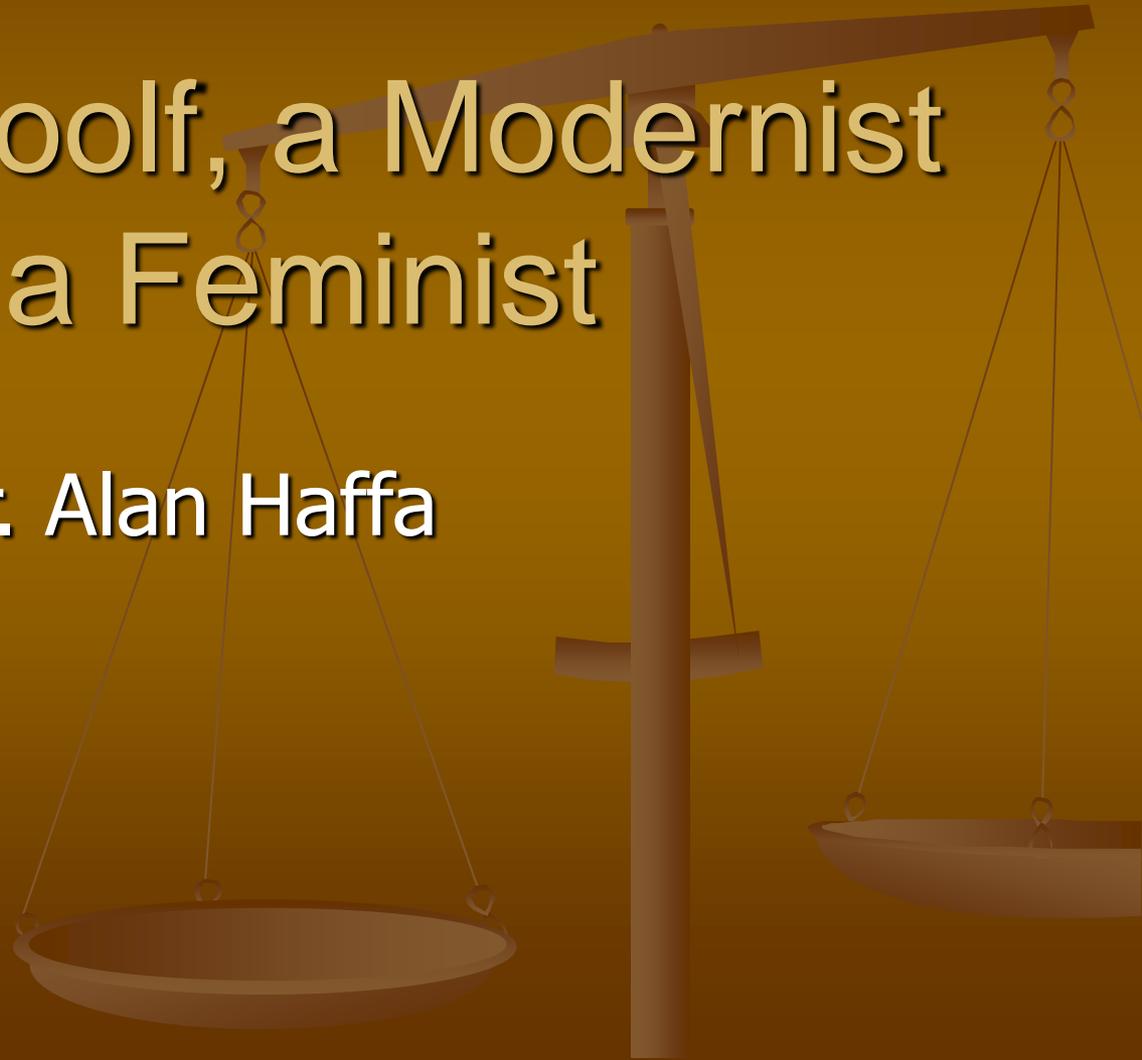


# Virginia Woolf, a Modernist and a Feminist

Dr. Alan Haffa



# Biography, 1882-1941

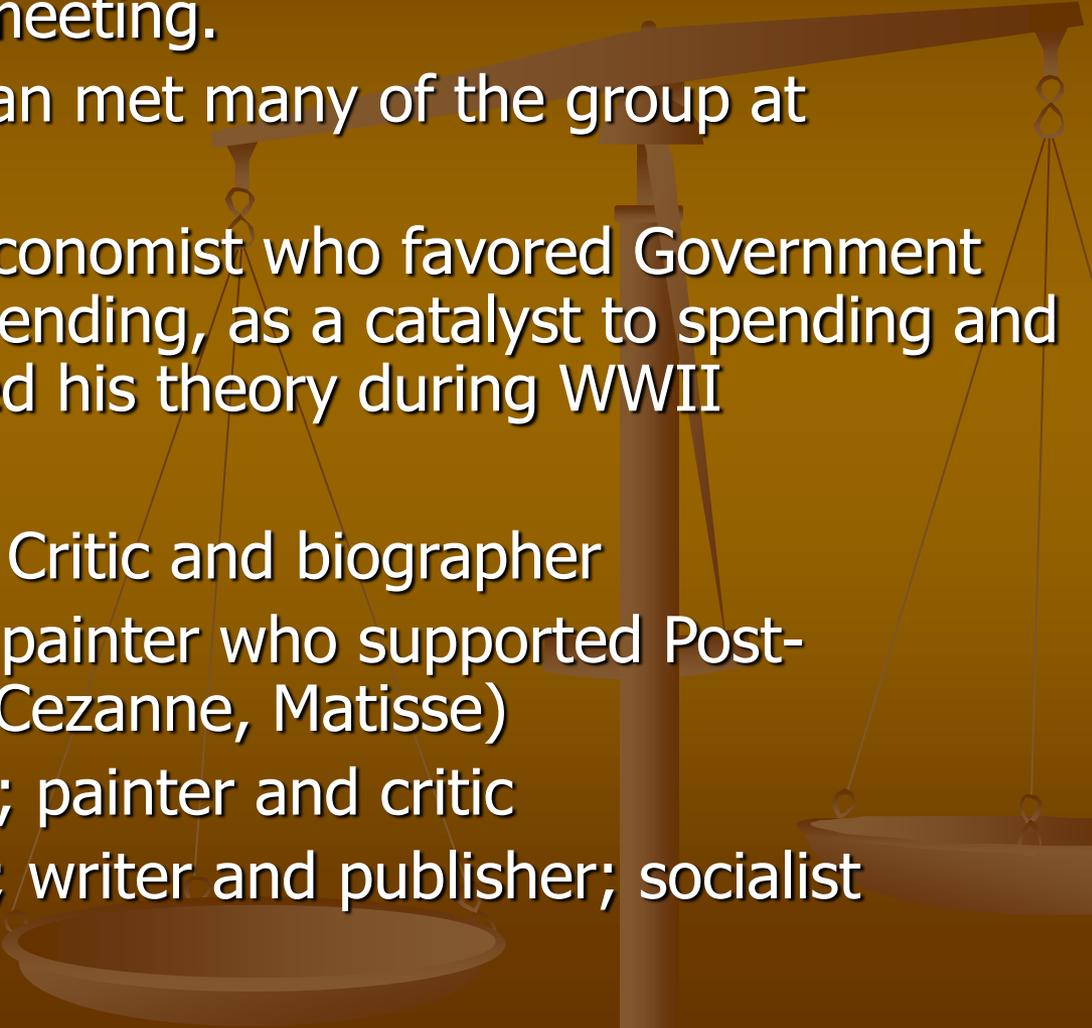
- Father was a scholar and biographer
- Women were not allowed at major universities
- Bloomsbury Group, 1904-41
- 1917– She and husband Leonard started Hogarth Press: Pub. Freud, Woolf, E.M. Forster, Katherine Mansfield, T.S. Eliot
- Battled Manic-Depression; 1941, she drowned herself



