Alumnae/i Reading Group Syllabus: Beauty and the Art of Attention

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Texts:

Text 1: Essays from Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*; Cal Newport, *A World Without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Communication Overload*; Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*.

Text 2: Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*.

Text 3: Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God"; "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" (excerpt).

Text 4: Makoto Fujimura, *Art + Faith*

Text 5: Ross Gay, *catalog of unabashed gratitude*.

Text 6: Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

Course Description

The French philosopher Simone Weil observes that the experience of beauty is a human need at every level of social existence. When such beauty is taken away from human beings, Weil calls it a crime, an "affliction" that targets the humanity of those who need that beauty for daily sustenance. In fact, Weil argues that the experience of the beautiful provides solace and peace in a world too often directed towards ever faster modes of production and consumption.

But what is beauty? What role does it play in human life? What is the relation of natural beauty with the beauty of human creativity? What is the relationship of beauty and justice, and can standards of beauty be implicated in great injustice? How might the experience of beauty differ from our participation in contemporary modes of technology and production? What might it tell us about our relation to the natural world and the life of the planet?

We begin with three contemporary authors who are all concerned about what technology may be doing to our powers of attention, and what the costs might be, both commercial and personal. All three maintain in the background a concern that the way in which we engage with technology both in our work and in our personal lives may be contributing to the anxiety and distraction with which we face the world and one another. One of them, Jenny Odell, sees the experience of art as a direct antidote to such distraction. We will continue with Elaine Scarry's book on beauty, in which the Harvard philosopher gives a useful primer on aesthetic theory, followed by a (controversial) thesis on how the experience of beauty may lead human beings

directly into moral inquiry. In this, she builds in part on the insights of Simone Weil, who believes that the experience of beauty makes us more attentive to God and to other human beings.

With Makoto Fujimura, we move directly to the work of artists meditating on the experience of beauty and attention. Fujimura is a Christian artist who creates within several important Japanese artistic traditions, especially that of kintsugi, or the practice of repairing broken pottery with gold and lacquer. He views making art and viewing art as both coming to terms with trauma and repairing broken lives. In this, he attempts to envision the experience of beauty against the backdrop of worldly tragedy. Ross Gay's poetry, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry for 2015 seems, at first blush, to take the opposite track, luxuriously and defiantly praising the gratuitous goodness of the world. However, hovering in the background is the violence of racism, the murder of his friend Don Belton, the death of his father, and the general fragmentation of American society. This is a fragmentation that Gay's poetry is meant to counteract by a subtle redirection of the reader's attention through poetry.

Finally, we will read Virginia Woolf's classic novel, *To the Lighthouse*. A word of caution, good readers: *this is not an easy book*. However, its rewards are endless. Woolf brings together many of the threads of the course. She sees the experience of beauty as the directing of our attention to the good. It is a respite from the tragedy of the world, present in the book in the experience of World War I. She also sees art as communally rewarding: works of art create a community around beauty which does not annul difference but brings a diverse and even antagonistic set of people together despite those differences. The art of the novelist in particular transforms the relations between human beings into a beautiful cathedral into which we the readers wander, ourselves entering into relation with them. We readers become part of the beautiful artifact.

Session 1: Technology and Attention

The readings for this session center on the role of technology in shaping our patterns of attention in the world. Start with the Prologue, Ch. 7, and Afterword of Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. The book was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for 2010. A second edition came out in 2020. Though there are elements of Carr's analysis that will seem somewhat outdated now in 2023, as Carr notes in his Afterword, his analysis seems to be even more trenchant with the emergence of smart phone technology. For biographical information on Nicholas Carr, see: https://www.nicholascarr.com/.

Questions:

* I would suggest beginning with a simple personal reflection: if you work at a computer every day, how does this make you feel at the end of the day? If you use a smart phone, what impact do you think that this has on your sense of well-being? Your attention to others? What are the benefits of this technology that you absolutely cannot do without?

* Why does Carr describe the brain engaged with modern technology as a "juggler's brain"?

* On p. 118, Carr discusses the impact of social media on our sense of ourselves as social beings. Is he correct about this? If so, what are some ways to combat the potentially harmful consequences?

* Carr claims that reading on the internet (or on phones, or on tablets) is not as "deep" as reading on the page. Does your experience bear this out? If you think he is right, what might account for this? What is it about reading on a computer or tablet that potentially makes us not as attentive to detail?

