
she was not made for that marriage; and so have
to meet a serious stare from eyes of unparalleled

depth, and confront Mrs. Ramsay's simple certainty . . . that her dear Lily, her little Brisk, was a fool. (77-78)

While Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe inquire about each other's ideas and visions, even differ with each other, they do not direct their differences into active conflict with one another; for ultimately Mrs. Ramsay is concerned with her private experience and Lily Briscoe with hers.

Each character sees himself in relation to a human framework of common ideas and values. However, he is never absorbed into the framework. For, secure in the conventions of a particular group, he is freed from the conflicts of fulfilling the conventions of an undefined group; and he can, therefore, forget the conventions of his group to speculate in more philosophical directions. Like Virginia Woolf herself, the character sees society and the individual in a double-aspect: society as unity, the individual as diversity. Both unity and diversity complement each other because both are necessary if the individual is to think about life as the eternal predicament. Ultimately, however, the character is concerned with his individual diversity--his own vision of personal values. Group ideas and values--those relating to money, religion, knowledge, and love and marriage are superficially held; hence they are easily discarded in favor of more pressing inquiries into personal perplexities.

Virginia Woolf believed that the inquiry into personal perplexity was not necessarily communicated by factual documentation. Neither character nor landscape was necessarily known or understood through fact. Mrs. Woolf writes in A Room of One's Own, "Fiction . . . is likely to contain more truth than fact."¹ Consequently, Virginia Woolf suppresses the material framework. Joan Bennett believes that "Possibly Virginia Woolf's own inaccuracy in matters of fact is a deliberate carelessness about all that is not essential to her vision."² And Virginia Woolf's vision, as we shall come to understand, is something symbolic, something beyond fact.

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 7.

²Joan Bennett, Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist (New York, 1925), p. 91.

CHAPTER II

THE SOLITARY INDIVIDUAL

Virginia Woolf dedicated herself to recording her symbolic vision of Mrs. Brown or life itself, and she suggested that for the modern novelist this description "lies very likely in the dark places of psychology."¹ Certainly the psychological revelation of the individual consciousness of her characters was her way of recording Mrs. Brown who was life itself, who was eternal, and who changed only on the surface. In her novels, each of her characters experiments with his own psychological self-awareness in order that he may get nearer to an understanding of life itself.

Because the Woolf character attains an understanding of Mrs. Brown or life itself by the method of solitariness, we as readers must trace in To the Lighthouse the theme of isolation which dominates not only this novel but all Woolf novels. In this novel Virginia Woolf does not personify isolation as an abstraction,² but rather she symbolizes it in the "lighthouse" symbol--the Lighthouse which stands alone in the midst of the sea and which, in its distant loneliness, overshadows the frail lives of the people on the Isles of Skye.

¹Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," The Common Reader, Series One, p. 215.

²In Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf personifies human isolation as the solitary traveller. See pages 85-88.

It is isolation--powerful, desolate, and challenging-- which is the core of both this novel and of Virginia Woolf's thinking. In solitude lies the way to self-success which is, for her, the good life, the only life. Near the end of A Room of One's Own, she advises the young women of Fernham College, Oxford of the necessity to be concerned ultimately with one's own vision:

When I rummage in my own mind I find no noble sentiments about being companions and equals and influencing the world to higher ends. I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else. Do not dream of influencing other people, I would say, if I knew how to make it sound exalted. Think of things in themselves.¹

In her novels and in her critical and feminist writings, Virginia Woolf repeatedly emphasizes that only the solitary self can finally understand life itself and can achieve the vision of reality: society and the vision of reality do not go together. Though there are a number of patterns in the novels which embrace many of the interests of life, we as readers always observe these patterns through the singleness of each character's understanding and reaction to them. Already, in chapter one, we have examined a number of patterns--patterns in which human beings were shown in contact with another person (love, friendship, dislike), in contact with ideas (religion, philosophy, literature), in contact with institutions (marriage, profession), in contact with groups of individuals (the social

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 167.

group, the family), and in contact with the desire for wisdom. Though, in chapter one, we have been primarily concerned to examine the unanimity of the group's adherence to the outlines of these patterns, we have also secondarily noted that the details were filled in by the innate aloneness with which each character synthesizes conclusions from his experiments with these patterns.

Each character must experiment alone because it is in the final seizing of the self that he apprehends his relationship with other selves, with life itself, and with reality. He must first retreat into the self because it is only in this retreat that he can catch a glimpse of wholeness of life and of reality. Virginia Woolf concludes A Room of One's Own with a summary discussion about the solitary self and its relation to reality when she advises the Fernham college women to obtain economic independence in order that they may bring Shakespeare's obscure sister (the creative woman) into being:

For my belief is that if we women live another century or so--I am talking of the common life the individual life in which one thinks of things in themselves and is oneself which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals--and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves; . . . if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down.¹

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, pp. 171-172.

Reality is discovered in the beingness of the spiritual life. The emphasis upon the spiritual life motivates the Woolf character to look within not without, to suffer and understand rather than to fight. Through the method of the spirit the character intuits the common life. In her essay, "Notes on an Elizabethan Play," Mrs. Woolf finds Elizabethan literature lacking in the solitude which she believed was essential if one were to think about things and understand them:

What is it that we are coming to want so persistently that unless we get it instantly we must seek elsewhere? It is solitude. There is no privacy here. Always the door opens and some one comes in. All is shared, made visible, audible, dramatic. Meanwhile, as if tired with company, the mind steals off to muse in solitude; to think, not to act; to comment, not to share; to explore its own darkness, not the bright-lit-up surface of others.¹

Virginia Woolf's understanding of reality embraced in isolation not only the contemplative minds of people but also the active being of physical things.² To the Lighthouse is saturated with the physical world; for although Virginia Woolf never describes a landscape in the detail that a Hardy does, the reader is no less aware of the landscape; in a few sentences

¹Virginia Woolf, "Notes on an Elizabethan Play," The Common Reader, Series One, p. 85.

²Bernard Blackstone maintains throughout his study of Virginia Woolf that the world of things is more attractive to her than the world of human beings because "it is easier to live with things than with human beings." The human personality is unreal except in rare moments because it is ordinarily separated from truth by the desires of self. But "there is no pretence, no false personality, in a tree or a rock." See Blackstone, Virginia Woolf: A Commentary, pp. 107-108.

here, a brief description there, and a phrase somewhere else, Mrs. Woolf always retains the physical world. And the physical world of this novel is a peculiarly Woolfian metaphysical world. The island, the Lighthouse, Nature--all are symbolic of a world which exists only in the conscious expression of Virginia Woolf.

As a part of the isolation of the physical world, the island and lighthouse remain throughout the novel; but in "Time Passes" Virginia Woolf has devoted an entire section to a sustained and separated examination of the physical world. In this section, the Ramsay's and their friends have almost disappeared except as the changes that happen to some of them are recorded in bracketed interludes. People have receded into the background. Nature in her fluidity of change in time is the leading character of this section. We read about the decay of the physical objects in the Ramsay's house and Mrs. McNab's attempts to defeat the decay of time-change caused by disuse and the moist sea air:

The books and things were mouldy, for, what with the war and help being hard to get, the house had not been cleaned as she could have wished. It was beyond one person's strength to get it straight now. She was too old. Her legs pained her. All those books needed to be laid out on the grass in the sun; there was plaster fallen in the hall; the rain-pipe had blocked over the study window and let the water in; (203-204)

In "Time Passes" Virginia Woolf speculates about Nature as removed from human values. Secure in her isolation, Nature is undisturbed by the fading and perishing values of men in ignorant armies which clash by night.

