# "This Mania of Hers for Marriage"

## Nonromantic Connection in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*

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Virginia Woolf's modernist masterpiece *To The Lighthouse* is perhaps best known in contemporary circles as a sapphic tragedy—about what it means to be a woman and to love another woman in a society where heterosexual marriage and homemaking are seen as the only purposes of a woman's life. Certainly, heterosexual marriage and homemaking are presented as the societal norm for English women in the book, and the two female protagonists are forced to grapple with the implications of that norm throughout the novel. But the moral of the story is not as clear cut, or as tragic, as one might assume.

*To The Lighthouse* is, first and foremost, an expression of grief. Published in 1927, the novel is a direct response to the outbreak of World War One, much like many of Virginia Woolf's other works. It is a character-driven piece with little emphasis on action; it shines in its omniscient depictions of relationships between the many characters who populate its plot. The dual protagonists of the novel are Mrs. Ramsay, a beleaguered but patient housewife, and Lily Briscoe, a soul-searching, independent family friend. *To The Lighthouse* emphasizes the pressure placed upon women to marry and the damage that expectation does to the self-image of the women in the text, as well as their personal relationships—with their husbands and otherwise. Through her depiction of the emotional contrast between married Mrs. Ramsay and unmarried Lily Briscoe, Woolf highlights the issue with setting marriage as the primary goal of a person's life; she argues that in a misogynist world, nonromantic connection is the most direct path to self-fulfillment, which should be one's ultimate telos in life.

To evaluate the extent to which Woolf presents an anti-romantic moral in *To The Lighthouse,* this essay will first discuss Mrs. Ramsay's role as matriarch in the novel as compared to the men around her—namely Mr. Ramsay, who is

privileged to busy himself with far-off metaphysical concerns rather than the emotional labor required of his wife. Further, it will examine the negative impact these romantic expectations have on both women and men; to do this, it will break down the poisonous details of Mrs. Ramsay's mindset as she casts it upon others, such as the young lovers Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, the course of whose lives are set into action by Mrs. Ramsay's urging them to marry, and her own daughters Rose and Prue Ramsay. This will culminate in an examination of Mrs. Ramsay's death and how it conclusively shows Woolf's intentions with her character through the novel.

Once it has been established that Mrs. Ramsay's embodiment of domestic motherhood and wifehood is not an aspirational example on behalf of Woolf, this essay will pivot to a discussion of Lily Briscoe and how she acts as a foil to Mrs. Ramsay. It will examine her internal monologue and her reactions to other characters both before and after the decade gap in the middle of the novel in order to evaluate the influence of Mrs. Ramsay's friendship—and mindset—on her character development. Finally it will present Lily Briscoe's platonic relationship with William Bankes, and thus Woolf's attitude towards friendship as opposed to romance, as the ultimate foil to Mrs. Ramsay's difficult marriage with Mr. Ramsay. In so doing, this essay will establish that Woolf's thematic statement in *To The Lighthouse* is that, so long as society unfairly mandates romance as necessary to the fulfillment of a woman's life, misperception of the self is inevitable in every relationship; only by breaking the bounds of society's romance-centering expectations, like Lily Briscoe, can one lead a fully actualized existence.

The very first impression of Mrs. Ramsay that Woolf allows the audience to have is one of her status as a wife and mother; this categorization defines her mindset through the course of the novel, literally ruling her life until its end. It is disturbing, then, that Mrs. Ramsay's introduction is contextualized by her husband overruling her input to her son James. Just as soon as Mrs. Ramsay soothes the boy in telling him they will all make a trip to the lighthouse the next day "if it's fine tomorrow," Mr. Ramsay denies the placation: "But… it won't be fine."[1] Here, Woolf introduces the primary thread of conflict on Mrs. Ramsay's path to self-fulfillment: she views herself as a wife before a person, and as such, the traditional roles of marriage she has internalized deem her as a subjugated part of a larger whole rather than an individual person on her own. She cannot break past this internalization, no matter how much suffering it causes her; she is greatly pained by "the inadequacy of human relationships… and could not bear the examination which, loving her husband, with her instinct for truth, she turned upon it…"[2] This feeling of inadequacy stems from the way marital expectations minimize her in relation to Mr. Ramsay, which here she recognizes to an extent but does not how to act upon or change.

1 Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd. 2013, 1.
2 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 29.

