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# The Fluidity of Consciousness: Stream-of-Consciousness Technique in To the Lighthouse

**Mahnoor Khalil*[c], Dr. Muhammad Asif[b], Asma Noor[c]**

a. Visiting Lecturer in English, Ghazi University, Dera Ghazi Khan.
b. Assistant Professor of English, Ghazi University, Dera Ghazi Khan.
c. Visiting Lecturer in English, Ghazi University, Dera Ghazi Khan.

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines how Virginia Woolf represents consciousness through shifting perspective, uneven narrative time, and the interaction of sensation and feeling in To the Lighthouse (1927). It combines close reading of selected scenes from the novel's three parts with concepts from narrative theory and cognitive approaches to fiction. Rather than treating the novel as empirical evidence about the mind, it asks what its formal choices make available to readers: the contrast between a character's private thought and another character's interpretation, the sudden compression of consequential events, and the return of experience through present perception. Readings of Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe show that the novel differentiates their mental lives even when its narration moves between them. The article proposes a three-part descriptive framework—temporal scale, focalization and attribution, and sensory-affective cues—for discussing these effects. It also outlines a possible classroom application while distinguishing that proposal from demonstrated educational outcomes. The contribution is a text-grounded account of how narrative form organizes the appearance of fluid consciousness, not a claim that fiction directly verifies cognitive mechanisms.

## 1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) centers on a postponed journey, a family's changing relationships, an interval of loss, and Lily Briscoe's unfinished painting. The novel's three parts—"The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse"—change scale and narrative focus so sharply that the meaning of an event depends as much on the consciousness through which it is encountered as on its external occurrence. "The Window" moves among people sharing an afternoon and evening; "Time Passes" places personal deaths within an account of an emptying house; and the final part juxtaposes a journey to the lighthouse with Lily's return to her canvas (Woolf, 1927).

The term stream of consciousness comes from William James's account of mental life and later entered literary criticism as a description of techniques for representing thought (James, 1890; Humphrey, 1954). It does not denote a single device. In Woolf, narrated thought, free indirect discourse, dialogue, remembered language, and changes of focalization work together. This

* Correspondence to: Visiting Lecturer in English, Ghazi University, Dera Ghazi Khan.
E-*mail address:* khalilmahnoor10@gmail.com (M. Khalil)

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novel repeatedly makes readers distinguish what a character feels, what another character guesses, and what the narrator allows them to see.

The argument here is deliberately bounded. Cognitive narratology provides concepts for describing the reader's work of attributing mental states, not proof that fictional characters possess measurable cognition. Palmer (2004) approaches fictional minds as socially embedded, while Zunshine (2006) examines readers' attributions of beliefs and intentions. These approaches offer a useful dialogue with Woolf's formal experimentation. This article asks how specific passages distribute access to thought, modulate time, and attach perception to emotion. It also considers how those passages might be used for teaching close reading, without claiming to have tested a classroom intervention.

### 1.1. Research Questions

- How do changes in narrative duration, focalization, and sensory detail shape the representation of consciousness in To the Lighthouse?
- How do the selected passages distinguish Mrs. Ramsay's, Mr. Ramsay's, and Lily Briscoe's ways of attending to other people?
- What can a cognitive-narratological vocabulary clarify about these formal choices, and what remains a tentative pedagogical application rather than an evidenced result?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Stream of Consciousness and Modernist Narrative Techniques

Wani and Jeelani (2025) studied the representation of time and human thoughts in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway as well as *To the Lighthouse*. They point out that Woolf does not write stories in the traditional way. She is interested in the changing thoughts and feelings of her characters. Their study shows that stream of consciousness helps readers to understand how people view life through their memories and feelings. Woolf also uses stream of consciousness or non-linear narration to portray human experiences (Khidirova, 2025). The researcher points out that time in Woolf's novels is linked to personal feelings, memories and thoughts. The technique puts her writing unlike traditional fiction.

### 2.2. Psychological Depth and Inner Consciousness

Williams (2023) discusses the psychological experiences for the characters in *To the Lighthouse*. She is interested in family relations, memories and emotional experiences. The study points to Woolf's exploration of personal feelings and the impact of family relationships with the human mind.
Balossi, M. (2025). Mrs. McNab in *To the Lighthouse*. The researcher discusses the role this character plays in the novel's narrative structure, particularly in the section titled "Time Passes". This study will help readers learn how Woolf uses various characters and narrative techniques to represent human experience and the passage of time.