. . ., and the soft nose of the clammy sea airs, rubbing, snuffing, iterating, and reiterating their questions--"Will you fade? Will you perish?"--scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity, as if the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer: we remain. (195)

But insecure man wishes to translate his own insecurity into security by identifying himself with the non-perishableness of Nature. In the loneliness of his meaninglessness, man seeks a meaningful reflection:

This intrusion into a scene calculated to stir the most sublime reflections and lead to the most comfortable conclusions stayed their pacing. It was difficult blandly to overlook them; to abolish their significance in the landscape; to continue, as one walked by the sea, to marvel how beauty outside mirrored beauty within. (201)

However, finally Nature seems to remain aloof and apart from man:

Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacence she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture. That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath? Impatient, despairing yet loth to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations), to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken. (201-202)

By isolating Nature, Virginia Woolf has been able to think about the thing in itself. Man tinges Nature with his desire to find meaning and so finds his meaning; but Nature looked at detachedly as a single thing completes her cycles removed, aloof, indifferent, unaware of man. Isolated like man, she does not ally herself with him.

If man is solitary in the physical world, he is no less solitary in the human world. Previously, we have noted in detail the superficial sense of groupness which is characteristic of the Woolf character; now we shall examine in detail the profound and genuine isolation which motivates the Woolf character as he lives within the group. There are two group situations in To the Lighthouse, in which Virginia Woolf reveals the innate aloneness of each individual personality.

In the first section, "The Window," there is a meeting of the entire group, the Ramsay's and their friends, in one place, Mrs. Ramsay's dinner-party. Only this once in the entire novel do all of the people gather. At this gathering, Virginia Woolf shows us both unity and discreteness, but she emphasizes discreteness. Because the characters do not react as a group unity but as discrete individuals within a group, we immediately note the absence of esprit de corps. At the dinner-party, each person, often unaware of the existence of other people, is intensely aware of his own existence.

Because of this intense individual awareness, the Ramsay dinner-party gets off to a bad start. Paul and Minta Doyle, who have taken a walk on the beach, are late. Charles Tansley, ill-at-ease because he has not dressed for dinner, is irritated by the "silly, superficial, flimsy" talk and charm created by the women. (129) Lily Briscoe is preoccupied with her painting problems and easily irritated by Charles Tansley's scorn of women's abilities. William Bankes, who prefers to dine alone because he dislikes the interruptions which a hostess must give

about the food, thinks "such are the sacrifices one's friends ask of one;" (133)

The truth was that he did not enjoy family life. . . . Why, one asked oneself, does one take all these pains for the human race to go on? Is it so very desirable? Are we attractive as a species? Not so very, he thought, looking at the rather untidy boys. (134)

Mr. Ramsay is peevish and sulking like a little boy because Augustus Carmichael has asked for a second helping of soup; and Mr. Ramsay hates "people wallowing in food, hated everything dragging on for hours like this." (144) Only Mrs. Ramsay--conscious of the tensions in spite of her worries about her piece de resistance the Boeuf en Daube which she is having served as the entree, forgets her own existence to impose harmony upon a group of people who will not and cannot forget their singularity.

The room . . . was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere. . . . Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it, and so, giving herself the shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, . . . (126)

But even the selfless Mrs. Ramsay is preoccupied with her own thoughts:

Lily Briscoe watched her Mrs. Ramsay drifting into that strange no-man's land where to follow people is impossible and yet their going inflicts such a chill on those who watch them that they always try at least to follow them with their eyes. . . . (127)

Individuality is being flaunted so brazenly by everyone that as dinner progresses each person, hoping that he is not exposing himself, becomes self-consciously uncomfortable-- everyone except Charles Tansley who is satisfying his need for self-assertion by abusing the government:

William Bankes, thinking what a relief it was to catch on to something of this sort when private life was disagreeable, heard him Charles Tansley say something about "one of the most scandalous acts of the present government." Lily was listening; Mrs. Ramsay was listening; they all were listening. But already bored, Lily felt that something was lacking; Mr. Bankes felt that something was lacking. All of them bending themselves to listen thought, "Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed," for each thought, "The others are feeling this. They are outraged and indignant with the government about the fishermen. Whereas, I feel nothing at all." (141-142)

Midway through the dinner, the tone of the dinner-party suddenly changes. The eight candles are lighted and suddenly each individual loses his egocentric hostility against the others. Then for a moment discreteness becomes unity. Suddenly these people do not feel isolated and fearful but bound together against the fears, desires, and ambitions of their individuality into a larger more meaningful existence in which separate consciousness flows into the unity of some common force. Later, in chapter three, we shall understand that Virginia Woolf was fascinated by this mystical unity which binds people together as well as fascinated by the isolation which separates people from each other.

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. Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (146-147)

This moment of harmonic unity withdraws the former tensions. During the rest of the party everyone is excited by Paul and Minta's return and the expectation that they will announce their engagement. The conversation becomes easier. Everyone is in a festive mood. Mr. Bankes is pleased by the Boeuf en Daube: "It was rich; it was tender. . . .She Mrs. Ramsay was a wonderful woman. All his love, all his reverence, had returned." (151) Mr. Ramsay enjoys teasing Minta Doyle. Lily forgets her resentment against Charles Tansley's scorn of her sex. Mrs. Ramsay is radiant in her success; she has created unity out of disunity.

But while the characters remain merged into group harmony during the rest of the dinner-party, paradoxically they retain their isolated singularity. Group unity allows them to return to their individual diversity. Mr. Ramsay is momentarily made uneasy by a remark about the lastingness of Scott's Waverley novels. Immediately he thinks of the durability of his own writings and reacts with his characteristic and singular anxiety. "He showed his uneasiness quite clearly now

by saying with some irritation, that, anyhow, Scott . . . would last him his lifetime." (161-162) Having forgotten his earlier displeasure, William Bankes relaxes into his characteristic carefree and impersonal enjoyment of things. Whether Scott will last or not does not bother him. "Let us enjoy what we do enjoy," he said. (161) The truth-seekers, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, quickly return to their attic-room of private thoughts; for now that edginess so characteristic of these people has been planed down, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily no longer need be disturbed by other people or by their own irritability, fear, and resentments. They return to their own individual wisdom. After having speculated about the nature of love and marriage, Lily decides that she need not undergo the degradation of marriage and begins to think about her painting: "She would move the tree rather more to the middle." (154)

Mrs. Ramsay thinks about the personalities and future of her children, the lives of the other guests, how much she admires Lily, how "William must marry Lily." (157) Then, ridding herself of everyday thoughts, she reaches for her special napkin of reality and begins to tuck away her conclusions about reality:

there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out . . . so that again tonight she had the feeling she had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (158)

Completely absorbed in the intensity of his own personality, each person unconsciously forgets his singularity until Mrs. Ramsay rises to leave the room. The overt movement of one person,

especially Mrs. Ramsay who is synonymous with harmony, consciously reminds the others that their real existence is a thing unique and apart. "And directly she went a sort of disintegration set in; they wavered about, went different ways." (168)

The relationship of solitariness to reality is most explicitly stated by Virginia Woolf in the third section, "The Lighthouse." Here Mr. Ramsay and his two youngest children make their literal and symbolic journey to the literal and symbolic lighthouse. Cam and James remain silent throughout most of the trip because James has sworn his sister to resist the tyranny of their father. However, the pact is an artificial bond because Cam (who is preoccupied with her own thoughts) does not feel resentment against her father's despotism so much as her brother and would break the pact if she did not feel her brother's accusing eye on her.

Virginia Woolf has used two words--Alone and Perished--to establish the essential isolation of the three people taking the journey to the Lighthouse. Mr. Ramsay first uses these two words when he is thinking about the wreck in the storm the previous Christmas. During the journey, the words are repeated several times by Mr. Ramsay, once by Cam. Even before Mr. Ramsay and his two children leave for the Lighthouse, Lily realizes the symbolic significance of the words:

"Alone" she heard him say, "Perished" she heard him say and like everything else this strange morning the words became symbols, wrote themselves all over the grey-green walls. If only she could put them together, she felt, write them out in some sentence, then she would have got at the truth of things. (219)

In spirit, if not in fact, Lily too makes the voyage to the

Lighthouse: alone with her painting, Lily Briscoe has her vision when Mr. Ramsay, James, and Cam land on the shores of the Lighthouse.

