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# "The Tyrant Father": Leslie Stephen and Masculine Influences on Virginia Woolf and her Novel, *To the Lighthouse*

Anya Graubard

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

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**“THE TYRANT FATHER”:  
LESLIE STEPHEN AND MASCULINE INFLUENCES ON VIRGINIA WOOLF  
AND HER NOVEL, *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE***

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
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by

Anya Graubard, Bachelor of Arts

Anthropology

College of Arts and Sciences

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Faculty Mentor:

Beverly Rilett, Ph.D., English

### Abstract

This paper examines the volatile yet nurturing relationship between Virginia Woolf and her father, Leslie Stephen. It specifically considers the effects of three male “tyrants” in Woolf’s childhood, including not only her father but also her two half-brothers, who abused her sexually. Analysis of the dynamics of these relationships provides insight into Woolf’s lifelong battle with mental illness and helps us to understand the complicated relationships she had as an adult with men and women.

In her letters, diaries, and memoir essays, Woolf reveals how she drew from her own experiences of childhood to write her most famous novel, *To the Lighthouse*. The fictional Ramsay family may be seen as a portrait of the actual Stephen family. Virginia Woolf herself can be seen in several characters—in James, in Cam, and in Lily. This paper demonstrates that Woolf not only drew from her personal life as she wrote the novel, but also shows that by writing it, she was able to free herself from some unresolved feelings about her parents, especially her demanding father.

**Key Words:** Virginia Woolf, Leslie Stephen, mental illness, depression, abuse, Vanessa Bell, family, dynamic, relationships, biography, fiction, Leonard Woolf

### **Dedication**

I would like to extend my utmost appreciation to Dr. Beverley Rilett for reigniting my interest in classic literature while allowing me to add in my own psychological understanding and biographical research regarding Virginia Woolf. Dr. Rilett encouraged me to expand my realm of knowledge and I am very grateful for her guidance over the past few months. This paper is dedicated to Woolf herself, for inspiring generations of writers after her and so intimately capturing the tragic essence of a fractured family in *To the Lighthouse*. Her years were cut too short at her own hands, but her words continue to live within her works.

**“THE TYRANT FATHER”:****LESLIE STEPHEN AND MASCULINE INFLUENCES ON VIRGINIA WOOLF  
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There is no other father-daughter duo quite like Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf. The father had a lengthy literary career in Victorian England and acted as the daughter’s teacher and mentor from her earliest childhood, while the daughter became one of the most pivotal female voices of the twentieth century. People have many influences in their childhoods and adult lives, but families and parents are especially important. What can we make of the loving, intellectually stimulating, yet volatile relationship Virginia Woolf had with her father? How did it help shape her into the woman and the writer she became? I will argue that Virginia Woolf’s erotic life and key themes in her novels, especially *To the Lighthouse*, were shaped by childhood relationships with her father, and, to a lesser extent, her half-brothers that mixed unusual intellectual nurturance of her mind with devouring emotional, even sexual demands. The mixed experience and her ambivalence show most clearly in the family’s story in *To the Lighthouse*, but also in her lifelong flirtatious, but sexually limited relationships.

**WOOLF’S EARLY LIFE**

Although the broad context and interpretation that biographers give us are necessary, hearing what the subjects actually say in their own words is uniquely revealing. The Stephen/Woolf family’s letters and diaries provide firsthand observations of what the subjects were feeling at that time. Leslie Stephen kept a thorough diary from his years raising his children with Julia Stephen at their home in Hyde Park Gate, London. Through these primary sources, Katherine Hill asserts that Leslie Stephen

primed Virginia Woolf, from a very young age, to be his “literary and intellectual heir” (Hill 351). For Stephen, an author himself, only his most special and talented of children would be able to carry on his legacy, and it seems evident that Stephen trained Virginia from toddlerhood to do just that. He read all his children stories and novels before bedtime, and first mentioned Virginia's storytelling abilities when she was just five years old: ““The babies flourish. Ginia tells me a ‘story’ every night” (Hill 352). Stephen was able to train his daughter in the art of literature for the duration of her youth, and luckily for Woolf, her father became her primary intellectual ally through this relationship. It is this close-guardedness that he had over her, though, that would prove to be the spark of a capricious yet passionate relationship between father and daughter.

There was instant connection between Stephen and Woolf and one could clearly see which parent Woolf most resembled in personality. Hill agrees, stating that “Virginia was clearly Leslie’s favorite... and Virginia not only came to this same conclusion but backed it up with behavior that indicated her affection for him” (352), solidifying the adolescent devotion that many children feel towards their parents. When she became a bit older, Stephen opened up his entire library to Virginia at her leisure and tutored her himself in biography and history. Hill states that “these sessions formed the core of her extensive grounding in English literature and she particularly remembered her father’s history lessons with affectionate nostalgia” (Hill 354). While Woolf’s brothers were off at Cambridge getting a traditional education, Woolf spent her time in Stephen’s library and having one-on-one tutoring sessions with him. In a time when women were denied the most basic of education, it was Stephen’s teaching and influence that comprised of the main intellectual stimulation Woolf had growing up.

Leslie Stephen himself was a Victorian literary powerhouse long before the birth of his children. He was so well received during his lifetime that he was awarded a knighthood for his extensive body of work. There may have been a large subconscious influence that Stephen had on his daughter that seeped into her ideology of literature as a whole and would come to mark her as a revolutionary voice of the twentieth century. In Stephen's time, evolutionary thought was new and controversial, and literature of the Victorian era and before felt stale to him. The science of evolutionary thought that was spreading throughout the time affected Stephen powerfully, throwing even his religious faith into question (Hill 356). Throughout his career he was able to reinvent certain aspects of English as a genre and achieved much of this through his time as a teacher. He used his critical essay, "The Study of English Literature" as a teaching tool to convey his most prominent criticism of literature at the time.

Papers and books could be (and have been) written about Stephen's own literary genius, this paper will focus on the influence he had over, and relationship with his prodigal child Virginia. Father had a clear ideological influence over daughter, with Hill asserting that "both father and daughter insist that the reader should attempt to view the author of a work as ordinary person...agree that the student and critic of literary art must maintain a careful balance between spontaneity and judgment" (Hill 355). Stephen and eventually Woolf rejected the previous dichotomy of literature that forces apart the reader and the author. Stephen's influence on Woolf essentially helped her to "birth a new literary genre" (a combination of memoir and fiction, as seen in *To the Lighthouse*), as Hill describes (355), and especially focusing on "shifting class structures" and believing that social class representing the "nation's most vital instincts at a given time" should act

as the mouthpiece for the era and effectively determines the “literary production of an era” (355). The differences were huge between social classes at the time in England, and Woolf, as a member of the upper class who was highly aware of these differences, took inspiration from this separation and injected it into her writing. Interestingly enough, it was Virginia who was at her father’s side as he finished his final piece of work before his death. Hill states “Virginia was his close and devoted companion... and focuses on the same set of forces that Stephen does in [the final work]” (355). Stephen was obviously a major part of Woolf’s life from her birth till his death - not only in instilling in her a love of reading and writing, but also actual dogma and literary structure that was key for Woolf to become a unique voice in her own right.

So far in Woolf’s childhood, the relationship between Woolf and her father was loving and encouraging. However, Hill’s belief is that Stephen “persecuted and tyrannized the women who propped him up emotionally and physically” (351). Stephen saw his children as his students, and while that is not inherently negative, Hill seems to suggest that Stephen may have been taking advantage of his family in order to hold him up and make him feel smart, strong, and authoritative.

