

Otterbein University

Digital Commons @ Otterbein

English Faculty Scholarship

English

1991

'There she sat': The Power of the Feminist Imagination in To the Lighthouse

Beth R. Daugherty

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/eng_fac



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Daugherty, Beth R., "'There she sat': The Power of the Feminist Imagination in To the Lighthouse" (1991). *English Faculty Scholarship*. 1.

https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/eng_fac/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ Otterbein. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Otterbein. For more information, please contact digitalcommons07@otterbein.edu.

“There she sat”: The Power of the Feminist Imagination in 3 *To the Lighthouse*

BETH RIGEL DAUGHERTY

Near the end of *To the Lighthouse*, a moving moment occurs. In the emotional climax of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay, dead for ten years, reappears: “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” (300). Virginia Woolf does not argue, justify, or explain; Mrs. Ramsay is simply *there*, resurrected.¹ Even on subsequent readings, this moment resonates with extraordinary power, a power that Woolf’s “moments of being” or the novel’s autobiographical basis cannot fully account for.² In that powerful moment, Woolf fuses her personal, feminist, and artistic aims to restore her mother, a woman destroyed by the patriarchal myths of Mary and Eve, to her own identity and thus transforms a woman who worked to perpetuate the patriarchal society into the personal, feminist, and artistic heritage she herself needs. For mother, daughter, and reader, it is an audacious moment of liberation.³

Left motherless at 13 and with a mother rarely *there* even before that (“Sketch” 83), Woolf mothers herself in *To the Lighthouse*, creating a mother who, as Bell Gale Chevigny explains, can only sanction the daughter’s autonomy after being freed from the patriarchy by the daughter (95–96). Woolf empowers her mother, herself, her characters, and ultimately us; Woolf’s feminist power removes the patriarchal myths strangling Mrs. Ramsay so that *there*, emanating from the page, is the power of a woman *as she is*.

When Virginia Woolf spoke about professions for women to the

London/National Society for Women's Service on January 21, 1931, she claimed to have killed the Angel in the House early in her career as a book reviewer: "If I had not killed her, she would have killed me—as a writer." The Angel, a phantom more difficult to kill than any reality, holds women back, even when outward barriers have disappeared, because it is an internalized, insidious voice, seductively crooning, "whatever you say let it be pleasing to men" ("Speech" xxxi; "Professions" 288). Many have noted the similarity between Mrs. Ramsay and the Angel as described by Woolf:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. . . . She sacrificed herself daily . . . she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others . . . she was pure . . . [Such women] must charm . . . must conciliate . . . must—to put it bluntly—tell lies if they are to succeed. ("Professions" 285–86)

When she writes in "A Sketch of the Past" that her mother's presence obsessed her and that she heard her mother's voice almost daily until she was 45, the year she completed *To the Lighthouse* (80), she reveals the Angel's identity: the internalized phantom she had to kill spoke with her mother's voice, and Woolf struggled with that haunting legacy long past those early review days.

But how could a woman who believed "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (*Room* 79) kill someone so clearly identified with her mother? On the other hand, how could she think back through a mother who celebrated patriarchal values?⁴ She needed to kill the Angel and she needed a female tradition to nurture her work, but her female tradition *was* the Angel! Woolf finally solves this dilemma in *To the Lighthouse* by separating the Angel role from the woman herself.⁵ She exposes the mythic origins of the pressures on the mother to play the Angel role, reveals the daughter's struggle to resist those pressures, and accepts and understands the mother, thus freeing her from those pressures. By rescuing the mother's *self*, Woolf kills the Angel in the House and liberates herself; after finishing the novel, Woolf writes, "I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her" ("Sketch" 81).

Mrs. Ramsay works hard to be the Angel in the House, "the woman that men wished women to be" ("Speech" xxix–xxx). She wholeheartedly supports patriarchal values, enjoining all to marry and to have children (93), believing wives should subject themselves to their husbands' labors (20), and trusting in the "admirable fabric of the

masculine intelligence" to uphold the world (159). She smoothes things over, hiding both small unpleasantries and more painful realities from her husband (62, 104). Although she feels "impeded in her proper function by these lies, these exaggerations" (63), and although Mr. Ramsay criticizes her for exaggerating, her proper function is to lie: Mr. Ramsay demands reassurance from her, not truth. The patriarchal code of behavior compels Mrs. Ramsay to be nice, to enlarge Mr. Ramsay's ego (137-39; see also *Room* 35).

When the younger children go to bed, Mrs. Ramsay can "be herself, by herself" (95) for awhile. Her need for solitude and silence is not surprising since she constantly gives herself to others: to the children (lessening strife, reading to James, calming Cam's fears, being a sponge for the emotions of all eight of them [51]); to her husband (giving him sympathy and comfort, joining him for a walk when she would rather continue to sit [100], taking his rebukes in silence [51]); to her guests (taking Charles Tansley to town, persuading Mr. Bankes to stay for dinner, taking full responsibility for "the effort of merging and flowing and creating" [126] at dinner); or to the patients she visits. She sacrifices herself so thoroughly that after building up Mr. Ramsay, she thinks, "there was scarcely a shell of herself left her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent" (60). When she can sit by herself, she shrinks to what she calls her self, "a wedge-shaped core of darkness" (95), but this sense of self merges into a more impersonal being (95-96), she has little time for such sitting, and it bothers her when Mr. Ramsay sees her do so: "Had she known that he was looking at her, she thought, she would not have let herself sit there, thinking" (104). Her powerful, public personality, then, is the Angel's, and it can operate only when she is doing the patriarchy's work; her real self exists in spare moments, does not function in any public way, and has little space in which to grow.

