

# Woolf Writes Relationships:

Offering a Woman's Perspective

on Relationships in Literature

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December 8, 2005

Core 152: The Challenge of Modernity

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Position Paper #3

At the time Virginia Woolf wrote, her work painted women in a new light. She offered insight into the female mind and was able to more accurately depict feminine motivations. Her work develops the relationships between men and women and women and women from the female perspective. Woolf emphasizes the difficulty of understanding the opposite sex in particular, and the subsequent negative impact on relationships between the genders, while at the same time offering a new look at the relationships among women. While male-female relationships are difficult to understand, female-female relationships carry a weight influenced by their needs of each other.

Lily Briscoe's interactions with Charles Tansley in the dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse* develop the idea of this lack of understanding in the relationships of men and women. Lily struggles against Charles at the dinner, provoking him by insincerely asking him to take her to the lighthouse. She is a strong character who, despite knowing how to play the traditional role of the woman, uses this knowledge to pervert her role in such a manner as to irritate Tansley. Meanwhile, Tansley underestimates women, believing them to be less capable. He previously told Lily that "women can't paint, women can't write,"<sup>1</sup> but despite this, he fears being made a fool of by a woman and tries to preserve his social power.

The scene is especially telling, though, as Lily puts Tansley on the spot and purposely makes him socially uncomfortable for a significant lapse of time before finally playing nice at the silent appeal of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily does not comprehend Tansley's chauvinistic attitude and pokes fun of it by provoking him to an absurd and irrational response. He, meanwhile, cannot see past the fact that Lily is a woman and accordingly acts rather defensively.

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1927, 75.

Ultimately, Lily's reflection on the situation shows their inability to see eye to eye. "She would never know him. He would never know her. Human relations were all like that, she thought, and the worst...were between men and women."<sup>2</sup> This is not a romantic relationship; in fact, it is not even a friendly relationship. Lily and Tansley are simply acquaintances with mutual friends. Still, their gender differences stand in the way of developing an understanding of one another. While Lily does resolve the conflict between them, she does so out of duty to Mrs. Ramsay, rather than respect for Mr. Tansley. Thus the quality of their relationship is negatively impacted.

The impact of gender on relationships effects not just the interactions of acquaintances; the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay also suffers from difficulty in developing awareness between the sexes. The marriage of the Ramsay's is intricate and dynamic; at one moment he is more powerful, the next she is. One scene the Ramsay's express marital discontent, and the next they return to connubial devotion.

The social power struggle in the Ramsay's relationship is evident in how each views Mrs. Ramsay's role. She reflects that "people said he depended on her, when they must know that of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible."<sup>3</sup> At the expense of discrediting her social importance, Mrs. Ramsay elevates her husband's status; she perceives him to be more important than she in his contribution to society, trivializing her work keeping the family's social life in order.

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<sup>2</sup> Woolf, 139.

<sup>3</sup> Woolf, 62.

Though irritable at times such as when Mrs. Ramsay initially suggested going to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay does truly care for his wife and children. At one point, though, he catches sight of Mrs. Ramsay knitting and is overcome by her inaccessibility.

It saddened him, and her remoteness pained him, and he felt, as he passed, that he could not protect her, and, when he reached the hedge, he was sad. He could do nothing to help her. He must stand by and watch her. Indeed, the infernal truth was, he made things worse for her.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Ramsay wants to be able to protect her, but feels unable to do so. Her strength is such a regard is truly incredible; Mrs. Ramsay's relations with men were such that "she had the whole of the other sex under her protection."<sup>5</sup> How can Mr. Ramsay protect his wife when she is so strong that not only does she not need protecting, but is, in fact, protecting all other men?

Thus Mrs. Ramsay sees herself as inferior to her husband, unequal even to the task of tying his shoes.<sup>6</sup> She believes that his greatness is abundant and her role is subordinate. Mr. Ramsay, meanwhile, does not seem to disagree that her role is subordinate; however he also dolefully recognizes her incredible power. This comes at the expense of Mrs. Ramsay's total dependence on him. Instead she is able to socially care for herself and others. The fact that she does not recognize this, however, feeds the typical mindset that the woman is weaker than the man.

