

**A Pool of Thought:
Modest Water's Mighty Work in 'To the Lighthouse'**

Carolyn Kelly

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this paper about introspection in To the Lighthouse, Carolyn Kelly's **against-the-grain approach** to Woolf's novel examines the significance of smaller, less obvious details as they recur throughout the text. In the first paragraph of her introduction, Carolyn constructs **motive** by **orienting** readers to how water imagery in To the Lighthouse is typically read. She then disrupts this context in the following paragraphs, illustrating why and how her **close reading** of overlooked bodies of water in the text can shed light on Woolf's large project.*

Excerpt

Virginia Woolf titled *To the Lighthouse*, titled her novel set on the Scotland coast, in reference to the journey from seaside home to island lighthouse. An expedition to reach the lighthouse forms the backdrop for the novel's two episodes of concentrated investigation into its characters' minds. Separating the party from their destination stands the ocean, nature's great force, where wind, wave, and weather reign rather than human will. This immense, impenetrable body of water shapes the lives it surrounds, in turns isolating or uniting. Yet although Woolf places the sea prominently in her characters' aspirations to cast off from shore and finally land on the distant beacon, she also recognizes the importance of smaller water forms in humans' commune with nature. The pronounced majesty of the ocean may eclipse the subtler role of the pool, but upon closer examination, this humble body of water and its recurring image perform a significant function in Woolf's introspective work.

Woolf locates a vivid, unforgettable drama in the span of a few unremarkable hours, plunging beneath the surface of different individual characters in order to draw her wider conclusions about human relationships. This overarching theme of magnification first hints at the worth of looking more closely at the position of pools in the novel. Woolf introduces the tide pools of the ocean in a scene which risks being dismissed as rather irrelevant to the novel's primary focus up to this point and afterward: the understandings that characters have of themselves and each other, and how their understandings influence their behavior. In this beach scene Woolf briefly brings readers inside the head of Nancy Ramsay, an exclusive occasion, as Woolf prefers to rotate among the perspectives of certain central characters. After this short chapter, the novel resumes total neglect of Nancy's consciousness, making the scene an easy one for audiences to disregard in favor of richer scenes with Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, for example.

Yet this short interlude is not to be overlooked, for when Nancy turns to tide pools to amuse herself on the shore, her play with dimensionality and perspective recalls Woolf's own experimentation:

Brooding, she changed the pool into the sea, and made the minnows into sharks and whales, and cast vast clouds over this tiny world by holding her hand against the sun, and so brought darkness

and desolation, like God himself, to millions of ignorant and innocent creatures, and then took her hand away suddenly and let the sun stream down (Woolf 75).

Nancy's dramatic imagination and her manipulation of the pool's environment evoke the authorial instinct. A novelist, "like God," decides unilaterally a sunny or stormy fate (75). However, Nancy's actions do not merely reflect the fiction writer's omnipotence; the close lens upon the pool, depicting the miniature organisms in an epic tale, echoes Woolf's unique technique throughout the novel of uncoiling unexceptional moments to find an illuminating story. The size of the stage does not restrict the emotional range of the narrative, *To the Lighthouse* argues. Self-reflection and revelation occur in scales both big and small.

Author Commentary

Carolyn Kelly

I wrote “A Pool of Thought” for an English course at University College London during my semester abroad. Literature studies are structured quite differently there, where most writing is done independently. You can write about any text, not necessarily on the syllabus, as long as it’s within the scope of the course. You’re not given any prompts or starting suggestions, and your essays are graded by an assigned departmental tutor who may not specialize in your course subject at all. In many ways, it’s like writing for a living rather than writing for a grade! You’re on your own and you’re addressing a more general audience.

I chose to write about *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf for the Modern Literature course, and I came upon my specific topic very organically. I had been flipping through the book for probably a few hours, looking hard for something that stood out as interesting and original. Having read the book before in high school, where we covered the most familiar symbols like the lighthouse and the ocean, I wanted to be able to contribute something new to the existing criticism and find something to say that was outside the box. Woolf herself was all about defying convention and creating her own unique forms, so I almost wanted to live up to that legacy. I similarly had the feeling that there was more to her work than the more obvious aspects. The image of the pool in the novel finally struck me as a small but intentional repetition that could benefit from close investigation.

