



To the Lighthouse – The Stephens Versus the Ramsays

Mrs. Stephen Versus Mrs. Ramsay

“It is perfectly true that she obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary rush. . . But I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written I ceased to be obsessed by my mother, I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her” (MOB 81).

CHARACTERISTIC	WOMAN	
	Mrs. Stephen <i>(Moments of Being)</i>	Mrs. Ramsay <i>(To the Lighthouse)</i>
Beauty	<p>“. . . the most beautiful of women as her portraits will tell you . . .” (MOB 32).</p> <p>“her astonishing beauty” (MOB 82)</p>	<p>“. . . she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen” (TTL 14).</p> <p>“. . . she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty; she carried it erect into any room that she entered; and after all, veil it as she might, and shrink from the monotony of bearing that it imposed on her, her beauty was apparent” (TTL 41).</p>
Charity Work	<p>“She visited the poor, nursed the dying, and felt herself possessed of the true secret of life at last, which is still obscured from a few, though they too must come to know it, that sorrow is our lot and at best we can but face it bravely” (MOB 32).</p> <p>“Her intellectual gifts had always been those that find their close expression in action; she had great clearness of insight, sound judgement, humour, and a power of grasping very quickly the real nature of someone’s circumstances, and so arranging that the matter, whatever it was, fell into its true proportions at once” (MOB 34-35).</p>	<p>Mrs. Ramsay, used James as a “measuring block for the Lighthouse keeper’s little boy” so that she could knit him a stocking (TTL 26).</p> <p>“She had been admired. She had been loved. She had entered rooms where mourners sat. Tears had flown in her presence. Men, and women too, letting go the multiplicity of things, had allowed themselves with her the relief of simplicity” (TTL 41).</p>
Lack of Religion	<p>“She flung aside her religion, and became, as I have heard, the most positive of disbelievers” (MOB 32).</p> <p>“What is known, and is much more remarkable, is that during those eight years spent, so far as she had time over from her children and house, ‘doing good’, nursing, visiting the poor, she lost her faith” (MOB 90).</p>	<p>“How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor” (TTL 64).</p>

CHARACTERISTIC	WOMAN	
	Mrs. Stephen (<i>Moments of Being</i>)	Mrs. Ramsay (<i>To the Lighthouse</i>)
Lost Love	<p>“She had her own sorrow waiting behind her to dip into privately” (MOB 82).</p> <p>“At any rate when he was dead she determined to consecrate those years as the golden ones; when as she phrased it perhaps, she had not known the sorrow and the crime of the world because she had lived with a man, stainless of his kind, exalted in a world of pure love and beauty. The effect of his death then was doubly tremendous, because it was a disillusionment as well as a tragic human loss” (MOB 32).</p>	<p>“Holding her black parasol very erect, and moving with an indescribable air of expectation, as if she were going to meet some one round the corner . . .” (TTL 10).</p> <p>“Never did anybody look so sad. But was it nothing but looks, people said? What was there behind it –her beauty and splendour? Had he blown his brains out, they asked, had he died the week before they were married – some other, some earlier lover . . .” (TTL 28).</p> <p>“. . . (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one’s being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover” (TTL 64).</p> <p>“. . . (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness . . .” (TTL 65).</p>
Feelings for Her Husband	<p>“In particular she read some early articles by your grandfather and liked them better than she liked him” (MOB 33).</p> <p>“Perhaps there was pity in her love; certainly there was devout admiration for his mind . . .” (MOB 91).</p>	<p>“Why could he never conceal his feelings? Mrs. Ramsay wondered . . .” (TTL 96).</p> <p>“She could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or affection for him” (TTL 83).</p> <p>“There was nobody whom she revered as she revered him” (TTL 32).</p>
Center of Family Life	<p>“She was keeping what I call in my shorthand the panoply of life – that which we all lived in common – in being” (MOB 83).</p> <p>“. . . but there it always was, the common life of the family, very merry, very stirring, crowded with people; and she was the centre; it was herself” (MOB 84).</p> <p>“. . . and while she was there the whole of that interminable and incongruous procession which is the life of a large family, went merrily . . .” (MOB 35).</p>	<p>“And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her” (TTL 83).</p> <p>“They came to her, naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that; one wanting this, another that; the children were growing up; she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions” (TTL 32).</p>

