

Gender roles and
conflicts expressed in
virginia woolf's "to the
lighthouse" essa...



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Gender Roles and Conflicts Expressed in Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" Essay Sample

Time and time again, gender-conflict has continued to be a focal issue. Since the beginning of time, this dilemma has been articulated through novels or other various forms of writing. It is now brought to the public's attention in forms such as the news, radio and the workplace. Habitually asked, are the age old questions of: " what is a man's place in society?", " what is a woman's place in society?", or " is there a specific place for either?" Furthermore, " is there a genuine difference at all?" One critic explains, " Woolf reaches beyond personal relationships to explore man's wider relation to the Universe" (McNichol 1). In Virginia Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse*, the differences in male and female roles are a reoccurring theme that is ultimately answered by one character in her final days at the Ramsey's home.

One of the central motifs in *To the Lighthouse* is the conflict between the feminine and masculine principles at work in the universe. " Within this symbolic framework Woolf probes the profound tensions at the core of all relationships between men and women" (McNichol 1). Two of the main characters that show the opposing sides are Mr. Ramsey, a self centered philosopher who feels that the duty of women is to cater to the needs of men, and Mrs. Ramsey, an emotional, old fashioned woman. Their flaws consist of their limited views and beliefs. The key factor in Woolf's novel is a character by the name of Lily Briscoe. She is a painter and friend of the family, who vacations at their home each summer. With her perspective on life, she thins out the line between male and female. Not only does this

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character show the ideal role of male/female in society, but when picked apart ever so carefully, she shows a version of Woolf herself.

Growing up in this type of society, during the time period before World War I, for a young woman was a rough time. The expectation of trying to fit into the stereotypical role of women in a male dominated society was a frustrating experience for any woman, if not all women. An example is that of Mrs. Ramsey encouraging all of her daughters to hurry and marry.

Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley had not come back then. That could mean, Mrs. Ramsey thought, one thing. She must accept him, or she must refuse him.

This going off after luncheon for a walk, even though Andrew was with them- what could it mean? Except that she had decided, rightly,

Mrs. Ramsey thought, to accept that good fellow, who might not be brilliant.

(61)

The pressure she imposes upon these young girls to make a decision of marriage at such a young age could possibly lead to a rough elder life. Her everyday worries consist typically of whether or not these young men she has met have proposed to her daughters and if her daughters have accepted. These young girls are very comparable to their mother in that they do not object to this prearranged lifestyle that is expected of them. Only a minute portion of the novel is focused on her daughters, and it is to show the typical life of women during this period.

The disturbance in this novel begins with Lily, " She appreciates Mrs.

Ramsey's ability to be nurturing, but doesn't feel she can fulfill that role,"

(Dougherty 1). She believes that women have the right to live a life of their
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own and that there is no need to wait on men hand and foot. This is the turning point in the novel, it shows the female/female clash. Not only are women looked down upon by men if they do not live up to the expected role of women, but now women look down upon them in disgust too. The protagonist, Lily Briscoe, struggles to be an artist in a society where women are expected only to be wives and mothers like Mrs. Ramsey is. The antagonist is Mrs. Ramsey. She is the perfect model of the old generation's value of a woman's position in society. It is here that Woolf centers her novel around the subtle distortions of which a strict division of gender roles produces on personalities and on family life. This theme is as important as the male/female role in society, if not more so.

The expectations that Mrs. Ramsey speaks of to Lily never bothered her so much, but the subject becomes very touchy when she becomes utterly disturbed with Mr. Bankes for the reason that he claims, " Women can't paint, can't write," (101). It is at this moment that Lily realizes why it is that she will never marry; people can't deal with variation in life. " Lily feels inadequate both as a woman and an artist, because it is not expected that she can do both," (Dougherty 1). She is a modern day woman who knows she does not need a man to be able to live her life happily and to be able to make something of herself, but she still feels a void since she knows it is expected of her from everyone in society to take on the long-established roles of women. As for Mrs. Ramsey's take on the subject matter, she feels that women should understand that they need to please men, for men have the power to rule India or become President, and she can't identify with why Lily doesn't comprehend this. In some rationale though it doesn't matter to

her because she only sees Lily as having, “ Those little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face, she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously...,” (19). She too expresses the same mindset as that of Mr. Bankes; that women cannot alter their lifestyles, should not alter their lifestyles.

This is where Woolf herself fits into the novel and how she uses Lily Briscoe to represent her own beliefs and struggles throughout her own life.

