

The men who are mr. ramsay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

To the Lighthouse is a novel about Mrs. Ramsay; her ways, her wiles, and her lasting impact. Though she dies with half the novel left to read, there is no doubt that, whatever intention Woolf had, Mrs. Ramsay is the main character for she is certainly the protagonist. The role of antagonist, then, falls squarely on the shoulders of her husband, Mr. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay is not as likeable as his better half, but he is just as complex. He may even be more so when examining the actual influences, and the number of them, that went into constructing his character. The novel is largely autobiographical. Woolf's family is represented, demographically, in a near perfect clone. In the novel, the Ramsay family consists of the parents and eight children (Woolf 14).

Woolf's family consisted of eight children as well, when counting half-brothers and half-sisters (Dalsimer 4). Such a fact could be merely trivial, except for how the families diminished in size. For the Ramsays, the mother died, followed by Prue, then Andrew (Woolf 128, 132, 133). Likewise, Woolf's mother died first, when she was 13, then a half-sister, and then her brother Thoby died (Dalsimer xiii). Woolf was young when her mother died, so it is difficult to guess where the character of Mrs. Ramsay and Woolf's mother find their correlations. She says herself "it is a child's view of her" (Dalsimer 98). Certainly the Ramsay children prefer their mother to their father, and likewise the Stephen (Woolf's Maiden name) children much preferred their mother's sense of humor and ability to praise her children. With the novel taking such an autobiographical approach to its plot and that character, one might assume that every character is a retelling of Woolf's childhood. This is not the case as some liberties were taken to ease the telling of the story.

Most notably, the Ramsay parents show no evidence of having been previously married. In Woolf's family, her parents were both widowed, and

the result was that she had four half-siblings (Dalsimer 4). By neglecting to include this element of the story it was probably easier to show the love that Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay had for each other by promoting the idea that these two could love each other and only each other. Additionally, the pre-existing emotional baggage would have changed the reader's perception of both characters, their children, and the reader. That is not the only time that Woolf changes history to create better fiction. The character traits of the individual family members differ as well; particularly the differences between the traits and beliefs of Mr. Ramsay and Woolf's father, Sir Leslie Stephen. That is not to say that there are no similarities; indeed there are many. In the novel, Ramsay was famous for his accomplishments, and there were those that considered him to be "the greatest metaphysician of his time" (Woolf 37). Stephen was also famous for his respective accomplishments; truly, one must be quite influential to be knighted. Just being respected, however, are not grounds to call Stephen the inspiration for Ramsay. One must consider their respective relationships with their families. Ramsay was a tyrant in his home, such that his two youngest, Cam and James, made a silent pact "to resist [his] tyranny to the death" (Woolf 163). Ramsay was a difficult fellow to live with. He was always "demanding sympathy," fishing for compliments to ease his mind (Woolf 37). He would shout and curse for seemingly inoffensive transgressions, for instance when he cursed his wife for continuing to tell James that the weather would be fine, or when he "lost his temper and banged out of the room" when Nancy had forgotten to order sandwiches (Woolf 145). At many points, the reader is told that James hates his father, and if one were to read about Woolf, that person would find that Ramsay is not alone in being the object of hatred. On a birthday of her late

father Woolf writes “ he would have been 96 today... indeed could have been 96, like other people one has known: but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine.” (Rose 159). Woolf could not tolerate her father and “ his exasperating domestic tyrannies” (Rose 158). Like Ramsay, Stephen demanded that his wife be “ constantly available, constantly supportive, constantly working to order his life” (Rose 158). Like Ramsay, who calls himself a failure, “ Stephen’s overbearing exactions of sympathy was his sense of failure” and he also would “ exaggerate his self-pity ‘ in order to extort from [his wife] some of her delicious compliments’ ” (Gordon 25, 26). Certainly, Stephen inspired some of the personality of Mr. Ramsay, but Ramsay is not a biographical figure. The two had their share of differences, most notably their professional careers. Ramsay is, of course, a metaphysical philosopher concerned with the “ the nature of reality” (Woolf 23). Stephen was “ a historian of thought, a biographer, a literary critic, and a moral philosopher, in approximately that order of importance” (Rosenbau 338). Philosopher was on his resume, but this is not where he achieved his notoriety, nor is his ethical philosophy similar to Ramsay’s epistemology. An additional difference appears when examining a central moment, and also the opening scene, of the novel in which a low-key argument about the weather takes place. In the novel, Mr. Ramsay tells his son and wife that the weather will not allow them to go to the lighthouse in the morning. Mrs. Ramsay insists that the weather will be fine, but Mr. Ramsay is correct, and the family stays home the next day. This argument is based on a real situation that took place in which Woolf’s father and mother have a similar argument, however the sides are reversed. “ It was Mrs. Stephen that remonstrated that it was pouring and argued against their going, while Mr.

