



## Facultade de Filoloxía

Traballo de fin de grao

Autora: Sara Cereiño Lourido

Titora: Laura María Lojo Rodríguez

**“She would never marry;  
one could not take her  
painting very seriously”: A  
Feminist approach to  
Virginia Woolf’s *To the  
Lighthouse***

Ano académico 2020/2021



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**Resumo** [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]

The title's opening quote from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) illustrates not only the relationship between the two main women characters in the novel - Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe- but also the existing tension between the patriarchal assumptions regarding the traditional roles of women in society and women's artistic aspirations. In the novel these two characters are apparently presented as antagonists since they stand for contrasting models of femininity and have different outlooks on life. However, Woolf also undermines such opposition by emphasising how their relationship is based on mutual love and admiration for each other: "she [Briscoe] was and independent little creature and Mrs Ramsay liked her for it".

The aim of this work will be to produce a critical analysis of Virginia Woolf's modernist novel *To the Lighthouse* from a feminist perspective. Therefore, I will make a special emphasis on topics such as the role of the narrative's female characters as well as the relationship between them, Woolf's representation of both traditional roles of women and unconventional subjectivities in the novel, the relation between art and gender or the connection of this narrative with the author's own experiences as a woman and as a writer. For this purpose, I will be using a range of critical works which comprise both primary sources, such as Virginia Woolf's personal diaries, letters and essays, along with a selection of criticism which tackles not only Woolf's personal life but also *To the Lighthouse* in particular from a gender perspective.

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## INTRODUCTION

*To the Lighthouse* was written by Virginia Woolf and published for the first time in 1927 by the Hogarth Press. At the time the novel was regarded as Woolf's best work in her writing career so far. I read this novel for the first time a year ago and after finishing it, *To the Lighthouse* automatically became one of my favourite books. However, I felt that there were many subtle meanings and interpretations of the novel which I was not able to grasp at the time. For this reason, when I had to choose a topic for my TFG, analysing *To the Lighthouse* was my first choice. I saw it as the perfect opportunity to work and analyse more in depth a novel which I already loved.

This dissertation aims to examine *To the Lighthouse* from a feminist slant by focusing on the main female characters—Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, respectively— and by paying attention to several aspects, such as the way the novel anticipates major concerns which Woolf would develop and theorize on in future essays. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf fictionalizes topics such as her own ambivalent and conflictive relationship with her patriarchal, Victorian father, while also denouncing the restrictive roles of women at that time or the struggle of women artists to pursue a career and acquire independence. However, these ideas presented in the novel are not only restricted to the level of the fictional narrative. I will here make emphasis on the fact that *To the Lighthouse* can be interpreted as Woolf's own vindication of the importance of art for the female artist at two different levels; both fictional and personal. The character of Lily Briscoe in the novel and Woolf herself are women who reclaim the use of art (painting and writing, respectively) as the expression of their distinctive ways of seeing the world, but also as a protest against patriarchal conventions and as the method to come to terms with traumatic experiences from the past, such as loss.

As the title indicates, the reading of the novel will be presented from a feminist perspective. For this reason, the main body of this dissertation will be focused on the close analysis of the two main female protagonists of the novel; Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. The analysis of *To the Lighthouse* will be supported and based on a variety of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include Woolf's main autobiographical writings, such as her personal letters and diaries, as well as the essay "A Sketch of the Past" (1939). Moreover, this dissertation will also include quotes and references to some of Virginia Woolf's main feminist essays, such as "Women and Fiction" (1928), "A Room of One's Own" (1929), "Professions for women" (1931) or "Three Guineas" (1938). These essays include Woolf's main ideas concerning the role and identity of women in the early twentieth century, and they all encapsulate Woolf's feminist agenda in different ways. Significantly, some of the ideas included in these essays, such as Woolf's criticism of the Victorian "Angel in the House", the denunciation of the patriarchal Victorian society or the artist's androgynous mind are already anticipated in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Concerning the secondary sources, these will include a variety of works regarding literary criticism of Woolf's work, but also biographical writings such as Hermione Lee's biography *Virginia Woolf* (1996).

The first chapter will address the social, historical and cultural context of Woolf's writing in order to provide a better understanding of the features that characterize *To the Lighthouse*. This chapter will also offer a brief introduction to the origins of Modernism as an aesthetic movement, as well as a description of the main innovations, features and members of this movement. Moreover, especial attention will be paid to explaining Woolf's narrative method, the so called "tunnelling process", the writer's own words to describe a connective strategy among her character's minds. This innovative narrative technique was clearly

inspired by her literary context, and will characterize some her major novels, including *To the Lighthouse* or *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

The second chapter offers a closer analysis of the novel itself, emphasizing the most relevant autobiographical aspects which inspired Woolf's book, which are crucial for the understanding of the novel. For instance, although Woolf did not use real names for places or people, the setting and the main characters of the novel are all based on her own personal experiences, especially drawing from her childhood, which highly influenced her development as a writer. In a sense, *To the Lighthouse* encapsulates Woolf's way of evoking her parents' memories, Leslie and Julia Stephen, and the crucial experiences Woolf lived in their summer house in Cornwall.

Finally, the third and fourth chapters constitute the main body of the analysis of the novel. These sections will present a close analysis of Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Significantly, the novel is divided in three different sections; Mrs Ramsay being the central character in Part I and Lily the main narrative voice throughout Part III. The analysis will tackle several aspects concerning both of them, such as their role in the novel, their relationship between themselves, the seemingly opposing ambitions and models of femininity which characterize them, as well as the inspiration in real-life events and Woolf's family members. Mrs Ramsay is presented as the perfect Victorian mother and wife, the "Angel in the House". On the contrary, Lily is the independent modern artist. Their differences and Lily's need for closure after Mrs Ramsay's death in the middle of the novel constitute the main conflict in need of resolution in *To the Lighthouse*. These two characters are based on the mother-daughter relationship between Julia Stephen and Virginia Woolf, and explore how the early loss of her mother affected the author. Significantly, both Lily and Virginia solve the conflictive relationships and the loss of their mother figures at the same time by the means of artistic creation.

## Chapter 1: Woolf and Modernism

### 1.1. The Modernist Movement

Virginia Woolf is a writer who has been consistently related to what is known as the Modernist movement. The term Modernism has been in use since 1908, although its present meaning is due to its use as a temporal and aesthetic category when used later in university courses (Whitworth, 147). As such, Modernism may be defined as a movement characterized by the rejection of realist depictions of the world and Victorian values, aiming to explore new innovative techniques which would more adequately mirror the complexities of human subjectivity in the wake of scientific, philosophical and technological advancements of the early twentieth century. However, as stated by Michael Whitworth, Modernism was not a coherent or unified movement. Instead, it worked as a series of affiliations such as the Bloomsbury group, to which Woolf belonged. In addition, Whitworth highlights that authors did not only respond to the developments that characterized the Modern world, but they also commented on their contemporaries' work by focusing on 'the experience of reading others' (146). For instance, Woolf's works respond to the work of contemporaries, such as James Joyce, as well as to the aesthetic or philosophical premises held by, for instance, Roger Fry or Bertrand Russell.

The point of inception of the so-called "Bloomsbury Group" was in 1904, when the Stephen siblings moved to 46 Gordon Square after their father's death. There, a group of new Cambridge graduates began to gather to discuss their views on art, beauty or politics. They became the student contemporaries that Woolf would have otherwise been denied because of her gender (McNeillie, 3). However, Bloomsbury was "neither an organization nor self-consciously a movement". Therefore, critics have had great difficulties when trying to study the group collectively and its aesthetic (McNeillie, 16). The year 1910 will be a crucial date



for Bloomsbury and within the framework of twentieth-century art in general. In this year Robert Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibition took place at the Grafton Galleries in London; it marked the beginning of the Post-Impressionist age, a revolution on the notions of beauty and art, as Woolf herself stated in her essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924): "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (3).

As the leader of the Bloomsbury group, Virginia Woolf was most aware of their common views regarding art and literature. This is expressed by Virginia Woolf herself in her essay "Modern Fiction", published in *The Common Reader* in 1925, a version of the earlier "Modern Novels", published in *Times Literary Supplement* in 1919. In this essay Woolf compares the realist techniques of perception of reality as understood by Edwardian authors with the new tendencies defended by herself and other contemporaries. In this sense, Woolf defines writers such as H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett or John Galsworthy as "materialists", since they focus on the external aspects of reality. Woolf states that "they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring" (159). Virginia Woolf contrasts these authors with several writers that try to portray reality in a different way: "In contrast with those whom we have called "materialists", Mr. Joyce is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain" (161). Moreover, Woolf states that "spiritualist" authors are not characterized for using any distinctive technique or a certain method. Instead, what they have in common is the interest on portraying 'life itself' and the individual's psychology in a complex and realistic way. Finally, Woolf concludes this essay with a reflection on fiction in general: "The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss" (164).

As Woolf herself expressed in “Modern Fiction”, the authors that are nowadays considered as “Modernists” were aware of their common interest to create new forms of writing and perceiving reality. They consciously rejected Victorian materialism and embraced the new scientific and philosophical discoveries: for instance, Michael Whitworth states that Woolf was highly influenced by Rutherford’s discovery of the porosity of the atom (150). This will lead to a conception of reality as permeable and porous, which will be very recurrent in her works. This idea can already be seen by Woolf’s “Modern Fiction”, she states that “life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.” (160)

However, Modernist writers did not always perform a radical break with previous literary and aesthetic movements and sensibilities, often establishing a fruitful dialogue with them. This is the case of Walter Pater’s theories of art and perception, which Woolf often echoed in her essays and novels. Pater rejected the idea of the solidity of reality and the individual by stating that everything is experiencing a constant change. His theories will be crucial for the development of Modernist thought. According to Pater, the individual’s mind is susceptible to impressions and after receiving them the brain organizes them in a series of “isolated moments” (Whitworth, 152). This susceptibility is exactly what brings the individual closer to reality, to ‘life itself’. Woolf’s “moments of being” and Joyce’s “epiphanies” are clearly inspired by this theory. These may be defined as moments when the characters are completely aware of the reality surrounding them, they are moments of “heightened consciousness” (Dick, 60). For instance, the dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse* is a great example of this: as Susan Dick argues, during this part of the novel Mrs Ramsay experiences a moment of complete awareness where “the ordinary and the extraordinary are perceived as one” (60).