# Bloomsbury Group Photo



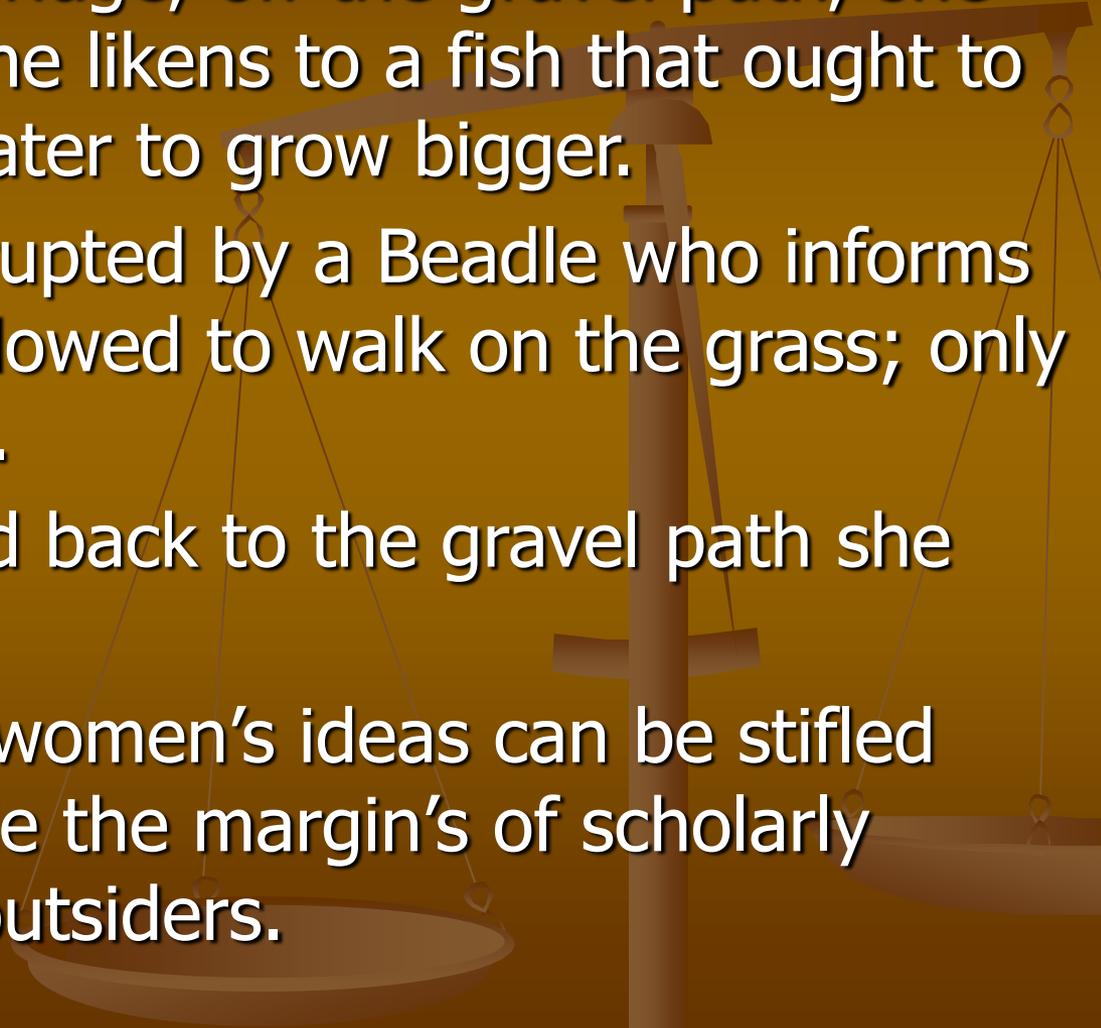
# Bloomsbury Group Members

- Reformers who wanted to change Victorian Society. Reviled by some for sexual promiscuity among group. Intellectual circle that began as a weekly meeting.
  - Brothers Thoby and Adrian met many of the group at Cambridge
  - John Maynard Keynes: Economist who favored Government spending, even deficit spending, as a catalyst to spending and production; FDR instituted his theory during WWII
  - Duncan Grant: Painter;
  - Lytton Strachey: Literary Critic and biographer
  - Roger Fry: Art Critic and painter who supported Post-Impressionism (Picasso, Cezanne, Matisse)
  - Clive Bell: Brother-in-law; painter and critic
  - Leonard Woolf: husband; writer and publisher; socialist
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# *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

- Autobiographical: her aunt died and left her a legacy that allowed her to rent a "room of her own." The 500/lb a year is more important than the Vote.
- Metaphor for a space where one can write.
- Derived from two speeches given to women students at Cambridge
- Discusses the challenges faced by women, women writers in particular in terms of education, lack of tradition, difficulty of having to write within a male Canon.
- Credits writers like Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, and others for making it easier for her.

