

2004

To the lighthouse, to the self

Kristina Fennelly
Lehigh University

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To the
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the Self

May 2004

To the Lighthouse, To the Self

by

Kristina Fennelly

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Department of English

Lehigh University

April 30, 2004

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts.

April 28 2003
Date

Thesis Advisor

Chairperson of Department

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge and thank Amardeep Singh, who served as the mentor of this project and who first introduced *To the Lighthouse* to me. Deep guided me through a short paper on the novel, which then expanded into a seminar paper for his British Modernism course I took in the Fall, 2003 semester. Since then, Deep has guided me through several versions of this paper and has led me to pursue British Modernism as one of my fields of post-doctoral studies. I am very grateful to Deep for his patient assistance, respectful guidance, and insightful dialogue about this paper.

I also wish to acknowledge and thank Beth Dolan, who read drafts of this thesis, met with me to discuss particular passages from the novel, suggested auto-biographical and feminist theory materials and allowed me to borrow her copies, and encouraged me to follow my passion and interest in both Lily and Woolf.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge and thank my parents, Dale-Karen and Kevin Fennelly, who have always encouraged my passion for reading and writing and have always supported the “woman-artist” in me.

Table of Contents

Page 1	Abstract
Pages 2-27	To the Lighthouse, To the Self
Page 28	Bibliography
Page 29	Biography

Abstract

In this master's thesis, I trace Lily Briscoe's personal struggles with self and art in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. These struggles unveil questions about the "woman-artist," raised by Adrienne Rich, as well as tensions between essentialism and constructionism elaborated on by Diana Fuss and Luce Irigaray. Ultimately, Lily's art in and of itself points to a desire for fluidity, for "multiple essences" (Fuss 72), which do not compete with one another for an essentializing subject. Rather, these "multiple essences" coalesce to form a unified self as woman, subject, and creation capable of voicing that self in resistant and subversive ways. Along Lily's journey *To the Lighthouse*, and to her self, she encounters the Other disguised as Desire in Mrs. Ramsey; she confronts the patriarchal male influence under the guise of Charles Tansley and Mr. Ramsey who seek to distract her from her work; and she ultimately transcends all of these figures and forces by continuously returning to Woolf's designated question: "What is 'herself'? [...] what is a woman?" Ultimately, I conclude that neither Woolf nor Lily ever fully answer such queries, leaving them open and inviting to pursue again and again as an inexhaustible, figurative journey *To the Lighthouse*.

Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex,
she did not know which) before she exchanged
the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting
she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed
like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some
windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the
blasts of doubt.

--Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927)

Situated in “The Lighthouse,” the final section of Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the above excerpt reveals Lily Briscoe’s intense personal struggle with reconciling her self with her art and her art with her self. Specifically, Lily attempts to move beyond the “blasts of doubt,” which both society and biology impose on her. Arguably, such doubt is self-imposed since Lily is still unsure of her fate as both woman and artist. Yet when considering comments offered by men like Charles Tansley (representative of her British Victorian society) who claim “women can’t write, women can’t paint” (91), the reader understands Lily’s natural inclination to take such words to heart, believing in this claim’s general truth (i.e., all women cannot write or paint) and in its personal applicability (i.e., Lily cannot write or paint). Lily’s consideration of whether her anxieties stem from her biological sex as female, or from her gendered and socialized nature as woman, capture this transitional period in history for many women, both artist and “angel” alike. In essence, Lily struggles between heeding what she is told by men—“women can’t write, women can’t paint”—and knowing what she feels as a woman—women *can* write and *can* paint.

Poet Adrienne Rich addresses this same anxiety when she describes the process by which she created and wrote her poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (1958-1960): out of “scraps and fragments” emerged “a theme, an obsession” with “this situation of the woman artist historically and in my time and place.” In considering “this

situation,” namely her own, she ponders “what it could possibly mean to be a woman and an artist in one body.” Her concern with this duality residing in one physical entity signals a tension between biology and society which Lily demonstrates. Both Woolf and Rich, through their writing, capture the struggles within the female self—both body and spirit—when confronted with socially-expected roles of femininity and womanhood.

In her opening chapter of *Essentially Speaking* (1989), Diana Fuss poses a similarly complex tension between essentialism and constructionism. Essentialism, she argues, “can be located in appeals to a pure or original femininity, a female essence, outside the boundaries of social and thereby untainted (though perhaps repressed) by a patriarchal order” (2). Biological sex, therefore, reflects the essence of woman as separate from societal influence. Constructionism, by contrast, “insists that essence is itself a historical construction [...] What is at stake for a constructionist are systems of representations, social and material practices, laws of discourses, and ideological effects” (2). Gendered and socialized nature thus constructs, or fashions, females into women: “the natural is itself posited as a construction of the social” (Fuss 2).