Mr. Ramsay's landing, Lily Briscoe's vision--both are the solitary experiences of the solitary personality touching reality. Shortly before landing, James articulates the relationship between the solitary self and reality, a relationship which both he and his father at least partially understand. Symbolically, James sees his father as a stone--a physical object without personality:

He looked, James thought, getting his Mr. Ramsay's head now against the Lighthouse, now against the waste of waters running away into the open, like some old stone lying on the sand; he looked as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both their minds--that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things. (301)

There is no indication that Mr. Ramsay ever perceives reality, but in reaching the Lighthouse he does not make contact with impersonality which is a quality of Virginia Woolf's reality.

Isolation in itself is not a guarantee to understanding reality. It is only the method by which one integrates his understanding about the truth of things with his vision of life. Ultimately there must be a harmonic fusion between one's personality and his momentary perception of reality. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe achieve this harmonic fusion; but in spite of the fact that Mr. Ramsay finally learns, at least momentarily, that impersonality is a part of the truth about

things; he does not achieve this fusion. His self-directed egotism obscures self-knowledge and the clarity of looking at life and seeing it whole. No integration between thinking and living results from Mr. Ramsay's isolation. His speculative gloom and his cheerful, sun-lit everyday living remain separate and contradictory. Mrs. Ramsay believed "it to be true; that with all his gloom and desperation he was happier, more hopeful on the whole, than she was." (91) After she has overheard her husband murmur about the universe, "Poor little place," (106) Mrs. Ramsay sums up the dichotomy of her husband's thinking and living:

He said the most melancholy things, but she noticed that directly he had said them he always seemed more cheerful than usual. All this phrase-making was a game, she thought, for if she had said half what he said, she would have blown her brains out by now. (106)

In his cell of isolation, Mr. Ramsay exercises "the splendid energies of his mind" to construct his theoretical metaphysical system. Mr. Ramsay's isolation is a refuge, which walling out other people, cloisters him within his monastic self of philosophical meditation:

He was safe, he was restored to his privacy. He stopped to light his pipe, looked once at his wife and son in the window, . . . so without distinguishing either his son or his wife, the sight of them fortified him and consecrated his effort to arrive at a perfectly clear understanding of the problem which now engaged the energies of his splendid mind. (52-53)

Because he fears his fame is transitory ("his last book was not quite his best") (62) and because he depends upon the praise and good opinion of other people, Mr. Ramsay vacillates in his thinking between introspective self-created doubt and abstract speculation.

Troubled by her husband's self-doubt, Mrs. Ramsay thinks,

He was always uneasy about himself. That troubled her. He would always be worrying about his own books--Will they be read, are they good, why aren't they better, what do people think of me? (177)

Mrs. Ramsay has protected him from everyday worries--the "fifty pounds for the greenhouse repairs"--given him sympathy whenever he demanded it, reassured him about the permanence of his fame. (62) As a result Mr. Ramsay has been allowed to indulge himself in his refuge.

Haughtily indifferent to the feelings of others, Mr. Ramsay swoops down like a god from Mt. Olympus upon his wife, his children, his guests, and decrees their praise, sympathy, reassurance, adoration. Though he is venerable for his godlike qualities of courage, endurance, search for rational truth, equanimity in facing difficult situations; he is also laughable, like the gods, for his vanity, tyranny, and and self-deceptions.

But this his happiness and his pleasure in it, his glory in the phrases he made, in the ardour of youth, in his wife's beauty, in the tributes that reached him. . . --all had to be deprecated and concealed under the phrase "talking nonsense," because . . . he had not done the thing he might have done. It was a disguise; it was the refuge of a man afraid to own his own feelings, who could not say, This is what I like--this is what I am; and rather pitiable and distasteful to William Bankes and Lily Briscoe, who wondered why such concealments should be necessary; why he needed always praise; why so brave a man in thought should be so timid in life; how strangely he was venerable and laughable at one and the same time. (70)

Mr. Ramsay, not discovering his vision of life in his isolated philosophical speculation, must finally turn back to his genuine

core of meaningfulness, his wife and children and profession. Though he deceives himself always, Mr. Ramsay betrays his real self and his discovery of life's meaning by his very belittlement of this genuine meaning. Mr. Ramsay looks from the terrace out at the dark landscape and thinks,

That was the country he liked best, over there; those sandhills dwindling away into darkness. One could walk all day without meeting a soul. . . . One could worry things out alone. It sometimes seemed to him that in a little house there alone-- he broke off sighing. He had no right. The father of eight children. . . . And he would have been a beast and a cur to wish a thing altered. Andrew would be a better man than he had been. Prue would be a beauty, her mother said. They would stem the flood a bit. That was a good bit of work on the whole--his eight children. They showed he did not damn the poor little universe entirely,(105-106)

Here we note again the cleavage between Mr. Ramsay's solitary world of thought and his actual living; he does not really want to be alone "in a little house out there." But he must rationalize that he wants the life of the recluse thinker because he cannot admit that the meaning of his life is not expressed in his rationale. Virginia Woolf writes,

Returned from the sight of human ignorance and human fate and the sea eating the ground we stand on, which, had he been able to contemplate it fixedly might have led to something; and found consolation in trifles so slight compared with the august theme just now before him that he was disposed to slur that comfort over, to deprecate it, as if to be caught happy in a world of misery was for an honest man the most despicable of crimes. It was true; he was for the most part happy; he had his wife; he had his children; he had promised in six weeks' time to talk "some nonsense" to the young men of Cardiff about Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and the causes of the French Revolution. (69-70)

Mr. Ramsay cannot reconcile his happy life with a world which

seems to be chaotic, uncertain, fragmentary, and disillusioning.

In his speculation, Mr. Ramsay consistently creates a rational and ordered world of fact, untinged by irrationality, disorder, and emotion. He will not allow contradictions or what he calls tampering with facts:

He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; (10-11)

Facts, not being contradictory, are of utmost importance to Mr. Ramsay's rational and ordered speculation. (However, for Mrs. Ramsay, as for Virginia Woolf, facts are contradictory and they are not the most important things). In order to let her husband retain his speculative world of indisputable fact and his introspective egotism, Mrs. Ramsay has submerged her will into his. Sometimes, however, she gently censors her husband's imperfection of not being able to relinquish self, in the disguise of fact, long enough to consider other people's feelings. When she has given her children--James and Cam who want very much to go to the Lighthouse--hope that the weather may be fine the next day, though all indications are that the weather will not be fine, Mrs. Ramsay is amazed by her husband's egotistical anger and petulant "damn you." (50)

To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that, without replying, dazed and blinded, she bent her head

as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked. There was nothing to be said. (51)

Ironically, Mrs. Ramsay has protected her husband's ego from his world of fact of which he believes himself so righteous a guardian. Mrs. Ramsay comments upon this protection when she decides that even the best of marriages are imperfect:

but then it was their relation, and his coming to her like that, openly, so that any one could see, that discomposed her; for then people said he depended on her, when they must know that of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible. But then again, it was the other thing too--not being able to tell him the truth, being afraid . . . about the greenhouse roof and the expense it would be . . . to mend it; and then about his books, to be afraid that he might guess, what she a little suspected, that his last book was not quite his best book . . . ; and then to hide small daily things, and the children seeing it, and the burden it laid on them-- (62)

In her portrait of Mr. Ramsay, Virginia Woolf indicates that his kind of isolation, an isolation rational and self-motivated, is not the kind of isolation in which one perceives reality. Bernard Blackstone compares Mr. Ramsay's approach to reality to Mrs. Ramsay's:

We have seen Mrs. Ramsay sinking to become a wedge of darkness, shedding her personality, and thus experiencing the emotion of unity. Mrs. Ramsay's goal was reached because she did not set herself any goal. Now we see her husband setting himself a definite goal, and failing; failing for two possible reasons other than the one he supposes. He thinks that he fails to reach R because his brain is not good enough . . . , but the reader is conscious of two other impediments: first, the mixture of self in his motives, and secondly, the possibility that R is to be reached, if at all, by another path than that of abstraction.¹

¹Bernard Blackstone, Virginia Woolf: A Commentary, p. 115.

