



## Visualizing Trauma and Time in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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### ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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### ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's book *To the Lighthouse* completely changed how stories handle time. While literary critics often praise Woolf's ability to map her characters' internal thoughts, her most powerful trick is actually visual. In the middle section of the book "Time Passes", important characters die, but instead of writing long, emotional scenes about their deaths, Woolf simply mentions them in short sentences trapped inside brackets. While she spends pages describing an empty house slowly aging, she squishes huge human tragedies into these tiny, quiet boxes. This contrast shows that the universe simply does not care about our grief, because time just keeps moving forward no matter what happens to us. By physically separating the sadness from the rest of the story with brackets, she highlights how the steady ticking of a clock is very different from how we feel pain. Instead of writing traditional chapters about mourning, Woolf uses this visual quietness to show that our deepest sadness is sometimes best expressed in silence.

### KEY WORDS

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Modernism, Temporality, Literary Formalism, Trauma Theory.

### INTRODUCTION

Reading the "Time Passes" section of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* puts the reader completely off balance. For the entire first section of the novel, "The Window," we are deeply buried in the highly detailed, personal thoughts of the Ramsay family and their guests during a single summer day on the Isle of Skye. Time moves incredibly slowly. A look across a dinner table, a moment of annoyance over a misplaced tool, or the stroke of a paintbrush on Lily Briscoe's canvas expands into pages of rich psychological exploration. The early chapters made us believe that human thought is the absolute centre of the universe. Then, night falls, the house empties, and Woolf completely changes the rules.

Over the course of roughly twenty pages, ten years go by. A world war is fought, the house falls into near ruin, and the family is broken apart by three sudden deaths. Yet the deaths do not get their own chapters. They do not even get scenes. They are stripped of dialogue, mourning, and emotional fallout. Instead, Woolf reports them in brief, cold sentences cordoned off by square brackets, dropping them seemingly at random amidst long, poetic descriptions of wind and dust. This is not just a quirky experiment, it is a bold choice. By reducing the loss of human life to grammatical sidenotes, Woolf creates a clash between the ticking clock of objective history and the messy, deeply felt reality of human memory. The brackets act like grave sites on the page, they are physical boundaries that isolate human trauma from a natural world that simply does not care.

### A New Way to Write About Time

To understand just how radical Woolf's use of punctuation is, we have to look at the literary traditions she was fighting against. The famous Victorian novelists like Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy built their stories on the foundation of strict, chronological time. In a traditional nineteenth century novel, time is a reliable, objective track upon which the train of the plot moves forward. Major life events command major space on the page. If a central character like Mrs. Ramsay were to die in a Dickens novel, the reader would sit through chapters of chronic illness, tearful bedside goodbyes, the gathering of the family, and the heavy, moralizing aftermath of the funeral. The amount of page space dedicated to an event was directly tied to how important the human was. The outbreak of the First World War shattered this illusion of a neat, forward moving timeline. The sheer scale of death proved that the old forms of storytelling could not hold the weight of modern trauma. Writers across Europe faced a crisis. While contemporaries like James Joyce and Marcel Proust responded by expanding a single day or a single memory into thousands of pages to map the inner workings of consciousness, Woolf took a different route. She realized that sometimes, the only honest way to represent terrible loss is through absolute silence. The traditional narrative tools lingering deathbeds, all knowing narrators felt entirely useless in a post war world where lives were extinguished randomly and instantly.

Woolf rejected the rigid, mathematical approach to storytelling entirely. She was strongly influenced by the philosopher Henri Bergson and his concept of *la durée* (duration), understanding that human beings do not actually experience time as a series of evenly spaced ticks on a clock. Bergson argued that mechanical time is the time measured by calendars and watches, it is a made up concept. He stated that pure duration is "the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states" (2). For Bergson, mechanical time was merely a tool of social organization, a way to synchronize labour and commerce. It had nothing to do with the human soul. True time is the time we actually live, is entirely subjective. An hour spent in a painful wait can feel like a lifetime, while a decade of boring routine can collapse into a single blurred memory. Woolf wanted a literary form that could mimic this cognitive reality. She aimed to capture the "cotton wool of daily life," as she called it in her autobiographical sketches the vast stretches of ordinary existence interrupted by sudden, shocking moments where reality tears through the fabric of routine. In her essay "Modern Fiction," she famously asked writers to record the atoms as they fall upon the mind, describing life not as a series of perfectly arranged lamps, but as a "luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (4).