As Woolf shines new insight on relationships between men and women, she also offers what at the time was a new view on the relationships between women. A prominent example of this is the connection between Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay.

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<sup>4</sup> Woolf, 98.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Woolf, 51.

The two women are of different generations and seem to be of completely different mindsets. Mrs. Ramsay is the older of the two. A mother of eight, she is extremely devoted to her children and her husband, as discussed previously. She is traditional in her views of the woman's role; not only does Mrs. Ramsay feel she is unequal to her husband as she ought to be, but she also encourages the development of a similar marital relationship between Minta and Paul and Lily and William Bankes. Mrs. Ramsay would

insist that she [Lily] must, Minta must, they all must marry, since in the whole world whatever laurels might be tossed to her...or triumphs won by her (probably Mrs. Ramsay had had her share of those), and here she saddened, darkened, and came back to her chair, there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman (she lightly took her [Lily's] hand for a moment), an unmarried woman has missed the best of life.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond her views of marriage, the traditional role is continually upheld by Mrs. Ramsay who is a genius of social architect. In the dinner scene, for example, she encourages Lily to maintain her role as a woman and socially aid Charles Tansley. The maintenance of social order is supremely important to Mrs. Ramsay, and this is done by the maintenance of the woman's traditional role.

Lily, on the other hand, is younger and content to not play the role dictated to her by society. Despite Mrs. Ramsay's endeavors and beliefs about the importance of a woman marrying and playing the traditional role, Lily rejects this. She is fully capable of fulfilling the traditional role prescribed for her, but does not. She doesn't marry William Bankes; instead Lily pursues a life of individuality devoted to painting. Similarly,

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<sup>7</sup> Woolf, 77.

there is a code of behaviour, she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behooves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite...as indeed it is their duty to help, she reflected, in her old maidenly fairness, to help us [women] suppose the Tube were to burst into flames.<sup>8</sup>

At the dinner, however, Lily disregards this code for a short time to torment Mr. Tansley. She clearly knows that she ought not behave in such a manner, and yet still does so, shirking the traditional role of the woman in doing so.

Despite these differences between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, they maintain a rather unique relationship. Mrs. Ramsay looks at Lily affectionately; she wants the best for the young girl's life. Her reason for suggesting marriage to Mr. Bankes is because Mrs. Ramsay honestly believes that to be best for Lily and she wants her to have the best possible life. Lily, meanwhile, looks rather affectionately on Mrs. Ramsay as well, "thinking that she was unquestioningly the loveliest of people...; the best perhaps; but also, different too from the perfect shape which one saw there."<sup>9</sup>

The difference of male-female and female-female relationships Woolf carefully delineates through the thoughts of Lily. "[N]o woman could worship another woman the way that he worshipped," Lily thinks of the way Bankes feels about Mrs. Ramsay. The significance of this is evident. Despite the apparent differences between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, their relationship is based on something more profound and not romantic in nature; the women seek an acceptance and companionship in each other. Unlike their

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<sup>8</sup> Woolf, 137.

<sup>9</sup> Woolf, 76.

relationships with men which are dictated by social codes and structures, the relationship of the women is based upon their need for mutual support.

Carolyn Heilbrun relates this depiction of female relationships to Woolf's own life, stating,

Virginia Woolf found a nurturing man to live with, and she found women to love her. She needed to be loved, and she knew it. Most of us women, I think transform our need to be loved into a need to love, expecting, therefore, of men and of children, more than they, caught in their own lives, can give us.<sup>10</sup>

This translates to much of Woolf's work and, in doing so Heilbrun claims, it offers women a new destiny aside from the traditional "marriage plot." Woolf gives women the dimension to allow them to seek out friendship and support; this is, ultimately, liberating.

Thus Woolf's vantage point as a female writer offers her work a perspective on the relationships of man and woman and woman and woman that previously had not been present in literature. Woolf illustrates the difficulty in developing an understanding in relationships between genders, while on the other hand showing the ability of relationships between women as able to overcome these differences to offer the women an important support they are unable to obtain from other relationships. Woolf's own experience certainly relates to this; her writing brings women literary relationships which have previously been dominated by the male perspective.

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<sup>10</sup> Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Writing a Woman's Life*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1988, 120-121.