



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Figure in the Window

**A Study of the Mother-Daughter Relationship
in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse***

Ritgerð til BA prófs í Ensku

Arndís Dögg Arnardóttir

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse* in 1926 when she was 44 years old, and it was published a year later. Her mother Julia Stephens died in 1895, when Virginia was only 13 years old. The memory of her haunted Virginia from the day she died until she finished writing *To the Lighthouse*.

The story is on the surface about two days, ten years apart, of the Ramsay family in their summer home and their interactions with a few choice guests. It is also about plans for a trip to the nearby lighthouse, about a painting that is to be painted, and how losing loved ones affects a person. The characters most important to this essay are Mrs Ramsay, wife and mother, and Lily Briscoe, a spinster and painter invited to the family holiday by Mrs Ramsay. In depth, the story is about these two women, the idealized versions of Mother and Daughter and how their relationship affects the daughter and her choices in life. It also has implications for her art and her identity as a woman and how the death of that mother affects her.

This essay focuses on the Mother–Daughter relationship as it is represented in the book. Mrs Ramsay and Lily are examined as well as Mrs Stephens and Virginia Woolf, and to what extent the two women in the book represent the real mother and daughter and their lives. It looks at the affects the loss of a mother has on a daughter and the effect the mother-daughter relationship has on the artist.

Virginia Woolf did not think of *To the Lighthouse* as a novel but rather an elegy for her parents and especially her mother. It is her most critically acclaimed work of art and her most personal. This essay is an attempt to analyse how much of Mrs Stephens is in Mrs Ramsay and how relevant this comparison of these women, their families and histories is to the construction and meaning of *To the Lighthouse*.

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Introduction

The similarities and resemblances between Mrs Ramsay and Virginia Woolf's mother Julia Stephens, as well as the similarities between the Ramsay and Stephens families in general, and the events that shaped the lives of both have been pointed out by critics. But how much of that is true? How much of Mrs Stephens is in Mrs Ramsay and how relevant is this comparison of these women, families and histories to the construction and meaning of *To the Lighthouse*?

The aim of this essay is to answer these questions by studying the character of Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe as idealized images of mother and daughter, to see how they relate to Mrs Stephens and Virginia Woolf, and to see how the relationship between mother and daughter and what, if any, effects the lack of motherhood has on Lily Briscoe and therewith the author herself both as a woman and as an artist. We will look at Mrs Ramsay's character and role in the novel, we will look at what Virginia Woolf had to say about her own mother and how much of her is present in the character of Mrs Ramsay. We will examine Lily Briscoe and Virginia Woolf and how closely linked they are, how the mother – daughter relationship is present between Mrs Ramsay and Lily and what effect that relationship has on Lily, both as a person and on her art. How accurate a representative of Virginia Woolf is Lily Briscoe?

To the Lighthouse is, from what I can see from Virginia Woolf's diaries, memoirs and what others have written about it, a very personal book for the author. She is weaving parts of her childhood into the story, especially the memory of her mother and father and the family's summer holidays in St Ives. We see glimpses of her childhood, the relationship between her parents and her feelings towards both her mother and her father. Virginia Woolf lost her mother at the tender age of thirteen and had her first mental breakdown that same year. According to the biographical preface in my Oxford edition of the novel, written by Frank Kermode, which is the copy used writing this essay, the mental breakdown may have been in relation to "the sexual molestation of which her half-brother George Duckworth is accused,"¹ but I am sure her mother's death played a large part as well. From my own experience, the relationship between mother and daughter is a very special one, unlike any other relationship I have with anyone else, even with my father or my sisters. I can attest to that when it is severed by

¹ Frank Kermode, "Biographical Preface" in *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), viii.

death, it can have devastating effects and be especially difficult to recover from. I think the author saw the book as an elegy to her parents and from her diary we can see that she intended her father to be at the core of it:

This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mother's; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in – life, death &c. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished*, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel – However, I must refrain. I must write a few little stories first, & let the Lighthouse simmer, adding to it between tea and dinner till it is complete for writing out.²

Then as we read through the novel, it becomes so much more than a story in which her father is at the core. The mother takes centre stage and the relationship with the mother and how it moulds and changes a person is the thread through the book, much rather than the relationship one has with one's father, in my opinion.

In Lily Briscoe we find a substitute for Virginia Woolf herself, though we can see possible glimpses of the author in the character of Mrs Ramsay's youngest child, James, especially when it comes to his mother being the centre of his world and his father being ten thousand times worse than her (TL 8).³ We see Lily struggle with her art and her identity: "Such she often felt herself – struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: 'But this is what I see; this is what I see', and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her" (TL 28), and we see her in her subservient role to her surrogate mother Mrs Ramsay. How she adores and admires her and what she stands for, the life she has, the life she provides for her family, which is also part of her identity crisis. She is not married, has no children and expresses her lust for the life Mrs Ramsay has, in her silent burst of passion (TL 28).

