

Lighthouse Imagery in the Lens of Gender Relations: The Great Gatsby and To the Lighthouse as Examples

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Abstract

The 1920s marked a transition from World War I to the Great Depression, with subtle changes in how the relations of men and women were perceived in society. A significant aspect of literature from this era was the innovative portrayal of gender issues and expectations, exemplified in works such as *To the Lighthouse* and *The Great Gatsby*, which are deeply rooted in the cultural ethos of the time. These novels intricately examined the interplay between feminine and masculine traits, but they differ in their portrayal of the outcomes. While *The Great Gatsby* depicts gender interactions as competitive, *To the Lighthouse* suggests a cooperative future.

Keywords

Lighthouse, Gender Relations, The Great Gatsby, To the Lighthouse.

1. Introduction

The 1920s marked a distinctive era positioned between the aftermath of the First World War and the onset of the Great Depression. The subtle shifts in the social division of labor between males and females following the war, coupled with the fervent rise of the feminist movement, gradually brought women's roles in society to the forefront and with it a subtle shift in gender relations. A noteworthy aspect of literary works from this period was the novel's innovative portrayal of gender issues and expectations. *To the Lighthouse* and *The Great Gatsby* are deeply entrenched in the cultural ethos of the 1920s. These novels intricately weave the depiction of gender relations, characterized by the interplay between soft, nurturing femininity and straight, resolute masculinity. However, the outcomes of this interplay in the two novels diverge significantly. In *The Great Gatsby*, the interaction between the sexes appears as a zero-sum game, whereas the gender dynamics in *To the Lighthouse* portray a promising future where both men and women can work together to foster growth. Some critics regard this harmonious gender relationship as androgyny.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the lighthouse serves as a pivotal imagery, while in *The Great Gatsby*, the lighthouse is transformed into a "green light", a symbol with profound significance. Both the lighthouse and the green light serve as guiding beacons, illuminating the examination of gender relations for the readers.

2. Green Light and Gender Relations in The Great Gatsby

In the novel, the lighthouse, or more accurately, the green light, appears a total of five times. Although it doesn't appear frequently, it threads through the entire novel, becoming not only Gatsby's spiritual pillar but also a crucial symbol in the story. The green light and Gatsby appear simultaneously in the readers' sight, highlighting the profound significance of the green light for both Gatsby and the entire novel.

2.1. Green Light as a Sign of Discordant Gender Relations

As described in the novel, "he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way...I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward---and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock" [1]. Gatsby's first appearance leaves readers a lonely and mysterious impression, embracing the distant green light in the dark night. As Dyson comments that "[h]e is content to 'be alone': and isolation is an essential part of his make-up, a necessary part of his god-like self-sufficiency. He is next heard of as a mystery: the man whom nobody knows, but whose hospitality everybody accepts"[2]. Gatsby's solitary appearance echoes his lonely death. This beginning and ending also suggests that what Gatsby seeks is intrinsically wrong. For Gatsby, the green light symbolizes hope or dream. As the novel unfolds latter, readers get to know that the "green light" is the light emitted by Daisy's dock lighthouse. However, with Daisy's arrival, Gatsby's once revered "green light" as a symbol of life belief ultimately transforms into the "green light" of the material world, for "[n]ow it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one"[3]. At this point, the green light becomes a symbol of Gatsby's dreams of love and wealth. The significance of this green light dissipates when Gatsby can finally touch Daisy. One of the most intriguing descriptions of the green light is as follows:

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter---to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther ... And one fine morning---

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. [4]

The preceding passage consistently conveys the fact that Gatsby's revered "green light" is, in reality, elusive and unattainable. The narrative highlights Gatsby's dream as a close yet illusory fantasy, serving as a critique of societal realities. Fitzgerald strategically places a green symbol between East and West Egg to depict socioeconomic disparities. The separation is not just geographical but psychological, representing the contrast between hereditary aristocrats in East Egg and newly affluent residents like Gatsby in West Egg. The impoverished "Valley of Ashes" further emphasizes the stark contrast. The green light becomes a landmark indicating Gatsby's physical distance from Daisy. Therefore, although the "green light" is visible to Gatsby, it remains forever out of reach, much like his status as a bootlegger, which, despite his wealth, prevents him from truly joining upper-class society.