* Carr claims that simply having a smart phone on the table in front of you is distracting. Is he correct? If so, what accounts for this? (As I write this question, my cell phone is on my desk; I have picked it up several times while writing.)

Next, read the Introduction and Ch. 1 of Cal Newport's *A World Without Email*. For biographical information on Newport, see https://calnewport.com/. Newport is on a quixotic crusade to decrease our reliance on email. He is convinced that our use of email, and more importantly the work flow that it incites in workplaces, makes us more anxious, unable to engage in deep thinking and creative work, and ultimately less productive.

Questions:

* How often do YOU engage with email over the course of the day? Do you think it makes you less productive? Do you set limits on your use of it?

* What does Newport mean by the “hyperactive hive mind”?

* Newport assumes that employers want employees who think deeply about their work. Is this always the case? Is it possible that email shapes the way we work because employers want us to do less?

* Do you find that your use of email or internet weakens your working memory? Is this really a problem with the advent of the internet?

* Is it realistic to think that workflow can be purged of the “multitasking” that technology both enables and demands?

* What does Newport mean by “network switching”? Does his characterization of this ring true to you?

* Does the use of email and group office technology make you more anxious? Why? Are there practical steps to mitigating this?

* Is Newport correct that email makes us less productive? Is there a realistic way to structure workflow so that the use of email does not become a distraction from deep work?

Finally, consider the Introduction and Ch. 4 of Jenny Odell’s *How to Do Nothing*. (For more on Odell, see https://www.jennyodell.com/about-news.html). Odell expresses a concern with how our modes of technology shape our perception, but, as an artist herself, she brings in the experience of art as a counterweight.

Questions:

* Given that actually doing nothing is impossible, what does Odell mean by “doing nothing”? Why are “solitude, observation, and simple conviviality” considered as elements of “doing nothing”?

* What might it mean to deepen one’s perception of space? How might it lead to “an awareness of one’s participation in history and in a more-than-human community”? How does learning about your specific place in the world (the patch of earth you live on) change the way you perceive yourself and others?

* What does Odell mean by the “attention economy”? Or “resisting in place”? How might one resist productivity as a measure of value, in the midst of a work culture that demands this inexorably?

* Is Odell correct that “certain forms of attention are contagious”? How so?

* How does art shape our attention, according to Odell? How does David Hockney characterize the engagement with a work of art? Is he right that looking at art is a practice or discipline that one needs to learn?

* Does art sharpen attention to what is not art? If so, how so?

* Does art encourage an “I-Thou” relationship of the kind described by Martin Buber? If so, how so? What is it about the experience of art that does this, in distinction to the perception of other media?

Session 2: Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*

Our second text is Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*. Elaine Scarry is the Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and General Theory of Value at Harvard University (https://english.fas.harvard.edu/people/elaine-scarry). Her work, however, has ranged broadly from theory of drama, to philosophical considerations of the body and the experience of pain, to the threat of thermonuclear annihilation. Her book on beauty was an attempt to defend aesthetics and theories of beauty from some in the academy who saw such considerations as too divorced from ethical and political concerns. The criticism assumes that writing about beauty is writing about something divorced from politics, something that has no consequences for how we think about questions of justice, fairness, and the common good. Scarry seeks to place the experience of beauty once again into conversation with "the good," resuscitating the connection that was always assumed by the ancient Greeks.

Questions:

* Is Scarry correct that beauty inspires copies of itself? Do you have any personal examples, where you have wanted to copy or share an experience of beauty?

* What do you make of the assertion that education is really only an attempt to "place oneself in the path of beauty"? How might education look different if this were taken seriously?

* In the first half of the book, Scarry characterizes in her own terms the experience of beauty. It is "unprecedented" or "life saving," it is "sacred" or is like a "greeting," or it "incites deliberation." Granted, such an experience seems simply on its face different from an experience of social media, or of using email, or of watching cable news. But how exactly? I would suggest that being specific, even with something that seems so obvious, can be helpful in pushing the discussion forward.

* What kind of deliberation does the experience of beauty incite? What is the relationship between experiencing beauty and the process of thinking together?

* Are palm trees beautiful?

* What does the experience of beauty do to our desire or wanting? Can a beautiful artifact incite destructive desire? Is the experience of beauty always as beneficial as Scarry seems to suggest?

* According to Scarry, what is the political critique of beauty? Do you agree with this critique? How might this critique be persuasive?