As argued above, Virginia Woolf shared opinions, views and literary techniques similar to those used by other Modernist writers, especially the members of the Bloomsbury Group. However, many critics define her as a distinct Modernist since she differs in many aspects from her male contemporaries. Woolf's perception of reality was not only influenced by the Modernist rejection of superficiality or the aim to explore innovative techniques of writing. Her distinct characteristic is that she perceived reality as a woman; she purposely distanced herself "from the politics of authoritarianism and the exaggerated masculinity of the period" (Whitworth, 147). Furthermore, and as Woolf's interest in Pater's theories of art and perception shows, the writer did not completely reject the Victorian heritage. Although in many of her works Woolf denounces or satirizes Victorian conventions and social order, she is highly influenced by the Victorian literary tradition, as Whitworth suggests: "The strand of late Victorian aestheticism in her modernist thinking kept her at a critical distance from the aesthetic preferences of many of her contemporaries (sculptural hardness and dryness)" (147).

Woolf's experience as a woman shaped her writing completely. She was more empathetic and concerned with political issues than other members of her literary community, especially in what pertains to women's visibility in the public sphere. She was fascinated by portraying the lives of women and the complexities of gender identity and is critical towards concepts such as authority, order and objectivity, which she regarded as prevalent male values: as an example, she often associates linearity in her writing with the male world and patriarchy (Whitworth, 155). Her male characters usually have ways of thinking characterized by linearity and rigidity, which emphasizes their obsession with external and material domination. For instance, the character of Charles Tansley in *To the Lighthouse* opposes and criticizes the fact that women wanted to be painters, writers or artists in general. Woolf satirizes this character and presents him as a ridiculous and laughable man.

Woolf's interpretation of the past and her present also differed from the main Modernist trends. James Joyce or T.S. Eliot often used what is known as the 'modernist myth', a reassessment of the past in the form of myths, as is evident in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). However, as Whitworth declares, Woolf may have felt uncomfortable with this technique: "She may have thought that the use of myth had a dangerous potential to blur real political issues" (156). Moreover, Woolf's different attitude towards the present can be seen, for instance, in her portrayal of urban life. Modernist authors usually rejected the hostilities and horridness of the urban environment. However, Virginia Woolf presents the city as associated with life and love in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), for instance, an example of her fascination with "the order that seems to emerge from chaos' in the urban environment" (Whitworth, 156).

It can be concluded that Virginia Woolf's identity as a writer was shaped by both her approach and connection to Modernism, but also by her will to distance herself from it. As a result, Woolf incorporates to her writing the rejection of materialism and the Modernist aim to reform the way of portraying reality in fiction. In so doing, Woolf adopts a distinct perspective which differs from that of her male Bloomsbury contemporaries.

## **1.2. Reassessing the Realist Novel: Woolf's 'Tunnelling Process'**

As many of her contemporary writers, Woolf clearly expressed her desire to reassess the conventions of the novel and abandon Victorian traditions. In "Modern Fiction" (1925), Woolf declared the distinct and innovative matters of interest of the "spiritualist" writers: to explore and portray reality as perceived by the individual's brain. This explains the appearance of some innovative narrative techniques aiming to explore the complexities of the human mind, such as the stream-of-consciousness, chosen by James Joyce in the closing paragraphs of *Ulysses*, or the free indirect speech used by Woolf herself in *Mrs Dalloway*

(1925) or *To the Lighthouse* (1927). However, Virginia Woolf did not employ this label to describe her own work. In 1923 Woolf wrote in her diary that during the creative process of writing *Mrs Dalloway* she had discovered a new method to construct her characters; the tunnelling process: "I have no time to describe my plans. I should say a good deal about *The Hours* and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment" (Woolf, *Diary* 263).

As Woolf expresses in the previous quotation the tunnelling process allowed her to explore in depth the psychology of her characters, as well as to connect them to each other in a deeper level. Susan Dick defined it as "a method of creating a character that imitated the selective process by which we know and recollect ourselves, one another and our world" (51). Therefore, through the tunnelling method Woolf achieves her objective of portraying the complexity of reality as perceived by her characters, being able to "dig into" their minds. Woolf's discovery is the result of the improvement of the techniques employed in previous novels such as *The Voyage Out* (1915) or *Jacob's Room* (1922), which foreshadowed this process but did not achieve the level of depth aimed by the author. Susan Dick also stated that *Mrs Dalloway* proves "the effectiveness of her tunnelling method, [because] she could completely merge her concept and expression of time through the character's consciousness" (52). In *Mrs Dalloway* every external detail, facts —such as time references or the descriptions of parts of London— are presented to the reader through the minds of the characters which perceive them. Moreover, the action of the novel takes place in one single day of the life of its protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway. This proves Woolf's interest in portraying the subjective perception of reality and also the success of the so-called tunnelling process, which allows her to connect Clarissa's perceptions with those produced by other characters in the novels and, in turn, to integrate them in a larger communal design.

However, *Mrs Dalloway* is not the only example of the effectiveness of this method. In *To the Lighthouse* all the information received by the reader comes from the character's inner thoughts as well. For this reason, there are barely any detailed physical descriptions or time references. Woolf's use of time and narrative style in this novel is truly complex: Part I of the novel takes place on the evening of one single day, although it is, paradoxically, the longest section of the narrative. In this part of the novel the voices and thoughts of the characters merge, which is a great example of how Woolf connected the caves she digs out behind her characters. Part II represents a clear break produced after Mrs Ramsay's death and the characters' desertion of the family house. The reader is informed of the progressive deterioration and abandonment of the Ramsay's property through the years in a much more simple and impersonal style (Dick, 61-62). However, Part III is set in a morning ten years later and there is a predominance of Lily's inner thoughts. Therefore, it can be seen how Woolf employs the tunnelling process in this novel in a rather more complicated way than in *Mrs Dalloway*.

Woolf's tunnelling process perfectly exemplifies her interest in the individual's subjectivity. She defined this narrative method as "her prime discovery", which suggests that she was consciously "transcending earlier techniques of fiction" (Hungerford, 165). Woolf's tunnelling process will be crucial to understand her writing, but it will also change the conception fiction in general.

## CHAPTER 2: *To the Lighthouse*, An Autobiographical Novel

*To the Lighthouse* (1927) is considered Woolf's most autobiographical novel. She chose the setting and constructed the main characters inspired by several family members and personal events that shaped both her personality and writing career. In her diary Woolf expressed that the autobiographical aspects were crucial when constructing the novel: "[...] Get on to *To the Lighthouse*. This is going to be fairly short; to have father's characters done complete in it; and mother's; and St. Ives; and Childhood; and all the usual things I try to put in- life, death, etc." (18) The action occurs in the Ramsay's summer house in the Isle of Skye. Woolf offers truly detailed descriptions of the garden, the house or the beach. One of the main features of the setting, and the most important motif of the novel is the lighthouse, as the title indicates. In addition to this, the narrative also offers a very psychologically realistic depiction of the characters: by using her tunnelling process, Woolf presents the protagonists' most intimate thoughts and feelings in a very personal way. Moreover, it is crucial to mention that the characters also present an accurate depiction of a traditional Victorian family, with the characters of Mr and Mrs Ramsay (inspired by Woolf's parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen) being representative of marriage as an institution in this period. Although the novel is inspired by autobiographical events, Woolf decided to set the narrative in a fictional world and to introduce several imaginary elements. Thomas A. Vogler explains that the reason for this may be that Woolf needed a double isolation process (both in terms of time and space) to come to terms with her own experiences and feelings towards her family and childhood memories (9). This fact is closely related to one of the main themes and the purpose of the novel; Woolf presents the importance of art as the artist's way to deal with their experiences and feelings. This is, of course, represented by Lily Briscoe, whom mirrors Virginia's own use of writing to reconcile herself with the childhood memories and the loss of her parents through the creation of *To the Lighthouse*.

The Ramsay's house is, in reality, Talland House, the Stephen's summer residency in St Ives, Cornwall. In fact, in *To the Lighthouse*, the descriptions of the landscape correspond to St Ives instead of to the Isle of Skye, where the novel is supposed to be set. Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, bought it when his wife Julia was pregnant with Virginia. Every summer the family moved from London to Cornwall, until Julia Stephen's death in 1895. The house appears in numerous of Woolf's writings such as *Jacob's Room* (1922), *The Waves* (1931), or the autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past" (1939). Woolf is obsessed with trying to recover Talland House and all the feelings associated to it through her writing. Throughout her life she idealized the summers in Cornwall before her mother's death: "Yet in retrospect nothing that we had as children made as much difference, was quite so important to us, as our summer in Cornwall" (Woolf, "Sketch" 127) Therefore, Talland House and everything associated with it became for Woolf the representation of happiness. As stated by Hermione Lee: "Talland House became, in Virginia Woolf's imagination and in the minds of the readers [...] where she sites, for the whole of her life, the idea of happiness. [...] Happiness is always measured for her against the memory of being a child in that house" (22). For instance, this can be seen in this idealized description of the place she wrote in "A Sketch of the Past": "The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked. But again I cannot describe that rapture. It was rapture rather than ecstasy." (66) The symbolism and the importance of the visual elements are crucial for Woolf; in several writings she tries to describe the colours and the sensations of the house and the garden as if she were a painter, in the same way as Lily does in *To the Lighthouse*: "If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green. There was the pale yellow blind; the green sea; and the silver of the passion flowers. I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent." (Woolf, "Sketch" 66).



Significantly, in "A Sketch of the Past" Virginia offers a recollection of some of her childhood memories and the ones she considers the most important ones happened in Talland House. For instance: "seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important [...] It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach" (64). Moreover, in this essay she also collects some other very significant memories in the house that she considers the origin of her famous "moments of being". Woolf's perception of reality is characterized by her distinction between moments of non-being and moments of being. The former are basically actions of everyday life: "One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner; writing orders to Mabel; washing; cooking dinner; bookbinding." (Woolf, "Sketch" 70) Her main aim in her novels is to reject the exclusive representation of the moments of non-being, as "materialist" writers did. She decides to focus on combining ordinary life with the inner reality and thoughts of her characters, their private moments of being:

Often when I have been writing one of my so-called novels I have been baffled by this same problem; that is, how to describe what I call in my private shorthand -"non-being". Every day includes much more non-being than being [...] These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being....  
(Woolf, "Sketch" 70)

She considers the origin of this distinction to be in some experiences she had while in Talland House as a child: "As a child then, my day, just as they do now, contained a large proportion of this cotton wool; this non-being. Week after week passed at St Ives and nothing made any dint upon me. Then [...] there was a sudden violent shock: something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life" (Woolf, "Sketch" 71). Therefore, this clearly indicates

the crucial role her experiences and recollections of the place had in her future career as a writer.

