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Understanding gender practices and identity in

Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* through the theories of Erving Goffman

Virginia's Woolf 1927 novel, *To The Lighthouse*, explores the nature of gender in the pre and post-World War One era. Through using a chronological narrative, Woolf demonstrates how the representation of gender within the novel shifts to fit the social beliefs and opportunities of different points in history. As the portrayal of masculinity and femininity is brought to the forefront of the novel, the "socialized" (Goffman 35) side of gender becomes apparent as characters participate in their expected gender roles differently based on whether they are in their "front" or "back" region according to sociologist Erving Goffman's theories. This provides a multifaceted narrative on gender that both embraces and challenges traditional Victorian gender norms and dynamics, which is highlighted through Woolf's depiction of the relationships between the Victorian man Mr. Ramsay, the Victorian woman Mrs. Ramsay, and the modern woman Lily Briscoe. Ultimately, the decisions surrounding gendered behaviors that these three individuals make in their regions determine whether they "fit into the understanding and expectations of society" (Goffman 35) or are perceived as social outsiders.

The representation of gender in *To The Lighthouse* is best understood through sociologist Erving Goffman's theories as seen in his 1956 text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. A prominent fact of the theoretical stance that he employs in this book is the use of theatre metaphors to represent how people understand their own identity, how different situations influence one's behavior, and the various factors that impact how individuals appear to others. Just as an actor memorizes lines and strives to be seen a certain way by the audience, Goffman

argues that humans put on “socialized [and] molded” (Goffman 35) performances that are “modified” (Goffman 35) in accordance to the “region” (Goffman 106) they are in.

In his breakdown of human behavior, it is Goffman's ideas that a person's conduct is a “performance” (Goffman 35) and that different environments are “regions” (Goffman 106) that are significant in understanding gender within the context of *To The Lighthouse*. Traditionally referred to as a setting, a region is “any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception” (Goffman 106). Within Goffman’s theory, two main regions relate to human behavior as a performance: the “front region,” and the “back region,” (Goffman 107, 134). These regions parallel, respectively, the front and back stage areas within a theatre. In this metaphor, the “front” region is where a “performance is given” with the intent to create “the appearance” that the individual's behavior “maintains and embodies” acceptable standards (Goffman 107). On the flip side, the “back” region, which can be a physical setting or one's inner mind, is where thoughts and actions occur that relate to the performance but are “inconsistent with the appearance fostered” by it (Goffman 134). Through introducing the idea that humans employ certain tactics to influence how they are perceived, and that their conduct is shaped by the region they are in, Goffman postulates that behavior including gender practices is subject to change based on factors such as social settings and conventions.

Both on a collective and individual scale, *To The Lighthouse*, connects to Goffman’s theory through its portrayal of gender as part of a “molded and modified” (Goffman 35) performance that individuals choose to either give in acceptance with societal expectations or that they choose to reject and therefore challenge accepted standards. Woolf accomplishes this through writing a story that disputes the traditional belief that gendered behavior is

predetermined based on a character's sex, as well as through how she portrays the front and back regions of three prominent characters.

To The Lighthouse utilizes a chronological narrative to illustrate the role and understanding of gender in European society during three primary time frames: before, during, and after World War One. Although “patriarchal tradition triumphs” (Neverow-Turk 431) within the text and scholars such as Vara Neverow-Turk and Perry Meisel have argued that Woolf is “faintly nostalgic” (Neverow-Turk 328) towards Victorian gender ideals, a feminist reading of *To The Lighthouse* shows how it highlights “mature [and] evolved views about women as artists, marriage and femininity” (Carley 32). In their dissertation “The Diacritics of Desire: Virginia Woolf and the Rhetoric of Modernism and Feminism,” Neverow-Turk and Meisel assert that through showcasing the changing nature of gender, specifically femininity, during these different moments in history, “the unitary subject and the rigid definitions” (Neverow-Turk 435) of masculinity and femininity “collapse under the incremental weight of their own inconsistency” (Neverow-Turk 435). As a result, Woolf successfully challenges the belief of gender as a predetermined fixed concept and instead represents it as a malleable “performance” (Goffman 35).

By illustrating gender as a performance, it is allowed to always be adjustable in order to ensure it epitomizes the “accredited values of the society” (Goffman 35). *To The Lighthouse* showcases this through how it refashions femininity and deviates from traditional Victorian womanhood. A divergence primarily implemented in the final section of the novel during Lily Briscoe’s front region performance, Woolf uses her to show the presence of “various paths” (Respress) for women and a feminine narrative that successfully moves away from the domain of “domesticity and marriage” (Carley). Along with being an influential part of the

novel's overarching storyline, the transformative nature of gender is also accentuated through a deeper reading of how three individuals practice gender in their front and back regions.