Both Fuss and Rich, like Lily in the above passage, intimate that this struggle between biological sex and social nature, between the woman as female and the woman as artist, can have a negative effect on the woman artist; and in her evaluation of the poem, she directs the woman artist or thinker to “take herself seriously even when no one else does.” Lily’s experience as a woman-artist, and Woolf’s process of writing the novel, reveal a genuine attempt by both creators to regard themselves “seriously,” and even to name themselves “seriously” as the combined “woman-artist.” When critics of both artists demoralize their pursuit of the personal and the pleasurable in their work, it is

crucial to trace Fuss's theory of whether "the natural is repressed by the social," according to the essentialist; or, to decide whether "the natural is produced by the social," according to the constructionist. As biography on Woolf indicates, however, psychology also influences these so-called "natural" paradigms of women. If we adopt an essentialist perspective, then society repressed Woolf's psychological processes, thereby resulting in her depression and lack of creativity at times. If we adopt a constructionist perspective, then society simply elicited, or drew out, Woolf's depressed tendencies. Either view couples the natural influence with the psychological influence, thereby re-complicating Fuss's formulations and our own understanding of Woolf from a feminist perspective.

Intensely self-revealing, *To the Lighthouse* functions as a catharsis for Woolf, as well as a literary achievement for her during her most severe bouts with mental illness. At these times, Woolf confirmed what Tansley preaches above, admitting once to Roger Fry: "'Cant write [...] (with a whole novel in my head too—its damnable) [...] 'It will be too much like father, or mother'" (Lee 471). Though deeply affected by the emotional drain from extricating herself from her obsession with her parents, Woolf nevertheless conceded that she wrote the novel with relative ease, "with speed and fluency" (Lee 471). Thus, through her literary art form, Woolf, like her female protagonist, demonstrates how women are just as capable as men in both professional and creative endeavors, relegating the personal onto a blank canvas or page to produce both an aesthetic creation and inspirational art form. Her own writing, both of fiction and scholarship, supports Lily's prevailing belief in herself and dispels Tansley's view, representative of the early twentieth century, but more specifically the previous Victorian era. Hermione Lee adds to this premise in her biography *Virginia Woolf*: "Virginia Woolf, in her retrospective

story of the Victorian family, diffuses her personal self” (474), ultimately diffusing and then reconciling that self with her own past and the past of her gender—both of which were thwarted in their initial aims of scholarship, the arts, and other noted professions.

In her essay, “Professions for Women,” Woolf shares her “professional experiences” as a woman writer. Foremost among her recollections is the moment when she realizes that she needs “to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*” (278). Woolf decries the angel in the house, Victorian society’s quintessential perfect woman, and examines this figure of mythic proportions who not only thwarted women from engaging in professions, but also impeded women’s ability to define and determine their own selfhood.

Though Woolf does not name the author of this “famous poem,” as she terms it, her audience and readership would have undoubtedly recognized it as Coventry Patmore’s mid-nineteenth century poem “*The Angel in the House*” (1854), written as a tribute to his wife whom he believed possessed all the qualities and characteristics indicative of a true angel on earth. Woolf summarizes the most obvious qualities of such a woman: “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” (278). Interestingly, Woolf uses the past tense to describe the angel, implying that she no longer exists. True, in Woolf’s own mind, the angel in the house is no longer a force in her life because “I killed her in the end” (279). But Woolf also admits the continuing, lingering presence of the angel (akin to that obsession with the woman-artist described by Rich earlier) since “she was always creeping back when I thought I had

despatched her” (279). The angel remained a haunting figure, not only because of its paternal and authoritative creator (Patmore and the patriarchy he represented), but also because of the angel’s feminine and maternal origins, which often masked themselves in patriarchal forms of scholarship and authority. As Lee reveals:

When she came to write a retrospect of these first writing years she invented the famous figure of the Angel in the House (named after Coventry Patmore’s poem), the Victorian mother/editor who would slip behind her [Woolf] in rustling skirts as she began to review a book by a famous man, and remind her to be charming, tender and polite—and whom the young woman writer had to kill, by throwing the inkpot at her, before she could find her voice. (213)

Her quest to find “her voice” mirrors Lily’s quest to finish her painting; both quests produce what Vanessa reviewed *To the Lighthouse* as: “a great work of art” (Lee 474).

Lily and Woolf both experience relative success with their professional and creative pursuits. Lee concurs by noting: “She [Woolf] is Lily Briscoe, painting her picture, like Virginia Woolf writing this book” (474). Similarly, Virginia and Lily both effectively dismantle “the angel in the house,” gaining a healthy degree of self-confidence in the process by relegating her mother and Mrs. Ramsey, respectively, to their proper place—outside the dominant consciousness of their personal selves. Nevertheless, they still must confront an irrepressible question, which Woolf posed before her audience at the National Society for Women’s Service in 1931: “What is ‘herself’? I mean, what is a woman?” (Woolf 280) Woolf intimates this same query four years earlier in *To the Lighthouse*; her direct questioning of the tension between selfhood and womanhood four years later signals an ongoing consideration of this issue, which remains elusive even now in the twenty-first century.

Selfhood and womanhood were intimately connected at the end of the nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century. Both reality and literature transformed the Woman Question into the New Woman Question, examining what the New Woman was and how she deviated from previous models of womanhood erected by Victorian codes and standards (Richardson and Ellis 39-40). Not only did the angel in the house serve as the basis for womanhood, but it also functioned as the foundation on which all of society rested. Essentially, the angel in the house served as the moral guardian of nineteenth-century codes and standards to ensure a healthy, happy family, and by extension a productive and honorable society. Any challenge to woman's normative role as angel in the house would severely jeopardize Victorian institutions, such as marriage and work.