It is in the solitary experience of Mrs. Ramsay that Virginia Woolf shows us the other path by which R or reality may be reached. Mrs. Ramsay lives a double-storied existence: the upper story of her life, which is her conscious life, contains her parlor in which she lives with her husband, her children, and her friends and acquaintances; the lower story of her life contains the storage-room of her thinking, a place private and almost unknown to others. In her storage-room, which is her unconscious life, Mrs. Ramsay perceives reality by the method of intuition and impersonality:

and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. . . . This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one ever find rest, . . . but as a wedge of darkness. (95-96)

Although there are two rooms in Mrs. Ramsay's personality, they are not unconnected. Mrs. Ramsay's social life and her solitary life are paradoxical rather than separate and contradictory. The parlor and the storage-room form complements in Mrs. Ramsay's personality and they are linked together by a dark and descending passageway. Within the intensity of her private experience, her sinking down into darkness, she achieves self-knowledge and wholeness of personality:

She knew then--she knew without having learnt. Her simplicity fathomed what clever people falsified. Her singleness of mind made her drop plumb like a stone, alight exact as a bird, gave her, naturally, this swoop and fall of the spirit upon truth which delighted, eased, sustained--falsely perhaps. (46)

Because of the completeness she finds in her solitary experience, Mrs. Ramsay leads an active and unselfish everyday life in which she fills the lives of other with beauty, reassurance, and love:

. . . George Manning; Mr. Wallace; famous as they were, they would come to her of an evening, quietly, and talk alone over her fire. She bore about with her, she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty; she carried it erect into any room that she entered; . . . She had been admired. She had been loved. She had entered rooms where mourners sat. Tears had flowed in her presence. Men, and women too, letting go the multiplicity of things, had allowed themselves with her the relief of simplicity. (64-65)

Always, Mrs. Ramsay places the feelings and the desires of others before her own. She even treats her children with the consideration that is often saved for guests. Though she is in a great hurry to get down to her dinner-party, Mrs. Ramsay has time to let her daughter Rose choose the jewels she will wear because Rose "had some hidden reason of her own for attaching great importance to this choosing what her mother was to wear." (122-123) Inconsequential though this ceremony may seem, Mrs. Ramsay knows that it is important because "Rose would grow up; and Rose would suffer, she supposed, with these deep feelings." (123) When all the others are making

fun of Charles Tansley and avoiding him, Mrs. Ramsay perceives his discomfort and loneliness. Though she preoccupied with her own thoughts and wishes to go into town alone, she "turned with a sigh and said, 'Would it bore you to come with me, Mr. Tansley?'" (18)

Though Mrs. Ramsay is a Christ-like figure who brings comfort to those who sorrow and rest to those who are weary, she lives, like many other Woolf characters, in the presence of a Woolf paradox: an intense love of life with an equally intense perception of the intolerableness of life. Although Mrs. Ramsay lacks her husband's information and his abstract wisdom, she has what was for Virginia Woolf a more profound understanding of life than her intellectual and self-flogging husband. Like him, she understands that she lives in a Hardy world of cruelties, injustices, and sufferings. ". . . she must admit that she felt this thing that she called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance." (92) Also life is chaotic, fragmentary, and disillusioning:

With her mind she had always seized the fact that there was no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. (98)

Mrs. Ramsay more deeply experiences the intolerableness of life than her husband because she understands with the compassion of the heart as well as with the scapel-dissections of the head. Feeling and thinking are inseparable for her; consequently she

knows that her husband's gloomy pharse-making reflections about the world are a game; for she is affected emotionally when she thinks of the violence and treachery of the world:

Never did anybody look so sad. Bitter and black, half-way down, in the darkness, in the shaft which ran from the sunlight to the depths, perhaps a tear formed; a tear fell; the waters swayed this way and that, received it, and were at rest. Never did anybody look so sad. (46)

Mrs. Ramsay knows that the individual cannot stabilize happiness by ignoring the intolerableness and hostility of life. The eternal problems--suffering, death, the poor--will not be ignored. The individual who constructs happiness by disregarding these problems may discover that the baseness and treachery of the world will splinter his fragile plywood happiness into despair and rejection of life. Consequently, Mrs. Ramsay believes that one must nail happiness into the firm and solid texture of this paradox: that happiness must be hammered within unhappiness, that love of life must be solidified within the hatred of the intolerableness of life. In the storage-room of her private thoughts Mrs. Ramsay counterpoints the harmony which is of life yet not life:

Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; (96)

Slipping out of solitude back into the world of physical things, discarding her veil of semi-Hardian metaphysics, Mrs. Ramsay experiences the intense joy of life. If she is oppressed by the ugliness of life, she is equally exhilarated by the beauty

of life. She feels the joy of life as she listens to the sound of the sea and watches the beam from the Lighthouse:

. . . watching it with fascination, hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, it is enough! It is enough! (99-100)

Whether Mrs. Ramsay feels that at one moment life is intensely joyful, at another intensely intolerable, she constantly knows that life is a lonely game of solitaire. Mrs. Ramsay discovers the Woolf core of life--human isolation--which Clarissa Dalloway in Mrs. Dalloway verbalizes: "here was one room: there another."¹ Thinking over her fifty years of living, Mrs. Ramsay says:

There it was before her--life. Life, she thought--but she did not finish her thought. She took a look at life, for she had a clear sense of it there, something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband. (91-92)

It is significant that Lily Briseo is the only other person in the novel, who perceives Mrs. Ramsay's real solitary self--significant because Lily is the only other person who perceives reality in the same way as Mrs. Ramsay does:

. . . she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay's heart. How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another about people, sealed as they were? (79)

¹Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway(New York, 1925), p. 193.

If Lily had answered her question, presumably she would have said that one knows people by the same method one knows reality--the method of intuition and impersonality. By sinking down into her wedge-shaped core of darkness, Mrs. Ramsay discovers reality. By "losing consciousness of outer things," (238) Lily perceives reality and finds the same wisdom that is "stored up in Mrs. Ramsay's heart." (79)

The idea of human isolation is incarnate in the character of Lily Briscoe. Continuously she asks, "Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge?" (256)

Lily Briscoe is the Greek chorus of To the Lighthouse. Always, she remains distant and apart from the actions of the other characters. Thus removed, she translates action into thematic meaning. Like both the Greek chorus and the artist she contemplates and re-creates the human scene. At the Ramsay dinner-party, it is she who examines the actions of the other characters:

Such was the complexity of things. For what happened to her, especially staying with the Ramsays, was to be made to feel violently two opposite things at the same time; that's what you feel, was one; that's what I feel, was the other. (154)

The integrated paradox of Mrs. Ramsay's personality--the blending of the social and the solitary--is alien to Lily's personality. Her understanding and sympathy embrace the uniqueness and loneliness of the human experience. After discussing her painting with Mr. Bankes, she says of her rare

experience of having shared something with another person:

This man had shared with her something profoundly intimate. And, . . . crediting the world with a power she had not suspected--that one could walk down that long gallery not alone any more but arm in arm with somebody--the strangest feeling in the world (83)

Lily's limitation and her strength is her drawing together of her own vision of life:

And now that she . . . had subdued the impertinences and the irrelevances that plucked her attention and made her remember how she was such and such a person, she took her hand and raised her brush. (235)

Following Virginia Woolf's advice, Lily Briscoe refuses to sacrifice a single hair of her vision of life to any Headmaster.¹ In comic terms, Virginia Woolf describes Lily's refusal to sacrifice her vision to the Headmaster of To the Lighthouse:

. . . what did one say? Oh, Mr. Ramsay! Dear Mr. Ramsay! That was what that kind old lady who sketched, Mrs. Beckwith, would have said instantly, and rightly. But, no. They stood there, isolated from the rest of the world. His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet. In complete silence she stood there, grasping her paint brush. (228)

Life is Lily's laboratory. Her colors² and brushes her chemicals. Often she regrets the obstacles which prevent her from experimenting and which obscure her understanding. At

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 160.

