

To Liberate a Sibyl: Virginia Woolf's Treatment of the Grail Quest Model in *To the Lighthouse*

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ABSTRACT

The following paper addresses Virginia Woolf's exploration and feminist revision of the quest model in *To the Lighthouse*. Specifically, it examines Woolf's expression of dissatisfaction with sex-role models as presented in the traditional quest form and the alternatives for change that she offers in the context of the novel.

RÉSUMÉ

La dissertation qui suit a pour sujet l'exploration et la revision féministe de la recherche romantique présentée par Virginia Woolf dans son roman *To the Lighthouse*. Dans celui-ci, les modèles sexuels de la recherche romantique sont étudiés afin de découvrir leurs effets sur les relations entre les différents personnages. Woolf nous apporte une vision d'un mode de vie moins limité par les conventions sexuelles.

In her article on "The Patriarchy in Virginia Woolf's Fiction," Beverly Ann Schlack makes the following comment on Woolf's "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid":

We must, Woolf concludes, substitute some better, life affirming activity for the male quest for victory and power. We must re-educate men and women against the prevailing, limited notions of their roles.¹

The issue that Schlack identifies in Woolf's essay is also addressed in the mythic structure of *To the Lighthouse*. As Jessie Weston pointed out in *From Ritual to Romance*,² the romantic quest derives from the ancient Isis-Osiris, Demeter-Persephone fertility myths. These have been recognized in Woolf's works by Evelyn Haller,³ Madeline Moore,⁴ and others. Weston argues that the grail tradition represents the masculinization of a formerly feminine ritual tradition. As such, this more recent version of the myth provides an archetypal model of the socially enforced sex roles that were at last being challenged by Woolf and many of her female contemporaries. Granted that evidence for Woolf's use of ancient fertility myths is substantial, I would argue that a parallel and complementary exploration of the grail quest tradition enriches *To the Lighthouse* by providing a vehicle for social criticism.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf closely examines the role of the quest's female character, or sibyl, in relation to that of the traditional male quester. She shows how the grail motif or model provides a diminished representation of both sexes by treating their roles as mutually exclusive. By placing her male and female characters in various positions along a continuum of responses to these roles, ranging from compliance to rebellion, and by testing the validity of these responses against the daily and global realities her characters face, Woolf is able to expose the limitations of the quest model and suggest alternative approaches to the human search for truth which allow fuller participation by members of both sexes.

In an attempt to show how Woolf debunks the sexist elements of the quest motif in *To the Lighthouse*, it seems prudent to have at hand a summary of the model's archetypal male and female roles. Grover Smith provides such a summary in a brief note describing T.S. Eliot's use of traditional quest elements in his works:⁵

The quest pattern, wherever found, requires three characters — the quester, the sibyl, (personating the fertility goddess), and the god. In the Hellenic mysteries, the sibyl instructs the initiate before he enters the

maze or labyrinth where he hopes to find the god of fertility and rebirth. In the Grail legend, she is both old and young; before the quester enters the Grail castle, a crone accosts him and warns him not to fail in his quest, and later, after he has reached the Fisher King (i.e., the divinity), she appears as the young grail maiden. Her importance lies in the fact that she is both an efficient and final cause of the quest: it is she who inspires the quester, and it is she whose hand he seeks when he has succeeded. No matter what the external fabric of the story, the sibyl is universally the same. The quester, in every instance is seeking love or its idea.... The journey is difficult; the labyrinth he threads or the wasteland he crosses symbolizes the toils of life. The pattern, of course, occurs frequently in literature. The sibyl, though usually a symbol of life, may be a vampire or source of evil.... At length, he [the quester] sees that he himself has been unworthy of his quest.... Without discipline... he can encounter the sibyl only as vampire.⁶

Smith's summary clearly defines sex roles as mutually exclusive in traditional quest lore. The male is active. The female is passive. Any relationship between the two is limited to ritualistic meetings that are almost incidental to the progress of the story. Although Smith stresses the importance of the sibyl's role, one wonders if a few prominently placed signposts might serve as well: "Start here," "Detour," "Finish Line." The sibyl's changing aspect reflects the worthiness of the quester. While the quester galavants about the country side, learning about himself and life, she simply inspires, influences and waits for him to return to her, ready to don whatever disguise he is prepared to see her in, given his state of development at the time.

It is not difficult to imagine that Virginia Woolf, artist, feminist and socialist,⁷ might find the model that Smith describes to be inadequate to her purposes. Certainly, as an artist in her own right, seeking her own truth, Woolf could not support, or use unaltered, a model that excluded the female sex from the activity of questing. On Saturday, February 27th, 1926, while working on *To the Lighthouse*, she identifies herself as a quester, in her diary:

Yet I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on and say "This is it?" (*WD*, p. 86)

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf renders ridiculous the notion that sex determines suitability for passive waiting or active questing by having Charles Tansley assert, in full compliance with the quest model and in direct opposition to his reality, that "Women can't paint. Women can't

write" (*TL*, p. 75), in a novel where he is the creation of a woman.

By the same token that Woolf could not, with integrity as an artist, deploy in her works the traditional quest model as she found it, she could not, as a feminist, validate the female role as exclusively passive, entirely bound up in and controlled by the conditions of the male quest. As a feminist, her treatment of the quest would have to advocate a change that would admit of the autonomy of women, expanding their role from the merely influential and decorative.