Woolf extends her challenge and critique of this model of womanhood to her female protagonist Lily Briscoe, imploring readers to engage in that task which she sets before her audience in 1931: "it is necessary also to discuss the ends and the aims for which we are fighting" (282). As evidenced in the opening passage from *To the Lighthouse*, Lily examines her own "ends and aims," questioning whether it is her own biology or the way external society—seemingly removed from the individual—has nurtured her which makes her both approach and recoil from painting, from engaging in a profession which offers both pleasure and access to her own self.

Thus, Lily eventually comes to paint in order to reconcile her life choices with social norms and expectations. Woolf herself admits to this act of reconciling one's inner life with the outer struggle via her literary work when she admits in her diary: "'I... got down to my depths & made shapes square up'" (472). Interestingly, "square" is

synonymous with reconcile, a figurative merging of various angles into one complete shape. Both Woolf's and Lily's primary obstacle then as both artist and woman involves dispelling the tension between conforming to and resisting society via one's work. Intermittent periods of self-doubt, as well as other social institutions (namely marriage and patriarchy), hinder writer and artist from fully participating in their creative act free of struggle. As Lee reminds us, this struggle was Woolf's primary goal for her character: "Retrospectively, she saw it as a successful endeavour to do the two things at once she makes Lily do in the last part of the book: understand her own feelings, and create a structure that worked" (472).

This "structure" manifests itself in the image of the lighthouse and later extends itself to Mrs. Ramsey—a point to which I will return in the next section. Lee directs our attention well to chapter eleven of the final section in the novel when Lily considers the power of "distance" on her painting, and also of physically distancing her self from her work. By extension, Lily also reflects on how distance affects human behavior that has influenced her own: "So much depends then, thought Lily Briscoe [...] upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us" (191). The allowance of such physical distance between two objects—in this case, herself and Mr. Ramsey "as he sailed further and further across the bay" towards the lighthouse—affords her a new perspective on her art and, by extension, affords the reader a new perspective on the truth of the novel. Lily presents such truth succinctly at the end of that paragraph: "some common feeling held the whole" (192). Yet what is this "feeling" which holds the "whole" of her vision of the distance between her self and the Other? Further, what is this "common feeling" which seemingly holds together the "whole" of the novel, uniting both creator and created—

Woolf being the creator who creates Lily (the created), who then becomes the creator (artist) and recreates the painting to produce a final creation?

Lee speaks to this similar cycle of creator-created-creator-creation in her commentary on this final part of the novel:

In the last part, moving between Lily painting her picture on the lawn and Mr. Ramsey with his two children in the boat, she [Woolf] wrestled, like Lily, with problems of balance, feeling that the material in the boat was not as rich 'as it is with Lily on the lawn.' She wanted to get the feeling of simultaneity. (471)

Indeed, the novel's "feeling of simultaneity" serves as the "common feeling" which emerges from Lily's watching the images of the "sails" and "clouds" and "blue" of the sky (191). Lee likens these images to Woolf's process of "scene making," her version of symbolism (472). Though akin to symbolism, Woolf goes to great lengths to dispel the lighthouse as a symbol, boldly asserting: "I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together" (472), to offer that "common feeling."¹ If the Lighthouse means nothing, then why did Woolf title this work in such a way that involves a journey—*To the Lighthouse*? Could the lighthouse—as a separate entity unto itself—mean nothing, while the journey means something? Lily hints at this latter consideration when she observes the daily routine of her fellow neighbors:

It was a way things had sometimes, she thought, lingering for a moment and looking at the long glittering windows and the plume of blue smoke: they became unreal. So coming back from a journey, or after an illness, before habits had spun themselves across the surface, one felt that same unreality, which was so startling; felt something emerge. Life was most vivid then. (191-192)

¹ For a fuller review of interpretations and misinterpretations of the "lighthouse," please see Anita Tarr's "Getting to the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf and Thomas Carlyle." Tarr contends: "Indeed, the major point to consider in *To the Lighthouse* is Woolf's use of the *lighthouse* as primary among her ocular metaphors."

The emergence of clarity and of participating in this journey of the self recalls Joseph Campbell's understanding of any hero who we come to regard ultimately as a hero, according him/her great honor and respect. This approbation of character can be attributed mostly to the journey he/she undertakes, a journey which Campbell terms as a "transformation of consciousness." In this transformation, there is a going out beyond the known and returning back changed by trials and tests which initiate the transformation of one's consciousness. It is this same altering of reality—from reality to "unreality," from the familiar to the unknown, from consciousness to delving into the subconscious—which Lily observes in others and experiences within herself simultaneously that renders any need for symbolism in the novel as unnecessary. The obvious coding of the image of the Lighthouse, which Roger Fry directed Woolf to do in her drafts, proved too much of a distraction to Woolf who responded: "Whether its right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me'" (qtd. by Lee 472). If we accord the lighthouse with too much meaning, then we absorb ourselves as readers wholly in this image and move away from the "central line" of the story: the voice of the novel via Lily's projection of her subconscious understanding of life onto the conscious landscape of the story. By silencing the Other—the inner critic, the outer judge, and the far off lighthouse—we begin to observe Lily listening to her self and giving voice to that self via art. Finding a new female voice thus dismantles that voice of the angel, the female image that assumed mythic proportions via writers like Patmore and others whom Woolf strove against to assert her own voice as a female writer of the early twentieth century.

