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Living Amidst Time and Death: A Portrait of Human Endurance in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

For as long as mankind has existed, it has been his plight to endure the destructive forces of nature that work against him, the forces of Time and Death. The human struggle to cope with these forces can often manifest itself in one of two ways: One can choose either to willfully ignore the passage of time, or to ruminate so heavily on his own mortality as to inhibit himself from finding any sort of purpose in life. In her novel *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf poignantly captures each of these responses to mortality in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, whose marital union highlights the stark divorce between their perspectives on reality. Whereas Mrs. Ramsay tries her utmost to turn a blind eye to the passage of time and to live a fruitful life, her husband seems to think only of the passing time, and, as a result, finds himself hesitant to engage with the world in any meaningful way. These alternate views of life dance with one another throughout the novel, and as the sense of precipitating doom grows stronger on every page, so, too, do the central questions — what is the meaning of life? are all efforts to find meaning in life futile? is man destined only for failure, for death? For all their efforts to understand the reality in which they move, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay both come up empty-handed, producing only bleak answers to these questions. But Woolf offers a third, more hopeful view of life in the character of Lily Briscoe, who, in her literal and figurative attempts to paint reality as she sees it rather than bend reality into something it is not, successfully unifies the concepts of

life and death, finitude and eternity, into an organic whole. By establishing Mrs. Ramsay as a creative force and Mr. Ramsay as a force of destruction, and subsequently by using the character of Lily Briscoe to unify both forces, Woolf conveys a profound truth: Even in the presence of Time and Death, life is worth living meaningfully.

The matriarch of the Ramsay family is a woman with an extraordinary capacity to hope and to impose meaning on the world around her, but, despite all of her arduous efforts to find purpose in her life, Mrs. Ramsay nevertheless harbors an intense fear of death and is, at her core, deeply unhappy. Unlike her husband, Mrs. Ramsay moves through life by acting upon the world. Almost as if to prove that she has a concrete place in the universe, Mrs. Ramsay is absorbed in the act of creating, of physically affecting her surroundings, of *doing*. She exhibits her love for others in tangible ways, such as knitting stockings for the Lighthouse keeper's son, cutting out pictures from a magazine with her youngest son, and meticulously setting the table for a dinner party. Lily Briscoe, the young painter who befriends the Ramsay family, captures the essence of Mrs. Ramsay's intrinsic need to act upon life by describing this impulse in the simplest of terms: "She opened bedroom windows. She shut doors" (Woolf 49). But although Mrs. Ramsay seems to move through life boldly, opening windows and shutting doors with a sense of domineering control, all of her efforts to belong fully to this world are merely an attempt to conceal her fear of that fate towards which all of humanity must march: death. Mrs. Ramsay is so preoccupied with the passage of time that Nature itself seems to encroach on her sense of security, and this is most evident when the sound of waves breaking upon the shore suddenly fills her with existential terror:

The monotonous fall of the waves on the beach... suddenly and unexpectedly... had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea... this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror. (16)

But what Mrs. Ramsay does next is telling, for after being overwhelmed with this paralyzing fear of death, she immediately forces it out of her mind by focusing on another sound, the sound of her husband reciting poetry in the garden. When she does so, “she [is] soothed once more, assured again that all [is] well” (16). Mrs. Ramsay’s tendency to deliberately ignore and conceal all reminders of death, which is epitomized when she wraps her shawl around an ominous skull that hangs in her children’s bedroom, reveals the extent to which she fears the passage of time, as well as the extent of her unhappiness. Although Mrs. Ramsay seems to approach life so differently than Mr. Ramsay does, she, like her husband, recognizes that life is in fact impermanent, and fails to find any lasting, meaningful form of happiness. But unlike her husband, Mrs. Ramsay continues to actively hope for happiness and impose meaning on the world, even when all of her efforts seem futile. This hope, which is embodied in her response to her youngest son, James, when he asks if they will go to the Lighthouse — ““Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow”” (3) — sets Mrs. Ramsay distinctly apart from her husband, who declares ““But... it won’t be fine”” (4). The characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay can be boiled down to these responses to the question of the Lighthouse, for while both fear (and, to some extent, know) that the journey will not take place, Mrs. Ramsay alone chooses to ignore reality and hope for the world to make sense.