In "Women in Fiction," Woolf dismisses the limited treatment of women as unrealistic, "for of course, until very lately, women in literature were the creation of men" (*CE*, II, p. 146). She insists that "change has turned the English woman from a non-descript influence, fluctuating and vague... to a responsible citizen, ... one who must act for herself and not merely influence the acts of others" (*CE*, II, p. 149). Woolf goes on to anticipate a change in women's fiction that will accommodate the changed feminine character. Change "will lead [women] to be less absorbed in facts.... They will look beyond the personal and political relationship to the wider questions which the poet tries to solve — of our destiny and the meaning of life" (*CE*, II, p. 147). Woolf's essay describes the process by which women writers must learn to produce fiction that will contribute to progress in the human quest for knowledge and meaning. By implication, she is also describing the process by which the sibyl's role in the quest motif must become more active if the model is to serve the needs of these new women writers and their readers. Like Mrs. Ramsay's daughters in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's female contemporaries were faced with the opportunity to create for themselves an atmosphere in which they could "sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other" (*TL*, p. 14). They were in a position to create a new female archetype for emulation. *To the Lighthouse* provides a fictional account of the social and creative processes by which such a change might be accomplished.

As a socialist who saw merit in a society that offers its members equal opportunity in exchange for shared responsibility in providing it, Woolf would certainly have found the quest model to be a poor program for social progress. A society that denies its female members equal opportunity for expression and action may also abdicate its responsibility for nurturing itself. In "Virginia Woolf and the

Women's Movement," Naomi Black summarizes this view:

women have produced a set of values and practical skills that are excluded, along with women, from the larger society that is organized and run by men. The female virtues are nurturant, co-operative, and peaceful. The female skills produce orderliness, safety, and security. An authoritative public role for women is therefore necessary to improve the defective social system.... Women's training and experience, what we would call socialization, would keep a government run by women from being imperialistic or warlike.⁸

Black goes on to marshal evidence that Woolf placed some credence in this "social feminist" position. Certainly, Woolf's views on the relationship of women, pacifism and war are well known. They were given the following expression in this oft-quoted passage from a 1916 letter:

I grow steadily more feminist, owing to the *Times*, which I read at breakfast and wonder how this masculine fiction [the war] keeps going a day longer — without some vigorous young woman pulling us together and marching through it. (*Letters*, II, p. 76)

The idea that allowing women a more active social role would produce an ameliorating effect for both sexes and the society they share stayed with Woolf all her life. In a 1940 letter, she speculates that a world educated to the horrifying outcome of the male quest for power might be more open to the responsible influence of female values. Woolf sees, in "pooling men's and women's work the possibility... of removing men's disabilities" (*Letters*, VI, p. 379). She goes on:

It looks as if the sexes can adapt themselves, and here (that's our work) we can, or the young women can, bring enormous influence to bear. So many of the young men, could they get prestige and admiration, would give up glory and develop what's now so stunted. (*Letters*, VI, p. 380)

A sense of responsibility toward one's fellow persons is inherent in the traditionally feminine value of nurturing. This sense is necessarily stunted in a society where the politically privileged members are brought up to value power above all else. Only when the cooperative "female" values are granted the "power" of "prestige" can issues of social responsibility be adequately refocused on improving the quality of individual lives. This point is illustrated in Mrs. Ramsay's frustrated desire to elucidate the social problem. Her indignation on this issue is justified since she has no opportunity to exercise her good intentions on

any grand scale in the society in which she lives. While she is ridiculed for her passion over the lack of a hospital in the vicinity of her summer home and the condition of English dairies, her concerns are valid and certainly more "life affirming" than Mr. Ramsay's liking "that men should labour and sweat" and be "drowned, out there in the storm" (*TL*, p. 245). Mr. Ramsay's idea of questing might be very romantic but, as Mrs. Ramsay momentarily realizes, with her fifty pound bill for the repair of the greenhouse roof, it is not necessarily practical.

If we think of the traditional quest model, with its rigid division of sex roles as providing a paradigm for the society that Woolf sought to change, its limitation as a vehicle for the expression of her socialistic ideas becomes evident. In Woolf's hands, the traditional elements of the quest motif are transformed to provide a new vision in *To the Lighthouse*.

In that novel, Woolf measures the validity of her characters' various responses to the quest's traditional sex roles. She shows the consequences that arise for each principal character as a result of his or her respective choice to adopt, resist or remain indifferent to the traditional roles. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are the novel's characters that most closely identify with the traditional roles of sibyl and quester and, for Mrs. Ramsay, this alliance is fatal. Mrs. McNab falls into the role of crone. Mr. Carmichael, who is interested in "the wider questions that the poet tries to solve" (*CE*, II, p. 147), remains indifferent to the issue, momentarily taking on the role of the god or Fisher King. Lily Briscoe and William Bankes and, to a lesser extent, Paul and Minta Rayley, provide revised role models who exhibit less sex-role inhibitions and who feel less obliged to wrest their inner conflicts and their relationships with others into the ancient shape of limited archetypes that cannot hold them. Cam and James who, as members of the new generation in a momentary state of rebellion, almost reject the quest model entirely, hoping "the whole expedition would fail" (*TL*, p. 243), carry on nonetheless, inheriting a society that bears both the stripes of the old vision and the seeds of the new. Significantly, Cam and James, who have grown up in a world where the Victorian imperialistic vision had given way to the increasingly democratic impetus of the Edwardian and post-world-war years, carry on the quest's notions of progress in a relationship without the sexual issues faced by the Ramsays, the Rayleys and, insofar as they reject the current norms, by Lily, William Bankes and Mr. Carmichael. As brother and sister, different but equal, they form a compact against the tyranny of the old model, and do not even consider interfering with the progress of each other's inner journeys.