One of Woolf’s lifelong concerns was the role of women in a patriarchal society. In Woolf’s time, learned men wrote scholarly and well-respected books on the intellectual inferiority of women. Woolf understood the overt and covert pressures placed on women not to write or make a living of what they loved, (Dougherty 1).

For example, the pressure that is placed on Lily not to paint by Mr. Bankes and Mrs. Ramsey. These pressures were created by the ideology of true womanhood, which was very strong during the Victorian period and is, to a certain extent, still present today. This philosophy held that women belonged in the home, where they provided a civilizing influence over men. Women were to be restrained to the house. This was not just some underlying belief in the society, but it went as deep as having newspaper editorials, scholarly books, medical professionals, preachers, and lawmakers all producing reasons why it was in women’s and in civilization’s best interest to keep middle and upper-class women uneducated and unemployed. She also brings her life into this novel in that, “ She believed her mother died prematurely from exhaustion. Mrs. Ramsey is said to be modeled after her

mother and Leslie Stephen, her father, is said to share qualities with Mr. Ramsey," (Rosenberg 1). With the addition of Lily Briscoe's character, " Woolf shows that in creative self-expression, humans may achieve a sense of completion and unify the disparate elements of life," (Dougherty 1).

The novel has three main parts; The Window, Time Passes, and The Lighthouse. The Window takes place before World War I and is the time when everyone is brought together and happy for the most part. Time Passes is the saddest section of the novel, when war takes place and almost all of the children die, as does Mrs. Ramsey. As for the chapter, The Lighthouse, this is the most vital part of the novel. This is when Lily comes back to the Ramsey's house during the summer after World War I has ended. She learns to take a different view on life now that Mrs. Ramsey is gone. It becomes a turning point for her in all that she had been through during her stays at their home.

Finally, " Lily is at last able to mourn for Mrs. Ramsey, realizing that the ' solution' to the problem of ' wanting' and not having is to understand that all of life is momentary," (Dougherty 1). Now that Mrs. Ramsey is gone everyone takes into thought how much she really changed things.

Mrs. Ramsey sitting under the rock, with a pad on her knee, writing letters. But what a power was in the human soul! She thought. That woman sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite something- this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking-

which survived, after all these years complete, so that she dipped into it to refashion her memory of him, and there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art, (182).

Now that Ms. Ramsey is dead, Mr. Ramsey realizes the significance of taking the children to the lighthouse, even though they are now young adults. It was what they wanted from the beginning, that he never gave them, but his wife always made them feel better when he put them down. He can't help but watch Lily paint the portrait of his wife, but this makes her hesitate when he watches what she does. In attempts to hurry him in the process of sailing to the lighthouse, she compliments him, which takes his mind off the moment, and he tells his kids it is time to go to the lighthouse. With everyone going their separate ways, Lily can now envision Mrs. Ramsey to finally finish the portrait she started so many years before.

She finds it easier to paint Mrs. Ramsey after she is dead, but realizes finally, " That her artistry depended on ' getting it right,' and that the natural world was unchanging, she now sees with Mrs. Ramsey's help, that the job of an artist is to make a moment permanent by capturing it," (Dougherty 1). With her last strokes of her brush, " Lily draws a line down the centre of her canvas thus unifying, as Mrs. Ramsey did at the [dinner] party , the separate forms that had resisted her attempts to unify them," (McNichol 1). It takes her almost a decade to appreciate the importance of Mrs. Ramsey's role in the Ramsey family, but she comes to realize that it is one of unification. " She has learned from Mrs. Ramsey that life ' from being made up of little separate incidents, which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave," (McNichol 1).

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The clash of female/female turns out to be not so much of what it was in the beginning. Lily finally comes to terms with Mrs. Ramsey's thinking and understands the purpose of it. Although she does not agree that women are subject to a predestined lifestyle which can have no alterations, she comprehends the magnitude of a wife/mother role in the family home. As she comes to terms with Mrs. Ramsey, "Lily feels that she is able to unify opposing forces, achieve completion, express her own personal truths, and to be both a woman and an artist," (Dougherty 1). The gender roles still stand in the end of this novel as they do today in some ways. *To the Lighthouse* is a perfect example of how gender-conflict is viewed and present in our society. By looking at the underlying story in the novel we are able to see the conflicts of gender as what they truly are, petty and ignorant. Today, it is more widely acceptable than it has ever been for a man to stay at home with the kids, or for the woman to work at a job and hold a very powerful position. This shows what leaps and bounds have been made in the past century. It will take a matter of time to overcome all stereotypical roles and rules that are present in society, but that world is not too far off in the distance partly due to stories such as *To The Lighthouse*, exposing the limitations imposed on young women.