



4-2005

Abstracting Intimacy: Lily Briscoe's Artistic Vision in *To the Lighthouse*

Laura Anne Collins

University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Follow this and additional works at: http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj

Recommended Citation

Collins, Laura Anne, "Abstracting Intimacy: Lily Briscoe's Artistic Vision in *To the Lighthouse*" (2005). *University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects*.

http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/832

This is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Tennessee Honors Program at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

Abstracting Intimacy:
Lily Briscoe's Artistic Vision in *To the Lighthouse*

Laura Collins
Senior Honors Project
April 21, 2005

Mentor: Dr. Urmila Seshagiri
Second Reader: Dr. Alisa Schoenbach

Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) delves into the fissures between artistic vision, human intimacy, and traditional marriage in modern society. Though filled with family, romance, and human connection, the novel denies the notion that traditional human relationships, especially sexual ones between a man and a woman, are ultimately fulfilling. The Ramsay's nearly ideal marriage affects every character in the novel who observes and longs for such an idyllic relationship. Despite her own nagging feelings of dissatisfaction, Mrs. Ramsay, a desirable, compelling picture of womanhood, urges the bonds of marriage upon the younger women in the novel. The artist figure, Lily Briscoe, questions the validity of marital intimacy in her world. Choosing her painting, Lily refuses the societal constraints of marriage in favor of a self-fulfilling vision of artistry and vision. At first substituting her art for intimate human relationships, Lily eventually reaches a true intimacy with Mrs. Ramsay through her final painting. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf exposes human intimacy through marriage as inadequate for Lily, who exists in a condition of modernity unknown to and resisted by the Ramsays. Lily's maturity as a painter and completion of her final abstract painting calls for new, transcendent kinds of intimacy, unmarred by the Victorian idea of intimacy between men and women.

The novel begins by exposing the flaws in Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's very traditional marriage. Despite their happiness, conflict between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay immediately exposes their relationship's disconnection. As she gives her son James permission to go on the long-awaited journey to the lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay represents joy, light, and "heavenly bliss"; Mr. Ramsay quashes James's hopes and Mrs. Ramsay's light with a dark forecast. By opening the novel with a break between the model married couple, Woolf alerts readers to a basic problem in her created world: how two people can marry, marking themselves as a single unit, and so vehemently disagree with each other over minor issues. Mrs. Ramsay's

irritation at her husband's remark leads her into meditation on the aloneness of the Lighthouse keeper and his family. She thinks, "For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time...?...and to have no letters or newspapers, and to see nobody; if you were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were..." (Woolf *TTL* 5). As Mrs. Ramsay's conflict with Mr. Ramsay reminds her of marriage's flaws, she turns almost unconsciously to thoughts of other's sure dissatisfaction with marriage. How can marriage adequately serve a Lighthouse keeper, whose job demands isolation? Mrs. Ramsay's marriage rises into view—how can her own marriage satisfy? Though she and her husband live in close quarters, Mrs. Ramsay becomes discouraged because of conflict over basic, menial matters of everyday life. Such isolation from one's partner may even sound appealing to Mrs. Ramsay, who must constantly give way to and appease her husband.

From the first pages of the novel, then, one must ask: in Mrs. Ramsay's world, why marry? If one must forever strive for connection and fail on the most basic levels of communication and agreement, why bother with the exercise of symbolically becoming one with a member of the opposite sex? Mrs. Ramsay senses this concern in her daughters and the young women she treats almost as her daughters, and frequently urges them to marry. At the end of her worries about the poor married-but-alone Lighthouse keeper, she asks, "How would you like that?...addressing herself particularly to her daughters" (Woolf *TTL* 5). Mrs. Ramsay's concerns about the Lighthouse keeper and her immediate threats of loneliness to her daughters suggest her own fears of unmarried solitude. Mrs. Ramsay subtly reveals her entire motivation for marriage as the fear of isolation. As she insists to her daughters, to Minta Doyle, and to Lily Briscoe upon her firm belief in marriage's merits and its ability to save one from loneliness, she presents herself as skeptical about marriage's ability to fill her own need for human connection.

Mrs. Ramsay continues to reveal a masked explanation of her dissatisfaction with marriage. Much beyond an inability to attain intimacy, marriage unites two inherently unequal people. During a moment of pity for Charles Tansley, a poor, socially inept student of her husband's disliked by nearly everyone in her house, she thinks of herself as a mother/martyr figure, protecting and uplifting men. Proudly, Mrs. Ramsay thinks,

Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain, for their chivalry and valour, for the fact that they negotiated treaties, ruled India, controlled finance; finally for an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to feel or to find agreeable, something trustful, childlike, reverential...and woe betide the girl—pray Heaven it was none of her daughters!—who did not feel the worth of it, and all that it implied, to the marrow of her bones! (*TIL* 6)

Mrs. Ramsay sees herself as superior to her husband, to Charles Tansley, to her son James, and ultimately to all other men who worship her for her woman- and motherhood. Instead of feeling herself protected by men—a typical “chivalric” ideal of the man/woman relationship—she feels as though women shelter and assure men. Mrs. Ramsay's reversal of sex roles seems matter-of-fact to her, but at a closer reading seems revolutionary. She reads marriage as equal to mothering, which contains inherent hierarchies. Mrs. Ramsay's emotional sensitivity far outweighs the reasoning world of men, as they “control finance” and “rule India.” Indeed, the care of men becomes nearly religious for Mrs. Ramsay, as they regard her with “reverential” trust. As though possessed of a calling of divine proportions, she fervently preaches the same calling to her daughters, Minta, and Lily.

However, instead of feeling satisfying sexual and emotional intimacy with a man to the “marrow of her bones,” Mrs. Ramsay feels only the satisfaction of a woman who fulfills her duty. By viewing her relationship with men—particularly her husband—as a relationship between a mother and a child, she exposes bizarre sexual tensions in her own marriage, leaving little possibility for a connection that truly fulfills her womanhood. Woolf imagines

Mrs. Ramsay's motherly reassurances of her husband's doubts and insecurities as sexualized. As Mr. Ramsay interrupts his wife's reading of "The Fisherman's Wife" to their son James, he morphs completely into a "barren" phallic symbol in need of a soft, fecund, creatively productive woman's reassurance (*TTL* 37). Mr. Ramsay breaks "into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. He wanted sympathy." (*TTL* 37). Mrs. Ramsay reassures him with her words only, in the presence of her child, but responds in almost sexual terms to her husband's childlike neediness. As Mr. Ramsay "plunged and smote," taking from her reassurance about his self and success, Mrs. Ramsay responds with the words he needs (*TTL* 38). Having satisfied himself with her words "like a child who drops off satisfied" from the breast, he leaves her drained (*TTL* 38). Exhausted by this combination of motherhood and sexuality, Mrs. Ramsay "seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself...while there throbbed through her, like the pulse in a spring which has expanded to its full width and now gently ceases to beat, the rapture of successful creation" (*TTL* 38).¹