The Angel role demands self-sacrifice, and Mrs. Ramsay complies. In exchange, she is revered. She explains that she has "the whole of the other sex under her protection" because of "an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to feel or to find agreeable, something trustful, childlike, reverential" (13). No one can read "The Window" and "fail to feel" the aura of reverence around Mrs. Ramsay. Charles Tansley realizes she, at 50, is the "most beautiful person he had ever seen" and is proud to be allowed to carry her bag (25); a poet inscribes a book to her, calling her Helen (43); and Mr. Bankes, responding to her voice on the telephone, says to her, "Nature has but little clay . . . like that of which she moulded you" (46-47). Mr. Ramsay comes to her

as though he were a supplicant approaching a goddess, asking for rejuvenation, restoration, and life (58–60). One associates the word “homage” with her (167), and Mr. Bankes, gazing with adoration at her reading to her son (73–76), sees “Mother and child . . . objects of universal veneration” (81). With these lines, Woolf indicates the mythic origins of the Angel in the House role: the Virgin Mary.⁶ The Angel in the House and the story of the Virgin grow out of the same equation: reverence paid for with the self’s denial. Mrs. Ramsay’s extreme self-surrender, for example, not her self, earns her the patriarchy’s reverence (224–25). As Marina Warner notes, the worship of Mary presupposes a denial of what women actually are. For example, Mary’s identity as Christ’s mother depends upon a denial of human sexuality. Warner writes:

every facet of the Virgin [has] been systematically developed to diminish, not increase, her likeness to the female condition. Her freedom from sex, painful delivery, age, death, and all sin exalt[s] her *ipso facto* above ordinary women and show[s] them up as inferior. (153)⁷

The Mary myth thus suggests that to be revered, women must be nonfemale, nonhuman.

Why would any woman want to play this role? Several debilitating side effects exist, as Woolf shows. Mrs. Ramsay suffers from fatigue and depression (“But what have I done with my life?” [125]), drives others to make the same choices she has, suggesting how strongly she needs validation (92–93), and reveals resentment in a power play with her husband at the end of “The Window” (185–86). Woolf connects the role and these feelings, but because reverence conceals the damaging payments, Mrs. Ramsay never does. Which is exactly why the patriarchy reveres women.

Woolf shows, however, that the lure of reverence as compensation does not alone compel a woman to play the Angel; the Eve myth urges that role upon her as well. As Mr. Bankes freezes his secular Madonna in his adoring gaze, Mrs. Ramsay reads her son “The Fisherman and His Wife” (61, 66, 85–87, 89, 93–94), a variation of the Adam and Eve story.⁸ This punishment-oriented fairy tale subconsciously affects Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts about herself, causing her to work even harder to be the Angel.

In the Grimm Brothers’ tale, a poor man catches a flounder who is actually an enchanted prince. When the flounder asks to be freed, the fisherman, startled by a fish who can talk, lets him go. His wife, Ilsabil, later tells him he should have wished for something and suggests a

better cottage. At her insistence, he returns to the ocean and calls for the flounder, telling the magic fish of Ilsabil's wish. The flounder grants the request, but Ilsabil keeps sending her husband back with further demands—after she gets the cottage, Ilsabil wants to be king, then emperor, then pope. The flounder continues to give her what she asks, though the sea gets uglier and wilder at every request, until she asks to control the rising of the sun and the moon and to “‘be like unto God.’”⁹ At this request, the flounder's wrath knows no bounds, Nature itself rages, and Ilsabil and her husband are thrown back into their original hovel. The tale thus implies that a woman who desires, or worse, *attains* power is unnatural and must be punished. The tale also justifies society's control of women, since it portrays women's desire for power as insatiable.

Words from the tale occasionally pop into Mrs. Ramsay's consciousness, as they occasionally pop into the novel. As she unwittingly puts it, “the story of the Fisherman and his Wife was like the bass gently accompanying a tune, which now and then ran up unexpectedly into the melody” (87). Its subtle but devastating message makes her question her motives, attitudes, and behavior. For example, Woolf places the first reference to the tale's title just after Mrs. Ramsay has reassured her husband that he has not failed and has allowed herself to feel “the rapture of successful creation” (61). Her increased awareness of what she is reading parallels the moment when her fatigue becomes tinged with

some faintly disagreeable sensation with another origin. Not that *as she read aloud the story of the Fisherman's Wife*, she knew precisely where it came from; nor did she let herself put into words her dissatisfaction when she realised, *at the turn of the page* when she stopped and heard dully, ominously, a wave fall, how it came from this: she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband (61; my emphasis)

Mrs. Ramsay may be unconscious of the connection between the tale's message and her inability to enjoy her achievement, but the reader sees it. The tale's punishment of a power-hungry woman transforms her “successful creation” into a fear of feeling, or even *appearing*, finer than her husband, “for then people said he depended on her” (62). The tale reminds her to put things “right”: “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” (62). Ironically, her fear of appearing superior to her husband is groundless; the men in the novel

certainly assume his contribution is more important than hers, and in fact, think she hinders Mr. Ramsay's career.

Woolf emphasizes the tale's power to damage a woman's esteem when she again juxtaposes Mrs. Ramsay's self-doubt with its title. Mrs. Ramsay cannot even allow herself to feel satisfied about playing the Angel role so well: "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?" (65; Woolf's ellipses). What should she do about this desire for satisfaction, this power-seeking? Why, "she had better devote her mind to the story of the Fisherman and his Wife" (66)! Thus, Woolf subtly suggests both a busy mother's admonition to herself and an internal censor—concentrate on the task at hand and devote oneself more thoroughly to the tale's message about power.