As traditional gender norms are interwoven into the understanding of modern gender norms, *To The Lighthouse* demonstrates the nature of gender through focusing on the front and back regions of three characters: Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe. Representatives of various social categories throughout history, they respectively illustrate the gender practices in the regions of the Victorian man, Victorian woman, and modern woman. With different positions on the social hierarchy, all three are impacted by unique sets of gendered expectations that are shaped by the social climate they live in. Consequently, how they individually choose to engage gender in their front and back regions determines if they “fit into the understanding and expectations of society” (Goffman 35) or if they fall “outside of the establishment” (Goffman 135) by not upholding said expectations. Furthermore, it is important to note in the analyses of the characters back regions the impact that their conformity or lack thereof conformity to gender norms has on their ability to develop individual identities. In their own way, each character's behavior in their front and back region reinforces the novel's overarching illustration of gender as a type of performance.

Masculinity and the Patriarch: The role of the Victorian Male Mr. Ramsay

Observed in relation to Victorian and modern ideals, as well as the intersection of these two belief systems, the traditionally fixed nature of masculinity is called into question. As the beliefs associated with masculinity fluctuate with the changing times, its right to a “rigid definition” (Neverow-Turk 435) is challenged by its “own inconsistency” (Neverow-Turk 435). While it is embraced and for the most part maintains its significance in the eyes of society even

as time passes, Woolf's joint integration of modernism and feminism into the text results in masculinity being viewed through a more critical lens than it historically has been.

To The Lighthouse reinforces and challenges various values of masculinity, which results in a more flexible understanding of its nature and practice. Even though “patriarchal tradition” (Neverow-Turk 431) does triumph, variations of “masculine authority and egotism” (Neverow-Turk 436) are “simultaneously accept[ed] and condemn[ed]” (Neverow-Turk 436). Therefore, the perceivably unwavering power associated with masculinity is brought to the foreground of its representation. Especially in light of the historical context of the novel, as Alison Carley claims, the rendering of World War One calls into question “failures of masculinity” (Carley 36) such as the “decline of power [and] loss of virility” (Carley 36). Mr. Ramsay’s practice of gender, which involves both the upholding and opposition of the archetypal behaviors of the Victorian man, parallels the overall representation of masculinity in the novel.

The head of his house and the social hierarchy, Mr. Ramsay serves as the traditional patriarch within the novel. A father of eight and a scholar who made a “definite contribution to philosophy” (Woolf 23) in his youth, Mr. Ramsay is often viewed as a “tyrannical,” (Ferhat 107) figure with a “gendered reliance on what he can prove, think, hear and say” (Carley 54). The embodiment of masculinity, Mr. Ramsay’s behavior in his front and back regions both support and diverge from the conventional expectations of the masculine gender.

A demanding father and husband, Mr. Ramsay rules his household with an iron fist — no one can go to the lighthouse, or make any decision, without the scrutiny of his gaze and his approval. His authoritative presence in his front region allows him to successfully live up to the “expectations” (Goffman 35) society has for him as a Victorian male. Even when it means never softening his words for “the pleasure or convenience” (Woolf 4) of anyone, his family included,

he chooses to maintain traditional masculine values instead of worrying about the emotions of others. By functioning under the impression that what he says is always the truth, Mr. Ramsay frequently performs behavior in a manner befitting of the patriarchal system that he is a product of.

Mr. Ramsay's presentation of masculinity in his front region is further strengthened through the power he exerts over those around him, specifically those of the opposite sex. Despite being seen as a dominant, "petty, selfish, vain, [and] egotistical" (Woolf 24) tyrant, Mr. Ramsay maintains the upper hand of power and control in his relationships with both the Victorian woman and the modern woman during his lifetime. Seen both in Victorian and modern times, Mr. Ramsay's ability to continue practicing masculine behaviors in both social contexts reiterates the triumph of patriarchy within *The Lighthouse*.