* Do you agree with Scarry that the experience of beauty assists us in being just? Do we really extend to others the care we experience for fragile, beautiful things? Does the attention I pay to the Mona Lisa awaken the attention I pay to the homeless?

* Scarry suggests that symmetry is an important part of beauty, and that because of that it gives rise to notions of equality and distribution. Is symmetry (or the departure from it) important in the experience of beauty? Does it have political repercussions?

* Have you ever felt “decentered” by a work of art? What was that experience like? Are there conditions in our modern world that make such an experience more difficult?

Session 3: Essays by Simone Weil

Simone Weil was a French philosopher of the first half of the 20th century. Born in Paris in 1909, she studied philosophy under the philosopher Alain at the *École Normale Supérieure*. Weil's philosophical project was, from her earliest writings, a sustained engagement with Plato and the early Greek tradition. However, she also saw her work as done in solidarity with the working classes, and she went out of her way to seek out the company of poor working men and women in Paris, even taking up positions herself working in the fields or in factories at various times in her life. She was also always interested in religious experience, especially mystical experience. In the years 1937-38, she had a series of mystical experiences in which she understood God to be present to her immediately. She wrote, "In my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God, I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God." She became a Christian and considered herself close to the Catholic church, but she never became baptized. She died in 1943, from complications that arose after she fasted in solidarity with her compatriots in German-occupied France. For more on Weil's life, see http:// americanweilsociety.org/ about_weil. On her philosophy, see https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/simone-weil/.

The two essays we have here present the basics of Weil's theory of attention. Attention implies two things for Weil: detachment, relation, and love. When we are attentive, we are detached from the other person or the world, and in this we imitate God's detachment from the world. We also imply the importance of that thing to which we are attentive. It is other to us, but it is of utmost importance. And that to which we give over our attention we also love. To give attention is to love. We will see in the second essay that when we give attention to beauty in the world, according to Weil we open ourselves up to the influence of the supernatural.

Questions

"Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God"

* What do you make of Weil's assertion that prayer consists of attention? Is this the way we usually think about prayer? How might it be same/different?

* What does Weil mean by "attention"? What is it attention to? What is the relationship between attention and thinking? What kind of effort does attention call for?

* What do you make of the main claim of the essay, that developing one's capacity for attention is the real aim of education? How might our education system look different if this were taken as the basis of it?

* What is the relationship, for Weil, between attention and desire/wanting? And between desire and God?

* How is school study like a sacrament?

* What might Weil mean that the love of the neighbor also has attention as its substance? Do we typically think of love for other people as consisting of attention? Why does Weil call this a "recognition"?

"Forms of the Implicit Love of God: Part II: Love of the Order of the World"

* How do human beings imitate the divine love, according to Weil? What is it that we do that is like what God does?

* What do you think of Weil's assertion that the love of the beauty of the world is love of the order of the world? What kind of order can there be in a world of blind necessity? Is beauty a mark of order? Does it necessarily have to be?

* Weil asserts that Christianity has mostly neglected the question of beauty in its theology. Is this true? Are there any Biblical texts that deal with the beauty of the world? Or specifically with the concept of beauty? If Weil is right, why might Christianity have neglected the concept of beauty? Is beauty the same as "glory"?

* What does Weil mean that a "sense of beauty" is "present in all the preoccupations of secular life"? Is this true?!

* What does Weil mean when she says that beauty "is a relationship of the world to our sensibility"? Why might this be significant in a theological sense?

* Weil insists that our ultimate goal should be to appreciate "universal beauty." What does she mean by this? Is this possible?

* What might Weil mean by "finality," and how can beauty be "the only finality here below"? How might attention to a finality be different from attention to technology? Or to consumer products?

* How is "carnal love" really love for the beauty of the world? Why is the ignoring of consent in carnal love such a horrible crime for Weil?

* If, as Weil suggests, the supernatural is "secretly present" throughout the natural, is there such a thing as the purely secular?

* Why is causing or enforcing "ugliness" a crime for Weil? What might she mean that all human beings have a "certain terrestrial poetry"?