Woolf shows how that message permeates society when Mrs. Ramsay tries to play a different role at the dinner table that evening. Her friends and family treat her just the way the flounder ultimately treats Ilsabil, and for the same reasons, but they react much more quickly. Mrs. Ramsay would like to work outside the home and clean up the English dairy system. She knows the problem exists and feels strongly about it: "Milk delivered at your door in London positively brown with dirt. It should be made illegal" (89). She presents her facts and is ready to prove her assertions. What happens when she thus suggests entering the "male" world of facts, charges, and reform, being something other than the Angel in the House? She is mocked:

her children laughed; her husband laughed; she was laughed at, fire encircled, and forced to veil her crest, dismount her batteries, and only retaliate by displaying the raillery and ridicule of the table to Mr. Bankes as an example of what one suffered if one attacked the prejudices of the British Public. (155–56)

She has attacked a British prejudice, all right, but not the one about milk. Mrs. Ramsay's ability to manage people would make her a skillful administrator, but because her society considers such a role unnatural for a woman, it makes her warmth, eloquence, and research look ludicrous. She faces a flood of laughter, a storm of mockery.

The idea that a woman's desire for knowledge and power is unnatural and should be punished originates in the Adam and Eve story. This myth transforms death's victims into death's cause¹⁰ and makes Eve responsible for death's appearance in paradise. Eve's "sin"—wanting knowledge, sight, and power the equal of God's (in Milton's version, Eve sins against the "natural" order of things by

desiring equality with Adam)—justifies God's punishment of her. God curses woman's generative power: the pain of childbirth becomes the price a woman pays to enjoy her sexuality; paternity and domination become synonymous as wife and children become possessions; and woman desires both the pain and the domination, becoming the archetypal masochist (Gen. 3.16). God curses Adam, too, but the curse has nothing to do with Adam's sexuality or his relationship with Eve. Whereas Eve loses the power to define herself, Adam retains the power to name, and in fact, names Eve. The story embodies what it describes—it defines Eve (and thus all women) at the same time it justifies man's "right" to define her. A tidy rationale for men's treatment of women, the story presents as truth both the definition of woman as secondary, sinful, and inferior and the right of man to define her that way.

Woolf carefully chooses passages from the tale—the Adam-like husband's noninvolvement (though he follows his wife's lead), the Eve-like wife's desire for power, the God-like flounder's anger, and the husband's paying for his wife's "sin"—to make its ties to the Genesis story and its hostility toward women clear. She also shows this hostile "bass" running up "unexpectedly" into the novel's "melody" of reverence for the Angel by scattering men's contemptuous comments about women throughout the novel.¹¹ The Eve myth just "naturally" shapes their opinions of women. For example, Charles Tansley transforms Mrs. Ramsay into Eve the temptress when he imagines saying to his friends, "Of course Ramsay had dished himself by marrying a beautiful woman and having eight children" (136). The novel's litany of disparagement demonstrates the male assumption of the right to define women:

The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women's minds enraged him. . . . Women can't paint, women can't write. . . . She had no control over her emotions, Andrew thought. Women hadn't. . . . They never got anything worth having from one year's end to another. They did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat. Women made civilisation impossible, with all their "charm," all their silliness. . . . Women can't write, women can't paint. . . . The women bored one so. . . . can't paint, can't write. . . . can't paint, can't write. . . . He thought, women are always like that; the vagueness of their minds is hopeless. . . . They could not keep anything clearly fixed in their minds. (50, 75, 117, 129, 130, 136, 137, 237, 238, 249)

Woolf uses "The Fisherman and His Wife" and its echoes of the Eve myth to show that patriarchal contempt for women exists on the

mythical, social, and personal levels within society. Mrs. Ramsay unconsciously internalizes, her society reinforces, and the men repeat the tale's message: women's claim to knowledge and power must be denied; they are too inferior to gain it, but if they *do*, they will misuse it.

Woolf also uses the tale to show *why* the Angel role attracts Mrs. Ramsay so. The two mythical messages feed off each other—trying to avoid being like Eve (unnatural, sinful, perverse), trying to avoid men's contempt, drives women into Mary's arms and the attempt to gain men's reverence. Such reverence then conceals its underlying contempt and its cost, the sacrifice of self. Indeed, the patriarchy gains women's "collaboration" by using reverence to keep the relationship between the two myths hidden: Mrs. Ramsay feels the pressure to play the Angel in the House as inherent and her drive to sacrifice self as natural.¹² She cannot possibly see how she participates in her own destruction, because the myths preventing such insight, forming the inward barriers Woolf mentions in "Professions for Women" (288), are so firmly entrenched and intertwined.

Though the Mary myth may seem prettier, its melody more easily heard, and the reverence a nice benefit, its cost is the same as the Eve myth—death. After all, Mrs. Ramsay is killed by her role: "Giving, giving, giving, she had died" (223). As Woolf points out in her "Professions for Women" speech, the Angel has "more blood on her hands than all the murderers who have ever been hanged" ("Speech" xxxii).