Of all the memories associated to Talland House, some are especially significant when studying a novel such as *To the Lighthouse*. The first one is when the Stephen siblings returned to Talland House in 1905, ten years after their mother's death. This event was quite significant in Woolf's life and it is believed to have sparked the emotions that moved her to write *To the Lighthouse* (Lee, 21):

There was the house, with its two lighted windows [...] But yet, as we knew well, we could go no further; if we advanced the spell was broken. The lights were not our lights; the voices were the voices of strangers. We hung there like ghosts in the shade of the hedge, & at the sound of footsteps we turned away. (Woolf, *Early Journals* 282).

Hermione Lee (21) highlights that, in the novel, Lily goes back to St Ives and tries to recreate the figure of Mrs Ramsay through her painting ten years after her death. In the same way, Virginia revisited Talland House and twenty years later decided to write a novel to reconcile herself with the memories of both her parents, especially with her mother's death: "But I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother [...] I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest"(Woolf, "Sketch" 81).

Therefore, Talland House is not always such an ideal and perfect place as usually portrayed by Woolf. The house represents childhood happiness, but its memory also brings back feelings of loss and disappointment. This is also proven by an episode during the Stephens' childhood, as recollected in their family newspaper Hyde Park Gate News. The

youngest sibling, Adrien, is not allowed to go on an excursion to the lighthouse with Thoby, Virginia and other friends. As Lee states:

Pain and grief would enter into the mood of *To the Lighthouse*, as well as pleasure. There are sinister elements to this childhood [...] which would make part of the memories and the fictional versions of Cornwall. In spite of this, her dominant images of childhood in St Ives were of light, freedom, pleasure and space. (Lee, 34)

This explains how the Ramsay's house in the novel will represent an ideal summer setting, but also the painful memories of the past, regret and the disappointment for not being able to take the trip to the lighthouse.

The often idealized image of Talland House is completely opposite to Hyde Park Gate, the Stephen's permanent residence in London. Woolf describes this house as oppressive, patriarchal and ruled by the traditional Victorian conventions. The Stephens abandoned Talland House after Julia's death: "And then in the spring of 1895 mother died. Father instantly decided that he wished never to see St Ives again." (Woolf, "Sketch" 136) These contradictory feelings which entail a binary opposition and a contrast between light and darkness, happiness and oppression are not only represented by the houses, but also extend to Virginia Woolf's father and mother and, of course, to their respective families and ancestors. During her lifetime, Woolf experienced the conflict of explaining her own character as influenced by this duality: 'her adult definition of herself as formed by two incompatible inheritances: cold, rational, Scottish Stephens and creative, intuitive, emotional French Pattles.' (Lee, 56) Therefore, after 1895 Woolf and her brothers and sisters were confined under the influence of their authoritarian father: "With mother's death the merry, various family life which she had held in being shut for ever. In its place a dark cloud settled over us; we seemed to sit all together cooped up, sad, solemn, unreal, under a haze of heavy

emotion.” (Woolf, “Sketch” 93) Leslie Stephen was very demanding and strict with his children: “The relations between parents and children today have a freedom that would have been impossible with my father. He expected a certain standard of behaviour, even of ceremony, in family life.” (Woolf, “Leslie Stephen” 114) Although Woolf and her siblings were modern and purposely rejected their Victorian, cold, and rational upbringings, they were very much influenced by these values. Especially in the case of the functioning of a family network according to Victorian conventions as seen in the structure/relationships established after forming the Bloomsbury group (Lee, 53).

Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell, as Leslie Stephen's only daughters by Julia Stephen, had the most conflictive relationship with him. In “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf recounts the difficulties of living with their father during the years after Julia's death. In many of her autobiographical writings she describes him as having a very strong and even irrational temper: “when Nessa and I inherited the rule of the house [...] it was the tyrant father—the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centred, the self-pitying [...] It was like being shut up in the same cage with a wild beast.” (116) According to Woolf, Leslie Stephen was the “typical Cambridge intellectual” (Woolf, “Sketch” 110), which led him to be obsessed with being a man of genius during his lifetime. However, this fact also isolated him and made him demand constant reassurance and gratification from others, especially from women. As Woolf herself expressed: “This frustrated desire to be a man of genius [...] later life at least made him so childishly greedy for compliments.” (Woolf, “Sketch” 110) Significantly, all these characteristics are perfectly reflected in the character of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*: “And then, and then--this was one of those moments when an enormous need urged him, without being conscious what it was, to approach any woman, to force them, he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 142) In fact, in Part III of *To the Lighthouse*,

Cam and James, Mr and Mrs Ramsay's youngest children, express their feelings and resentment towards their father. Cam's expression of her anger and indignation clearly resembles Virginia's comments about Leslie: "that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms, so that even now she woke in the night trembling with rage and remembered some command of his; some insolence: "Do this", "Do that; his dominance: his "Submit to me" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 159).

Woolf's personal relationship with Leslie was particularly different compared to Vanessa's. Although she felt resentment and anger towards her father, she also admired and loved him: "But in me, though not in her [Vanessa Bell], rage alterned with love." (Woolf, "Sketch" 118) Hermione Lee explains that these irresolute feelings haunted Woolf for her whole life and writing career: "Virginia wrote and rewrote her father all her life. She was in love with him, she was furious with him, she was like him, she never stopped arguing with him, and when she finally read Freud in 1939 she recognised exactly what he meant by "ambivalence" (68). Therefore, she despised his temper, self-centeredness, and despondency. Nevertheless, those feelings were often accompanied by some hints of admiration. Since her childhood, Woolf always sought his approval and imitated his manners and customs: "how proud, priggishly, I was, if he gave his little amused surprised snort, when he found me reading some book that no child of my age could understand. I was a snob no doubt, and read partly to make him think me a very clever little brat." (Woolf, "Sketch" 111). Their relationship both conditioned and shaped her working habits, career, and literary taste. She expressed that her writing would not have been possible if Leslie had lived longer: "his life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; - inconceivable" (Woolf, *Diary* 208). However, Woolf, maybe unconsciously, ended up imitating her father's own behaviours: "Like her, he was a workaholic who pushed himself beyond his limits [...] Like hers, his relation to his work was often self-tormenting" (Lee,

72). Moreover, she also expressed her professional admiration for him from a writer's perspective: "there often steals in, not a filial, but a reader's affection for him; for his courage, his simplicity, for his strength and nonchalance, and neglect of appearances." (Woolf, "Sketch" 115-116) This complex mixture between rage and admiration are clearly portrayed in the novel through the character of Cam: "And watching her father as he wrote in his study, she thought [...] he was most loveable, he was most wise, he was not vain nor a tyrant." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 177) Vogler made emphasis in the fact that "Cam shares Virginia Woolf's sentiments for the encounters with her father in the library, her tendencies to 'dream of obscure adventures' at the same age and her reconciliation of a brilliant daughter's complex attitudes towards a problematic father." (12)

All these ambivalent feelings and complicated relationship accompanied Woolf during her whole life, until she wrote *To the Lighthouse* in 1927; it was this novel which granted her the closure she needed: "I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing *To the Lighthouse*, laid them in my mind." (Woolf, *Diary* 208) Woolf only came to terms with her father when she was in her forties, which proves the problematic feelings she had regarding him. Although she had written about him on several occasions, in *To the Lighthouse* Woolf presents Mr Ramsay as the most problematic and tyrannical version of Leslie Stephen: "She almost always wrote about him as an old man... culminating with Mr Ramsay, dramatizing him as the tyrannical egoist, the eccentric scholar, the grand, solitary mournful Alpine stoic." (Lee, 68) In *To the Lighthouse*, she managed to express that "long felt emotion" that granted her liberation from those past traumatic experiences with both her parents:

Further, just as I rubbed out a good deal of the force of my mother's memory by writing about her in *To the Lighthouse*, so I rubbed out much of his memory there too. Yet he too obsessed me for years. Until I wrote it out, I would find my lips moving; I

would be arguing with him; raging against him; saying to myself all that I never said to him. (Woolf, "Sketch" 108)

In fact, Mr Ramsay was supposed to be the protagonist and central figure of the novel, which was actually meant to be titled "The Old Man": "But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel...*" (Woolf, *Diary* 18-19).

Nevertheless, as she kept working on the novel, Woolf decided to change this initial plan. Instead, she established the focus on the two main female characters, which will be closely analysed in the following chapters: Mrs Ramsay, the narrative focus in Part I, and Lily Briscoe, in Part III. This fact not only proves the importance of Julia Stephen's memory and death for Virginia, but it is also truly significant when analysing the novel from a feminist perspective. Hermione Lee highlights the importance of her female ancestry for Woolf: "Virginia decided to write the history of her family on her own terms. She made her female inheritance count for just as much as her father's influence, deriving inspiration from her mother (nurse, muse and writer of stories) [...]" (57). Significantly, Woolf herself stated in "A Room of One's Own" (1929): "We think back to our mothers if we are women." (58) Therefore, she was most likely aware of the importance of creating a distinct female literary tradition and history and tried to achieve that through her writing. (Marcus, 223-224) Mrs Ramsay and Lily allowed Woolf to explore ideas which will be very significant in her future core feminist essays "A Room of One's Own" and "Three Guineas". For instance, she criticises the conventional roles of women in the Victorian society and family hierarchy, and she also introduces her thoughts about women's identity and the struggle of the female artist.

## CHAPTER 3. Mrs Ramsay, Julia Stephen and the Angel in the House.

### 3.1. Julia Stephen

Given that Mr Ramsay represents Leslie Stephen, Mrs Ramsay is obviously inspired by Julia Stephen. This was clearly stated by Woolf herself in "A Sketch of the Past" and in numerous diary entries about the process of writing the novel: "father & mother & child in the garden: the death; the sail to the lighthouse" (Woolf, *Diary* 36). In a letter to her sister, Vanessa Bell expressed the huge impact which *To the Lighthouse* (1927) had caused on her: "[...] you have given me a portrait of mother which is more like her than anything I could ever have conceived of possible. [...] You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character, which must be the most difficult thing in the world to do." (572) It seems that Woolf achieved her goal of presenting a realistic portrait of her mother's personality and role in the family. In the letter mentioned above, Vanessa uses the word 'difficult' to describe her mother's personality. This is quite significant since Woolf also employed that word when describing her in "A Sketch of the Past": "I find it now so curiously difficult to describe both my feeling for her, and her herself." (80) This difficulty to evoke their mother's personality may be given since they lost her at a very young age, but also because of Julia's complicated character and busy life as a mother and wife (Lee, 81).