Session 4: Fujimura's *Art + Faith*

Makoto Fujimura is a contemporary Japanese American artist who combines the artistic techniques of Europe with traditions of Japanese painting and sculpture. He studied at the Tokyo University of the Arts and honed his skill in *nihonga*, traditional Japanese painting. Though he is primarily a painter, Fujimura has also been deeply influenced by the *kintsugi* tradition in Japan, the process of taking broken vessels and repairing them with gold and lacquer. He is also an advocate for the role of the arts in mending a broken culture, a process that he calls "culture care," in opposition to our "culture wars." To this end, he founded the Fujimura Institute, which "spearheads broad initiatives that integrate art, faith, and beauty." Fujimura's broad cultural project unites his Christian faith with his Japanese artistic heritage in an effort to re-imagine art, theology, and the way that art heals personal and cultural division. For more on Fujimura's life, see: https://makotofujimura.com/.

Fujimura's *Art + Faith* is a sustained effort to give an account of this difficult synthesis. *Kintsugi*, the process of transforming a broken cup or bowl into something even more beautiful than before, a brokenness transfigured and made into deeper beauty, becomes for Fujimura a way of conceiving the healing power of the Spirit, a power that brings new beauty into the world. This is a beauty that participates in the new creation and as such brings with it the healing of trauma and brokenness. For Fujimura, each new work of art points to the ultimate consummation of all things, renewed and made whole, united with God. This beauty emerges, though, always through the careful, disciplined attention of the artist engaged in a slow process of creative discernment. In his vision, artistic making carries with it its own knowledge and makes evident the divine presence in the world. As he bluntly writes, "Simply put, when we make, God 'shows up.'"

The following questions are focused on chapters 1-5 of *Art + Faith*, but I would encourage you to read the book in its entirety. He develops the issues in the earlier chapters more fully as the book progresses.

Questions:

* What might Fujimura mean when he talks about somatic knowledge in making? What does one come to "know" through making art? How does attention function in this process of making?

* Why does creating art require hope and "faith in abundance"?

* Do you agree with Fujimura that imagination is the marker of God within us? What might be the theological consequences of claiming this?

* How does Fujimura solve this theological puzzle: on one hand, we are broken; on the other hand, we are perfected already in Christ? What role does artistic making play in resolving this paradox?

* What does Fujimura mean by “co-creation”? What does this have to do with his interest in *kintsugi*?

* What is the relation for the author between beauty, making, and mercy? How is the experience of beauty “merciful”?

* How might art help both artist and audience to survive trauma? What is it about making art and experiencing art that might enable this process? What about on a social level: can you think of any works of art that have played a role in healing broader social trauma?

* Why does Fujimura react against “fixing” language? How does *kintsugi* provide a different model for conceiving healing and salvation?

* Why is it important for Fujimura that the beauty of something lies beyond its utility and practical purposes?

* What do you make of his insistence that “Before the fall, we were all artists and poets”? How does this recontextualize human work more broadly? What is the relation between a market economy and artistic creativity? How might we combine “capitalistic society” with “creative society” more effectively?

Session 5: Ross Gay's Poetry

Ross Gay is a contemporary American poet who teaches at Indiana University. Born in 1974, he studied as an undergraduate at Lafayette College. He later earned his MFA at Sarah Lawrence College, and his PhD from Temple University. His earlier volumes of poetry include *Against Which* (2006), *Bringing the Shovel Down* (2011), *Lace and Pyrite: Letters from Two Gardens* (2014), and *River* (2014). However, his work attained a new visibility with the appearance in 2015 of *catalog of unabashed gratitude*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award for Poetry, the winner of the National Book Critic Circle Award for Poetry, and the winner of the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. Since then, he has notably followed up with two books of prose, *The Book of Delights: Essays* (2019) and *Inciting Joy: Essays* (2022). He also wrote a follow up book of verse, *Be Holding* (2022).

On his website, Gay describes himself as follows: "Ross Gay in interested in joy. Ross Gay wants to understand joy. Ross Gay is curious about joy. Ross Gay studies joy. Something like that." Anyone who reads *catalog of unabashed gratitude* (and his two books of essays) will sense this immediately. Gay's *catalog* is one of the most affirming books of poetry any of you are likely to read, either now or in the future. Only Walt Whitman's verse would compete. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to simply view Gay's book as a straightforward ode to the simple beauty of the world. Tragedy lurks at the corners of this poetry: racism, anxiety, murder, illness, and death. In one particularly poignant poem, Gay meditates on the murder of his friend, colleague, and neighbor Don Belton in a sexually charged act of violence. This is poetry of "nevertheless": the world contains tragedies, and yet nevertheless there is joy, community, and beauty.

