

Mourning a loved one is, in most cases, a necessary step people need to take to grieve and the most telling sign that a person is starting to move forward with life. People who suffer from loss must come to accept that a death has occurred and make peace with it in their own way. In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the death of the Ramsay matriarch comes suddenly but takes the entire rest of the novel to mourn. This process that her family and those around her go through is represented by the fascination with and desire to understand the beauty by which she is characterized throughout the novel. People recognize but do not understand Mrs. Ramsay, her beauty, and the resulting otherworldly power she seems to possess over them. They seek to make sense of her beauty and who she was in order to also, on a deeper level, make sense of her death. It is only when all come to terms with Mrs. Ramsay's equivalence with both beauty and death that harmony is restored and those she left behind begin to move on with life.

According to her family and close friends, Mrs. Ramsay's beauty is on a caliber that makes her equivalent to beauty itself. Because this has been a fact known but not quite understood by all, a gap has formed between her and essentially everyone around her. The Oxford English Dictionary defines beauty as "perceived physical perfection" or the "attractive harmony of features, figure, or complexion" (beauty, 2013). By these definitions, to define a person as not just being beautiful but as beauty itself establishes that he or she, usually she, is perfection. To possess harmony in any of one's attributes also means there is perfection. Lily Briscoe, a painter who becomes friends with the Ramsays, wrestles with what Mrs. Ramsay's beauty means as she struggles throughout the entire novel to finish a single portrait of her. "Beauty had this penalty—it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life—froze it. One forgot the little agitations ... which made the face unrecognizable for a moment and yet added a

quality one saw for ever after. It was simpler to smooth that all out under the cover of beauty” (Woolf 177). Here, Lily thinks deeply considers the negative in what having beauty means. She downplays any positive significance it could have, as there are other qualities and things that get somewhat wrongfully overlooked, or ignored for the moment, by the blinding quality of beauty. Beauty is a quality so striking that people remember it well and tend to neglect the negatives that still do exist around it. All of those things are simply and easily rendered unimportant “under the cover of beauty.” Even up until the end of the novel, Lily continues to struggle to understand the beauty that everyone, including herself, has decided Mrs. Ramsay is and why it has been established that way. “Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought. Among them, must be one that was stone blind to her beauty” (Woolf 198). She believes that more than fifty pairs of eyes are necessary for people to see others clearly, as her opinions of people, including Mrs. Ramsay and the learning philosopher Charles Tansley, change as she considers more qualities about them. She thinks fifty eyes are not enough to truly see and understand all that Mrs. Ramsay is, perhaps due to the implied greatness of her beauty. And only when there are at least fifty pairs of eyes is there the chance that one would be able to see past, or ignore, her beauty. Jane Lilienfeld’s essay “The Deceptiveness of Beauty,” which deconstructs the quasi-mother-daughter relationship between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, explicates Lily’s extensively complicated feelings toward Mrs. Ramsay and everything she represents. At one point in the novel, Lily characterizes Mrs. Ramsay as a “maturely beautiful ... mother ... with qualities beyond those of a mere earthly being. Lily’s longing for Mrs. Ramsay’s meaning, more than human nature itself, is the only way she can partake of Mrs. Ramsay’s essence until she can paint the picture which embodies her” (Lilienfeld 349). Despite her lack of

understanding for Mrs. Ramsay's beauty in the previous passages, Lily nonetheless considers her beauty to surpass earthly standards and desires to understand and accept who, or what, she is, especially as she struggles to paint her. A large gap has formed between the artist and subject, the sort of daughter and mother figures, as Mrs. Ramsay's seeming-perfection has left her humanity to be doubted and confused. Most people in the novel, including Lily, never consider that Mrs. Ramsay is simply beautiful, but that she is beauty itself.

Furthermore, the fact that Mrs. Ramsay is aware of her own beauty, in a not-narcissistic way, further credits the quality as fact. Relatively early on in the novel in an instance involving the poet friend Augustus Carmichael, Mrs. Ramsay internally acknowledges the way she appears to people and the effect she often has on people. "She went out of her way indeed to be friendly. ... And after all—after all (here insensibly she drew herself together, physically, the sense of her own beauty becoming, as it did so seldom, present to her)—after all, she had not generally any difficulty in making people like her" (Woolf 41). Here, the self-acknowledgment of the judgment everyone has about Mrs. Ramsay becomes an admitted truth, as she thinks through each of her actions and consciously makes choices for how to act accordingly. Due to her beauty, she is not used to people not liking or not trusting her, which is a trivial matter, but one that comes up nonetheless. Mrs. Ramsay then goes on to consider how she handles her beauty in a more general way. "She bore about with her, she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty; she carried it erect into any room that she entered; and after all, veil it as she might, and shrink from the monotony of bearing that it imposed on her, her beauty was apparent" (Woolf 41). Mrs. Ramsay lives with her beauty in an unusually not-narcissistic way, fully aware of others' perception of her and her role, while not allowing any part consume her and her pride. She is unable to ever

hide or deny possessing beauty and carries it with a sort of dignified sense of responsibility, which indicates the fact that she is essentially beauty itself. She is not simply a beautiful woman whose looks and actions are subjectively attractive, but rather, a woman literally representing beauty.