Ultimately, then, the bass and the melody play the same dirge: woman as she *is*, is not acceptable and must be controlled, through contempt and/or reverence. Woolf reveals the mythic pressures on Mrs. Ramsay, exposes the double bind surrounding and within her, and shows why she does not see the trap. What Mrs. Ramsay cannot do for herself, then, Lily (and Woolf) do for her. But the painter and the writer free neither the mother nor their own imaginations without a struggle. They must fight against their own reliance on patriarchal definitions, must strive to accept death, pain, and loss as part of reality, and finally, must go beyond being merely critics of patriarchal culture to become feminist seers. When they have gone through this process,¹³ they can re-create the mother, imagine her as she might have been outside the double bind: they seek the woman that emerges "before habits [have] spun themselves across the surface" (285).

Woolf portrays Lily Briscoe as a critic of the patriarchal society from the beginning. Lily does not accept patriarchal definitions and myths as given, handed down by God, always and already present, but

views them as constructs, reflections of desire, useful fictions. For example, Lily questions the "code of behaviour" that exchanges female protection for male assertion because it prevents men and women from really knowing each other (137–39). Mr. Bankes is shocked when she neglects "the significance of mother and son" (262) in her painting of Mrs. Ramsay and James, but Lily does not see Mrs. Ramsay as just a role model. Instead, she asks, "How did she differ? What was the spirit in her, the essential thing . . . ?" (76). Whereas the society labels and controls under the auspices of protection and reverence, Lily questions because she wants to see. Lily also refuses to let the rationale behind patriarchal myths inform her art. She does not define art as the subduing of reality into a system she can then name truth. She *wrestles* with reality, knowing she will never control it:

For what could be more formidable than that space? Here she was again, she thought, stepping back to look at it, drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people into the presence of this formidable ancient enemy of hers—this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her, emerged stark at the back of appearances and commanded her attention. . . . It was an exacting form of intercourse anyhow. Other worshipful objects were content with worship; men, women, God, all let one kneel prostrate; but this form, were it only the shape of a white lamp-shade looming on a wicker table, roused one to perpetual combat, challenged one to a fight in which one was bound to be worsted. (236)

Lily confronts rather than masters, opens herself up to reality rather than controls it, and wants to communicate reality's complexity rather than simplify it; she does not want her art to give things "a wholeness not theirs in life" (286). For Lily, the great revelation, the one that would *explain* the meaning of life (and Mrs. Ramsay), "had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark . . ." (240). Woolf repeatedly reminds us that Lily's vision differs from that of her society.

She is aware, for example, of her society's mythical structures. Lily cannot, even self-consciously, imitate Mrs. Ramsay's self-sacrificing behavior, which had seemed so "natural" to the older woman (224–25). But Lily also recognizes the hold those mythical structures still have on her: she understands it is not natural to "lose" herself as Mrs. Ramsay did, but she also wonders about her adequacy as a woman (224–26). Woolf shows how even Lily, who struggles against patriarchal structures, can easily fall into the habit of expressing either contempt or

reverence for a woman. When Lily thinks about a marriage Mrs. Ramsay arranged, a marriage that did not turn out well, she becomes childishly mocking, triumphant:

Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone, she thought. We can override her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. . . . And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes. (260)

Her contempt quickly disappears, however, when she recalls how compelling Mrs. Ramsay's marriage "mania" had been in life (261). Then remembering how Mr. Bankes looked at Mrs. Ramsay, Lily sees an "astonishingly beautiful" woman (264). But she soon rejects reverence, too, because beauty freezes life into one mold (264). Finally understanding that neither a dusty, out-of-date matchmaker she can rebel against nor a lifeless icon have much to do with the woman she wants to paint, she attempts to do more than criticize her society's codes. Wanting to actually see from a position outside those codes and myths, she rejects the reverential and contemptuous modes of patriarchal thinking. But that means she must also give up the control and protection such habits of thinking provide.

Lily must face Mrs. Ramsay's absence. At first, it feels "safe" to think of the older woman. But when she tries to see Mrs. Ramsay clearly, her sense of the world's reality changes:

Ghost, air, nothingness, a thing you could play with easily and safely at any time of day or night, she had been that, and then suddenly she put her hand out and wrung the heart thus. Suddenly, the empty drawing-room steps, the frill of the chair inside, the puppy tumbling on the terrace, the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness. (266)

Without the comfort of myths that impose meaning on underlying fears, that explain death and promise life, Lily must confront the reality of her loss, the reality of a world without safety or certainty:

Could things thrust their hands up and grip one; could the blade cut; the fist grasp? Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air? Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life?—startling, unexpected, unknown? For one moment she felt that if they both got up, here, now on the lawn, and demanded an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexplicable, said it with violence, as two fully equipped human beings from whom nothing should be hid might speak, then, beauty would roll itself

up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape; if they shouted loud enough Mrs. Ramsay would return. "Mrs. Ramsay!" she said aloud, "Mrs. Ramsay!" The tears ran down her face. (268)

Through Lily's experience, Woolf shows us our desire to control, to violently shout what we want into being, and thus shows us why patriarchal myths continue to inform our lives. But Woolf does not allow herself or her fictional artist to explain away the void at the center of things. Rather, she and Lily try to accept the world as it is, without making it less painful. Paradoxically, that attempt eases the painful feelings somewhat and then, and only then, does Lily sense "some one there, of Mrs. Ramsay, *relieved for a moment of the weight that the world had put on her . . .*" (269; my emphasis). Lily's acceptance allows her to sense what Mrs. Ramsay might have been like without the burdens of the Eve and Mary myths upon her.¹⁴

At first pursuing this sense of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily thinks:

She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, *the thing itself before it has been made anything.* (287; my emphasis)

Pictures and phrases prevent real insight when Lily tries to force the process. Straining to see what Mrs. Ramsay was like before myth, before history, she soon realizes that "one got nothing by soliciting urgently. . . . Let it come, she thought, if it will come" (287-88).