If we interpret the "green light" and Daisy from this perspective, we understand that Gatsby's ideals lack practicality. Therefore, "he could hardly fail to grasp it" is only ironic and wishful thinking on Gatsby's personal part. The rivalry between Gatsby and Tom for Daisy, on the surface, appears as two men vying for the same woman, but in reality, it is a confrontation between two different strata of the upper class. Daisy's alliance with Tom signifies the union of the "upper class", aiming to consolidate their unassailable status and resist the entry of the nouveau riche. Daisy's withdrawal upon learning of Gatsby's bootlegging identity also indicates that the "green light" is unattainable. The "green light" rejects everything not belonging to the old-money class, and Daisy and Gatsby cannot truly come together, foreshadowing that the male-female relationship guided by the "green light" cannot achieve harmonious coexistence.

Roger aptly observes, "Gatsby's gospel of hedonism is reflected in his house...Daisy, a rather soiled and cheapened figure, is Gatsby's ultimate goal in his concept of the American dream. However, he falls victim to his own preachings" [5]. The pursuit of the green light marks Gatsby's evolution from the idealistic James Gatz to the rootless Jay Gatsby. His tragedy lies in dedicating everything to the meticulously woven fabric of his dreams. Gatsby's demise mirrors the collapse of the American Dream, as the green light transforms from a beacon of hope and wealth to a symbol of the West's rejection of the East and the stark divisions between the nouveau riche and the old money.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the green light serves as an illusory life guide, evoking desires but incapable of shaping character and finally leads to a spiritual wasteland. It not only signifies the socio-economic divide but also accentuates the inherent estrangement in relationships, both between classes and genders.

2.2. The Zero-sum Game of Gender Interaction in *The Great Gatsby*

In his paper, Frances Kerr emphasizes that interpreting Fitzgerald's novel within the context of a modernist dialogue about the role of gender in emotional expression in art not only contextualizes its historical gender and sexuality themes but also deepens our understanding of Fitzgerald's psychological perspectives. Simultaneously, it offers a fresh interpretation of the novel.

While *The Great Gatsby* portrays antagonism and division between the male and female protagonists, some characters in the novel still embody both masculine and feminine qualities. Frances Kerr highlights two male characters exemplifying distinct feminine traits, like Nick Carraway, as he comments "Nick acts like a man, but-sometimes-feels like a woman"[6]. Another male character, the photographer Mr. McKee, similarly exhibits feminine qualities. At the beginning of his paper, Frances references H. L. Mencken's description of Gatsby as a "clown" with "the simple sentimentality of a somewhat sclerotic fat women" [7]. Acknowledging Fitzgerald's admission that he writes with a partially feminine perspective, stating, "I don't know what it is in me or that comes to me when I start to write. I am half feminine—at least my mind is"[8]. This paper argues that the nuanced portrayal renders Gatsby a multifaceted character, demonstrating both masculinity and tenderness. Consequently, contrary to H. L. Mencken's feminine portrayal, Gatsby emerges as a complex individual.

Gatsby embodies unmistakable self-made masculinity, highlighted by his war experiences and enigmatic past. Party-goers' rumors of wartime espionage, heroism, smuggling, and murder enhance his masculine appeal. In the closing chapter, Gatsby's disciplined and industrious male persona is revealed, showcasing his meticulous self-improvement plan outlined in a cherished novel, involving abstinence from tobacco, daily showers, and weekly reading.