Recurring imagery and allusions to Greek mythology indicate that death is the other, less obvious concept Mrs. Ramsay embodies. While in many appearances throughout the novel Mrs. Ramsay's beauty is openly regarded as fact, her connection with death is not explicitly stated or even considered as often. Early on, there is a reference to a description that Mr. Bankes, another friend of the Ramsays who Mrs. Ramsay hopes would marry Lily, has mentally given the matriarch's beauty while on the phone with her. "‘Nature has but little clay,’ said Mr. Bankes once ... ‘like that of which she molded you.’ ... The Graces assembling seemed to have joined hands in meadows of asphodel to compose that face" (Woolf 29). Here, the multiple allusions being made to mythology involve Mrs. Ramsay's beauty to foreshadow her death. Mr. Bankes states that Nature, an important force and theme in Greek myth, and the Graces, Greek deities, are responsible for "molding," or "composing," Mrs. Ramsay—diction that implies she is a work of art. The asphodel on its own is defined in the OED as an immortal flower that covered the Elysian meadows, otherwise known as the Meadows of Asphodel, which were first mentioned in Homer's *The Odyssey* as a section of the underworld where souls are sent to reside after death (asphodel, 2014; Atsma). This thought Mr. Bankes has during a brief conversation with Mrs. Ramsay establishes the greatness of her beauty, a work of art created by the Greek gods, and makes clear implications to the death she has been fated to since her creation in the underworld. Later in the novel, after Mrs. Ramsay has passed, Lily imagines the mother figure as she bitterly

attempts to complete her painting. "It was strange how clearly she saw her, stepping with her usual quickness across fields among whose folds, purplish and soft, among whose flowers, hyacinths or lilies, she vanished" (Woolf 181). This vision takes the allusion of the fields a step further with additional color imagery and reference to the Greek god Hyacinth. According to one definition in the OED, the color purple is used symbolically in some cases, usually pertaining to the Christian Church, to signify "penitence and mourning" (purple, 2007). The mention of hyacinths and lilies, both of which are purple in color, reinforces the relevance of this definition. The hyacinth flower refers to the Greek god of the same name, whose myth states that the blood he shed during his death formed a flower with petals marked with mourning and who is therefore a classical metaphor of death and rebirth in nature (Hyacinthus, 2007). In her attempt at mourning, Lily imagines Mrs. Ramsay stepping into these fields that signify death, thereby becoming death itself. These allusions to mythology and specific color-involved imagery establish Mrs. Ramsay not only as beauty itself, but also as a physical portrayal of death.

Prue Ramsay, the elder Ramsay daughter, bears a remarkably similar role in the novel to her mother and therefore serves to further emphasize Mrs. Ramsay's irrefutable equivalence with both beauty and death. A generally unfortunate character, Prue is one-dimensionally categorized as simply equating beauty in every reference and appearance in the novel and is suddenly taken by death. According to the site *Think Baby Names*, which credits the U.S. Census and scholarly research, "Prue" is derived from "Prudence" but is itself not and has never been known to be a popular first name for women (Prue, 2015). It is fitting that Prue's is the only name in the novel that is a shortened version of a more common name and not even one itself, just as her character is not presented with any more depth beyond her similarities with her mother. There is not any

notable character development that occurs, and she is literally cut from the story relatively early on. In one instance when Mr. Bankes mentally categorizes the Ramsay children with short descriptors, he notes solely on the obvious beauty she possesses rather than something about her character. "Cam the Wicked, James the Ruthless, Andrew the Just, Prue the Fair—for Prue would have beauty, he thought, how could she help it?—and Andrew brains" (Woolf 22). For all the other children listed here, Mr. Bankes points out some trait related their attitude or mentality, yet for Prue, he only mentions what is on the surface, indicating that that quality is the only one of significance. Mrs. Ramsay herself also does not reveal much else about her daughter and recognizes her beauty similarly to the way that others do. "Prue, a perfect angel with the others, and sometimes now, at night especially, she took one's breath away with her beauty" (Woolf 58). Just as when Mr. Bankes thinks about the children, Mrs. Ramsay only considers the fact that Prue has and is beauty. Even the character most similar to Mrs. Ramsay is not given any more character or depth beyond Mrs. Ramsay herself, which again implies the sole importance of her one quality and the sameness of the two characters. Lilienfeld's analysis reaffirms Prue's staying true to her role as a literal, physical emphasis of Mrs. Ramsay. "Prue is reluctant to marry death, yet she follows the example of her mother to perfection. ...Prue accepted her fate with a grace and beauty that Lily who struggled for independence never could have done" (366). Prue has literally embodied the simplest form of who Mrs. Ramsay appeared to be and has had no choice but to take the same fate of an early death. It would not have been of as much consequence if any other character, including the sort of daughter figure Lily, had the same fate, as Prue has been crafted in the image of her mother and was therefore destined to die a similar death. Prue's entire

existence, as shown in the novel, has been to reiterate in a more condensed way that Mrs. Ramsay represents beauty and death.