Lily, like her creator, stands among few heroines of this genre who persists with “the human apparatus for painting or for feeling” (193). More importantly, she stands out from other New Women prevalent in late-nineteenth, early-twentieth-century literature because she survives, refusing to compromise her work, her freedom, or her self (both the physical and intangible self). Both her self and her work confirm Woolf’s observations of her character: “it [the human apparatus] always broke down at the critical moment” (193). Regardless, Lily believes “heroically, one must force it on” (193)—that is, follow one’s passion to the unveiling of the self and consequently to the birth of the soul which no longer stands naked, “hesitating on some windy pinnacle,” but embraces that “fluidity of life” instead. In this way, Lily mimics Woolf when she wrote *To the Lighthouse*: “she composed it with a joy and a fluidity that she encountered only intermittently in the creation of her other fiction” (van Buren Kelly 5). Is it any wonder, then, how these same elements of joy, fluidity, and artistic creation become infused and inseparable from Lily’s character, allowing the reader to fully appreciate and perhaps even participate vicariously in this rare human experience?

Before Lily embraces this life of “joy and fluidity,” however, she faces certain hindrances, namely due to her gender and the era in which she lives. The early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the New Woman, though this figure primarily existed in literature in characters like Lady Brett Ashley of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and Lily Bart of *House of Mirth* (1905). However, the characteristic angel-in-the-house (represented by Mrs. Ramsey in Woolf’s novel) remained a prominent staple in family life and in society as a whole. Fictional characters like Agnes Wickfield of Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and Mrs. James of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s

“The Angel Over the Right Shoulder” (1852) popularized this image; and even art conveyed a similar ideal of virtue, purity, and self-sacrifice for women. Abbott Henderson Thayer (1849-1921), an American idealist painter, is best known for his series of angels and Madonnas in the late nineteenth century. His painting *Angel* (1887) promotes both his personal and artistic vision of women as “sacred embodiments of moral virtue” (Turner 648). If you were not an angel, you were a fallen woman and could, therefore, never return to that original state of purity to which all women of the nineteenth century ascribed. This dichotomy persisted into the twentieth century; and, to an extent, still exists today.

The New Woman, by contrast, afforded women another space—both literally and figuratively—by which to challenge certain social conventions, namely those of marriage and work. The New Woman embodied confidence, self-assertion, and belief in one’s self as a fully capable human being—no longer a weak, frail woman dependant on a man. The New Woman is not as easily identifiable or definable as the angel in the house. In their recently published collection of essays *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de-Siecle Feminisms* (2001), editors Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis examine this category of women, pursuing not only the question “who was the New Woman?” but also “who were the New Women?—a question which was far from settled at the fin de siecle” (12). Richardson and Willis outline several common qualities of the New Woman, based on the various definitions offered by their contributors: “her perceived newness, her autonomous self-definition and her determination to set her own agenda in developing an alternative vision of the future” (12).

Woolf tacitly conveys many of these qualities when she first introduces Lily in the story. Much of how we define the New Woman—and consequently Lily—is based on how we define women other than angels in the house. In the nineteenth century, you were either an angel or a fallen woman, one who “falls from her purity” and for whom “there is no return” (Starbuck). Yet fin-de-siecle and early twentieth-century life and literature loosens this strict dichotomy, affording a new category of New Women for those who chose alternative paths. These new directions for women usually involved a divergence from the traditional occupation of housewife. As Lily demonstrates, she chooses to paint—presumably for both employment and enjoyment—rather than serve as wife and mother.

At the close of chapter three in “The Window,” Lily paints a portrait of Mrs. Ramsey, a woman who has willingly chosen marriage and motherhood as her life’s work. The pairing of these two very dissimilar women allows Woolf to capture both images of womanhood: the traditional angel and the burgeoning New Woman. This pairing demonstrates the tension women like Lily experience as they are forced to choose between maintaining gender norms and asserting their own free will. Through art, Lily chooses to affirm her independence, albeit she is judged severely by her counterpart, Mrs. Ramsey, who firmly believes “people must marry; people must have children” (60)—two aspects of life in which Lily wants no part. For the most part, Mrs. Ramsey fails to understand Lily’s conscious decision not to participate in the coveted institutions of marriage and motherhood. Her attempts to join Lily together with William Bankes fail, not because the two individuals are an ill-suited couple, but rather because Lily experiences the “newness” to which Richardson and Ellis refer. More in the concluding

chapter than in the preceding two sections does Woolf articulate the “newness” which Lily experiences: “She felt curiously divided” (156). Understandably, Lily feels divided between her gender and her self, unable to identify whether “her nature, or [...] her sex” forces her into that exchange of “fluidity of life for the concentration of painting.”

While Lily does not have a husband, she does suffer from a father figure, Mr. Ramsey, whose attention and needs also cause her to feel “curiously divided” between her home and her work: “she pretended to drink out of her empty coffee cup so as to escape him—to escape his demand on her, to put aside a moment longer that imperious need” (147). Moments like these when she is literally consumed with both an external demand and a personal need—“imperious” and absolutely necessary at that—temporarily fixes Lily in the socially dictated role of daughter, which she seeks to escape from via her own quest for “truth” (147). In this way, Lily diverges from that model of the angel in the house, who is featured best by Agnes Wickfield in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*. Dickens first introduces Agnes as Mr. Wickfield’s “little housekeeper” and later as “his daughter Agnes” (194). These terms define Agnes as the quintessential angel in the house, by nineteenth-century standards, who tends tirelessly and selflessly to the material and emotional needs of others. Lily deviates from this pattern, however, because she is not self-less; in other words, there is no actual absence or lack of self in Lily.

