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Virginia Woolf

Dr. Haffey

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What We Talk About When We Talk About the Ramsays: Gender Politics in *To the Lighthouse*

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes that, "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (Room 35). This sentiment, which suggests that women are supposed to uphold the fragile masculine ego, is an accurate reflection of the surface relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and is a good starting point for discussing gender politics in her earlier novel, *To the Lighthouse*. Yet, it is clear, through a close reading of the text and the criticism surrounding it, that Woolf provides a varied and multifaceted portrait of gender relations, and this essay will work present that picture in all its complexity. To do this, this essay will look specifically at Woolf's representations of naturalized binaries surrounding gender in the text. Theoretically speaking, gender binaries are constructed in such a way that men are typically seen as physically strong, unemotional, external or public, and rational. The so-called "fairer sex," is, conversely, physically weak, emotional, domestic, and lacking the ability to reason. Woolf, in writing *To the Lighthouse*, consistently works to problematize these binaries. Rather than presenting readers with characters who consistently follow these socially constructed norms, the Ramsays instead consistently flout convention. As such, this essay will first consider the portrayals of Mr. Ramsay and his son James. Mr. Ramsay is, as "a paragon of logic and facts," connected to an ideal of Victorian masculinity, a cultural construction that Woolf critiques in her novel (Crater 125). Although Mr. Ramsay is representative of Victorian masculinity in the text, it

is my contention that he fails to fully perform this role, despite the fact that this performance is precisely his goal in the narrative. Instead, Woolf portrays Mr. Ramsay as a character in constant need of validation. This depiction of Mr. Ramsay is quite striking when it is compared to that of his son, James, a figure who has largely been ignored in criticism. While Jane Goldman dismisses James as being “already inducted into [the] masculine realm,” I would argue that in analyzing his interactions with Mr. Ramsay, a truer portrait that considers both his feminine and masculine attributes emerges. I will then move, from discussing James’ position, as aligned with feminine characters and Mrs. Ramsay in particular, to discussing two of the female characters in the text, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. While most critics discuss these characters in terms of how they differ (positioning Mrs. Ramsay as an “Angel of the House” and Lily Briscoe as a “Modern Woman”), I will work to problematize that binary and suggest that *To the Lighthouse* is work that captures a culture in shift (Crater 125). Woolf’s novel, rather than maintaining the status quo, then, focuses on the shift between the Victorian ideal and the emergence of the Modern Man and Woman.

In the opening pages of *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay discuss the possibility of a journey to the lighthouse in a day’s time. While this topic for conversation seems innocuous, gender relations between husband and wife are immediately established. Mr. Ramsay’s declaration that “[the weather] won’t be fine [enough to make the journey]” is of particular importance (Lighthouse 4). Although Mr. Ramsay is clearly aware of his son’s desire to visit the lighthouse keeper and his child, this exchange hints at the fact that Mr. Ramsay is ruthlessly rational. While Mrs. Ramsay does not openly critique her husband for his lack of empathy, she does ridicule Charles Tansley, her husband’s disciple, who sides with Mr. Ramsay in the conversation. ““Yes, he did say disagreeable things, Mrs. Ramsay admitted; it was odious of him

to rub this in and make James still more disappointed” (Lighthouse 5). Although these opening remarks seem to be of little importance, the fact that Woolf includes this domestic dialog is of particular importance, especially given James’ violent reaction to Mr. Ramsay’s words and the title of the novel (Lighthouse 4). Here, Woolf sets up an equation between rationality and masculinity and emotionalism (or the lack of rationality) with femininity. As the novel progresses, though, this equation becomes increasingly problematic.

Later in the novel, for instance, when Woolf gives reader’s access to Mr. Ramsay’s thoughts, it becomes possible to more fully construct his character, and his true struggle to maintain his masculine performance becomes apparent. At this point Mr. Ramsay famously equates his mind to “the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order” (Lighthouse 33). This particular arrangement of his mind has lead many critics to point out that Woolf, in constructing Mr. Ramsay as “a paragon of facts” who is “linearly progressing through the alphabet of knowledge, respected (to a point) by other men, resented by his children and dependent on his wife for nurturing and a sense of meaning in life,” presents “an accurate psychological picture of the late Victorian patriarchal family” (Crater 125). These points give credence to the idea that Mr. Ramsay attempts to perform a sort of masculine ideal, and most critics are content to simply present Mr. Ramsay in this way. Despite Mr. Ramsay’s obsession with rationality, though, it is clear that he fails to fully conform to the ideal of rational manhood to which he aspires. Instead, the end of *To the Lighthouse* presents readers with a character in constant need of validation. Near the end of the novel, for instance, Mr. Ramsay asks himself “why [Lily] should look at the sea when [he] is here,” and Lily shies away from lending the sympathetic ear he expects (Lighthouse 151). Scenes like these demonstrate that despite Mr. Ramsay’s attempt at complete Victorian Masculinity,

Woolf offers instead the beginning of a picture of a culture in shift. It is clear that Mr. Ramsay is both a rational man and an emotional one, and she begins to problematize the binary between rational/emotional and man/woman.