Perhaps the answer to why Virginia Woolf’s father Leslie Stephen acted the way he did towards his own children stems from his own youth. There are many similarities in the young lives of Stephen and Woolf, including family dynamic and tragedy. Virginia Hyman, in *Reflections in the Looking Glass*, looks at Stephen’s youth and his relationship with his parents. Hyman says that “As a child, Stephen, like Virginia has been considered verbally precocious, subject to tantrums and hypersensitive to criticism in a family where the father was ‘skinless, nervous and irritable’ and the mother was the stabilizing force”



(200). The intellectual, if fragile prowess that Stephen had in his childhood was clearly present in his daughter, and Stephen sought to harness that to prepare Virginia for eventual literary greatness. Stephen was very successful in this, and not only mentored Virginia, but also passed on many of his own characteristics to her, especially in work ethic.

One of Stephen's most chaotic breakdowns, "began at fifty-six, and, as a consequence, had to give up a lectureship at Cambridge, just as his father had done" (Hyman 202). This was a major blow, as teaching and lecturing had been his life's work, and was halted due by the same personal issues that had affected his own father. Jane Lilienfeld had previously written regarding the relationship between maternal love and hate in *To the Lighthouse*, focusing on Woolf and her mother, while mentioning Stephen's "tyrannical neediness" (345). This essay by Hyman, written a few years after, is pivotal in the world of Woolf studies, as an essential and original analysis of the relationship between Stephen and Virginia. Hyman also brings up the thread of mental illness that plagued the Stephen family, and alludes to

the general pattern of early success and subsequent failure and breakdown in the Stephen heritage... here we find a pattern of development remarkably similar to Woolf's own. (199)

Stephen found himself stuck in a loop that he had seen firsthand in his family when he was young, of being unable to recover from a personal trauma. The genetic lineage of tragedy and mental breakdown would not end with Stephen either, but follow his daughter. After his wife's death, he entered "a crisis which he feared might permanently incapacitate him as similar crises had incapacitated his father and his older

brother” (Hyman 202). It seems that for the Stephen men when they were knocked down, it was near impossible for them to get back up. Staying “incapacitated” after an event with no end in sight can be detrimental obviously to the individuals and their own psyches, but also will affect those around them. Leslie was witness to this in childhood, but found himself in precisely the same position at the same age as his father, a cruel parallel that continued to his children. Though the Stephens were highly intelligent, capable, and determined men, they all seemed to lack resilience in the face of personal tragedy and subsequent crisis. It seems that the price to pay for artistry in the Stephens’ family is the stability of their sanity, which would eventually prove fatal for Virginia at her own hands.

But Virginia’s interaction with men and boys during her childhood was not limited to her father and perhaps some of her parents’ friends; it included her siblings. The Stephens were a large mixed family with eight children total, including Gerald, Stella and George Duckworth: Woolf’s half-siblings and the product of Julia Stephens’ first marriage to Herbert Duckworth. Quentin Bell (nephew and biographer of Woolf) states that these boys “whom Virginia described as the tyrants and demigods of their childish world” had a much larger impact on her life than just playful bullying as children (Bell 34). Here again, in Woolf’s personal history, do we see her use word “tyrant” specifically. And as Woolf states in “A Sketch of the Past”, there was something much more insidious going on:

Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this, and as I sat there he began to explore my body. I can remember the feel of his hand going

under my clothes going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop. (69)

The sexual abuse at the hands of her brother must have been terrible, and knowing about it only furthers the understanding we now have of the mental illness that plagued Woolf her entire life. Woolf even states that this is one of her earliest memories as a child, still very much present in her mind even when she writes towards the end of her life. When Bell describes the period after their mother's death in 1895, he comments on how much

George Duckworth was the model brother. His devotion to his half sisters was exemplary. After their mother's death his kindness knew no bound; his was an emotional, a demonstrative nature; his shoulder was there for them to weep on, a demonstrative nature; his arms were open for relief. (45)

Having a strong figure to lead the family through their dark time could have been, and probably was a comfort. With Leslie Stephen completely incapacitated with grief, there had to be a new figurehead of the family, if even temporarily. But as Bell goes on to say

What had started with pure sympathy ended by becoming a nasty erotic skirmish. There were fondlings and fumbings in public when Virginia was at her lessons and these were carried to greater lengths-indeed I not know what lengths- when, with the easy assurance of a fond and privileged brother, George carries his affections from the schoolroom into the night nursery. (45)

George Duckworth here demonstrates textbook familial sexual abuse behavior, and Bell can see it. He preyed on Woolf in arguably one of the worst times in her life- when she was quite suffering from the loss of her mother, and also aiding her father in his grief.

## MENTAL ILLNESS

Unfortunately for Virginia Woolf, the stories surrounding her mental illness and suicide sometimes supersede her brilliance as an author. But what effect did her father's mental state have on her own? Stephen's *own* father had a mental breakdown at age 58 that, according to Hyman "permanently altered Stephen's career...he felt permanently damaged...for the crisis was financial as well as emotional... as a result of the family's reduced income" (201). Stephen seems to have passed on not only potential genetic mental illness to Woolf, but "a lifelong anxiety about money (an anxiety he was also to bequeath to his daughter)", which no doubt contributed to her own neuroses.

Vanessa Bell, Woolf's sister, recalled Woolf's tantrums when she was a young child: 'I had not been aware of it before she produced it. Suddenly the sky was overcast and I in the gloom. It would last for endless ages- so it seemed to a child- and then go' (Hyman 203). "It" here is referring to the sudden mood changes in Virginia. Vanessa was not only subject to her father's temper, but also her sister's, calling it "a Stephen characteristic", furthering the similarities that she commented on previously between Stephen and Woolf. Quentin Bell echoed his mother's statements: "From the outset, Virginia's life was threatened by madness, death and disaster. Whether there was, in those early years, any seed of madness within her, if those 'purple rages' were the symptom of some psychic malady, we do not know; neither probably did she; but madness walked the streets (Bell 36)." It is completely possible that Woolf was subject to inevitable childhood temper tantrums, but interesting to bear in mind when thinking of her later mood instability as well.

How much can we say that Woolf's mental illnesses were a direct product of her genetics? Psychologists Kane and Garber performed a meta-analysis on the relations of depression in fathers and the eventual psychopathology in their children and concluded that after controlling for the way that mothers parent, "fathering was more consistently related to young adolescents' internalizing behaviors, whereas mothering was more connected to adolescents' sense of hope". In Virginia's case, her mother's death can be bleakly interpreted (at least in the eyes of Kane and Garber) as the death of hope- maybe even a hope Virginia was not aware of till much later in her life, as she suggests in "A Sketch of the Past". Woolf's childhood was that of privilege and seemingly lots of familial love, and she describes her childhood as comprised of

Many bright colours; many distinct sounds; some human beings, caricatures; comic; several violent moments of being... that is a rough visual description of childhood. This is how I shape it; and how I see myself as a child, roaming about, in that space of time, which lasted from 1882 to 1895. ("A Sketch of the Past" 79)

Woolf sees her childhood through an artistic lens, bringing in colors and sounds to paint a visual picture of the happiness she experienced when her mother was alive. She also mentions her mother's distinct presence: "certainly there she was, in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood; there she was from the very first" (81). In the use of "Cathedral space" to describe the spatial context in which her childhood took place, we can see just how goddess-like she viewed her mother to be. Consider what Woolf writes about the death of her mother in relation to ending of her childhood

What a jumble of things I can remember, if I let my mind run, about my mother...of her omnipresent, of her as the creator of that crowded merry world

which spun so gaily in the center of my childhood...this was proved on May 5th 1895. For after that there was nothing left of it. (84)

Imagine the devastation that fourteen-year-old Woolf felt at the time if this was how she saw the death of her mother many years later. Julia's passing was a profoundly tragic blow to the Stephens family from which they were never able to truly and wholly recover. Woolf herself speaks so fondly of her "merry" childhood, full of bright symbolism reflective of her own happiness, which centered on her ethereal mother.