Lee observes how the paternal presence of Mr. Ramsey not only troubles Lily’s true desires to remain alone and unaffected, but even complicates Woolf’s creation of the novel: “Of all these complicated connections between the life and the fiction, perhaps the most surprising—and, it may be, the deepest—is between Virginia Woolf and Mr.

Ramsey. The comic, tyrannical, charismatic father is often described as the enemy in the novel” (474-475). Lily’s escape from Mr. Ramsey—“She got up quickly, before Mr. Ramsey turned” (147)—confirms Woolf’s refusal to compromise her art for the needs of others [namely her father’s need for “No writing, no books” for his daughter] (qtd. by Lee 475), showcasing her heroine’s choice of self over selflessness.

Unlike Lily, Mrs. Ramsey is not divided, fulfilling all her obligations as a wife and mother, never “slur[ring] over her duties” (6) or acting deficient in any consequential manner. She matches the same description of an angel which Woolf constructs. Like a true angel, Mrs. Ramsey is “intensely sympathetic... immensely charming... utterly unselfish... excelled in the arts of family life... sacrificed herself daily” (Woolf 278). Her position in the aforementioned scene with Lily composing her portrait reinforces these angelic qualities: “she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible” (17). In other words, her duty is to remain passive, calm, demure, and immobile—very much like her actual life as wife and mother. Lily, by contrast, paints actively and passionately, struggling to achieve not only a painting but to assert that courage which ebbs at moments of creation: “Such she often felt herself—struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: ‘But this is what I see; this is what I see,’ and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her” (19). Alice van Buren Kelly’s criticism offers insight into scenes such as these, which beg for resolving the general tension between “two social worlds”—that of the past and that of the present (6). Van Buren Kelly expounds on this point when she asserts: “The artist’s task is to conquer the paradox, to find the eternal in the reconciliation of the everlastingly contradictory, to

capture in words sensations that move faster than words” (21). Lily aims towards this end, while simultaneously distancing her fears and anxieties that interrupt her work: “as she began to paint... there forced themselves upon her other things, her own inadequacy, her insignificance, keeping house for her father off the Brompton Road...” (19). Herein lies part of Lily’s anxiety: she struggles to fulfill her duties as a good and attentive daughter (indicative of an angel in the house) while willfully asserting her own personal passion, her love for her art, and her desire to know both herself and others through art.

Yet what differentiates Lily from other New Women is the fact that ultimately she resolves such anxiety and does not allow it to consume her as it does other women in literature who struggle between tacit bondage and fully actualized autonomy. Instead, Lily—through art—gives birth to her new self, her new womanhood. The description of Lily’s creative process mimics the transition from conception to birth:

Then beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in her hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment’s flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child.
(19)

Interestingly, the above passage suggests a development not only of her art and her work, but also of herself as a mature human being, fully conscious of her fears, passions, capabilities, and hindrances. Like a child, though, she is initially terrified of the unknown, seeking shelter with those most familiar and comfortable.

Mrs. Ramsey provides such comfort and even a form of mothering, since Lily’s mother is absent from the story; unlike her father, Woolf does not even mention the existence of Lily’s mother. Instead, Lily develops a particular and perhaps even peculiar

bond with Mrs. Ramsey, whom she simultaneously adores and abhors for her meddling in Lily's private affairs. Of crucial significance is the moment in the first section of the novel when Lily recalls why Mrs. Ramsey had upset her due to "some highhandedness" (48). Her train of thought leads her to consider Mrs. Ramsey's words of caution—"an unmarried woman has missed the best of life" (49)—and reflect on her attraction to a woman whose lifestyle diverges so clearly from her own. As with her artwork initially, Lily also feels "childlike" in the company of Mrs. Ramsey: "she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that; and so have to meet a serious stare from eyes of unparalleled depth, and confront Mrs. Ramsey's simple certainty (and she was childlike now) that her dear Lily, her little Brisk, was a fool" (50). Yet soon we come to realize that Lily is neither child nor fool, immature nor ignorant. Rather, Woolf shows Lily's careful consideration of the outer world—via her painting of individuals and landscapes—and her thoughtfulness in questioning what those women like Mrs. Ramsey would never even think to question: their place in life, their inner world, which Woolf gives voice to earlier by considering "What is 'herself'? I mean, what is a woman?" (Woolf 280)

The following passage offers some of the salient questions Lily—and by extension Woolf—poses to herself and to the reader:

What art was there known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsey one? (51)

If unity can be found in love between Lily and Mrs. Ramsey, then we must deduce that Mrs. Ramsey is "the object" which Lily "adored"—though not in a purely sexual way.