People who have interacted with Gatsby tend to offer positive assessments of him. Mr. Wolfshiem labels him as "[h]andsome to look at and a perfect gentleman"[9], and "[t]here's the kind of man you'd like to take home and introduce to your mother and sister"[10]. For Nick, Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together"[11]. How can someone with strong male charisma also embody feminine qualities? The key lies in his emotionally expressive and excessive responses. Gatsby's sentimentality and love for Daisy become his Achilles' heel, adding depth to his character without reducing him to a one-dimensional male figure.

Gatsby has an enduring desire to relive the past, despite constant reminders from those around him that the past is irrevocable. His nostalgic and poignant retracing of the places where "their footsteps had clicked together"[12] stands in stark contrast to Daisy's current vibrant and carefree life. Describing Gatsby at this moment, the novel states, "... even though she was absent, the surroundings were permeated with a melancholic beauty"[13]. At this juncture, Gatsby, far from the robust and decorated military figure he might have been on the battlefield, appears

more forlorn and disheartened than a lovelorn young girl. He clings desperately to the fading dream, perceiving it with a feminine sense of melancholic “beauty”.

Moreover, Gatsby surprising readers by deeply loving Daisy adds complexity to his character. Initially a casual pursuit, Gatsby finally becomes prey to love, expressing “I can't describe to you how surprised I was to find out I loved her, old sport. I even hoped for a while that she'd throw me over, but she didn't, because she was in love with me too” [14]. Daisy, however, never confirms her ardent love for Gatsby. Daisy's vague acknowledgment of having loved Gatsby leaves uncertainty about her true feelings. For Daisy, love might not hold the same precious and sacred connotations as it does for Gatsby. Their differing definitions of love, influenced by Daisy's world of wealth and carelessness, contribute to the tragedy. Gatsby's tenderness and concern for Daisy, even after she accidentally kills Myrtle, give him a somewhat womanly and hesitant demeanor. This contrasts with the decisive and ruthless image one might expect from a smuggler, highlighting Gatsby's possession of feminine qualities.

In Kerr's paper, it is mentioned that critics praised the “no important woman character” [15] in *The Great Gatsby*. However, in the exploration of gender relations, the presence of Daisy is crucial. Introduced as the female protagonist, Daisy initially presents a charming image reminiscent of a mythical fairy. However, beneath the surface, she possesses masculine qualities, including negative traits such as selfishness, a focus on money and pleasure, and indifference towards people or events. While these traits may reflect common vices of the upper class during the time, when contrasted with Gatsby's idealism and pursuit of love, Daisy's rationality and materialistic pursuits seem notably masculine.

Daisy's rationality is first manifested in her choice of marriage. “For Daisy was young and her artificial world was redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes” [16]. In the kaleidoscopic whirl of life, Daisy encountered Tom Buchanan, and driven by a desire for tangible assets, she contemplated marriage. Viewing Tom as a suitable partner who satisfies her vanity, the novel notes, “[t]here was a wholesome bulkiness about his person and his position, and Daisy was flattered” [17]. This underscores her pragmatism and rationality. Unlike Gatsby, she recognizes that love and marriage are not synonymous. Ultimately, she chooses wealth and social standing, deciding to align herself with money and forget Gatsby. When Gatsby finally meets Daisy again, she remains her primitive and money-worship nature, “[h]er voice is full of money” and “[h]igh in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl” [18]. In matters of romantic relationship, Daisy emerges more as a hunter, while Gatsby assumes the role of the hunted. Daisy's cruelty becomes all the more pronounced in contrast to Gatsby's tenderness, and even if Gatsby's emotions tilt towards the feminine, Daisy unmistakably exhibits masculine traits.

In contrast to *To the Lighthouse*, where the masculine and feminine qualities of the main characters eventually blend harmoniously, as will be analyzed in the following section, *The Great Gatsby* depicts opposite-sex characters failing to achieve integration and balance. Despite embodying traits typically associated with the opposite gender, the male and female protagonists' characteristics in *The Great Gatsby* remain compartmentalized, hindering the development of a harmonious relationship between the two genders.