According to the descriptions in some of Woolf's autobiographical writings, Julia Stephen seems to have been a rather complicated person: "Yet if one could give a sense of my mother's personality one would have to be an artist. It would be as difficult to do that, as it should be done, as to paint a Cézanne." (Woolf, "Sketch" 85) She is usually described as the perfect mother and wife, the centre of family life and of their lives. She was extremely beautiful and compassionate, but also sad and lonely. Hermione Lee wrote a very accurate description of her personality:



She seems to have fully endorsed the Victorian models for female behaviour. She was opposed to female suffrage and thought women should only be educated for domestic careers. The romantic Pre-Raphaelite image of Julia- as virgin, young mother with children, mater dolorosa, muse, beloved- id a political image, embodying the acceptable roles for a beautiful middle-class woman in the nineteenth century. (84)

After reading the previous quote, any person acquainted with *To the Lighthouse* will be aware of the clear and intentional resemblance between Julia and the character of Mrs Ramsay.

Although Woolf expressed the difficulties to describe her mother's image accurately, her ghost was very present in both her life and writing, in the same way as her father. However, in contrast with Leslie Stephen's death, which was a liberation from tyranny and Victorian conventions, Julia Stephen's was "the greatest disaster that could happen." (Lee, 79) Her death meant the loss of childhood and of the pleasant family life they used to have, as well as the loss of Talland House. Woolf was greatly affected by this: in fact, Julia Stephen's death in 1895 triggered the first of many mental breakdowns, with which she would struggle for the rest of her life. Woolf will be obsessed with her mother for many years, and it was not to be after the completion of *To the Lighthouse* that she found some peace:

Until I was in the forties- I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse*, but am too casual here to bother to do it the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings. She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life. (Woolf, "Sketch" 80)

In the novel Woolf reflects and expresses her feelings towards her mother mainly through the relationship between Lily Briscoe and Mrs Ramsay. She seems to present reflections and opinions about her mother from another adult woman's perspective (Lily's perspective), since

Woolf herself never had the opportunity to do so during her mother's life. Lily is truly critical with some of Mrs Ramsay's actions, attitudes and behaviours: she criticises her obsession with marriage, her need to control everything and everyone, and her restriction and submission to her role as the conventional Victorian wife. However, Lily also profoundly admires Mrs Ramsay. She even feels the need to reconcile herself with her death by finishing her painting. Moreover, at the end of the novel Mrs Ramsay becomes the source of Lily's inspiration and the source of her crucial revelations about life, human relationships, art and painting.

### **3.2. Mrs Ramsay and The Angel in the House**

Through the character of Mrs Ramsay, Woolf explored and introduced the debate about one of the most important and characteristic ideas of her feminist agenda: "Killing the Angel in the house was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Woolf, "Professions" 142). Significantly, after the publication of *To the Lighthouse* Woolf's feminist debates about the Victorian conventions became more public (Lee, 81) and the Angel in the House "becomes her figure for the gender inequities of the Victorian Period" (Blair, 53). In the novel Woolf is already very critical with Mrs Ramsay's role as the perfect mother and wife through Lily's perspective. This seems quite complex since, as has been mentioned above, Mrs Ramsay is inspired by the venerated and idealized Julia Stephen. Therefore, Woolf is at the same time praising her mother's importance for her, but also criticising the role to which she was confined. For this reason, it needs to be argued if Mrs Ramsay could be defined as a completely accurate representation of the Angel in the House, the famous idealization of Victorian femininity as encapsulated by Coventry Patmore's eponymous poem (1854).

According to Woolf in "Professions for Women" (1931), the Angel in the House has the following characteristics:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. [...] in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all--I need not say it---she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty--her blushes, her great grace. (Woolf, "Professions", 141)

Mrs Ramsay seems to share many of the features that Woolf associated with the Angel in the House, especially the ones in the first part of the description: sympathetic, charming and willing to sacrifice herself for the love and care of others. Everyone in her family completely depended on her on an emotional level, as Woolf expressed through the character of Mrs Ramsay, the fictionalization of her own mother: "They came to her, naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that; one wanting this, another that; the children were growing up; she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotion." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 31) Moreover, Mrs Ramsay usually sacrifices herself and ignores her own needs to protect her loved ones: "So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 37) These ideas are best represented by the protective role she adopts with James, her youngest son, on occasion of the the impossibility of going to the lighthouse the following day, as the child desires:

'No going to the Lighthouse, James' he said, as he stood by the window [...] Odious little man, thought Mrs Ramsay, why go on saying that? [...]

'Perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing,' she said compassionately, smoothing the little boy's hair, for her husband, with his caustic

saying that it would not be fine, had dashed his spirits she could see. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 15)

The hypothetical excursion to the lighthouse is the most recurrent motif in Part I; “like the sound of the waves [...] is heard throughout the narrative” (Ruotolo, 129). The discrepancy about the excursion to the lighthouse emphasizes the differences between Mr and Mrs Ramsay. Mr Ramsay asserts his authority and tyranny by saying that they will not go because the weather will not be fine. However, Mrs Ramsay is much more compassionate and aware of her son's delicate feelings; “her opposition marks as much an advocacy of her own omniscient design as a defence of her son's feelings” (Ruotolo, 129-130). This event perfectly represents Mrs Ramsay's natural role as a caregiver and protector of the ones she considers fragile, which are inherent features of the Angel in the House.

Moreover, Mrs Ramsay also has extremely traditional ideas: as Ruotolo states, her “visions of the future remain but an extension of past decorum.” (124) For instance, she conceives marriage as the greatest ambition to which a woman could aspire; to become the Angel in the House for her husband. Mrs Ramsay convinces Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley to get married. However, although she thought that the match was one of her triumphs, the novel later unveils how that marriage resulted in failure. Mrs Ramsay's obsession with marriage contrasts with Lily Briscoe's desire for independence. In Part I, Mrs Ramsay plans on trying to make Lily and William Bankes marry each other: “Smiling, for it was an admirable idea, that had flashed upon her this very second--William and Lily should marry.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 26) Lily is aware of this and openly criticises and laughs at Mrs Ramsay's old-fashioned ideas: “[Lily] laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 47-48) By introducing this conflict about Mrs Ramsay and Lily's respective ideas about marriage Woolf is clearly addressing a controversial debate

about the conventional roles of women. According to Laura Marcus, Mrs Ramsay's image of marriage as "two different notes, one high, one low" allowed Woolf to explore the Victorian concept of separate spheres: public life and domesticity. (222) Unlike Woolf, Mrs Ramsay seems perfectly comfortable with her confinement to the domestic space.

### **3.3. Part I: 'The Window.' Mrs Ramsay's Centrality as A Character**

However, although Mrs Ramsay shares several characteristics with the ideal Victorian Angel in the House, it can be argued that she is not exclusively restricted to this role. Mrs Ramsay is not a completely accurate representation of the Angel in the House as seen in other literary works, such as in Patmore's famous poem. Woolf granted her a voice in the novel and, through the focalized omniscient narrator the reader is able to know Mrs Ramsay's most private thoughts, opinions and even her selfish wishes or moral dilemmas. Woolf constructed her as a deep character with a very characteristic and charismatic personality, who is not exclusively a mother or Mr Ramsay's wife. This is proved by the fact that Mrs Ramsay is the absolute central figure in Part I of the novel. In that sense, and in terms of narrative technique, Woolf constructed *To the Lighthouse* using her famous "tunnelling process" as a means to provide psychological depth to her characters. Therefore, the narrative primarily focuses on the inner processes of the characters' minds. In doing so, Woolf presents "movements within the consciousness of individual personages" (Auerback, 110), with Mrs Ramsay being the centre, the main focus of the narration in the first section of the novel.

Woolf's innovative use of free indirect speech in the novel also extends to her particular reassessment of narrative time. In *To the Lighthouse*, as in many other of Woolf's novels, it is crucial to establish the distinction between internal and external time. Part I takes place on one day in September 1910: the action of this section starts in the afternoon and finishes when the characters go to bed that same night. In contrast with this short period of

what could be called the external time, the internal time is much more complex, as Auerbach explains:

a sharp contrast results between the brief span of time occupied by the exterior event and the dreamlike wealth of a process of consciousness which traverses a whole subjective universe [...] rendering those processes in their peculiar freedom, which is neither restrained by a purpose nor directed by a specific subject of thought; elaboration of the contrast between 'exterior' and 'interior' time. (120)

During those different processes of thought and reflections of the characters, they refer to several events in the past, they recollect memories or think about their futures, but, more importantly, they react to their surroundings. Therefore, the exterior reality and events "have actually lost their hegemony, they serve to release and interpret inner events." (Auerbach, 120) As Vogler explains, "the physical world around a character takes on the form of the thought, reflects it and comments on it in a very deliberate and highly developed manner." (28) For instance, while Mr and Mrs Ramsay are walking back to the house together before dinner, the narrator presents a mixture between Mrs Ramsay's external actions, and how those actions intertwine with her reflections about her husband:

[...] she must stop for a moment to see whether those were fresh molehills on the bank, then, she thought, stooping down to look, a great mind like his must be different in every way from ours. [...] It might be a rabbit; it might be a mole. Some creature anyhow was ruining her Evening Primroses. And looking up, she saw above the thin trees the first pulse of the full-throbbing star, and wanted to make her husband look at it; for the sight gave her such keen pleasure. But she stopped herself. He never looked at things. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 66)

Therefore, structurally speaking and focusing on the construction of the narrative technique in the novel, Mrs Ramsay is the central figure among the different processes of thought of the characters who react to their surroundings. This means that Mrs Ramsay is usually the focalizer of the omniscient narrator. However, she is also central from the point of view of the rest of the characters of the story. This fact clearly reflects Woolf's own description of her mother's role in the family life: "And of course she was central. I suspect the word 'central' gets closest to the general feeling I had of living so completely in her atmosphere that one never got far enough away from her to see her as a person." (Woolf, "Sketch" 83) Mrs Ramsay has this same role of central figure in the novel, she is the centre, support and creator of her group of family and friends. In the novel, Woolf presents an "obsessive evocation of her mother standing more firmly than her father at the center of everything." (Ruotolo, 120) Woolf presents her powers and centrality using her daily life activities as symbols. For instance, Mrs Ramsay's knitting represents her capacity to rule and affect other people's lives: "Flashing her needles, confident, upright, she created drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow; bade him take his ease there, go in and out, enjoy himself. She laughed, she knitted." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 36) Mrs Ramsay's power is also perfectly exemplified by her matchmaking, but more importantly, by the failed excursion to the lighthouse. Lucio Ruotolo states that this event proves the incredible and lasting influence she inflicted over her family and friends; Mr Ramsay triumphed in cancelling the excursion, but Mrs Ramsay's power is so strong "that ten years later he will feel bound to complete the interrupted trip". (Ruotolo, 121)

Mrs Ramsay is absolutely aware of the power of her influence, and it could be said that she has mastered the use of her social abilities and charm. However, she often questions the morality of her own actions, which proves her complexity as a character. For instance, she is very compassionate and selfless and loves helping those in need. She visits people

suffering from illnesses or wishes to bring gifts to the lighthouse keeper and his family. However, she experiences some conflicting feelings towards this; she wonders whether she is really a good person or if she only seeks validation from others because of her own vanity:

[...] all this desire of hers to give, to help, was vanity. For her own self-satisfaction was it that she wished so instinctively to help, to give, that people might say of her, 'O Mrs. Ramsay! dear Mrs. Ramsay ... Mrs. Ramsay, of course!' and need her and send for her and admire her? Was it not secretly this that she wanted [...] she did not feel merely snubbed back in her instinct, but made aware of the pettiness of some part of her, and of human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking, at their best. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 40)

The presentation of this inner moral dilemma proves that although it may seem that she acts like the ideal Victorian woman; selfless, compassionate and with no wishes of her own, she is not that simple. As shown in the above quoted passage, Mrs Ramsay shows a deep reflection about both herself and human relations in general. She questions the motivation of her wishes and actions, which proves that she does not act guided by an absolute instinct of being good and kind but is conflicted by the morality of her decisions.

