

Mrs Ramsay's Character in *To the Lighthouse*

Being a female writer in a patriarchal society, Woolf raises issues on gender and gender roles, and challenges the role of the Victorian woman, both in her novels as well as in her essays. The ideas of women, their role and identity become especially obvious in her novel *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf in this novel clearly juxtaposes the two images of women, namely the Victorian ideal and the 'New Woman'. Woolf herself contributes greatly to shaping the new woman's identity, as she sets out to destroy the stereotype of that time which suggested that only men can be important writers.

The Victorian Womanhood

The Victorian woman was often seen as the ideal woman, the Angel in the House, even long after the Victorian era. The term "angel" stems directly from Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem "The Angel in the House," in which he described his meek and pious wife. Central of the Victorian ideology of the feminine was the idea of 'true womanhood'. The four 'cardinal virtues' in the true woman were piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. This was not totally new, but the emphasis was different. Idealisation of women became heavily domestic in the nineteenth century. The notion of the domestic idyll and woman's place in it, was essentially middle class.

To rationalise this domesticity, the notion of the separate spheres of the sexes was popular. During the Victorian era (1837- 1901) the public and the private sphere were increasingly identified with ideas of gender, so that the life of a woman in Britain revolved entirely around the private sphere of the home, the family and motherhood. Whereas men, being in a superior or privileged position, were able to be part of both spheres, the public and the private. The nineteenth century was confident that it knew the difference between the sexes and that these differences were total and innate.

Marriage was the major goal for most women, ignoring their possibilities to emancipate themselves. Staying single meant that a woman lost her social position and only attracted disapproval of society. The odd woman - the woman who could not marry - undermined the comfortable binary system of Victorian sexuality and gender roles.

Politically the New Woman was an anarchic figure, who criticized the society's insistence on marriage as woman only option for fulfilling life. Women were taught at a young age that they were to get married and have children, and thus also their education was targeted at these goals. A large proportion of their education included domestic duties such as sewing and preparing her for marriage in general. As Woolf pointed out for women in the nineteenth century "Marriage was the only profession open to her."

Mrs. Ramsay

Woolf's novel is set in the Ramsay family's summer home in the Hebrides, on the Isle of Skye. The gender landscape of the book is highly traditional despite of the fact that the novel is set between 1910 and 1920. Mrs. Ramsay devotes herself to her family and friends. She embodies the virtue of duty, subservience, self-sacrifice and other qualities which are proper for a Victorian woman. Mrs Ramsay's character symbolizes the essence of the Victorian womanhood. There is no clear reference to her first name or maiden name in the novel, she exists only as Mr. Ramsay's wife. We don't know any information, details about her life before her marriage, before she became Mrs. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay, the patriarch - known only by his surname – is an authoritarian, emotionally distant philosopher. Mrs. Ramsay is described in the novel through the technique of interior monologue.

Mrs. Ramsay's first word in the novel's opening scene is "yes", which discloses her affirmative and positive nature. This opening scene represents an idyllic picture about Mrs, Ramsay and her son. The tenderness and protectiveness likens this picture to the Madonna and child paintings. Mrs. Ramsay is the generative force in the novel who must literally provide and create life for all of her family. "They came to her naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that; She often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions."