

35. Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf *To the Lighthouse* (1927)

Mrs Ramsay and the stocking 137

The passage starts with the description of the external reality and moves gradually inside the mind of the main protagonist, Mrs Ramsay. The reader follows her train of thought until they are brought back to reality again.

- And even if it isn't fine tomorrow, – said Mrs Ramsay, raising her eyes to glance at William Bankes and Lily Briscoe¹ as they passed, – it will be another day. And now, – she said, thinking that Lily's charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant² in her white, puckered³ little face, but it would take a clever man to see
- 5 it, – and now stand up, and let me measure your leg, – for they might go to the Lighthouse after all, and she must see if the stocking did not need to be an inch or two longer in the leg.
- Smiling, for an admirable idea had flashed upon her this very second – William and Lily should marry – she took the heather mixture stocking⁴, with its
- 10 criss-cross of steel needles⁵ at the mouth of it, and measured it against James's leg.
- My dear, stand still, – she said, for in his jealousy, not liking to serve as measuring-block for the Lighthouse keeper's little boy, James⁶ fidgeted⁷ purposely and if he did that, how could she see, was it too long, was it too short? she asked.
- 15 She looked up – what demon possessed him, her youngest, her cherished? – and saw the room, saw the chairs, thought them fearfully shabby⁸. Their entrails⁹, as Andrew said the other day, were all over the floor; but then what was the point, she asked herself, of buying good chairs to let them spoil up¹⁰ here all through the winter when the house, with only one old woman to see to it, positively
- 20 dripped with wet¹¹? Never mind: the rent was precisely twopence halfpenny; the children loved it; it did her husband good to be three thousand, or if she must be accurate, three hundred miles from his library and his lectures and his disciples; and there was room for visitors. Mats, camp beds, crazy ghosts of chairs and tables whose London life of service was done – they did well

1. **William Bankes and Lily Briscoe:** two guests; he is a botanist, she is a painter
 2. **aslant:** it. *obliqui*
 3. **puckered:** wrinkled (it. *grinzoso*)
 4. **heather mixture stocking:** it. *calzerotto color dell'erica*
 5. **criss-cross of steel needles:** it. *incrocio di ferri d'acciaio*

6. **James:** one of Mrs Ramsay's children
 7. **fidgeted:** kept moving his hands and feet (it. *si dimenava*)
 8. **shabby:** in poor condition (it. *malandate, malridotte*)
 9. **entrails:** the inner parts
 10. **spoil up:** ruin (it. *sciuparsi*)
 11. **dripped with wet:** totally humid (it. *gocciolanti di umidità*)