The imagery that is so present not only when Woolf reflects on her childhood but also her life in general may be indicative of something further, buried within her psyche. Michael R Schrimper uses such a psychoanalytic approach to break down how vision and imagery fit into Woolf's mind. He proposes that a reason Woolf "appeared to be obsessed with seeing was her belief, as demonstrated in her fiction, that to behold a scene or object closely was to create a temporary stoppage that prevents the passing of time" (6). We will see this especially in *To the Lighthouse*, but to see things as they are as well as how they were (before, say, her mother died), is a way for Woolf to immortalize the things or people missing in her life.

In the aptly named piece "Moments of Being", Woolf states that her most intense memories from her youth are grounded in "moments of rapture of shock, cutting through the moments of 'non-being', of everyday life" (Lee 104). Moments such as the death of her mother, breakdown of her father, eventual death of her sister Stella, and even less aggressively tragic happenings. Famed Woolf scholar Hermione Lee argues that for Woolf, "only by being turned into writing...can these moments be 'made whole' or lose their power to hurt" (Lee 105). This is the entire motive behind Woolf's writings: "she

masters her memories by structuring them like fictions” (Lee 105). To contain, to control her memories both devastatingly sad and colorfully merry, Woolf finds comfort in the ordering of her own memories, especially within the context of fiction.

While Woolf was not a young child when her mother died, the fact that she had to cope with her father’s astounding and never-ending mourning at her pubescent age of fourteen no doubt had effects on her own psyche. Susan Bennett takes an interesting look on the gendered ways that Woolf and her father were “allowed” to grieve in the wake of Julia’s death, stating that “to her family and to many of her critics Virginia’s grief was a disease; Leslie’s was normal”. Woolf was simply prescribed rest in the country and was told to stop all her lessons in the months after her mother’s death. Years later, another doctor would prescribe the same thing after her father’s passing (Bennet 312). Bennet sees “the rest cure to be a form of Victorian moral medicine which enforced the doctor’s domination over rebellious women” (313). Even when trying to treat a woman in the time of her deepest sadness, especially in a woman so young who had prior “nervousness”, doctors were just trying to rid the public of these “hysterical” women. Why was Stephen allowed to mourn ceaselessly and fawned over by “sympathetic women” while his daughter was shunted off to the countryside to mourn alone? He was, of course, the head of the family and there was no one there to control him; we certainly do not see him having control over himself. Perhaps Woolf felt some resentment at the fact that her father languished in his sadness for years, whereas she was expected to hide it and get over it, all while taking the burden of her father’s devastation on her.

### **CONSEQUENCES FOR WOOLF’S RELATIONSHIPS**

Leslie Stephen spent the last years of his life working on his final piece, *Mausoleum Book*, an autobiography. By this point, Stephen was able to reflect on his own flaws and described himself as “weak and broken” and acknowledged sharing many of his father’s faults” (Hyman 202). Stella, who had become a surrogate mother for her siblings and had effectively taken Julia’s place, ran the household. However, she met the same fate as her own mother and died in 1897. The period between 1897 and 1904 in the Stephen household was described by Virginia as “the lash of a random unheeding flail that pointlessly and brutally killed the two people who should, normally and naturally, have made those years, not perhaps happy but normal and natural” (“A Sketch of the Past“ 291). This time was also when Virginia was able to attend classes at King’s College in London and started to write professionally between her work and aiding her ailing father. In his last years, Woolf was there to take care of him, and it was only years after his death that she was able to shake the grip he had over her and strike out on her own to become who we know her as today. However, the transition out of caretaker and daughter to writer was not easy for Woolf nor her mental state, as Bell describes:

now the writing did not go well; nothing went well; how could it? She had lost her father... now appeared more heartbreakingly tragic. She was more than ever convinced that he had wanted to live and that the true and happy relationship between him and his children was only just beginning (Bell 91).

Woolf had to put her grief aside once and for all after the passing of her father if she wanted to continue down the path he had spent much of his life as a father helping her strive for.



It seems to biographers such as Hyman that Woolf had so much potential corked up, cast aside in the years she spent tending to her father, and only after were these ideas able to burst free to make their way into novel and essay form. However, this period when Woolf was spending an inordinate amount of time with her father was not all bad, as she writes to a friend “We have all been so happy together and there was never anybody so lovable” (“A Sketch of the Past” 205). Bell adds that Stephens’s “faults were forgotten, his kindness, his quickness, his intelligence was not” (91). Woolf feels some understandable guilt after his passing, recalling how “He was so lonely often, and I never helped him as I might have done... if he had only lived we could have been so happy” (206). The feelings she had toward her father were anything but consistent, as human emotions never are, but after his death, he ascended to some sort of ethereal martyrdom, as her mother had. It is ironic, even tragic that Woolf felt like she did not do enough to assuage her father’s sadness, when in reality that was her sole purpose for a long time.

When one reads Woolf’s own words about her father, it is hard to forget them in favor of cheerier portraits painted by Woolf about him. “Reminiscences” (part of *Moments of Being*, compiled of lifelong autobiographical writings), written when Woolf was in her early twenties shortly after the death of her father, refers to Stephen as “the tyrant of inconceivable selfishness” (“Reminiscences” 56). This single statement about her father essentially sums up his domineering nature (that is resoundingly echoed in *To the Lighthouse*). An editor’s note at the start of the second section of “A Sketch of the Past” written nearly forty years is eerily similar as well. While Woolf was getting older, so was her father, who was “increasingly isolated from reality and, at times, rudely tyrannical to his daughters” (“A Sketch of the Past” (61). We will see the stream of this

paternal domination starting in Woolf's life at a young age and continuing endlessly, worsened by family tragedy that followed the Stephens.

There seem to have been two different Stephens: the gentler, mentoring tutor and the "authoritarian Victorian father" who was present more and more after the death of his wife. Author Jane Fisher suggests that the "multiple identities [Woolf] gave him indicate the complexity of her identification with and rejection of different aspects of his personality" (Fisher 42), and I must agree. The complex nature of her relationship with her father was at the backbone of much of her writings, not only in her biographical fiction works but also in feminist essays. Fisher makes the point that Woolf was aware of "the daughter's status as a knowing subject dependent on a father figure to whom she is subordinate" (Fisher 31). In her youth, her father was a gentle mentor to her, as she grew up, he became more of a tutor, letting her into his extensive library and realm of personal knowledge regarding literature, philosophy, and history. The fact that her intellectual growth relied solely on her father cemented her status as subordinate daughter, as Fisher suggests. It is only after her father's death that Woolf was able to strike out and find her own path towards intellectual freedom.

### **AFTER FATHER; BEFORE HUSBAND: WOOLF AS A SINGLE WOMAN**

The next phase of Woolf's life is truly when her career took off. She and Vanessa linked up with the now-famous Bloomsbury Group in 1904. For all the intellect and years of learning she had under her belt during some time at the Ladies' Department of King's College London, Woolf felt stuck and unaffected by her own writing. Her time living in the Bloomsbury neighborhood of London (from which the group derived its name) was a

well-known time of freethinking and meeting of the minds that ultimately led Virginia also to her husband, Leonard Woolf. But before marrying Woolf, she was being pressed by her female friends (and the pressures of society) to marry. Vanessa's marriage to author and Bloomsbury Group member Clive Bell was a great blow to her- but not because she was jealous in a predictable way. Quentin Bell sums it up: "What then did she want...she was not in the least in love with Clive Bell] in so far as she was in love with anyone she was in love with Vanessa" (139). This idea, that Woolf was, in fact, in love with her sister, is backed up by Mitchell Leaska, who says that during this time "Virginia's love for Vanessa now often seemed obsessive and her dependency morbid; and her letters to her sister were sounding more and more like Leslie's to Julia during the height of their courtship" (133). It is this desperate *dependence* Woolf had for her sister that is so reminiscent of the way her father was "propped up emotionally" by his wife (and later daughters). Bell came into the picture and promptly took Vanessa away, and it was until "the appearance of Vita-Sackville West, still many years away, Vanessa would remain Virginia's primary love object" (133), with Woolf fixating on her sister and soon turning her sights on her brother-in-law.