For those of you who feel anxious about reading poetry, here's some advice for this volume: keep reading and don't expect to understand everything on the first read. Take your time with the poetry; reading poetry too quickly defeats the purpose. This is poetry that is asking you to read it differently than you would email, web browsing, or watching cable news. Pay attention to imagery, metaphor, rhythm, and sound. Also pay attention to how the sentences are structured. Gay toys with sentence structure and sometimes the syntax is ambiguous. Finally, it might be helpful to see these poems as streams of consciousness that string together distinct thoughts and images. Because of this, it makes sense to see them as drawing together diverse moments of attention and perception. These are poems built around significant perceptions and images that you as the reader are invited also to survey. Above all, approach this poetry with a sense of play and possibility. It is meant to incite your creativity as a reader.

The questions below pertain to 4 central poems from the volume. I urge you to read the entire volume and to range in your discussions much more broadly.

Questions:

"To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian"

* How does the narrator of this poem portray the processes of his mind and attention? To what sorts of things does the poet pay attention in this poem?

* How does the speaker portray the fig tree? What sorts of actions does it enable?

* Why is it important in this poem that figs are a fruit to be *eaten*? Why is eating important here?

* Why does the speaker highlight the fact that fig trees are not native to Philadelphia?

* What is the significance of the fact that the poet anthropomorphizes tree? ("yes I am anthropomorphizing / goddammit I have twice / in the last thirty seconds")

* Why does the poem end with the speaker's observation about Philadelphia being "a city like most / which has murdered its own / people"?

"Spoon"

* What kind of relationship does the speaker of the poem have with Don Belton? (Belton was murdered in 2009). What details does the poem give?

* How does the speaker describe his garden? Why is he nervous about it? What is the significance of the fact that Belton tells the speaker that his garden "looks beautiful"?

* How does fear appear in this poem? What are the two characters afraid of, and how do they address those fears?

* Gay often includes dreams in his poems? What is the significance of the dream in this poem? Why is it important that he is retelling Belton's dream? And why does he feel the need to insert himself into the dream?

* The speaker claims he cannot make the spoon into a metaphor. Why not? Does he really not do so? If the purpose of the poem is not to create a central metaphor, what is it? How is the poem's purpose the same or different for poet and audience?

"The Opening"

* Why does this poem begin with the poet "sitting next to Myself"? Why is "Myself" capitalized? What is he anxious about in this poem?

* Why does the speaker describe his experience as "flamboyant terror"?

* What is the first metaphor that the poet devises to describe his inner state? How does this metaphor work? What do these birds represent? And why does he revise the metaphor as the poem goes on? What does he mean that the birds “favor the long view / of open meadows”?

* What is the “opening” of the title of this poem? How is it a reflection of the mental state of the speaker of the poem?

* What does this poem imply about the nature of sorrow, and of how we process it? How might the writing and reading of poetry contribute to this process?

* What do you make of the turn to nature and to cultivation at the end of this poem? What is being cultivated, and to what end? What role does the experience of beauty and attention play at the end of this poem?

“Last Will and Testament”

* How does the “grody chore” of the beginning of the poem make you feel as a reader? What exactly is the poet asking you, the reader, to do?

* What relation does this imply between humanity and nature?

* If we consider the idea of the poet being divided up as a metaphor, what might be its significance?

* What do you make of the poet’s comparison of himself with his father? How do they both approach the question of death? How does this resonate with other representations of his father throughout the volume?

* The poem ends with the speaker discussing the reader’s “transubstantiative gift.” Transubstantiation is the process by which the bread and wine in the Catholic mass change into the body and blood of Christ. Why does the speaker end with such a reference? How does a reader “transubstantiate” a poet? What does this imply about the nature of poetry and poetic truth? Or about the power of poetic beauty?

Session 6: Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

It is no exaggeration to say that in the early 20th century, no one did more to transform the nature of the genre of the novel in English than James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Woolf lived from 1882-1941, years that saw the completion of World War I and the commencement of World War II. Woolf thought that the events of the first World War in particular changed utterly the way that Europe thought about beauty, truth, politics, and gender relations. She explored this transformation through such important novels as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928) and her volume of creative non-fiction, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Not only did Woolf change the novel with her formal innovations, but she also proved incredibly influential as a publisher. Together with her husband Leonard Woolf she founded the Hogarth Press in 1917 which became a major platform for modernist intellectual discourse, publishing works by E.M. Forster, T.S. Eliot, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Sigmund Freud, among many others. Throughout her life, Woolf was seen as a great champion of women's rights, taking part in the English suffrage movement and arguing passionately for the importance of the history of women's writing in English. For more on Woolf and her place in literary history, see https://www.bl.uk/people/virginia-woolf.