Lily once again rejects her own attempt to control and lets her mind wander. Instead of trying to pin down Mrs. Ramsay, she begins to wonder about the older woman's vantage point: what was it like to be Mrs. Ramsay? Such a question is a loving gesture from a daughter to her mother, a gesture that implicitly accepts the woman's value and assumes the mother's complexity:

Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one women with, she thought. . . . One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone; which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, *her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke? . . . And then what stirred and trembled in her mind when the children cried, "How's that? How's that?" cricketing?* (294; my emphasis)

Woolf portrays Lily intuitively focusing on those moments when Mrs. Ramsay was most likely to experience her self, that wedge-shaped core of darkness. More important, Lily's desire—though impossible to fulfill—and her questions—though unanswerable—assume that Mrs. Ramsay is a person worthy of her (and our) attention. And these are just the questions a patriarchal society never asks of Eve, of Mary, of women—how does it feel to be you?

For Lily and Woolf as daughters, the questions reflect an interest in how someone else sees, but without any compulsion to see in the same way, and thus they free mothers and daughters to be themselves. For Lily and Woolf as feminists, the questions reflect an acceptance of a woman as she is and an assumption that life for a traditional woman is also complex and deep and meaningful. For Lily and Woolf as artists, the questions reflect a desire to see, not control, a refusal to play God, and an attempt to build into a work of art the acceptance of reality's resistance to art. The inherent respect for Mrs. Ramsay revealed by these questions, the assumption that Mrs. Ramsay had a view of the world that might not be the same as her publicly expressed views, the acceptance of Mrs. Ramsay as a person in her own right, constitute a feminist understanding that allows Mrs. Ramsay to be *in* the world once more. Thus, Woolf creates the moment: an acceptance of death as part of reality, a validation of Lily's way of seeing, and an assumption of Mrs. Ramsay's complexity all converge. The feminist imagination produces a world in which Mrs. Ramsay can exist, a place on the page where *her* power, not the patriarchy's, can be felt:

“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. (300)

For Lily, Mrs. Ramsay's very presence, her “thereness” are good and perfect in themselves. Cursed by patriarchal contempt, killed by patriarchal reverence, Mrs. Ramsay disappears from the novel. Accepted as human, named worthwhile, seen and valued for what she was, Mrs. Ramsay appears again. Lily makes the absent mother present.

And so does Woolf. When her mother died, Woolf writes that the real tragedy was not so much Julia Stephen's literal absence, painful as that was, but her being made unreal (“Sketch” 95). Her father's

Mausoleum Book, into which he poured his grief and guilt, reifies Julia Stephen, creating a paragon of saintly and angelic virtues, a "marble angel" (Annan 104). Her father's extreme reverence killed her mother's reality for Virginia, guaranteeing the presence of the Angel's haunting voice later. Only the daughter's artistic act of murder, the killing of the Angel in the House, could resurrect Julia Stephen. After reading *To the Lighthouse*, Vanessa Bell, Woolf's sister, testified to the novel's power:

It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. . . . It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up and on equal terms and it seems to me the most astonishing feat of creation to have been able to see her in such a way. (*Letters* 3: 572)

No longer a saint, no longer a role model impossible to emulate, the mother is real again, someone the daughter can meet on equal terms and claim as her heritage.

Seeing and understanding the myths that crippled her mother removed the inward barriers to Woolf's own artistic development. Woolf made up *To the Lighthouse* "in a great, apparently involuntary, rush" ("Sketch" 81). The focus of the novel, originally on her father, shifted between the conception and the writing of it; on the second page of her manuscript, she writes, "The dominating impression is to be of Mrs. R.'s character" (MS 2; see also *Diary* 3: 18–19 and Dick 25–26). Writing the novel "very quickly," Woolf recalls that she ceased to be obsessed by her mother. She also writes, "I suppose that I did for myself what psychoanalysts 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" ("Sketch" 81). Woolf finally kills her personal Angel in the House.

Killing that Angel, she frees both mother and daughter to be themselves; she strips away veils of habit in her art, openly acknowledging her desires and yet courageously attempting to see reality as it is; and she recovers the mother that existed beneath the burden of myth and claims *her* as part of her feminist heritage. Woolf makes her mother real again, changing a haunting Angel into an internalized ally, someone she can think back through. Woolf embodies that transformation in Lily's glimpse of Mrs. Ramsay before she "has been made anything" (287). Present in the novel under the daughter's power, not the patriarchy's, transformed from a hindering Angel into an enabling subject who literally helps the daughter complete her painting, Mrs. Ramsay also becomes an audience, silently approving the daughter's powerful art, the art that enables her to live. It is as though Woolf brings Julia Stephen (the first audience that mattered to her)

back into the drawing room to pick up a copy of the *Hyde Park Gate News* and praise it ("Sketch" 95): the daughter empowers the mother so the mother can empower the daughter. Quite a contrast to the Angel who "would have killed me—as a writer" ("Speech" xxxi). ❀