# “Lost Fish”

- While walking at Oxbridge, off the gravel path, she had a thought that she likens to a fish that ought to be put back in the water to grow bigger.
  - But then she is interrupted by a Beadle who informs her that she is not allowed to walk on the grass; only Fellows and Scholars.
  - After being redirected back to the gravel path she “lost” her “fish.”
  - A metaphor for how women’s ideas can be stifled when they are outside the margins of scholarly society, treated like outsiders.
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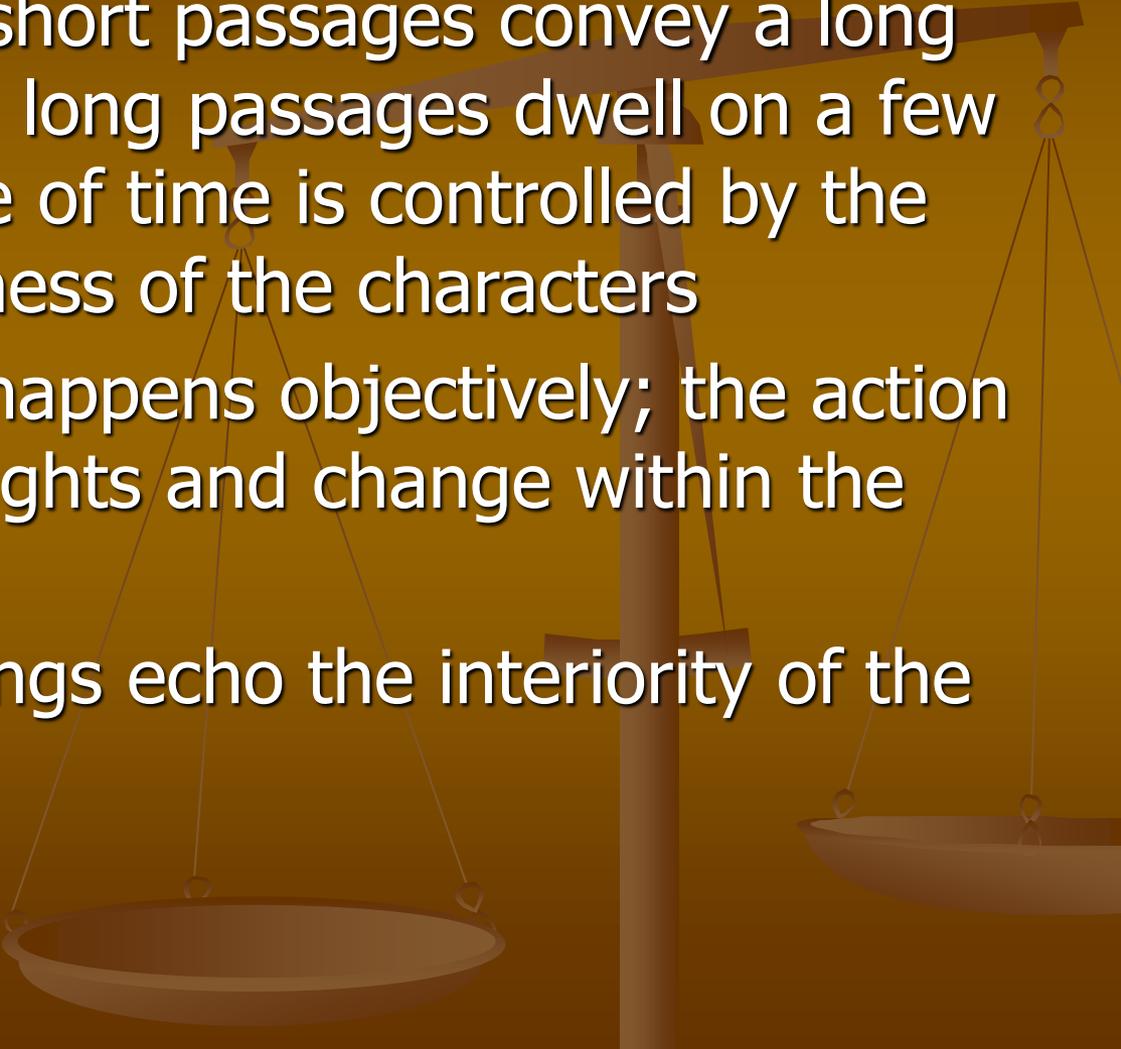
# Women as Object

