

Who is the "model" mother?



In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf portrays Mrs. Ramsay as the “ model” mother. Loved by her children, depended upon by her husband and admired by her neighbors Mr. Bankes and Lily Briscoe, Woolf creates a seemingly amorphous character made up of a collection of descriptions from the people who surround her. Through this fluid character, Woolf systematically synthesizes the “ model” mother’s identity. With a structured precision, Woolf divides her synthesis into three parts. She poses her question regarding the “ model” mother’s identity in “ The Window” through Mr. Ramsay’s philosophical work, presents an example of the mother in “ Time Passes” through creating the parallel of a house and a mother, and reaches a conclusion about the “ model” mother’s true identity in “ The Lighthouse” through Lily Briscoe’s completed painting.

Before delving into her synthesis, Woolf introduces her subject of study, Mrs. Ramsay, through the eyes of her son who finds her optimism and caring spirit as a source of “ extraordinary joy” (*The Window*, Part 1). She cements Mrs. Ramsay’s position of nurturer by juxtaposing her optimism with Mr. Ramsay’s harsh realism, which leaves James clamoring for a weapon to “ gash a hole in his father’s breast” (*To the Window*, Part 1). After establishing the dichotomy of Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay, Woolf weaves the central question of her synthesis into Mr. Ramsay’s philosophical work. Like Mr. Ramsay, Woolf attempts to study “ subject and object and the nature of reality” (*The Window*, Part 4). Placing Mrs. Ramsay in the role of object and the Ramsay family in the role of subject, she effectively challenges the reader to “ think of a kitchen table [...] when your not there,” (*The Window*, Part 4). In other words, she asks the reader to consider the “ model” mother’s identity when

her family is not there. Woolf toys with the notion of identity in "The Window," by placing a disproportionate amount of focus on other characters' insights about Mrs. Ramsay's character, rather than Mrs. Ramsay's insight about her own character. She places Mrs. Ramsay's insights sparingly throughout "The Window" to highlight how Mrs. Ramsay perceives her personal thoughts insignificant when compared to the thoughts of those who admire her. Woolf does allow the audience a brief look into Mrs. Ramsay's self-analysis when she explains how she "often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions" (The Window, Part 4). However, her analysis is immediately interrupted by her thoughts about her husbands' brilliance, when Woolf writes "there was nobody she revered more. She was not good enough to tie his shoe strings," (The Window, Part 4) reducing her previously poignant self-focused insight into a seeming afterthought.

After posing the question of the "model" mother's identity apart from her family in "The Window", Woolf explores the concept of the "family-less" mother by establishing the parallel of a house as a mother. Through this parallel, Woolf, in effect, suggests the role of the mother, much like the role of a house, is to provide shelter for and be inhabited by other people. She then offers an example of what a "family-less" mother looks like through the emptiness of the Ramsay's house in "Time Passes". In her description of the empty house Woolf uses words such as "bare," "tarnished," and "cracked," (Time Passes, Part 4) to comment on the state of disarray that has resulted as a consequence of the Ramsay's, who represent the house's family, abandonment of the house. Woolf's use of these verbs suggests an interesting relationship between a house and its inhabitants, or a mother and

her family, a need to be needed. While the inhabitants of a house rely on the house's foundation to provide shelter, the house relies on its inhabitants to provide upkeep. Further, it situates the house as barren and unused, essentially worthless without anyone to shelter. Woolf continues her description of the house through the items left behind, " what people had shed and left [...] those alone kept the human shape and indicated how once they were filled and animated" (Time Passes, Part 4). Woolf personifies the wind, naming it " loveliness and stillness," as well as the items it " rubs" asking a question " Will you fade? Will you perish?" To which the items respond, " we remain" (Time Passes, Part 4). By describing the house through the items left behind Woolf further establishes the parallel between house and mother in the way that a house is described by the things that inhabit it, as these things represent people, and these people give the house meaning. In the same, way the " model" mother is described by her family, the way she sympathizes with her husband, the way she cares and nurtures for her children, these descriptions of the mother are what " remain". In essence Woolf states, the " model" mother's sole purpose is to be inhabited.

In " The Lighthouse", Woolf comes to accept the " model" mother's identity with the completion of Lily Briscoe's painting. The audience is introduced to Lily's painting of Mrs. Ramsay and James in the sitting room in " The Window". Woolf describes Lily's obsession with capturing the essence of the scene perfectly, " beneath the colour there was a shape. She could see it so clearly [...] it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed" (The Window, Part 4). Lily's obsession with perfectly capturing the essence of Mrs. Ramsay is echoed by many of the characters throughout "

The Window", such as Mr. Bankes and Mr. Tansley. Woolf emphasizes this preoccupation in order to highlight the fluid nature of Mrs. Ramsay's character. As each character ponders what makes Mrs. Ramsay such a wonderful woman, they project on her all the characteristics they desire to find in the "model" mother, whether she actually possesses these characteristics or not. This oversight of the real Mrs. Ramsay prevents Lily from finishing her painting as she never feels that anything she does will capture Mrs. Ramsay's essence.

Ten years later, when Lily returns to her painting, she encounters many of the same problems she encounter earlier. Again, she describes her desire to "get hold of something that evaded her [...] when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay," to move past the "beautiful pictures" and "beautiful phrases" and capture "that very jar of nerves" (The Lighthouse, Part 11). Woolf challenges the reader to follow Lily on her journey to discover the true Mrs. Ramsay by separating the thoughts about Mrs. Ramsay from her actions. Lily does this through Mr. Carmichael, the only character that seemed to truly see Mrs. Ramsay. Only through examining Mrs. Ramsay's dislike of Mr. Carmichael is Lily able to move past the mental block that has kept her blind to the true Mrs. Ramsay. She finally realizes Mrs. Ramsay was not able to woo Mr. Carmichael like the rest of her admirers because "he wanted nothing" (The Lighthouse, Part 11). Mrs. Ramsay could not take the form of Mr. Carmichael's desires because he did not desire anything and therefore challenged Mrs. Ramsay to assume her own form, breaking the convention of the "model" mother who Woolf frames as someone who shamelessly gives. Through this discovery Lily begins to notice the cracks in Mrs. Ramsay's

seemingly perfect veneer, she states that “ it was her instinct to go [...] turning her infallibly to the human race, making her nest in its heart” (The Lighthouse, Part 11). This recognition of Mrs. Ramsay as a flawed human being is what allows Lily to finish her painting. Woolf places her conclusion of the “ model” mother’s identity in Lily’s final acceptance of the sloppy imperfection of her painting,” she writes “ she looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred [...] she saw it clear for a second [...] it was finished.” Like Lily, Woolf comes to accept that the “ model” mother, though seemingly perfect, belongs to the human race and is therefore fallible. She specifically focuses on the mother’s overwhelming self-sacrifice and lack of identity as the example of her fallibility.

Virginia Woolf places Mrs. Ramsay at the center of the novel, allowing her to synthesize the identity of the “ model” mother. She begins by constructing the perfect wife, mother, and neighbor, by placing importance on the depictions of Mrs. Ramsay rather than Mrs. Ramsay herself. She then calls the audience to deconstruct the truth of Mrs. Ramsay from her depiction, in effect, challenging her audience to study reality with the same eagerness as Mr. Ramsay. Through the personification of the house, she displays how the “ model” mother ceases to be viewed as a human being and instead is looked at as hollow and judged by how well she provides shelter. Finally, she allows her audience to see the fallibility and humanness of the “ model” mother by breaking down the façade of Mrs. Ramsay and recognizing her lack of a personal identity.

Works Cited:

<https://assignbuster.com/who-is-the-model-mother/>

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