Mr. Ramsay's struggle towards creation follows a greater theme in the novel of the need for creation. Mrs. Ramsay's sexuality allows her to create, though not intellectually or artistically: she produces eight children, and funnels all of her passionate, creative energies into caring for her family. Mr. Ramsay's sexuality, on the other hand, thwarts his intellectual creations. William Bankes, watching Lily Briscoe paint on the beach, thinks back to his friendship with Mr. Ramsay before his marriage and family. He marks the end of their real friendship as Mr. Ramsay's admission of the beauty of motherhood, thinking, "their friendship had petered out on a Westmorland road, where the hen spread her wings before

¹ For a detailed reading of this encounter, see Jane Lilienfeld, "Where the Spear Plants Grew: the Ramsay's Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*, 155-158.

her chicks” (*TTL* 21). Saying, “Pretty—pretty,” Mr. Ramsay falls victim to the spell of beauty and maternity embodied in a hen and chicks out in a field. Though Mr. Bankes regrets his childless state, envying especially Mr. Ramsay’s daughter Cam, he feels as though Mr. Ramsay has surrendered his sharp intellectual powers to his family. Thinking of the children and Ramsay’s youthful success in philosophy, Mr. Bankes “weighed Ramsay’s case, commiserated him, envied him, as if he had seen him divest himself of all those glories of isolation and austerity which crowned him in youth to cumber himself definitely with fluttering wings and clucking domesticities. They gave him something...but they had also...destroyed something” (*TTL* 22). Mr. Bankes marks Mr. Ramsay’s success in philosophy and his marriage as a binary opposition—Ramsay chose a pretty brooding hen over his work, and can never reverse his decision nor reap the benefits of success both in marriage and family and in intellectualism.

Mr. Ramsay also sees success and family as an either/or choice, and he feels somehow that he has made the wrong one. Watching his wife and son James while reading and meditating on his work, Mr. Ramsay thinks of his “splendid mind,” and how his thought has progressed along a systematic scale of greatness, reaching to the point of “say, the letter Q” in an alphabet of intellectual progress (*TTL* 33). He immediately juxtaposes his reasonable, alphabetic imagery of the mind with a domestic scene of his children in the garden and on the beach—a domestic scene filled with “a doom which he perceived,” directly connected with the sight of “his wife and son, together, in the window” (33). Feeling his lack of intellectual progress, he blames his lack of success directly on his wife and children. Without them and their demand for his protection, his devotion, he could have progressed past Q to R, even onto Z. Mr. Ramsay senses his friends’ disparaging view of his mind after marriage, hearing “people saying—he was a failure” (*TTL* 34). Blaming his wife

and his son, he turns directly to his wife for comfort, continually demanding of her retribution for the rustiness of his splendid mind.

Mrs. Ramsay's creative powers become pale and frustrated, much like Mr. Ramsay's; however, she transforms her failures into domesticity, merely recalling her potential to have created visual and aesthetic art. At her famous dinner-party in the middle of the first section, Mrs. Ramsay channels her entire creative capacity into party-giving: perfecting the timing of the Boeuf en Daube, arranging people, and glorying in the forms of fruit in a bowl. Her concerns reveal her inner desire for aesthetic creation in opposition to her chosen motherhood. As she sits at the table, glorying in the geometric forms of "the plates making white circles" on the table, she arranges people—just as Lily will later think of arranging elements of her painting (*TTL* 83). Mrs. Ramsay experiences a sense of failure as she tries to merge the elements of her party into a united composition, but, "robbed of colour, she saw things truly. The room...was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere...Nothing seemed to have merged...And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her" (*TTL* 83). Mrs. Ramsay's domestic creation of a dinner party becomes an almost painterly concern, as she worries about questions of composition, form, color, and unity—concerns echoed in Lily's struggle with her painting.

In her mind, Mrs. Ramsay continues to connect sex with creation, even art. As she frets over her feminine need to create art, even at a dinner party, she feels "again...as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men..." (*TTL* 83). Beyond sexuality, creation becomes a strictly feminine role in her mind, directly related to femininity and childbirth. Marriage, however, impedes her own feminine creation, and Mrs. Ramsay seems to admit this as she thinks about Lily and her art, comparing her all the while to Minta, newly engaged. Directly comparing Lily to Minta, Mrs. Ramsay thinks, "With Lily it was different. She faded, under

Minta's glow; became more inconspicuous than ever... Yet, thought Mrs. Ramsay... of the two, Lily at forty will be the better. There was in Lily a thread of something; a flare of something; something of her own which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared" (*TTL* 104). Because of Lily's desexualized aura and lack of appeal to men, Mrs. Ramsay sees in her "something of her own" which can never be taken away by a relationship to a man. Feeling a need to preserve Lily's burning uniqueness, Mrs. Ramsay resigns Lily to the possibility of marrying an older, perhaps less sexually active man. As she thinks of William Bankes as Lily's only possible suitor, Mrs. Ramsay thinks them both "cold and aloof"—holding themselves apart from and above sexual relationships (*TTL* 104). While Minta glows warm at the prospect of sex, Lily shrinks, instead holding her art as a burning core at her center, and it is Lily's small, burning talent that Mrs. Ramsay prefers and sees as more desirable and permanent, especially in comparison to her own pale life of traditional femininity.

Forced by her marriage into a pale simulation of her true artistic abilities, Mrs. Ramsay folds herself neatly into the role of mother, cook, and caretaker. After her triumph of a dinner party, she puts her children to bed and seeks her husband, hoping for a time of connection. Mrs. Ramsay seeks "something more, though she did not know, could not think what it was that she wanted" from her husband (117). Mrs. Ramsay's feminine ambiguity about her needs from her spouse contrasts with Mr. Ramsay's masculine demands earlier in the novel. Wanting comfort and reassurance from his wife, Mr. Ramsay easily obtains it; unsure of the source of her unease, Mrs. Ramsay cannot forcefully demand companionship and connection from her husband. As her husband reads Sir Walter Scott, Mrs. Ramsay abandons her knitting and turns to a book of poetry. The lines Woolf weaves into her

narrative suggest the source of Mrs. Ramsay's discomfort with herself to be the same as Mr. Ramsay's anxieties: the significance of one's work after marriage.