### The Relentless Flow of Time

"Time Passes" is the ultimate test of this philosophy, but it achieves its goal by doing the exact opposite of what a reader might expect. Instead of diving deeper into the human mind, Woolf removes the human mind entirely. The Ramsay family leaves the summer house, and the narrative perspective shifts to the empty rooms, the creeping damp, and the mindless, repeating forces of nature. Erich Auerbach, in his famous study of *Mimesis*, notes that Woolf's narrative technique often uses an "objective reality" only as a trigger for a sprawling inner life. He points out that a simple action, like measuring a brown stocking, can launch a character into a deep well of memory and reflection (1). But in this middle section, Woolf flips her own signature technique upside down. The trigger is still there, the decaying house, the creeping damp but the inner life has been surgically removed. The objective reality is the only thing left, and without human consciousness to process it, it becomes vast and unfeeling.

Also, the writing style in this section changes drastically. It becomes wide, rhythmic, and entirely cold, mimicking the unstoppable flow of time itself. Woolf writes of the darkness creeping into the house “Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers” (5). The sentence structure itself mirrors this shift. The sentences are long and sprawling, linked by commas and clauses that roll over each other just like the ocean tides outside the house. There are no hard stops, no individual crises. Time is treated as a physical substance, an eroding “flood” that swallows human objects with total indifference. The house is decaying, the garden is being overrun by weeds, and the natural world is reclaiming space. The reader is calmed into this slow, majestic rhythm. We spend pages reading about the weather, about dust settling on floorboards, about the strange, lonely life of a house without people. The rhythm of the prose mimics the indifferent, geological timescale of the earth itself, making human existence feel small and fleeting.

- **Brackets as Literary Grave sites:** And then, without any warning, the prose fractures. Right in the middle of a paragraph describing the slow passage of a dark night, Woolf inserts the first bracket (Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty). (5)
- **The Sudden Loss of the Mother:** It is hard to expand how shocking this sentence is for the reader. Mrs. Ramsay is the beating heart of the novel, the gravitational centre around which every other character orbits. In “The Window,” her inner life and her rare ability to bring people together take up over a hundred pages. Yet here, her death is banished to a background detail. The grammar itself feels deliberately cold. The actual subject of the sentence isn’t Mrs. Ramsay or her death, the subject is Mr. Ramsay and his physical act of “stumbling.” His wife’s passing is slipped in as a passive, almost inconvenient occurrence “having died rather suddenly the night before.” That word “rather” does a lot of heavy lifting. It applies a thin layer of upper class politeness to a terrible loss, shrinking it down to a logistical issue. The bracket acts as a physical barrier on the page, effectively separates the grief. By fencing this tragedy, Woolf visually demonstrates how objective time operates. The wind blowing through the house does not stop just because Mrs. Ramsay died. The tragedy is enclosed from the surrounding prose, forcing the reader to carry the emotional weight while the narrative simply moves on to describe the changing seasons. We feel the shock of the loss largely because we are given absolutely no room to process it.
- **Andrew Ramsay and the War:** This harsh sentence structure escalates as the section goes on. The First World War breaks out, but the narrator refuses to give it any historical importance. The fighting is felt only as a distant, whispering echo that occasionally shakes the empty house. When the war finally claims a member of the Ramsay family, the writing is even more compressed (A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.) (5) Andrew was the brilliant son, a mathematician whose mind held immense promise. Here, his entire life is wiped out in twenty three words. The blunt, declarative sentence “A shell exploded” clashes heavily with the wavy, flowing descriptions of the sea that surround it. It is mechanical and sudden.

What makes this particular bracket so chilling is the phrase “whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.” Who is deciding if this is a mercy? It sounds like the detached voice of the official historical record of a cold telegram from the War Office, or the polite condolences of a society lacking the words for death. By shoving the defining trauma of the early twentieth century into a bracket, Woolf critiques the failure of objective history. A historian might simply note that Andrew died in France in 1916. But that fact tells us nothing about his life or the empty space he leaves behind. The bracket shows us history exactly as it is cold, contained, and fundamentally disconnected from human reality (3).