Thus, what Bell Gale Chevigny says a female biographer may ultimately accomplish in writing a foremother's biography—literally "authorizing" both women's individualities (95–96)—Woolf struggles toward and achieves with her biological mother in her fiction. Woolf gains some of the biographer's distance by making Lily an outsider ("so much depends, she thought, upon distance" [284]): she is *not* Mrs. Ramsay's daughter, is single, has no fame, and is older, more mature, and more openly rebellious than the young Virginia was. And Woolf "re-creates" a mother from whom she "can integrate and separate more effectively" (Chevigny 96), a mother she *can* understand, transform, and empower, when she creates a Mrs. Ramsay who is much more trapped than Julia Stephen was. Woolf portrays Mrs. Ramsay as caught by reverence, trapped in a double bind she cannot see; the Eve/Mary myths so victimize Mrs. Ramsay that she unknowingly participates in her own destruction. The outsider daughter, then, can see the myths operating and thus free her. To create a mother she *can* rescue from the patriarchy, Woolf creates a character who differs from the woman who knew about but failed to see the importance of suffrage to women, who knew about but failed to see why education might be valuable for her daughters, who failed to create an atmosphere in the home so that certain truths could be told, who failed to protect her daughters from her sons, and who, in fact, failed to be *there*.¹⁵ The historical Julia Stephen saw much more than the fictional Mrs. Ramsay does, yet planned to sacrifice her daughters to the patriarchy nonetheless.

But Woolf's revision of the actual Julia Stephen into a victimized Mrs. Ramsay for *To the Lighthouse* serves to focus attention on the power of the patriarchal myths, the strength of those internalized bonds. Indeed, to not go beyond accusing Mrs. Ramsay of collaboration means one has simply exchanged reverence for contempt and thus enacted the patriarchal thinking Woolf exposes in the novel.¹⁶ In creating Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf confronts her own ambivalence, telling the truth about her mother without blaming the mother for the existence of that truth. By noting the context within which the mother's power operates and is limited, she directs her anger at the patriarchy, not at the mother. Through her use of the fairy tale and the Angel in the House, Woolf shows the implications of the patriarchal myths for women—they kill. The Eve and Mary myths allow Mrs. Ramsay no real choice and no real

THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION

value. In fact, both myths imply that the only good woman is a dead woman. Because Woolf's portrayal of the interlocking of the Eve/Mary myths acknowledges the patriarchy's extreme power, it also suggests that Julia Stephen, even with more knowledge, options, and support than Mrs. Ramsay, may have been, after all, just as trapped. Woolf's use of the myths reveals her feminist insight into the patriarchal dynamic: the mother's tactics against the daughter are actually the weapons wielded by the patriarchy against all women. When Woolf says the Angel has more blood on her hands than any other murderer, she means it; the Angel's voice may haunt the daughters, but it *killed* the mothers.

Furthermore, Mrs. Ramsay is not just another valorized, reified version of Julia Stephen. For one thing, Mrs. Ramsay's flaws are apparent, and though they do not expose Julia Stephen's actual failings, they suggest them. For another, though Woolf does not condemn Mrs. Ramsay's alignment with the patriarchy, she does not condone it, either. Revising her mother by refusing to look at her through either the reverence or contempt filters, she gains a clear vision of a woman who is, above all, human.¹⁷ (See Woolf's repetition of "I see now" ["Sketch" 83] for another example of such revision.) As a result, Woolf's portrayal, as Lily's purple triangle does with Mrs. Ramsay's dark wedge, probably comes as close as is possible to the complexity of Julia Stephen's "felt" life: the pressures without and within; the compulsion (and the bewilderment in the face of it) to perpetuate the patriarchy; the lack of validation for her choices and thus the drive to force others to make the same ones; the lack of any *real* power; the rich inner life; the fatigue. Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay, her revision of Julia Stephen, then, paradoxically rescues the actual: what Virginia Woolf ultimately understands about her mother through her creation of the fictional Mrs. Ramsay is that Julia Stephen, too, would have been different without the weight of the world on her.

Woolf's ability to understand, accept, and reenvision her mother also proves the patriarchy wrong in its assumptions about women and power; she does not abuse or greedily keep her power to herself. In fact, Lily's first impulse after seeing Mrs. Ramsay is to share. The patriarchal power of reverence and contempt, which has, in effect, created a blank space where woman should be, is supplanted by Woolf's feminist power, a power that heals, imagining a new space in which woman can simply *be*. Woolf's personal, artistic, and feminist aims converge in that extraordinary moment of resurrection; no longer silenced by a curse, no longer an idol, Mrs. Ramsay is *there*, and a

woman's power, power that rarely exists unfettered, but that Woolf's power releases, appears on the page and makes us gasp. "There she sat" literally embodies, for one moment, the feminist realm of possibility: there, the "dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister" and the dead woman who was Woolf's mother can "put on the bod[ies] which [they have] so often laid down" (*Room* 118) and join living women in naming, creating, and writing themselves. Her powerful moment/vision ripples outward: transforming what some have called a patriarchal collaborator into a heritage for the feminist enterprise, Woolf's powerful feminist imagination robs the defining pen from the patriarchy and hands it back to Eve and her daughters—to us.

NOTES

I would like to thank James Bailey, Susan Clark, Louise DeSalvo, James Gorman, Laura Moss Gottlieb, Candace Hartzler, Walter Isle, Andrew J. Kappel, Mary Kuhner, Jane Marcus, Alison Prindle, Mary Beth Pringle, Gloria Stephenson, Judy Strayer, and Linda Westervelt for their support and their insightful readings of this essay as it evolved from part of a dissertation chapter (1982) into its present form.