Mr. Ramsay's concerns about the posterity of his work worry her as she sets aside her knitting for a book of poetry. His silence and reading selection indicate to her his continuing concern about whether his work will continue to be read, or whether like Sir Walter Scott's, it will be abandoned, considered old and outmoded by young men like Charles Tansley. Mrs. Ramsay reads lines of poetry: "And all the lives we ever lived/ And all the lives to be,/ Are full of trees and changing leaves..." (*TTL* 119). Unsure of their meaning, she thinks, "She did not know at first what the words meant at all" (*TTL* 119). Playing into Mr. Ramsay's preference of thinking her silly and simple, "for he liked to think that she was not clever, not book-learned at all," Mrs. Ramsay deliberately misses an understanding of the book she holds (*TTL* 121). As they both read, Mr. Ramsay silently thinks of his wife's beauty, and wishes she would speak works of love to him (*TTL* 122-123). Both experience moments of dissatisfaction and frustration, but the scene—and with it, the first section of the novel—ends with connection despite the rigidity of traditional gender roles: "...she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it; yet he knew" (*TTL* 124). Thinking the same thoughts about love, the Ramsays experience companionship despite their sacrifices. Their choice to marry represents a choice of traditional companionship over creative potential—a choice Lily spurns in favor of art.

The Ramsay's marriage profoundly impacts the unmarried characters around them in its alternate states of individual failure and profound, unearthly harmony. Perhaps because of his age—he is Mr. Ramsay's peer—William Bankes observes the tensions between good and bad in the Ramsay's marriage most profoundly. While Mr. Ramsay seeks comfort from his wife for his failure to reach the letter Z, even the letter R, Mr. Bankes realizes Mrs.

Ramsay's role in such a failure, recalling the scene in which Mr. Ramsay declares a hen and chicks "pretty, pretty" (*TTL* 21). Despite his disappointment at Mr. Ramsay's failure as a philosopher and a writer simply because of the welter of mouths to feed, Mr. Bankes also experiences a moment of wonder at the beauty of maternity similar to Mr. Ramsay's moment of weakness. Though Mr. Bankes "was childless and a widower," able to be sensible and rational and free to wander about discussing art with young women like Lily Briscoe, he watches Mr. Ramsay's family and becomes "alive to things which would not have struck him had not those sandhills revealed to him the body of his friendship lying with the red on its lips laid up in peat—for instance, Cam" (*TTL* 21). By dissecting the cause of Mr. Ramsay's failure, Mr. Bankes must necessarily face his own failure to have a "wild and fierce" daughter like Cam (*TTL* 21). Admiring Cam and desiring his own wild little girl, Mr. Bankes feels "somehow put into the wrong by her about his friendship. He must have dried and shrunk" (*TTL* 22). Torn between watching his friend Mr. Ramsay "divest himself of all those glories of isolation and austerity which crowned him in youth" and his own desire for the "something" Mr. Ramsay gains through his wife and children, Mr. Bankes feels saddened and desperate (*TTL* 22). Though recognizing traditional marriage as a threat to one's intellectual progress, Mr. Bankes longs for the companionship and the joy of fatherhood. The choice between children and the free intellect of a childless widower haunts Mr. Bankes, whose firm roots in Victorian traditionalism dictate that he cannot attain both.

The next generation of characters—Lily Briscoe, Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, Charles Tansley, and Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's children—have some hope of breaking the necessity of choice between one's creative self and companionship with the opposite sex. Their choices reflect the extent to which Victorian ideals of marriage mire not only the parental generation but the young, new, supposedly dynamic generation coming after.

Importantly, only Lily Briscoe resists the bonds of traditional marriage, judging it inadequate to meet her needs for intimacy. Paul, Minta, and the Ramsay's daughter Prue all wed, and Woolf affords them nothing but disturbingly unsatisfactory ends. Prue dies in childbirth after being parenthetically given in marriage on her father's arm during the middle section of the novel (*TTL* 131-132). Paul and Minta marry and live, but become distant despite the new title Mrs. Ramsay feels bond them together: "the Rayleys," in whose lives Mrs. Ramsay hopes for the revival even of her own parents' lives (*TTL* 113). While Paul and Minta marry, they nearly disappear from the last section of the novel in Woolf's paring-down of characters, significant only in Lily's imagined narrative of their marriage. Though ambiguous, Woolf leaves readers little doubt that the Rayley's marriage did indeed "turn out rather badly," as Lily envisions them arguing and thinks of Paul's mistress (*TTL* 173, 175). Those younger characters who heed Mrs. Ramsay's urging to marry experience a loss of self—either literal, as in the case of Prue's death in childbed, or figurative, as in Paul and Minta's supposed breakdown and failed marriage.

A cause of Lily's discomfort and the recipient of an odd mix of revulsion and motherly concern from Mrs. Ramsay, Charles Tansley at first glance seems to join Lily in firmly resisting the bonds of traditional marriage. Upon closer examination, Charles Tansley's mean-spirited jibes at Lily, Mrs. Ramsay, and the Ramsay children seem to stem from his thwarted desire for marriage and his awkward inability to attain an intimate relationship with a woman. At the very beginning of the novel, Charles Tansley reveals his longing for a wife as he accompanies Mrs. Ramsay on her errands. Finally taking Mrs. Ramsay's bag in his hands, "for the first time in his life Charles Tansley felt an extraordinary pride; felt the wind and the cyclamen and the violets for he was walking with a beautiful woman. He had hold of her bag" (*TTL* 14). The picture of chivalry and protection, Charles

Tansley glows as he accompanies the ideal wife and mother. Yearning only for the reality of a wife to walk by him, Charles Tansley covers his desire with a façade of bluster and meanness, especially to Lily and the Ramsay children. Charles Tansley too disappears in the last section of the novel, present only in Lily's memory. Thinking that their "squabbling, sparring had been silly and spiteful," Lily absorbs his most hurtful words to her—"Women can't paint, can't write"—as a distinct and useful memory (*TTL* 160, 159). Though Charles Tansley "upset the proportions of one's world," he cannot upset the proportions of traditional marriage like Lily. Lily imagines him married, happy, fulfilling his desires for a traditional man/wife relationship. As she paints at the end of the novel, Lily thinks of Charles Tansley as her foil—as a possibility for her life had her awkwardness become bitterness, had she chosen traditional relationships as her ideal instead of asking for an alternative.