²David Daiches has an interesting discussion of the color symbolism in To the Lighthouse. He says that Lily's colors, blue and green, are "the colours of impersonality" whereas Mr. Ramsay's colors, red and brown, are "the colours of individuality and egotism." See Daiches, Virginia Woolf, pp. 87-88.

the Ramsay dinner-party, she regrets that a code of behavior says that as a woman she must let the male (here Charles Tansley) assert himself. Though she would defy the code, Mrs. Ramsay asks for her aid so that "for the hundred and fiftieth time Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment--what happens if one is not nice to that young man there--and be nice." (139)

As a result of her dislike of intrusions, Lily rejects love and marriage. After Mrs. Ramsay's death, she recalls how Mrs. Ramsay had wanted her to marry:

Mockingly she seemed to see her Mrs. Ramsay there at the end of the corridor of years saying, of all incongruous things, "Marry, Marry!" And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes. . . . I'm happy like this. (260)

Mrs. Ramsay needed love and marriage because they expressed the social half of her nature, her relation to the world of men and women. But Lily's personality is singular; and her purpose is singular: the relation to the world of reality. Her spinsterhood is symbolic of the fact that in our relation to reality "there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone."¹

Mercifully one need not say, very briskly, crossing the lawn to greet old Mrs. Beckwith, who would be coming out to find a corner to sit in, "Oh, good-morning, Mrs. Beckwith! What a lovely day! Are you going to be so bold as to sit in the sun? and all the rest of the usual chatter. One need not speak at all. One glided, . . . between things, beyond things. Empty it life was not, but full to the brim. (285)

In spite of divergent attitudes both Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay discover, each by her own solitary vision, the same

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, pp. 171-172.

Woolf pattern of life: that all things are two-fold in their manifestations. Mrs. Woolf describes Lily's thinking about the contradictory nature of truth, "that nothing is one single thing:" (277)

. . . impressions poured in upon her of those two men [Mr. Ramsay and William Bankes], and 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, so that even the fissures and humps on the bark of the pear tree were irrevocably fixed there for eternity. (40)

In A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf herself writes in a specific expression the larger pattern basic to her thinking: "the beauty of the world which is so soon to perish, has two edges, one of laughter, and one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder."¹

In this chapter, we find that the world of solitude integrates the world of society and the world of vision. Virginia Woolf writes: "it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top."² Already we have examined some double-aspects of truth which are discovered in solitude; in chapter three, we shall look at the visionary definition of reality as a continuance of this double-aspect of truth.

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 25.

²Ibid., p. 47.

CHAPTER III

THE VISION OF REALITY

It is in solitude that Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe speculate about a question fundamental to Virginia Woolf's world of vision: how can the individual impose stability upon a world of instability? However, before we can comprehensively understand the answers which Mrs. Ramsay and Lily give to their question, we must first examine Mrs. Woolf's presentation of a fluid world incessantly sweeping inward and receding in the ever-extending waters of time-change.

To the Lighthouse, like other Woolf novels, is saturated with the ebb and flow of time in a fluid world, "a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily." (147) The last line of a refrain of a poem which Mrs. Ramsay murmurs to herself expresses the fluidity of the Woolf world:

And all the lives we ever lived
And all the lives to be,
Are full of trees and changing leaves, (178)

Mrs. Woolf's world of time-change is not merely a clock-bound world. There are distinctly different kinds of time in it: first, there is what William Tindall calls "outer-external" or "mechanical" time; and second, there is what he calls "inner" or "duration" time.¹ Outer time is the time of a clock-bound

¹William Tindall, Forces in Modern British Literature (New York, 1947), p. 306.

physical world. Inner time is the time the individual lives through, a time which occurs within the physical world but which is a unique psychological time distinct from it.

Mrs. Woolf gives over most of the middle division of the novel to a description of the outer time in a universe "full of trees and changing leaves." (178) During the ten years period which the second chapter covers, she describes the changes in the Ramsay home, the change of day into night and of season into season. Always, the controlling emphasis of this second section is the passage of time. By using only a few brief and scattered references to the lives of the Ramsays and their guests, Virginia Woolf subordinates narrative description of character to narrative description of the changes in the physical world. The only person who has any significance at all is Mrs. McNab, the charlady. And she is used principally to emphasize the changes which occur within outer time; the reader's attention is centered not upon Mrs. McNab's personality but upon Mrs. McNab's hopeless attempts to prevent the Ramsay's summer home from being absorbed into ruin:

It was beyond the strength of one woman, she [Mrs. McNab] said. They [the Ramsays] never sent. They never wrote. There were things up there rotting in the drawers--it was a shame to leave them so, The place was gone to rack and ruin. (207)

The chaotic world of outer time-flux which Virginia Woolf describes in "Time Passes" resembles Hardy's unordered, purposeless universe. There seems to be little place for

"blighted but enduring man" in a world submerged in relentless time-flow.

Night after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference. . . . (for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together) in idiot games, until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself. In spring the garden urns, casually filled with wind-blown plants, were gay as ever. . . . But the stillness and the brightness of the day were as strange as the chaos and tumult of night, with the trees standing there, and the flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible. (202-203)

This universe which is "eyeless and so terrible" is the universe which previously caused Mrs. Ramsay to believe that life is chaotic, fragmentary, and disillusioning. But for Mrs. Ramsay, as for Virginia Woolf, "nothing is simply one thing." (277) Thus Virginia Woolf does not finally conclude that the fluid universe swept along in the tumult of time-change is entirely chaotic and purposeless. If she sees only disunity here, later we shall find that she see unity as well.

In "Time Passes" Mrs. Woolf occasionally varies her dominant theme with a minor theme--the changes of the human world, which occur simultaneously with the changes of the physical world. She records the changes brought to the Ramsays and others by World War I via Mrs. McNab's thoughts:

many families had lost their dearest. So she Mrs. Ramsay was dead; and Mr. Andrew killed; and Miss Prue dead too, they said, with her first baby; but every one had lost some one these years. Prices had gone up shamefully, and didn't come down again neither. (205)

By rendering Mrs. McNab's thoughts against a background of nature description, Mrs. Woolf implies a similarity between the temporal flux in the physical world and a similar flux in the consciousness of the individual. As physical nature is reassembled into night and day, into the four seasons on the assembly-line of outer time-change so too human life is melted down and rewelded by the character's drifting inner time consciousness. A stitch of Mrs. Ramsay's past life has been dropped and picked up in the memory and associations of Mrs. McNab:

She [Mrs. McNab] could see her [Mrs. Ramsay] now, stooping over her flowers; and faint and flickering, like a yellow beam or the circle at the end of a telescope, a lady in a grey cloak, stooping over her flowers, went wandering over the bedroom wall, up the dressing-table, across the wash-stand, as Mrs. McNab hobbled and ambled, dusting, straightening. (205)

Mrs. Ramsay recedes into the cloak of outer time, which clings to all human life. In section three, Lily Briscoe articulates the idea of human life receding into time-flow:

Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone, We can ride over her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us. (260)

Death has caused Mrs. Ramsay to recede into outer time; but at the same time she still exists in inner time because she returns as a part of the inner time consciousness of Lily Briscoe just as previously she was a part of the inner time consciousness of Mrs. McNab.

If, for Virginia Woolf, the physical world is a fluid

world of outer time-change, the personality as it drifts and swirls, expands and diminishes in inner time-change, is no less fluid. In a monologue interieur, Mrs. Ramsay thinks about the surface personality as opposed to the fluid, unconscious personality which is the real personality:

one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel, our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. (96)

Like Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Ramsay denies the unphilosophical concept of time--that an object is at one moment what it is at another; fluid experience dissolves the object in inner time-change. After her dinner-party, Mrs. Ramsay pauses to look at her husband, her children, and her guests, who, diminishing in Mrs. Ramsay's consciousness, are already changing from the present to the past:

With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta's arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past. (167-168)

The outer time of the physical world and the inner time of personality become, in Virginia Woolf's writings, consonant with one another; Mrs. Ramsay expresses the coincidence of personality and the physical world when she thinks ^{it} odd,

how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers, felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus . . . as for oneself. (97-98)

Much like Jacob, the title protagonist of Jacob's Room, Mrs. Ramsay has a close affinity to the physical world of things. Often, as above, she implies that the human personality and the physical world are two separate streams emptying into each other to form a unified whole of experience. Reality is found in this concrete, physical world which Mrs. Ramsay enjoys and identifies herself with. Significantly, Mrs. Ramsay's mind singles out concrete, physical objects whereas Mr. Ramsay's mind generalizes the physical world into abstract observation:

And looking up, she saw above the thin trees the first pulse of the full-throbbing star, and wanted to make her husband look at it; for the sight gave her such keen pleasure. But she stopped herself. He never looked at things. If he did, all he would say would be, Poor little world, with one of his sighs. (108)

Like Mrs. Ramsay, Virginia Woolf takes her images of reality from physical things. In A Room of One's Own, she defines reality in terms of inanimate objects. She says that reality is "now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. . . . --and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly."¹ It is significant that Virginia Woolf interlocks human personality, fluidity, and the physical world because these three things organized in certain relationships constitute her vision of reality.

