

# Was it possible for a woman to be successful in the victorian age?

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Virginia Woolf's books are great examples of showing what women go through when trying to be successful in the world, especially aspiring female role models. In *A Room of One's Own* she discusses a typical Victorian woman's relationship with the men around her and how she is so often interrupted, leaving her unable to think or do for herself and prove her worth. This book serves the purpose of exposing readers to the cruel ways that women were treated. In order to get that message across, the book focuses mostly on the negative aspects of women's lives and can be somewhat exaggerated and unrealistic at times. Another book by Woolf, titled *To the Lighthouse*, uses more specific characters and a story with a plot to demonstrate interactions between the sexes. It incorporates some positive aspects of women's lives that come with the way they are treated by men which also makes it more believable. Because these books have such similar topics, are written by the same author, and were published within less than two years of each other, one can expect to see many overlapping topics. Some of these include the male figures' willingness to prove a woman wrong or deny her something, the manner in which males constantly seem to be putting women down, and the way that Woolf speaks about females' lack of education in this time period. Those ideas are basic truths which is why they appear consistently throughout both books. However the more conflicting ideas such as those about interruption and protection of the opposite sex vary between the two books because they are more opinionated ideas. The idea of interruption in *A Room of One's Own* correlates with a certain negativity that Woolf purposely uses to get her

point across whereas she uses protection in *To the Lighthouse* with a positive undertone that is more realistic.

Throughout both of these books we can see that there is a trend where the men try to seem more powerful – they are straightforward with their answers and quick to say “no” to women. They have a certain willingness to prove a woman wrong or deny her something. In the very beginning of *A Room of One’s Own*, we already see the female narrator being told that she is not to be walking about on the turf because she is a woman. She, being a woman in this time, understands her role and notes “only the Fellows and the Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me” (8). Shortly after, when trying to access a library where she could search for some novels, the narrator is yet again prohibited from doing something that she could do if she were with a man. The man at the door “wave[s her] back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction” (9). If the narrator were a man she would never have been stopped from entering. We can see that this is not only something that happens between a single man and woman; rather it seems to be an issue for groups of them at a time. We learn about women trying to raise money to start a women’s college but it is noted that “Mr — won’t give a penny” because none of the males were willing to help the females progress in any way (22). The males yearn to be the dominant sex with more knowledge and access to the world around them. This same idea of dominance for the males and prohibition for the females is also present in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Throughout this book we see a husband, Mr. Ramsay, constantly warning his wife and son, James, that the weather will

not be suitable to visit the lighthouse that James wants to see. Mrs. Ramsay seems to know that it will not be good weather but she tries to hide that from her son, whereas Mr. Ramsay finds it necessary to constantly say things like “ But it won’t be fine” (TtL 4), “ No going to the Lighthouse, James” (14), and that “ There [is]n’t the slightest possible chance that they c[an] go to the Lighthouse tomorrow” (31). Again, we see the female figure learning her proper role and simply obeying or agreeing with the male, in this case Mrs. Ramsay telling her husband “ You were right” (124). If she were a man, she would not have to be constantly told no, nor would she need to fall back and be inferior.

Another similarity that can be observed between these two texts is the way that men are constantly putting women down. This is one of the main reasons that females of this time seem to have such a difficult time trying to succeed at anything. Woolf talks about how “ wife-beating was a recognized right of man” (43) because a female in that time was thought of as “ property of her husband” (45). Men, especially fathers, controlled their daughters’ decisions regarding whom they married and were comfortable with the idea that they could be subject to be “ locked up, beaten and flung about the room” (44). The author expresses this suppression of respect for women more thoroughly through the example of Shakespeare’s imaginary, metaphorical sister. She says that “ it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare’s day should have had Shakespeare’s genius. For genius like Shakespeare’s is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people” (50). It is worth noting these last three phrases that Virginia Woolf used to

describe women; “labouring, uneducated, servile” (50). Because of the way that women are expected to stay at home and care for their children, as well as cook and clean and please their husband, they do not have the opportunity to thrive like their male counterparts. They are stripped of their rights – although, it is difficult to have something that never existed taken from you – and it makes it a great deal harder for them to progress than for men to. On top of their lack of freedom, the fact that women are aware of their image to the opposite sex is another large part of what stops them from doing great things. “There [is] an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually. Even if her father did not read out loud these opinions, any girl could read them for herself; and the reading, even in the nineteenth century, must have lowered her vitality, and told profoundly upon her work” (55-56). The men in *To the Lighthouse* have a very similar outlook on the female sex, which is expected because these books were written in the same time period. Mr. Ramsay, arguably the most dominant man in this book – or so he likes to think – mentions his opinion that “the vagueness of [women’s] minds is hopeless” (167). Simply because the women around him think in a different way than him, he decides that it could be of no advantage toward their sex because they have not progressed much in the past so, clearly -at least, in his opinion, – the way that women are thinking is the wrong way to think.