¹ Several critics have noted the miraculous nature of Lily's vision, most recently Abel 188, and Rosenman 111. Hirsch, on the other hand, thinks it significant that the novel does not end with this vision and that Lily must turn toward Mr. Ramsay (114). Mr. Ramsay's arrival at the lighthouse seems anticlimactic, however, and finishing the painting seems to require his absence, just as it requires Mrs. Ramsay's presence.

² Woolf openly admitted her novel's autobiographical basis in her letters, unpublished autobiographical writings, and diary. See Lilienfeld and Ruddick for examinations of the close links between life and art in the novel.

³ Other feminist critics who study *To the Lighthouse* as an early twentieth-century mother/daughter text see Woolf using various strategies to reconstruct the mother for her art: recompense rather than rejection, narrative maneuvers, and oscillation. See Gubar, du Plessis, and Hirsch. My approach does not so much disagree with theirs as suggest another component in Woolf's overall strategy. When Woolf places her ambivalence about her mother in the context of the Mary/Eve myths, a more human mother emerges. The interaction of those myths may also explain feminist ambivalence about Mrs. Ramsay (as revealed in diametrically opposed versions of her as heroine or villain!). Woolf first makes her readers feel the strength of these myths and their intertwining and then removes the myths and simply lets Mrs. Ramsay be *there*. Thus, she simultaneously defuses the idea of a mythic, all-powerful mother and gives the mother more real power than she has ever had before. DeSalvo's reading of Woolf's life supports my belief that the word "there" ("There she sat" and "she drew a line there, in the centre," in *To the Lighthouse*, "For there she was," in *Mrs. Dalloway*, etc.) loomed large in Woolf's imagination.

THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION

⁴ See Marcus, "Introduction" xix, and "Thinking Back through Our Mothers" 14–15.

⁵ I am indebted to a long line of feminist critics who suggest a similar maneuver in contexts different from mine: Brett 56; Heilbrun 13; Lilienfeld, "The Deceptiveness of Beauty" 366–67; Moore 83; Rosenman 99, 110–11; and Marcus, "Thinking Back through Our Mothers" 21, and "Introduction: Virginia Woolf Aslant" 3. Rose, however, claims that Woolf does not resolve the issue in *To the Lighthouse* and never kills the Angel in the House (161–72).

⁶ Leslie Stephen says that Julia was "a better saint for me than the blessed Virgin" (53). See Gilbert and Gubar, who note Coventry Patmore's role in popularizing the Mary myth in secular form during the latter nineteenth century (20). Haller and Rosenman also discuss Julia Stephen's Madonna image.

⁷ See also Phillips.

⁸ Dick points out that "The Fisherman and His Wife" does not appear in the first draft (21). Woolf mentions titles of other tales in her draft—the Three Bears, the Three Dwarfs—but quotes no materials from them (MS 73, 96, 101, 103, 104). I suspect Woolf chose "The Fisherman and His Wife" because of its sea setting and its patriarchal message. She quotes only the parts of the tale most directly related to men, women, and power: the husband's thinking his wife's desires are "not right"; the husband's prefacing his remarks with "For my wife, good Ilsabil/Wills not as I'd have her Will"; and the sea's raging when Ilsabil wants godlike power.

See Pedersen 588–89; DiBattista 80–81; Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of the Patriarchy* 154; and Gillespie 3, for brief interpretations of this fairy tale different from mine. Gubar 46; Rosenman 97; and Zwerdling 191, however, also see the tale as a cultural message to women about their role.

⁹ See *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* 103–12, for the entire tale. The Pantheon edition uses the 1944 James Stern revision of Margaret Hunt's translation of the German tales, and it differs slightly from the version Woolf seems to have used. For example, in the description of the storm's waves, Woolf's quotation does not include the words "crests of" in the phrase "and all with white foam at the top" (93). Woolf's quotations, however, exactly match Margaret Hunt's translation of the tale in *Grimm's Household Tales, with the Author's Notes*, I: 78–85. Perhaps Woolf also read the tale's footnote, where the Grimm brothers reveal that in at least two variations, the *husband* asks to be God? The Grimms also note, "The feature of the wife inciting her husband to seek high dignities is ancient in itself, from Eve and the Etruscan Tanaquil (*Livy* i.47), down to Lady Macbeth" (I: 358–59), but they do not explain how or why a tale portraying men's desire for power in some versions becomes a tale descended from and about only women's desire for such power. Bottigheimer suggests that the Grimms' tales often reflect a conflict between the enlightened education tradition of collecting texts and the desire to impose a Christian viewpoint on those texts (167–72).

¹⁰ See Choron, where he writes that "nowhere can the idea be found among the primitives that man himself is responsible for death (as he is in the Old Testament); rather, the explanation often encountered is that the gods have sent death because they are jealous of man, who has driven them from the earth" (14).

¹¹ The word "revere" itself, whose Latin root means, among other things,

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

fear, suggests that reverence and hostility are inextricably linked. See *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* and the *OED*.

¹² See Barthes, who notes that the "very principle of myth" is to transform "history into nature" (116).

¹³ Both Ruddick and Lilienfeld, "The Deceptiveness of Beauty" call this process mourning.

¹⁴ Lily, the main character in Woolf's short story, "The Introduction," written between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, is also crushed by the patriarchal dynamics of reverence and contempt and ends by looking "as if she had the weight of the world upon her shoulders" (188). By creating a Lily who uses similar words to describe Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf transforms the daughter's experience into an understanding of the *mother's* experience.

¹⁵ See Marcus, "Thinking Back through Our Mothers" 14–15; Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* 80–82; Stemerick; Gillespie; and DeSalvo for specific information about Julia Stephen's life.