Such an existence requires a huge amount of emotional labor from Mrs. Ramsay that goes largely unnoticed by her family—while reading to her son as her mind wanders towards thoughts of her husband, she gets a sense that her life is incommunicable to her family: "A sort of transaction went on between them, in which she was on one side and life was on another, and she was always trying to get the better of it…"[3] It is the inequal nature of her own life—the subjugation she experiences within the bounds of the traditional wifely role—that prevents Mrs. Ramsay from labelling her experiences. She does not share these "private"[4] musings on the transactionality of her existence because she *can't*; she is not permitted the space to within the role society has set out for her. She must spend her time planning parties and expressing sympathy and rearing her children, not philosophizing or engaging in introspection. Mrs. Ramsay is permitted to exist only as a function of Mr. Ramsay, and until her death much later in the text, he does not recognize how much he relies on her work to feel valuable as a human being.

The social rule that women must marry at any cost deeply scars Mrs. Ramsay's ability to foster genuine connection outside of her marriage—and, crucially, to recognize the value of nonromantic connection at all. For instance, in chapter ten of the novel's first section, Mrs. Ramsay's attempt simply to read a book aloud to her son James is thwarted by her concern for the whereabouts of the young lovers Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle; her thoughts run wild with questions of how Minta could "say now that she would not have [Paul]"[5] even as she is actively trying to engage with her son. Woolf breaks from Mrs. Ramsay's internal monologue to return to the narration of her reading with the conjunction "But" before "she read," suggesting that Mrs. Ramsay's preoccupation with the marital status of Minta and Paul is actually her primary focus here rather than bonding with her son. This behavior is subconscious to Mrs. Ramsay, a muscle-memory type reaction; because marriage is, in her view, the primary goal of one's being, it is instinctual to her to regard any romantic relationship over which she feels she has influence with higher priority than other relationships, including the familial relationship she has with her own son. Tragically, Mrs. Ramsay can on occasion see through the veil of internalized sexism—she herself is haunted by the possibility "it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry"[6] as she continues reading to James. She knows her power as the matriarch of the Ramsay family is overwhelming to the young lovers and doubts her own instinctual wielding of it to ensure their marriage. But just as soon as this doubt enters her mind, it shifts away. She notices night falling outside and returns to her preoccupation with Minta and Paul's whereabouts in the darkness. Self-awareness, Woolf suggests, is a privilege; when burdened so completely by the expectations of married life as a

3 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 43.
4 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 43.
5 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 40.
6 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 44.

woman, any glimpses of introspection on internalized misogyny are transient. To be a wife is, necessarily, to be bound by the chains of these expectations.

Woolf is, however, nuanced in her beliefs about womanhood and wifehood in the context of child-rearing. In her 1985 review-essay "Virginia Woolf and her Critics: 'On the Discrimination of Feminisms,'" literary scholar Lydia Blanchard claims that Woolf's work, with all its complexity and tension and multitudes, "shows that it was possible to encompass [many different feminisms.]"[7] *To The Lighthouse's* depiction of generational misogyny is similarly nuanced, particularly in the different approaches Woolf takes to describe the Ramsay daughters. Mrs. Ramsay seems to find genuine joy and fulfilment in some of the traditional expectations for mothers even as they play into the misogyny that agonizes her; for instance, before her dinner party, she delights in allowing her daughter Rose to choose her jewelry. Her internal monologue is loving and wistful: "…this little ceremony of choosing jewels, which was gone through every night, was what Rose liked best, she knew."[8] And when her older daughter Prue expresses a kind of vicarious interest in Paul and Minta's romance, Woolf's narrative voice moves away from one of criticism and towards genuine motherly affection; Mrs. Ramsay looks fondly upon her daughter, thinking to herself, "You will be so happy as she is one of these days. You will be much happier… because you are my daughter."[9] Blanchard's argument that "Like all great writers, she shut off no part of humanity"[10] holds true in this context—while overall critical of the institution of marriage and its impacts on women's well-being, Woolf does not deny that authentic value can be found within it and within its relation to child-rearing.