Stephen, along with the children, was eager to go regardless of the weather” (Dalsimer 37). Woolf juxtaposes the roles of the parents in order to reinforce Ramsay’s cruelty. Breaking from the factual, though not something Ramsay is capable of, was something that Woolf would gladly do in order to facilitate her writing process. Woolf’s willingness to stray from the factual traits of her father to construct Ramsay’s familial ties and characteristics of his personality, while still adhering to certain realities, begs a new inquiry: where did she find the inspiration for Ramsay’s professional attributes? The first answer to come to mind is Ramsay’s pseudo-namesake, the mathematician Frank Ramsey (hereafter known as F. Ramsey, in order to aid the reader). There are some good correlations between the two, and not just in their names. First, Mr. Ramsay was a young man when he achieved his notoriety: 25 as Mr. Bankes states (Woolf 23). Similarly, F. Ramsey was 23 years old when he gained notoriety for his 1925 work entitled *The Foundations of Mathematics* (O’Connor and Robertson 2003). There is also a correlation in what the two men did after their breakthroughs. Mr. Bankes tells Lily “ Ramsay is one of those men who do their best work before they are forty” and calls Ramsay’s later work “ amplification, [and] repetition” (Woolf 23). F. Ramsey met with his greatest success before he was forty also, becoming a Fellow at Cambridge University; indeed it was the only time he had success, because his life ended at the age of 27 (Mellor 2004). Like Ramsay, his later works, particularly his philosophy papers, did not meet with the acclaim of his earlier works. This may have lead Woolf to believe that F. Ramsey’s career, in philosophy at least, would be unsatisfactory, thus she created Mr. Ramsay’s professional struggles. Woolf could not have known that F. Ramsey’s work would be rediscovered and praised almost 20

years later (Mellor 2004). With the restrictions that time places on knowledge, she could have assumed that F. Ramsey would live to an old age, as her father did, and his career would never “reach R,” as Mr. Ramsay put it, because of the immediate reception of his works. This could lead one to believe that F. Ramsey was the primary inspiration for the professional aspect of Mr. Ramsay. However, consider F. Ramsey’s *Truth and Probability*, in which he states “actions are caused not by beliefs alone, but by combinations of beliefs and desires, and any action can be caused by more than one such combination” (Mellor xvii). “When people say it will probably rain, for example, at least part of what they mean is that they believe that it will rain more strongly than that it won’t rain. But what they do as a result of this belief – for example, whether they take umbrellas with them when they go out – depends also on what they want” (Mellor 2004). Here it is helpful to consider the first scene, a scene coincidentally involving rain, in which Mr. Ramsay contradicts his wife, his belief being that the weather will not allow them to go to the lighthouse the next day. His action is to state this, for there is no debate in that regard; what is at question is his desire for saying this. James feels it is for “the pleasure of disillusioning his son and ridiculing his wife” (Woolf 4). This may not be the case. Mrs. Ramsay’s action was telling her son, repeatedly, that the weather would be fine, in the face of conflicting evidence; she ignores her belief and takes an action, desiring to make her son happy in the short term. She is only postponing his disillusionment, for he will wake up the following day and not be able to go. Mr. Ramsay appears to be trying to save his son the heartache, and keep James from becoming distrustful of his mother. This could be his desire. In Mr. Ramsay’s opinion, one should always take action that corresponds with