25 enough here; and a photograph or two, and books. Books, she thought, grew of
 themselves¹². She never had time to read them. Alas! even the books that had
 been given her, and inscribed by the hand of the poet himself: ‘For her whose
 wishes must he obeyed...’, ‘The happier Helen of our days...’ disgraceful
 30 to say, she had never read them. And Croom on the Mind¹³ and Bates on the
 Savage Customs of Polynesia (– My dear stand still, – she said) – neither of
 those could one send to the Lighthouse. At a certain moment, she supposed, the
 house would become so shabby that something must be done. If they could be
 taught to wipe their feet and not bring the beach in with them – that would be
 something. Crabs¹⁴, she had to allow, if Andrew really wished to dissect them,
 35 or if Jasper believed that one could make soup from seaweed, one could not prevent
 it; or Rose’s objects – shells, reeds¹⁵, stones; for they were gifted, her children, but
 all in quite different ways. And the result of it was, she sighed, taking in the whole
 room from floor to ceiling, as she held the stocking against James’s leg, that things got
 shabbier and got shabbier summer after summer. The mat was fading; the wallpaper
 40 was flapping¹⁶. You couldn’t tell any more that those were roses on it. Still, if every
 door in a house is left perpetually open, and no lockmaker in the whole of Scotland
 can mend a bolt¹⁷, things must spoil. What was the use of flinging¹⁸ a green Cashmere
 shawl over the edge of a picture frame? In two weeks it would be the colour of pea
 soup. But it was the doors that annoyed her; every door was left open. She listened.
 45 The drawing-room door was open; the hall-door was open; it sounded as if the
 bedroom doors were open; and certainly the window on the landing¹⁹ was open, for
 that she had opened herself. That windows should be open, and doors shut – simple
 as it was, could none of them remember it? She would go into the maids²⁰ bedrooms
 at night and find them sealed like ovens, except for Marie’s, the Swiss girl, who would
 50 rather go without a bath than without fresh air, but then at home, she had said, ‘the
 mountains are so beautiful!’. She had said that last night looking out of the window
 with tears in her eyes. – The mountains are so beautiful –. Her father was dying
 there, Mrs Ramsay knew. He was leaving them fatherless. Scolding and demonstrating
 (how to make a bed, how to open a window, with hands that shut and spread like a
 55 Frenchwoman’s) all had folded itself quietly about her, when the girl spoke, as, after a
 flight through the sunshine the wings of a bird fold themselves quietly and the blue
 of its plumage changes from bright steel to soft purple. She had stood there silent for
 there was nothing to be said. He had cancer of the throat. At the recollection – how
 she had stood there, how the girl had said: – At home the mountains are so beautiful,
 60 – and there was no hope, no hope whatever, she had a spasm of irritation, and
 speaking sharply, said to James:
 – Stand still. Don’t be tiresome, – so that he knew instantly that her severity was real,
 and straightened his leg and she measured it.

12. **grew of themselves**: multiplied themselves freely (it. *crescevano da soli come funghi*)

13. **Croom on the Mind**: the book written by Croom on the Mind

14. **Crabs**: it. *Granchi*

15. **reeds**: it. *canne*

16. **flapping**: waving

17. **bolt**: latch (it. *chiavistello, catenaccio*)

18. **flinging**: throwing

19. **landing**: it. *pianerottolo*

20. **maids**: it. *donne di servizio*

Michael Cunningham

The Hours (1999)

Cunningham's novel weaves together the stories of three women, separate in time but parallel in their development, each focusing on the experiences of a particular woman during the course of one apparently ordinary but in fact pivotal day in her life. This choice follows the pattern of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1929) by Virginia Woolf, in which the protagonist is depicted on a single day while organising a party. Clarissa Vaughan, a book editor in present-day Greenwich Village, is also organising a party for her oldest friend. Laura Brown, a young wife and mother in 1949 Los Angeles, prepares a birthday cake for her husband as she tries to resist increasing waves of panic and feelings of alienation. Virginia Woolf herself, the third woman, works on her new novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, while caressing the idea of death. As the novel jump-cuts through the century, the lives and stories of the three women converge, stunningly and unexpectedly, on the night of Clarissa's party.

Prologue 138

The novel begins with the suicide of Virginia Woolf in 1941. Virginia and Laura are both, in a sense, prisoners of their time and societies, and both long for freedom from this cage. Clarissa Vaughan, on the other hand, apparently enjoys every freedom, yet she also seems trapped in a conventional role.

1.

She hurries from the house, wearing a coat too heavy for the weather. It is 1941. Another war has begun. She has left a note for Leonard, and another for Vanessa. She walks purposefully toward the river, certain of what she'll do, but even now she is almost distracted by the sight of the downs¹, the church, and a scattering of
 5 sheep², incandescent, tinged with a faint hint of sulfur³, grazing under a darkening sky. She pauses, watching the sheep and the sky, then walks on. The voices murmur behind her; bombers drone⁴ in the sky, though she looks for the planes and can't see them. She walks past one of the farm workers (is his name John?), a robust, small-headed man wearing a potato-colored vest, cleaning the ditch⁵ that runs through
 10 the osier bed⁶. He looks up at her, nods, looks down again into the brown water. As she passes him on her way to the river she thinks of how successful he is, how fortunate, to be cleaning a ditch in an osier bed. She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted⁷ eccentric. Patches of sky shine in puddles⁸ left over from last night's rain. Her shoes sink⁹
 15 slightly into the soft earth. She has failed, and now the voices are back, muttering indistinctly just beyond the range of her vision, behind her, here, no, turn and they've gone somewhere else. The voices are back and the headache is approaching