Virginia Woolf struggled herself with the very same problems that Lily does, and her triumph at the end is bitter sweet, as she accepts the choices she made in her life and lays old ghosts to rest.

² Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume III. 1925-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 18-19. All further references to this book in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated *Diary*.

³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), ed. Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8. All further references to this book in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated TL.

Mother

“During the reign of Queen Victoria, a woman's place was in the home, as domesticity and motherhood were considered by society at large to be a sufficient emotional fulfilment for females.”⁴

Mrs Ramsay's primary role in the book is being the mother, and to fulfil the demands of the traditional standards to which women were held in Victorian times. She is married to an academic, she has several children, sees herself as charitable and kind, and invites those she deems less fortunate to stay with them or near them at the summer home. She looks after her family and visits the poor. Mrs Ramsay is above all else described as a beautiful woman, “The happier Helen of our days” (TL 38), and we see that she does not really appreciate or understand the needs of others, as becomes obvious in her desire to play match-maker, whether people suit each other or not, namely Lily Briscoe and William Bankes and Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley. She manages to arrange for Minta and Paul to get married to each other, which we are later shown was not a happy union for either, but luckily she is less successful in her efforts when it comes to Lily and Bankes.

She is a little petty and just as judgemental as she deems her children to be: “Strife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices, twisted into the very fibre of being, oh that they should begin so early, Mrs Ramsay deplored. They were so critical, her children” (TL 14). Mrs Ramsay thinks they should not invent differences between people; that people are different enough all on their own. We can see on numerous occasions in the book how judgmental she herself is, from how she sees Lily Briscoe and her looks (TL 25), to what she thinks of Charles Tansley, feeling sorry for him to her children in one instance and thinking of him as an “odious little man” in another (TL 22), or even of Mr Carmichael, whom she frustratingly cannot seem to charm.

Whatever her faults, her children love her, her husband loves her and she is the heart of their home. She is the one who worries about funds and repairs to their home. Her children look to her for guidance and comfort, she is the buffer between them and their father, she is the one who everyone wants to please, whose attention they want.

⁴ Lynn Abrams, “The Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain. BBC History,” Web. Accessed 9 August 2001.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_02.shtml.

She appeases her husband when he is rampaging about one thing or another, “someone had blundered” (TL 46), and he looks to her for validation and assurance of his own importance and brilliance when he needs it, much like her children. We get the sense that she does not really have any deep relationships outside of her family. There is really no one we can point to and say that her relationship with that person is on an equal footing. Although loved and admired for her beauty, no one seems to know her really. Is her beauty only skin deep, does anyone bother to find out? Is there anything to find out? We see she is perhaps not perfectly happy, both by how sad she looks sitting and knitting (TL 40), the way she folds in on herself after she has reassured her husband of his importance (TL 54), and also at the dinner party, when Lily observes of Mrs Ramsay: “How old she looks, how worn she looks, Lily thought and how remote” (TL 114).

Mrs Ramsay mostly spends her time looking after the children, assigning love interests to unsuspecting young people or middle-aged bachelors, and she poses, a figure in the window, for a picture for Lily Briscoe, whom she feels rather sorry for. She is an anchor for her husband when he needs it, and she tolerates Charles Tansley, Mr Carmichael and William Bankes to a degree. We see her interact with both Bankes and Tansley at the dinner table, and through Lily’s observation we see how Mrs Ramsay really feels about men: “‘Do you write many letters, Mr Tansley?’ asked Mrs Ramsay, pitying him too, Lily supposed; for that was true of Mrs Ramsay – she pitied men always as if they lacked – something – women never, as if they had something” (TL 115-116).

In his book on Virginia Woolf, Michael Rosenthal comments on Mrs Ramsay’s great capacity for love, how she is love personified in *To the Lighthouse*, “Bringing people together by the force of her love.”⁵ I don’t necessarily agree with Rosenthal in his observation. I do not think that Mrs Ramsay loves outside her family. I think she loves her children and her husband, though he frustrates her at times, and was perhaps not her first choice of a paramour, and she takes good care of her family. She invites a number of people to join the family in their activities at their summer home, but I do not think she has any particular love for these people. Charles Tansley is there to stroke her husband’s ego, William Bankes is an old friend of Mr Ramsay’s, Mr Carmichael she feels is unhappy due to his own wife, which is why he is there, and Minta Doyle and

⁵ Michael Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 108.