- **The Tragedy of Prue Ramsay:** Between the death of the mother and the son, Woolf buries the daughter. Prue Ramsay, beautiful and destined for a traditional marriage, dies in a way that points out the suffocating expectations placed upon women of her era (Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well.) (5) Once again, tragedy is locked away in brackets. But here, Woolf uses the physical enclosure to mock the

social performance of grief. The repetition of “people said” and “they said” distances the reader from the raw, physical reality of a young woman dying in labour. Prue’s death is reduced to neighbourhood gossip. The real trauma of her body failing is erased, replaced by polite murmurs from a society that valued her mostly for her potential to be a mother and a wife. The bracket visually mimics this containment, Prue’s suffering is boxed up so that it does not disturb the polite surface of the world. Through these three distinct brackets, Woolf builds an architecture of silence. In conventional literature, meaning is found in what is written. In “Time Passes,” meaning is generated by what is left out on purpose. When we read a Dickens novel, the author holds our hand through the grieving process, offering tears and a sense of emotional closure. Woolf abandons the reader entirely. She drops terrible information and immediately forces our attention back. We are left with the uncomfortable realization that human life is fragile, and the physical universe simply does not care.

### Healing Through Human Thought

The isolation of these brackets sets up the emotional heavy lifting of the novel’s final section, “The Lighthouse.” When the surviving members of the Ramsay family, along with the painter Lily Briscoe, return to the house ten years later, they are walking into a physical and psychological space haunted by the middle section. The objective facts of deaths have already happened in the historical past. Now, the characters must deal with the messy, subjective fallout. In “The Lighthouse,” time slows down again, returning to the highly psychological pace of the first section. It takes an entire morning and nearly a third of the novel page count, for Lily to paint a single line on her canvas, and for Mr. Ramsay to sail across the bay with his surviving children. The vast difference in pacing between the two sections proves Woolf’s central point about time and consciousness. A death takes only a second in objective, mechanical time, represented perfectly by a single, bracketed sentence on the page. But the mental impact of that death the nonlinear process of grieving, of figuring out who we are when the people we love are gone takes years to untangle. It stretches out across the vast, internal landscape of the human mind, refusing to be confined by the neat edges of a bracket or the ticking of a clock.

When Lily Briscoe stands on the lawn in the final section, desperately crying out for Mrs. Ramsay, she is fighting a war against the brackets. She is trying to pull the reality of Mrs. Ramsay out of the cold, living stream of subjective memory. This is not just a personal struggle, it is an aesthetic one. Lily must find a way to paint a world that has been torn apart by time. Her eventual completion of her painting drawing a single line down the centre of the canvas is a triumph not of objective fact, but of psychological healing. That single, decisive brushstroke serves as a structural counterweight to the brackets in “Time Passes.” Where the brackets closed in on human life and silenced it, Lily’s line cuts through the empty space, asserting the presence of the artist. She manages to pull the trauma of the past ten years into a single, cohesive vision. She defeats the silence of the brackets by imposing her own creative, subjective reality in the world.

### CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf’s use of brackets in “Time Passes” remains one of the most amazing structural developments in modern literature. She recognized that the old tools of storytelling the sequential chapters, the lingering deathbed scenes, the all knowing narrators were entirely useless for capturing the fractured reality of the modern era. World War I had proved that human life could be blown out randomly, instantly, and on a massive scale. The traditional Victorian novel simply could not honestly represent that kind of mechanized trauma. By pushing the deaths of her central characters into grammatical enclosures, Woolf forces us to rethink how we assign meaning to our lives and our histories. The architecture of silence she constructs on the page hits hard because it is so accurate. It reflects the uncomfortable truth that the external world is deaf to our suffering. The wind will continue to blow, the sea will continue to eat away at the shore, and the house will continue to rot, regardless of whether we are there to witness it. The brackets are a stark, visual reminder of how small we are in the face of cosmic time.

Even though she isolates these deaths to highlight their insignificance to the physical universe, Woolf fiercely defends the absolute necessity of the human mind. If the external world is just a ticking clock and creeping decay, then the only place where life has colour, meaning, complexity, and weight is within human consciousness. The brackets show us the poverty of objective history. It is only in “The Window” and “The

Lighthouse” the sections where time is dictated by the messy, fluid, and beautiful minds of her characters, that life actually matters. Woolf dismantled the very structure of the novel to prove that while mechanical time will eventually bury us all in brackets, the psychological time we experience while we are alive is the only reality that holds any truth.

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