

A Tragedy of Family Caused by Patriarchy

– Character Analysis in To the Lighthouse

Boyu Chen^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Modern Languages & Cultures, University of Glasgow, G12 8QQ, UK*
a. mrecalcitrantc@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: For several decades, the literary work *To the Lighthouse* authored by Virginia Woolf has engrossed both readers and researchers. This study examines the influence of a patriarchal societal structure on the portrayal of characters in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, with specific attention given to the experiences of Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and James Ramsay. Utilizing an extensive array of scholarly references and primary texts, the present analysis explores the intricate dynamics between societal conventions, individual aspirations, and household responsibilities within the framework of patriarchal structures during the early 20th century. Utilizing qualitative analysis by means of meticulous examination of the text, this study undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the sacrifices and challenges encountered by every character as they navigate the limitations imposed by a society structured along gender lines. The study emphasizes the long-lasting effects of inflexible gender norms and cultural pressures on these individuals, providing insight into their complex and diverse encounters. The study highlights the enduring significance of Woolf's ideas in current discussions on gender roles, societal expectations, and personal fulfillment, while also recognizing its limitations and opportunity for more contextual analysis.

Keywords: *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay, James, patriarchy

1. Introduction

The literary work entitled *To the Lighthouse* authored by Virginia Woolf has garnered significant attention and interest from both readers and researchers over an extended period of time. This can be attributed to its intricate portrayal of individuals through introspective depictions and its profound examination of the human condition within the confines of a patriarchal social structure. The study aims to explore the lives of three key protagonists in the novel, namely Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and James Ramsay, in order to analyze the complexities of their existence and the cultural frameworks that influence and restrict them. The objective of this study is to analyze the sacrifices made by the characters and the subsequent consequences they face while navigating the gender conventions and societal expectations prevalent throughout the early 20th century. The novel *To the Lighthouse* takes place within the context of the patriarchal society prevalent throughout the early 1900s. This societal framework is marked by the enforcement of strict gender roles, adherence to traditional expectations,

and the confinement of women to domestic realms. The Ramsays exemplify a conventional gender dynamic in which Mr. Ramsay exemplifies intellectual assertiveness and benefits from masculine privilege, while Mrs. Ramsay embodies emotional closeness and engages in self-sacrifice, thus reflecting deeply ingrained traditional gender standards [1]. While other academics tend to place greater emphasis on the portrayal of an idealized contemporary female character, namely Lily in the literary work. Lily's pursuit of artistic expression empowers her to chart a novel trajectory, so attaining a level of personal autonomy that eludes both Mrs. Ramsay and Bertha [2].

In order to conduct this inquiry, the author utilizes an extensive qualitative examination of the characters and their interactions within the novel *To the Lighthouse*. By conducting a meticulous analysis of the text, the author critically examines the complex network of interpersonal connections, emotional dynamics, and acts of selflessness that the characters undergo within the context of a patriarchal structure. The author demonstrates a specific focus on the dialogues and inner monologues of Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and James Ramsay, in addition to their interactions with other characters. Furthermore, the technique employed in this study encompasses a comprehensive comparative examination of the characters, aiming to delve into the divergent experiences and emotional turmoil they endure due to the influence of societal pressures and gender norms. This essay examines the embodiment of societal norms by Mrs. Ramsay through the application of a gendered lens. It also explores the representation of traditional masculinity in Mr. Ramsay, as well as the portrayal of James Ramsay as a symbol of the generational clash between individual wishes and societal reality. The present study carries substantial significance in elucidating the lasting pertinence of Woolf's examination of patriarchal society. Through an examination of the intricacies inherent in the lives of these characters, this analysis serves to enhance comprehension regarding the influence exerted by gender norms and society expectations on the individual. This study also functions as evidence of the enduring relevance of the ideas explored in *To the Lighthouse*, since they continue to be significant in current discourse about gender roles, societal norms, and individual satisfaction.

2. Female Character—Mrs. Ramsay

Within the framework of self-sacrifice for a patriarchal societal structure, the prominence of Mrs. Ramsay becomes apparent. The existence of Mrs. Ramsay is subject to limitations imposed by the patriarchal societal norms prevalent during her era. In light of her personal yearnings for self-actualization, she finds herself driven to relinquish her own ambitions as a result of prevailing cultural norms and expectations. The existing gender norms within a patriarchal culture impose constraints on her prospects and confine her to conventional roles, ultimately compelling her to relinquish her personal aspirations in order to adhere to the societal and familial expectations and demands.