The text of *To the Lighthouse* is strewn with evidence that Woolf intended her reader to recognize Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay as respectively cast in the traditional roles of quester and sibyl.

Because Mr. Ramsay belongs to a society that offers men a wide range of occupations requiring the qualifications of a quester, his identification with masculine quest values is associated with a variety of leadership roles. These include not only the noble knight (*TL*, p. 51), but also the soldier general (*TL*, p. 48), the head of a northern expedition (*TL*, p. 55), and, of course, the ship's captain (*TL*, p. 54). In his role as quester, Mr. Ramsay is treated with both respect and an occasionally humorous disdain in *To the Lighthouse*. When he exhibits the more noble qualities of the traditional quester, "endurance and justice, foresight, devotion [and] skill" (*TL*, p. 54), Ramsay is praised in the novel. His daughter, Cam, recognizes the value of these qualities as she imagines how her father would behave if he were involved in the sea tragedy that Macalister describes on the voyage to the lighthouse.

[A]nd Cam thought, feeling proud of him without knowing quite why, had he been there he would have launched the lifeboat, he would have reached the wreck.... He was so brave, he was so adventurous. (*TL*, p. 246)

Clearly, as she dismantles and reassembles the quest model, Woolf does not seek to discard everything that is associated with the "male" quest. The noble qualities and aspirations of the restless searcher are valuable and necessary. On the other hand, with Cam and James, Woolf bids her readers to recognize that possession of such qualities does not entitle the quester to assert his will over others. "There was the compact; to resist tyranny to the death" (*TL*, p. 246).

Mr. Ramsay is disliked and ridiculed in the text when he uses the image of himself as quester to make demands on others or to serve his own conceit:

All his vanity, all his satisfaction in his own splendour riding fell as a thunderbolt, fierce as a hawk at the head of his men through the valley of death, had been shattered, destroyed. Stormed at by shot and shell, boldly we rode and well, flashed through the valley of death, volleyed and thundered-straight into Lily Briscoe and William Bankes. He quivered; he shivered. (*TL*, p. 49)

Perhaps, despite the nobility of his intentions, it is because of his vanity and his need to feel powerful that Mr. Ramsay tends to see himself, as do other characters in the novel, as the "leader of a forlorn hope" (*TL*, p. 55). Cer-

tainly, while his penchant for charging about in the shrubbery is a source of comedy in the novel, his desire to assert himself, and his dependency on the sympathy of women, particularly that of Mrs. Ramsay, is treated very seriously.

Mr. Ramsay's dependency on the sympathy of his wife, (and women in general), is very much in keeping with the traditional quest model where sex roles are defined as mutually exclusive and, thereby, necessarily interdependent. At one point in "The Window," the description of Mr. Ramsay's dependence on Mrs. Ramsay is given in language that clearly suggests that Woolf had the quest model in mind:

Who will not secretly rejoice when the hero puts his armour off, and halts by the window and gazes at his wife and son, who, very distant at first, gradually come closer and closer, till lips and book and head are clearly before him, though still lovely and unfamiliar from the intensity of his isolation and the waste of ages and the perishing of stars, and finally putting his pipe in his pocket and bending his magnificent head before her—who will blame him if he does homage to the beauty of the world? (*TL*, p. 57)

Because the quest model divides the task of maintaining civilization between the sexes in this way, with male questers exploring the waste of ages and female sibyls sustaining the beauty of the world, the quester needs the sibyl's nurturing skills to restore the natural order, and to be creative in his own realm. Woolf makes a similar comment in *A Room of One's Own*:

But we should wrong these illustrious men very greatly if we insisted that they got nothing from these alliances but comfort, flattery and the pleasures of the body. What they got, it is obvious was something their own sex was unable to supply; some renewal of creative power which is in the gift only of the opposite sex to bestow. He would open the door of drawing room or nursery... the center of some different order and system of life, and the contrast between this world and his own, which might be the law courts or the House of Commons, would at once refresh and invigorate; ...and the sight of her creating in a different medium from his own would so quicken his creative power that insensibly his sterile mind would begin to plot again... (*RO*, p. 82)

One of the truths that Woolf's version of the quest in *To the Lighthouse* reveals is that creation does not specifically require a division of labour by sex roles. In fact, although the search for truth requires the contemplation of beauty and nurturing, sex is irrelevant to that contem-

plation. Mr. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe and William Banks all come to understand that "a mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence" (*TL*, p. 81). Both Lily and Mrs. Ramsay subdue their impressions as women "to something much more general" (*TL*, p. 82). They learn to ascribe value "with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (*TL*, p. 95). When thus divested of their social roles, both women can address more universal issues — Lily, the spatial relationship of masses on her canvas, and Mrs. Ramsay, the challenges of "her old antagonist, life" (*TL*, p. 120). Both women feel and resent the pressure, particularly from Mr. Ramsay, but also from their society in general, to uphold their designated feminine positions. While Lily Briscoe simply resists that pressure, refusing to marry, reluctant to give sympathy, Mrs. Ramsay, who has accepted the role of sibyl, wills herself to don the disguise, recognizing that the functioning of a society that reverences archetypal male and female roles, depends upon the ability of its members to adopt them:

the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it, nobody would do it. (*TL*, p. 126)

This division between the sexes of the labour of maintaining civilization is not merely an imposition. It is also unfair because it places unrealistic expectations upon members of both sexes. All feel guilty when they cannot fill the requirements of their socially designated roles, or when they fail to appreciate or be impressed by the assumed roles of others. William Banks feels "treacherous" when he realizes for a moment that Mrs. Ramsay's "beauty meant nothing to him" (*TL*, p. 134). Mr. Ramsay is saddened when he realizes that he cannot protect Mrs. Ramsay, as his social role dictates. "He could do nothing to help her" (*TL*, p. 98). This tension between the real world of human experience and the expectations of the mythic model of the quest exists throughout the society portrayed in *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf uses this tension to demonstrate how the socially reinforced archetypal roles figured in the quest are supposed to work, where they fail, and why and how they must be changed.