Though nothing ever came to physical fruition, as it were, Clive and Virginia engaged in a long-term flirtation that caused a permanent rift between her and her sister. Bell's take on this situation was that Virginia, clever as she was, "loved Vanessa so much that she had to injure her," pathologically calculating to enter "and in entering that break that charmed circle within which Vanessa and Clive were so happy and by which she was so cruelly excluded, and to have Vanessa for herself again by detaching the husband who, after all, was not worthy of her" (139). The presumed internal struggle here though is

confusing. If Woolf was truly interested, she could have had a physical relationship rather than “a violent and prolonged flirtation” with Bell. However, Virginia seemed to wantonly to take it to a certain point in order to get Vanessa to herself again, as Bell suggests. Bell the biographer may be biased in a certain direction, given that the subjects in question in this case are his parents (Vanessa and Clive), but he writes from a shrewd and matter-of-fact perspective. If Virginia had simply wanted some male attention, she could have turned to any one of her suitors but “the field of search had been narrowed, or at least the pitch had been queered, by her discovery that most of the young men who interested her were buggers” (Bell 133). Bell here also notes that the use of “bugger” as being something Woolf and her comrades used often, suggesting that perhaps they were especially used to the flirtations of men that they had no interest in and understandably, were annoyed by. Her interest in Clive, however, was not to “arouse male lust only to disappoint it” (140), that is, she was not just flirting to prove her sexual power. Woolf was a creative, and very attractive woman. She had been a beautiful young girl who was given criticism, and, when she really deserved it, admiration from her father for her literary work. She enjoyed the attention Bell gave her, and also appreciated him for his mind.

Perhaps in Bell Woolf saw much of her father; a man of great talent and dignity whose criticism and support she craved. Biographer Mitchell Leaska interprets the situation in the same way Quentin Bell does, adding that “Virginia discovered that Clive was sufficiently sensitive to her as a writer...Clive would be flattered to see himself in so critical a role. If his sister-in-law needed him as a literary advisor and confidant, he would come to her” (Leaska 129). The “entire unpleasant drama” based upon the

flirtation that Woolf entered into with Bell was clearly multi-faceted. She loved the attention in its purest form, especially when the attentiveness surrounded her work as a literary figure. If her father had laid the foundation for her to become great, Bell furthered it with personally attending to her and her early works, for at this point, Woolf was working at *The Guardian*, publishing her first professional pieces (Leaska 127).

Woolf seemed interested in marriage and had suitors who were apparently impassioned with the intelligent and young Woolf, but she did not seem ever to be certainly interested in one until she met Leonard Woolf. Though they had run in the same circle for quite some time, in the months at the end of 1911 Leonard was falling deeply in love with Woolf, despite the fact that “exactly how she felt about him, apart from her obvious fondness, he did not know” (Leaska 153). Around this time as well, Woolf was suffering from effects of her mental illness and had to take a reprieve in the countryside, during which Leonard was able to visit with her during her recovery, encouraged by Vanessa.

Aside from the fact that she was pleased to see her sister have a fond companion (and a successful make one at that), biographers do note that Vanessa saw the budding relationship as one potentially beneficial not only for Virginia, but for herself. “There was a distinct advantage in Leonard’s marrying Virginia: he would assume [Vanessa’s] job as mental health custodian” (Leaska 155). Thus begins the entrance of Leonard Woolf into Virginia’s life into a marriage where *she* was the one being taken care of, for Leonard saw Woolf’s maladies not necessarily as inhibiting her creativity, but perhaps furthering it. Leaska comments on a “crazy” letter that Woolf wrote to Leonard that only made him view her as ever more “brilliant” (155), with Quentin Bell adding that “a tepid

lover might have wondered what kind of woman he was wooing and might well have withdrawn from the undertaking, but there was nothing tepid about Leonard's love" (Bell 190). He was mad about Virginia, writing to her letters pouring his deepest feelings out for her. He was obviously very sensitive to Virginia's mental state, going so far as to assure her that "I wouldn't have you marry me, much as I love you, if I thought it would bring you any unhappiness" (Bell 191). Virginia did not do much to assuage Leonard's feelings that perhaps she was not as in love with him as he was with her; "the best she could say was that she was half in love with him, wanted to love him and marry him only if she could" (Bell 193). This was very different than the prior flirtations Virginia had found herself in.

Marrying Leonard almost seemed like a move to prove a point, if even subconsciously. For Leonard was "disquietingly foreign", a Jew whose widowed mother was the matriarch of their large family, a very "alien" concept to Virginia; Bell states that "no place could have been less like home than her future mother-in-laws house" (231). Lee even refers to Leonard's "problematic Jewishness" as sort of an incentive for Virginia. This begs the question as to *why* Virginia chose, of all possible suitors, Leonard. I feel that she believed and saw it happen, that he could attend to her, perhaps even take care of her. Virginia had spent a large portion of her life tending to her own father and learning under his potentially "tyrannical" reign, Leonard flipped the whole narrative she had lived prior on its head.

The budding relationship between Leonard and Virginia was most definitely encouraged by Vanessa, almost becoming "arranged" (Lee 301). While Bell may have a unique perspective on the relationship between his aunt and uncle, Lee takes a different

approach, stating that “Leonard Woolf’s obvious suitability as a husband was both an attraction to Virginia and, perversely, an obstacle (Lee 302). Lee and I agree that Leonard and Virginia had a “pressurizing and intense courtship”, in that Virginia was in need of a husband, but due to her mental illness, also needed a caretaker. Her sister Vanessa, having been very familiar with her sister’s illness and possibly growing somewhat annoyed at her meddling as a single woman, pushed the two into a relationship.

Physically, Virginia has been described by numerous biographers such as Bell as “sexually frigid”, elaborating on her aversion to male sexuality. “George [Duckworth] certainly left Virginia with a deep aversion to lust... Virginia in her disposition to shrink from some profound and perhaps congenital inhibition” (Bell 242-243). Bell sees to the early sexual trauma that Virginia underwent at the hands of George as inhibiting her adult sexuality. I must agree with this reading, for trauma manifests itself in ways that can lay dormant for years. Virginia could have had sex with Clive Bell, and she did not seem physically (or at least sexually) attracted to her now husband Leonard, asking Vanessa in a letter “why do you think people make such a fuss about marriage and copulation? Why do some of our friend change upon losing chastity?” (Bell 233). If Virginia had never explored sexuality on her own terms, she was hoping that Leonard could perhaps ignite something within her.

Virginia’s mental illness caused her to have debilitating insomnia, spending sleepless nights tossing and turning with Leonard at her side, the witness to her discomfort. Despite the fact that Virginia insisted on her well-being, Leonard more than once called her long-time doctor for advice and some of these times even sent her back to a nursing home where she had recovered from a suicide attempt years earlier. Just as

Vanessa had suspected (and hoped), Leonard quickly became Virginia's primary caregiver "without any serious and wholly unequivocal warning of what he was letting himself in for... her insanity was clothed, like some other painful things in that family, in a jest" (Bell 246). Here, Bell's view of the relationship is that of the utmost respect, and sympathy for Leonard, who selflessly took care of Virginia and never complained about it. Bell comments on the fact that in Leonard's own autobiography, he "does not pause in order to indulge in self-pity", and instead describes his then-late wife's state of mind rather than his own. In this manner, Leonard shows how much he was truly devoted to his wife, the tragedy of which is that this was not reciprocated, at least not erotically.