Paul Rayley are merely present in the book to show us how short-sighted she is when it comes to other people. She reflects on how much nicer it is for Minta to be around herself and be under her wing than that of her own parents and she works quite hard to make her feel beholden to her and to get her engaged to Paul Rayley (TL 76-79). She feels sorry for Lily Briscoe with her “Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face . . .” (TL 37) and concludes that it will take a clever man to see the charm in her looks. I do not think Mrs Ramsay invited Lily to participate in the family holiday out of any particular love; it seems more that she was invited out of pity and perhaps to give Mrs Ramsay a sense of accomplishment. She does want to help the poor and unfortunate ones, which is what she thinks of every one of the characters in the novel, who are not a part of her family. She feels sorry for them, whether poor, unfortunate or strange, or she has an agenda, a mission, such as marrying off Minta and Paul. “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?” (TL 58).

Virginia Woolf talks about her own mother at some length in a letter/essay called “Reminiscences,” which she addressed to her nephew Julian Bell, her sister Vanessa and Clive Bell’s oldest son. She describes her mother as being “. . . not only the most beautiful of women, as her portraits will tell you, but also one of the most distinct.”⁶

She talks about how her mother’s first husband died and left her a widowed mother at the age of 24, how the experiences one associates with a whole lifetime were crammed into a few short years. “She had been happy as few people are happy, for she had passed like a princess in a pageant from her supremely beautiful youth to marriage and motherhood, without awakenment” (MB 32). Virginia Woolf is not certain, however that her mother’s first husband was really worthy of her but concludes that after his death “. . . she determined to consecrate those years as the golden ones; when as she phrased it perhaps, she had not known the sorrow and the crime of the world because she had lived with a man, stainless of his kind, exalted in a world of pure love and beauty” (MB 32). She then goes on to describe how the death of her first husband led to her renouncing religion and how she began to exercise her mind by reading

⁶ Virginia Woolf, “Reminiscences,” in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, second edition (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1985), 32. All further references to this book in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated MB.

extensively: “In particular she read some early articles by your grandfather and liked them better than she liked him” (MB 33).

Virginia Woolf had great affection for her mother and describes her further:

Her intellectual gifts had always been those that find their closest expression in action; she had great clearness of insight, sound judgement, humour, and a power of grasping very quickly the real nature of someone’s circumstances, and so arranging that the matter, whatever it was, fell into its true proportions at once. Sometimes with her natural impetuosity, she took in on herself to despatch difficulties with a high hand, like some commanding Empress. But most often I think her service, when it was not purely practical, lay in simply helping people by the light of her judgement and experience, to see what they really meant or felt. (MB 35)

Mrs Stephens was a mother of eight children (gave birth to seven, one was a daughter of Mr Stephens when she married him) and, like Mrs Ramsay in her own home, she was the reason the household ran as smoothly as it did, and it must have been an incredible feat:

All her gifts had something swift, decisive, witty even in their nature; so there could be no question of dullness or drudgery in her daily work, however lugubrious it seemed of itself. She was sensitive by temperament and impatient of stupidity; and while she was there the whole of that interminable and incongruous procession which is the life of a large family, went merrily; with exquisite humour in its incidents very often, or something grotesque or impressive in its arrangement, perpetually lit up by her keen attention, her amazing sense of the life that is in the weakest most threadbare situations. (MB 35)

Mrs Stephens shared other traits with Mrs Ramsay, such as meddling in the affairs of others, perhaps because the abrupt change to what they had planned for their lives made them determined to help others live their lives as they deemed best, and there was not a moment to lose:

Life rather had taught her that facts, as she interpreted them, were by themselves of supreme importance; it was a matter of anxious moment to her that Lisa Stillman should like her brother-in-law, or that a workman wounded in an accident should find healthy employment. She kept herself marvellously alive to all the changes that went on around her, as though she heard perpetually the ticking of a vast clock and could never forget that some day it would cease for all of us. (MB 35)

As much as I believe Virginia Woolf loved her mother, I have to wonder if she really remembered her this vividly, if her memories of her mother are in fact her own? When we lose someone we loved dearly, we tend to only cling to memories that are good and bright and lovely of that person. Our memories of the person become immersed in loss and the need to remember everything about them. We talk about them to others who loved them and their memories get mixed with our memories and things change in the collective “memory” of those who contribute. I wonder, therefore, if Mrs Stephens, as portrayed in the author’s memoirs collected in *Moments of Being*, is not just another of Virginia Woolf’s wonderful characters? How much can a person who has suffered great losses from the age of thirteen and had a number of nervous breakdowns remember of their mother who died when they were so young? She writes in one of her memoirs, “A Sketch of the Past”:

The tragedy of her death was not that it made one, now and then and very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal; and us solemn and self-conscious. We were made to act parts that we did not feel; to fumble for words we did not know. It obscured, it dulled. (MB 95)

For the purpose of this essay, the character of Mrs Stephens is viewed as a portrayal by her daughter in her memoirs and diaries, referred to in this essay, in order to see how much of her mother Virginia Woolf gave to Mrs Ramsay.

