

Social ideology and its impact on the text



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Throughout literature the ideology of the society in which the author was living is evident in the text. This can cause certain groups within a text to be empowered while the other groups are marginalised and constrained by the social restrictions placed upon them by the ideology. In the novel *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, Woolf shows us an awareness of gender politics during the 1920¹s Britain by subverting the traditional gender roles but at the same time naturalises notions of class causing certain groups to be constrained. In the novel Woolf subverts the patriarchal portrayal of feminism with the character of Lily Brascoe. Lily is constructed as an independent character who defies the ingrained beliefs of how a woman should act. She does this through her actions in a different style despite Mr Tansley¹'s assertion that 'women can't write, women can't paint¹' and refuses to marry even though it was a popular belief that all women should marry 'as an unmarried woman has missed the best of life¹'. Instead Lily thought that 'she did not need to marry, thank heaven she did not need to undergo that degradation. Woolf applauds this attitude, as at the completion of the novel, Lily is one of the few characters who has achieved fulfilment or in her case the completion of a painting begun ten years prior. Yet although the character of Lily and her decisions are applauded in the text, Lily is only enabled to have such an attitude because of her status as a member of the wealthier class. In the novel, class is viewed more as a benign structure for the common good than as a structure in which the members of the higher classes are given greater life chances. Consequently the class system is not examined in the text although gender roles are. Lily was only able to make the decisions she did because she had the financial means to support herself in a style of leisure. Otherwise, she would have been forced to marry or

accept a job as a governess. It is in such away that the higher classes of wealth are privileged by their class. Mrs Ramsay was also privileged by her class. Although she did not subvert the gender roles but was instead a model wife who acted in every way what the dominant ideology dictated she should. She was constantly there to provide support for her husband, help the disadvantaged and be a loving mother to her children. Yet, she was only able to do so because she came from a higher class and need not work to support her family. Nevertheless the character of Mrs Ramsay is contrasted to that of Lily Briscoe in their actions in fulfilling the gender roles expected of them. While Mrs Ramsay is not overtly criticised by the text she can be viewed as being too generous willing to submerge herself in the needs of others being like a 'fountain'. This can be seen as one of the reasons for her untimely death. Mr Tansley is another character who found himself adversely affected by the constraints of class. He had a background from the working class yet he was trying to become accepted as an intellectual. It was for this reason that he worshipped Mr Ramsay's work and was invited to the cottage with them, yet as a character he was criticised due to the attitudes held towards the lower classes. Even the children criticised him, 'He could not play cricket, he poked, he shuffled'. Yet cricket in those times was a game that the wealthier classes indulged in and consequently, due to his lower social background, Charles Tansley was criticised for not being masculine enough. The dinner party is another example of where class and gender roles intersect. Lily found that to her chagrin she would have to go the aid of Mr Tansley who was hopelessly drowning in the need to make social conversation. She found that there 'was a code of behaviour in which the seventh article indicated that it behoves a woman to go to the help of a

young man'. As a result Lily was forced to 'rescue' Mr Tansley from his social inadequacy despite the fact that she rarely adhered to expected gender roles. Had she been of a lower class or different social background she would not have been expected to act in such a manner, yet due to her class and position was forced to act by such constraining gender roles. It can be seen that it was Mr Tansley's lower social background that caused the rift in the first place. He decided that 'he would not be condescended to by these silly women' yet the social niceties expected at the Ramsay's table due to their class required he make conversation. He also seemed confused by the fact that they would 'dress for dinner' whereas 'he came down to dinner in his ordinary clothes, he did not have any dress clothes'. Again the character of Mr Tansley is criticised and his need to assert himself is seen as foolish although it is also his lower social class that caused the rift. The characters of Mrs McNab and Mrs East also find themselves constrained by notions of both class and gender. As the Ramsay's servants they performed their cleaning tasks around the home diligently despite the fact that 'Mrs McNab creaked, Mrs East groaned, they were getting old'. Yet as they had no wealth and did not hold a privileged position in the society they were forced to accept their lot in life. They too supported the class system despite the fact that they were constrained by it remembering 'the boy who had died, she had read his name in the paper' but not 'the cook. What was her name? Mildred, Marion maybe.' From this it can be seen that the lower classes were greatly constrained by the attitudes and values of the ideology pertaining to them even to the extent that they supported the rigid structure that would impose such restrictions upon them. Throughout the novel there are many examples where men and women are constrained or privileged as a result of

their class. This is because despite the fact that Woolf subverted the patriarchal portrayal of feminism to an extent but not notions of class, class and gender were so closely intertwined that men and women of wealthier classes within the text were often privileged while those of the lower class found themselves constrained by the gender roles pertaining to them. This is often the case as in a particular ideology, as gender roles vary for different social background.