This is not to say that the marriage was loveless, quite the opposite, I am distinguishing between companionate love and the erotic passionate feelings that Woolf had for the two most important people in her life at the time. Woolf writes that "If it weren't for the divine goodness of L. how many times I should be thinking of death". It was not just that Leonard was good at minding his wife, his "drive for control and her need for care fell into a consistent life-long shape because of her illness" (Lee 314). Somehow, the two of them found themselves in a mutually beneficial relationship, and biographers such as Lee insist that it would be a definite mistake to interpret Leonard as a "cold, obstructive disciplinarian" (Lee 333). From the view of Bell and Leaska, Leonard seemed to have just been sort of there, getting in the way of perhaps what could have been a full-blown relationship between his wife and Vita, or another woman she met. Lee states that this is wrong, that in fact "He was a person of deep, articulate, excitable feelings", just as his wife was, he just had better control "through fierce self-training" (Lee 333). There is no doubt that there was love and definite friendship between the two,



as Lee says: “she *liked* him” (334). Obviously it would be wrong to see Leonard as a wet-blanket - after all, Virginia needed someone who could keep up with her strong intellect.

### **WOOLF AND WOMEN**

The relationships that Woolf had with other females were extremely important to her from a young age. Leaska says that Virginia’s early “‘crushes’ on Madge Vaughan and Violet Dickinson” (two of her closest friends) “had in them a large component of longing for this cosseting and maternal solicitude” that could never be fully accepted by Virginia (248). Vita Sackville-West (or Mrs. Harold Nicholson) met Virginia for the first time in December of 1922, and though immediately taken with her, no one could have predicted the passion that their friendship would take on. By 1924, Vita and Virginia were extremely close. Leaska describes Vita as having “a tendency to take charge of people’s lives. Her arrogance flattened obstacles, and her vanity renounced shabbiness”, Perhaps this domineering side to reminded Virginia of her father, twenty years after his death. On the flipside, Vita was also “gentle, compassionate, who held the moth and nursed the swallow”, and for Virginia, who described herself as a “broken chrysalis” more than once in her life, Vita was a new form of comfort and love for her.

Where Madge Vaughan and Violet Dickinson could not fulfill all the roles Virginia so wanted them to, Vita immediately stepped into these roles within Virginia's life. Leaska even refers to her relationship with Vita as “inevitable”, a culmination of years yearning for something further than heterosexual companionship, which is essentially how she and Leonard were living. The more Virginia fell for Vita. The more “the attempt to make Vita show her all the maternal affection and care she had expected

in her earlier years” (Leaska 251), increased as well- wishing for Vita to take care of Virginia the way her mother originally had, then Stella, and finally Vanessa.

Additionally, Virginia wanted Vita to “correct all the errors of the past and somehow fulfill the promise Virginia's childhood figures, Julia Stephen principally, had failed at” (Leaska 253). Virginia had experienced the loss of hope, of pure manic depression so early on in her life, and Vita was able to enter and become a larger than life figure who could somehow “save” Virginia the way she so desperately wished to be nurtured for. The women that Woolf sought out were chosen for their emotional intensity in memory of the idealized mother who died before Woolf and her siblings could grow to see her as a real person, and not just an endlessly giving saint.

The wrench in this whole situation, though, was Leonard. He seemed to be oblivious to what was going on between the women, or if he did know, he did not want to inject himself between them. Instead, he passively would “remind Virginia that ‘their relationship had not been so good lately’”, yet the main issues at hand “remained unspoken” (Leaska 253-254). Part of what Leonard lacked, Virginia saw in Vita. Leonard, comparatively, was a much more soft-spoken gentleman, whereas Vita was a spitfire, engaging passion in Virginia she had not felt ever with Leonard. Virginia was well aware of her husband’s blindness, describing a day spent with Vita consisting of “knotting her pearls in lustrous eggs. She had come to see me-so we go on- a spirited creditable affair... rather a bore for Leonard, but not enough to worry him” (Leaska 258). It seems to me nearly impossible that Leonard could have been simply unaware of his wife’s sexual passion towards women; instead, I suggest that he was capable of accepting it.

It seems to biographers that Leonard was simply more of a close friend and caretaker to Virginia, but her erotic and romantic fulfillment came from Vita. Both women were married at the time of their relationship, and it's clear that they did not feel the need to go to great lengths to hide their lives from their respective husbands. A week-long trip in 1924 taken just by Vita and Virginia to Belgium was perhaps the one taste the two women had of what life may have been like had they been in a committed relationship to each other, without the fuss of husbands and extraneous lovers (mainly in Vita's case). Woolf was able to take what she wanted from each of her lovers- Leonard supported her mentally and was always there for her in her "illnesses", as he called her spells of depression and suicidal tendencies. Vita, though, kept a spark alive in Woolf- a romantic vibrancy cemented in the female friendship that Woolf had been quietly yearning for her whole life.

### **LIFE INTO ART: *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE***

These emotional tangles from childhood are both displayed and resolved in *To the Lighthouse*, in that novel, childhood traumas are conquered in art, if not in life. The novel opens with James, the youngest Ramsay child, feeling immense hatred towards his father. Within the first few pages, James is having very violent fantasies about hurting his father: "Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it" (*To the Lighthouse* 4). This is the first time in the novel that there is such a stark break in the thoughts of a character, and it is especially disconcerting given that this is six-year-old James' own thoughts about his father. Perhaps this was Woolf's way of venting her anger and frustration towards her own father through the innocent and enraged eyes of a child.

In Mr. Ramsay's case, any small thing he does elicits a response from James, who "hates him. He hated him for coming up to them, for stopping and looking down on them, he hated him to interrupting them..." (36). Interestingly, James is especially angered when his father distracts Mrs. Ramsay from James, as "he hoped to recall his mother's attention, which, he knew angrily, wavered instantly his father stopped" (*To the Lighthouse* 37). During the first portion of the novel, James spends a lot of time one-on-one with his mother and relishes the attention she gives to him. The conflict between James and his parents sets the tone for the way the rest of the characters throughout the book also look at Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.

The former is constantly viewed as "tyrannical" and controlling, with those exact words being used at the very end of the novel, ten years after the first section. Recall the fact that Woolf refers to certain men in her life as "tyrants" as well, strengthening the biographical aspect of the budding memoir meets fiction genre she was wading in. Though some of the other characters in *To the Lighthouse* express their disdain towards Mr. Ramsay, James is the one who most directly feels true abhorrence towards him and wishes actual violence, even death upon him. Perhaps the reader can interpret these aggressive fantasies as coming from a part of Woolf's own mind, using James as a literary conduit, if we are to believe Hyman's statement that Stephen was a true tyrant taking advantage of the women around him.

Hyman's theory is not only accepted upon by many critics but is backed up by Woolf's own writings. She speaks about her father's change in temperament during the years following her mother's death, saying that she and her siblings "made him the type of all that we hated in our lives; he was the tyrant of inconceivable selfishness"

(“Reminiscences” 56). This greatly differs from the adoration Woolf had felt for her father during her youth, even writing that her father “replaced the beauty and merriment of the dead with ugliness and gloom” (“Reminiscences” 56). The carefree innocence of the lives of the Stephens family they had before the death of their mother is shattered. The duality of this loving versus abusive mentality that would befall the household only heightens the tension between children and father, and to make matters worse for the Stephen children, the patriarch seemed “prepared to take Vanessa for his next victim”, going so far as to say explain that “When he was sad, she should be sad” (“Reminiscences” 56). He very much made his children hold him up during his unending period of grief, while they were unable to process Julia’s death on their own terms. This emotional abuse and manipulation against his children did not seem to fade with time, either, and backs up Hyman’s notion that Stephens was the cause for much trauma in his children’s lives.

