

Gender roles and relationships in virginia woolf's to the lighthouse



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Virginia Woolf's revolutionary novel *To the Lighthouse* provides an incredibly in-depth psychological study of its many characters. Family and friends pass through the Ramsay's summer home in the Hebrides, all of whom carry characteristics, tendencies, and beliefs worthy of analysis on any number of levels. However, examining the ways in which Woolf portrays the sexes in her novel, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay provide a relationship dynamic that remains wholly representative of how the author views men, women, and their respective roles and characteristics. By examining these two central characters, it becomes clear that Woolf aims to provide a commentary on the self-centered, egotistical, and dominant nature of men, while also exploring the sympathetic, domestic, and socially aware qualities of the traditional woman. The novel paints a picture of how a relationship between the sexes should look, making it clear that the woman's primary duty in a relationship is to tenderly stroke the tortured male ego, without receiving anything in return.

This thankless existence is familiar to Mrs. Ramsay, who encompasses what it means to be a woman in the novel. Her beauty is recognized by all, yet her strength as a human being is confined to a domestic context—she holds a gift for creating social harmony—but she even disregards her potential for social impact at times, worried it will stand in the way of her familial duties. She holds a high value on marriage and family, announcing, “ an unmarried woman has missed the best of life,” (49). As for her devotion to her husband, “ there was no one she revered more,” and “ she was not good enough to tie his shoe strings, she felt,” (32). Mrs. Ramsay believed that her husband was “ infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in

comparison with what he gave, negligible,” (39). This level of adoration and commitment could potentially be admired on some level, but the lack of reciprocation from Mr. Ramsay makes it tragic and almost pitiful, in some respects, whittling Mrs. Ramsay’s character down further and further, as she was “ so boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent,” (38). Thus, Woolf paints the traditional female role as one of injustice and tragedy, almost a warning against the insatiable, all consuming, selfish male.

If Mrs. Ramsay represents conventional femininity in relation to marriage and family, Lily Briscoe represents the opposite, making a concerted effort to reject Mrs. Ramsay’s lifestyle. Despite her pride in her own unconventionality, she is unable to shake the memory of “ Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, ‘ Women can’t paint, women can’t write...’” (48), emphasizing her insecurity and anxiety about remaining an independent woman. Though she is extremely critical of Mrs. Ramsay at first, she experiences a transformation over the course of the novel, recognizing her strength, patience, and selflessness. In pages 148-149 we see Lily reflecting, in awe, of Mrs. Ramsay’s sympathy and ability to give, while Mr. Ramsay just continued to take, wondering how “ at this completely inappropriate moment, when he was stooping over her shoe, should she be so tormented with sympathy for him,” (154). In the novel, Lily’s character embodies a woman living outside of gender conventions, thus representing a new, evolving social order, however the fact that Lily remains possessed by

thoughts of Mrs. Ramsay in the end, suggests a certain rejection of the idea of the independent female in this society.

Mr. Ramsay, though clearly very intelligent, is an incredibly self-absorbed character, often exhibiting “ exactingness and egotism,” (36) and described as “ tyrannical,” “ unjust,” (46) and displaying little to none of the sympathy or commitment that his wife displays for their relationship or their family as a whole. In his scarce interactions with his wife, she recognizes that “ it was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius,” (37) and Mrs. Ramsay provides him with that sympathy, security, and support time and time again. Again, her commitment would be commendable, save for the lack of appreciation that Mr. Ramsay holds for his wife. His annoyance, impatience, and distaste for her come far too easily given all that she does for him, reacting to things she says by complaining about “ the extraordinary irrationality of her remark[s],” and quickly enraged by “ the folly of women’s minds,” (31). Additionally, when discussing what makes him happy, Mr. Ramsay only briefly mentions “ his wife’s beauty,” (43) before traveling into a much more lengthy discussion of his work, quickly forgetting about his wife in an effort to wonder whether his work will comprise a legacy to remain for future generations.

This relationship that Virginia Woolf has created, however poignant, is certainly heartbreaking in its nature, as Mrs. Ramsay’s eventual death suggests that she may have given so much of herself away, she could no longer live. *To the Lighthouse* is such a deep and self-conscious narrative that the stark relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay certainly is not an accident. Woolf is providing the reader with a commentary about the <https://assignbuster.com/gender-roles-and-relationships-in-virginia-woolfs-to-the-lighthouse/>

traditional expectations of gender roles, questioning the meaning of a successful marriage between a man and a woman at this time, while simultaneously exploring the idea of a new female role in the character of Lily Briscoe.