Lily's fascination and obsession with Mrs. Ramsey points to her larger quest to identify "some common feeling [which] held the whole." Prior to this section, I have regarded "the whole" as the whole of the novel. But if "the whole" really signifies Lily's "whole" self, we must return to Irigaray's premise on essence. Irigaray argues that women have the potential for subjecthood but can never be subjects unto themselves because they are denied access to it. Diana Fuss explains:

Because only subjects have access to essence, 'woman' remains in unrealized potentiality; she never achieves 'the wholeness of her form'—or if she has a form, it is merely 'privation' (*Speculum*, 165). Woman is the ground of essence, its precondition in man, without herself having any access to it; she is the ground of subjecthood, but not herself a subject.
(71)

The inability to achieve "the wholeness of her form" would explain Lily's struggle to specifically name "some common feeling [which] held the whole." Fuss attempts to move beyond such limitations using Lacan's argument that "woman does not *possess* the phallus, she *is* the Phallus. Similarly, we can say that, in Aristotelian logic, a woman does not *have* an essence, she *is* Essence" (71). By not seeking first to possess and control the way man as subject seeks to possess and control the female as object, women gain "entry into subjecthood" through their identification as Essence with a capitalized "E" to signal their naming of themselves, not their attempt at possessing essence with a lower-case "e" that signals mere object.

Lily first attempts, and ultimately fails, to gain entry into her own subjecthood via her obsession over Mrs. Ramsey, rather than exploring or attempting to find her Essence. This obsession, she believes, will afford her access to an intimacy that would allow her to possess, rather than be possessed—a seemingly preferable power dynamic. If Mrs. Ramsey is the object noted in the earlier passage, then Lily serves as subject, one who is

capable of loving and conferring love on her possessed object. Further, since Lily is successful in cultivating her personal and professional self by engaging in the possibility of “knowing” through art in the first section of the novel, she increases her own subjectivity and thus transcends Mrs. Ramsey as a mere object (an image of the angel).

In this section, Lily further questions: “What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? ... How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were?” (51) Lily’s desire for intimacy and human connection points to a more pressing question of the novel: How can we access another if we have difficulty accessing ourselves? By extension, using Irigaray’s model, how can we identify ourselves as Essence if we have difficulty accessing the essence of ourselves? Woolf complicates this query even further when she speculates: “Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge?” (171) Perhaps, then, part of the reason Lily likes to “be alone” and likes to be “herself” is due to this knowledge of the self, of knowing who one is and why. Or, perhaps that knowledge of intimacy and of self remains elusive and fluid, much like Lily’s art, throughout the majority of the novel.

Like Woolf who does not answer such queries for us in *To the Lighthouse*, Irigaray refuses to define and prescribe “essence,” for such a move would prove too limiting and patriarchal in establishing a clearly defined system of what is essence and what is not. Rather, Irigaray attempts and encourages women to gain entry into subjecthood via their own individual essence “without actually prescribing what that essence might be, or without precluding the possibility that a subject might possess multiple essences which may even contradict or compete with one another” (Fuss 72).

Lily's indeterminacy over her self and over "some common feeling [which] held the whole" parallels the reader's struggle to truly identify and name that relationship which Lily and Mrs. Ramsey share: mother-daughter, lover-lover, friend-friend. Ultimately, Woolf encourages that "possibility" which Irigaray names as a subject possessing "multiple essences," rather than possessing that object which Lily seemingly desires in Mrs. Ramsey. Lacanian theory also supports this move towards fluidity by de-essentializing woman. Fuss explains:

On the surface, Lacan's erasure of the 'The' in 'The woman' is a calculated effort to de-essentialize woman. Eternal Woman, the myth of Woman, Transcendental Woman—all are false universals for Lacan, held in place only the dubious efforts of the 'signifier which cannot signify anything'—the definite article 'the' ('God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman,' 144). (11)

What this premise reveals is how Lily does not desire a particular object, or even subject, in Mrs. Ramsey; rather, as Fuss explains, "Desire *for* the Other often manifests itself as desire to speak as Other, from the place of the Other (some would even say, *instead of* the Other)" (12). Thus, Lily's desires actually signal an intense move to appropriate a female voice, which her own experience as a single woman cannot afford her. Lily is not a mother, nor does she have a woman in the novel to call as mother. Regardless, her voice as woman artist insists on being heard in these most intimate moments between Lily and Mrs. Ramsey; we hear this voice of the woman-artist taking herself seriously instead of the Other maternal figure perpetuating the natural essence of womanhood.

Initially, one might observe that the absence of a mother causes Lily to develop a particular affection for Mrs. Ramsey as a maternal figure. She desires to throw "her arms round Mrs. Ramsey's knees" (50) as a child would in order to read the figurative "tablets bearing sacred inscriptions" that would reveal to Lily the "secret chambers" containing

answers about life, love, and happiness (51). Yet readers would be remiss in interpreting this scene as pro-feminist with two women bonding together in mutual understanding and admiration. In fact, Janis Paul's critique of Mrs. Ramsey thwarts our respect of her character since she is undeniably an eternal angel: "adherence to social strictures stultifies her own possibilities and keeps her from a greater unity with others..." (165). Since she cannot achieve a "greater unity" with others, not even her husband, a maternal reading of Lily and Mrs. Ramsey's relationship neglects to closely analyze Mrs. Ramsey's true role in the this novel. Further, "greater unity" does not allow Lily's intense desire to form a unit—to become "one"—with this so-called mother figure.