We see the similarities between Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Stephens quite clearly. They both had a tragedy early in life, which took away their first love, both married intellectuals, who were more pleased with themselves and their work than they possibly had a right to be. Both men seem somewhat overbearing and evoke strong feelings of resentment in their children. *To The Lighthouse* opens with Mrs Ramsay being an

indulgent mother to James, giving him hope and being loving and gentle. We see the mother and child in a room, the love between them clear as day and then the next scene brings the father, Mr Ramsay, and with him the hope given by the mother is smothered by the father (TL 7-8). James is then described as wanting nothing more than to murder his father, by any means possible at that moment, for:

Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr Ramsay excited in his children's breasts by his mere presence; standing as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgement. What he said was true. It was always true. (TL 8)

Virginia Woolf said of her own father as she remembered him on his birthday, November 28th 1928, years after he had passed away: "Father's birthday. He would have been 96, yes, today; & could have been 96, like other people one has known; but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; - inconceivable" (*Diary* 208). She says in other memoirs that he was a tyrant, ". . . the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centred, the self-pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternately loved and hated father – that dominated me then" (MB 116). Perhaps that is why she thinks she would not have become a writer had he lived. Perhaps she would have been forced into the traditional female role of keeping house for him or marrying at an early age.

Both women had numerous children who adored them and as we see from Virginia Woolf's words about how life "went merrily" while her mother was there (MB 35) and from the description of the house deteriorating, in the middle chapter of *To the Lighthouse*, and how different it was when Mrs Ramsay was alive; these two women were the heart of their families. Both indulged their children it seems. We see how indulgent Mrs Ramsay is with James in the beginning of the book and how she dotes on all her children, covers up horrors for Cam, thinks it fine if Andrew wants to dissect a crab or James wants to make soup from seaweed, she just thinks they are gifted, her children (TL 38-39). As for Mrs Stephens, her daughter says in the letter to her nephew:

Four children were born to her; there were four others already, older demanding other care; she taught us, was their companion, and soothed, cheered, inspired, nursed, deceived your grandfather; and any one coming for help found her invincibly upright in her place, with time to give, earnest consideration, and the most practical sympathy. (MB 34)

She read and probably was the one to encourage her daughters to read whatever they wanted and to learn. They were not allowed to have a formal education like the boys, as was the norm in their day, but apparently they had the run of their parents' library, which was extensive, and this was not normal in those days.⁷

Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Stephens make similar choices for their lives, both may have chosen one specific path in the beginning when in love and had their lives planned out, but then had been forced to make do with something else or rather someone else. But both marriages seem relatively happy, the husbands involved with their philosophy and the wives with their children and their charity work. We see how Mrs Ramsay soothes her husband and strokes his ego when needed (TL 53) and Mrs Stephens tells her children "Your father is a great man" (MB 39). The moments of tenderness between Virginia Woolf's parents, "Beautiful often, even to our eyes, were their gestures, their glances of pure and unutterable delight in each other" (MB 37), are somewhat echoed in the novel in the scenes between Mr and Mrs Ramsay, especially in the way Lily sees them: "Directly one looked up and saw them, what she called 'being in love' flooded them" (TL 64), and when they are strolling together and he kisses her hand in response to her questioning whether he is sorry to have married her, and she delights in the fact that he seems as a young man still, despite being over sixty (TL 95). Also when he wants her to tell him she loves him but she is unable to speak the words: "And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him" (TL 167).

Mrs Ramsay has dreams like her husband; she too would like to leave a legacy behind, be known for something other than having a family and being beautiful. She has aspirations and dreams of becoming "an investigator elucidating the social problem" (TL 15) and we see her visiting the poor, whether she is in the summer home or in London making notes on her visits. She goes on these visits to the less fortunate, but are

⁷ Kermode, vii.

they to aid the poor, or is she in search of admiration, adulation, immortality? “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!” (TL 58). This desire to leave a legacy of her own is further stressed by her thoughts of her accomplishment with Paul and Minta’s engagement, her expectations of how “. . . wound about in their hearts, however long they lived she would be woven. . .” (TL 153).

Mrs Stephens had aspirations outside the family as well, in nursing and aiding the less fortunate than herself. She visited the poor, nursed the ill and became an agony aunt to numerous people who would write to her:

Each evening she sat at her table, after some laborious afternoon, her hand moving ceaselessly, at least a little erratically, as she wrote answers, advice, jests, warning, sympathy, her wise brow and deep eyes presiding, so beautiful still, but now so worn, so profoundly experienced that you could hardly call them sad. (MB 38)

She takes the time to answer all who write to her, though she states her relief that there is no post on Saturday nights (MB 38) it is not quite convincing. Perhaps she, too, wanted to be admired and sent for and needed?