Although the Ramsays and several of the other characters in the novel feel tension around the issue of sex-role stereotyping, the traditional roles remain fairly intact through the course of "The Window," at least with the Ramsays. This happens because the Ramsays get reinforcement by perpetuating the myth. Mr. Ramsay's ego, of course, is fortified by his self-image as quester. Certainly, Mrs. Ramsay is aware and proud of the power inherent in

her role as Mr. Ramsay's sibyl when she restores his self esteem in the very sexual scene on the patio:

If he put implicit faith in her, nothing could hurt him; however deep he buried himself or climbed high, not for a second would he find himself without her. (*TL*, p. 60)

Mrs. Ramsay recognizes, however, that such posturing does have an element of selfishness:

[S]he did not merely feel snubbed back in her instinct, but made aware of the pettiness of... human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking at their best. (*TL*, p. 66)

One of the tasks of the questers in *To the Lighthouse*, then, is to achieve a less illusory sense of self-worth, one that does not require false self-aggrandizement, self-denial or the subjection of others.

For Mr. Ramsay, the achievement of such an equilibrium means learning to stand on his own two feet, so to speak, without depending on a sibyl, that is, his wife, or any other woman, for sympathy. It is only after the death of his wife, and the refusal of Lily Briscoe to offer sympathy, a refusal that takes the form of praise for Mr. Ramsay's footgear (which is as remarkably serviceable as Lily's own), that Mr. Ramsay can complete his quest and reach the lighthouse. In *To the Lighthouse*, then, Mr. Ramsay is identified with the traditional male quester, and the success of his quest depends on learning to change his relationship with the sibyl, so that he is free from dependence upon her, and so that she is free from his subjection.

In the case of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf provides ample opportunity to identify a strong resemblance to the traditional sibyl of the quest motif or model. Such hints range from the subtle repetition of instances in which Mrs. Ramsay's remarks seem designed to motivate or inspire the actions of others, to more obvious occasions when other characters in the novel identify her qualities with those traditionally held by the sibyl.

As the novel opens, Mrs. Ramsay speculates on tomorrow's weather and the probability of making the voyage to the lighthouse to which her son, James, looks forward intensely. Her son's reaction confirms the inspirational quality of her remark:

To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward,

for years and years, it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail, within touch. (*TL*, p. 9)

On other occasions, Mrs. Ramsay makes similar remarks. As she heads off to the town with Charles Tansley, she jokingly informs Mr. Carmichael that "they were making the great expedition" (*TL*, p. 19). When she learns that a circus will be staging a performance soon, she cries, "Let us all go!" (*TL*, p. 21). In all three cases, her remarks serve as a call to action and contribute to her identification with the sibyl's role as inspirer.

Many of the novel's characters recognize and respond to Mrs. Ramsay in her role as sibyl. Charles Tansley sees her

with stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets.... Stepping through fields of flowers and taking to her breast buds that had broken and lambs that had fallen; with the stars in her eyes and the wind in her hair. (*TL*, p. 25)

Some love-sick young poet inscribes a copy of his poems for her with: "For her whose wishes must be obeyed... the happier Helen of our days" (*TL*, p. 43). Even Lily Briscoe is momentarily overcome by an emotional response to the notion of Mrs. Ramsay as a wise, inspiring, powerful and mysterious sibyl:

She imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? (*TL*, p. 79)

Poor Paul Rayley finds himself engaged to Minta Doyle as the result of Mrs. Ramsay's inspiration:

It had been far and away the worst moment of his life when he asked Minta to marry him. He would go straight to Mrs. Ramsay, because he felt somehow that she was the person who had made him do it. She had made him think he could do anything. Nobody else took him seriously. But she made him believe that he could do whatever he wanted. He had felt her eyes on him all day today, following him about (though she never said a word) as if she were saying "Yes, you can do it. I believe in you. I expect it of you." She had made him feel all that, and directly they got back... he would go to her and say, "I've done it, Mrs. Ramsay; thanks to you." (*TL*, pp. 118-19)

Mrs. Ramsay plays the inspiring sibyl to everyone, and enjoys the sense of power this role gives her. Just before the dinner party, she is described

like some queen who, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them, and descends among them, and acknowledges their tributes silently and accepts their devotion and their prostration before her ... their tribute to her beauty. (*TL*, p. 124)

Mrs. Ramsay is recognized and treated as sibyl by her fellow characters because she and they, together, comprise and belong to a society that holds this role for women as more or less valid. Even Mrs. Ramsay's daughters, who plan more independent lives for themselves, find, in the ancient sibyl's role their mother plays, something "of the essence of beauty, which called out the manliness in their girlish hearts, and made them, as they sat at the table beneath their mother's eyes, honour her strange severity, her extreme courtesy" (*TL*, p. 14). Quaint or noble, the traditional sibyl's role is an integral part of Mrs. Ramsay's social function, one that she sees as extending an important contribution to civilization:

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... (*TL*, p. 13)

As with Mr. Ramsay, Woolf is here demonstrating how the traditional sex role archetypes of the quest model are sustained by a social agreement or understanding that they are necessary to civilization. Again, as with the noble qualities of the quester, the nurturing, courteous role of the sibyl is not rejected out of hand. Qualities of nurturing and sympathetic responsiveness to the needs of our fellow persons are valuable and necessary. "But it tired Mrs. Ramsay, it cowed her a little" (*TL*, p. 296). Madeline Moore recognizes in Woolf's treatment of the quest motif, both in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, the understanding that this type of sex-role stereotyping limits the ability of quester and sibyl alike to achieve self-determination.