Due to the fact that both of these books by Virginia Woolf were written and published in the late 1920’s, it is clear that women were not then nearly equal to their seemingly superior counterparts, men. Women were far less

educated than men, another large reason as to why it was so hard for them to succeed. However, women did not have a choice in the matter. When trying to fund a women's college, as mentioned earlier, the men provide no help. Women were not sent to school which meant that they had almost no chance to succeed, unlike men. They were expected to have certain skills, like making clothes , cooking, and learning to please their arranged husbands. Woolf, going back to the example of Shakespeare's metaphorical sister, discusses how " she picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers." Her father would try to get her to marry but " she cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father." When she tried any activities, whether it be reading or theatre, that were not thought of as proper for a woman, " men laughed in her face" (ARoOO 49). Any success that could have come out of a woman wandering out and doing unique tasks was feared by the men for they were afraid of progress and inferiority. However, the males knew that even a successful woman could be stripped of her earnings. " In the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned." The males took it upon themselves to declare that women were not responsible or worthy enough to have the money that they earned themselves. A woman's money " will be taken from [her] and disposed of according to [her] husband's wisdom" because he is thought of as more capable of spending it in a useful way because he is more educated (ARoOO

24). We see this trend of uneducated women carry on in *To the Lighthouse* when Mrs. Ramsay is speaking with a man but, after hearing what he had to say, she “ did not quite catch the meaning, only the words, here and there... dissertation... fellowship... readership... lectureship” (TtL 12). We can tell that not much has changed between these two books and that is not very helpful for the females.

In terms of differences between the two books, *A Room of One's Own* focuses on the idea that the women are always the ones being interrupted and it exaggerates to demonstrate the struggle that women have in everyday life whereas, in *To the Lighthouse*, men and women alike both see several opportunities to interrupt but interestingly decide and learn to hold back those urges, which is why this is the more realistic of the two books. We see the female narrator in *A Room of One's Own* being told she cannot walk on the grass and must instead be on the turf, as mentioned earlier, which interrupts her train of thought while watching the fish. She is also interrupted while trying to enter the library. The men in this book seem not to care much about the harsh effect that these interruptions have on the female mind. This is different in *To the Lighthouse* when, at one point, Mr. Ramsay notes his wife's pure beauty and claims that “ he could not interrupt her[...] for he wished to protect her” (TtL 65). This would have been very out of place, had we seen it in *A Room of One's Own*, because the men there seem very willing, if not eager, to constantly interrupt women in a manner to prove their superiority. The same thing happens again but conversely when Mrs. Ramsay looks at her husband “ and s[ees] that he d[oes] not want to be

interrupted – that [is] clear” (TtL 117). In the other text, neither men nor women took the time or effort to think about whether the person they are about to interrupt wants to be disturbed. Additionally, women were never even given the opportunity to interrupt in the other book but the same does not apply here. Interrupting – a sign of superiority in some cases – is offered to both sexes in *To the Lighthouse*.

Another aspect of Woolf’s writing in these two book that differs relates to the deeper relationships that characters of the opposite sex have towards one another. In *A Room of One’s Own* men care more about themselves than they do about women and neither sex tries to protect the other. Obviously this could not have been the case for every person but Woolf really emphasizes it in this text in an attempt to show the neglect that women of this time felt. However, in *To the Lighthouse*, both sexes occasionally try helping and understanding each other in one way or another, which is much more realistic. In *A Room of One’s Own* the men make it clear that they think more about themselves in comparison to females than about females themselves. “ When the professor insisted a little too emphatically upon the inferiority of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority, but with his own superiority” which shows us that the men here do not necessarily put down women simply to put them down; it has a deeper effect which, in turn, makes themselves look more dominant (ARoOO 36). Woolf further discusses this image by talking about reflections. She says 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” (ARoOO 37).



Because the male characters in this book seem so concerned with their own dominance in comparison to that of women, they pay very little attention to the females. Woolf uses an analogy to better explain this when she says that “if opinions upon any of these matters [regarding the treatment of women] had been chalked on the pavement, nobody would have stooped to read them” (ARoOO 94). Although the women and men in *To the Lighthouse* have a mutual understanding that the men are viewed as having a larger, more important role in the world, they go about it in a much different way than we see in *A Room of One's Own*. In *Lighthouse* the men and women think twice before acting upon or hurting one another, and they do not always try to ruin one another's image. At one point, Mr. Ramsay seems to soften his character which is not expected of men and would actually be shunned if anyone were to find out because it is very feminine of him. “That discomposed her; for then people said he depended on her, when they must know that of the two he was infinitely the more important” (TtL 39). Mrs. Ramsay takes it upon herself to make sure the people around her and her husband know that she is still inferior to him so as to not ruin his masculine reputation. Relating back to the part of the book where Mr. Ramsay himself chooses not to interrupt her “for he wishe[s] to protect her” we see here that he refrains from hurting his wife because she has done the same for her (TtL 65). This is not something that occurs in *A Room of One's Own*. The two sexes are much harsher towards each other and are not willing to help protect each other at all. Another time we see the men and women having closer relationships in *Lighthouse* is when Mr and Mrs. Ramsay are looking at stars. Mrs. Ramsay admires them but decides not to bother her husband by asking him to look.

However, he decides to say ““ Very fine,” to please her” (TtL 71). Several times they will refrain from saying anything so as to not upset each other. There is more communication regarding this in *To the Lighthouse* than in *A Room of One’s Own*. At one point, Mr and Mrs. Ramsay’s “ eyes me[e]t for a second; but they d[o] not want to speak to each other[....] Don’t interrupt me, he seem[s] to be saying, don’t say anything; just sit there” (TtL 119). The exact same thing happens, yet again, at the end of the book. “ They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything” (TtL 208). The relationships in this book were friendlier – at times – and more realistic.

As you can see, the fact that these books were written by the same author, in the same time period, and with the same goal in mind – to inform readers of the oppression that females faced in this era – there are many similarities. However, the way that these messages are conveyed results in some varying aspects of each book. Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and *To the Lighthouse* clearly relate in aspects regarding dominance of the male sex and the lack of education for females whereas they differ when speaking about the way that men may or may not interrupt and/or care for women and vice versa.