By contrast, does such intimacy provide knowledge and also become a viable vehicle for the release of a kind of sensual desire? Lily's physical longing to connect her body with Mrs. Ramsey's, to throw "her arms round Mrs. Ramsey's knees" and thus place herself in a subservient position to Mrs. Ramsey, suggests a sexual attraction, which critic Lise Well confirms in her essay "Entering a Lesbian Field of Vision." As noted earlier, Lily seeks to broaden her vision as both artist and woman via knowledge, which she believes Mrs. Ramsey can provide willingly. Well concerns her analysis of *To the Lighthouse* with this quest for vision, ultimately deeming it a rejection of patriarchy in order to embrace a fuller actuality:

Lily Briscoe's journey in *To the Lighthouse* is above all a journey in vision; in [Marilyn] Frye's terms, it is a journey to lesbian vision. In the course of the novel, Lily comes to see clearly and fully not only Mrs. Ramsey, but everything that had once overwhelmed her about the Ramseys and their way of life [...] as she [Lily] begins to see all that has been left out of the patriarchal vision of reality, she becomes the very kind of seer Marilyn Frye defines as a lesbian: 'a seer for whom the background is eventful, dramatic, compelling... one who, by virtue of her focus, her attention, her attachment, is disloyal to phallographic reality' (171). (242)

Indeed, Frye's definition of lesbian is convincing in terms of how it positions Lily in relation to Mrs. Ramsey. Yet to determine that Lily really harbors latent homosexual desires for Mrs. Ramsey proves too convenient and simplistic. What is most useful in applying Frye's definition of Lily to lesbian is how it helps us to see Lily's ultimate rejection of patriarchy—including its most conventional institutions, marriage and motherhood—and eventual recognition and acceptance of a more complete field of vision that New Women in the early twentieth century were seeking: a field that is “eventful, dramatic, compelling” (Weil 242).

As both Weil and Frye assert, Lily's vision deviates from conventional patriarchy, as well as from traditional gender roles. In this regard, her vision matches that premise noted by Richardson and Willis, who define the New Woman based on one who “set her own agenda in developing an alternative vision of the future” (12). Indeed, Lily develops an alternative vision not only for her future but for her present, as well. Though Weil, among many other critics of *To the Lighthouse*, does not include Lily among the category of New Woman, our reading of Lily's engagement with art, vision, and ways of knowing (physically, sexually, and maternally) confirm the reader's perception of her rightful inclusion in the genre of New Women literature.

Also meriting Lily's inclusion among twentieth-century's New Women is how she, unlike any other character in the novel, arrives at truth via art. Van Buren Kelly aptly reveals what such truth entails for Lily and how Woolf imparts this truth to her readership: “Art may hold out the possibility of a different sort of unity and intimacy than that offered by the love that Mrs. Ramsey believes in—different, though no less important, no less satisfying” (97). Yet several characters in the story demonstrate their

inability to arrive at a definite truth about their own lives and their own inability to accessing self-knowledge and self-realization. Mrs. Ramsey, for instance, questions her actual achievements at the beginning of her dinner party. Set in a scene of perfect domestic bliss around the dinner table, Mrs. Ramsey ponders, “But what have I done with my life?” (82) Though she posits this question, the answer does not elude her. Rather, she eludes the answer, never taking the time to focus exclusively on her self, her needs, or her desires the same way Lily does. In fact, the narrator reveals how Mrs. Ramsey “disliked anything that reminded her that she had been seen sitting thinking” (68). She does not wish to be “seen” inert and contemplative since that activity diverges from the only role she’s ever known: an angel in the house. Further, the avoidance of thinking and exploring her own interests points to a very real fear Mrs. Ramsey has of knowing—or of getting to know—her self.

Mrs. Ramsey also fears her children growing up because then she will have to face an inevitable void in her role as a woman, that of mother: “she never wanted James to grow a day older...Nothing made up for the loss” (58). From the context of the quote, we understand that by “loss” Mrs. Ramsey is referring to the loss of her children’s youth as they eventually mature into adulthood. More crucial to our examination here is the loss of self—in fact, the very undeveloped and non-evolved self—which Mrs. Ramsey’s character demonstrates.

This absence of self also reveals itself in Mr. Ramsey who, like Lily, experiences self-doubt about his work. Unlike Lily, though, Mr. Ramsey’s struggle is more self-centered than self-developing. According to Anita Tarr in her essay “Getting to the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf and Thomas Carlyle”: “Mr. Ramsey is...one who borrows

excuses in order to justify his own inadequacies” (270). Lily and William Bankes echo such sentiments when the narrator reveals:

he [Mr. Ramsey] had not done the thing he might have done. It was a disguise; it was the refuge of a man afraid to own his own feelings, who could not say, This is what I like—this is what I am; and rather pitiable and distasteful to William Bankes and Lily Briscoe, who wondered why... so brave a man in thought should be so timid in life. (45)

Mr. Ramsey is, indeed, plagued by fears of inadequacy, specifically regarding his work. He reveals his innermost fears by measuring his accomplishments along an alphabetized scale, placing himself at “Q” and consoling himself with the argument that “Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q” (33). Not only does this moment demonstrate his egocentric behavior, but it also shows his ethnocentric mindset, describing the “whole of England” as if it were the whole world. He fears people—scholars specifically—will no longer read his books and his ideas will cease to circulate in academia; thus, he would no longer be at the center of his self-made world. However, he does not feel inadequate about his contributions to his family, despite the fact that he rarely offers them much support, compassion, or love, as evidenced by his strained relationship with his youngest son James. He consoles his work-related anxieties when he thinks, “That was a good bit of work on the whole—*his* [my italics] eight children” (69). Casting aside any doubts where his family is concerned, he relies heavily—and almost parasitically—on his wife.