The prevailing patriarchal symbolic system prioritized women's subordination to male symbols of authority, hence perpetuating their subordinate position within society. During the Victorian era, women were idolized as embodiments of purity and motherhood, with their identities being strongly intertwined with their capacity to fulfill parental responsibilities. There exists a certain discomfort among men over the notion of women holding wisdom that has the potential to challenge the patriarchal system [3-4].

A substantial section of the book is dedicated to extensive dialogues that depict the interactions between Mrs. Ramsay and other personalities, as well as her introspective contemplations. During the course of these conversations, Mrs. Ramsay undertakes the responsibility of protecting and nurturing the delicate emotional state of each member of the family. The individual in question has characteristics akin to that of a "emotional sponge," as she possesses the ability to absorb and subsequently provide mental energy to others within her social group [5].

Within the depths of her psyche, Mrs. Ramsay exhibits a heightened cognizance of the societal norms imposed upon her, and she assumes a central position in offering unwavering psychological

assistance to the entire household. Consequently, she effectively manages her interactions with everyone in her vicinity, including Banks, Tansley, and Mr. Ramsay.

When discussing the central motif of “whether to go to the lighthouse”, various characters present differing opinions. The children show eager anticipation to the lighthouse, while male characters like Mr. Ramsay adopt a pragmatic point, striking up a discordant tune, “it won’t be fine” [6]. Mrs. Ramsay steps in as a mediator, skillfully navigating to create an environment of harmony and familial cohesion within the household.

Mrs. Ramsay possesses a keen understanding of the children's aversion towards Mr. Ramsay and his acquaintances, including Mr. Tansley. However, in order to keep a harmonious and tranquil environment within the family, she must navigate the management of her husband's intellectual pursuits and the children's individual dispositions.

Attending to the everyday requirements of the children may seem inconsequential; nonetheless, an even greater challenge lies in managing the complex familial paradoxes, while simultaneously striking a balance between the children's naivety and the men's hubris. Gradually, the act of persuading them that there is always hope to see the lighthouse becomes an integral part of her daily regimen.

“Perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing,” she said compassionately, smoothing the little boy’s hair, for her husband, with his caustic saying that it would not be fine, had dashed his spirits, she could see” [6].

While children are not the only people who need psychological support from Mrs. Ramsay, whenever Mr. Ramsay faces difficulties or feels ineffectual in his work, she stands out.

The individual in question expressed a desire for sympathy, seeking reassurance regarding their intellectual prowess. Additionally, they sought inclusion inside the realm of existence, seeking comfort and solace, with the hope of having their faculties revitalized, their lack of productivity transformed into abundance, and the various spaces within their dwelling imbued with vitality [6].

The woman is expected to perform her societal role, sometimes referred to as the “female born duty,” which encompasses several responsibilities such as providing emotional support to her husband during meals, offering spiritual support in his career, and meeting his desires for affection in the bedroom. This necessitates her prioritizing these tasks over her other obligations.

Nonetheless, she also demonstrates a keen self-awareness, dispelling the notion that she is solely the praised Penelope figure [4]. Mrs. Ramsay has the life she cherishes, which is not only bustling in the daily grind but also wandering “from one red-and-white flower to another” [6]. She is devoted to her family and strives to create a harmonious domestic environment, often putting the needs and desires of others before her own. Engulfed in her responsibilities, Mrs. Ramsay rarely introspects upon her own desires, allowing herself only fleeting moments for self-reflection – “But what have I done with my life? Thought Mrs Ramsay ,taking her place at the head of the table” [6]. What would normally be an inconspicuous “reading” in everyday life becomes “dreaming” in the case of Mrs. Ramsay. This juxtaposition of reality and dream-like imagery portrays how leisure and having solitary time are luxuries for Mrs. Ramsay. While she immerses herself in reading, she is simultaneously burdened by the role of Penelope she plays in the “real world.” She needs to stay vigilant if Mr. Ramsay “ wanted her to wake she would” [6].

When it was painful to feel herself convicted of unworthiness, and impeded in her proper function by these lies, these exaggerations – it was at this moment when she was fretted thus ignobly in the wake of her exaltation, that Mr Carmichael shuffled past, in his yellow slippers, and some demon in her made it necessary for her to call out, as he passed, “Going indoors, Mr Carmichael?” [6]

The portrayal of the protagonist's inner self as a “demon” can be seen as a satirical representation, as it contradicts the prevailing Victorian notion of femininity. The inner monologues of the protagonist serve as a means of expressing her uncertainties regarding her role and the cultural

limitations imposed upon her. To adhere to prevailing societal and familial gender norms, she relinquished her sense of self-awareness and wholeheartedly embraced the role of a homemaker.