### 2.3. Memory, Time, and the Fluidity of Consciousness

Basirizadeh et al. (2021) consider the notion of time in *To the Lighthouse.* The study is about Henri Bergson's ideas on time and consciousness. Time, according to the researchers, is presented by Woolf as human thoughts, as personal experiences, not simply a sequence of events. Kalkan (2023) looks at the purpose of memory in *To the Lighthouse*. The researcher argues that Woolf links the past and the present via the memories of her characters. These memories inform how characters view themselves and their lives. The present study suggests that memory is important for the formation of identity and consciousness.

### 2.4. Research Gap

In *To the Lighthouse*, previous researchers have investigated stream of consciousness, psychological experience, memory and time. Wani and Jeelani (2025) are interested in modernist narration and the experience of time. Williams (2023) is interested in psychological and familial relationships. Kalkan (2023) examines memory and its relationship with past and present.
These studies are important for understanding Woolf's writing, but this research will examine the way narrative techniques, psychological experiences, memory, and time work together to produce a continuous flow of consciousness. This study will concentrate on the way Woolf presents the changing nature of human thoughts through the experiences of Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe.

## 3. Methodology

This is a qualitative close reading of one primary text, supported by selected works in Woolf criticism and cognitive narrative theory. Four textual units were chosen for their distinct formal functions: Mrs. Ramsay's encounter with her husband's unspoken distress in "The Window," section VI; Lily's response to Charles Tansley's judgment of women's painting in "The Window"; the compressed account of Mrs. Ramsay's death in "Time Passes," section III; and Lily's final movement between the distant boat and her painting in "*to the Lighthouse,*" section XIII. The unit of analysis is a passage's arrangement of narrated perception, reported thought, speech, and narrative duration. The first and final findings directly compare Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and Lily.

Primary-text quotations are located by part and numbered section of the 1927 text; page numbers are not supplied because pagination differs across editions. Quotations and the three-part organization were checked against the public-domain 1927 transcription listed in References. This procedure makes the textual anchors reproducible without inventing edition-specific page citations. We use secondary works for their stated conceptual or historical relevance, rather than to support unsupported claims about particular scenes. No participants, questionnaires, classroom observations, or experimental measures were involved.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1. Uneven Narrative Time: Expanded Attention and Compressed Loss

The opening part dwells on the small changes of feeling within shared domestic time. In "The Window," section VI, Mrs. Ramsay recognizes an echo of Mr. Ramsay's private distress in the phrase "Some one had blundered" (Woolf, 1927). The words are initially detached from an understood cause. Her consciousness catches up with an emotional situation before she can fully explain it. A reader must therefore track two temporal movements at once: the short duration of the encounter and the return of language already circulating in her mind.

"Time Passes" shifts the scale. The narrator places Mrs. Ramsay's death inside a bracketed statement, noting that Mr. Ramsay's outstretched arms "remained empty" ("Time Passes," section III). The restraint is formally consequential: an event that would dominate a conventional family narrative occupies little narrated space, whereas weather and the house receive extended description. The point is not that the text records a psychological measurement of grief. Rather, narrative duration refuses to equate emotional importance with the amount of textual space an event receives. The contrast also qualifies the original draft's claim that all time in the novel is "internal". This middle part gives sustained attention to a world from which the central human consciousnesses are largely absent.

### 4.2. Social Minds Without the Erasure of Difference

In "The Window," section VI, Mrs. Ramsay tries to interpret her husband's agitation. At the same time, the narration also gives readers access to the martial language through which he experiences a blow to his self-image. Her response depends on recognisable signs of his mood, but her uncertainty remains visible. Woolf's movement between the two perspectives does not literally merge their minds: it makes the gap between access and inference part of the scene. This distinction accords with Palmer's account of the social presentation of fictional thought and with Zunshine's interest in mental-state attribution (Palmer, 2004; Zunshine, 2006).

Lily's consciousness works differently. In "The Window," she hears Tansley's dismissive claim, "Women can't paint," as she notices the gap between the picture she intends and the marks on her canvas (Woolf, 1927). The remark is not objective narration; it is an intrusive social judgment that she remembers and contests. Mrs. Ramsay attends to another person's immediate emotional demand, Mr. Ramsay seeks reassurance from those around him, and Lily struggles to preserve a visual judgment in the face of another person's voice. The comparison identifies three different relations between thought and social pressure rather than declaring consciousness universally interchangeable.

In "The Lighthouse," section XIII, Lily imagines the boat's arrival while standing beside Mr. Carmichael. Their brief accord remains a narrated interpretation of an encounter, not a demonstration that their mental states are identical. The novel presents relational awareness while retaining the difference between a character's thoughts, another's words, and the narrator's arrangement of both.