Ultimately, though, Woolf uses *To The Lighthouse* to emphasize that patriarchal, role-based expectations for women do far more harm than good. This is perhaps most evident in the immediate reversal of the joy just discussed. All of Mrs. Ramsay's musings on her daughters' happiness are underscored by melancholia; even as she joyfully deliberates over her mother's jewelry, Mrs. Ramsay is burdened with the knowledge that "Rose would grow up; and Rose would suffer… Rose, as she was the lady, should carry her handkerchief… Rose, who was bound to suffer so."[11] In this sense, womanhood and the expectations that come along with it—which Mrs. Ramsay knows well involve a wife's subjugation at the hands of her husband—overpower the enjoyment derived from aspects of it, however genuine. Woolf emphasizes this point further in the transitional mid-section of the novel, "Time Passes": as ten years go by after the night of the dinner party described in the first section, the vacation house is left to wait out the war with no occupants, and Woolf dedicates paragraphs upon paragraphs of description

7 Lydia Blanchard, "Virginia Woolf and her Critics: 'On the Discrimination of Feminisms,'" *Studies in the Novel* 17, no. 1 (1985): 103, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29532328.

8 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 59.

9 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 79.

10 Blanchard, "Discrimination of Feminisms," 103.

11 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 59.

to this end. Prue, however, is addressed only in a bracketed aside between paragraphs: the news of her marriage, and then the news of her death to "some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said no one deserved happiness more."[12] Here, Woolf evokes a mocking sense of irony—in equating *happiness* with *married life,* the audience is left to steep in the unfairness of such high regard for Prue being offered only after her death, not to mention the juxtaposition of such grand sentiments presented in a brief aside between other details. Woolf is again highlighting how the saintly idealization of wifehood neglects to view women themselves as people; Prue's death is a tragedy only because marriage and childbirth are seen as the only path to happiness for a woman. The same can be said of Mrs. Ramsay's death, placed casually in another bracketed aside: "Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty."[13] After a hard life of emotional labor and toil after her husband, Mrs. Ramsay is denied the right of being the syntactical subject of her own death. Woolf is clear in her intentions here: in a world of oppressive expectations for women to be married and thus made into counterparts of their husbands, any joy derived from womanhood is futile and transient at best.

With Mrs. Ramsay dead and her innermost thoughts on her identity left unacknowledged and unsaid, the last section of the novel, "The Lighthouse," begins quite listlessly. Literary scholar Sally Minogue uses excerpts from Virginia Woolf's diary to explain this sense of vacuity as an output of the novel's structure. A figurative reoccurrence in Woolf's diary—and as such, her literature—is the use of bathos, and further, the use of expectation subversions and contradiction. "Woolf's sense of the existential abyss"[14] results in a fixation on bleak isolation in *To The Lighthouse*, especially in relation to mortality's overwhelming presence around human relationships. Mrs. Ramsay's death is placed as it is in the novel with an eye for the bathos of a sudden absence, combined with the existential horror of such a quickly put-out flame as hers; Woolf uses curt language and a bracketed aside so as not to linger on the death itself, leaving the audience to fill in the gaps with their own imagination and thus forcing them to contend with their own mortality, Minogue concludes. Mrs. Ramsay's death is a warning in regards to the brevity of human life and the importance of communication of the self while one is alive; tragically, Mrs. Ramsay is hampered in her self-expression by misogynistic standards expected of her and as such, her attempts to voice her internal life fall flat. These standards do not disappear with Mrs. Ramsay's death—the rest of the women in the novel still must contend with them. But rather than simply affirming the cycle, Woolf uses the last portion of the novel to highlight a different

12 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 98.

13 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 95.

14 Sally Minogue, "Was It a Vision? Structuring Emptiness in 'To the Lighthouse,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 21, no. 2 (1997): 284, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831464.

avenue to human connection under the tyranny of sexism: art.

Lily Briscoe, a quietly rebellious young woman who counts Mrs. Ramsay among her closest friends, is the moral hero of *To The Lighthouse.* She acts as a thread of hope for human connection, rejecting societal standards of womanhood and romance in pursuit of authenticity, no matter the cost. Her primary form of expression to this end is painting, which Woolf presents as an alternative to the sexism-based impossibility of connection through language. In her 1990 essay "'The Difficult Business of Intimacy': Friendship and Writing in Virginia Woolf's 'The Waves,'" literary scholar Laurie F. Leach argues that for Woolf, language and human relationships are allegorically intertwined—and yet, as has been established by Mrs. Ramsay's unspoken life and quiet death under the stifling force of misogyny, societal norms around womanhood prevent women from interpreting and communicating their inner lives with words. Ergo to engage in authentic human relationships, women must find alternative methods of connection—methods which evade the limits imposed upon them by patriarchal standards of communication. In *To The Lighthouse*, Leach says, "Lily hopes to transcend the limits of human vision [with her art]... she imagines a communication beyond words,"[15] suggesting that with all the misperception and confusion inherent to language in the context of the patriarchy, Woolf aims to present Lily and her art as guidelines for authenticity—especially that found in nonromantic relationships.