I think that spending a significant amount of time one-on-one with the text and just looking for something that was intriguing *to me* allowed me to develop a strong motive. Chances are that if I still had this question after having studied the book and read it a few times, other people would be interested in the answer as well. What does this overlooked image accomplish that the major images of the book do not? Why is it worth looking at after all? I tried to set up those motivating questions in my introduction and the beginning of my analysis. Throughout the rest of the paper I had to be willing to entertain multiple ideas about the purpose of the pool, because it’s not the kind of straightforward symbol from which you can derive a single strong argument. Sometimes you need to be able to admit ambiguity and not force one reading of the image that’s too rigid. The questions that arise from uncertainty can actually enrich your analysis.

Fellow Commentary

Nicolette D'Angelo

While there are many arguments to be made about Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* regarding the novel's more obvious themes or stylistic oddities—perhaps too many—Carolyn's essay is a unique, successful case study of how smaller details, too, can be just as telling about the whole text as ubiquitous, unignorable symbols like the sea and the lighthouse itself.

“Although Woolf places the sea prominently in her characters' aspirations to cast off from shore and finally land on the distant beacon,” Carolyn writes, her “overarching theme of magnification first hints at the worth of looking more closely at the position of pools in the novel.” This nuanced, in-text motive may be easy to miss during a first-read, but Carolyn found it by going back and listening closely to the finer resonances of the text itself, as one would a seashell.

Finding and deciphering instances of the small but mighty pool thus becomes Carolyn's procedure throughout the essay, leading her to consider how, “upon closer examination, this humble body of water and its recurring image perform a significant function in Woolf's introspective work.” The result is a thesis that creates an exciting, open-ended, and operable roadmap for the rest of the paper.

It is important to note, however, that—while the roadmap thesis creates real opportunities to experiment and play with different interpretations of the text—Carolyn's is not untethered to a general claim, nor is it an excuse to merely list her observations about Woolf's pools as they occur to her. Instead, Carolyn close-reads each instance of pools in the text as a new installment in a cumulative story about our interactions with smaller, insignificant portions of nature, suggesting that these interactions may be what speak most profoundly to Woolf's larger narrative project.

As Carolyn's argument ultimately shows, there is no stage too small, no moment too quotidian in the novel from which we can draw meaning. Indeed, “Self-reflection and revelation occur in scales both big and small” throughout *To The Lighthouse* and perhaps throughout most other novels, as long as we are willing to equally consider them both.

Professor Commentary

Maria DiBattista

Virginia Woolf was haunted by the rhythm of waves breaking against the shore and related her own imaginative flights to the tidal pull of the sea beckoning to adventure—or to annihilation. In *To the Lighthouse*, her most autobiographical novel, the sea looms large over the destiny of humankind in its double character as creator and destroyer. But as Carolyn Kelly shows in her attentive and at times suspenseful reading of the novel, Woolf's imagination was also drawn to the smaller but equally absorbing spectacle afforded by the life imaged in tidal pools or ponds. Carolyn rightly notes, in fact, that the rippled surface of the tidal pool is more enigmatic than the stark vision of the sea as it “eats away the ground we stand on” because it evaluates as well as mysteriously mirrors the life of those who contemplate it. The pool may be modest, but it proves a rich source of imagery for Woolf's modernist aesthetic, which aims to chronicle the life of the ordinary mind on an ordinary day. Contemplating the delicate microcosm of pool or island pond affords the novel's brooding characters the most astonishing revelations about the nature of the world and of the human place within it.

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927. Print.

Bios

Carolyn Kelly '18 is an English major from Glenview, IL. When she isn't reading and writing for her classes, she reads and writes as a junior editor for the Nassau Weekly magazine. For a change of pace, she also works with food, people and spreadsheets as the Student Coordinator for Butler/Wilson dining hall. She wrote this as a junior during her semester abroad at University College London.

Nicolette D'Angelo '19 is happy to join the *Tortoise* staff this year, supplementing her other editorial experiences on-campus as Managing Editor of *The Nassau Literary Review*, a Fellow in the Writing Center, staff writer for *Stripe Magazine* and Head Symposiarch for the Council of the Humanities' first year mentorship program. When she isn't reading other students' work, she enjoys writing poetry, singing in the University Chapel Choir, eating (too many) cookies in Murray Dodge Cafe and visiting her family in West Milford, NJ. She will most likely concentrate in English (Theory & Criticism) with certificates in Gender & Sexuality Studies, Humanistic Studies and Creative Writing. She wrote this as a sophomore.