### 4.3. Sensory and Affective Attention in Lily's Final Scene

The ending connects Lily's sense of distance, bodily fatigue, and visual composition. As the lighthouse recedes into haze, she returns to the canvas and draws a line in its center. Her concluding thought, "I have had my vision," follows an action rather than preceding it as an abstract statement ("The Lighthouse," section XIII). Sight, exertion, memory of Mrs. Ramsay, and the

physical work of painting are presented as intertwined. This supports an interpretation of embodied and affectively charged attention at the level of literary form; it does not establish a general scientific theory of perception.

## 5. Discussion

The close readings suggest that “fluidity” is most useful when specified rather than repeated as a general adjective. It names different formal operations: a remembered phrase acquiring meaning during an encounter, a major death reduced to a brief narrative insertion, and an artistic decision emerging from the alternation between distant sight and immediate work. None of these operations alone is equivalent to unmediated interior monologue. Woolf’s narrator selects, juxtaposes, withholds, and contrasts mental perspectives.

These examples also clarify how cognitive vocabulary should be used. Palmer (2004) allows us to describe characters’ minds in relation to their social world, Zunshine (2006) highlights readers’ interpretation of one person’s assumptions about another. In “The Window,” Mrs. Ramsay’s interpretation of her husband is neither complete access nor sheer ignorance. Lily’s remembered encounter with Tansley shows that an attributed social voice can reshape private attention. The concepts illuminate reading choices, but literary analogy must not be confused with an empirical claim that Woolf reproduces actual neural or cognitive mechanisms.

There is a related implication for gendered experience. Lily’s difficulty in painting is both formal and social: the remembered disrespectt interrupts her work, and the final action reasserts her own arrangement of the canvas. The analysis can retain insights from feminist Woolf criticism without treating gender as an alternative to studying technique (Abel, 1989; Showalter, 1977). The bracketed announcement of Mrs. Ramsay’s death challenges an exclusively person-centered account of the novel: the impersonal house and its changing physical conditions have narrative force.

The results affirm that Woolf employs shifts in temporal line, changing points of view, and emotional moments to depict consciousness. The difference between “The Window” and “Time Passes” reveals that duration of the narrative has an impact on how personal experiences and loss are captured. It is this reading that equates with the work of Hou (2026), To the Lighthouse, which emphasizes the importance of the activities of the body and the rhythm of the story in literary time. Balossi (2025) also notes that “Time Passes” ties together the parts of this novel into one whole by utilizing the energy of time and the transformation of the house. These studies validate the interpretation of Woolf's narrative technique put forward in this analysis as a way to offer a representation of consciousness which is not a stream of individual thoughts.

The findings are also about social relationships and personal problems that are different for Mrs Ramsay, Mr Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. The theory of fictional minds proposed by Palmer (2004) and Zunshine's (2006) theory of mind explains readers' inferences of other characters' thoughts and beliefs. Lily's last painting again conveys the correlation between sensation, memory and judgment in art. More recent work on Woolf's narrative strategies also focussed on the link between the fluctuating points of view, subjective experience and narrative time (Mehra, 2026). The stream-of-consciousness narrative of the novel suggests consciousness not only as individualistic, but also shared; the classroom application that is proposed does not demonstrate a pedagogical outcome, but remains an option.

### 5.1. Pedagogical Application

A seminar could ask students to annotate three brief passages with separate marks for narrated thought, a character’s inference about another mind, and sensory description. Students could then compare why Mrs. Ramsay’s encounter takes up more textual space than the announcement of her death, and students could explain how Lily’s final visual action relates to her earlier self-doubt. This activity plausibly teaches evidence-based interpretation and the difference between observation and inference. It is not a finding that the novel increases metacognition, empathy, or attainment: those outcomes would require a separately designed educational study with appropriate measures.

## 6. Limitations

This interpretation examines selected passages from one novel and cannot claim comprehensive coverage of all its narrative techniques or of the full Woolf scholarship. The three analytic categories are heuristic, not a validated psychological taxonomy. They describe representations of thought and the interpretive work prompted by narration; they do not establish that fiction mirrors cognition directly. No reader-response or classroom data were collected. Any claim about teaching effectiveness remains a proposal for future testing. Part-and-section references provide stable passage locations, but an eventual journal submission should select a specified print edition and add its exact page numbers after checking that edition.

## 7. Conclusion

To the Lighthouse makes consciousness fluid through formal differences rather than a single undifferentiated flow. Mrs. Ramsay's uncertain reading of her husband, Mr. Ramsay's need for recognition, and Lily's effort to maintain an artistic vision offer distinguishable relations between private experience and other people. Across the novel's three parts, changes in narrative duration and focalization determine how those experiences become available to readers. A close reading grounded in identifiable passages supports a more modest but more justifiable interdisciplinary claim: cognitive narratology can clarify what readers must infer from Woolf's narrative arrangements. At the same time, the consequences of using the novel in a classroom remain an open empirical question.

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