While the Ramsays' lives and creativity suffers from the bonds of marriage, influencing even younger characters to follow in their footsteps, Lily bends under different burdens. Faced with the choice of intimacy with a man or her art, Lily chooses painting above any kind of human intimacy. The forms she first lays down with paint on canvas suggest her struggle with intimacy in all forms, even maternal, while her interactions with Mrs. Ramsay, William Bankes, and even Charles Tansley indicate her undeniable desire for intimacy. The Victorian template of womanhood, intimacy, and their consequences for artistry, exemplified by Mrs. Ramsay and her relationship with Mr. Ramsay denies Lily the fulfillment of all her desires. At first turning to abstract forms as a means of understanding and substituting for desired relationships, Lily becomes frustrated with her nontraditional vision and actions. Choosing art above marriage, Lily rejects Mrs. Ramsay's advice and the world Mrs. Ramsay has created around herself—but by the end of the novel, Lily establishes

a more intimate connection with the dead Mrs. Ramsay than any other woman in the novel establishes with a man. While creating an abstract work of art, Lily works toward a deep understanding of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, other characters such as Paul and Minta, Charles Tansley, and William Bankes, and most importantly, herself. Instead of indicating the end or the impossibility of human intimacy, Lily becomes a symbol of the modernist artist who transcends the difficulties of Victorian traditional intimacy through abstraction.

Lily's quest for abstraction begins as a pure pursuit, impeded only by her desire for others' approval and connection with the minds of others through her art. Woolf filters Lily's internal thoughts with Mrs. Ramsay's opinion of Lily: "Lily's picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face, she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; she was an independent little creature, and Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it..." (*TTL* 17). Lily cannot stand apart from Mrs. Ramsay's indictment of smallness and oddness; throughout the novel the reader will hear Mrs. Ramsay's fond, unintentionally belittling opinion of Lily seeping through the narrative Lily's determination and artistic theories. Shaded by other characters, Lily struggles for the "independence" Mrs. Ramsay laughingly allows her, and she does this by seeking a new kind of art that fully describes her own vision of what art ought to be (*TTL* 17).

Though determined to be independent, Mrs. Ramsay's perception of Lily as childish seems accurate. Lily seems flustered, nervous about her painting: as James Ramsay blusters past, "coming down upon her with his hands waving shouting out," she panics, hoping the little boy will not see her painting, for "that was what Lily Briscoe could not have endured. Even while she looked at the mass, at the line, at the colour...she kept a feeler on her surroundings lest some one should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at" (*TTL* 17). Lily's constant fear of discovery, of judgments of her unworthiness as

an artist keeps her from fully immersing herself in her work. Fearful even of a little boy's judgments, Lily isolates herself from the other characters, who look at her as though from a distance. Her view of the others shows in her paintings. Always watching silently from a distance, guarding herself from exchanges with other characters, especially about her painting, Lily can only see an abstracted view of human intimacy.

Despite her timidity, Lily allows William Bankes to approach her as she paints, and even reluctantly lays down her brushes to take a walk with him. Their conversation deals with the detached, outsider's vision of marriage that both Mr. Bankes and Lily hold as truths. Mr. Bankes blames marriage for Mr. Ramsay's lack of success as a philosopher; Lily defends Mr. Ramsay's work because she admires the state of the couple's "what she called 'being in love'" (*TTL* 46). Blurry and removed from the phenomenon of intimacy she observes so paintstakingly, Lily maintains an idealistic view of the Ramsay's marriage. A couple in love, "they became part of that unreal but penetrating and exciting universe with is the world seen through the eyes of love. The sky stuck to them; the birds sang through them...And, what was even more exciting, she felt, too,...how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave..." (*TTL* 47). Far removed from the burdens of the Ramsay's relationship, the tediousness and frustration of Mrs. Ramsay's everyday life of "little separate incidents" with her husband and children, Lily encapsulates their relationship in visual language. Later, watching Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay share a moment of silent, married complicity on the beach as they watch their children play ball, Lily thinks, "So that is marriage...a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball" (*TTL* 72). Reducing the sacred Victorian ideal of marriage to a series of moments equals the reduction of figurative art into a constructed, abstract aesthetic. Lily's artistic project, therefore, concerns marriage as much as an artistic vision that rebels against traditional

forms of representation. Making marriage “unreal but penetrating and exciting,” Lily defines and devours what she sees from afar, even incorporating elements of her abstract definition of marriage into her painting. Unable to penetrate into the realm of marriage and intimacy, Lily stands outside, substituting simplified definitions of marriage for actual attempts at intimacy.

Observing the banality of intimate relationships from afar, Lily feels separate from the “unreal” universe of love in which nature celebrates the joyousness of love and marriage. Turning her gaze from the married couple to her painting, she substitutes the hope of art for the hope and joy of marriage. The rapturous gaze William Bankes casts upon Mrs. Ramsay contrasts with the gaze of horror Lily casts on her painting. Hysterically, Lily “could have wept. It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad! She could have done it differently of course...But then she did not see it like that. She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral. Of that only a few random marks scrawled upon the canvas remained” (*TTL* 48). Lily describes her vision in vivid terms, equal to the manner in which she describes the Ramsay’s marriage. She can no more paint the vividness of “burning color on a framework of steel” than she can “the unreal but penetrating...universe” of “being in love” (*TTL* 48, 46-47). The inadequacy of art as a substitute for the glow of marriage she observes from afar echoes the inadequacies of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s relationship. Independent and striving for her vision, Lily spurns traditional intimacy, but finds no comfort in her art.

Woolf’s own observations of marriage echo Lily’s as she gazes on the Ramsays from a distance. Though neither Woolf nor her sister Vanessa spurned marriage, Woolf chooses to portray Lily as successful only because she does not “dilute” herself with a husband (*TTL* 102). Much like Lily, the young Stephen sisters struggled with themselves and each other

about the concepts and meanings of marriage. In her extensive biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee details Woolf's personal struggle with herself as well as her worries about her sister's marriage to Clive Bell. Seeing her sister Vanessa Stephen's engagement to Clive Bell as tantamount to death and "bereavement," the young Virginia expressed worries about losing her sister (Lee 232). Virginia also explored the "oppositions between writing and marriage," the ability to continue producing artistically despite a new, more domestic feminine role (Lee 234). However, young Virginia Stephen did marry Leonard Woolf, with whom she experienced close companionship—but with whom she never produced children. Her life with Leonard was intellectual, 'automatic,' and filled with friendship, but it was not characterized by romantic passion (the *Diary*, cited Lee 319).² Woolf's worries about intimacy and the ability to produce art are echoed in her character Lily's worries about life and art. Lily's relationship with William Bankes seems to reflect Woolf's relationship with Leonard; Lily compares herself to the domestic Mrs. Ramsay as Woolf compares herself to her maternal sister Vanessa Bell; and both women's worries about the validity and merit of their work plague them throughout their careers. Though commonly read as an image of Vanessa Bell, Lily seems more autobiographical, working through the same problems of creation, domesticity, and memory as Woolf.