Mrs Ramsay, unlike Mrs Stephens, is not a perceived intellectual. She does not read, not even poetry books sent to her with flowery compliments from the poet himself (TL 38), and she has no idea really about her husband’s work. Her husband does not think her a great intellect; he doubts she understands what she reads, but when he thinks how astonishingly beautiful she is, he is quite satisfied with having a beauty for a wife and not an intellectual (TL 163). Perhaps he could not handle a wife who was considered his equal intellectually? He does seem the sort who could possibly not even conceive of the possibility that a woman, let alone his wife, could be his equal. Mrs Stephens on the other hand read quite a bit on religion and philosophy, her husband’s work among other things (MB 32-33). I think it must have been thanks to her influence that Virginia Woolf was encouraged by her father to read whatever she wanted,⁸ as we are told that he was a Victorian gentleman (MB 113).

⁸ Kermode, vii.

Daughter

“A daughter is a mother's gender partner, her closest ally in the family confederacy, an extension of her self. And mothers are their daughters' role model, their biological and emotional road map, the arbiter of all their relationships.”⁹

Mrs Ramsay's actual daughters play a minimal role in *To the Lighthouse*, the role of daughter falls allegorically to Lily Briscoe, who is not even a part of Mrs Ramsay's family, and through their relationship we experience the mother – daughter dynamic which is so profound and pronounced in the book. Lily Briscoe is shy, introvert, naïve, nervous and not quite comfortable in her own skin. She is not confident about her art and she is tortured by Charles Tansley's words “Women can't paint, women can't write . . .” (TL 67) which attack her very identity.

The relationship between Lily and Mrs Ramsay is not on an equal footing at all. It is based on a sort of mother and daughter relationship and in the beginning of the novel the daughter is childlike in her thoughts and admirations of her mother despite her actual years. Mrs Ramsay is portrayed very much as the mother figure, the giver of life and love, not only in Lily's eyes, but the author's as well. As the book progresses, even within that first part that only spans a day, we witness the gradual change in the way Lily looks at Mrs Ramsay, like the view of a child growing up and away from its mother. At first she is enamoured of Mrs Ramsay, wanting to tell her how much in love she is with her life and wanting to fling herself at her knees and profess her childlike love for her, or rather her motherhood, life and situation. (TL 28) Then we see Lily gradually growing up, like a teenager she starts seeing that perhaps her mother is not perfection personified as she observes her at the dinner table looking old, tired and remote (TL 114)

Susan Dick, in her book *Virginia Woolf*, says about Lily's relationship with Mrs Ramsay and her function in the novel:

Besides serving Woolf's interest in exploring modes of perception, Lily functions as an important critic of the role Mrs Ramsay plays for the other characters, that of the beautiful, self-sacrificing wife and mother, the celebrated

⁹ Victoria Secunda, *Women and Their Fathers: The Sexual and Romantic Impact of the First Man in Your Life* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1992), 54.

‘angel in the house’. The tension between Lily’s profound and unspoken love for Mrs Ramsay and her recognition of the limitations of Mrs Ramsay’s understanding of other people’s needs and desires is shown most memorably during the dinner scene when Lily, understanding Mrs Ramsay’s silent plea that she ‘be nice’ to Charles Tansley, toys with the notion of *not* being nice to him.¹⁰

She then goes on to say that out of her sympathy for Mrs Ramsay she decides not to not be nice to him and thinks about her painting instead, her work, which shields her against Tansley’s prejudice against women, claiming they are not able to work or write.¹¹ Lily then, rebelliously, decides she is going to change the way the painting looks, she is going to move things about as she sees fit, to suit her vision. She is not to be pitied; she has her work (TL 115).

Norman Friedman has the following to say about Lily in his essay on double vision in *To the Lighthouse*:

Lily likewise is a complex figure: a spinster disinterested in ordinary sexual attachments, she is nevertheless capable of a fierce outburst of love; as an artist perpetually terrified by a blank canvas, she still manages to approach a solution to the complex problem of the art-life relationship.¹²

He is right about her, Lily does not seem to feel she needs to marry a man to satisfy the notion of others, such as Mrs Ramsay, who relentlessly tries to talk her into marrying William Bankes. She likes Bankes, they have easy discourse and a budding friendship but she is not blind to his admiration of Mrs Ramsay and understands it quite well. Even though at the beginning she is insecure and not as comfortable in her own skin as she would like to be, she is not easily manipulated into matrimony. She wants to please her surrogate mother, Mrs Ramsay, but not at the expense of her freedom. As she matures in the story we can see how her childlike love for Mrs Ramsay changes from blind admiration to a more mature emotion. It changes from an intense burst of emotion and the sort of longing, that one feels most acutely as a child or an adolescent, to a calmer acceptance of her own life and the deeper sense of love one feels when it is

¹⁰ Susan Dick, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 53.