Woolf continues this trend in her depictions of James Ramsay, a character who seems entirely out of touch with standards of antebellum masculinity. Although Goldman suggests James is “already inducted into [the] masculine realm,” it is also helpful to consider James in terms of Gary Spear’s discussion of the definition of effeminacy (Goldman 171). In his essay, Spear points out that, “As the *OED* amply demonstrates, “effeminate” could be either an adjective or a noun. As an adjective it designates a man who is “womanish, unmanly, enervated or feeble.” (1a.); “delicate” (1.b); “gentle, tender compassionate...without implying reproach” (1c.); or through a pseudo-etymology self indulgent or voluptuous or “devoted to women.” (3). As a noun, it designates a man who is possessed of any or all of the above qualities” (Spear 410-411). Spear’s definition of effeminacy is incredibly important to discussing James’ character in *To the Lighthouse*. While Woolf does not devote a lot of space to James’ thoughts in the text, his thoughts surrounding Mr. Ramsay, in particular, shed some light onto how he is gendered. Thus, when James begins to realize that Mr. Ramsay has denied him a journey to the lighthouse, Woolf writes, “Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father’s breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr. Ramsay excited in his children’s breasts just by his mere presence” (Lighthouse 4). Clearly, these thoughts constitute a flight from rational thought, and Woolf herself points out James’ “extremes of emotion” (Lighthouse 4). This scene can also be described as incredibly “self-indulgent, a quality Spear aligns with effeminacy (Spear 411). This example is interesting though, because, despite the effeminate quality of James’ irrationality, the

emotions that manifest remain extremely violent in nature. This tendency establishes James as a character with both “typically feminine” and “typically masculine” traits.” Additionally, Jane Goldman points out that readers should note “the opening description of a mother and son; a vignette of family values implicitly connected (in the image of the Army and Navy catalog and in Mrs. Ramsay’s ambitions for her son) with imperialism and colonialism.” James, she argues, “seems already inducted into this masculine realm, which separates him from his mother by a ‘private code’” (Goldman 179). Although Goldman is right to point out the colonial undertones here, it is also interesting to note that Woolf captures James in the act of cutting a refrigerator out of the catalog (Lighthouse 4). This image hints at something less masculine and more domestic. For this reason, it is clear that James’ actions are aligned with his thoughts, and Woolf continues to blur the problematic line between masculine and feminine in his character. Moreover, although Goldman argues that James and his mother are not aligned, this scene is obviously Oedipal. While it is debatable how well Mr. Ramsay conforms to “typical masculinity” as defined by the text, he remains the most “typically masculine” character of the novel. This scene can, thus, be used as evidence that James is clearly aligned against Mr. Ramsay and Victorian Masculinity more generally. (Goldman 179; Lighthouse 4)

Woolf’s novel also indicates that James’ loyalties are not simply the product of childhood, and James’ dislike of Mr. Ramsay continues into his adolescence. Thus, following the “Time Passes” section of the novel, after which the proverbial “trip to the lighthouse” is actually realized, Cam observes that James continues to say, “Resist [Mr. Ramsay]. Fight him” (Lighthouse 168). Yet, this quote is also interesting in terms of the power relations between James and Cam. James, (here described as the “lawgiver, with tablets open upon his knee”) seems to have taken on the role of masculine power (Lighthouse 168). Clearly James continues

to be aligned against Mr. Ramsay (and by extension Victorian masculinity itself), but his persistent dislike of his father is something *To the Lighthouse* also continues to cast as both irrational and “self-indulgent” since Woolf, here, importantly establishes James’ anger towards Mr. Ramsay but gives little information in terms of the reasons behind James’ ire (Spear 411). This stylistic choice forces readers to consider James’ feelings in terms of their sheer emotionalism as opposed to any rational base they might have. Despite the fact that James’ actions can be read in terms of the way they reflect James’ femininity, though, he also clearly takes a position of power. For these reasons, it seems clear that Woolf, in writing James’ character, is, in fact documenting the emergence of a different sort of man. While Mr. Ramsay’s character needs to be deconstructed in order to see the ways in which he fails to meet the established standard of Victorian Masculinity, James clearly embraces an entirely different form of manhood—one in which effeminacy and masculine power exist at the same time. Since James stands for the next generation, Woolf clearly uses his character to problematize gender binaries in her depiction of the Modern man.