CHARACTERISTIC	WOMAN	
	Mrs. Stephen <i>(Moments of Being)</i>	Mrs. Ramsay <i>(To the Lighthouse)</i>
Sympathy Toward Her Husband	<p>“ . . . she wore herself out and died at forty-nine; while he lived on, and found it very difficult, so healthy was he, to die of cancer at the age of seventy-two” (MOB 133).</p> <p>“It was thus that she left us the legacy of his dependence, which after her death became so harsh an imposition” (MOB 133).</p>	<p>“ . . . not for a second should he find himself without her. So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent. . .” (TTL 38).</p> <p>“That man, she thought, her anger rising in her, never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died – and had left all this” (TTL 149).</p>
Miscellaneous	<p>“I see now that she was living on such an extended surface that she had not time, not strength, to concentrate, except for a moment if one were ill or in some child’s crisis, upon me, or upon anyone – unless it were Adrian. Him she cherished separately; she called him ‘My Joy’” (MOB 83).</p>	<p>“ . . . bundle of sensitiveness (none of her children was as sensitive as he was), her son James” (TTL 42).</p> <p>“He was the most gifted, the most sensitive of her children” (TTL 58).</p>
	<p>“ . . . a person who died forty-four years ago at age forty-nine, without leaving a book, or a picture, or any piece of work . . . ” (MOB 85).</p>	<p>Mrs. Ramsay died prematurely and didn’t have any book or art to show for her years. Her work was in the domestic sphere.</p>
	<p>“ . . . I see her knitting on the hall step while we play cricket . . . ” (MOB 84).</p>	<p>“She listened, but it was all very still; cricket was over; the children were in their baths; there was only the sound of the sea. She stopped knitting . . . ” (TTL 64).</p>
	<p>“I see her going to town with her basket . . . ” (MOB 84).</p>	<p>“She had a dull errand in town; she had a letter or two to write; she would be ten minutes perhaps; she would put on her hat. And, with her basket and her parasol, there she was again . . . ” (TTL 9).</p>

Mr. Stephen Versus Mr. Ramsay

“Further, just as I rubbed out a good deal of the force of my mother’s memory by writing about her in *To the Lighthouse*, so I rubbed out much of his memory there too. Yet he too obsessed me for years. Until I wrote it out, I would find my lips moving; I would be arguing with him; raging against him; saying to myself all that I never said to him” (MOB 108).

CHARACTERISTIC	MAN	
	Mr. Stephen <i>(Moments of Being)</i>	Mr. Ramsay <i>(To the Lighthouse)</i>
Bad Temper	“But I can add something to my father’s steel engraving – a violent temper” (MOB 109).	“He was irritable – he was touchy. He had lost his temper over the Lighthouse” (TTL 64). “He would start from the table in a temper. He would whizz his plate through the window” (TTL 199).
Self-Centered	“. . . self-centredness which in later life at least made him so childishly greedy for compliments, made him brood so disproportionately over his failure and the extent of it and reasons for it . . .” (MOB 110). “. . . he would say exactly what he thought, however inconvenient; and do what he liked” (MOB 111). “But it never struck my father, I believe, that there was any harm in being ill to live with” (MOB 109). “And now that against all his expectations, his wife had died before him, he was like one who, by the failure of some stay, reels staggering blindly about the world, and fills it with his woe” (MOB 40).	“. . . never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children . . .” (TTL 4). “. . . he is absorbed in himself, he is tyrannical, he is unjust . . .” (46) “Why could he never conceal his feelings? Mrs. Ramsay wondered . . .” (TTL 96). “. . . that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms, so that even now she woke in the night trembling with rage and remembered some command of his; some insolence: ‘Do this,’ ‘Do that,’ his dominance: his ‘Submit to me’” (TTL 170).
Regarded as Godlike by His Wife	“He had a godlike, yet childlike, standing in the family. He had an extraordinarily privileged position. I twisted my hair, imitating him. ‘Father does it,’ I told my mother when she objected. ‘Ah but you can’t do everything father does,’ she said, conveying to me that he was licensed, for he was somehow not bound by the laws of ordinary people” (MOB 111).	“. . . for then people said he depended on her, when they must know that of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible” (TTL 39). “There was nobody whom she revered as she revered him” (TTL 32). “She was not good enough to tie his shoe strings, she felt” (TTL 32).

CHARACTERISTIC	WOMAN	
	Mrs. Stephen <i>(Moments of Being)</i>	Mrs. Ramsay <i>(To the Lighthouse)</i>
Childlike – Demanding Sympathy	<p>“He needed always some woman to act before; to sympathise with him, to console him” (MOB 145).</p> <p>“. . . he did not scruple to lay before her his sufferings and to demand perpetual attention, and whatever comfort she had to give” (MOB 41).</p> <p>“. . . took all that she offered him . . . as his right” (MOB 45).</p>	<p>“But no. Nothing would make Mr. Ramsay move on. There he stood, demanding sympathy” (TTL 37).</p> <p>“. . . and she pretended to drink out of her empty coffee cup so as to escape him —to escape his demand on her, to put aside a moment longer that imperious need” (TTL 147).</p> <p>“That man, she thought, her anger rising in her, never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died – and had left all this” (TTL 149).</p>
Relationship to Children	<p>“. . . the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centred, the self pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternately loved and hated father . . .” (MOB 116).</p> <p>“But in me . . . rage alternated with love” (MOB 108).</p>	<p>“. . . that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms, so that even now she woke in the night trembling with rage and remembered some command of his; some insolence: ‘Do this,’ ‘Do that,’ his dominance: his ‘Submit to me’” (TTL 170).</p> <p>“. . . she thought (now sitting in the boat) he was not vain, nor a tyrant and did not wish to make you pity him” (TTL 190).</p>

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *Moments of Being*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1985.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981.