From a slightly different point of view, Woolf may have fathomed in Mrs. Ramsay the paradox she would fully explore in Percival's personality in *The Waves*: if one is the center of everyone else's fantasies, one cannot speak about anything of substance, for that would block the path of other's projections.⁹

Owing to the assumptions of the society in which she lives, Mrs. Ramsay is essentially trapped in her role as sibyl. Mr. Ramsay is trapped with her, although, as the

novel shows, his scope for self-determination is wider, and so, once Mrs. Ramsay disappears from the story, he can still complete his quest.

Despite the problems created for the Ramsays by their adoption of stereotypical sex roles, their relationship is described as having dignity (*TL*, p. 297) and, certainly, the level of cooperation they evince in sustaining the illusion of the quest role models is remarkable. Once again, Woolf treats this cooperation as valuable. Together, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are described as giving "to each that solace which two different notes, one high, one low, struck together, seem to give each other as they combine" (*TL*, p. 61). Mrs. Ramsay treats this shared solace as the object of marriage, and advocates its virtues to all and sundry.

While Virginia Woolf gives ample time to nostalgia for this point of view, the text of *To the Lighthouse* holds in tension with this nostalgia a relentless attention to the limitations imposed upon the Ramsays by their adoption of the traditional sex-differentiated roles of the quest model. Woolf exposes these limits to fairness, objectivity and responsible action in a variety of ways.

Certainly, as already discussed, there is an element of unfairness to both of the Ramsays in the interdependent nature of their relationship. Because Mr. Ramsay must occasionally put off his armour and pay homage to the beauty of the world, he is distracted from his quest to reach "R." William Bankes recognizes this in his friend:

[H]e 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. (*TL*, p. 37)

Because Mrs. Ramsay must provide her husband with sympathy, and because her range of activity is limited by the society she inhabits, she cannot achieve her ambition to elucidate the social problem.

The validity of the Ramsays' adopted postures is also constantly challenged. Mr. Ramsay may think of himself as a noble quester as he vaults through the bushes and bellows on the lawn, but when observed by the less enraptured eyes of William Bankes and Lily Briscoe, he looks the fool. On the trip to the lighthouse, James, once he has dealt with his own anger, recognizes his father for what he is — a sad old man reading a book. Mrs. Ramsay's features may carry the dignity and grace captured in a portrait of Queen Victoria (a symbol of the period), but she also occasionally claps an old hat on her head, dons galoshes

and gallops about the grounds. Charles Tansley's enraptured identification of her qualities with those of a sibyl is undercut by the fact that it is precipitated by the act of holding her bag.

Finally, by serving the sex roles passed down to them in a sexist tradition, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay shirk some of their moral responsibilities. To serve the emotional needs of her son, Mrs. Ramsay must tell him lies about the probability of reaching the lighthouse, given the weather conditions. Conversely, to serve the truth he seeks, and to preserve his sense of self-important power, Mr. Ramsay tends to deny the emotional needs of his children.

That something has gone awry in the Ramsays' relationship is evident in the fact that we are given glimpses of each in their roles as sibyl and quester, in scenes that associate their values with those of the "vampire" described by Smith. In contemplating Mrs. Ramsay's behaviour in relation to the engagement of Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, Lily recognizes that, on some level, Mrs. Ramsay as inspirer, as sibyl, leads her victims to the alter (*TL*, p. 153), suggesting not only the pending nuptials, but also, the notion of sacrifice. By the same token, James carries into adulthood a childish wish to kill his father when his quest for power emerges as "that fierce sudden black-winged harpy, with its talons and its beak all cold and hard that struck and struck at you" (*TL*, p. 273).

The disturbing undertone of a dangerous note in the accord of the Ramsays' relationship, is reinforced by references to the story of the Fisherman's Wife. In "The Window," Woolf provides her reader with a clue as to how these references might be interpreted:

...for the story of the Fisherman and his Wife was like the bass gently accompanying a tune, which now and then ran up unexpectedly into the melody. (*TL*, p. 87)

Briefly, in this fairy tale, the traditional sex roles are reversed so that it is the female who seeks power and the male who serves her wishes by bringing them to the flounder. The story closes when the couple are forced to return to and accept their humble origins. Woolf's use of this model of non-traditional role reversal enriches her attempt to dismantle and redesign the quest model in three ways. First, it points to the ultimate futility of the traditionally masculine quest for power. Second, it illustrates the masculine fear that relinquishing power to women will result in an escalation of greed and tyranny. Finally, it warns women against the adoption of the traditional masculine values of glory and power. The story also sheds light on some of the less attractive aspects of the Ramsays' relation-

ship which arise out of the couple's conformity to the quest model. The tale illustrates how power is venerated in the traditional model and suggests that Mrs. Ramsay gets caught up in the power quest "wishing to dominate, wishing to interfere, making people do what she wished" (*TL*, p. 88). It also reinforces a sense of Mr. Ramsay's moral weakness in accepting the limitations imposed upon him by a traditional relationship, and in not recognizing how these limits diminish his potential as well as that of those around him. Clearly, the quest model's sex role divisions produce a subliminal tendency to adopt some of the qualities traditionally assigned to members of the opposite sex.