¹¹ Dick, 54.

¹² Norman Friedman, “Double Vision in ‘To the Lighthouse,’” in *Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse: A Casebook*, ed. Morris Beja (1970; London: Macmillan, 1980), 153.

realised that the person we love is not without fault and that we love them in spite of that.

Lily's growth, which starts in the first chapter of the book, takes place over the years we are told about, in the middle chapter of *To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes." This chapter is devoted to change, decay and loss. We are informed of Mrs Ramsay's death, and then see how that affects the house, how it affects the family in so much as they do not even visit anymore. We learn that the Ramsay's eldest daughter Prue has died and that Andrew has been killed in the war. We sense the uncertainty in the world brought on by the war which is echoed in the uncertainty in the Ramsay family brought on by their loss, of Mrs Ramsay especially. When reading the description of the deterioration of the house, we are reminded of Andrew's explanation of his father's work; of subject and object and the nature of reality, and how we are to think of a kitchen table when you're not there (TL 33). We see the house getting gradually worse until the time comes when the family will return. We are then told of cleaning and repairs, the attempt to return the house to its former state, though we know that the house will never be the same, for she is gone. It is time to move on.

The last chapter shows us how Mrs Ramsay's death forces Lily to grow up. She is not as insecure in her own skin anymore, she is not blind with childlike love for Mrs Ramsay anymore. She sees her much more clearly and the possible mistakes she made with her impetuosity, such as match-making Minta and Paul, and it does not lessen her love for Mrs Ramsay, but rather changes it from a childlike admiration and love to a more mature and possibly deeper emotion, to loving someone while knowing their shortcomings, despite their shortcomings. Lily, like Virginia Woolf, is deprived of her mother too early. She has to go through the rest of her life without her; she has to deal with the repercussions her death has upon her and she has to then move on to make her own choices. It is no coincidence that Lily is 44 when she finally finishes the painting. Virginia Woolf was 44 when she wrote the story, and both manage to finish their works of art, each one an elegy to a mother or mother-figure who has passed on.

Mother-daughter relationship and the Role of the Artist

“For we think back through our mothers if we are women.”¹³

I quite like Norman Friedman’s analysis of Lily Briscoe and her role in the book, a “complex figure”, “spinster”, passionate in her art though perpetually insecure (Friedman 153), and that he could almost as easily have been talking about the author herself. Although Virginia Woolf was not a spinster, as she had married Leonard at the age of 30, it is suggested by many critics that her marriage was not a conventional one even though at the start of it she perhaps expected it to be.

Elaine Showalter, in her book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, suggests that Virginia Woolf viewed her marriage to Leonard in 1912 as a guarantee for love, security and normalcy, though she was not sexually attracted to him.¹⁴ That she expected that to change and that they would have children but was deemed frigid by herself, her husband and her sister Vanessa Bell, who was consulted on the matter: “The inadequacy Virginia felt when she contrasted the sexual side of her life with Vanessa’s was compounded by Leonard’s decision that they should not have children.”¹⁵

Perhaps the relationship between William Bankes and Lily Briscoe, their friendship, is somewhat representative of the relationship between Virginia Woolf and her husband Leonard Woolf. Lily does not take the final step and marry Bankes, unlike Virginia Woolf, therefore making her perhaps the most independent character of all, both personally and artistically. She consciously decides to go against Mrs Ramsay’s wishes and possibly society’s expectations and not marry, though she does admit that, had Mrs Ramsay lived, she might have succumbed to her will and married William Bankes (TL 236).

I had always thought that it was a conscious decision by Virginia Woolf herself not to have children. It had seemed to me from this book, how she describes the fates of the beautiful women, the wives, the mothers, and their bitter ends, that she did not want

¹³ Virginia Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own,” in *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 99.

¹⁴ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 271.

¹⁵ Showalter, 272.

children and that being a mother was limiting to the creative self; that you could choose to create works of art or children, not both.