With a wife who "reverenced" (Woolf 32) him more than she did anyone else, and offered him the emotional reassurance he often desired, their marriage dynamics typified the Victorian gender roles of the submissive wife and the patriarchal husband. But following Mrs. Ramsay's inevitable death given the impossibility of Victorian femininity to move into the modern world shaped by World War One, which is an idea that will be considered more in-depth later in this paper, Mr. Ramsay turned to the modern woman Lily Briscoe with the expectations of being able to continue these traditional roles. As he bears "down on her" (Woolf 148) and has a gendered assumption that no "woman could resist him" (Woolf 153), Mr. Ramsay tries to seek "sympathy from Lily" in an attempt "to force her to become a surrogate for his dead wife" (Neverow-Turk 438). When he finds Lily unable to offer him the support he desires, he realizes he must "share the stage with the modern woman" (Fehrat 110). However, despite this disruption to traditional dynamics, Mr. Ramsay still ultimately exerts masculine power over Lily when he

ties her shoes. By correcting her “feeble,” (Woolf 154), or feminine, system with his unbreakable method, he successfully reminds Lily of her gender inferiority and recreates the dynamics of female reliance on men. While his practice of masculinity in his front region is convincing, Mr. Ramsay’s inner thoughts that occur in his back region interfere with the ability for him to be perceived as fully upholding traditional masculinity.

Despite being a masculine figure in his front region, both in Victorian and modern times, the juxtaposition of Mr. Ramsay’s insecurities in his back region causes his participation in masculinity to be recognized as a performance. As someone who feels more at ease in the “privacy” (Woolf 33) of his back region, which is made up of his inner thoughts and physical environments where he is isolated from others, this is where Mr. Ramsay feels “safe” (Woolf 33) enough to drop his “mask” (Goffman 19) of being the all-knowing confident male. Although he believes himself to only speak the truth and uses this as a form of power in his interactions with others, his back region is full of individual doubts and regrets that cause him to constantly search for outside reassurance. Even with all the power that he holds in the front region, Mr. Ramsay’s back region shows his regret that he has “not done the thing he might have done” (Woolf 45) and how he feels as if he has “no choice” (Woolf 44) but to perform the masculine gendered behaviors in a front region because it serves as “a disguise” (Woolf 45). The stark contrast between his behaviors in his front region and his thoughts in his back region demonstrates the criticism and changes in the understanding of traditional masculinity that occurred following World War One.

The Curtain Closes on the Performance of the Angel in the House: Traditional Victorian

Femininity and Identity as seen Through Mrs. Ramsay

Sharing the stage with Mr. Ramsay as he practices masculinity, there are two key performers in *To The Lighthouse*'s narrative on femininity: the Victorian woman Mrs. Ramsay and the modern woman Lily Briscoe. In spite of the long-lasting presumption that typecasted women into gender roles with the expectations they would continue sustaining "traditional modes of femininity" (Neverow-Turk 436) such as "wifely submission, motherhood, sympathetic responsiveness to male insecurity, marital bliss (Neverow-Turk 436), the differences of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe brought this assumption to a halt. With a striking contrast in how they either practice or avoid practicing traditional feminine behaviors in their front and back regions during two different points in history, a comparison of their gender performances identifies the eventual upheaval of traditional femininity as it is reshaped in the aftermath of the First World War.

In the Victorian era before 1914, Mrs. Ramsay completes her due diligence to society through her portrayal of the part of the perfect Victorian woman. An ever doting wife and mother, she "splendidly portrays her social role" (Miles 27) and even "derives much pleasure" (Miles 1) as well as some power from her position within her family. The quintessence of Victorian femininity, her front region is full of behavior that enforces the expectations and values of the patriarchal system. From her beliefs that all women should marry, to the support she offers her husband, and the love she showers her children with, Mrs. Ramsay presents herself as an "Angel in the House" (McIntire). The only role she has even been taught, it is the only way of life she knows — and her desire to constantly live up to the stigma and standards surrounding it is evident in her devotion to her husband. Even when she disagrees with him in her back region about the chance a visit to the lighthouse will occur the next day, in the end, she supports him in her front region even though it's a decision she knows will follow James negatively for "all his

life” (Woolf 62). While her ability to practice the behaviors expected of her as a Victorian woman is an accomplishment that allows her to fit into society, as well as something that provides her some happiness, as seen in her back region it comes at the cost of her ability to develop her own identity.