3. Male Characters—Mr. Ramsay

Mr. Ramsay is often overlooked as an individual who, despite his gender, experiences victimization within the context of a patriarchal societal structure. Similarly, Mr. Ramsay conforms to society norms regarding gender roles by prioritizing his professional pursuits, which therefore leads to a loss of familial bonds and a disconnection from his inner identity.

Mr. Ramsay exemplifies specific conventional ideals of masculinity that were widespread during his era. These societal expectations frequently encompass the demonstration of intellectual superiority, a strong drive for success, and assuming the responsibilities of being the principal financial provider and leader of the household. The intense focus exhibited by Mr. Ramsay on his scholarly endeavors and his relentless quest for acknowledgement are congruent with conventional ideals of masculinity. The prevailing societal expectations regarding male duties have resulted in a significant portion of Mr. Ramsay's daily energy and time being allocated to his regular occupational tasks. This can be attributed to the societal demand for individuals to uphold logic and actively participate in ongoing intellectual discourse.

He does a little consciously raise his numbed fingers to his brow, and square his shoulders, so that when the search party comes they will find him dead at his post, the fine figure of a soldier? Mr Ramsay squared his shoulders and stood very upright by the urn [6].

Even during short intervals of relaxation, his thoughts remain centered on his professional endeavors, driven by a persistent concern for the progression of his academic works and the eventual attainment of his goals.

He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach the geraniums... But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something [6].

The cultural perception of men played a significant role in influencing Mr. Ramsay's prioritization of his personal aims and desires over the emotional well-being of his family members. Consequently, he exhibited a lack of emotional expression, which gradually led to a growing emotional distance between him and his family members. The individual's interactions with his offspring, particularly James and Cam, are characterized by tension as a result of his emotional aloofness and his incapacity to offer the requisite care and emotional assistance they require.

On the morning of the journey to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay realized that without his wife, it is difficult for him to unite the family as a whole. Cam and James "should have gone already—they had to catch the tide or something" [6]. He had no choice but to become somewhat distraught—"What's the use of going now?" He truly wishes for the entire family to embark on the journey to the lighthouse together—this place, which had once been desired by everyone apart from himself. It seems as if he is recalling the past and attempting to fix the mistakes he had made, compensating for his past absence within the family - a role where he could be a companion to his children, a father who could share in the joys of life.

Within the context of a patriarchal culture, Mr. Ramsay, who has traditionally occupied the position of the "rational philosopher," becomes cognizant of the challenges he encounters in fulfilling his responsibility of offering spiritual guidance to his family, which is an essential component for upholding familial equilibrium. Therefore, during the journey to the lighthouse, the atmosphere is subtly charged. Mr. Ramsay laments the fleeting nature of time and reflects on his wife's death. He struggles to establish a spiritual connection with his family. This is undoubtedly a poignant realization, compelling him to initiate discussions on seemingly "foolish" topics with Cam. He can do nothing

but sing William Cowper's "The Castaway" alone on the boat, and he knows he never has no idea or the ability of mental communicating.

Sitting in the boat he bowed, he crouched himself, acting instantly his part – the part of a desolate man, widowed, bereft; and so called up before him in hosts people sympathizing with him; staged for himself as he sat in the boat a little drama; which required of him decrepitude and exhaustion and sorrow [6].

Despite Mr. Ramsay's prominent role within the familial structure of a patriarchal culture, the events that transpired in his life might equally be characterized as tragic. Mr. Ramsay encountered challenges in cultivating a comparable degree of emotional closeness with the children, in contrast to the amount of intimacy that Mrs. Ramsay had achieved. In the absence of Mrs. Ramsay, the individual in question ceased to occupy a central role within the family unit, resulting in a diminished willingness on the part of the children to engage in communication or share their experiences with him. The absence of an emotional bond resulted in his sense of isolation within the familial context. As a result, he initiated a process of withdrawal and attempted personal transformation, as can be observed in his dialogue with Lily.

"What a beautiful boots!" she exclaimed. She was ashamed of herself. To praise his boots when he asked her to solace his soul; when he had shown her his bleeding hands, his lacerated heart, and asked her to pity them... Instead, Mr Ramsay smiled. His pall, his draperies, his infirmities fell from him. Ah yes, he said, holding his foot up for her to look at, they were first-rate boots [6].

The concept of a patriarchal society refers to a social structure in which authority is predominantly held by men across various organizational roles [7]. However, the security and organization represented by a patriarchal society are, in fact, very removed from the ideal. In contrast, Mr. Ramsay is in dire need of emotional support from his wife and other feminine characters. Similar to a youngster, he seeks emotional relief from others at a psychological level.