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 165.

Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe combine personality, the fluidity of time-change, and the universe into a stability which will express their sense of the harmonic unity of reality.

Mrs. Ramsay imposes design upon a liquid world of evanescent shapes and sounds by the unity of her deep-rooted personality.

After Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily recalls the spreading growingness of Mrs. Ramsay's former control over her when she says,

She had felt, now she could stand up to Mrs. Ramsay-- a tribute to the astonishing power that Mrs. Ramsay had over one. Do this, she said, and one did it. Even her shadow at the window with James was full of authority. (262)

As we have already discovered in chapter one, Mrs. Ramsay's wisdom is the creativeness of her personality. In "The Window" Virginia Woolf constantly reiterates the luxuriant productivity of Mrs. Ramsay's personality:

Immediately, Mrs. Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself, so that she had only strength enough to move her finger, in exquisite abandonment to exhaustion, across the page of Grimm's fairy story, while there throbbed through her, like the pulse in a spring which has expanded to its full width and now gently ceases to beat, the rapture of successful creation. (60-61)

At the dinner-party Virginia Woolf describes separate personalities flowing into the unity which is Mrs. Ramsay's personality. Mrs. Ramsay's entrance at her dinner-party signals the change from separateness to unity. Immediately her husband, her children, and her guests are still-lifed into singleness,

into stability:

And, like some queen who, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them and descends among them, and acknowledges their tributes silently, and accepts their devotion and their prostration before her . . . she went down, and crossed the hall and bowed her head very slightly, as if she accepted what they could not say: their tribute to her beauty. (124)

When Mrs. Ramsay leaves the dining-room, the solidity of many personalities merged into her personality dissolves again into the fluidity of separately flowing personalities. "And directly she went a sort of disintegration set in; they wavered about, went different ways." (168)

Both Prue Ramsay and Lily comment upon this unity which exists in personality. Prue Ramsay sees her mother standing on the stairs above her shortly after the dinner-party and thinks,

"That's my mother," Yes; Minta should look at her; Paul Rayley should look at her. That is the thing itself, she felt, as if there were only one person like that in the world; her mother. (174)

While she is regarding her painting, Lily Briscoe makes a similar comment:

Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, "Life stand still here"; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)-- this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing . . . was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she repeated. She owed it all to her. (240-241)

Mrs. Ramsay too has the sense of the stable unity of her personality. In "The Window" she thinks:

Now one thought of it [reality], cleared of chatter and emotion, it seemed always to have been, only was shown now and so being shown, struck everything into stability. They would, she thought, going on again, however long they lived come back to this night; this moon; this wind; this house: and to her too. It flattered her, where she was most susceptible of flattery, to think how, wound about in their hearts, however long they lived she would be woven. (170)

Mrs. Ramsay, "an artist in life,"¹ knows that in her children, in her affirmative management of other people, she has found a way to create design in a world endlessly changing.

In "The Lighthouse" the reader realizes perhaps even more the uniting force of Mrs. Ramsay's personality because in this section Mrs. Ramsay is absent and as a result of her absence the house is one "of unrelated passions." (221) Lily Briscoe, who alone understands the real significance of Mrs. Ramsay's personality, articulates the change that has taken place in the house on the Isles of Skye:

The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her. She had no attachment here, she felt, no relation with it, anything might happen, and whatever did happen, a step outside, a voice calling . . . , was a question, as if the link [Mrs. Ramsay's personality] that usually bound things together had been cut, and they floated up here, down there, off, anyhow. How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal it was, (218-219)

After Mrs. Ramsay's death, stability has again become instability, unity has been sliced up and separated into the fluidity of time-change. However, Mrs. Ramsay later returns

¹Bernard Blackstone, Virginia Woolf: A Commentary, p.125.

to become a part of Lily's painting; together Mrs. Ramsay and Lily complete a unified design.

In "The Window" it was Mrs. Ramsay who imposed design upon a fluid world. In "The Lighthouse" it is Lily Briscoe who imposes that design. Like Virginia Woolf herself, Lily turns to art for unity in a flowing world. And like most artists, she doubts the worth of her work even as she does it, must do it:

Always . . . before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. Why then did she do it? She looked at the canvas, lightly scored with running lines. It would be hung in the servants' bedrooms. It would be rolled up and stuffed under a sofa. (236-237)

Art makes something endurable out of the moment. Lily thinks of what Mr. Carmichael the poet would say about the unity of art:

She looked at her picture. That would have been his answer, presumably--how "you" and "I" and "she" pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint. Yet it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa; yet even so, even of a picture like that, it was true. (267)

The trueness of the re-created scene remains. However, Lily's painting and Mrs. Ramsay's personality, though they are expressive of the unity of reality, are only the outward manifestations of the deeper harmonic unity of reality "which is the business of the artist to find and collect and communicate."¹

¹ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 166.

Virginia Woolf isolates the symbol of reality, the Lighthouse, in the midst of the sea--her symbolic sea which she uses to suggest time-flux--a flux seemingly transcending all things. We observe that the symbol of reality, the Lighthouse, is a fixed and physical object. Virginia Woolf describes the solidity and durability of the physical Lighthouse and James Ramsay's satisfied response to this solidity and durability:

There it loomed up, stark and straight, glaring white and black, and one could see the waves breaking in white splinters like smashed glass upon the rocks. One could see the windows clearly; a dab of white on one of them, and a little tuft of green on the rock. . . . So it was like that, James thought, the Lighthouse one had seen across the bay all these years; it was a stark tower on a bare rock. It satisfied him. (301)

In James Ramsay's satisfied response to the Lighthouse, we observe a characteristic impulse of the Woolf character--the impulse to sail away from the fluidity of the sea toward the unity and stability of this fixed object, the Lighthouse. Thus the journey to the Lighthouse, which Mr. Ramsay and his two children take in the third section, is both a literal and symbolic treatment of the direction away from fluidity toward unity; for symbolically, the journey to the Lighthouse is the journey of the soul through the sea-waves of consciousness¹ to a stable object outside the fluidity of either outer or inner time-change.

¹I am indebted to William Tindall for the above image. See his Forces in Modern British Literature, p. 302.

The fluid sea of time-change in the Woolf metaphysical world obscures the distant Lighthouse; but while fluidity is a very real part of the character's experience--even the most consciously elaborated and emphasized part--fluidity is not the totality of that experience. When the swimming character pauses for breath, he sees the distant beam of the Lighthouse flash its shadow upon the restless currents of time-change. It is then that the swimmer experiences a flash of insight into a reality immune from the changing currents of time which waver waterily and vanish as they flow through the swimmer's consciousness.

In the Lighthouse symbol Virginia Woolf, "who was not without transcendental impulses,"¹ postulates an impersonal and unconscious force in the universe which binds changing things together. All things, animate or inanimate, which touch this force in their flow through time-change are struck, at least momentarily, into unity, into stability, and into completeness. It is significant that Virginia Woolf symbolizes reality in a physical object² because the Lighthouse rock is comparatively stable whereas the human consciousness, which perceives reality, is continuously in flow until it touches that reality outside itself. Also, it is significant that Virginia Woolf describes the fixity and permanence, characteristic of the Lighthouse, in her definition of reality. In A Room of One's Own she makes

¹William Tindall, Forces in Modern British Literature, p. 305.

