

Men and women in virginia woolf's to the lighthouse



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In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf bases her exploration of consciousness on the premise that men and women perceive the world in vastly different ways. However, Woolf believes that creativity can (and must) transcend the boundaries of gender. Life and work are incredibly fragile, but art, she believes, is the means of making one's life significant in a world without order or meaning. "Nothing stays, all changes," Lily Briscoe reflects when mourning for Mrs. Ramsay. "But not words, not paint." (264) The climax of the novel depends upon the primary artist figures, Lily and Augustus Carmichael, to bring together male and female creativity, thus uniting intellect and emotion. As Vivian Gornick would later advocate in *The End of the Novel of Love*, Woolf has replaced romantic love with a more powerful force: creative drive. While Woolf holds great affection for the novel's primary female characters, Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay, they are symbolic of the changing role of women in light of this departure from romantic love. The adult male characters in *To the Lighthouse* are strictly analytical men, philosophers and scientists (with the exception of Mr. Carmichael, the poet). Mr. Ramsay, who plots out knowledge like the letters of the alphabet, is so obsessed with his own insecurities and the transient nature of his work that he has become insufferable. (He wanted something she always found it so difficult to give him; wanted her to tell him that she loved him. And that, no, she could not do...A heartless woman he called her; she never told him that she loved him. But it was not so it was not so. It was only that she never could say what she felt. [123-124]) Charles Tansley (a student of Mr. Ramsay) and William Bankes (a botanist) are both immovable in their opinions and critical of Lily's painting (And it would never be seen; never be

hung even, and there was Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, " Women can't paint, women can't write... [48]). The male characters attempt to create order from life in the most reductive ways possible: Tansley's cynical declarations, Mr. Ramsay's disconnected poetics, or impersonal images (frequently in reference to abstract concepts like Mr. Ramsay's work). Woolf's female characters, however, have a more intuitive view of life. Mrs. Ramsay is honored, above all things, as the ultimate mother figure: beautiful, selfless and nurturing. Her greatest desire is to bring people together: to see her children and friends marry (to create more mothers and children!) or to soothe her guests with the perfect dinner party. Lily Briscoe, on the other hand, is a " free spirit": an artist who will not marry, whose life's work is to transform her private vision into art. For Lily, as it is for Virginia Woolf, art is a means of creating order in an undependable world.

It would be easy to immediately label Mrs. Ramsay simply as old fashioned and Lily Briscoe the new woman, but they are both extremely complex characters. Mrs. Ramsay's maternal aspect does not necessarily make her a submissive woman, indeed, her assurance that her husband has need of her has a gently superior tone to it she believes that men are useless without women (Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection [6]). And while this belief echoes Mr. Ramsey's philosophy, there is a suggestion in *To the Lighthouse* that the cold, often brutal behavior of the men is based in their insecurities and constant need for reassurance. However, it is obvious Woolf (while meaning no malice to Mrs. Ramsey, who bears a striking resemblance to her own mother) believes that women are destined for something greater. The Ramsay's daughters cannot see

themselves living life as their mother has lived it (Prue, Nancy, Rose could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other... [7]), and Lily Briscoe's fierce independence and refusal to marry are central to her character, and the novel itself. Lily rejects the conventional femininity that Mrs. Ramsay represents, though, like everyone else in the novel, cannot help but love her dearly: her much-agonized over portrait of Mrs. Ramsay is, after all, the apex of her artistic vision.

Lily Briscoe is, perhaps, what Mrs. Ramsay would have been, had she been offered something more than the conventional role of a woman. Like Lily, Mrs. Ramsay places a great amount of value on making her life meaningful, though she uses simple human interaction as her medium, rather than art. ([A]nd that all this desire of hers to give, to help, was vanity. For her own self-satisfaction was it that she wished so instinctively to help, to give, that people might say of her, O Mrs. Ramsay! dear Mrs. Ramsay . . . Mrs. Ramsay, of course! And need her and send for her and admire her? Was it not secretly this that she wanted...[41]) And both have a similar view of life as made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach. (47)

But while Lily will end the novel with a triumphant brushstroke, Mrs. Ramsay is frequently associated with images of closed doors. It is in this contrast that one can see the relevance of Vivian Gornick's *The End of the Novel of Love*.

Mrs. Ramsay is from the tradition of women who have missed the

opportunity for a real life for the sake of marriage and a misconception of
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romantic love. Lily Briscoe, however, has arrived at an awful, implicit knowledge that the effort of soul-making is a solitary one, more akin to the act of making art than of making family. It acknowledges, even courts, loneliness. Love, on the other hand, fears loneliness, turns sharply away from it. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily rejects the prospect of marriage for the literal need to create art. It is suggested that she and Augustus Carmichael, as they contemplate the trip to the lighthouse in the closing scene of the novel, have the higher goal Woolf writes about in *A Room of One's Own*: the artistic visions of androgynous minds, which, free from gender prejudice, are far more creatively active and expressive.