Instead of seeing art as inadequate to fill her emotional needs, Lily blames her lack of talent for failing to provide forms that transcend the void left by the lack of marriage in her life. Worries about her womanhood fill her as they fill Mrs. Ramsay. Charles Tansley's taunt "Women can't paint, women can't write" haunts her, reminding Lily of the forced choice between art and traditional womanhood (*TTL* 48). Mrs. Ramsay, reading poetry, "did not know at first what the words meant at all"; Lily worries that Charles Tansley's damnation of

² For an extended description of Woolf's married life, see "Marriage" in Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 319-340.

woman in the arts hold nothing but truth (*TTL* 119). Lacking the fulfillment of her traditional role as a wife and mother, Lily feels she also lacks the talent to become an artist. Struggles with her inner desires for intimacy stem from her desire to cling to her femininity while still producing art of worth. At first believing Charles Tansley's taunt, she counts her painting "little and virginal," feeling as though womanhood and painting cannot combine (*TTL* 50). Lily's project combines a desire for a feminine art that refutes Charles Tansley's judgements of women's art with a desire to fill the void left by her lack of traditional intimacy. Lily fails at her first painting not because she believes Charles's taunts, but because she strives so feverishly against them, losing sight of art's true potential to express and to create intimacy in lieu of mere substitutes.

Lily paints because she cannot attain nor understand the human intimacy she deeply desires and admires so much in Mrs. Ramsay's model relationships. Thinking of Mrs. Ramsay and of her own "virginal" painting, Lily questions the nature of true human intimacy. Mrs. Ramsay's ability to attain the "unreal" state of marriage and traditional ideals of womanhood in all their glory puzzles and fascinates Lily:

Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? Was it, once more, the deceptiveness of beauty, so that all one's perceptions, half-way to truth, were tangled up in a golden mesh?...What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired...intimacy itself, which is knowledge... (*TTL* 50-51)

Though Lily sees her own painting as inadequate to achieve intimacy, she questions the ability of the human sexual relationship to do the same. Her own incapacity to love or to be the object of love haunts her, especially as she faces Mrs. Ramsay, loving and loved by many men. Lily wonders, "What art was there...by which one pressed through into those secret

chambers?” Mingling art and sex in her mind, Lily wonders at the effectiveness of either to achieve sameness, “unity,” or “intimacy itself.” As unreal and abstract as the Ramsays’s “being in love,” Lily longs for and questions the possibility of true intimacy.

Lily’s true desire for intimacy leads to “[l]eaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee” in an attempt for physical connection. She attains “Nothing! Nothing! as she leant her head against Mrs. Ramsay’s knee” (*TTL* 51). Lily defines “intimacy” not as sex but as knowledge—a deeper spiritual connection attained most efficiently by nonsexual means. Trying to mingle her mind with Mrs. Ramsay’s body, leaning bone against bone to attain “knowledge,” Lily attempts an intimacy without sexual penetration, but fails. Focused on her head and her mind as the site of knowledge, Lily overanalyzes the methods of achieving intimacy. Instead of passion and bodily contact, Lily seeks a more cerebral knowledge. Unable to get to the depths of Mrs. Ramsay, she sees herself as “sealed,” a term reminiscent of her “virginal” painting (*TTL* 51, 50). Her sealed body reflects her sealed mind, closed to the knowledge of another person. Even at such an early stage in her artistic career, Lily senses that intimacy results from “art,” but confuses her definition of “art” with a mix of sexual visual imagery: for example, intimacy is “waters poured into one jar” or “a golden mesh” (*TTL* 51). The failure of her intimacy reflects the failure of her painting— inexperience in intimate relationships, Lily fails at attempted intimacy, while her painting remains “virginal” because it can no more penetrate to the knowledge of another than Lily’s skull can penetrate Mrs. Ramsay’s knee.

A perception of intimacy as cerebral “knowledge” influences Lily’s art as she paints through a substitution for intimacy (*TTL* 51). Her sense that intimacy can be reached through theoretic, structured art results from Woolf’s conception of art theory. Working with Roger Fry as part of the Bloomsbury Group, Woolf knew the essays Fry wrote on the

aesthetics of modern art. In “An Essay on Aesthetics,” Fry outlines reasons for the production of art, even abstract art. Defining art as “the expression of the imaginative life rather than a copy of actual life,” Fry argues for abstraction as an expression of feeling (Fry 76). He writes, “those feelings to which the name of cosmic emotion has been...given find almost no place in life, but...do become of great importance in the arts” (Fry 79). Lily’s feelings of “cosmic emotion,” those of longing for intimacy, cannot be expressed in real life, finding release only in visual art. Arguing for the direct communication of the “pure sensations” of the artist, Fry allows that “we may, then, dispense once for all with the idea of likeness to Nature, of correctness or incorrectness as a test, and consider only whether the emotional elements inherent in natural form are adequately discovered” (Fry 82). Ridding the artist of the burdens of correct, naturalistic depiction, Fry focuses on the direct expression of emotions, best brought about by abstraction. Woolf carries Fry’s ideas about abstraction’s purity into Lily’s work. Naturalism inadequately represents Lily’s longing for intimacy. She turns to abstraction first as a theoretical substitute for emotion and intimacy, later reaching a solution for intimacy in modernity through a final, abstract work of art.

Distinguishing her representation of Mrs. Ramsay and James reading from naturalistic portraiture, Lily forces a cerebral, theoretical abstraction upon her first painting. With curiosity, Mr. Bankes points out Lily’s abstraction, demanding explanation. He asks, “What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, ‘just there?’” (52). Instead of accepting art without “likeness to Nature” as a credible artistic development, Mr. Bankes sees it as incomprehensible, begging explanation and analysis. Lily reveals her subject matter to Mr. Bankes—she has chosen to portray “Mrs. Ramsay reading to James” as a purple triangle. Continually seeking to neatly package the immensities of human love, Lily reduces her outsider’s understanding of Mrs. Ramsay and James’s intimacy to a purple triangular

shape. However, her willingness to abstract forms and focus on color and composition indicates progressiveness in her form of artistry. Lily's struggles and dissatisfaction with being made to choose between marriage, motherhood, and womanhood or her art drives her towards a new way of seeing. Though timid and doubtful of her own merit her painting's success, Lily forges the way to abstraction with a purple triangular shape. Despite Lily's inability to completely abandon representation and subject matter, her need to define and reduce the human relationship results in technical artistic advances.