²Again I wish to remind the reader that Virginia Woolf defines reality in terms of physical objects. See Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 165.

this statement about the nature of reality: "It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent."¹

In his observation that there are two Lighthouses, James Ramsay re-expresses Virginia Woolf's statement about the double-aspect of reality: the erraticness and undependability it presents in the fluidness of time-change and the unified fixity and permanence it possesses in actuality. James describes the first Lighthouse, which is the one he has always mistily perceived from the Isles of Skye: "The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening." (276) But when James is about to land at the real Lighthouse, he sees that it is a much different Lighthouse:

He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it? (276-277)

Like Virginia Woolf, James does not reject one Lighthouse for the other--"No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too." (277) Nothing is simply fluidity or stability. Both are double-aspects of Mrs. Woolf's reality just as laughter and anguish are the double edges which cut the heart asunder.

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, pp. 165-166.

However, the external symbol of the Lighthouse has no meaning for Virginia Woolf until a human being has tapped its meaning. Until the symbol becomes interlocked into the experience of a human life, it remains a thing apart, an unknown truth and reality.

Both Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay live in the presence of this reality. Symbolically, their perceptions of reality are usually interlocked with the Lighthouse. In her mystical experience, Mrs. Ramsay identifies her experience with the third stroke of the Lighthouse:

And pausing there [in her sinking down into darkness] she looked out to meet the stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. (96-97)

Joan Bennett interprets the Lighthouse as a poetic symbol which represents for Mrs. Ramsay, as for Virginia Woolf, the double-aspect of life:

. . . for Mrs. Ramsay, the alternating light and shadow of the lighthouse beam symbolizes the rhythm of joy and sorrow in human life and the alternating radiance and darkness of even the most intimate human relationships:
. . . .

For Lily Briscoe, as for Mrs. Ramsay, the Lighthouse symbolizes her vision of life. When Mr. Ramsay lands on the shore of the Lighthouse, Lily simultaneously finishes her painting which expresses her vision of life. "He has landed," she said aloud. "It is finished." (309)

¹Joan Bennett, Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist, p. 118.

Though Mr. Ramsay makes the journey to the Lighthouse, his journey seems to be little more than the right direction toward reality; the only thing that Mrs. Woolf suggests that Mr. Ramsay achieves in it is the loss of ego, a loss which is only the requisite to perceiving reality, not the perception itself. Previously, in the first section, Virginia Woolf has already symbolically described Mr. Ramsay's blindness to the Lighthouse by the use of the hedge¹-her symbolic hedge which is the repository of unreality.

He was irritable--he was touchy. He had lost his temper over the Lighthouse. He looked into the hedge, into its intricacy, its darkness. (99)

Further, Virginia Woolf never describes Mr. Ramsay as having any experience in which he perceives reality.

Only Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe translate the symbol of reality into experience. Sinking down into reality, they receive their sense of beingness and of wholeness; it is their perception of reality which enables them to impose design upon time-flow, to exchange the restless loneliness of the solitary life for the arrested completeness "of the common life which is the real life."²

Just as one sails away from the fluid movements of the sea to the motionless rock of the Lighthouse, one discovers reality by working from one opposite to another opposite: from

¹See Virginia Woolf's discussion of reality and the hedge in A Room of One's Own, p. 166.

²Ibid., p. 171.

change to unity, from self to impersonality. Though Mrs. Ramsay and Lily retreat into the self to perceive reality, they work within a paradox: it is by the method of self-awareness that they come to their perception of reality, but it is only when they lose the self that they experience it. At the unconscious level Lily has her moment of insight. Without self, she discovers reality--"that glaring, hideously difficult white space" (238)--which she has been trying to paint:

Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues. (238)

Similarly, Mrs. Ramsay experiences reality by letting her conscious mind overflow into the impressions of the unconscious:

She could be herself, by herself. And that was what she often felt the need of--to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. . . . Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; (95-96)

In her description of Mrs. Ramsay's and Lily's mystical experiences, Virginia Woolf reveals her own mystical impulse to discover things drawing together into the beauty of harmonically counterpointed order and significance. She herself, who knew well the feeling of aloneness and uniqueness,¹ was not alien to

¹See Stephen Spender's description of Mrs. Woolf in his World Within World, p. 141.

the experience of pure being, sensitive both to the state of flux and rest.

In this state of arrest in which we can feel ourselves as ourselves, the conscious self, the counterpart of flux, is exchanged for impersonality, the counterpart of unity. At the level below consciousness, it is as if Mrs. Ramsay and Lily were self-propelled in their rhythmic flow to the focal point of enduringness and completeness. Then the flowing ceases and experience is stilled, becomes "the thing that endures with change." (158) Symbolically, the paradoxical Mrs. Ramsay, whose personality is both social and solitary, experiences the stillness and completeness of reality during her dinner-party:

. . . just now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness seemed now for no special reason to stay there like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. . . . there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out . . . in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (157-158)

While questioning the predicament of human life, Lily Briscoe too sinks down into the unity of reality:

"What does it mean? How do you explain it all?" she wanted to say, turning to Mr. Carmichael again. For the whole world seemed to have dissolved in this early morning hour into a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality, and one could almost fancy that had Mr. Carmichael spoken, for instance, a little tear would have rent the surface

pool. And then? Something would emerge. A hand would be shoved up, a blade would be flashed. (266-267)¹

In Virginia Woolf's own life the feeling of unity, which for Mrs. Ramsay and Lily is the sensation of reality, was a core value. Her belief in the necessity for harmony is one of the dominant themes of her critical essays and feministic writings. Because she was concerned with the problem of how to translate the unity of her vision of life into the harmony of words, Virginia Woolf usually juxtaposes her consideration of life's harmony with art's harmony. In A Room of One's Own, we discover that artistic creation is achieved in the same way that Mrs. Ramsay and Lily experience reality. It is when the mind relaxes and sinks into the unconscious that the composed simplicity and singleness of both reality and artistic creation emerge:

The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace. Not a wheel must grate, not a light glimmer. The curtains must be close drawn. The writer, I thought, once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness. He must not look or question what is being done. Rather, he must pluck the petals from a rose or watch the swans float calmly down the river.²

¹There is a curious suggestion in "A hand would be shoved up, a blade would be flashed" of lines from Tennyson's "Morte d'Arthur." In this poem Sir Bedivere describes to Arthur the miracle of the sword:

Then with both hands I flung him, wheeling him;
But when I looked again, behold an arm,
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,
That caught him by the hilt, and brandished him
Three times, and drew him under in the mere.

W. H. Auden

X

Does the resemblance suggest that Lily's vision is indeed a miracle?

²Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 157.

In this state of arrest, the writer finds "the thing he wants to write about," Mrs. Ramsay and Lily the common life instead of the separate life. In whatever form or shape it manifests itself, it is this harmonic unity which is, for Virginia Woolf, "the thing itself." (174)

For Virginia Woolf the discovery of this common life is wisdom; in the constant discovery and rediscovery of the common life, the individual satisfies his desire for the ideal of beauty, order, and significance, reduces multiplicity to simplicity, replaces separateness with wholeness. Significantly, it is Lily Briscoe, the artist, who describes this common life:

. . . she felt . . . 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. (73)

In To the Lighthouse, we find that the harmony of this common life,¹ "curled and whole like a wave," is expressed in the symbol of the Lighthouse, the permanent force in the midst of fluidity, and in the experiences of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily in which, for a moment, all things come together. Lily combines the experience of another human life with hers "to form a single indeterminate whole."² At a single moment in time, Mr. Ramsay lands on the shore of the Lighthouse and Lily finishes her painting. (309)

¹David Daiches comments upon this common life in his discussion of Mrs. Dalloway: "There is a suggestion throughout that the experiences of individuals combine to form a single indeterminate whole, and that wisdom is the recognition of this." See Daiches, Virginia Woolf, p. 73.

²Ibid., p. 73.