Throughout Part I of the novel, Mrs Ramsay has other similar reflections regarding her outlook on life, her family and how she relates to other people. Mrs Ramsay has quite a dark worldview, which may be represented by her short-sightedness (Vogler, 16). This absolutely contrasts with the harmonious, pure and beautiful image of herself that she offers to other people:

Only she thought life--and a little strip of time presented itself to her eyes--her fifty years. There it was before her--life. Life, she thought--but she did not finish her thought. She took a look at life, for she had a clear sense of it there, something real,



something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband. A sort of transaction went on between them, in which she was on one side, and life was on another [...] must admit that she felt this thing that she called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 56)

This idea is reinforced a few pages later in the novel, when Mrs Ramsay has the opportunity to be left alone for the first time in the narration: “[...] it was a relief when they went to bed. For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. [...] When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 58-59) Significantly, in this passage Mrs Ramsay also expresses a quite deep and meaningful reflection on how she perceives life. The fact of being alone, even if it is for a few minutes, grants her freedom and limitless opportunities. Mrs Ramsay's thoughts in this excerpt may contrast with the image that she had given of herself previously in the novel. In this passage she expresses her relief for not having to worry about anyone, not even her own children. In the context of the early twentieth century, with the Angel in the House being the imposed role women must comply with, this may probably have been seen as extremely selfish and improper behaviour for a woman who is also a wife and a mother.

It has been made clear that Mrs Ramsay's conscience is the central voice in Part I. However, as stated by Auerback:

the essential characteristic of the technique represented by Virginia Woolf is that we are given not merely one person whose consciousness [...] is rendered, but many persons, with frequent shifts from one to the other [...] The design of a close approach to objective reality by means of numerous subjective impressions received by various individuals (and at various times). (117-118)

Therefore, when analysing Mrs Ramsay, it is crucial to focus not only on her thoughts, but also on what other characters think about her. In Part I almost every character presents their opinion on Mrs Ramsay: Bankes and Tansley's admiration, Paul Rayley's trust, James's love and idealization or Mr Ramsay's dependence on her. However, Lily's perception of Mrs Ramsay is probably the most interesting one. For instance, Mrs Ramsay's famous and notable beauty is praised by several characters throughout the novel and the male characters, such as Mr Ramsay or William Bankes, usually reduce Mrs Ramsay to that quality: "He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought. She was astonishingly beautiful. Her beauty seemed to him, if that were possible, to increase" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 112). In contrast, although Lily is aware of Mrs Ramsay's beauty, she knows that praising her looks would be a simplification of her complex personality: "She was astonishingly beautiful, as William said. But beauty was not everything. Beauty had this penalty--it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life--froze it" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 166). Moreover, although Lily criticises Mrs Ramsay's actions several times, she is aware of her distinctiveness, there is something more to Mrs Ramsay that is almost impossible to describe:

thinking that she was unquestionably the loveliest of people (bowed over her book); the best perhaps; but also, different too from the perfect shape which one saw there. But why different, and how different? [...] How did she differ? [...] She was like a bird for speed, an arrow for directness. She was wilful; she was commanding. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 46)

Lily's incapability to define accurately what distinguishes Mrs Ramsay probably mirrors Woolf's own opinions about her mother; her critical perspective about Julia Stephen's conventional role in the family, but also her admiration for her. Moreover, this feeling is also transmitted to the reader. Mrs Ramsay is an enigma, as Auerbach stated: "The multiplicity of persons suggests that we are here after all confronted with an endeavour to investigate an

objective reality, that is, specifically, the 'real' Mrs. Ramsay." (117-118) It is extremely difficult to describe or define her, in the same way that Julia Stephen's daughters could not find the words to describe their own mother. By the end of the novel, the reader does not know if they should consider Mrs Ramsay as the submissive and pure Angel in the House, as a manipulative woman obsessed with controlling everyone's lives or even as a complex person with doubts and fears about herself and her actions.

### 3.3.1. The Dinner Scene

The peak of Mrs Ramsay's centrality and complexity coincides with the most relevant chapter in Part I in terms of the narrative technique employed by Woolf: the dinner scene. Significantly, this was Woolf's favourite part of the novel, of which she was the proudest: "Dear me, how lovely some parts of *To the Lighthouse* are! Soft & pliable, & I think deep, & never a wrong word for a page at a time. This I feel about the dinner party." (Woolf, *Diary* 132) According to Susan Dick, the first chapters in Part I serve to present and organise the activities and personalities of the sixteen characters and, after this, Mrs Ramsay's dinner party takes place as a culmination of the first part of *To the Lighthouse* (60). At this point the characters' consciousnesses mix together after having presented them in a more individual manner in the previous chapters. This party is clearly inspired by the Stephens' dinners organised by Julia Stephen that were recurrent during Woolf's childhood, for this reason "the events shimmer with a certain Victorian authenticity" (Ruotolo, 123). In this part Woolf invested great care to present not only the characters' thoughts and interactions, while also offering "the reader a rich perception of the sight and odours of the food, such sovereign moments fulfil a predilection for closure by lifting us above existence." (Ruotolo, 123) In this way, the reader gets the feeling of what Ruotolo calls "lifting us above existence" thanks to Mrs Ramsay's and Lily's revelations during dinner. Their respective reflections and thoughts are crucial in this part, they are the peak of Mrs Ramsay's importance and the introduction of

the revelations Lily will experience in Part III, at the end of the novel. Mrs Ramsay had great expectations for this dinner party, since it must be a triumph and everything had to be perfect: “[..] she wished the dinner to be particularly nice, since William Bankes had at last consented to dine with them; and they were having Mildred’s masterpiece—*Boeuf en Daube*.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 74) However, as soon as dinner starts, the reader is aware that she is not particularly happy: “But what have I done with my life? thought Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table, [...] They had that [...] she, only this--an infinitely long table and plates and knives. [...] She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 77)

The dinner party could be divided in two different parts, distinguished by the characters present at dinner and their different attitudes. Moreover, the mark that signals the division between these two phases is Mrs Ramsay’s order to light the candles. The first part of the dinner scene is characterized by several —quite shallow and awkward— interactions between some of the characters. For instance, Bankes and Mrs Ramsay talk about the Mannings, some friends about whom Mrs Ramsay had not thought in several years. She is surprised that they still exist outside of her reach: “For it was extraordinary to think that they had been capable of going on living all these years when she had not thought of them more than once all that time.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 81) Another significant example is Lily’s annoyance and her refusal to be nice to Charles Tansley, whom she despises. However, in the end, and due to Mrs Ramsay’s pressure, she accepts that “duty” that was expected from women at the time: “when Mrs. Ramsay said all this, as the glance in her eyes said it, of course 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.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 85) During these first conversations all the characters feel that there is “something lacking”, being unable to connect to each other and establish a successful conversation:

Lily was listening; Mrs. Ramsay was listening; they were all listening. But already bored, Lily felt that something was lacking; Mr. Bankes felt that something was lacking. Pulling her shawl round her Mrs. Ramsay felt that something was lacking. All of them bending themselves to listen thought, 'Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed' for each thought, 'The others are feeling this. [...] Whereas, I feel nothing at all'. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 87)

According to Vogler, this is due to the fact that "the characters continue their multiple private existence, conforming reluctantly only to the limited conventional properties of social role-playing. [...] This phase of interaction is explored until it almost breaks down, as Mr Ramsay [...] cannot accept Carmichael's request for another bowl of soup." (32)

As Vogler states, the decay of this part starts with Mr Ramsay's anger at Carmichael, which makes everyone at the table even more uncomfortable. However, Mrs Ramsay is able to take control of the situation by ordering to light the candles: "Everybody could see, Mrs. Ramsay thought [...] and so she said promptly (indeed it was time): 'Light the candles, and they jumped up instantly and went and fumbled at the sideboard.'" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 89) That moment marks the beginning of a new phase and a change in the diners' attitudes; "Some change at once went through them all [...] they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 90) Lily Briscoe reflects that she feels as if "solidity suddenly vanished [...] the many candles in the sparsely furnished room, and the uncurtained windows, and the bright mask-like look of faces seen by candlelight. Some weight was taken off them; anything might happen." (Woolf, *Lighthouse*, 90) Shortly after this, Paul and Minta return at the moment the *Boeuf en Daube* is being served. Significantly, both these events are part of Mrs Ramsay's so expected triumph: Paul and Minta become engaged and William Bankes states that the *boeuf* "is a triumph." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 93)

It is during this second phase of the dinner party that Mrs Ramsay experiences a moment of enlightenment, what Woolf called “moments of being”. As has been already mentioned, Woolf’s first personal experiences with such moments of being were in Talland House. She described one which she considers highly important in “A Sketch of the Past”: “in the garden at St Ives. I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; ‘That is the whole’, I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth.” (71) Morris Beja has explained this in terms of Woolf’s presentation of the problem of “subject, object and the nature of reality”: “when the true nature of reality is perceived, an intuitive union takes place between the subject and the object, that is, the person knowing and the thing being known.” (220) Therefore, a moment of being could be compared to an instant of revelation and dissociation from common perception where the ordinary elements mix with the extraordinary. This is truly similar to Mrs Ramsay feelings during dinner: “She looked at the window in which the candle flames burnt brighter now that the panes were black, and looking at that outside the voices came to her very strangely, as if they were voices at a service in a cathedral.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 101) During the course of these reflections Mrs Ramsay experiences, she is able to achieve a revelation: “[...] there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines [...] so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 97) The experience of these intense “moments of being” make Mrs Ramsay, “spiritually, the wisest character in *To the Lighthouse*” (Beja, 221), and constitute her main difference compared, for instance, to her husband’s personality, who is incapable of grasping this experience “despite his intellect, or because of it” (Beja, 220).