- Visit to British Museum
- “Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?”
- Why is Man so angry at Woman? “when the professor insisted a little too emphatically upon the inferiority of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority, but with his own superiority.”

# Philosophy of Androgyny

- *The Waves* (1931): Hard to distinguish between Male and Female consciousness of characters
- In *Room*, "Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind."
- Metaphor: Man and Woman getting in a taxi; "But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness."
- Coleridge "a great mind is androgynous"; Example of Shakespeare

# *To the Lighthouse* (1927)

- Time: sometimes short passages convey a long period of time and long passages dwell on a few moments; passage of time is controlled by the interior consciousness of the characters
  - Action: Very little happens objectively; the action consists of the insights and change within the character's minds
  - Physical surroundings echo the interiority of the characters
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# Organization and Summary

- Sections: "The Window" "Time Passes" and "The Lighthouse"
- James Ramsay wants to go to the Lighthouse; mother says they will if the weather allows
- Lily Briscoe is a painter who paints Mrs. Ramsay; Mrs. R tries to arrange a marriage with a friend, Mr. Bankes; She does set up Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle
- Part II; Time passes; War breaks out; Mrs. R dies; son and daughter die; house falls into disrepair
- Part III: back at the house, they plan to go to lighthouse; Lily Briscoe paints the ocean as they sail to the lighthouse.

# Lighthouse as Symbol

- For James, the boy, it is a symbol of excitement and adventure and the male goal of conquest; When his Father crushes his hopes of going there it is as if he crushed his emerging male Self.
- On another level, it is civilization—light—offering guidance in a world of shadows and fog. Knowledge.
- Man's mastery of the physical world: the waves crash the shore around it and it is beaten, but it stands up to the weather as a symbol of Man's power.
- While close and visible, it is always just out of reach (like Mr. Ramsay's desire to get to the end of the alphabet or Lily's desire to paint)
- When James reaches the lighthouse as a man he must reconcile his childish image of it with the current reality; nothing is stable and meaning is always slipping away.

# Waves and Ocean

- The Ocean represents Nature and Life; it is both life affirming but also life threatening. We want to contain it, control it, make it stable, but it resists those attempts. Ultimately, like the realm of knowledge, it defies human control and is the symbol of Change and Instability. The waves hitting the shore are a constant reminder that the Ocean is not what we want it to be.
- “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.”

# Alphabet and Tennyson's Charge of the Light Brigade

- Mr. Ramsay can say the alphabet from A to Z, only he gets stuck at Q. What comes after Q?
- A symbol of the academic desire to know everything.
- Mr. Ramsay is learned and smart, but he acknowledges that he is no genius. This is his failure and it is a symbol of the failure of Britain as an Empire and the failure of Western Civilization to answer the enduring questions.
- "Someone blundered..." Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" <http://www.bartleby.com/42/645.html>