Leach proclaims that in Woolf narratives, friendship and writing "[fulfil] the same two functions."[16] It makes sense, then, that Mrs. Ramsay, who fails every attempt to use language as a form of genuine self-expression, cannot fathom the idea of friendship as a priority in life. It is primarily in this way that Lily acts as a foil to Mrs. Ramsay: while Lily is content never to marry and to find joy in her friendships and painting, Mrs. Ramsay has internalized the misogynist expectations placed upon her such that she sees both these goals as erroneous for a woman. For example, at the very beginning of the novel, when Lily begins the painting which she will develop through the rest of the story, Mrs. Ramsay thinks, "Lily's picture! Mrs Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; but she was an independent little creature, Mrs Ramsay liked her for it…"[17] Lily's independence, just like her painting, is to Mrs. Ramsay a novelty: inherently unfeminine, immature, and without foresight for her future, charming though it may be as a distraction. Mr. Tansley, another family friend infamous among the Ramsay party for his obtrusive arrogance and desperate desire for pity, echoes Mrs. Ramsay's sentiment. He insists to Lily over and over that "women can't paint, [and] women can't write"[18] until the sentiment is carved into her memory; she

15 Laurie F. Leach, "'The Difficult Business of Intimacy': Friendship and Writing in Virginia Woolf's 'The Waves,'" *South Central Review* 7, no. 4 (1990): 55. https://doi.org/10.2307/3189094.

16 Leach, "Friendship and Writing," 60.

17 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 12-13.

18 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 35.

thinks about him every time she picks up her brush. If Lily's art is an attempt to share her worldview as an alternative to linguistic communication, then Mr. Tansley's condemnation of it suggests on a deeper level that he thinks women simply cannot have worldviews worth sharing; that Mr. Tansley adopts this belief in conjunction with his idealizing obsession with Mrs. Ramsay is particularly telling. The deeper issue here is not art itself—it is women's independence. In that sense, Mr. Tansley's insistence that women can't paint is, effectively, the same statement as Mrs. Ramsay's insistence that women must marry.

Woolf's use of dramatic irony, particularly as she evokes it through the juxtaposition between Lily's internal monologue and Mrs. Ramsay's, highlights how intensely she condemns this patriarchy-based pressure for women to prioritize romance above all else. Lily Briscoe's friendship with William Bankes, an older, widowed, scientific man also invited to the Ramsays' dinner party, is established very early on in the novel, just following the moment wherein Mrs. Ramsay, looking at Lily's painting, discounts her independent personhood as a novelty. Woolf shifts from Mrs. Ramsay's perspective to Lily's; Lily agonizes over the prospect of anyone watching her paint over her shoulder when she senses another person walking her way, before she "somehow divined, from the footfall, William Bankes, so that though her brush quivered, she did not, as she would have done had it been… anybody else, turn her canvas upon the grass, but let it stand."[19] From this thinking, two important aspects of Lily's relationship with William are clear: first that she knows him deeply, well enough to recognize him by the sound of his footsteps without looking, and second that she does not fear judgment from him as she might face from Mr. Tansley or Mrs. Ramsay. These aspects are key to defining Lily as a foil to Mrs. Ramsay—Mrs. Ramsay cannot, because of her entrenchment in social convention, form close nonromantic bonds with other people, and because she has no unconventional social bonds, she cannot fathom the kind of nonjudgmental attitude Lily finds in William.

Woolf sharpens the dramatic irony to an even more direct point as she goes on to emphasize that, as long as the expectations upon women demand them to be subjugated in marriage, the qualities which allow William and Lily to connect so deeply—genuine mutual respect and understanding—can *only* arise in a nonromantic context. She describes William through Lily's eyes: "…you are the finest human being that I know; you have neither wife nor child (without any sexual feeling, she longed to cherish that loneliness)…"[20] Here, Woolf tells the audience directly that the nonromantic nature of Lily and William's relationship is crucial to its flourishing. If William were married—if he did not have his *loneliness*, as Woolf puts it—Lily would, by necessity of social convention, be deprioritized in his life. Societal expectations in *To The Lighthouse* are such that when a person is married, their other relationships shall not matter to them, because