As the plot of *To the Lighthouse* advances, apparently in the pattern of the traditional quest model, Woolf continues to undermine its assumptions. In "Time Passes," we meet Mrs. McNab, the sibyl as crone. Mrs. McNab's wisdom lies in her unfailing fidelity to reality. She acknowledges human mortality and weakness. Her message, repeated throughout the text of "Time Passes," makes the following judgement on the sibyl's traditional role of providing security to questers: "It was beyond the strength of one woman" (*TL*, p. 207). Clearly, in the real world of Woolf's novel, it is beyond the strength of one woman to fluctuate through all of the roles prescribed by the quest model. One cannot inspire as a maiden, work like a hag, and reappear as a maiden bride to a questing male partner. Mrs. Ramsay's mortal nature dictates that someone else must fill her role and, in a house abandoned to the ravages of time, in a grail castle that partakes of the mortal world, only Mrs. McNab is available.

Actually, Mrs. Ramsay's death can be seen as proof that the traditional and illusory sibyl was necessarily killed by the awful truth of global warfare, that no woman can protect "her" man, herself, or anyone else from the fact of human mortality. As if to substantiate this point, Mrs. Ramsay's protective shawl, which was wrapped around the skull in the children's room, loosens. Furthermore, her death symbolizes the fact that, to allow the female a more active role in the search for truth, acceptance of a more passive role must be eliminated. In "Professions for Women," Woolf describes this process of shedding the guise of the traditional sibyl as killing the Angel in the house.

I will describe her shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life ...she slipped behind me and whispered... the truth about human relations, morality, sex... cannot be dealt with freely by a woman, they must charm,

they must conciliate, they must — to put it bluntly — tell lies if they are to succeed.... Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. (*CE*, II, p. 286)

Mrs. Ramsay, because she identifies so closely with the traditional role of sibyl, falls with the phantom, as her fellow female characters begin to adopt a more active role in the control of their own destinies.

Mrs. McNab's assertion that the work of the sibyl is too much for one woman does more than suggest the demise of Mrs. Ramsay; however, it also points to the fact that leaving the task of maintaining a civilization's sense of security to one sex is irresponsible. The Ramsays "never sent; never came" (*TL*, p. 206), while the summer house crumbled. By abandoning the role for preserving nurturant wisdom to the sibyl, the traditional quest model permits questers to abdicate their responsibility for the nurturing and preservation of the structure of civilization. In keeping with the traditional quest storyline, Mrs. McNab warns that the novel's questers must define for themselves a new order with less illusory division of sex role responsibilities, or the grail castle will deteriorate beyond repair. Dealing with the fact of human mortality and preserving the most noble aspirations of humankind must be a shared responsibility.

In her exposé of the failings of the traditional quest model, Woolf leaves no stone unturned. Although Mrs. McNab fills the role of crone and, indeed, imparts wisdom which both warns of the dangers of the old and points out the direction to a new vision, she does so unconsciously. Her almost incidental relationship, to the quest, as sibyl, is demonstrated in the following narrative comment:

The mystic, the visionary, walking the beach on a fine night, stirring a puddle, looking at a stone, asking themselves "What am I?" "What is this?" had suddenly an answer vouchsafed them: (they could not say what it was) so that they were warm in the frost and had comfort in the desert. But Mrs. McNab continued to drink and gossip as before. (*TL*, p. 198)

Clearly, like the silly and wise Mrs. McNab, women in the mortal world do not play the role of sibyl all the time, nor can they be directly responsible for leading the mystic to his or her answers. Each person goes that journey alone and, like the wisdom of all mortals, Mrs. McNab's is an alloy, mixed with folly, simply her own, available to the reader, but hidden from the questing mystic in the novel's world.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf has done much to dismantle the credibility of the quest's traditional sex roles as appropriate models for survival in a complex world. She has not, however, abandoned the quest itself as a worthy model for human endeavour. Rather, she has developed, alongside the Ramsays, characters who provide alternative approaches to the distribution of the labour or questing. Lily Briscoe and William Banks are the most obvious of these. Although Lily feels strongly the burden of a social history that would compel her to serve a male quester, she decides she need never marry and can, thus, maintain the freedom to complete her own quest. William Banks, by the same token, does not develop a dependence on female sympathy, but pursues his own interests, independently. The two become friends, supportive but not dependent. Madeline Moore recognizes this relationship as an improvement over that of the Ramsays:

Although the Ramsays are the... characters to whom Woolf assigns definite mythological associations, it is through Lily that their sociological significance is translated. Only after she experiences the ecstasy which she associates with Mrs. Ramsay, and recognizes it as false (feeding as it does on the inferior position of women) can she forgive Mrs. Ramsay her flawless beauty and move beyond to friendship with a man who does not feed on the treasure of the house.¹⁰

The beauty of Woolf's accomplishment here is that she has managed to propose her changes to the sex-role models of the quest while maintaining the structure of the motif. The quest to reach the lighthouse is inspired by a sibyl, Mrs. Ramsay. The need for change is presented by the crone, Mrs. McNab and, in the course of the novel's movement toward the lighthouse, an answer to the problem is vouchsafed as in the example of the relationship between Lily Briscoe and William Banks. In fact, Lily appears, at the close of the novel, in the traditional position of the grail maiden. In this position, Lily translates the sociological significance of the questing theme to the novel in a vision that, while granting value to the qualities of both sibyl and quester, and positing the need for a cooperative relationship between the sexes, allows each simultaneously to pursue his and her own questions. Mr. Ramsay and Lily do not marry at the close of *To the Lighthouse*, but the fact that they are both questing, intertwines the successful outcomes of their respective quests.