Elaine Showalter, however, claims that Virginia Woolf “. . . had happily anticipated having children and did not know of Leonard’s misgivings until some time after they married.” And then she further claims that “Virginia was led to feel not only that she had renounced a primary female role, failed to accomplish the act that is woman’s rite of passage into adulthood, but also that in marrying Leonard she had destroyed his opportunities to be a father.” This leads to one of her most serious breakdowns and a suicide attempt.¹⁶ The deprivation of motherhood leaves Virginia Woolf without even the possibility of identifying herself with that which she must have seen as the most feminine of all. It is suggested by Showalter that Leonard’s decision may have been because of Virginia’s mental state, that “. . . in the end Leonard decided and persuaded Virginia to agree that, although they both wanted children, it would be too dangerous for her to have them.” She goes on to say that she believes Leonard was probably right about this, for she herself finds it “hard to see Virginia as a mother.”¹⁷

I am not sure I agree with Showalter’s assessment of Virginia Woolf, I find it hard to offer an opinion as no one knows how having a child would have affected her. It could have changed her mental state permanently; it could have altered her writing or even prevented it, though I suspect she could have hired a nanny. At least we know it would have spared her the mental anguish brought on by the decision being taken from her. Showalter claims “. . . it was to be a permanent source of grief to her and, in later years, she could never think of Vanessa’s fruitful state without misery and envy.”¹⁸ This anguish is, according to psychological studies, quite common. In *The Mother-Daughter Relationship, Echoes Through Time*, a collection of works of professionals in the field of psychology and psychoanalysis of mother-daughter relationships, Maria V. Bergmann, in her study “The Effect of Role Reversal on Delayed Marriage and Maternity,” says about women who had passed the child-bearing age without having achieved maternity: “They then went through a period of intense mourning for not

¹⁶ Showalter, 272, 273, 274-75.

¹⁷ Showalter, 273.

¹⁸ Showalter, 273.

having been able to produce a child. The lost child represented the patient herself as well as the loss of a symbiotic union with her own mother.”¹⁹

Virginia Woolf fails to connect fully with her mother, as she cannot put herself in her mother’s shoes being childless herself: the daughter never becomes a mother. On more than one occasion we see how Mrs Ramsay reflects on the joy of children and motherhood, “. . . people must marry; people must have children” (TL 82) and how she wants to keep her children, especially Cam and James, from aging. She would preferably have a baby in her arms always (TL 79). William Bankes also ponders the marriage of Mr Ramsay, of his having a family and the difference between the two of them, one married with eight children the other one widowed and childless, desperate to not have “dried and shrunk” (TL 31-32). He weighs and measures Mr Ramsay’s life before and after marrying and having children and finds himself both relieved to not be in his shoes and quite envious at the same time (TL 32-33). Children seem a source of happiness to other people; he cannot see how eight children can be raised on philosophy and they are messy and noisy, but he is envious of Mr Ramsay with Cam crawling over him (TL 32-33) and we see how Mr Ramsay’s children are more likely to become his legacy rather than his alphabet of philosophy.

Perhaps Lily describing the creating of a picture as a child being born, “this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child” (TL 28), is not so surprising in view of the fact that she as well has no children of her own and neither does Virginia Woolf, despite the fact that “people must have children” (TL 82).

The notion that to Lily Briscoe and Virginia Woolf, the creation of a work of art is like giving birth is not so farfetched. Sometimes there is a long gestation period, ten years for Lily’s painting, and the author indicates the slow nature of perfecting this story when she talks about writing *To the Lighthouse* in her diaries, about writing a few little stories first and letting the novel simmer until it is ready to come out (*Diary* 18-19). Moreover, in her essay on Woolf and the creative imagination, Harvena Richter states: “Virginia Woolf experienced illness and pain during the creation of her work; after each

¹⁹ Maria V. Bergmann, “The Effect of Role Reversal on Delayed Marriage and Maternity,” in *The Mother-Daughter Relationship: Echoes Through Time*, ed. Gerd H. Fenchel (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1998), 191.

novel was published she suffered a breakdown, which can be linked to postpartum depression.”²⁰

In the final words of the novel we can also see how much it takes out of Lily Briscoe to paint her picture: “Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (TL 281). Human beings like to think of life as a great big circle, we sometimes talk about things coming full circle or closing the circle. Neither of these women experienced the final connection with their mothers, whether it be a biological mother or a symbolic one; the circle of life is not complete for them. Lily perhaps is not obviously burdened by this and neither is Virginia Woolf, at first glance. But let us not forget Lily’s passionate outburst, though be it a silent one, as to how in love with Mrs Ramsay’s life she is. Virginia Woolf, we have come to understand, wanted children and what was considered normal family life after she married Leonard Woolf. We know the mothers’ influence, the pressure of “must marry, must have children” must have been ingrained in them both pretty much from the start and the fact that not conforming to this pressure makes them have more in common with the men in the story, who focus on their work, desperate to leave some intellectual legacy behind. We are not told what legacy Lily may leave behind, as the one painting she finally finishes in the book is destined for the attic, where no-one will ever see it. But then, for Virginia Woolf, it is not the actual painting that is important; it is the fact that it is impressionistic or abstract that we should notice, and the journey it takes Lily to finish it. Her growth as a person is represented by the way she takes charge of her own vision, her own work: “With sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished” (TL 281). Virginia Woolf left a wonderful legacy of her own. She is by far the most well known for her work of her family. Her husband Leonard Woolf is only recognised by most for being that, her husband, and we probably would not know of her siblings and/or parents except in relation to her. Her legacy is one that Mr Ramsay could only dream of: a critically acclaimed body of work with a style all her own.