1. **downs:** hills

2. **scattering of sheep:** it. *gregge sparso di pecore*

3. **tinged ... sulfur:** it. *tinto di una debole traccia di zolfo*

4. **drone:** it. *ronzano*

5. **ditch:** it. *fosso*

6. **osier bed:** it. *vincheto*

7. **gifted:** it. *dotata*

8. **puddles:** it. *pozzanghere*

9. **sink:** go deep

as surely as rain, the headache that will crush whatever is she and replace her with
 20 itself. The headache is approaching and it seems (is she or is she not conjuring
 them herself?) that the bombers have appeared again in the sky. She reaches the
 embankment¹⁰, climbs over and down again to the river. There's a fisherman
 upriver, far away, he won't notice her, will he? She begins searching for a stone.
 She works quickly but methodically, as if she were following a recipe that must be
 25 obeyed scrupulously if it's to succeed at all. She selects one roughly the size and
 shape of a pig's skull. Even as she lifts it and forces it into one of the pockets of
 her coat (the fur collar tickles¹¹ her neck), she can't help noticing the stone's cold
 chalkiness¹² and its color, a milky brown with spots of green. She stands close to the
 edge of the river, which laps against the bank, filling the small irregularities in the
 mud with clear water that might be a different substance altogether from the
 30 yellow-brown, dappled¹³ stuff, solid-looking as a road, that extends so steadily from
 bank to bank. She steps forward. She does not remove her shoes. The water is cold, but
 not unbearably so. She pauses, standing in cold water up to her knees. She thinks of
 Leonard. She thinks of his hands and his beard, the deep lines around his mouth.
 She thinks of Vanessa, of the children, of Vita and Ethel: So many. They have
 35 all failed, haven't they? She is suddenly, immensely sorry for them. She imagines
 turning around, taking the stone out of her pocket, going back to the house. She
 could probably return in time to destroy the notes. She could live on; she could
 perform that final kindness. Standing knee-deep in the moving water, she decides
 against it. The voices are here, the headache is coming, and if she restores herself¹⁴
 40 to the care of Leonard and Vanessa they won't let her go again, will they? She
 decides to insist that they let her go. She wades awkwardly (the bottom is mucky)¹⁵
 out until she is up to her waist. She glances upriver at the fisherman, who is wearing
 a red jacket and who does not see her. The yellow surface of the river (more yellow
 than brown when seen this close) murkily¹⁶ reflects the sky. Here, then, is the last
 45 moment of true perception, a man fishing in a red jacket and a cloudy sky reflected
 on opaque water. Almost involuntarily (it feels involuntary, to her) she steps or
 stumbles¹⁷ forward, and the stone pulls her in. For a moment, still, it seems like
 nothing; it seems like another failure; just chill water she can easily swim back out
 of; but then the current wraps itself around her and takes her with such sudden,
 50 muscular force it feels as if a strong man has risen from the bottom, grabbed¹⁸ her
 legs and held them to his chest. It feels personal.

10. **embankment:** artificial slope along a river
 (it. *argine*)

11. **tickles:** it. *le fa il solletico*

12. **chalkiness:** typical of chalk (it. *qualità gessosa*)

13. **dappled:** it. *chiazzata*

14. **restores herself:** puts herself back

15. **wades ... mucky:** it. *si muove nell'acqua
 con difficoltà (il fondo è fangoso)*

16. **murkily:** dark

17. **stumbles:** it. *inciampa*

18. **grabbed:** it. *avesse afferrato*

2.