19 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 13.
20 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 18.

marriage is the ultimate telos of one's life; to hold onto nonromantic relationships is to delay that telos. Mrs. Ramsay's social deterioration arises from this standard. Her betrothal to her husband has pulled her from the world of authenticity and placed her into one of convention; the fatigue that wears constantly on her mind when she attempts any introspection is proof of how crucial nonromantic relationships are to maintaining one's wellbeing. Yet just after Lily and William have this moment of connection, Woolf spins back into Mrs. Ramsay's point of view as she is "Smiling, for an admirable idea had flashed upon her this very second—William and Lily should marry…"[21] With this ironic flip of the audience's perspective, Woolf seals the tragedy of misperception into Mrs. Ramsay character and firmly places Lily as her narrative foil. If Mrs. Ramsay is the ideal of misogynist expectations for women's lives, Lily is the opposite: an independent thinker forging her own path forward, unconcerned with marriage.

Lily pushes at the bounds of social conventions throughout the novel, beginning to end—but the vast majority of her success in defining her own role in life happens in the wake of Mrs. Ramsay's death, an indication that Woolf recognizes the active harm women can do to others when they internalize pernicious standards as deeply as Mrs. Ramsay does. Woolf scholar Dr. Brenda R. Silver sees Lily as a daughter figure to Mrs. Ramsay; in her 2009 essay "Mothers, Daughters, Mrs. Ramsay: Reflections," she discusses matrophobia, the fear a woman may exhibit in regards to becoming alike her own mother, as a reason for Lily's rebellion. In the first act of *To The Lighthouse,* it is certainly true that Lily is "the daughter who wants what she cannot have";[22] her rebellion is overwhelmed by Mrs. Ramsay's matriarchal power. At the dinner party, for example, long before the death of the Ramsay matriarch, Lily watches Mr. Tansley beg for sympathy and muses about social convention:

> There is a code of behaviour she knew… it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself; as indeed it is their duty… to help us [in an emergency]… But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things?[23]

Immediately, though, Lily is faced with the power of Mrs. Ramsay's conformity to social law; she feels Mrs. Ramsay's expectations upon her so pressingly that "for the hundred and fiftieth time Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment—what happens if one is not nice to that young man there—and be nice."[24] In this passage, Woolf highlights the contagious nature of adherence to social rules, sug-

21 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 19.

22 Brenda R. Silver, "Mothers, Daughters, Mrs. Ramsay: Reflections," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3/4 (2009): 265. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27740593.

23 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 66.

24 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 66.

gesting that Mrs. Ramsay is a kind of unintentional perpetrator as well as victim of sexism. Internalizing these standards radiates their damage outward just as much as it does inward—thus the cycle continues.

Mrs. Ramsay's death, then, acts as the catalyst for Lily's self-actualization. The time between the beginning of the novel and its end allows Lily space for retrospection *without* Mrs. Ramsay's overbearing presence looming at the edges of her thoughts. Mr. Ramsay's increasingly pathetic actions without his wife constantly managing his ego have rendered him, to Lily, "a king in exile"[25]—she can see clearly just how crucial Mrs. Ramsay's emotional labor was to maintaining the patriarchal structure of the Ramsay family, the very same structure whose standards have imposed upon Lily's independence her whole life. "Giving, giving, giving, she had died," Lily thinks of Mrs. Ramsay, "and had left all this."[26] Beyond the simple tragedy of Mrs. Ramsay's death, though, Woolf points the audience to the freeing effect her absence has on Lily's self-perception. As she tries to complete her painting, Lily wonders, "What was this mania of hers for marriage?"[27] Only now, in the context of Mrs. Ramsay's death and the ensuing lack of social pressure upon her, is Lily confident in the value of the nonromantic relationship that has brought her so much joy: her friendship with William Bankes.