My dear alumnae/i, To the Lighthouse *is not an easy book.* Nevertheless, it is well within the abilities of graduates of this distinguished college. I therefore call you to interpretive greatness! If you stick with this novel, it will pay you back richly. In order to make sense of it, it is helpful to know a couple of things. First, the book is written in a stream of consciousness narration, but of a very particular sort. The consciousness that unfolds is that of an implied narrator. The narrative is written in what is called "free indirect discourse," in which a narrator begins to take on the characteristics of the characters within the story as that narrator engages with them. Woolf's narrator takes on the voices of her major characters, sometimes without even signaling that she is doing so. Sometimes she can shift voices from one sentence to the next. This gives the reader some frustration, but it also gives the reader the sense of life and consciousness unfolding like a flowing river or the undulations of the ocean. Indeed, the ocean, both dangerous and gorgeous, is the ghostly presence lurking behind this entire book.

The book is in three sections. The first section centers around the charismatic, powerful Mrs. Ramsay, who rules over her family's vacation household on the coast of Scotland. Surrounding her are her children (of special importance are James, Pru, and Cam); her tyrannical philosopher husband Mr. Ramsay; their artist friend, Lily Briscoe; poet Augustus Carmichael; their botanist friend Mr. Bankes; and Mr. Ramsay's student Charles Tansley. The culmination of this first part of the book is a dinner prepared by Mrs. Ramsay for all of the other characters. The middle section of the book reflects obliquely on the events of World War I. The final section narrates a trip to the lighthouse taken by Mr. Ramsay and his children, James and Cam, and culminates with Lily Briscoe attaining the artistic vision for which she has struggled throughout the book.

Do not expect that you will understand everything in this book. No one does. Let the prose wash over you, and while it does, look for patterns that emerge. Woolf is one of the most

poetic writers, so reading this text with an eye towards imagery, metaphor, rhythm, and syntax will be helpful. Above all, try to place yourself amid the relationships between the characters. They are beautifully written. The following questions are meant to give you some orientation to this ocean of a novel.

Questions:

* Look at the opening of the novel. How does the narrator describe the relationship between James and Mr. Ramsay? What upsets James about his father, and how does he view his mother?

* What is it that makes Mrs. Ramsay's presence so powerful in the first part of the book? She arguably holds this community together. How does she do so? Is her power always wielded benevolently?

* How does Mr. Ramsay think about philosophy, and about his profession? How does this understanding impact his character and his relationships with the other characters?

* How would you characterize the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay? Do they love one another? What makes their relationship stable? How does Mrs. Ramsay understand marriage, and how does that influence her relationship with Minta, Paul Rayley, and Lily Briscoe? How do Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe differ on the question of gender roles?

* Consider the character of Lily Briscoe early in the novel. How does she consider her art? What does it mean for her to be an artist? What does she admire about Mrs. Ramsay? How would you characterize their relationship?

* At the beginning of section XI, Mrs. Ramsay has a mystical moment while she stares attentively at the lighthouse. How does the narrator describe this moment? What is it that is so affirming in this moment? What role does detachment and observation play? Why does Mrs. Ramsay berate herself for thinking of this experience in traditional religious language?

* What significance does the dining room scene play, both for Mrs. Ramsay and for the reader? What does Mrs. Ramsay accomplish in this scene? Anything? What does she ultimately find so affirming from this scene?

* What happens in the middle "Time Passes" section? What is the impact on the reader to learn of the deaths of major characters in the way that we do? This section has some stunningly poetic descriptions of the natural world. How does the narrator describe nature, and why? What does the war do to the sense of our relation to the natural world?

* What is the significance of the lighthouse to the characters who travel there later in the book: Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James? How might these characters change through their journey to it? How might the memory of Mrs. Ramsay impact the events of this final journey? You could also

think about the range of references that the lighthouse takes on over the course of the book. It gives rise not only to a single metaphorical referent, but to a whole series of significations.

* How ultimately would you describe Lily Briscoe's vision? What, if anything, does it have to do with Mrs. Ramsay? Why does she need to incorporate Mr. Ramsay into it? What is it that Lily Briscoe finds beautiful about this family and its relationships? What was "artistic" about the way that Mrs. Ramsay brought her community together?