4. Next generation—James

James represents a cohort that embodies resistance within the framework of a patriarchal culture, while simultaneously embodying a generation characterized by acts of sacrifice and experiences of sorrow. James Ramsay serves as a prominent figure embodying the intricate nature of human emotions and the temporal progression inside the narrative. The individual in question is the offspring who holds the position of being the most junior member of the familial unit of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. The narrative of the work encompasses the depiction of this individual's physical and psychological maturation throughout time.

"James will have to write his dissertation one of these days," he added ironically, flicking his sprig.

Hating his father, James brushed away the tickling spray with which in a manner peculiar to him, compound of severity and humor, he teased his youngest son's bare leg [6].

James harbored a deep sense of resentment towards his father due to the latter's insistence on molding him into a philosopher, a mere replication of his own persona. This paternal expectation persisted despite a lack of consideration for James' inherent disposition and the natural inclinations typically associated with childhood. The rearing experienced inside a patriarchal societal framework is characterized by stereotyped, polarized, and extreme dynamics, resulting in inequality and the dehumanization of individuals. Consequently, this environment compelled his father to suppress his son's aspirations and optimistic outlook.

"Going to the lighthouse" can be seen as the innocence or noble pursuit of childhood, but under the patriarchal society, the demands on men are not like this. His father teaches him not to hold onto fantasies and to become a "philosopher" like him in the future. James' nature is extinguished, and in such an environment, he can't resist. The family relationships become more distant, to the point that the atmosphere in the family worsens after the mother's death [8].

Whenever the topic of "whether to go to the lighthouse" is brought up, Mr. Ramsay always delivers a blow of disappointment to James. It can be said that "going to the lighthouse" is a childhood wish in James' heart, even if it is a simple matter in the eyes of adults, it is an aspiration and desire in young James' heart.

"It will rain," he remembered his father saying. "You won't be able to go to the Lighthouse."

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now—— [6]

James' hope is consistently dampened by his father's "it will rain tomorrow." The significance of the lighthouse in James' heart diminishes only upon their return to the Isle of Skye in Scotland a decade later. The previously vibrant hues have significantly diminished, to the extent that James, upon learning of the intention to visit the lighthouse, experiences a sense of melancholy rather than elation on the subsequent day. In the patriarchal society of that time, the inability to reach the Lighthouse hinders personal growth. Individuals have lived according to their eras' conventions and values their entire lives. When someone tried to free themselves and embrace their true self, society said, 'You won't be able to travel to the Lighthouse.' Later in life, people see their prior goals as less relevant and meaningful, leaving them with ashes in their hearts. In James's view, they wander aimlessly around society like the Lighthouse.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed Mrs., Mr., and James Ramsay's complex lives in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In the patriarchal culture of the early 20th century, people faced problems and selflessly performed deeds that demonstrate the complex relationship between social expectations, personal goals, and family duties. This study examined the negative impacts of patriarchal culture on the aforementioned characters, revealing the long-term effects of rigid gender standards and expectations. The investigation focuses on the novel's characters rather than the cultural and historical context. The Ramsays' experiences reflect patriarchal society. A more thorough understanding of the cultural and historical backdrop would reveal the dynamics at play. A deeper look at the novel's language and narrative could help explain the characters' experiences. However, *To the Lighthouse*'s continued importance in gender roles and societal expectations emphasizes the need to study the complex relationships between social structures and individual experiences. This study urges readers and researchers to investigate and improve existing systems and emphasizes Woolf's legacy in current conversations.

References

- [1] Kaivola K. *Revisiting the Ramsays: Love, Alterity, and the Ethical Experience of the Impossible in Virginia Woolf's To The Lighthouse*[J]. *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 2013, 24(3): 202-225.
- [2] Onans R. *Seeking the self in the garden: class, femininity and nature in To the Lighthouse, "Bliss" and "The Garden Party"*[J]. *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 2014 (86): 21.
- [3] Roya, N. "Tess's Commodification and Liberation in the Unconscious of Patriarchy". *The Proceedings of 2011 2nd International Conference on Humanities, Historical and Social Sciences*. Ed. IACSIT Press, 2011, 346-351.
- [4] Hui J. *Metaphors of patriarchy in the context of intertextuality: rereading to the lighthouse*[J]. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 2014, 8(1): 110.
- [5] Lilienfeld J. "The Deceptiveness of Beauty": Mother Love and Mother Hate in *To the Lighthouse*[J]. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 1977, 23(3): 345-376.
- [6] Woolf V, Woolf V. *To the lighthouse*[M]. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1992.
- [7] Rahman M M. *Why Society Needs Patriarchy: A Scientific and Social Justification*[J]. *Social Sciences*, 2021, 10(5): 229.
- [8] Cohn R. *Art in "To the Lighthouse"*[J]. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1962: 127-136.