The thought of living on without Julia and ever being happy again seemed a far fantasy for Stephen and his children, concisely stated as “death spoilt what should have been so fair” (“Reminiscences” 56). Woolf tries to speak on her father’s condition during the summer when her mother became ill, “But no words of mine can convey what he felt, or even the energy of the visible expression of it...” (“Reminiscences” 40). The devastation that Stephen felt is powerful, and perhaps the sadness that still clung to Virginia regarding her mother’s death prevented her from elaborating much on Mrs. Ramsay’s death, instead cutting it down to one sentence and never speaking of it again. In this regard, Woolf recreates her mother’s death in her novel. *To the Lighthouse* was written in 1927, many years after the death of her mother, but perhaps it took this amount

of time for her to process. Putting the tragedy in writing allowed Woolf to let go and move on from being haunted by her mother. It is more the aftermath of the deaths that Woolf dwells on, speaking through Lily Briscoe in the second half of the novel after Mrs. Ramsay's sudden death.

Even the period directly following the two women's death is similar. Woolf felt like the family's source of strength had been ripped from them, as "[Julia's] position in the family was such that her death not only removed the central figure from our eyes, but brought about such a shifting of relationships that life for a long time seemed incredibly strange" ("Reminiscences" 44). In *To the Lighthouse*, the middle portion of the book ("Time Passes") uses the empty deterioration of the Ramsay's summer home as symbolism for the loss of Mrs. Ramsay; "Nothing it seemed could break that image, corrupt that innocence, or disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week, in the empty room wove into itself..." (129). The "motion of time", as Schrimper puts it, allows the reader to watch the time passing during this dark and lonely period within the house (Schrimper 6). Through her words and descriptions, things such as "stray airs" on "bare boards" give a visual representation of the continuation of time- and let the reader into Woolf's own mind during the time after her mother died. The women were the pillars of their family, and the sudden loss of them clearly had resounding effects on their families and especially on their husbands. What these mothers also did, though, was protect their children, guard them against the uncertainties of the world. Woolf and the Ramsay children all felt *safe* during the time their mother was alive.

In a scene from *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay covers up a large pig skull mounted on the wall that is scaring Cam, her youngest daughter. This fear of the dark as

lifted straight from Woolf's own childhood, as Lee describes her as a "nervous" child (Lee 104). The mother is literally shielding her children from the sights of death that understandably scare them and cause the sleepless nights (114). This image is returned to in the middle of the novel after the death of Mrs. Ramsay, when in the now silent abandoned summer home did "Only once a board sprang on the landing; once in the middle of the night with a roar... one fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro" (*To the Lighthouse* 130). After the loss of Julia and Mrs. Ramsay, the children were no longer protected from childlike instinctive fear they felt. The shawl that was wrapped around all things scary and deadly was loosened and would continue to fall away, exposing more and more of the reality of everyday terrors.

Whether they knew it or not, the children in both situations were now catapulted into a form of early adulthood, especially the Stephen children in response to their father's actions after Julia's death, Stephen seemed to take this to another level, wallowing in his grief for some time afterward and allowing for his children to absorb all of it. While "For some time life seemed to us in a chronic state of confusion" ("Reminiscences" 45), Stephen found a way to cope with his grief at the expense of his eldest daughter, Stella.

"I do not think that Stella lost consciousness for a single moment during all those months of his immediate need...sometimes at night she spent a long time alone in his study with him, hearing again and again the bitter story of his loneliness, his love and his remorse" ("Reminiscences" 41).

Though she did not have much of a choice, Stella was thrust into the role of her mother, cooing over Stephen and tending to him in his state. Stephen was so lost in his own world

that he took all the grief for himself, not only blanketing his children with his own emotion but pouring out “bitter” stories. There was no room left for anyone else in the family to mourn, and Stephen either ignored or saw no issue with this.

The ending section of the novel entitled *Back to the Lighthouse* centers on the period of time in the years following the death of Mrs. Ramsay. It is here that we see very real parallels between Leslie Stephen’s own grief and that of his counterpart, Mr. Ramsay. In the last section of *To the Lighthouse*, we are brought back into James’ (now seventeen-year-old) psyche. There is an obvious echo of the first scene where James shows his violent thoughts; on page 184 of *To the Lighthouse*, James “had always kept this old symbol of taking a knife and striking his father to the heart”. Woolf directly recalls the knife symbolism she had used earlier in the book and brings it back now.

However, in this later scene, James seems to look beyond just being mad at his father. Not everything is the same as it was ten years prior. Now it is James who is directing the boat to the destination that he had wanted to go so badly as a child; “only now, as he grew older, and sat staring at his father in an impotent rage, it was not him, that old man reading, whom he wanted to kill, but it was the thing that had descended on him” (*To the Lighthouse* 184). James wants to “track down and stamp out tyranny, despotism”, characteristics, which his father *represents*, rather than just kill “the old man reading”. As James ages, he is able to tease out the characteristics that he hates in his father. In terms of Woolf, perhaps she is able to feel more sympathy for the parts of her father that were unsavory by the time she was older in age herself. As Woolf writes her memoir as a middle-aged woman she describes, how, in her father’s later years “He was getting deaf...Indoors he would walk up and down the room, gesticulating, crying that he



had never told mother how he loved her” (“A Sketch of the Past” 94). This is not the image of a domineering tyrant that Leslie Stephen once was. Describing an aging man forever mourning the loss of his wife, Woolf is able to feel compassion for him. The pure hatred echoing James’ feelings she may have once felt is diminished, furthered by the fact that Stephen seems to be breaking down his own walls by telling his children that “we were his only hope, his only comfort” (“A Sketch of the Past” 94). It seems less and less likely that James is Woolf’s sole counterpart. There is another Ramsay sibling that she may have related to much more.

The devastation felt by the Stephens children is palpable and presented through the eyes of sixteen-year-old sister Cam, who has an internal struggles between wanting to sympathize with her father, like her mother, and staying loyal to James in sharing his hatred of Mr. Ramsay. The differences in the way the children view their father can be seen while they both watch him reading, with very different interpretations of his actions: “...as they hung about in that horrid calm, he turned a page... James felt that each page was turned with a peculiar gesture aimed at him” (*To the Lighthouse* 183). James seems determined to believe that every single thing his father does is in some way intended to spite him. He describes the way Mr. Ramsay turns the pages as “assertively, now commandingly” (183), furthering his view that his father is the ultimate tyrant. Meanwhile, Cam describes the same actions of her father “as if he were guiding something, or wheedling a large flock of sheep” (190). She does not see her father as reading at all “aggressively” but rather connotes it with much gentler imagery. Cam thinks, “he was not in vain, nor a tyrant, and did not wish to make you pity him. Indeed, if he saw she was there, reading a book, he would ask her, as gently as anyone could,

‘Was there nothing he could give her?’” (*To the Lighthouse* 190). She directly contradicts James’ thoughts of his dictator father and she wants “to say aloud to James, look at him now,” (*To the Lighthouse* 190). But Cam stays quiet. She acknowledges and feels the same pain as James about the loss of their mother, but instead of seeing her father as the eternal villain, she empathizes with the old man and wishes James would as well. There is a heightened sense of disunity between the siblings and presumably was felt by Woolf’s siblings as well. As she had stated earlier, the death of Julia broke her family apart. They were no longer a fluid team living in familiar harmony but were now fractured children left in their home with their overwhelmingly and unfailingly sad father.

While the childhoods in question may have ended abruptly after the mother’s death, Woolf clearly shows dramatic back-and-forth between scorning her father and loving him intensely, and perhaps it is not James Ramsay that Virginia Woolf identifies herself with, but Cam. Throughout *To the Lighthouse*, the reader is taken into the consciousness of various characters. Cam is also a child at the start of the novel and serves as a contrast to her tunnel-visioned brother. Cam seems to be the only character who is able to see different points of view between her family members and their emotional states and wishes to point this out to her brother, while James sees things in black and white. The fluid empathy that Cam shows is comparable to how Virginia felt navigating the dynamics of her own family, her “vivid account of her father's emotional outbursts...has fostered the image of Stephen as a domestic tyrant, before and after this turbulent period Woolf saw her father as kind and supportive, offering moments of intimacy and intellectual freedom...” (Hyman 203). It would have been easy for Woolf to maintain Mr. Ramsay as the domineering, tyrannical father figure that James sees him as,

and leave Mrs. Ramsay as an eternal goddess-like figure, but that's too simple. By using Cam as a proxy of herself, she is able to show her own empathy and understanding of her parents that had changed over the course of her life and their deaths.

