**Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse**

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Literature by women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century has a significant and irreplaceable stature as being a torchbearer for feminism. These texts stand defiant in the pre-world war era where Victorian households maintained the tradition of opposing the idea of women as artists or writers. From Jane Austen to the Bronte sisters and Mary Shelley; none escaped fire from their critics based on their gender. As the long nineteenth century dragged along, literature by women and for women was increasing at unprecedented rates. The gendered role of women was an unending topic of discussion in every social setting and the idea of women as writers did not sit very well. At the turn of the century, even after a mountain of literature gathered at women’s feet, the social strata loitered amidst hierarchies and narrow boundaries of how far a woman could go.

The first world war shifted this understanding around gendered boundaries as women took up jobs left unoccupied by men who went off to fight. Virginia Woolf in her novel ‘To the Lighthouse’ emerges as the feminist voice of this transition. The novel joins two moments stretched across ten years of war, blood and conflict. (Gjurgjan, 2011) The world when this journey to an actual lighthouse is suggested is completely different from the one in which it reaches its culmination.

At a cursory glance, it is the story of a boy becoming a man in the eyes of his father. There is regular discussion of and circulation around the various layers and meanings to a father-son relationship. The way Woolf describes Mr. Ramsay as a stoic and unflinching patriarchal figure with strong opinions and a very well-defined character almost takes the attention away from the real theme of the story. Seemingly underlying is the very real and lifelike mother-daughter relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. These women of ‘To the Lighthouse’ exist in the realms of this novel as two halves of a whole. (Jingrui, 2015) The novel also provides fascinating commentary on marriage through their relationship. Lily is an artist and an unmarried woman who, according to the matchmaker Mrs. Ramsay, is not quite attractive enough to be married. Even so, Lily’s art is later irrelevant and her financial dependence on men is the reason why she must give in to Mrs. Ramsay’s ideals of marriage.

Moreover, even as Mrs. Ramsay reaffirms her husband’s masculinity and stays lovingly subservient to him throughout the course of the story, there is more than enough proof to declare her as the true central character. Although the father is supremely unyielding and masculine to the point of cruelty, it is the love of the mother which acts as the true grounding force for their children. The pervading homage to her throughout the final part of the novel even after her death confirms it. Therefore, Woolf only appears to give in to Freud’s orthodox views that pin the father as the center of the household. She successfully dodges it to illustrate the Kleinian matricentric theory through Mrs. Ramsay. (Fang, 2018) There are countless feminist undertones to Virginia Woolf’s writing in general. One can see those in this novel as easily as peeling off a single layer of the Freudian façade.

The scene at the beach successfully touches nearly all of these themes as clearly as they are expressed elsewhere throughout the novel. The striking femininity of emotion (Minta) juxtaposed with the satirically displayed relationship between manliness and apathy (Andrew) shows how patriarchal men perceive both women and emotions. To Minta, the loss of a dear item is unbearable. There are memories of her late grandmother attached to the physical item and she would have lost anything but the precious brooch. To Andrew on the other hand, the fuss over ‘a brooch’ is aggravating. It is clear that Minta’s emotional attachment to the brooch, which elevates it from simply being any brooch, is incomprehensible to Andrew. A few sentences later, this comparison is reinforced when Minta makes a declaration that exaggerates the danger they are in. Andrew’s exasperation is condescending. Masculinity is re-invoked as Andrew and Paul calmly discuss their next course of action. It is, once again, feminine emotions and theatrics vs masculine sternness and presence of mind. Only Nancy, also a woman, successfully connects with Minta’s grief. As it is with gender and feminism in the novel as a whole, this paragraph also seems to reaffirm patriarchal notions. However, with only one layer peeled off, the tone with which Woolf weaves these sentences becomes visible. It establishes the indifferent masculinity as hollow and the compassionate femininity as pure.

Another aspect of orthodox gender roles is clearly defined in the next paragraph as Paul takes it upon himself to console Minta and to ‘provide for her’ that which she desires. The paragraph begins with Paul wishing to pacify and comfort Minta as a lover would desire to soothe their beloved. He narrates childhood stories of ‘valor’ and reinforces the idea of him willing to face danger to bring back her brooch. This sentiment has already been foreshadowed in the previous paragraph as Paul vehemently searches for the brooch and instructs Andrew to do the same. Andrew’s clear annoyance at Paul condoning Minta’s behavior is also underlined with the patriarchal notion of men lowering their station if they heed to a woman’s whims. Reinforcement for this idea arrives in the second paragraph as the mood shifts from Paul’s desire to help Minta. Paul now believes he should search for Minta’s brooch at dawn and replace it if he cannot find it ‘without telling her’. Like Andrew, Paul also completely fails to understand that it is sentimental attachment that makes the brooch s0 important and its loss so profound. If we peel off the ‘love’, Woolf has successfully painted a picture of how patriarchal men would believe that their condescension and coddling towards a woman is love.

After mixing gender roles with loss, sentiment, apathy and condescension; the most significant part of this scene is the analysis of marriage in the eyes of Paul. The opening sentence of his train of thoughts contains a short and exceptionally vivid picture of what marriage is to him: the man always leads while the woman stays by his side. The several thoughts that follow this declaration are all secondary ideas that draw their relevance from it. Paul feels exuberant over his engagement, but he also draws confidence, strength and his manliness from it. The broader theme of the novel in the context of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay with respect to marriage is the same as Paul’s idea of it. The last few sentences bring in Mrs. Ramsay herself in order to reinstate the patriarchal belief at the root of the institution of marriage: a woman’s support so the husband can ‘feel like a man’. Paul scolding himself over harmless childish gimmicks in the last sentence is also a successful dig at masculinity by Woolf.

This micro-event at the beach encompasses several key themes of the whole novel in two paragraphs. Clear juxtaposition of gender roles throughout the text assisted by the patriarchal perception of loss, emotion and marriage are all topics covered at length in ‘To the Lighthouse’. The passage therefore comprehensively caters to complicated phenomena of gender and marriage in the Victorian era. We owe it to the genius of Virginia Woolf.

# References

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