

English Literature II, Fall 2001
Essay #3, due November 20, on:
Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

Lily Briscoe's Life: A Dedication to Mrs.

Ramsay?

Introduction

A lot of essays on Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* have already dealt with the relationship between Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay. These two characters generally control the novel's action. But what is it that makes this human relation so special, so remarkable?

This essay is in particular concerned with Lily's point of view. She achieves Mrs. Ramsay's - at least mental - presence even after her death. And Lily closely connects the result and success of her painting to her understanding of Mrs. Ramsay's character and mind. The admiration Lily feels for her is clearly revealed by her thoughts, her considerations and her memory. Is her life thus dedicated to Mrs. Ramsay? Does she try to live on Mrs. Ramsay's life or at least to copy her way of life? These questions are to be answered by the following considerations, focusing on Lily's painting.

Lily's Art: The Visual Connection to Mrs. Ramsay

"In To The Lighthouse Virginia Woolf maintains a consistent and clear analogy between the human problem of truly knowing and experiencing another person and the aesthetic problem of creating a unified work of art, in other words, between human relations and aesthetic relations," (Matro 212) Thomas G. Matro states at the very beginning of his essay on Woolf's novel. This

statement refers to Lily's painting and the problems she has with finishing it in a satisfying way. Much more important in this context is that the painting mainly stands for the status of human relations in the novel. Frequently it is a question of connecting "*the masses on the right and the left*" (Matro 214), i.e. there is a juxtaposition of two objects on her canvas that are, as human beings, a visual and mental unity in Lily's mind. Her conscience therefore always searches for a solution, for a way to express and much more to achieve this unity in her painting:

"It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken." (Woolf 53)

She obviously hesitates and even doubts in her own perception. The "unity of the whole" is also the unity of herself and the understanding of her environment. Lily's tries to get familiar with the persons around her, especially Mrs. Ramsay. At the end of the first day described by Woolf, however, she has not reached her aim yet. Matro says, "*By the end of part 1, she has not completed the painting nor does she feel she knows Mrs. Ramsay*" (212). He draws a parallel between art and human relations, which becomes more complex towards the end of the novel. The death of Mrs. Ramsay in section 2 makes it more difficult, almost impossible for Lily to achieve the mental unity with and the knowledge of Mrs. Ramsay. Nevertheless, the solution of her problem again is found in her art. It seems like she tries to go back in time by starting the same painting again after the ten-year interval, depicted in "Time Passes". Lily tries to reproduce Mrs. Ramsay in her mind and hopes for a vision - that should include Mrs. Ramsay as inspiration for her painting: "*With the brush slightly trembling in her fingers she looked at the hedge, the step, the wall. It was all Mrs. Ramsay's doing. She was dead. [...] She was dead. The step where she used to sit was empty. She was dead*" (Woolf 149/150). By repeating that "she was dead" several times Lily wants to convince herself that Mrs. Ramsay is not present any longer. But in

her mind she obviously is, and that is what confuses Lily. So she really struggles - she struggles with life, with her memory, with her art. "*What is the meaning of life?*" (Woolf 161) Lily wonders and doubts that she would ever find an answer that also provides a solution for her permanent thoughts about Mrs. Ramsay. "*The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come,*" (Woolf 161) she even fears that her art would also suffer from these thoughts that always control her conscience.

It is thus absolutely obvious that the memory of Mrs. Ramsay controls Lily's mind, Lily's thoughts and even her emotions - at the same time that means that this memory also has taken control over Lily's life and her art. Every brush on her canvas is connected to the past and to a particular memory of Mrs. Ramsay. "*And as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past there,*" (Woolf 172) this connection is depicted in *To the Lighthouse* and continues later, "*She went on tunnelling her way into her picture, into the past*" (173). And it even goes so far that Lily feels observed by Mrs. Ramsay, what, however, inspires her artificial conscience. Mrs. Ramsay's 'presence', the visions, the memory of her turn out to be stimulating for Lily. It is obviously easier for her to continue and, much more important, to progress her painting. Woolf describes this incidence as follows: "*And Lily, painting steadily, felt as if a door had opened, and one went in and stood gazing silently about in a high cathedral-like place, very dark, very solemn*" (171). But as Lily not achieves permanence in her mind - neither a permanence of Mrs. Ramsay's presence nor her absence - she is furthermore confused and has her doubts about her painting. To reach this permanence Lily is steadily concerned with thinking about Mrs. Ramsay, still trying to understand her character. This leads to Lily's strong wish of having a vision of Mrs. Ramsay that finally maybe reveals the 'secrets' about her. Furthermore, this vision, she believes, would allow her to remove all her doubts and thus to finish her painting. "*Lily grows doubtful about this notion when she thinks that even her painting can be considered vulnerable [...]*" (Matro 219) Matro analyses in his essay and refers with this statement also to her character. As

long as Lily cannot achieve her vision, she lives in despair not understanding Mrs. Ramsay's nor her own life. But as Lily finally really has her vision, "*interruptions make it difficult to hold*" (Matro 219) and Lily slightly and slowly recognizes that she has connected her mental conscience too much to Mrs. Ramsay. So Matro interprets Lily's realization as follows and already includes the immediate necessary steps Lily takes:

"But since she has to admit that neither the painting nor her feeling will endure even if the vision is captured, she moves, albeit through several reversals, toward a reluctant acknowledgement that the importance of the painting, of her effort, is not what it captures but what it attempts" (219).

Lily achieves satisfaction and in a way unity with herself. That immediately leads to that she is able to finish her painting, even though her vision had another effect than she originally had assumed and wished. Mrs. Ramsay in the end of the novel is not present any longer - or at least Lily is not aware about it. How free and relieved she feels then is clearly shown by the last lines of *To the Lighthouse*:

"She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (209).

Conclusion

Lily feels free, feels relieved in the end. The memories of Mrs. Ramsay do not interfere with her art any longer. She has finished her painting; she is satisfied - even though her 'happy end' was constructed different from what she originally had imagined. But what about Mrs. Ramsay's part in Lily's development? Was she only a barrier on Lily's way to finish her painting and achieve happiness? Or did she have a significant influence in Lily's success?

As the preceding section showed, Lily closely connected her art and her life to Mrs. Ramsay. Lily admires her and how she coped with her life. She is a kind of model for Lily's life and so she wants to transfer Mrs. Ramsay's experience, loveliness, and justice to her own character. She tries to adapt mentally to Mrs. Ramsay's lifestyle. But her intention slightly becomes too strong so that Lily somehow gets obsessed of these thoughts. And exactly this obsession is the barrier on her way to finish her painting and become happy. The redefinition of her intentions - *"that she has relinquished both the 'unity of the whole' she had sought for the painting and the 'oneness' she had wanted with Mrs. Ramsay"* (Matro 222) - finally relieves her consciousness, because she somehow finally achieves this "oneness" with Mrs. Ramsay. To modify her expectations - *"that the importance of the painting, of her effort, is not what it captures but what it attempts"* - brings her closer to the character of Mrs. Ramsay than ever before. It was always unity Mrs. Ramsay wanted to achieve within her family, and now Lily tries to achieve this unity on her canvas and so for herself. The attempt, the wish for unity is more important than its result. This 'modesty' shows Lily's final understanding of Mrs. Ramsay. And the final stroke on her canvas so becomes an unaware dedication to Mrs. Ramsay, thanking her for having been Lily a mentor for life.

Works Cited

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