This same patriarchal attitude extends itself to Charles Tansley, who Mr. Ramsey is guiding in his academic studies. Tansley represents the obstacle to women which society erects in order to keep women in the home, in the previous century’s conception of womanhood. Often pointing to women as that which makes “civilization impossible

with all their 'charm,' all their silliness" (85), Tansley causes Lily to temporarily doubt her self-worth as a woman and an artist. Ultimately, though, Lily's own sense of purpose prevails: "Women can't write, women can't paint—what did that matter coming from him? ... Why did her whole being bow, like corn under a wind, and erect itself again from this abasement only with a great and rather painful effort?" (86) Woolf's metaphor of wind as a social force altering and shaping humans signifies the primary obstacle Lily faces repeatedly in the novel. Through Tansley, Woolf—and consequently Lily—further questions whether patriarchy fully "believed" women to be incapable, or if "for some odd reason he wished it?" (197) This question returns us to Lily's initial consideration of whether "it was in her nature, or in her sex" to affirm the negative stereotype to which Tansley gives voice: women can't paint.

Nevertheless, Lily's emergence as a New Woman dispels this myth of women as purely reproductive rather than productive in their own right. She does not wish to accede to a "normal" life filled with marriage, children, and only a household to run, as Mrs. Ramsey does all so expertly. Instead, Lily dismantles the imposing and essentializing role of the angel in the house via her art. While painting, she pauses to reflect on the dead Mrs. Ramsey who still haunts her soul: "But the dead, thought Lily, encountering some obstacle in her design which made her pause and ponder..." (174). As evidenced here, even through dead human beings, social norms intrude upon her art and her work of fulfilling her vision and satisfying her self. However, rather than fulfill that destiny typical of many heroines in late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century literature, Lily does not give in to social mandates like Agnes Wickfield; she does not commit suicide like Lily Bart (albeit her "suicide" is debatable); nor does she abandon her life's

work altogether, which Woolf herself feared many women did, like Shakespeare's fictitious sister Judith. She does not become an object like Lady Brett Ashley, conveniently at the disposal of all the men around her; nor does acquiesce to be strengthened and comforted by "the angel over her right shoulder." Instead, she concludes: "one would have to say to her [Mrs. Ramsey], It has all gone against your wishes... I'm happy like this... [Lily] triumphed over Mrs. Ramsey who would never know... how she [Lily] stood here painting, had never married, not even William Bankes" (175).

In Lily, we begin to see what Tarr refers to as that "female genius"—a genius which, like the lighthouse, "now carries a light across the dark room of our lives" (271), obscuring the limitations of the past in order to illuminate—as a lighthouse would—a more promising future for women and their work of choice. She satisfies Woolf's direction both to "kill the angel in the house" and "to discuss the ends and the aims for which we are fighting, for which we are doing battle with these formidable obstacles" (282). Clearly, Lily aims not only for the lighthouse beyond, but also the lighthouse within, seeking enlightenment of the self via her art, attaining an Essence, a personal identity, which transcends beyond mere subject/object limitations.

We thus return to Woolf's initial inquiry: "What is 'herself'? [...] what is a woman?" Simply, Lily is "herself" and "woman," and "herself" and "woman" are Lily. Fuss cautions against further defining of such terms, even from the onset of her scholarship: "Real essence is itself a nominal essence—that is, a linguistic kind, a product of naming. And nominal essence is still an essence, suggesting that despite the circulation of different kinds of essences, they still all share a common classification *as*

essence” (5). As previously demonstrated, Fuss uses Irigaray to silence those invocations of the Other to “define the essence of ‘woman’” and listen, instead, to that “common thread,” that female voice which Lily fully commands and authorizes. Irigaray puts forth the above questions as challenges: “‘I’ am not ‘I,’ I am not, I am not one. As for woman, try and find out...” (qtd. by Fuss 72). Along with Lily, we as careful readers ultimately surrender to that pleasure of finding out “What is ‘herself’? [...] what is a woman?” with each new journey *To the Lighthouse* and to the self.

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Biography

Name: Kristina Ruthann Fennelly

Date of Birth: April 19, 1980

Place of Birth: Hackensack, New Jersey

Parents: Kevin & Dale-Karen Fennelly

Institutions Attended:

- Hackensack High School, 1994-1998
Graduated 4th in a class of 360
- Skidmore College, 1998-2002
Graduated summa cum laude and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with Honors
- Lehigh University, 2002-2004
Graduated with a Master of Arts degree in English

Teaching Experience:

- Substitute teacher at Hackensack High School, 2002-2003
- Teaching Fellow at Lehigh University, 2002-2004
- Teaching Assistant, Center for Talented Youth, Johns Hopkins University, 2001-2003

Honors:

- Member of the National Honor Society, Spanish Honor Society, and French Honor Society
- Member of the Phi Beta Kappa society; inducted in May, 2002
- Received Departmental Honors for senior thesis on the fallen woman in nineteenth-century British and American literature
- Received the Sally Chapman writing award from Skidmore's English Department
- Received the E. Beverly Field Women's Studies Award from Skidmore's Women's Studies Department
- Received award for senior thesis from Skidmore's Periclean Honors Society

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