Virginia Woolf's common life has cosmic proportions.¹ In the common life, she includes not only the experiences of people but she also includes all inanimate things. All things, losing identity which is separateness, flow and merge into the common life. Mrs. Ramsay feels the community of all things in this common life:

. . . she felt . . . that community of feeling with other people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin that practically . . . it was all one stream, and chairs, tables, maps, were hers, were theirs, it did not matter whose (170-71)

Though the common life is achieved by fluidity, it is, paradoxically, the feeling of form within formlessness which the sensation of reality gives to the common life. All this fluidity converges upon the fixity and permanence of the Lighthouse. Lily Briscoe describes the common life:

Empty it [life] was not, but full to the brim. She seemed to be standing up to the lips in some substance, to move and float and sink in it, yes, for these waters were unfathomably deep. Into them had spilled so many lives. The Ramsays'; the children's; and all sorts of waifs and strays of things besides. A washer-woman with her basket; a rock, a red-hot poker; the purples and the grey-greens of flowers: some common feeling held the whole. (285-286)

Lily Briscoe is painting her vision of life on the Isles of Skye in the presence of the fluidity of the sea and the fixity of the distant Lighthouse. The Lighthouse symbolizes the reality which the artist has the chance to live in the presence of more than other people.² Though Lily's vision

¹In her conception of the common life as fluidity and yet stability, multiplicity yet singleness, Mrs. Woolf seems near the thinking of the Buddhist mystic when he says that God is one thing and yet many things.

²Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 166.

of life remains blurred like her canvas,¹ we have certain clues as to what this canvas or vision is composed of just as in her writings we have certain clues about Virginia Woolf's vision of life. Among other things, we know that Lily's painting is of Mrs. Ramsay and her son James, and yet it is not of them but of something more general,⁽⁸¹⁾ that it is "lightly scored with running lines,"⁽²³⁷⁾ and that there is a "glaring, hideously difficult white space" which she cannot paint in. ⁽²³⁸⁾

By inference, we discover that Lily Briscoe is painting a picture in the way that Virginia Woolf writes a novel. Mrs. Woolf says that the artist must have a mind incandescent, with no obstacle in it, no foreign matter unconsumed.² Lily Briscoe paints in this detached manner:

She took up once more her old painting position . . . , subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general; becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children⁽⁸²⁾

And the painting itself? Lily is painting Mrs. Brown or life itself; for the painting is something more general than Mrs. Ramsay and son James, and the something more general is life itself. As the running lines symbolize fluidity, Mrs. Ramsay symbolizes the unity within fluidity. The difficult white space is symbolic of the difficulty with which the vision is drawn together and presented. At the end of the novel when she has

¹"she looked at her canvas; it was blurred." Woolf, To the Lighthouse, p. 310.

²Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 85. Throughout this book Virginia Woolf refers to the incandescent mind which is the "state of mind most propitious for creative work." She uses Shakespeare's mind as an example of the incandescent mind.

her vision, Lily symbolically draws a line through the center of the blurred canvas.¹ The problem--"how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left"--has been solved. (32) The line in the center symbolizes the unity and stability of reality with which Lily has unified and fixed the Woolf world of personality, fluid time-change, and the physical universe into the organized harmony of the common life.

Like Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe is more than a character; she too is in essence life itself. In her adherence to a single vision, she represents that unity which endures for a moment. The unity of Lily's vision, like life itself, has been surrounded by fluid impressions and personalities. All the fluidity of impressions, of human personalities, of things, which have touched Lily have been struck into stability by that unity which is the singleness of her vision. Thus the human personality becomes symbolic of the common life into which all things flow and merge into the form of that personality. This is what Virginia Woolf suggests in her somewhat enigmatic statement that Mrs. Brown is life itself, eternal, changing only on the surface.²

As the human personality is perceived in flashes of insight, in fleeting and dim impressions so is the common life perceived. Lily thinks,

What is the meaning of life? That was all--a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The

¹"with a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center." Woolf, To the Lighthouse, p. 310.

²Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," The Captain's Death Bed and other Essays, p. 110.

great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; (240)

Symbolically, the Lighthouse remains a distant object for Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. As they can only see the flashes of the Lighthouse beam, their experience of the unity of reality is a momentary illumination.

The vision of reality, stilled in the moment, dissolves quickly, almost imperceptibly, into the flux of everyday experience. In her essay on Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf writes:

It the moment fills itself; it shines; it glows; it hangs before us, deep, trembling, serene for a second; next the housemaid passes, and this drop in which all the happiness of life has collected gently subsides again to become part of the ebb and flow of ordinary existence.¹

Mrs. Ramsay and Lily experience this same loss of momentary vision to the flux of the everyday world. Lily loses the concentrated vision of a painting problem:

The problem might be solved after all. Ah, but what had happened? Some wave of white went over the window pane. The air must have stirred some flounce in the room. Her heart leapt at her and seized her and tortured her. "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she cried, feeling the old horror come back--to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still? And then, quietly, as if she refrained, that too became part of ordinary experience, was on a level with the chair; with the table. (300)

The vision of reality is dim and unsubstantial.

Lily and Mrs. Ramsay merely glimpse the distant beams of the

¹Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen," The Common Reader, Series One, p. 202.

Lighthouse through a spray of sea-foam. They live in a fluid world of the sea and consequently they can only translate an outside reality, stable and unified, into the vague and intangible terms of the fluid life they know. Lily, whose painting is an "attempt at something," (309) says about the incommunicability of reality:

"About life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay"--no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low. Then one gave it up; then the idea sunk back again; then one became like most middle-aged people, cautious, furtive, with wrinkles between the eyes and a look of perpetual apprehension. For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? express that emptiness there? (She was looking at the drawing-room steps; they looked extraordinarily empty.) It was one's body feeling, not one's mind. (265)

To explain life is too difficult; one can only suggest it in paint by "running lines" and by filling in "difficult white spaces," in words by means of rhythm and symbol. (237 and 238) Finally, for Virginia Woolf, "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."¹

From Virginia Woolf's statement about life, we may deduce that she assumes completeness to be incompleteness. Were the individual to achieve completeness, self-experiment would stop, all glimpses of reality would cease. Therefore, the very nature of the inquisitiveness of Mrs. Woolf's characters,

¹Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," The Common Reader, Series One, p. 212.

attempting to resolve the meaning of life itself, prevents them from being interested in final answers. As long as the final answer remains suspended, there are the renewed perceptions of the common life; but if the answer were finalized, each character's raison d'etre would be exhausted. In Night and Day, Katherine Hilberry says,

"It's life that matters, nothing but life--the process of discovering--the everlasting and perpetual process, not the discovery itself at all."¹

In To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe says, "Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life?--startling, unexpected, unknown?" (268) Lily's intrinsic inquisitiveness causes her to continuously search for that reality which is what is fixed and permanent in experience.²

¹Virginia Woolf, Night and Day, (New York, 1920), p. 130.

²Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 166.

CONCLUSION

In our examination of Virginia Woolf's three worlds of experience--the social, the solitary, and the visionary--we have discovered that she sees the human experience revealed in both group expression and individual expression: the social life and the private life, the separate life and the common life. She believed that one could best realize the private life by loosely accepting the code of behavior prescribed by a particular social group. In his private life one then lost the separate life by his circular return to a still larger life than the social life--the common life in which all things merge into a universal harmony.

We have found in her vision of reality that she postulated both a world of time-flux and a universal harmony outside of flux. Her purpose as an artist was to communicate in the unity and flow of character and symbol this double-aspect of reality which combined to form the common life. Whether or not Virginia Woolf achieved a total communication of her vision of reality it is not the purpose of this thesis to judge. However, she repeatedly insisted that one should seek the direction rather than the conclusion of one's vision and that one should follow that direction where ever it

lead one:

So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery, and the sacrifice of wealth and chastity which used to be the greatest of human disasters, a mere flea-bite in comparison.¹

Always Virginia Woolf's direction is forward; for she seems to have finally decided that the questions are eternal,
the answers temporary.

¹Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 160.

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¹Only those works which have directly contributed to my thinking about Virginia Woolf's ideas have been included in this bibliography.

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