²⁰ Harvena Richter, “Hunting the Moth: Virginia Woolf and the Creative Imagination,” in *Virginia Woolf. Revaluation and Continuity: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Ralph Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 27.

Conclusion

To the Lighthouse is a splendid elegy to Virginia Woolf's parents. I think we can see quite clearly the similarities between Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Stephens and I think that the author wrote quite a bit of her father and her family into the story. Of course this is not a biography, it is a novel, though the author uses it to silence her ghosts:

It is perfectly true that she obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently, involuntary, rush. . . . and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. (MB 81)

She then goes on to explain that after expressing the emotions she had carried for a long time, she managed to lay them to rest. As the portrait drawn up of Mrs Stephens in this essay is the one Virginia Woolf herself gave of her mother, we can see the similarities between her and Mrs Ramsay quite clearly. The question of whether Mrs Ramsay truly resembles Mrs Stephens is more difficult to answer. Mostly the information readily available about Mrs Stephens is in relation to Virginia Woolf and her representation of her. The presence of her mother, her father, their family and her childhood is what makes the story. The way it flows from one single day, then through ten years and then back to one day is exciting. The first part is all about the presence of Mrs Ramsay and how she affects everything. She is the centre point and everything revolves around her, much as Virginia Woolf presents her own mother's position and presence in the Stephens household (MB 81). The middle part, which happens over the longest period of time, is the part where we are just briefly informed what has happened and in no detail. Nothing really happens that we can see or get involved emotionally in, we are just told that Mrs Ramsay dies, that Pru and Andrew die, and that the family never comes to the house, and that it deteriorates from lack of use and attention. The last part of the book is all about the absence of Mrs Ramsay and how that affects everyone who has returned there. Mr Ramsay must go to the Lighthouse and Lily must finish her picture. We get a sense of closure as the story comes full circle. At the start there was a trip that was never taken and a painting that was never finished. Now, ten years later,

these tasks will be finished in memory of Mrs Ramsay. This is an ending perhaps as cathartic for the characters, as finishing the book was for Virginia Woolf. *To the Lighthouse* had always, for me, been about Virginia Woolf's mother and the choices the author made in her own life. Choices of a life different from the one her mother lead of family and motherhood. It seems clear from the fate of the mothers in the book, who either die or are stuck handing tools to their husbands, that she did not want to be one of those women. I assumed she consciously chose not to have children, not to conform to the Victorian standards of femininity and the traditional role assigned to women. It came, therefore, as a bit of a surprise that she had indeed wanted children and perhaps a more conventional life with her husband than she wound up having. This discovery is not disappointing in any way in fact I think it makes Virginia Woolf even more human than she seemed before.

The author says in her diary about the finished novel:

Dear me, how lovely some parts of *The Lighthouse* are! Soft & pliable, I think deep, & never a word wrong for a page at a time. This I feel about the dinner party, & the children in the boat; but not of Lily on the lawn. That I do not much like. But I like the end. (*Diary* 132)

I think mostly, she is right. I wholeheartedly agree with the first part of Virginia Woolf's statement about *To the Lighthouse*. It is lovely, the way it is written flows beautifully, and the end is brilliant, but unlike the author, I happen to like Lily on the lawn. I wonder why the author did not. Perhaps it was a style issue for her? Hardly an issue with the text, as that could have been fixed. Or could it possibly be the vulnerability and raw emotions of the scene? Lily is emotionally exposed in the scene on the lawn; she is as insecure as she ever is in the novel about her painting, her skills and her artistic identity. She cannot bear to show anyone her half-finished work, she is shaken by tumultuous emotions towards Mrs Ramsay and she realises that she will never marry Mr Bankes, no matter how much her symbolic mother Mrs Ramsay had wished it. Perhaps it is these feelings that the author dislikes? I admire the bravery Virginia Woolf showed by writing this story, she shows her own vulnerability, her own feelings of insecurity, love, loss and longing on every page, it is what makes the story so successful and such a joy to read. Had the story not been so filled with the author's personal life, her memories of her mother and her own personality, I do not think *To the*

Lighthouse would have been as it is, her most successful story and the crowning jewel of her legacy.

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