belief, and not desire. Mrs. Ramsay is his opposite, willing to suspend belief in an effort to make others happy. In this case F. Ramsey and Mr. Ramsay differ. Whereas Ramsay is quick to contradict his wife, with something he knows to be truth, F. Ramsey would not have done this. He is described as having “almost refrained entirely from argumentative controversy... He felt too clear on his own mind, I think, to want to refute other people” (Richards qtd. In Mellor xvi). Mr. Ramsay seems to pass his time trying to prove other people wrong; his actions stem from belief. F. Ramsey, however, was secure enough to suspend his belief, for the desire of not offending anyone; we find on the second page of the novel that this is not Ramsay’s mentality. While personality and philosophy are separate categories, philosophically Ramsay does not believe that desire should contradict belief, and therefore alter actions. Since he does not see actions as the “combinations of beliefs and desires,” his philosophy and F. Ramsey’s do not correlate (Mellor xvii). Also, however similar their careers could be described, there are differences in that regard that show that Mr. Ramsay is not entirely based on F. Ramsey. First of all, F. Ramsey’s subsequent works were not restatements of his earlier works, as was the case for Ramsay. F. Ramsey delved into several fields: philosophy, mathematics, and economy, and was masterful at them all (Mellor xi). With these disparate fields, it would be difficult to imagine Woolf giving F. Ramsey’s work the description of “amplification, [and] repetition” (Woolf 23). They were not well received, not because of their resemblance to older arguments, but because his “work was hard to take in... because it was so profound and so original” (Mellor xvi). Furthermore, most of F. Ramsey’s philosophical works, though written before Woolf began *To the Lighthouse*, were not published until the 1930’s (Sahlin 2001). She

could not have been privy to such papers. F. Ramsey may have had some influence on the character of Mr. Ramsay, but it is most likely minor. To find the real philosophical mind behind Mr. Ramsay's, it must be known who would have done such groundbreaking work with enough time for Woolf to read it and use it. In this case, the man under investigation is George Edward Moore. Moore's work, *The Refutation of Idealism*, was first published in 1903, allowing ample time for Woolf to read it and mold his opinions to fit her novel. He was well known at the time of Woolf's writing and lent a great many characteristics to Mr. Ramsay, the first being the summary of their careers. Like Mr. Ramsay, Moore was a young man when he first achieved status with his work *Principia Ethica*. Ramsay was 25 when he published his first major work, and Moore was 30 (Rosenbau 339). While it can only be speculation what Woolf thought to be the outcome of F. Ramsey's career, she could be far more certain that Moore's "subsequent career was an anticlimax to some of his friends" (Rosenbau 339). The last part of that sentence is particularly like Ramsay, for it is his friend, Mr. Bankes, who tells Lily "what came after [Ramsay's first work] was more or less amplification, repetition" (Woolf 23). Woolf would not have needed to presume the fate of Moore's career; it was already in a downward spiral by the time she started writing her novel. Additionally, "Moore was also teacher, colleague and conversational partner to the likes of Frank Ramsey" (Schultz 2003). This brings to mind images of Ramsay's relationship with Charles Tansley. F. Ramsay is described as a "militant atheist," and his wife emphasizes that he was not an agnostic (Mellor 2004). Tansley is an atheist as well (Woolf 5). Further, F. Ramsey was, first and foremost, a mathematician. Coincidentally, Tansley is at work on a preface "to some branch of mathematics" (Woolf 7).