More than an hour later, her husband returns from the garden.

‘Madame went out,’ the maid says, plumping a shabby pillow that releases a miniature storm of down. ‘She said she’d be back soon.’

Leonard goes upstairs to the sitting room to listen to the news. He
5 finds a blue envelope, addressed to him, on the table. Inside is a letter.

Dearest,

I feel certain that I am going mad again:

I feel we can't go through another of these terrible times.

And I shan't recover this time.

10 *I begin to hear voices, and can't concentrate.*

So I am doing what seems the best thing to do.

You have given me the greatest possible happiness.

You have been in every way all that anyone could be.

I don't think two people could have been happier till

15 *this terrible disease came.*

I can't fight it any longer, I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know.

You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read.

What I want to say is that I owe all the happiness of my life to you.

20 *You have been entirely patient with me & incredibly good.*

I want to say that – everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you.

Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness.

I can't go on spoiling your life any longer.

25 *I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.*

V.

Leonard races from the room, runs downstairs. He says to the maid,

‘I think something has happened to Mrs. Woolf. I think she may have tried to kill herself. Which way did she go? Did you see her leave the

30 house?’

The maid, panicked, begins to cry. Leonard rushes out and goes to the river, past the church and the sheep, past the osier bed. At the riverbank he finds no one but a man in a red jacket, fishing.

3.

She is borne quickly along by the current. She appears to be flying, a fantastic figure, arms outstretched¹, hair streaming², the tail of the fur coat billowing³ behind. She floats, heavily, through shafts of brown, granular light. She does not travel far. Her feet (the shoes are gone) strike the bottom occasionally, and when they do they

5 summon up a sluggish cloud of muck, filled with the black silhouettes of leaf skeletons, that stands all but stationary in the water after she has passed along out of sight. Stripes of green-black weed⁴ catch in her hair and the fur of her coat, and for a while her eyes are blindfolded⁵ by a thick swatch⁶ of weed, which finally loosens itself and floats, twisting and untwisting and twisting again.

10 She comes to rest, eventually, against one of the pilings⁷ of the bridge at Southeast. The current presses her, worries her, but she is firmly positioned at the base of the squat⁸, square column, with her back to the river and her face against the stone. She curls⁹ there with one arm folded against her chest and the other afloat over the rise of her hip. Some distance above her is the bright, rippled¹⁰ surface. The sky reflects

15 unsteadily there, white and heavy with clouds, traversed by the black cutout shapes of rooks¹¹. Cars and trucks rumble over the bridge. A small boy, no older than three, crossing the bridge with his mother, stops at the rail, crouches¹², and pushes the stick he's been carrying between the slats of the railing so it will fall into the water. His mother urges him along but he insists on staying awhile, watching the

20 stick as the current takes it. Here they are, on a day early in the Second World War: the boy and his mother on the bridge, the stick floating over the water's surface, and Virginia's body at the river's bottom, as if she is dreaming of the surface, the stick, the boy and his mother, the sky and the rooks. An olive-drab¹³ truck rolls across the bridge, loaded

25 with soldiers in uniform, who wave to the boy who has just thrown the stick. He waves back. He demands that his mother pick him up so he can see the soldiers better; so he will be more visible to them. All this enters the bridge, resounds through its wood and stone, and enters Virginia's body. Her face, pressed sideways to the piling, absorbs it all: the truck and the soldiers, the mother and the child.

1. **outstretched:** open
2. **streaming:** floating
3. **billowing:** swollen by the water
4. **weed:** it. *erbacce*
5. **blindfolded:** covered the eyes
6. **swatch:** it. *ammasso*
7. **pilings:** it. *piloni*

8. **squat:** it. *tozza*
9. **curls:** it. *si raggomitola*
10. **rippled:** it. *increspata*
11. **rooks:** it. *corvi*
12. **crouches:** it. *si china*
13. **olive-drab:** it. *grigio-verde*