Lily addresses directly how ridiculous an idea it is to her that she should ever marry, rejecting Mrs. Ramsay's dominance over her mindset; considering the Rayleys, she thinks, "They're happy like that; I'm happy like this,"[28] and goes on to ponder her relationship with William in greater detail while she paints. A decade ago, the night of the dinner party, he had looked at her unfinished painting of the island landscape and questioned Lily's portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay's figure in the window—insignificant, not a focal point. Woolf writes, "But William, she remembered, had listened to her with his wise child's eyes when she explained how it was not irreverence: how a light there needed a shadow there and so on… One could talk of painting then seriously to a man."[29] This is a perfect reversal of Mr. Tansley's earlier insistence upon the inability of women to paint, and the implications his view casts upon Mrs. Ramsay, unfortunate partner in his sexism: not only does William believe women's worldviews are valuable, he appreciates Lily's *for* its unconventionality. He takes Lily's art for what she wants it to be, however tradition-defying, and embraces it *because* it is an expression of her being—he sees her as a person before a woman, before a wife. Their rejection of romance is what allows William and Lily's friendship to work so well, Woolf indicates. When Woolf writes conclusively that "She loved William Bankes,"[30] she is referring to love *in defiance* of romantic expectations, which speaks volumes to the corro-

25 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 111.
26 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 112.
27 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 131.
28 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 130.
29 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 131.
30 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 131.

sive nature of the so-called love Mrs. Ramsay believes she holds for her husband. Lily proves that Woolf sees friendship just as she sees art: endlessly valuable and transcendent in its ability to connect individuals, especially when its presence and prioritization goes against the expectations by which it is surrounded.

In her 1971 article "Lily Briscoe's Painting: A Key to Personal Relationships in 'To The Lighthouse,'" literary scholar Sharon Wood Proudfit contextualizes Lily's painting within the English Post-Impressionist movement, whose paintings emphasize "the arrangement of the scene, its formal relations and [the painter's] vision of them..."[31] to translate the emotions wrought by aesthetic harmony through the artist. Proudfit argues that this painting style is reflective of the complexity of Lily's own relationships, the very ones which have rendered her painting so difficult to complete over the years. Woolf's conclusion to *To The Lighthouse* is, for the emotional and relational vastness of the text, surprisingly simple; Mr. Ramsay and his children dock at the lighthouse while Lily, finishing her painting, and aging poet Augustus Carmichael watch them do so from across the ocean.

Critically, though, neither Mr. Carmichael nor Lily actually witnesses the landing of Mr. Ramsay's boat—they just so happen to understand simultaneously that the boat has been docked and that the Ramsays have completed their journey. Woolf specifies that, in Lily and Mr. Carmichael's acknowledgement of the boat's landing, "They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything."[32] Here, Proudfit's argument about Lily's art as the physical manifestation of her perspective on the world—a perspective which she has battled so hard to communicate to others throughout the text—rings true. Earlier, while musing about her relationship with William, Lily thinks, "Many things were left unsaid."[33] Their connection and mutual respect allows them to communicate without words. With the completion of Lily's painting, and according to Proudfit, her ultimate transcending and transforming of the oppressive, patriarchal expectations set forth by Mrs. Ramsay, she has discovered her full potential as an independent woman—and this is proved by her newfound ability to wordlessly understand Mr. Carmichael, with whom she has never had this kind of connection. By releasing her from the overbearing romantic expectations of wifehood that haunted her relationship with William Bankes, the death of Mrs. Ramsay has granted Lily Briscoe the agency to fully realize her independence: to paint a new kind of womanhood, one where marital subjugation is cast away in favor of genuine expression and connection.

*To The Lighthouse* is, overall, a condemnation by Virginia Woolf of the restrictive ways society regulates women's relationships, and thus their capacity for self-expression. She creates the parallel characters Mrs. Ramsay and Lily

31 Sharon Wood Proudfit, "Lily Briscoe's Painting: A Key to Personal Relationships in 'To the Lighthouse,'" *Criticism* 13, no. 1 (1971): http://www.jstor.org/stable/23098980, 28.

32 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 154.

33 Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 131.

Briscoe to portray the effects of romantic expectations when internalized and when defied; Mrs. Ramsay spends her life desperately trying to follow the rules of social convention and it destroys her, while Lily faces the world with an eye for authenticity even in the most difficult times. Mrs. Ramsay's impact is tragically corrosive to the people around her, feeding into their own sexist tendencies and issues with misperception. Lily, however, does the opposite—she finds genuine human connection in the form of her best friend William Bankes and allows their relationship to flourish without romance taking dominion over either of their individual lives. Mrs. Ramsay is half of a human, the counterpart to her husband and nothing more; Lily transcends the singularity of individualized personhood with her art, communicating without words the deepest truths of the human condition. Ultimately, Woolf sees the sexist centering of romance above all else and the subjugation of women it necessarily entails as a misstep at best and a death sentence at worst—and she believes it the duty of womankind to pursue authenticity even in the face of such oppression, through art, friendship, or otherwise.