Paul and Minta Rayley also provide an example of a newly defined quest, where the traditional roles of sibyl and quester have been abandoned. These two achieve the equilibrium they seek in their troubled relationship when

they cease to encumber each other with the conventional expectations of fidelity that are inherent in the quest's sex-role models.

Mr. Carmichael, in his indifference to the issue of sex roles in questing, provides his own example of a changed search for truth. The success of his book of poems, which is attributed in "Time Passes" to the impact of the war, suggests that, compared to the higher questions raised by human mortality, the sex of the quester becomes irrelevant to the quest. The fact that Mr. Carmichael's marital relationship is treated as unimportant to his professional success, despite Mrs. Ramsay's perception that it is less than ideal, substantiates this view.

In "The Lighthouse," Mr. Carmichael momentarily takes on the role of the Fisher King, as described by Smith:

"He has landed," [Lily] said aloud. "It is finished." Then, surging up, puffing slightly, old Mr. Carmichael stood beside her, looking like an old pagan god, shaggy, with weeds in his hair and the trident (it was only a French novel) in his hand. He stood by her on the edge of the lawn, swaying a little in his bulk and said... "They will have landed," and she felt that she had been right. They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything. He stood there as if he were spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind: she thought he was surveying, tolerantly and compassionately, their final destiny. Now he has crowned the occasion, she thought, when his hand slowly fell, as if she had seen him let fall from his great height a wreath of violets and asphodels which, fluttering slowly, lay at length upon the earth. (*TL*, p. 309)

It is as if, in his role as god of the quest, Mr. Carmichael is giving his blessing to the changed model that Woolf proposes in *To the Lighthouse*. The fact that such a blessing is treated as appropriate to this conventional quest figure suggests that the sex-role stereotyping, in the romantic quest model, was never a necessary part of the human search for truth. That Carmichael gently lets fall a wreath, similar to the one Lily envisions Mrs. Ramsay wearing after hearing of her death (*TL*, p. 270), substantiates the view that traditional romantic roles of women, in particular, must be relinquished if humankind is to achieve its full potential.

In the final section of the novel, Lily Briscoe is able to use this truth — that the nature of the quest does not preclude full participation in all of its roles for members of both sexes — to rescue Mrs. Ramsay from her fate in the role of sibyl. Lily comes to recognize that, limited though

her materials were, Mrs. Ramsay was an artist, a quester in her own right.

[S]he brought together this and that and then this and so made... something... this moment of friendship and liking — which survived, after all these years complete, so that... it stayed on in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art. (*TL*, p. 240)

The truth is that on some level we must all be questers and sibyls to be human.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf rejects the oversimplification of human nature that the designated sex roles of the quest model suggest. In its place, she offers a new form that admits of greater complexity of issues and individuals. In "The Narrow Bridge of Art," she explains the need for such a change by describing how the complexity of ordinary life has increased.

The ordinary person... discusses openly what never used to be mentioned privately... things that have no apparent connection are associated in his mind. Feelings that used to come single and separate do so no longer. Beauty is part ugliness; amusement part disgust, pleasure part pain. Emotions which used to enter the mind whole are now broken up on the threshold. (*CE*, II, p. 222)

She describes the difficulty of using traditional forms in dealing with the complexities of human nature when it is faced with new realities: "On all sides writers are... forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it." (*CE*, II, p. 218) By testing the quest model against modern experience and the moral values of fairness, objectivity and responsibility, Woolf alters its form in *To the Lighthouse*. No longer are the roles of sibyl and quester treated as the exclusive province of either of the sexes. Mr. Ramsay's quest concludes only after he has learned to nurture James by acknowledging that his skillful handling of the boat is "well done." Lily achieves her own vision by recognizing the validity of all quests, including her own. Furthermore, these changes are presented as necessary to the achievement of the novel's quest and, indeed, on one level, have been its object.

Of course, the object of the quest in *To the Lighthouse* has many levels and, as such, is also changed from the traditional grail. In place of the grail, Woolf offers the lighthouse, a symbol that can accommodate the various visions or goals of male, female and androgynous quests. Reaching the lighthouse is a different achievement for each of the novel's characters, an achievement which has been facilitated by the abandonment of old role models.

Cam and James, who began their roles in the novel firmly embedded in the quest tradition, as evidenced by their place in the company of siblings named after the Kings and Queens of England, are faced with the task of modelling their own quests. When they set out on their journey to the lighthouse, "Cam was not ready and James was not ready" (*TL*, p. 217). Like the other questing characters in the novel, they begin their journey as flawed human beings, with pain and prejudice, and the baggage of victimization which the old models of the quest form have bequeathed to them. Cam, like her mother, is short-sighted, while James' approach to the elimination of tyranny retains the violence of former masculine approaches to opposition. As these limitations to Cam and James' vision are revealed, the voyage, which seemed potentially promising, momentarily loses its momentum. The wind of such ancient approaches cannot inspire the sails of the Ramsays' craft. James' image of the crushed foot, which recalls previous images associating competence on the quest with the assumption of the responsibility of moving forward on one's own two feet, reveals that the old approaches unwittingly destroy the ability of innocent bystanders to get on with their own journeys. James correctly attributes such destructive forces not only to the Victorian values of his parents, but also to the world of "Time Passes," where the larger currents of human history are examined.