While James and Cam each represent of a different facet of Woolf's thoughts regarding her father, another character may act as a much more objective observer of the patriarchal domination that Mr. Ramsay had and lost over the course of the novel. Lily Briscoe is a young, unmarried woman staying at the Lighthouse with the Ramsay family. Like everyone else, she is enchanted and attracted to Mrs. Ramsay and slightly afraid of Mr. Ramsay. When acknowledging on the idea that Mr. Ramsay may be "a bit of a hypocrite", Lily also thinks that he "is the most sincere of men, the truest (here he was), the best". This first half of this thought is how Lily thinks of Mr. Ramsay on a surface level- yes, he is a successful man with a wonderful wife and eight children. He seems to have it all, and his mind is the greatest gift of them all. Lily even "suspects" that "teaching and preaching is beyond human power", elevating Mr. Ramsay into a higher status through his intellect.

Mr. Ramsay himself, though, dwells on what could have been, thinking to himself that "a father of eight children has no choice" but to work and provide, wherein "in effect, he had not done the thing he might have done. It was a disguise; it was the refuge of a man afraid to own his own feelings" (*To the Lighthouse* 45). Mr. Ramsay spends much of the early half of the book in quiet thought, not actually saying much, but being an immensely domineering presence nonetheless; "Lily had said something about his frightening her- he changed from one mood to another so suddenly". This is evident in the remainder of the thought Lily had had about how true and great Mr. Ramsay was, she

completed her earlier thought by saying that “looking down, she thought, he is absorbed in himself, he is tyrannical, he is unjust” (*To the Lighthouse* 46). And she is right- Mr. Ramsay is so caught up in his own self and possibilities he could have grasped, had he not been “the father of eight children”. Arguably the only redeeming quality of Mr. Ramsay is the love he has for his wife, which is keenly observed by Lily, who she keeps her eyes down to avoid the experience that “directly one looked up and saw them, what she called ‘being in love’ flooded them”. More and more in this passage, we can understand that Lily is acting a conduit for Woolf in recalling the positives and negatives of her parents.

Though Lily herself is not interested in marriage, she sees how special and true the love between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay is and sees that “they became part of that unreal but penetrating and exciting universe which is the world seen through the eyes of love” (*To the Lighthouse* 47). The first half of the novel is spent with Lily bonding and thinking the tenderest thoughts of Mrs. Ramsay, while carefully avoiding Mr. Ramsay and his “tyrannical, unjust” nature. Lee hypothesizes that the language Woolf used in *To the Lighthouse* was “like the language she used for Vita, who had fertilized her mind” (Lee 493). Lee also notes that during the time Woolf was writing *To the Lighthouse*, she was away from Vita, and the longing for her is shown within the pages of the book, through Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, perhaps. The adjective used to describe Mr. Ramsay, though, are eerily reminiscent of Hyman’s view of Stephen as being just the same, and of being seen by his daughters as just the same.

Lily is a painter, creating visual art but struggling with a specific painting she is working on at the start of the novel. One major aspect of Lily’s character is that she is of

absolutely no relation to the Ramsays. Because of this separation, she acts as a perfect objective view on the characters and in a larger sphere, of Woolf's own views of her parents.

Even Mrs. Ramsay, Lily's closest companion in the novel, is also the model for the start of the painting. However, despite the fact that Lily was "an independent little creature, and Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it [she] could not take her painting very seriously" (*To the Lighthouse* 17). It is within this passage that we are first introduced to Lily, and if we view her as a proxy for Woolf, it is only fitting that the painting, which is so integral to the structure of the novel, starts out as a painting with Mrs. Ramsay as the subject. Woolf said herself that "the presence of my mother obsessed me", and that only through the publishing of *To the Lighthouse* was she able to "express some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest" ("A Sketch of the Past" 81). By finally gaining closure and performing a sort of literary psychoanalysis of herself, Woolf is able to part with the dimming memory of her mother that had "obsessed" her for so many years. This was something that Stephen was unable to do, keeping himself locked in a state of perpetual mourning from the moment Julia died.

The second part of the novel takes on a much darker tone, with the sudden death of Mrs. Ramsay (in a strikingly similar manner to Julia Stephens' own passing). Recall that after Julia's death, Stephen mourned at length, looking for sympathy wherever he could find it; "He had constant interviews with sympathetic women, who went in to see him nervously enough, and came out flushed and tear-stained" ("Reminiscences" 40). It was not enough for Stephen to use his daughters as emotional crutches; he actually

outsourced pity from other women who were vulnerable to the great author in mourning for his wife.

Similarly, when Lily returns to the lighthouse ten years after the novel's start and is still working on the same painting, she "finds she is unable to paint with Mr. Ramsay around, with him begging for sympathy she cannot give" (Proudfit 34). If we are to believe that Lily is speaking for Virginia, this is eerily echoing of what her mother had to do thirty years prior to the writing of *To the Lighthouse*. Bell states that the exhaustion Julia faced in the months leading up to her death, presumably from complications of rheumatic fever, was worsened by her "lifetime in altruistic work and at length her physical resistance had burnt out" (Bell 41). Leslie Stephen was so consumed in his work on those years that he wholly relied on his wife for support; "Julia had to wake him up and comfort him...to reassure and, indeed to administer him...and so she exhausted herself" (Bell 41). After the death of his wife, Mr. Ramsay is entirely stripped of the potentially "hypocritical" confidence he had; has been reduced to an elderly man made smaller by the deaths of his wife and two of his children. Lily observes him

Suddenly [raising] his head as he asked and looked straight at her, with his distraught wild gaze which was yet so penetrating... and she pretended to drink out of her empty coffee cup so as to escape him- to escape his demand on her, to put aside a moment longer that imperious need (*To the Lighthouse* 147).

Woolf seems to be speaking directly through Lily here, venting her wishes to escape the profound sadness that her father felt. It would have been enough, to simply watch her father sink deeper into a state of depression, after family tragedy, but Stephen

had a pathological *need* for sympathy, and to take care of- the brunt of which fell to Virginia after the death of her own sister, Stella.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Stella's counterpart is Prue, who "[died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy]" (*To the Lighthouse* 132). This one-off sentence sums up the suddenness and permanence of death in the same manner that described Mrs. Ramsay's passing and including the implications it has on subsequent generations. Echoing the idea of the death of hope, Manya Lempert asks: "what of Mrs. Ramsay's dashed hopes that Prue 'her own daughter, must be happier than other people's daughters?'" (470). The death of both the mother and daughter shows the lack of renewal that comes with death. Instead, it remains heavy, tragic, unexplained. Perhaps Woolf saw her own genetic lineage as doomed, inheriting neuroses from her father and maternal figures who kept disappearing from her life in some sudden tragedy. If Prue and her child had lived, they could have kept Mrs. Ramsay's spirit alive, somehow, and the promise of a new generation that could be "happier" than those that came before. This hope, however, is cruelly denied.