However, as is Woolf's tradition, they are not carbon copies. Ramsey was a man who "refrained almost entirely from argumentative controversy" (Richards qtd. In Mellor xvi). On the contrary, Tansley was the sort who was not satisfied until "he had turned the whole thing round and made it somehow reflect himself and disparage them" (Woolf 8). They are similar in some regards, and Woolf could not have known F. Ramsey's manners in a personal way, so she could have been speculating at his personality. Moore seems likelier to be the inspiration for Mr. Ramsay, if a person is to be judged by the company he keeps. What of their philosophical beliefs? Moore was famous for refuting Idealism by finding the distinction between subject and object (Moore 32). He believed that there is an objective reality whether we can notice it objectively or not. This is quite similar to Mr. Ramsay's work, which Andrew sums up as "subject and object and the nature of reality" (Woolf 23). Ramsay is a man of logic; as he has no willingness to sugarcoat things for James, he has no time to romanticize things. When he is standing outside and is thinking "it was his fate...to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away, and there to stand...alone...facing the dark of human ignorance" (Woolf 44). His description of himself bears striking resemblance to the lighthouse, but he does not mention it directly, as his wife does (Woolf 63). He will not assign special meaning to the lighthouse, for the nature of reality does not depend on him assigning special meaning to it. Even when he appears to, he is not aware of it. Moore mentions, "if it is true that my experience can exist, even when I do not happen to be aware of its existence, we have exactly the same reason for supposing that the table can do so" (Moore 44). Because Ramsay is unaware that he is thinking of the lighthouse, it proves that subject and object exist

separately, and thereby refutes Idealism. As Woolf says, “ had he been able to contemplate it fixedly it might have led to something” (Woolf 44). This could refer to his not realizing that he was refuting Idealism, which would have been the breakthrough of the age. Ramsay is unaware that he is refuting Idealism or has the ability to do so, and this is perfect for Moore’s argument and for their correlation. This leads to the matter of whether Ramsay’s fame will last. He spends much of the first section of the novel pondering how long his fame will last, coming to the conclusion that “ his own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two” (Woolf 35). If Moore is the inspiration for Ramsay’s career, this will not be so. With his one article, Moore closed the door on Idealism and ushered in a new century of philosophical thought. Though he may never have reached “ Z,” and his later work was “ an anticlimax,” he still influences philosophy. Likewise, he is, indirectly, immortalized in Woolf’s literature. When Ramsay, on many occasions, repeats the lines from Tennyson’s “ The Charge of the Light Brigade,” it raises a good point. These men, who accomplished nothing; who did not change the tides of the Crimean War, are remembered through a poem; through words passed down. Like them, Ramsay, Stephen, F. Ramsey, and Moore, whose glory may fade quickly, are immortalized in Woolf’s literature. “ When can their glory fade” is a question Tennyson could not answer and still cannot be answered. Many believe that *To the Lighthouse* is a novel for Woolf’s mother. She is portrayed as kind, sympathetic, and the preferred parent. However, one of the last times the novel focuses on Ramsay is when Cam is remembering his kindness; the way he encouraged her thirst for knowledge (Woolf 188-9). This moment, too, was based on the real relationship between Woolf and Stephen (Dalsimer 98). This novel

served as an elegy, of sorts, for Woolf's mother, but it also served to resurrect and preserve the legend of her father: his complexities, his inspirations, and his kindness. All the while, she was most certainly unaware of the experience. Work Cited: Dalsimer, Katherine. *Virginia Woolf: Becoming a Writer*. New Haven: Yale U. P. 2001. Gordon, Lyndall. *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life*. New York: W. W. Norton. 1984 Mellor, D. H., " Philosophy Cambridge Ramsey Biography". [online].. Darwin College (Cambridge University). 2004.—. " Introduction" from Ramsey, Frank. *Philosophical Papers*. Ed. D. H. Mellor. Cambridge U. P. 1990. Moore, George Edward. " The Refutation of Idealism." From *Selected Writings*. Ed. Thomas Baldwin. NY: Routledge. 1993. pp 23-44 O'Connor, J. J & Robertson, E. F., " Ramsey." [online].. University of St. Andrews (Scotland) School of Mathematics and Statistics. October 2003. Rose, Phyllis. *A Life of Virginia Woolf*. New York: Oxford U. P. 1978. Rosenbau, S. P. *English Literature and British Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1971. pp 337-46. Sahlin, Nils-Eric. " Frank Ramsey." [online].. University of Lund: 2001. Schultz, Bart. " G. E. Moore" *Philosopher of the Month*. [online]. 2003. Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt. 1981.