With such a religious and persistent practice of traditional femininity in her front region, Mrs. Ramsay’s back region gets caught at a crossroads: a part of her believes the role she plays is who she is and a part of her does not know who she is. Her consistent performance of femininity in her front region in her efforts to “live up to” (Goffman 19) the role of the ideal Victorian woman results in this performance limiting her “conception” (Goffman 19) of herself and her freedom “to explore her private identity” (Miles 27). She is stuck to live her life trapped in a double bind: although she receives some happiness from her role as a submissive woman, she recognizes that she is unable to pursue her passions and thoughts if she wishes to avoid ridicule. Only in her back region, made up of her inner thoughts and settings where she is alone, can she shed the responsibilities of “being” (Woolf 62) and “doing” (Woolf 62) that comes with the role of the “Angel in the House” (McIntire). The relief and peace she feels in her back region when she can finally focus on herself, instead of her family, shows traditional femininity is a lifestyle choice instead of a concrete character trait. As time passes the double bind comes to constrain Mrs. Ramsay to such an extent that her narrative concludes abruptly when the behaviors and standards associated with long-established femininity are challenged by the new modernist norms in post-World War One society.

The New Woman: Lily Briscoe Paves the Way for Female Artists

While initially upheld, and always viewed by the patriarchy as evocative, traditional femininity is symbolically murdered through the death of the idealized Victorian woman Mrs.

Ramsay. Her physical inability to make it past World War I and “into the brave new world of a (gradual) reconceptualization of what and who women could be” (McIntire) represents the end of a time where Victorian gender ideals were the only options, as well as paves the road for new forms of femininity to exist outside of the realm of family and marriage. As different gender roles and social expectations emerge following the end of the war, it is the “young, single artist” (Miles 2) Lily Briscoe who steps into the role of the “new woman” (Carley 67) and “courageously breaks free of patriarchal rules” (Miles 2). Unlike the Victorian couple that performed traditional gender norms in their front regions and only experienced doubts in their back regions, following Mrs. Ramsay’s emblematic death Lily grows into her own identity and boldly defies traditional femininity in her front region.

Originally silenced by men and women who attempted to push patriarchal values onto her, Lily is unable to break free of society's contempt for women until she revisits the Ramsay’s summer house ten years after her previous visit. The first visit left her feeling censored when she was told “women can’t paint, women can’t write” (Woolf 48), but as Brenda Miles and Patricia Cherin state in their dissertation, her second visit allows her to fight for her “own identity, her right to paint, her right to choose her own path, to rise above gender constrictions” (Miles 41). Her actions allow her to move past what she has been told about what women can and should do and instead uses her front region to spotlight the new modern norms where women were beginning to be seen as equals to men. Despite her scorn towards Mr. Ramsay for all he put his late wife through, she finds it in her to forgive him “the [very] personification of Victorian patriarchy” (Miles 41) which allows her to find the peace she needs to “co-exist with men in peace, in unity” (Miles 41). Through ridding herself of the pressure of performing under the

guise of a social mask in her front region, Lily finds herself able to move forward as an artist and individual in a way that Mrs. Ramsay never was able to.

With a front region defined by her identity, the values and principles associated with femininity primarily affected her inner peace in her back region. By consciously recognizing how her methods of practicing femininity contrasted with Mrs. Ramsay's, she is very aware in her back region of being perceived differently due to her refusal to offer Mr. Ramsay the same emotional comfort "any other woman in the world" (Woolf 151) would have been able to. She compromises with her back region thoughts and front region behavior, by focusing on his boots as opposed to his emotions. While this grants him the ability to exert a small bit of masculine control over her, she successfully refuses to serve as a tool in his quest for validation. Lily's recognition in her back end, as well as her interaction with Mr. Ramsay, parallels how the modern woman was still to an outsider to a certain extent and their freedom was not complete: there was a long journey ahead of them for society to fully accept this new form of femininity.

Conclusion

Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* uses modernism and feminism to offer a new side to the discourse surrounding gender standards, dynamics, and practices in the pre and post-World War One era. Through using sociologist Erving Goffman's theory about what constitutes a performance, as well as the role of the front region and back region in human behavior, gender within the novel is seen as a moldable construct as opposed to it being a predisposed trait. This theoretical lens showcases a narrative where there are a clear stigma and pressure associated with the expectations to 'perform' one's gender. While Woolf uses performances in the front and back regions to demonstrate how these beliefs impact men and women alike, she also emphasizes how the patriarchal gender hierarchy results in women having a harder time balancing the act of

meeting social standards and maintaining one's individuality. Ultimately this novel analyzes how gender conformity in the front region may harm one's ability to develop their own identity, which especially holds for females, as well as how it does not always equate to full gender commitment within an individual's personality and belief system.

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