¹⁶ See Chodorow and Contratto 55–59, and Baym 57–58, for their concerns about feminist criticism that blames the "bad" mother, thus becoming the obverse of those who idealize and put the "good" mother on a pedestal.

¹⁷ It is as though Woolf responds to what Terence Hewet says about male writers in the British edition of *The Voyage Out*: "Of course, we're always writing about women—abusing them, or jeering at them or worshipping; but it's never come from women themselves. I believe we still don't know in the least how they live, or what they feel, or what they do precisely . . ." (258).

WORKS CITED

- Abel, Elizabeth. "'Cam the Wicked': Woolf's Portrait of the Artist as Her Father's Daughter." *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury: A Centenary Celebration*. Ed. Jane Marcus. London: Macmillan, 1987. 170–94.
- Annan, Noel. *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian*. New York: Random, 1984.
- Barthes, Roland. "Myth Today." Trans. Annette Lavers. *A Barthes Reader*. Ed. Susan Sontag. New York: Hill, 1982. 93–149.
- Baym, Nina. "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory." *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987. 45–61.
- Bottigheimer, Ruth B. *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987.
- Brett, Sally Alexander. "No, Mrs. Ramsay: The Feminist Dilemma in *To the Lighthouse*." *Ball State University Forum* 19.1 (1978): 48–56.
- Chevigny, Bell Gale. "Daughters Writing: Toward a Theory of Women's Biography." *Feminist Studies* 9 (1983): 79–102.
- Chodorow, Nancy, and Susan Contratto. "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother." *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*. Ed. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom. New York: Longman, 1982. 54–75.
- Choron, Jacques. *Death and Western Thought*. New York: Collier, 1963.
- DeSalvo, Louise. *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work*. Boston: Beacon, 1989.

THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION

- DiBattista, Maria. *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980.
- Dick, Susan. "Introduction." *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*. Virginia Woolf. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982. 11-35.
- du Plessis, Rachel Blau. *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Gillespie, Diane. "The Elusive Julia Stephen." *Julia Duckworth Stephen: Stories for Children, Essays for Adults*. Ed. Diane F. Gillespie and Elizabeth Steele. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1987. 1-27.
- Grimm, Wilhelm and Jakob. *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Trans. James Stern. New York: Pantheon, 1972.
- _____. *Grimm's Household Tales, with the Author's Notes*. Trans. Margaret Hunt. Introduction Andrew Lang. 2 vols. London: Bell, 1884, 1910; rpt. Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1968.
- Gubar, Susan. "The Birth of the Artist as Heroine: (Re)production, the *Kunstlerroman* Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield." *The Representation of Women in Fiction*. Ed. Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983. 19-59.
- Haller, Evelyn. "The Anti-Madonna in the Work and Thought of Virginia Woolf." *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*. Ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb. Troy, NY: Whitston, 1983. 93-109.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn. "To the Lighthouse: The New Story of Mother and Daughter." *ADE Bulletin* 87 (Fall 1987): 12-14.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.
- Lilienfeld, Jane. "'The Deceptiveness of Beauty': Mother Love and Mother Hate in *To the Lighthouse*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 23 (1977): 345-76.
- _____. "Where the Spear Plants Grew: The Ramsays' Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*." *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Jane Marcus. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1981. 148-69.
- Marcus, Jane. "Introduction." *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Jane Marcus. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1981. xiii-xx.
- _____. "Introduction: Virginia Woolf Aslant." *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*. Ed. Jane Marcus. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1981. 1-6.
- _____. "Thinking Back through Our Mothers." *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Jane Marcus. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1981. 1-30.
- _____. *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of the Patriarchy*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987.
- Moore, Madeline. *The Short Season between Two Silences: The Political and Mystical in the Works of Virginia Woolf*. Boston: Allen, 1984.
- Pedersen, Glenn. "Vision in *To the Lighthouse*." *PMLA* 73 (1958): 585-600.
- Phillips, John A. "The Second Eve." *Eve: The History of an Idea*. San Francisco: Harper, 1984. 131-47.
- Rose, Phyllis. *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. New York: Oxford UP, 1978.
- Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk. *The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and the Mother-Daughter Relationship*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1986.

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

- Ruddick, Sara. "Learning to Live with the Angel in the House." *Women's Studies* 4 (1977): 181-200.
- Stemerick, Martine. "Virginia Woolf and Julia Stephen: The Distaff Side of History." *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*. Ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb. Troy, NY: Whitston, 1983. 51-80.
- Stephen, Leslie. *The Mausoleum Book*. Ed. Alan Bell. Oxford: Clarendon, 1977.
- Warner, Marina. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume Three, 1925-1930*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. 5 vols. New York: Harcourt, 1980.
- _____. "The Introduction." *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Susan Dick. 2nd ed. New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1989. 184-88.
- _____. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume III, 1923-1928*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 6 vols. New York: Harcourt, 1977.
- _____. "Professions for Women." *Collected Essays*. 4 vols. New York: Harcourt, 1967. 2: 284-89.
- _____. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1957.
- _____. "A Sketch of the Past." *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Jeanne Schulkind. 2nd ed. New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1985. 64-159.
- _____. "Speech before the London/National Society for Women's Service, 21 January 1931." *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years*. Ed. Mitchell A. Leaska. New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1977. xxvii-xliv.
- _____. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1955.
- _____. *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*. Ed. Susan Dick. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982.
- _____. *The Voyage Out*. London: Duckworth, 1915.
- Zwerdling, Alex. *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.