3. Lighthouse and Gender Relations in *To the Lighthouse*

In contrast to the illusory green light in *The Great Gatsby*, the lighthouse in *To the Lighthouse* serves as a tangible spiritual beacon for the characters in the novel. The lighthouse imagery is a recurring motif throughout the novel, with each character having an inner lighthouse guiding their forward journey. Within this intricate imagery of lighthouses, there are both physical

lighthouses in the real world and spiritual lighthouses in the ideal world. Therefore, the lighthouse is a complex symbol with layered meanings.

3.1. Lighthouse as a Mutually Spiritual Pursuit

On the surface, the lighthouse appears to be the destination for the characters' travel over the course of ten years in the novel. However, from the moment Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay disagree about the possibility of going to the lighthouse, the lighthouse is endowed with symbolic significance. While critics generally considered the lighthouse a symbol of Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual enlightenment, representing the triumph of her life principles, Mr. Ramsay also plays a significant role in facilitating the successful realization of the trip to the lighthouse. Woolf once wrote in her diary, "I'm now all on the strain with desire to stop journalism & get on to To the Lighthouse. This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in---life, death &c. But the centre is father's character." [19].

In reading *To the Lighthouse*, it's crucial to recognize Mr. Ramsay's symbolic role related to the lighthouse and the significant connection between him and Mrs. Ramsay. Their characters go beyond contrast; they mutually influence each other. In "The Window", Mr. Ramsay embodies rationality and commitment, lacking empathy, while Mrs. Ramsay is emotionally rich but her actions are ineffective. The unity of these characters signifies the convergence of reason and emotion, reality and ideals, symbolized by the lighthouse as a harmonious representation of gender relations.

Mrs. Ramsay is likened to the shining beacon of a lighthouse not only because she possesses a radiant and torch-like beauty but also because of her philanthropy. As McIntire wrote, "Mrs. Ramsay was both a 'figure'--- a matriarch, a Madonna--- and a martyr, and, like Woolf, she seems to take a 'queer disreputable pleasure in being abused'" [20]. She consistently approaches those around her with a caring heart, much like a light that transforms "all the poverty, all the suffering had turned to" [21] the light dropping in the wind, providing hope. Ten years later on the trip to the lighthouse, the readers finally approach the real lighthouse through James' eyes:

...The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now ---

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too. It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. In the evening one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat. [22]

In James's childhood consciousness, the lighthouse takes shape as "a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye", and this yellow eye is characterized as soft. The reason behind this imagery lies in James projecting Mrs. Ramsay's tender love onto his imaginative conception of the lighthouse. Amidst a scenario where male characters such as Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley assert the impossibility of the journey to the lighthouse based on practical considerations, it is only Mrs. Ramsay who approaches the shattering of ideals with maternal tenderness and acknowledges its profound impact on a child.

As James matures and witnesses the lighthouse in person, he comes to the realization that there are two lighthouses. The tangible lighthouse, stripped of the soft and gentle qualities associated with femininity, is described as featuring "white-washed rocks" with windows and even

laundry spread on the rocks to dry. Sensually, it appears “stark and straight”. At this juncture, the lighthouse adopts the characteristics reflective of James’s perceptions and images of his father. The juxtaposition of the two lighthouses underscores the simultaneous existence of reality, enabling readers to grasp another symbolic layer of the lighthouse: the harmonious unity of gender relationships or androgynous gender expression. This theme emerges as a significant element in *To the Lighthouse* and intricately intertwines with the exploration of gender dynamics.

3.2. The Mutual Development of Gender Relations in *To the Lighthouse*

In *To the Lighthouse*, gender relationships symbolically evolve harmoniously, highlighted by the arrival of Mr. Ramsay, James, and Cam at the lighthouse. The novel doesn’t emphasize gender differences but views the lighthouse as a symbol of harmonious development. Mrs. Ramsay, a kind and tolerant guardian, plays a pivotal role in maintaining gender relations, as observed by Lily Briscoe in the final section.