Lily returned to the summer home for a reason, but it was not to provide sole comfort for Mr. Ramsay, and after avoiding interaction with him feels that "She must escape somewhere, be alone somewhere" (*To the Lighthouse* 147). Perhaps Mr. Ramsay's steadfast hope that his writings/teachings will outlast him is directly related to the insecurity Stephen felt regarding the afterlife, given his complete loss of faith. The hold that Stephen had over his daughter was enormous, and Woolf seemed to only find true solace in her writing. However, Woolf says herself that it is to her father she owes her prowess, creating a disconnect between admiring him as a mentor and hating him as

an emotional tyrant over her throughout her whole life, emotionally. Lily also finds comfort within artistry:

suddenly she remembered. When she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little sprig or leaf pattern on the table-cloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation. There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture. Move the tree to the middle, she had said. She had never finished that picture. She would paint that picture now. It had been knocking about in her mind all these years (147).

It is only a moment in the penetrating hold of Mr. Ramsay that sparks Lily's interest in finally finishing her painting. Just as this "revelation" came about ten years prior and again in the present, Woolf finds her biggest inspirations from her interactions with her father, and in her most famous novel, she has immortalized him so wholly within her most famous novel. In this, we see that from trauma and loss, creation can emerge.

The relationship at the heart of *To the Lighthouse* is that between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay. The painting that has been analyzed by scholars for years is open to much interpretation. However, we know that the subject of the painting is Mrs. Ramsay. The adult male characters in *To the Lighthouse*, all seem to be flawed. In my view, they represent the way that Woolf viewed men in general, or at least the way they acted in parts of her life. We are first introduced to Charles Tansley, a preacher, and "a miserable specimen...he was a sarcastic brute" (*To the Lighthouse* 7). Throughout the novel, Tansley is haughty, and more often than not, extremely condescending, with Lily hearing his voice echoing "women can't paint, women can't write" as she works on her art (48).



But Lily and Mrs. Ramsay do not let Tansley get to them. He stays around, a student of Mr. Ramsay.

Another companion of the family, Mr. Bankes, is kind to Lily and wants to marry her. Lily (in a very similar vein to a young Virginia) couldn't care less about the prospect of his proposal, and instead she "thought with some amusement because she was relieved. Why did she pity him? (84). It was Mrs. Ramsay's plot to get Mr Bankes and Lily together, but it is so clear that the real object of Lily's pure, unadulterated affection *is* Mrs. Ramsay. She finds commonality in the way they both think, with Lily feeling that she can read through Mrs. Ramsay's external instincts to find Lily a husband; "Lily supposed; for that was true of Mrs. Ramsay- she pitied men as if they lacked something- women never; as if they had something" (85). The latter part of this passage is extremely pertinent to Woolf's own life. She had had her suitors, she had flirted aggressively with her sister's husband, and why? But it is evident that Woolf's most meaningful erotic relationships came from females.

The way in which Lily and Mrs. Ramsay are contrasted not only stems from their age and maturity level but also physical descriptions. Whereas Mrs. Ramsay's femininity and beauty is commented on by many of the characters in the novel, including her own children, Lily's "virginal body evokes inviolability", according to Kristina Groover (220). She argues that Lily is "both attracted to and threatened by the potential for intimacy", very reminiscent of Woolf's own hesitations to pursue a sexual relationship while at the same time showing her definite interest in men such as Clive Bell. The sexual fixation on Mrs. Ramsay maybe indicative of Woolf's views on the inherent loveliness and worth of women, while the imperviousness of men looms overhead. Lily

closely guards her painting, as well as her own character from men in the novel, starting with Charles Tansley. Woolf had closed herself off sexually to people, and with good reason after her childhood abuse. This is also an obvious defense mechanism for her, for, as Groover states: “while intimacy extends the body, it also threatens autonomy, subjecting the individual to both the rising crescendos and the crashing falls of human relationships” (220). One can argue that Woolf’s whole life had been a series of slow rises and heavy, devastating “falls”. For Woolf, “grounding art and aesthetic activity in physical, bodily experience is not a denial of its alterity and its cognitive potential” (Koppen 388), and instead supplied her with a path to finding her own voice that is able to let the reader in. Almost entering another body and feeling the space that the body takes up within the context of the narrative is an effective and distinctive writing technique utilized by Woolf in nearly all her fictional writings. By limiting her sexuality in real life and extending eroticism in her writings to be solely about the female body, Woolf shows just how much abusive masculinity has affected her as a woman, and as a writer.

Starting with her sisters, Stella and Vanessa, in addition to her martyred mother, Woolf found solace in female friendships. A psychological reading of this could take into account the sexual abuse she underwent at a young age perhaps pushing her heterosexual instincts to the back of her mind. What were Woolf’s own views on her homosexuality? Lee proposes that Woolf’s “preference for her own sex had been a fact of her life since childhood”, and was sort of a running joke for her and her friends. Still, Woolf “could not bear to categorizes herself as belonging to a group defined by its sexual behavior” (Lee 484). Woolf did not even see herself as a “Sapphist” (Lee 485), yet in almost every one

of her novels “there are intimate and sensual relationships between women who move fluidly between the roles of mothers and daughters, sisters and friends” (Lee 485). This is one of the most important things to note regarding subtle eroticism in Woolf’s works. The relationship between Vita and Virginia was blooming around the time she started writing *To the Lighthouse*, and it is my feeling that the love Lily felt for Mrs. Ramsay was intertwined not only with Virginia’s longing and “obsession” for her mother, but in some ways, by the infatuation she felt for Vita. Though there are numerous male characters in *To the Lighthouse*, a few of whom are interested in marriage, by far the brightest light falls on the female relationships, especially that of Lily and Mrs. Ramsay. The strength that Woolf found in Vita is echoed in a statement by Leaska:

Vita never failed to come to her side. Vita the lover proposed all kinds of difficulties, but Vita the mother was as stable as the Rock of Gibraltar. Sir Leslie Stephen had behaved in exactly the same way when he wanted Julia’s attention all for himself. Father and daughter were indeed mirror images. (286)

Where Leonard had been a gently stable force in Virginia's life and was someone she could rely on, he did not spark her erotic passions or true love. That was saved for Vita, a woman who was able to finally be both mother and lover- and to fulfill a sexual desire Virginia had not presently been aware of before she met Vita.

It takes a certain amount of independence and self-responsibility to move on from a loss, a strength that Woolf had and that her father ultimately lacked. Woolf poured her feelings into writing, as Lily does with her painting. Woolf writes

I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives

me... a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me (“A Sketch of the Past” 72).

The fractured parts of Woolf that broke after her mother's death, and again with the loss of her father and Stella, are be glued back together through the action of writing. Whereas Lily uses her painting to escape the world and naysaying men, Woolf is able to cure her instability – temporarily- by putting her ideas into words. *To the Lighthouse*, in particular, is nearly more journal than it is novel. It is the new form of biography combining fiction, biography, and memoir that Stephen had pioneered and Virginia honed.

*To the Lighthouse* is an early and exquisite example of this form, in which the author pours some of their own life and feelings into their fiction, in this case wholly based around Woolf's own family. It is a testament to the love she felt for her mother prior to her death, the dysfunctional relationship with her father, and the eventual anger and overall annoyance she felt toward the men around her, and the comfort she found in women and the nonsexual relationship with her husband. By capturing at least some of her parents' essences in her work, Woolf keeps their memories alive; Vanessa commends her sister's ability to “raise mother from the dead” (“Reminiscences” 88) upon finishing the novel. Woolf's childhood was marred by personal issue, her adolescence and adulthood by her mental instability. All the while she was carrying over profound effects of her father's own fragility and subdued sexual scars from her brothers' abuse. After a long period of personal exploration in which she found her husband, and possibly more importantly, Vita. Woolf uses her past by turning it into literary art and understanding, focusing both on the mother she didn't get to know well, and the father who was both admirable and a monster of ego.

To create all those characters whose vastly different emotions she can understand and make vivid is both art and a kind of forgiveness and letting go, just as Lily does through her painting. As Lily says at the end of the novel, with that sense of completeness, "I have had my vision (209)."

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