This moment of being experienced by Mrs Ramsay will be crucial in the following chapters of the novel, especially for Lily. Already during the dinner party, Lily reflects on

how to improve Mrs Ramsay's painting: "In a flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 78). In this instant, her painting is a way of rebelling herself against Mrs Ramsay's conventional views and wishes of Lily marrying Bankes. However, in Part III, Mrs Ramsay becomes Lily's inspiration and her painting will be her means to reconcile herself with her memory and loss. As Susan Dick states, "in Part III Lily discovers that she wishes to achieve in art what Mrs Ramsay achieved in life: a moment where the ordinary and the extraordinary are perceived as one." (Dick, 60)

The dinner party ends with Mrs Ramsay's expected and desired sense of triumph. She had achieved all her objectives for the evening: Bankes' compliments, Lily had been nice to Tansley, Paul and Minta were engaged and she even felt "that he [Carmichael] liked her better than he ever had done before". (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 103) Conscious of the importance of the events that had just happened, before leaving "she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked [...] it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 103). After dinner, she sits with Mr Ramsay to read poetry, which makes her feel "as if she was ascending, she stands omnisciently above the world, the text becomes her jewel." (Ruotolo, 131) Sitting next to her husbands she thinks that "nothing on earth can equal this happiness." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 114) Part I finishes with this "final apotheosis of Victorian domesticity." (Ruotolo, 131)

### **3.4. Part II: 'Time Passes'. The Empty Space in the Middle.**

After presenting Mrs Ramsay as the central voice in Part I: 'The Window', Woolf establishes an intentional break in Part II: 'Time Passes'. The narrative technique changes completely. Woolf's intention was to be more abstract and to break the harmony of Part I. She decided to

focus on nature and on the disruption and emptiness of the house, rather than on the characters' consciousness: "I cannot make it out- here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing- I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing no cling to: well." (Woolf, *Diary* 76) In Part I the internal processes are the centre; in Part II, however, the emphasis on the external was intended "to reveal the force of time and flux upon man and his works and to emphasize the indifference of nature to man's fate." (Kaehelen and German, 197)

In contrast with Part I, in which the action lasts less than one day, 'Time Passes' recalls or summarizes the events which had taken place in a period of time which spins for ten years, being, paradoxically, the shortest section of the novel. This section starts with the inhabitants of the house going to bed after Mrs Ramsay's dinner party. However, soon the characters disappear, and the omniscient narrator informs the reader of the deaths of Mrs Ramsay, Andrew and Prue, as well as the abandoned state of the house. The Ramsay's property is taken over by the uncontrollable processes of nature and the pass of time:

Night after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine (had there been any one to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing [...] (for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together). (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 125)

These description emphasizes the break with the previous part of the novel (Dick, 61-62) and the effects of Mrs Ramsay's disappearance. She "leaves a void in the lives of the characters as well as in the text" (Ruotolo, 131). Moreover, A.D Moody emphasizes the idea that 'Time Passes' "enforces and explores the facts of transience and death" (53). For this reason, Woolf decided not only to include the deaths of several characters but also the decay of the house.



Both of these facts are natural process that cannot be controlled by humans, not even by Mrs Ramsay, who in Part I demonstrated her wish and power to control everything around her. Kaehele and German state that “this section of the novel demonstrates the value, but limited power, of the best Ramsay traits, largely through showing what happens in a world devoid of these characteristics.” (197)

The only presences to enter the house during this period are Mrs McNab's, the caretaker's, and the Lighthouse beam:

What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature? Mrs. McNab's dream of a lady, of a child, of a plate of milk soup? It had wavered over the walls like a spot of sunlight and vanished. She had locked the door; she had gone. [...] Only the Lighthouse beam entered the rooms for a moment, sent its sudden stare over bed and wall in the darkness of winter.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 128-129)

Mrs McNab, the main character of Part II, is sent to take care of the Ramsay house. However, she is unable to counteract the forces of nature that deteriorate the property. She is “distracted both by recollections of the past and by the objects that emerge around her” (Ruotolo, 134), which emphasize the emptiness and lack of life in the house. Significantly, Kaehele and German state that she is presented as “the antithesis of the Ramsays. [...] [She is] content to float eternally on a sea of gossip and drink, she suggests the power of flux over human beings who lack Mr Ramsay's regard for fact and Mrs Ramsay's desire for moments of inner truth.” (198-199)

The second part of the novel, ‘Time Passes’, ends with the return of the remaining members of the Ramsay family, Mr Carmichael and Lily Briscoe. The last lines are dedicated to a description of Lily awake in her room, “ready in the absence of Mrs Ramsay to ask questions of her own in a voice of her own” (Ruotolo, 136): “Here she was again, she

thought, sitting bold upright in bed. Awake.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 133) This ending anticipates Lily's future importance as the main voice in Part III, significantly entitled 'The Lighthouse'. Revealingly, the break and interruption which 'Time Passes' represents in the middle of Woolf's novel, mirrors Lily's difficulties to fill the empty space in the middle of her painting, a problem presented in Part I and resolved in Part III. Lily's vindication of herself as woman artist, her reconciliation with Mrs Ramsay's loss and her clear similarities with Woolf as an artist are some of the most crucial ideas presented in Part III of the novel, and they will be the object of analysis in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: Lily Briscoe, the Woman Artist

### 4.1. Lily as Mrs Ramsay's Antagonistic Daughter

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Lily, along with Mrs Ramsay, could be considered one of the two main characters of *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Since the beginning of the novel, Lily is presented as Mrs Ramsay's counterpart in terms of ideals, social skills and outlook on life, thus seemingly having an antagonistic relationship. They represent two completely different models of femininity, the Angel in the House and the independent woman artist.

Lily is depicted as the self-sufficient artist whose main preoccupation is her work. In Part I of the novel, 'The Window', she expresses a quite severe attitude towards Mrs Ramsay's conventional ideas about the role women should have in society. In the same way, Mrs Ramsay ignores Lily's ideals and artistic ambitions: "One could not take her painting very seriously" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 17). Instead, Mrs Ramsay wishes her to get married, since "she pictures Lily Briscoe's happiness almost exclusively in the terms imposed by society." (Ruotolo, 121) Although Mrs Ramsay is depicted as an influential character for her loved ones, Lily asserts her independence and decides that she wants her art to be the focus of her life: "He has his work, Lily said to herself. She remembered, all of a sudden, as if she had found a treasure, that she too had her work." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 78) Interestingly, this realisation comes to her while thinking about Mr Banks. In so doing, Lily expresses her wish to live like a man, since at that time men had the prerogative of ignoring marriage and dedicating themselves to their work.

Moreover, Lily also criticises Mrs Ramsay's ability to "manipulate" and influence people. She is aware of Mrs Ramsay's power of influence over her and everyone else: "there was something frightening about her. She was irresistible. Always she got her own way in the end" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 93). For instance, during the dinner party Lily refuses to have a

conversation with Tansley. However, "Mrs Ramsay's very presence restrains Lily's impulse to experiment, most notably at the dinner table, when Lily's small rebellion [...] virtually dissolves under Mrs Ramsey's influence." (Ruotolo, 121) Therefore, although Lily shows resistance, Mrs Ramsay's influential presence is enough to restrict her sometimes and, interestingly, this emphasizes their conflicting ideas.

Nevertheless, their relationship is not one of enemies or antagonists, since Lily and Mrs Ramsay are a perfect representation of female friendship and mutual admiration. However opposite their ideas may be in some respects, they admire and respect each other. Although Mrs Ramsay does not understand Lily's artistic desires or her refusal of marriage, she expresses admiration for her independence: "[...] 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." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 17) Conversely, Lily praises Mrs Ramsay through her painting, which is started in Part I and finished in Part III, ten years later. In the final section of the novel Lily is greatly affected by the profound distress that Mrs Ramsay's loss has caused her and her painting will be her way of working through that traumatic loss: "she will embrace her own artistic idiom as a means of confronting the nothingness Mrs Ramsay absence still occasions." (Ruotolo 136) In this sense, it can be stated that "Lily is a reflection of Virginia Woolf the artist, exploring and creating the character of Mrs Ramsay as a person and a mother." (Vogler, 10)

Lily's relationship with Mrs Ramsay and her identity as "the new woman", the Modernist artist, resembles Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, the Stephen daughters. Both were artists who purposely rejected the traditional Victorian roles expected for them. Moreover, Woolf considered her sister as an equal and thought that their respective artistic progress was parallel (Harrington, 376). In her autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past", Woolf expressed their family's expectations for them to participate as passive women in the

Victorian society: "The patriarchal society of the Victorian age was in full swing in our drawing room. [...] Vanessa and I were not called upon to take part in some of those acts. We were only asked to admire and applaud when our male relations went through the different figures of the intellectual game." (153) This ironic statement written by Woolf clearly mirrors Lily's attitude throughout the novel, her rejection of convention and the reclamation of her capacity to participate in the "intellectual game". Moreover, Lily's relationship with the Ramsays and her final reconciliation with them through painting mirrors the complicated relationship the Stephen daughters had with their parents. Interestingly, Vogler states that "the attitude of awe and admiration that Lily has for Mrs Ramsay, and her feelings of inadequacy reflect both the daughter's feelings for an external feminine mother and the artist's feelings that art is in some vital way inferior to life." (10-11)

After Mrs Ramsay's death, Lily will take over as the focus of the narration in Part III. It could be said that Mrs Ramsay delegates in Lily the role of the main voice of the novel: significantly, it is in this section where Lily will experience the culmination of her artistic vision. The final stroke of the brush in the canvas will mark her reconciliation with the Ramsays, in the same way that finishing *To the Lighthouse* granted Woolf peace of mind regarding her parents' haunting memories.