While Mrs. Ramsay embodies the typical Victorian “Angle in the House”, her stance in the novel goes beyond that of a submissive woman who simply caters to her husband and family. She takes on the responsibilities that be expected of the mistress of the house, such as taking charge of household responsibilities, caring for guests, and managing expenses. And the central climax of the novel is Mrs. Ramsay’s presiding over her Last Supper. But readers would be wrong if they think Mrs Ramsey is just a simple housewife. Mrs Ramsey exhibits a strong sense of social responsibility, engaging in profound reflections on issues like wealth disparity and actively participating in charitable causes mentioned in the novel:

“[B]ut more profoundly, she ruminated the other problem, of rich and poor, and the things she saw with her own eyes, weekly, daily, here or in London, when she visited this widow... in the hope that thus she would cease to be a private woman whose charity was half a sop to her own indignation, half a relief to her own curiosity, and become what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator, elucidating the social problem”. [23]

This passage showcases Mrs. Ramsay as a complex character with a keen awareness of both gender and social issues. Her aspirations to be an investigator demonstrate a desire for active engagement and a deeper understanding of the world around her, transcending the limitations often imposed on women in her societal context. This commitment elevates her nature beyond typical feminine traits. Through the character of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf explores a complex and multifaceted representation of femininity, challenging conventional expectations and revealing a woman who transcends traditional roles, embodying strength, responsibility, and social awareness.

In many aspects, Mr. Ramsay stands in stark contrast to Mrs. Ramsay. While Mrs. Ramsay exhibits patience, kindness, and a diplomatically considerate demeanor towards others, Mr. Ramsay often appears irritable, selfish, and blunt. Woolf fittingly describes him as “lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one”[24], echoing not only his general disposition but also implying the sharpness of his character. As a scholar well-versed in philosophy, Mr. Ramsay made valuable contributions to the field in his youth, but his mental preoccupation with achieving the elusive “R” leaves him less devoted to his family and children compared to Mrs. Ramsay. The core of Mr. Ramsay’s spirit is not as robust as that of Mrs. Ramsay; he is “emotionally needy, immature, and underdeveloped”[25].

Mr. Ramsay possesses the flaws and weaknesses stereotypically associated with masculinity; he is selfish and self-centered, always steering conversations toward himself and his works. As James would express it, “He is a sarcastic brute. He brings the talk round to himself and his books. He is intolerably egotistical. Worst of all, he is a tyrant” [26]. This demeanor leads his

children, especially James and Cam, to harbor resentment towards him, viewing him as a despot. In his childhood, James harbored a symbolic representation of hatred, keeping an old symbol of taking a knife and striking his father to the heart. "But his son hated him. He hated him for coming up to them, for stopping and looking down on them; he hated him for interrupting them; he hated him for the exaltation and sublimity of his gestures; for." [27]. The passage marked by a deep-seated hatred on the part of the son. The reasons for this hatred are multi-faceted, involving his father's physical intrusion, interruption of a moment, perceived pretentiousness in gestures, egotism, and a commanding presence. It hints at a strained relationship between Mr. Ramsay and James. And McIntire claimed that there exist Oedipal tensions between James and his father. [28]

As the novel's third part, "The Lighthouse", gradually unfolds before the readers, the children's attitudes towards Mr. Ramsay continue to undergo a subtle change. Simultaneously, Mr. Ramsay undergoes new reflections on his own life. His introspection leads to the forgiveness of his younger son, and the two finally reconcile. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, perpetually guards him like a lighthouse, and the qualities that are unique to parents are reflected in the youngest son, James. This is mainly shown in James action that he "began to talk to himself half aloud, exactly as his father had said" [29]. As for his younger sister, Cam, sees benevolence and kindness in her father's way of reading, by meditating that "he was not vain, nor a tyrant, and did not wish to make you pity him. Indeed, if he saw she was there, reading a book, he would ask her, as gently as anyone could, 'Was there nothing he could give her?'" [30]. In this specific moment, Cam perceives her father in a more positive light, seeing him as neither vain nor a tyrant, but rather someone who genuinely cares for her well-being. The familial complexities and transformations underscore the nuanced exploration of relationships and character development in the novel. The forgiveness of the tyrannical father by his children signals the resolution of the opposing conflict and represents the complete elimination of the binary opposition between male and female.