Mr. Ramsay, the patriarch of the Ramsay family, copes with the harsh reality of life by immersing himself in thoughts concerning the passage of time and the futility of all human efforts, an approach which unsurprisingly leaves little room for meaning in his life. Unlike his wife, he not only acknowledges, but also embraces the concept of death, taking a strange comfort in the idea that all men are destined to perish. A man characterized by his intensity of mind, Mr. Ramsay spends his time isolated from others in deep and profound thought. As a result, he believes himself to understand, perhaps better than anyone, that “life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished [is] one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure” (4). Mr. Ramsay prides himself on his power to endure, painting himself in his mind as “a king in exile” (148), a sort of martyr figure who is enlightened enough to realize the emptiness within life, and strong enough to take on the burdens of mankind. So much does Mr. Ramsay look down upon the world, which he refers to as this “poor little place” (69), that he actually feels “as if to be caught happy in a world of misery [is] for an honest man the most despicable of crimes” (44). If Mrs. Ramsay is characterized by her need to actively seek out beauty and meaning in concrete things, it is fair to say that her husband is characterized by his desire to seek meaning through abstract thought. Mrs. Ramsay captures her husband’s love of the abstract over the concrete in the following passage:

Indeed he seemed to her sometimes made differently from other people, born blind, deaf, and dumb, to the ordinary things, but to the extraordinary things, with an eye like an eagle’s. His understanding often astonished her. But did he notice the flowers? No. Did

he notice the view? No. Did he even notice his own daughter's beauty, or whether there was pudding on his plate or roast beef? (70)

Despite all of his intellectual attempts to find the meaning in his life, Mr. Ramsay never truly looks at the world and experiences it with his senses. He instead chooses to remain a passive observer in life, which leaves Lily Briscoe wondering "why so brave a man in thought should be so timid in life" (45). Although Mr. Ramsay's somewhat pessimistic approach to life has its benefits — one being that Mr. Ramsay gains the respect of everyone around him for the sheer depth of his mind —, it has many more setbacks. Indeed, Mr. Ramsay's refusal to "hope what [is] utterly out of the question" (31), a refusal that is exemplified by his emphatic assertion that the approaching weather will not permit anyone to venture to the Lighthouse, earns the enduring hatred of his youngest son, James. It is likely that James dislikes his father because Mr. Ramsay represents everything that Mrs. Ramsay is not. For while Mrs. Ramsay has a strong sense of this-worldliness, Mr. Ramsay is characterized by "a fiery unworldliness" (24). While Mrs. Ramsay creates hope, Mr. Ramsay utterly destroys hope. And while Mrs. Ramsay gives to those around her, Mr. Ramsay takes mercilessly from those around him. Lily Briscoe recognizes this, reflecting, "That man... never [gives]; that man [takes]... Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving..." (149). Although Mr. Ramsay's struggle to endure life manifests itself so differently than does that of his wife, he does share something in common with her: he is deeply unsatisfied with life. Truly, despite all of his efforts to think his way into to the heart of life's meaning, he, like his wife, comes up empty-handed.

The tension that arises from Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's contrasting perspectives of life is revolved through the character of Lily Briscoe, who, in her literal and figurative attempts to paint