Woolf continues to complicate gender binaries in her depictions of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Literature until the Modernist era, of which Woolf is part, generally presents gender relations as clear and indisputable. In these texts, women are almost always subservient to men. As she did with masculinity, Woolf’s novel clearly complicates this paradigm. Rather than simply critiquing patriarchal norms, as Woolf does in Lily Briscoe’s character, Woolf also presents readers with Mrs. Ramsay, a character who seems to follow the rules and uphold patriarchal authority. This role is particularly present in her interactions with Mr. Ramsay. Thus, as Theresa Crater points out “Mrs. Ramsay serves her husband [by] constantly reassuring him that he is admirable, by giving him sympathy” (Crater 126). The last lines of “The Window” are

also particularly telling in this regard as they detail Mrs. Ramsay's capitulation to Mr. Ramsay's authority. "'Yes you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go [to the lighthouse],' [thought Mrs. Ramsay]. And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it; yet he knew" (Lighthouse 124). Scenes like this make it easy to reduce Mrs. Ramsay to the typical, "Angel of the House, the fertile all-providing earth mother to her children and husband, the creator of social comfort to her guests, the comforter of the sick and the poor, [and] an advisor on life's problems to those closest to her (Crater 125). Indeed, it is this behavior, in particular, that Woolf seems to be critiquing in her constructions of Mrs. Ramsay's character. Yet, it is clear that there is more to Mrs. Ramsay than meets the eye, and although Crater's essay, entitled, "Lily Briscoe's Vision: The Articulation of Silence," encourages readers to see Lily Briscoe as working against a sort of antebellum femininity (which Mrs. Ramsay clearly represents), Crater herself indicates there is some slippage inherent in the binary opposition of Mrs. Ramsay/Lily Briscoe (Crater 122, 127). Instead, Crater suggests that Mrs. Ramsay's role as "the good hostess" is merely a "masquerade" that "sometimes slips into mimicry" (Crater 127). Crater uses the dinner party scene as evidence of this point, and she suggests that Mrs. Ramsay is aware she must fill the role as hostess in order to make the evening progress (Crater 127; Lighthouse 97-11) Yet, the suggestion is that the self Mrs. Ramsay presents here is not genuine (Crater 127). On the contrary, Mrs. Ramsay's actions during the dinner seem performative, and Woolf seems to be highlighting the disparity between Mrs. Ramsay's internal thoughts and her actions at the end of the dinner. Here, Mrs. Ramsay "made herself get up," effectively forcing herself to rejoin society, rather than remaining with her private self (Lighthouse 108). Scenes like this, though few in the novel, show that there is discrepancy between Mrs. Ramsay's actual self and the one she presents to the world. This

inconsistency means that Mrs. Ramsay, rather than conforming wholly to ideals surrounding femininity and womanhood, actually works against them and only performs the role of the traditional femininity. This depiction again complicates typical gender binaries, and Woolf presents readers instead with the portrait of a “typical woman” who fails to fully conform to the role she is meant to fill.

Mrs. Ramsay’s tendency towards internalization and introspection is also of importance here. While a great deal of Mrs. Ramsay’s portions of the narrative are concerned with her role as the “social glue” that holds everyone together, Woolf also includes sections during which Mrs. Ramsay is introspective. In, “The Window,” for instance, there is a memorable passage in which Mrs. Ramsay likens herself to “a wedge of darkness” (Lighthouse 63). Of this darkness, a thing that Woolf leaves intentionally undefined and ambiguous, there are some interesting observations. Mrs. Ramsay reflects, for example, that, “Her horizon seemed to her limitless. There were all the places she had not seen; the Indian plains; she felt herself pushing aside the thick leather curtain of a church in Rome. This core of darkness could go anywhere for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exalting. There was freedom, there was peace” (Lighthouse 62). This quote is interesting in that it depicts Mrs. Ramsay as “[free]” when she is not subject to others’ gazes. (Lighthouse 62) While these lines, thus, serve to underscore the performative aspect of Mrs. Ramsay’s social identity, this passage also blurs the lines between the domestic and public spheres. While Mrs. Ramsay is seen knitting in this passage and would, therefore, seemingly be aligned the domestic and feminine side of things, Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts suggest something more public and external. Within her private realm, Mrs. Ramsay accordingly becomes a character with agency and power. Crater, for her part, unsurprisingly links this passage with the development of a uniquely feminine voice and consciousness, a thing

she connects to the psychoanalytic idea of “[speaking] from elsewhere” (Crater 128, 122). “Elsewhere,” as Crater explains it, is a uniquely feminine state of mind, which “does not follow the Law-of-the-Father” (Crater 122). Rather, it is neither “linear” nor “rational” (Crater 122). Given the way that rationality is associated with masculinity in *To the Lighthouse*, Crater’s description is particularly interesting, and this suggestion allows readers to see agency and power as not being solely masculine traits.