The harmony in gender relationships portrayed in the novel is ultimately achieved through Mr. Ramsay's overcoming of one-sided masculine qualities and the incorporation of Mrs. Ramsay's feminine qualities, including her soul, emotions, instincts, and intuition. Woolf pushes Mrs. Ramsay to the end of her death, which makes the action of getting to the lighthouse the initiative of a living person.

Additionally, the novel's portrayal of gender relationships extends beyond the Ramsays to include a transcendent female character---Lily Briscoe. Lily, a dedicated artist, shares Mr. Ramsay's concern about the destiny of her artwork, fearing it may be neglected. She rejects traditional femininity embodied by Mrs. Ramsay, who represents conventional roles like marriage and family. The memory of Charles Tansley's belief that women can't excel in painting or writing intensifies Lily's self-doubts. The novel begins with Lily struggling with a problematic portrait of Mrs. Ramsay, reflecting her artistic insecurities. However, as the story unfolds, Lily transforms into a capable artist, overcoming her anxieties. In the end, she applies the lessons learned from Mrs. Ramsay, creating something beautiful from transient elements like changing light and the bay view. Lily's artistic success symbolizes a sense of fulfillment, as she finally feels connected to Mr. Ramsay and his rational, intellectual world.

4. Conclusion

In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf shows us that, despite the distinct traits between men and women, they ultimately come together to achieve a balance of strength. The perfect embodiment of art is a reflection of the perfect integration of the sexes. Just like the lighthouse in the novel, the family finally reaches the lighthouse, and Lily ultimately completes her artwork.

The reasons why Gatsby's story not only marks a socio-economic divide, but also highlights the disconnect inherent in the gender relationship are as follows:

On the one hand, in *To the Lighthouse*, both male and female characters have a clear spiritual guide, a unifying principle that is notably absent in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby considers the green light at the end of Daisy's dock as his spiritual guide, encompassing two crucial elements: wealth and love. Gatsby aspires to revive past dreams through sufficient wealth and the rekindling of his old affection for Daisy. However, his spiritual guide is inherently flawed from the start because this principle is effective only for Gatsby; it holds no sway over Daisy. She does not cherish Gatsby's love, and their brief interaction may well be a retaliation against Tom. When Gatsby's true identity is revealed, Daisy's reaction confirms this: she does not love Gatsby, and she is unimpressed by Gatsby's wealth and his status as a self-made man. Consequently, even though the main characters exhibit traits of the opposite sex, the absence of a shared goal and direction makes it challenging for them to come together.

On the other hand, in *To the Lighthouse*, both male and female characters undergo growth under specific spiritual guidance. In contrast, the crucial protagonists in *The Great Gatsby* show no sign of progress. Gatsby achieves financial success, hosting opulent parties. The speed of waste production and the quantity of juice extracted give a glimpse of his economic prowess and the liveliness of his parties, beyond the means of an average person. However, compared to his financial success, Gatsby remains a "child" emotionally. He fails to grasp reality, unable to comprehend that Daisy is not the embodiment of the "love" he pursues. Even considering Daisy's status as Tom's wife, indicating the impermanence of an extramarital affair, Gatsby continues to immerse himself in his romantic fantasies, completely ignoring reality. Gatsby shows minimal growth in understanding people's natures; he misjudges Daisy's feelings towards him, resulting in a passive situation. Overall, while achieving significant progress economically, Gatsby remains inferior and vulnerable mentally. As for Daisy, her focus on wealth and social status remains constant, neglecting spiritual development and personal growth. Therefore, their gender dynamics in the relationship reflect mutual alienation rather than the harmony depicted in *To the Lighthouse*.

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