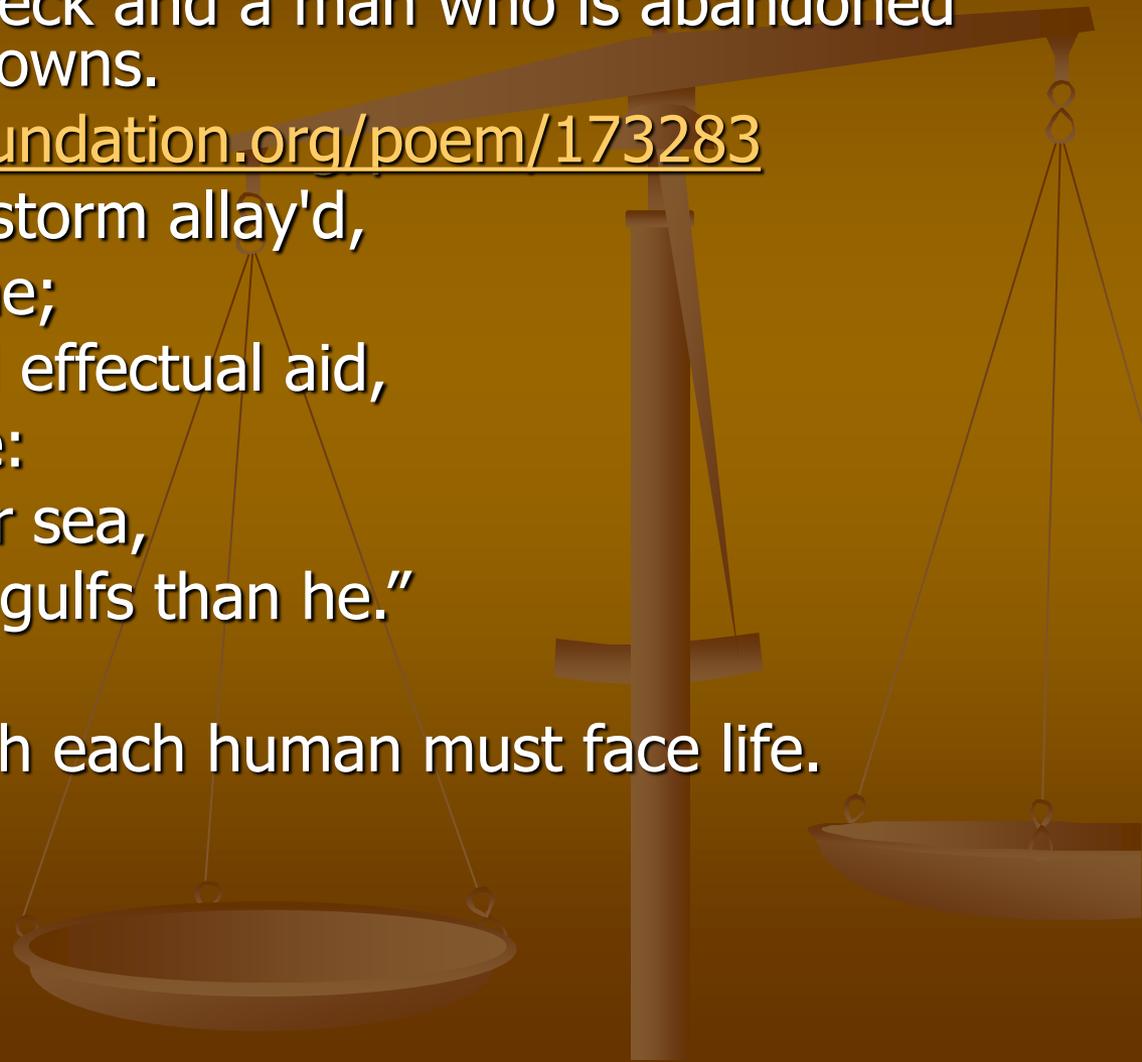
# William Cowper's "The Castaway"

- Poem about a shipwreck and a man who is abandoned by his friends. He drowns.

- <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173283>

- "No voice divine the storm allay'd,  
No light propitious shone;  
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,  
We perish'd, each alone:  
But I beneath a rougher sea,  
And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he."

The Isolation from which each human must face life.



# Art as a Solution?

- Painting as a metaphor for the attempt to make meaning out of the complexity of life. In particular, it represent female expression (Mr. Tansley's: "women can't paint")
- Lily Briscoe is a painter: purple triangle represents mother and child. (p. 52)
- Art attempts to freeze the world in an instant: "nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint."
- "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision."

# Summary

- One of the early Modern writers, but with a uniquely female point of view and interest
- In *Room of One's Own*, she shows the importance of independence, tradition, and leisure for the creative arts
- In *To the Lighthouse*, she models the failure of Western Civilization as a male attempt to make sense of the world by dominating it, controlling it. In contrast, Lily Briscoe and perhaps art in general offer an alternative, which observes the world without trying to capture its meaning or control it or force it into manmade categories.