#### **4.2. Part III: 'The Lighthouse'. A Change of Perspective.**

The third and last section of the novel is titled Part III: 'The Lighthouse'. The action of this section starts ten years after the events in Part I, and it deals with the remaining members of the Ramsay family and their return to their property in the Isle of Skye along with other characters, such as Lily and Mr Carmichael. As already mentioned, at this point in the novel the narrative is mainly focalized by Lily Briscoe, thus offering a representation of her thoughts about topics such as the Ramsays, loss and art. In this sense, Norman Friedan offers

an interesting summary of the main themes Woolf portrayed in each section: Part I mainly deals with the relation of the self to the other, Part II analyses the relation of man to nature, and, finally, the last section is about the relation of art to life, and “continues in the knowledge of loss as well as the achievement of gain.” (151-153) In Part III, Mrs Ramsay has a crucial role for Lily's artistic vision, the painter both contrasts and celebrates Mrs Ramsay. For instance, A. D. Moody states that in the beginning of this section “Lily's inadequacies in ordinary human relationships are markedly contrasted with Mrs Ramsay's.” (54) In fact, Mrs Ramsay's empathy and feminine intuition will be the main sources of inspiration for Lily, since she “complements and continues Mrs Ramsay's achievements, in the other sphere of art, and, under her inspiration, reaches towards the complete vision she had sought.” (Moody, 54)

However, the third section of the novel is not focused on Lily's reflections exclusively, since it alternates Lily's actions and thoughts while painting at the lawn of the Ramsays house, with the expected trip to the Lighthouse. Mr Ramsay organised this journey and forces his children, Cam and James, to go along with him against their will. These actions are presented in alternate chapters and they “are arranged to parallel and contrast with each other in various ways.” (Kaehele and German, 201) Kaehele and German mention that both actions explore topics such as reality: Lily focusing on the aspect of time (bringing Mrs Ramsay to the present) and Cam, on space (the sight of the receding island from the boat), respectively. These actions contribute “to an understanding of Lily's final vision” (199). Significantly, the culmination of Lily's painting coincides with the expected moment of arrival to the Lighthouse.

The parallel development of these two actions contributes to the emphasis on Lily's need of reconciliation with Mr and Mrs Ramsay. Her goal is trying to recreate Mrs Ramsay through her painting. However, she unexpectedly establishes a bond and is finally able to

understand Mr Ramsay's ambiguous and odd character. Throughout the novel Lily had shown resistance to offer feminine sympathy to men. For instance, in the beginning of this section before the sail to the Lighthouse, Mr Ramsay approaches Lily seeking for her sympathy, in the same way he used to do with his wife: "an enormous need urged him [...] to approach any woman, to force them, he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 142) Lily even finds his presence almost paralyzing: "Every time he approached [...] ruin approached, chaos approached. She could not paint. She stooped, she turned; she took up this rag; she squeezed that tube. [...] For if she gave him the least chance, if he saw her disengaged a moment, looking his way a moment, he would be on her. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 139) Lily is unable to offer Mr Ramsay that recognition since "this would entail performing a more sexual role than she will allow in her desire to keep her artist-spinsterhood intact." (Friedan, 165) However, they are finally "drawn together by their mutual admiration of his boots, and when he ties her shoe, she feels great sympathy for him." (Kaehele and German, 204) For the rest of the novel Lily feels guilt for not being able to offer Mr Ramsay her sympathy, as Mrs Ramsay would have done. In this sense, Kaehele and German establish that this helps Lily comprehend "more fully the nature of his longing when she herself cries out to Mrs Ramsay and discovers how 'anguish could reduce one to such a pitch of imbecility.'" (204) Therefore, this symbolizes Lily's understanding of, not only Mr Ramsay, but also Mrs Ramsay's attitude and supportive role with respect to her husband, which she had never been able to understand before.

Moreover, the sail to the Lighthouse also presents another conflict in need of resolution: Cam and James' relationship with their father. Mr Ramsay organises this trip as "a rite in memory of the dead" (Kaehele and German, 199). Mrs Ramsay's influence was so crucial that he feels the need to fulfil her wish to go the Lighthouse after her death. Significantly, James, who was eager for this trip ten years ago, now refuses to go,

symbolizing a rejection of his father in general. Cam and James decide to “resist tyranny to the death” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 155); although both are decided to hate and resist their father, their opinions change as the journey to the Lighthouse advances: “the younger Ramsays’ attitude towards their father is influenced by the pace of the boat.” (Kaehele and German, 200) Finally, when they reach the island Cam and James achieve a reconciliation with him: “They both wanted to say, Ask us anything and we will give it you. But he did not ask them anything. He sat and looked at the island.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 193) Similarly, and as Kaehele and German have suggested, Lily undergoes her own process of reconciliation when seeing the boat arrive to the Lighthouse from the shore (200): “‘He must have reached it,’ said Lily Briscoe aloud, feeling suddenly completely tired out [...] Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning, she had given him at last.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 193)

Therefore, the final section of the novel, although it mainly focuses on Lily painting of Mrs Ramsay, also offers an almost simultaneous reconciliation of the main characters both with the past and with each other. Cam, James and Lily are all finally able to comprehend the need of their reconciliation with Mr Ramsay, an experience understood both as “union- and salvation- in a climatic moment of being.” (Beja, 225) Significantly, each of these characters seems to represent different aspects of the relationship Woolf and her siblings had with their parents, especially with Leslie Stephen. For instance, James portrays Woolf’s anger provoked by her father’s authoritarian character: “tyranny, despotism, he called it- making people do what they did not want to do” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 172). On the other hand, Cam’s attitude towards Mr Ramsay mirrors Woolf’s ambivalent feelings towards Leslie Stephen. However much she despised his tyranny and arrogance was, Woolf loved him and greatly admired him. Finally, Lily, whom at the end of the novel is the same age as Woolf herself when writing *To the Lighthouse*, represents the adult daughter coming to terms with her traumatic past experiences. The novel culminates with a simultaneous vision or moment of being



experienced by all these characters. However, Woolf decided to offer Lily her own private and personal vision as an artist, which is what differentiates her from the rest of the character's healing journeys in this section. Lily achieves her artistic culmination as a result of combining Mr and Mrs Ramsay's perspectives. Her revelations are portrayed in her painting, and they prove that "the Ramsays serve as 'lighthouses' for other people as well as for each other." (Kaehele and German, 202)

### **4.3. Woolf's Vindication of Lily as an Artist**

As mentioned in Chapter 1; Post-Impressionism was regarded as a highly significant movement for Modernist writers, including Woolf. Her writing was greatly influenced by Roger Fry's ideas, by aesthetic innovation and the subjectivism of Post-Impressionist painting. As Sue Roe explains, Woolf's interest in spatial representation, colour and the evocation of light in her writing prove that "she was working [...] with the ancient problems of picture-making." (171) Significantly, Andrew McNeillie defined *To the Lighthouse* as "the Post-Impressionist novel" (18) where Woolf tries "to explore the psychology of the painter." (Hungerford, 166). In this sense, Lily Briscoe works as the embodiment of the Post-Impressionist painter who challenges conventional understandings of art and perception. For instance, Lily's painting of Mrs Ramsay is not realistic at all: it is composed of geometrical figures and bright colours which do not aim at reproducing reality in a faithful way. Briscoe decided to portray the figure of Mrs Ramsay with James on his lap as a triangular purple form:

What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, "just there"? he asked.

It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection-- that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. [...]

But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other

senses too in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 49-50)

This is similar to the composition of traditional Renaissance paintings which represented the Virgin Mary and Jesus. Woolf was probably inspired by her sister's art to create both the character of Lily and her painting. In fact, Harrington stated that "the deliberate postimpressionist violation of Renaissance space and perspective is characteristic of Vanessa Bell's paintings, but this new style created its own problems for her, problems remarkably similar to Lily's". (373) Significantly, Vanessa Bell herself even wrote about Lily in a letter to Woolf: "By the way surely Lily Briscoe must have been rather a good painter." (573)

#### **4.3.1. Lily's Picture as Structural and Thematic Frame in *To the Lighthouse***

Lily's role as an artist is not only crucial because of her resemblance to Vanessa Bell, or for her embodiment of contemporary Post-Impressionist techniques. The fact that Lily is working on her painting and her attempts to solve the problems posed by it serve as a sort of "structural frame" in *To the Lighthouse*. At the novel's opening Lily is already working on Mrs Ramsay's painting and, significantly, the last words of the novel are dedicated to her final stroke on the canvas. During most of the process of painting, Lily is challenged with the problem of the unity of her picture, "how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 50). This problem will arise in Part I, while working on her first painting, and during Mrs Ramsay's dinner party, Lily thinks about a solution: "In a flash she saw her picture, and thought Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 79). However, Mrs Ramsay's death happens before

Briscoe can make use of this revelation. In fact, she will not be able to solve this problem until her final vision at the end of the novel. At this point, she will “rediscover a pattern that will restore the sense of balance that she experienced during Mrs Ramsay’s dinner party.” (Harrington, 365-366) As Moody has suggested, Lily’s “abstract aesthetic problem becomes an analogy for her main concern, and the novel’s, which is to bring Mr and Mrs Ramsay, and the worlds they represent, into a harmonious relation.” (54)

Therefore, Lily’s painting also provides thematic continuity to the novel. Lily has to work on the problem of how to bring balance between the opposite sides of her canvas, which at the end of the novel clearly represents her need of finding a balance between Mr and Mrs Ramsay. In the same way as Lily, throughout *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf tries to find a balance between the memories of her parents. Both artists have a similar purpose and reach similar results, since “the novel can be read like the painting and that the painting’s meaning is also the novel’s.” (Harrington, 364) Lily discovers that the best way to achieve the balance she is seeking for in her picture is by drawing a line in the middle of her canvas, which represents the lighthouse.

#### **4.3.2. The Symbolic Meaning of the Lighthouse**

The figure of the Lighthouse had been present throughout the whole novel. In Part I, it is clearly associated with Mrs Ramsay; she even identifies herself with its stroke of light:

[...] this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with

her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at--that light, for example. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 59)

Although Mrs Ramsay is no longer present in the novel, Part III: 'The Lighthouse' is "an intensive demonstration of her persisting power. What she had achieved in her life continues to fructify in the lives of her children, and in the mind and art of Lily Briscoe." (Moody, 54) At this stage, however, Lily finds herself confronting even more problems to finish her painting that ten years ago. Since Mrs Ramsay is not there anymore, the artist must bring her to the present to finish the painting, since it is by "recalling and celebrating Mrs Ramsay [...]" which brings a clearer understanding of her achievements." (Moody, 55) Lily abandons the critical attitude towards Mrs Ramsay that had characterized her previously in the novel and begins to admire her in a more profound level: "what Mrs Ramsay had been in her life provides an answer then to Lily's questioning of life, and reveals how a human order may be established within the flux of nature" (Moody, 55) Lily achieves some of her main revelations as a woman artist inspired by Mrs Ramsay's role in her family, her philosophy of life and her feminine qualities. The painter realizes that Mrs Ramsay was an ordering force in everyone's lives, since she had the capacity to create permanence and stability out of chaos, which is Lily's objective in her painting (Kaehele and German, 202). This revelation allows Lily to 'summon' Mrs Ramsay; she sees her sitting in the window and finally understands her:

"Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she cried, feeling the old horror come back--to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still? And then, quietly, as if she refrained, that too became part of ordinary experience, was on a level with the chair, with the table. Mrs. Ramsay--it was part of her perfect goodness--sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 188)

Therefore, “the rediscovery of what is missing in her painting depends on surrendering her will and silencing her cry, ‘Mrs. Ramsay’.” (Harrington, 367) Lily often experiences the “frustration of trying to translate moments of intensity into worthwhile art, to capture in her painting.” (Beja, 226) Therefore, it is quite significant that Mrs Ramsay is the object of Lily’s vision, since during her life “she herself was a creator of moments of eternity” (Kaehele and German, 205), such as the Dinner party in the first section of the novel.