Doubts and difficulties plague Lily as she struggles for the representation of her vision, much as they plagued Virginia Woolf. In her famous essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf reveals her concerns with literary representation to be as difficult and elusive as Lily's struggle with visual art. Struggling to remain true to the characters who taunt her "Catch me if you can," Woolf identifies the motivation for fiction as a pure function of representation ("Mr. Bennett" 193). As Woolf describes her struggles with the representation of character, which necessitate "a season of failures and fragments," Lily's painting and struggles with the representation of character and her vision come to mind (*TTL* 211). In another essay dealing with the difficulties of her own art, Woolf comes to terms with abstraction as a valid literary device. "Modern Fiction" declares boldly the need for abstraction to narrate the modern condition of life. Woolf famously states: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end...we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it" ("Fiction" 288). Reaching towards abstraction in painting a representation of life and vision, Lily's experiments with painterly abstraction echo Woolf's own work with fiction.

Referring to the deep connection between Woolf's writing and visual artistry, Jane Dunn expounds on "the painterly qualities of Virginia Woolf's work," arguing that "Her acute visual sense suffused her writing, giving the sense on countless occasions that she was creating a picture, painting with the pared-down boldness and simplicity of a Post-Impressionist" (Dunn 149). In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's novel most ostensibly concerned with visual art, passages of the novel demonstrate her concern with word and phrase as brushstroke, plot and arrangement as painterly composition. Appropriately, Woolf's most intensely visual passages concern Lily. Woolf carefully details color and form as she describes Lily's earliest vision:

The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white, since she saw them like that... 'It suddenly gets cold. The sun seems to give less heat,' she said, looking about her, for it was bright enough, the grass still a soft deep green, the house starred in its greenery with purple passion flowers, and rooks dropping cool cries from the high blue. But something moved, flashed, turned a silver wing in the air. (*TLL* 19)

Careful attention to brilliant imagined color characterizes this and other passages, as though Woolf holds an artist's palette, applying color to the narration of Lily's thoughts. The stylistic phrasing, set apart by commas, evokes brushstroke. Phrases seem gestural, applied with the brush of an artist, resulting in smooth, polished sections of narrative or quick, agitated, punctuated phrases expressing emotion. Woolf even defines the movement of a bird in a painterly fashion—instead of simply narrating the flight of the bird, she communicates the visual, formal movement of the bird's wing in space.³ Woolf structures the novel as a whole in a composition precisely like that of Lily's painting—two halves

³ For further discussion of the painterly aspects of Woolf's writing, particularly in the short fiction "Kew Gardens" and "Blue and Green," see Jack Stewart, "A 'Need of Distance and Blue': Space, Color, and Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*," 78-79.

connected and separated by a line down the middle.⁴ In her book on the relationship between Woolf's writing and Vanessa Bell's painting, Diane Gillespie notes Virginia's youthful but sensitive drawing experiments (Gillespie 22-31). Woolf's "painterly" writing stems directly from an eye for the visual, an artistic talent that combines with her prose style to create true art.

As Lily expounds on her reasons for abstraction to Mr. Bankes, she consciously rejects her only opportunity for a traditional male/female relationship. Her stroll with Mr. Bankes, subtly engineered by the matchmaking Mrs. Ramsay, marks a new territory of courtship and even flirtation for Lily. She shares her canvas with him as she does no other character; she thinks of the relations between men and women with a more forgiving eye simply because of Mr. Bankes (*TTL* 92). Despite her softening heart towards the widower, Lily makes a conscious decision against the "dilution" of marriage (*TTL* 102). Watching Paul and Minta announce their engagement, Lily keenly observes the effects of young love, new marriage, thinking, "For at any rate...she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle" (*TTL* 102). The seemingly illogical progression of Lily's thoughts on marriage directly to compositional problems of her painting suggests the true nature of Lily's painterly project. Substituting a life of vision and work for a life of "degradation" and "dilution," Lily rejects the subtle matchmaking of Mrs. Ramsay in favor of her painting. Realizing later the true implications of her choice, Lily admits, "Indeed, his friendship had been one of the pleasures of her life. She loved William Bankes" (*TTL* 176). Discarding her chance for traditional marriage, Lily chooses painting, hoping for more profound expressions of intimacy.

⁴ See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* 475-477, Stewart 79.

The death of Mrs. Ramsay, the war, and Lily's confirmed spinster status divide the novel, separating Lily's anxiety-filled struggles with painting from her triumphant fugue-state of creation at the end of the novel. Marking the division between old and new, failure and triumph, and traditionalism and modernity, "Time Passes" also echoes the form of Lily's final painting. In this section, Mrs. Ramsay, the picture of domesticity—the Angel in the House—dies almost silently, parenthetically.⁵ Mrs. Ramsay's death reveals itself not as a decisive, independent occurrence, but as an event that signifies not in its happening but in its absence: Mrs. Ramsay's death comes to light only as Mr. Ramsay seeks her and finds her missing (*TTL* 128). Despite her domestic power and presence, Mrs. Ramsay affects Mr. Ramsay—and soon Lily—only in her absence. Prue, the Ramsay's daughter who follows Mrs. Ramsay's urgent advice to marry, dies "in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well" (*TTL* 132). Obeying her mother's wishes to marry, Prue dies without the success of creation, symbolized strongly by her death in childbirth. Despite everyone's highest expectations for her life, Prue dies; Lily, from whom no one expects much, lives to filter the occurrences of the last section of the novel to readers.

In the final section of the novel, called "The Lighthouse," Lily takes up her paints for a final attempt to solve the problems of intimacy and abstraction in her work. Though the Ramsay's changing lives are only parenthetically and generally described in "Time Passes," Lily's activity between "The Window" and "The Lighthouse" remains a mystery. Suddenly forty-four years old, Lily mourns the death of Mrs. Ramsay in the same setting in which she struggled with painting in the beginning of the novel (*TTL* 150). Decisively, Lily thinks, "She would paint that picture now," knowing that her maturity and the death of Mrs.

⁵ Beth Riegl Daugherty explicates Woolf's need to kill Mrs. Ramsay in "Time Passes": see "'There She Sat': The Power of the Feminist Imagination in 'To the Lighthouse'" (290).

Ramsay, who symbolized external pressure to conform to traditional marriage will change her viewpoint, aiding her in completing her picture (*TTL* 147). Her decision, strong and unwavering, marks an internal change: no longer plagued by doubts about her purpose or the correctness of her decision, Lily knows she will complete her task.

Stressing the importance of the problem Lily must solve in this painting, Woolf clearly indicates Lily's inability throughout the interval of years in "Time Passes" to create the picture she fretted over in "The Window": "She would paint that picture now. It had been knocking about in her mind all these years. Where were her paints, she wondered? Her paints, yes. She had left them in the hall last night. She would start at once" (*TTL* 147). Though she continues painting in "Time Passes," away from the scene of her youthful artistic struggle, only here, in the presence of memory, maturity, and the remnants of the Ramsay's marriage can she solve the artistic problem of intimacy.