There was an old woman gossiping in the kitchen; and the blinds were sucked in and out by the breeze; all was blowing, all was growing; and over all those plates and bowls and tall brandishing red and yellow flowers a very thin yellow veil would be drawn, like a vine leaf, at night. Things became stiller and darker at night. But the leaf-like veil was so fine that lights lifted it, voices crinkled it; he could see through it a figure stooping, hear, coming close, going away, some dress rustling, some chain tinkling. (*TL*, p. 276)

As James ponders these matters, striving to "round off his feeling into a concrete shape" (*TL*, p. 275), subduing his emotions to objective analysis, he comes to recognize the validity of "both" lighthouses, Mr. Ramsay's which cannot be reached in the rain, and Mrs. Ramsay's, beautiful through the mists. In so doing, he is able, like Lily, to recognize value in the quests of both his parents. Although James reverts, perhaps out of habit, to thoughts of over-coming tyranny in destructive ways, this achievement of learning to respect quests other than his own cuts off his habitual violence in a forward surge of motion, as the sailboat catches the wind again and resume its journey across the bay. On some level, James has resolved the division he feels between the visions of his parents and, as

the forward movement of the boat suggests, the collective quest which also bears the Macalisters, Mr. Ramsay, Cam and, in spirit, Lily and Mr. Carmichael, may thus continue.

Similarly, Cam is able to rescue an impression of her father and his companions contributing to the joyous vision that motivates the human quest for excellence. As the boat begins to accelerate again, under the wind of the new understanding simultaneously coming to Lily, James and Mr. Ramsay, she dreams.

From her hand, ice cold, held deep in the sea, there spurted up a fountain of joy at the change, at the escape, at the adventure.... And the drops falling from this sudden and unthinking fountain of joy fell here and there on the dark, the slumbrous shapes in her mind; shapes of a world not realized but turning in their darkness, catching here and there, a spark of light; Greece, Rome, Constantinople. Small it was, and shaped something like a leaf stood on its end with the gold sprinkled waters flowing in and about it, it had, she supposed, a place in the universe — even that little island? The old gentleman in the study she thought could have told her. (*TL*, p. 281)

Cam too, on some level, validates the human quest for all of civilization, for the individuals she knows, the fathers as she specifically remembers them, the mothers, as she follows their feminine vision, but also, all of accumulated human thought.

It is as if Cam and James have unconsciously absorbed, along with the folly of the novel's preceding generations, and of all human history, the wisdom that has been gathered over and over, by all of their ancestors, until they have been equipped by their collective human past to carry on with the quest. The accumulated experience of the novel, however, has prepared them to go on this journey in a new relationship, not as sexual partners or intellectual rivals, but as brother and sister, individual in sex and outlook, but with equally valid contributions to make.

In *To the Lighthouse*, then, Virginia Woolf has demystified the quest model by challenging the romanticism of its designated sex roles. She has, in fact, substituted a more life-affirming vision for the "male quest for victory and power." She has presented us with a view of human history that acknowledges a collective task, a collective achievement. By including the quest motif in her mythic structure in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf has undermined its sexist elements while reaffirming the values it offers as a model for the responsible action of both sexes in a complex world.

NOTES

1. Schlack, B.A. "Fathers in General: The Patriarchy in Virginia Woolf's Fiction." *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*. Jane Marcus (ed.), Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983, p. 73.
2. Weston, J. *From Ritual to Romance*. New York: Doubleday, 1957, p. 31. Weston's review of the sources of romance legends was also an inspiration to some of T.S. Eliot's imagery.
3. Haller, E. "Isis Unveiled: Virginia Woolf's Use of Egyptian Myth." *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*. Jane Marcus (ed.), Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983, p. 109. Haller provides an interesting review of Woolf's use of Egyptian myth.
4. Moore, M. *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1984, p. 59. Although Moore focuses on a pattern of more ancient mythic allusions than those of the quest with which this paper is concerned, she makes a similar point: "Woolf has consistently experimented with a method of thematic and mythic construction in which the psychological and social expansion of human concerns undercuts and qualifies the heroic thrust of the given frame... by principles of gentleness, tolerance and a qualification of the conventional postures of male and female behaviour" (p. 90).
5. Virginia and Leonard Woolf published Eliot's *The Wasteland* in 1922.
6. Smith, G. "T.S. Eliot's Lady of the Rocks." *Notes and Queries*, 194, 1949, p. 123-25.
7. Marcus, J. "Thinking Back Through our Mothers." *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983, p. 182. Marcus provides an interesting analysis of Woolf as a rebel against the state.
8. Black, N. "Virginia Woolf and the Women's Movement." *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*. Jane Marcus (ed.), Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983, p. 182.
9. Moore, M. *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1984, p. 72.
10. Moore, M. *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1984, p. 86.

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Teacher's Husband

The students carry home her outlines and charts,
knowledge distilled to sudden windowpanes;

but he knows her joy when she strokes their cat,
school work shaken in the wind,

the stillness of her fingers, surrender
to glinting fur, tangible things,

his body held in hands so warm
he can peel off all defences,

laughter like flocks of clouds
out in the spring sky
to eat the first warm suns.

And he does not see
her briefcase, her papers, her eyes
changed by the classroom, her shoes

to enter and walk across strange stories
unbuttoning the heroes' woolen coats,

but fleeting moments of possession: fresh marguerites,
offered unabashed before they settle down.

Liliane Welch
Sackville, New Brunswick