However, this vision does not grant Lily the final solution or revelation about how to achieve the balance she is seeking to portray in her painting. After experiencing the vision of Mrs Ramsay, Lily suddenly feels the need for Mr Ramsay, who was on the boat on his way to the Lighthouse:

And as if she had something she must share [...] full her mind was of what she was thinking, of what she was seeing, Lily went past Mr. Carmichael holding her brush to the edge of the lawn. Where was that boat now? And Mr. Ramsay? She wanted him.  
(Woolf, *Lighthouse* 188)

As Moody has suggested, Lily, “having satisfied her sense of Mrs Ramsay [...] becomes aware of a need to comprehend Mr Ramsay as well, and to be on a level wit ordinary experience.” (55) In this sense, Woolf expressed in her diary her doubts and difficulties when planning this part of *To the Lighthouse*: “[...] At this moment I’m casting about for an end. The problem is how to bring Lily and Mr R[amsay] together and make a combination of interest at the end.” (Woolf, 106) Woolf eventually achieved the union between these two characters by interrupting Lily’s vision of Mrs Ramsay when she sees Mr Ramsay’s boat in the distance: “The boat’s interruption of the imagined scene causes her to give up trying to concentrate on the details either of her painting [...] or of Mrs. Ramsay.” (Harrington, 367) This vision grants Lily the opportunity to restore “the razor edge of balance between two

opposite forces; Mr Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary.” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 180) Interestingly, in Part III, the Lighthouse, which has always been associated with Mrs Ramsay, also becomes representative of Mr Ramsay. This is proven by James' impressions when seeing the Lighthouse from a close distance for the first time:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now--

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white [...] So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too. It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. In the evening one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 173-174)

The lighthouse is seen as the symbol which contains both light and darkness, it is delicate and stark and combines the Ramsays' male and female qualities.

After achieving balance in her artistic vision, Lily becomes the female artist whose “fluid and shifting perception of the world” allows her to find an equilibrium between Mr Ramsay's “systematic linear rationality” and Mrs Ramsay's “more inclusive poetic and empathetic awareness.” (Ward Jouve, 206) Kaehele and German state that the fact that Lily adopts an attitude combining the perspective of both Mr and Mrs Ramsay “makes reality simultaneously factual and miraculous.” (205) Her final revelation is that “the artists' vision is the fusion of the ordinary and the extraordinary unites on a theoretical level the perceptions of reality enacted by Mr and Mrs Ramsay.” (Dick, 62) This balance between the Ramsays will be portrayed in Lily's canvas by the “line there, in the centre” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 194)

representing the Lighthouse. After drawing it, Lily finally states: "It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision."  
(Woolf, *Lighthouse* 194)

To summarize, the line in the middle of Lily's canvas can, therefore, be interpreted as the lighthouse "which Mr Ramsay has just reached, and which, as its title implies, the whole novel has been approaching." (Moody, 56) This symbolizes Lily's introduction into a more balanced and androgynous artistic perception influenced by the Ramsays. Although the Lighthouse has crucial symbolical implications in the novel, Woolf never explained its meaning. Significantly, in a letter to Roger Fry, she wrote:

I meant nothing by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it deposit for their own emotions- which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether its right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me. (385-386)

This quote proves Woolf's clear symbolical intentions with the figure of the Lighthouse, and the "Modernist ambiguity" she purposely created. However, it also highlights Virginia Woolf's own similarities with the character of Lily Briscoe. Both are the artists who need a "central line down the middle [...] to hold the design together". Vogler states that Lily's attitude in the final section of the novel parallels Woolf writing Part I and trying to make sense of the memories of her parents. (12) The novel's equivalent to a central line is clearly Part II: 'Time Passes'. Harrington explained that: "Like Lily's central line, "Time Passes" unifies the narrative masses to either side of it, but it also throws the narrative off balance by

altering the perspective from the lively web of everyday occurrences that precede and follow it [...] (381) It can be concluded that Woolf portrayed in Lily her identity and perception as an androgynous artist. The finalization of their respective works of art grants them, as Woolf expressed in "A Sketch of the past", the opportunity to express a "long felt and deeply felt emotion" and "to laid it to rest" (81)

As a final point, it can be stated that through the character of Lily, Woolf not only represents her role as a daughter trying to make sense of the loss of a mother, but also vindicates the role of the woman artist by expressing the importance of art based on her own personal experiences. After the publication of *To the Lighthouse* in 1927, Virginia Woolf will pay great attention to studying the differences between the male and female mind, as well as their opposite perceptions of art: "that both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values. [...]" ("Women and Fiction", 136) Lily realises that to achieve her ultimate artistic vision she must combine both typically male and female perceptions. Lily's achievement of an androgynous vision inspired by the Ramsays at the end of the novel anticipates the crucial idea of the artists' mind as androgynous that Woolf will develop in "A Room of One's Own" (1929):

in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; [...] It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly, by pausing and looking at a book or two [...] the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. (Woolf, "Room" 74)



## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* presented in the previous chapters provides several conclusions relevant to the objective of this dissertation, namely, the obvious significance of the study of this novel from a gender perspective. First of all, it can be concluded that *To the Lighthouse* is, of course, a great example of a Modernist novel. It fictionalizes the relevance of Post-Impressionist pictorial techniques, here serving the purpose of signalling the subjective perception of the human mind through the use of innovative narrative methods, such as Woolf's "tunnelling process". However, and as explained in Chapter 1, Woolf's writing is distinguished from her male contemporaries for her concern and her wish to focus on female experience, which is obvious in *To the Lighthouse*. Although the author's first impulse was to present Mr Ramsay as a protagonist, she decided to make Mrs Ramsay and Lily the main narrative voices of the novel.

This dissertation has also shown how particular autobiographical aspects present in *To the Lighthouse* are crucial to understand the novel, alongside Woolf's feminist agenda in doing so. As argued in Chapter 2, Woolf was inspired by some her childhood experiences and memories, fictionalizing memories tied up to Talland House in Cornwall. This place was defined by Woolf as the setting where she experienced some of the most crucial moments that determined her development as a writer and her artistic perception, such as the experience of what she famously called "moments of being", that will be so recurrent in her novels as a pivoting strategy serving the purpose of characterization. Moreover, through the novel Woolf obviously works through the conflictive relationship with her parents. Mr Ramsay, Woolf's fictionalization of Leslie Stephen, the tyrannical "Cambridge intellectual", and Mrs Ramsay, representing the early loss of Julia Stephen, the idealized Victorian mother and wife.

The main part of the study of the novel has been presented as a complete analysis of the two main female characters, which emphasizes the pertinence of reading *To the Lighthouse* from a gender perspective. Attention has been paid to several aspects concerning these characters, such as their role in the novel, their biographical relevance and the feminist debates and ideas they introduce in the novel. Chapter 3 was dedicated to the interpretation of the character of Mrs Ramsay, combined with the analysis of the first two sections of the novel- Part I: 'The Window' and Part II: 'Time Passes'; these sections emphasize her centrality as the narrative focus as well as the disruptive power of her absence for her relations and environment. As mentioned above, Mrs Ramsay can be interpreted as the representation of the Victorian "Angel in the House", whom Woolf—in "Professions for Women" (1931), published four years after *To the Lighthouse*—declared as the enemy that must be killed by the female artist. However, it has also been argued that Mrs Ramsay is not completely restricted to this role, in the same way that Woolf did not see Julia Stephen exclusively characterized by her motherly attributes. Mrs Ramsay represents Woolf's vindication of the importance of female ancestry for women, as she declared in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): "We think back to our mothers if we are women" (58).

On the other hand, the last chapter was exclusively dedicated to the analysis of Lily Briscoe in the third section of *To the Lighthouse*, Part III: 'The Lighthouse'. This chapter emphasizes the parallels between Lily and Woolf herself, in terms of their identity as "daughters" trying to accept the loss of a mother figure, as well as their role as Modern artists defending art as a way of addressing reality and a form of self-expression. This chapter has demonstrated the relevance of Lily's painting in the novel, which parallels Woolf writing *To the Lighthouse* in many respects. They share similar purposes, challenges and reach similar conclusions through their respective artistic expressions. One of the main points illustrated in this chapter is the relevance of Lily's revelation at the end: her need to combine Mr and Mrs

Ramsay's masculine and feminine perceptions of life which she represents by the symbolical figure of the Lighthouse. This idea anticipates one of the most famous and controversial notions which characterize Woolf's feminism: the artist's androgynous mind. The author will address the topic of the differences between the male and female rationalities in future writings such as "Women and Fiction" (1928), and she will reach her final conclusion in *A Room of One's Own*, where she vindicates the artist's androgynous mind, combining male and female qualities to achieve the most natural and unadulterated sense of creativity.

To conclude, this dissertation has offered a thorough analysis of the novel *To the Lighthouse* from a feminist perspective by tackling the main aspects proposed at the beginning: the centrality of the female characters, the novel as a precursor of Woolf's main feminist ideas and the author's vindication of the female artist through her writing. Moreover, it has also been demonstrated that *To the Lighthouse* is a novel which must be studied considering the topics of gender, art and biography to achieve a complete appreciation of Woolf's purpose with this work.

As a final point, it would have been interesting to offer a more in-depth recollection of different critical works and studies addressing *To the Lighthouse* as the origin of some of Woolf's future feminist thinking, which will pave the way for late twentieth-century feminism. Due to the length restrictions of this work, it seemed more appropriate to here focus on the analysis of *To the Lighthouse* and its characters, rather than on its repercussion in terms of future feminist studies, which could, however, be approached in forthcoming essays in the near future.

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