As Lily has aged, so has Mr. Ramsay, especially in his wife's absence. As he remarks to himself on Lily's "shrivelled," "skimpy, wispy" appearance, Lily thinks of his piteous appeals to her for comfort (*TTL* 150). The source of his behavior, Lily knows, is Mrs. Ramsay's treatment of him in the past. Mrs. Ramsay had allowed and encouraged childlike, demanding behavior in the presence of adult women; Lily feels her femininity inspires Mr. Ramsay's demands: "A woman, she had provoked this horror; a woman, she should have known how to deal with it" (*TTL* 152). Lily now understands the burdens of Mrs. Ramsay's traditional femininity, responsible both for a man's actions and his state of mind. The marriage she viewed from a distance at the beginning of the novel, thinking, "So that is marriage...a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball," becomes more immediate and threatening than even the prospect of Lily's own marriage to William Bankes (*TTL* 72). Marriage no longer represents something unearthly to Lily, drawing her in by the secret

intimacy inherent in the spiritual joining of two people; rather, it represents the sacrifice of a woman's life: "Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died—and had left all this. Really, she was angry with Mrs. Ramsay" (*TTL* 149). Lily's interactions with the widowed Mr. Ramsay bring about the realization of the true nature of marriage, seen before as "dilution" and now as the ultimate sacrifice of woman's self. The immediacy of Mr. Ramsay's demands crows Lily, but in her maturity, she stands firm and refuses to abandon her creativity to yield to his wants, thinking, "She would give him what she could" (*TTL* 150). Nevertheless, Lily realizes the power and danger of Mr. Ramsay's insistence, praying he ceases before his demands "swept her down in [their] flow" (*TTL* 151).

Marking the concrete difference not only between herself and the late Mrs. Ramsay but between the mutable, doubting Lily of "The Window" and the aging, focused woman of "The Lighthouse," Lily rejects Mr. Ramsay's pitiful pleas for maternal compassion. In her article "'There She Sat': The Power of the Feminist Imagination in *To the Lighthouse*," Beth Rigel Daugherty reads Lily's strength and insistence in artistic creation not as a rebellion against Mrs. Ramsay but as a reclamation of Mrs. Ramsay's "given" self (*TTL* 149). Daugherty insists that Mrs. Ramsay's death "frees both mother and daughter to be themselves...she recovers the mother that existed beneath the burden of myth and claims *her* as part of her feminist heritage" (Daugherty 301). Lily's painting represents a reforming of woman's work, a re-creation of Mrs. Ramsay only conceivable by a woman who rejects the forms of social tradition under which Mrs. Ramsay suffocated. In resisting Mr. Ramsay's demands for mothering and care, Lily positions herself against Mrs. Ramsay; however, Lily achieves a certain kind of knowledge of Mr. Ramsay in the completion of her work—knowledge defined by the young Lily herself as "intimacy" (*TTL* 51).

Though reclaiming Mrs. Ramsay in her meditative work, Lily also strives towards a more important goal in her final painting. In her essay on *To the Lighthouse*, Brandy Brown Walker insists that the subject matter and the motivation for Lily's painting is her own artistic vision and development as a woman (Walker 38). Contrasting to the subject matter of her original painting—a figurative depiction, in part, of Mrs. Ramsay and James—this picture, Walker claims, “chooses” both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, “and then discards them both as insufficient options of a limiting binary” (Walker 38). Lily's painting in the last section of the novel becomes less about depiction of vision and more about depiction of self and the life choices she has made. To depict a nontraditional life, Lily relies on nontraditional standards of art. Though Woolf provides few details about the appearance of Lily's canvas, its abstraction can be assumed from Lily's earlier experimentations with abstracting the form of Mrs. Ramsay reading to James.⁶

As an act of forming self and reaffirming nontraditional decisions, Lily's painting necessarily reaches back to the past, and to the people against whom she once measured herself, especially Mrs. Ramsay. Once a figurehead for the only kind of femininity available, Mrs. Ramsay now becomes a force against which Lily rebels. Nevertheless, Lily feels the need to reclaim Mrs. Ramsay in an act that Mrs. Ramsay herself never could have completed in the shadow of her husband. Struggling with the meaning of her life, much as Mrs. Ramsay has struggled earlier with the meaning of her domestic life, Lily wonders, “What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come” (*TTL* 161). Struggling to uncover for herself and for the Ramsays the true goals of

⁶ Walker points out the debate about the forms of Lily's final canvas, especially the final line drawn down the center. Horizontal or vertical, the line more clearly represents an abstract vision of art rather than masculinity or femininity. See Walker 36.

human existence, Lily marks that marriage does not contain revelations, judging from the Ramsays; nor does age, as her revelation has not simply appeared. A struggle for the meaning of a human life, both by itself and in relation to others fuels Lily's drive to finish her painting; an urge to uncover universal truth about human existence and the possibilities of intimacy both for her own benefit and for the benefit of the Ramsays' past marriage.

The novel's final section fades back and forth between James' and Cam's struggle with their father, and Lily's struggle with memory and painting. Within these memories lie her struggles with Charles Tansley, her love for William Bankes, but most importantly, her struggle against Mrs. Ramsay's "mania for marriage" (*TTL* 175). Her desire for a "razor edge of balance between two opposite forces: Mr. Ramsay and the picture" necessarily reflects Lily's rejection of marriage (*TTL* 193). Balancing the demands made on her by a man—the demands Mr. Ramsay exacted upon his late wife in the first section of the novel—with the creation of art, Lily resolves early on to give Mr. Ramsay only "what she could" (*TTL* 150). As she nears the completion of her painting, Lily struggles not only with the balance between Mr. Ramsay and her painting, but between marriage and aloneness, femininity and masculinity, and ultimately, emptiness and fullness. Lily thinks,

One glided...between things, beyond things. Empty it was not, but full to the brim...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...It was a miserable machine, an inefficient machine, she thought, the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force it on. (*TTL* 192, 193)

At some moments Lily feels full of life, full of vision, "full to the brim"; at others she feels "painting" and "feeling," intertwined human "apparatuses," to be completely insufficient and meaningless for the fulfillment of her goal. Wanting to balance the formation of the

“thing...before it has been made anything” with “itself,” Lily seeks to balance something with nothing (*TTL* 193).