reality, realizes that life can only be understood in terms of both the light and the shadows, both the inevitability of future death and the undeniable beauty of the present moment. If Woolf had not created the character of Lily Briscoe, the portrait of life she paints in her novel would have been a bleak one. Indeed, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay both demonstrate throughout the entirety of the novel that they are yearning for something more, longing for happiness to fill the void in their lives. What Mr. Ramsay desires is the feeling that he “[is] needed; not here only, but all over the world” (37), and though Mrs. Ramsay cannot name exactly what is missing from her life, she acutely recognizes its absence, thinking, “There is something I want — something I have come to get... [but she falls] deeper and deeper without knowing quite what it [is]” (119). Unlike Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, Briscoe alone has the ability to feel at peace with her life. Briscoe’s ability to accept life in its fullness stems from her ability to see reality as it truly is, without bending it to her fancies, like Mrs. Ramsay, and without ruminating too heavily on its negative aspects, like Mr. Ramsay. Indeed, Briscoe’s one goal is to paint the world as she sees it, to “[struggle] against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: ‘But this is what I see; this is what I see’” (19). In this struggle to capture every element of the reality which she observes, Briscoe acknowledges that “a light here [requires] a shadow there” (53), signaling on some deeper level that antagonistic forces are necessary for life itself. This necessary union of antagonistic forces is best embodied in the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, who, despite their differences in perspective, display a profound and genuine love for one another. Mrs. Ramsay, an utterly life-giving force who clings to hope in the most desperate of circumstances, loves her husband despite his declaration that they will not reach the Lighthouse on the next morning. And Mr. Ramsay, who thinks such profound thoughts on the nature of life as to be “incapable of untruth” (4), loves his

wife despite her choice to believe what is, perhaps, the ultimate untruth, which is that ““yes, of course”” (3) the Lighthouse will be reached. Briscoe, who sees Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay as absolute “symbols of marriage” (72), recognizes that their marriage works in spite of, and perhaps even because of, their fundamental differences, and that the same force which binds them in marriage is the same force which holds all of life together: love. Truly, for Briscoe, who must restrain her impulse to exclaim, “I’m in love with this all”” (19) as she surveys the world around her, love is the force through which “barbarity [is] tamed, the reign of chaos subdued” (47). Because Briscoe is able to, through love, see life as an organic whole, she is able to find a certain meaning in it which neither Mr. nor Mrs. Ramsay can find. In other words, Briscoe believes that her life is purposeful, and reflects that even their little island, “small as it [is]... [has] a place in the universe” (189). This does not mean, however, that Briscoe is ignorant or unaware of the impermanence of life; like all human beings, she knows that she is subject to the forces of Time and Death. Indeed, even as she paints she reflects on the perishability of her canvas, thinking, “It [will] be hung in the attics... it [will] be destroyed. But what [does] that matter?” (208). Even with the knowledge that she and all of her work will perish, Briscoe continues to seek meaning in her life; she continues to paint what she sees. In doing so, she is stronger than both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. For, unlike Mrs. Ramsay, Briscoe is able to fully accept the impermanence of life and face death, and unlike Mr. Ramsay, she is able to choose to go on living, to engage with the world and finding meaning even in her small corner of the universe. By recognizing that her painting is not permanent and neither is life, and by choosing to paint, to live, nonetheless, Briscoe defiantly refuses the idea that life is meaningless.

All of the characters which Woolf portrays in *To the Lighthouse* are fighting the same fight, the fight to impose meaning on the world around them, even though life seems to beat on monotonously and without purpose. And although they are united in their fight, each ultimately stands alone in his or her personal struggle to find meaning. Mrs. Ramsay seeks this meaning by acting upon the world; Mr. Ramsay seeks meaning by observing the world; Lily Briscoe seeks, and attains, meaning by doing both. Because Briscoe is both an active participant and a conscious observer in life, she offers what is perhaps the most reliable perspective of reality in this novel. This perspective integrates Mrs. Ramsay's unreasonable optimism with Mr. Ramsay's inhibiting pessimism, providing Briscoe with the ability to see life as a coherent whole. By using the character of Lily Briscoe to highlight the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, in whom lie the opposing forces of life, Woolf suggests that reality is a sacred union of life and death, permanence and impermanence. And though the fight to reach the Lighthouse — that final destination where all will be clear and where meaning will be unveiled — is ongoing, constantly changing, and never-ending, perhaps the purpose of life is not to reach the Lighthouse, but to live in constant hope of reaching it. Truly, to go on living with hope and purpose in the midst of uncertainty is the most noble feat of mankind.

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1927.