Interestingly, Mrs. Ramsay’s introspective moments also explicitly unite her with the lighthouse. Woolf writes, for instance, that, “she looked out to meet the stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last stroke of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw” (Lighthouse 63). In this moment, Mrs. Ramsay and the Lighthouse are put on equal terms. Since, in terms of the form of the novel, the Lighthouse is, arguably, what unites three otherwise disparate parts of the text and gives the novel its coherence, Woolf seems to be suggesting that Mrs. Ramsay, despite appearances to the contrary, is also in a position of power. For these reasons, it is clear that Mrs. Ramsay’s introspective moments, coupled with Crater’s idea of Mrs. Ramsay’s “mimicry,” lend this character a unique second dimension that contradicts typical depictions of her (Crater 127). For these reasons, rather than relying on typical representations of Mrs. Ramsay’s character, it is more helpful to consider her in terms of the ways she subverts typical femininity. Instead of embracing the “typically feminine” and being subservient in all things, Mrs. Ramsay’s is depicted as essentially powerful, a quality that would usually be reserved for masculine character.

Unlike critical representations of Mrs. Ramsay cited here, there is little ambiguity in scholarship surrounding Lily Briscoe’s character. Rather, Lily is always depicted as the feminist

center of the text, and, indeed, Lily is put in a surprising position of power specifically because she is painting James and Mrs. Ramsay. Accordingly, Lily's "gaze" becomes a central preoccupation for Woolf in the novel, and she writes of Lily observing Mrs. Ramsay that, "One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see her with, [Lily] reflected...One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, and sitting silent in the window alone" (Lighthouse 198). Although this passage seems emphasize Mrs. Ramsay's essential "unknowability" and seems to place Mrs. Ramsay in a position of power since Lily is unable to ever gratify her desire, this passage also emphasizes that Lily is not a passive observer. In her landmark essay about "the gaze," Laura Mulvey suggests that this dynamic is atypical. Rather, "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance," Mulvey argues, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 589). Lily clearly overturns this paradigm, positioning herself as the active observer and Mrs. Ramsay as the passive subject.

Yet, it is clear that Lily also has the power to interpret what she sees, and her painting is evidence of this key point. Goldman, for her part, points out that, rather than depicting Mrs. Ramsay as she actually is, Lily paints her as a "'triangular purple shape'" (Goldman 171). Goldman argues that the colors Lily uses are also of particular importance here and suggests that "[Lily's] struggle for self-expression in male dominated environs coincides with her vision of 'bright violet' and 'staring white. These colors,'" Goldman continues to say in the following sentence, "seem to defy the masculine presences overshadowing her work, and may even offer a glimpse of suffrage colors" (Goldman 172 quoting *To the Lighthouse*). It is clear from this sentiment that feminist consciousness permeates this novel, and Crater hints that Lily Briscoe has the most triumphant end of any character in the novel. Her picture, according to Crater is of "an

alternate reality” in which, presumably a female consciousness does flourish (Crater 134). For these reasons, it is clear that Woolf presents readers with a novel in which gender is not simply a binary in which masculine presences have privilege over their female counterparts. Instead, *To the Lighthouse* is a work in which there is more than one type of masculine, and femininity is a source of power.

For Virginia Woolf, gender politics is a key issue. She devoted a book-length essay to the topic when she wrote *A Room of One's Own*, so it is no surprise that gender relations are a key theme in *To the Lighthouse*. With this in mind, it is easy to reduce Woolf's depiction of gender to the fundamentals and simply say that Woolf presents gender relations as intentionally patriarchal in order to critique a system in which women are undeservedly disenfranchised and lack any power. While this reading has its merits, it fails to describe Woolf's portrait of masculinity in any detail. In some ways, this essay has, thus, worked against that reading and shown that, as opposed to the simplistic reading of masculinity that critics have provided so far, Woolf actually gives a nuanced portrait of this theme (Crater 125; Goldman 171). Thus, *To the Lighthouse* gives voice to two very different types of masculine identity, Mr. Ramsay's "typical masculinity" and that of his son, James, whose gender presentation is more effeminate (Crater 125). Yet, this reading also fails to acknowledge the power that Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe do have in the text. Though it is clear that the power these characters have may not work under the same terms as masculine power, which is undoubtedly the standard here, it is clear that these characters do have a sort of power for which such simplistic readings of the text fail to account. For these reasons, it is clear that, in *To the Lighthouse*, there is no one-dimensional account of what it means to be gendered in the ever-changing world of the novel. What Woolf offers instead is a multifaceted account.

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