Unlike her early struggles with form and abstraction, Lily’s fluid, meditative approach to artistic portrayal brings about a successfully harmonious abstract canvas. Instead of worrying about the specific mechanics of abstraction as she does at the dinner party, moving her painted tree with the salt shaker, Lily remarks on almost nothing about the form of her last, successful painting. Nevertheless, her concern with balance and expression of memory and emotion recall Fry’s treatise on aesthetics. In his essay, Fry not only defends abstraction as a valid form of modern art, but outlines the “various methods” of “arousing emotions,” referring to these as “the emotional elements of design” (Fry 80). Citing “rhythm...mass...space...light and shade...colour” as elements of painting, Fry outlines almost exactly Lily’s mix of concerns in her final painting. Before obsessed with arranging still-representational forms, Lily’s thoughts now play with absolute non-figuration. Thinking of the “hollowness” in her body after Mrs. Ramsay’s death, Lily “called out silently...to that essence which sat by the boat, that abstract one made of her, that woman in grey, as if to abuse her for having gone...” (*TTL* 178). Woolf describes Lily’s idea of Mrs. Ramsay as an abstract, formed by elements of mass, space, color, and “essence” (*TTL* 178). Abandoning her earlier preoccupation with technical correctness, Lily reaches to the “essence” of Mrs. Ramsay, the “essence” of memory and herself, achieving naturally the elements Fry defines as pleasing in abstract work.

Balancing the present with the past, the living Lily with the dead ghost of the feminine Mrs. Ramsay, remains the most ambitious goal of Lily’s painting, formally and emotionally—and that which brings her the most satisfaction and the “intimacy” she seeks through physical contact in the first section of the novel (*TTL* 51). The younger Lily leans

her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee, seeking to absorb and know the older, admired woman. The older Lily no longer idolizes Mrs. Ramsay; rather, sees her life as a life of difficulty, of sacrifice. While she directly defies Mrs. Ramsay's explicit urges to "marry, marry," Lily thinks, "We can over-ride her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us" (*TTL* 174). Lily finds, however, that Mrs. Ramsay does not recede from her painting; rather, she integrates her ghost deeply into Lily's creation, making herself a part of Lily—more of intimacy than Lily could have anticipated. Surprised by the nearly physical presence of Mrs. Ramsay and her feelings, losses, and disappointments, Lily thinks:

To want and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have—to want and want—how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again! Oh, Mrs. Ramsay! she called out silently, to that essence which sat by the boat, that abstract one made of her, that woman in grey, as if to abuse her for having gone, and then having gone, come back again. It had seemed so safe, thinking of her. Ghost, air, nothingness; a thing you could play with easily...she had been that, and then suddenly she put her hand out and wrung the heart thus. (*TTL* 178-179)

Speaking both of herself and of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily feels the pain of desire for what one cannot have—Lily cannot have secure, happy, traditional intimacy as Mrs. Ramsay knows it, while Mrs. Ramsay cannot have art or creativity as Lily can. At this sudden, deep moment of connection, Lily understands another human for the first time, knowing her motivations, her pains, her death most closely. Guilty for "abstracting" and "abusing" her for her "old-fashioned" ideas, Lily's heart aches with Mrs. Ramsay's presence and with her own connection to the dead woman (*TTL* 178, 174). Having rejected intimacy for painting, Lily finds a connection with another human through her art, one that remains for her more meaningful than her connection with Mr. Ramsay, Mr. Bankes, or any temptation of the traditional connection of marriage.

At the very end of her painting, Lily reaches completion at the moment Mr. Ramsay, James, and Cam land at the Lighthouse. She surveys “its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter?...With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished” (*TTL* 208-209). Fry comments directly on the function of the line, saying, “The drawn line is the record of a gesture, and that gesture is modified by the feeling which is thus communicated to us directly” (Fry 80). A final gesture of abstraction in the spirit of balance finishes Lily’s painting—instant and spontaneous, not preconceived or planned, the line finishes the painting as a deliberate action of the artist. Realizing herself and her ability to act and create, Lily creates an intimacy both with herself and, Fry proposes, the viewer of her work. Abstraction creates a pure expression of her emotion, allowing her to connect both with herself and with a viewer. Lily’s painting, which began as a cerebral substitute for the physicality of human intimacy, becomes in the end a universal gesture of intimacy in the emotions of the artist and the carefully observing viewer. Significantly, Lily experiences none of her earlier desire to hide her canvas. Confident in the clarity of her vision, she can communicate her deepest emotions with a viewer through her canvas.

Lily’s disinterest in the enduring value of her art indicates the temporality of self-discovery and –definition. For Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, the key to self lies in marriage, in the enmeshing of one’s soul with one’s spouse. Rejecting this notion, Lily chooses to fulfill herself, seeking new models of femininity and intimacy that she reaches through her final painting. Knowledge of herself, an understanding of Mrs. Ramsay, and her vision remains more important than traditional marital intimacy, and the temporality of the product of Lily’s self-discovery reinforces the progressive nature of the human character. As she realizes her

painting “would be destroyed,” she realizes the modernity and temporality of her artistic vision. Though it solves her current problems of intimacy and emotion, Lily’s painting cannot make claims for universality for differing times. Just as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s model of function and “the meaning of life” could not satisfy the younger Lily existing in a post-Victorian modernity, Lily’s model of modernity through her abstract painting will not function for future generations (*TTL* 161). Lily’s discovery of self through painting, though begun as a substitute for traditional intimacy, transforms and redefines her own models of human relationships, allowing her life and her art validity in modern times. Woolf pushes her readers to modern visions of intimacy and art, dealing closely with the concerns of visual art but also structuring her fictional representations in new, innovative, even abstract ways. Lily’s personal vision establishes connection: with her self, with her past, with her viewer, and with Woolf’s reader, standing as an innovative intimacy in the conditions of modernity.

Bibliography

- Daugherty, Beth Riegl. "‘There She Sat’: The Power of the Feminist Imagination in *To the Lighthouse*." *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), 289-308.
- Dunn, Jane. *A Very Close Conspiracy: Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1990.
- Fry, Roger. "An Essay in Aesthetics." *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 75-82.
- Gillespie, Diane. *The Sisters’ Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988.
- Harrington, Henry R. "The Central Line down the Middle of *To the Lighthouse*." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1980. University of Wisconsin Press. 363-382.
- Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1996.
- Lilienfeld, Jane. "‘Where the Spear Plants Grew’: the Ramsays’ Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*." *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1981. 148-169.
- Walker, Brandy Brown. "Lily’s Last Stroke: Painting in Process in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*." *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*. New York: Pace University Press, 1997. 32-38.
- Woolf, Virginia. "Blue and Green." *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick. San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1985. 142.
- . "Kew Gardens." *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick. San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1985. 90-95.
- . *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1923-1928*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

- . "Modern Fiction." *The Virginia Woolf Reader*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984. 283-292.
- . "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." *The Virginia Woolf Reader*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984. 192-212.
- . *A Room of One's Own*. San Diego, Harcourt Inc., 1929.
- . "A Society." *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick. San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1985. 124-136.
- . *To the Lighthouse*. San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1927.