The many characters in the novel that are fixated on Mrs. Ramsay's beauty must make sense of it in order to restore harmony, the very quality that defines beauty, in their minds. Following the aforementioned claim Mr. Bankes makes regarding Mrs. Ramsay's immeasurable beauty, he also acknowledges the contradicting disharmony he, as well as others, has with its significance in his mind. "Yet she's no more aware of her beauty than a child," said Mr. Bankes. ... For always, he thought, there was something incongruous to be worked into the harmony of her face" (Woolf 29). He points out that there is some lack of harmony happening within those who only consider that she has beauty, i.e., that she is beautiful. Here and in the following few sentences, Mr. Bankes and all the others have a sort of childlike level of awareness, unable to go beyond what is apparent on the surface and realize that Mrs. Ramsay does not simply possess beauty, but is beauty. Lily's own restlessness due to her lack of understanding Mrs. Ramsay's beauty also shows the necessity in resolving the contradiction that is taking place regarding harmony. During a mother-daughter-esque moment between the two women, Lily questions who Mrs. Ramsay is and what her beauty means. "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 in a golden mesh? Or did she lock up within her some secret which certainly Lily Briscoe believed people must have for the world to go on at all?" (Woolf 50). Lily thinks about what Mrs. Ramsay might know, what others might know, in terms of the way one must live in this world to know others and share intimacy. By doing so, she confirms her own childlike awareness and clearly reveals her fixation with the fact that Mrs. Ramsay possesses this beauty. Her obsession

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itself emphasizes the fact that Mrs. Ramsay is beauty, but there is a disconnect here because she does not understand that that is the case. Similarly, when Lily shows Mr. Bankes her unfinished painting of Mrs. Ramsay shortly after her pondering, his own pondering reaffirms the death imagery and his own mental disharmony. "Mother and child then—objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty—might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence" (Woolf 52). The color imagery in the purple shadow Lily has unknowingly used to capture Mrs. Ramsay's essence emphasizes that the latter is a figure of death, yet neither of the two seem to be aware of its significance. Instead, Mr. Bankes continues to express a lack of and need for understanding and harmony on the very subject of Mrs. Ramsay's apparent physical harmony. Making sense of the fact that she is beauty is necessary in order to resolve who she is before her death and to find peace after her death.

The significance of understanding and accepting that Mrs. Ramsay is beauty is paralleled with making sense of her death, both of which, as shown by the novel's end, can and only does happen through mourning. Immediately following the sudden deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew Ramsay, the novel takes note of the tragic disruption that has taken place from a universal perspective. "... There was a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath. ... It was difficult to blandly overlook ... to abolish their significance in the landscape; ... to marvel how beauty outside mirrored beauty within" (Woolf 133-4). Here, the color purple receives yet another mention, and with the surrounding imagery, it makes clear that death is what needs to be accepted and made peace with. The word beauty makes a rare appearance unattached from Mrs. Ramsay, as well as the minor beauty Prue, to represent the character(s) and further emphasize the transitive equivalence of



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beauty and death. It will become increasingly difficult to ignore realizations made of the disturbances in harmony, which have been brought on by the deaths themselves and Mrs. Ramsay who has been established as death itself, and the subsequent mourning that is now to take place. When Lily finally begins to mourn Mrs. Ramsay, beauty makes another solo appearance, taking the place of the mother figure and her daughter Prue, to elicit the restoration of harmony. "Through the open window the voice of the beauty of the world came murmuring, too softly to hear exactly what it said ... entreating the sleepers ... if they would not actually come down to the beach itself at least to lift the blind and look out" (Woolf 142). Here, beauty acts like a comforting wind that comes through the window, bringing the peace, right when mourning occurs. These are the "voices" of Mrs. Ramsay and Prue, coming and encouraging mourning to happen, so those who were left behind can find peace. Lilienfeld states that Lily, in particular, goes from disbelieving Mrs. Ramsay's death to being bitter about it before coming to acceptance by realizing that the mother "wanted to make permanent a harmony between people that Lily wanted to effect between the elements of her art" (Lilienfeld 361). Although the two women work in different ways internally, both, as well as every other person in the novel, desire to feel stability and harmony. At the very end of the novel, the asphodel flower makes its final appearance as Lily finds peace when she observes, with the poet friend Mr. Carmichael, the ever-grieving Mr. Ramsay and his children finally reach the lighthouse. "Now [Mr. Carmichael] 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" (Woolf 208). Here, in the novel's closing paragraphs, these purple flowers of mourning, which have been mentioned and hinted at this need for lamentation throughout the novel, are

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released as harmony begins to return to ones who have loved and been loved by Mrs. Ramsay.

The inclusion of "earth" indicates the resolution of making sense of death by bringing the notion of harmony full circle with the earlier references to Nature. Mourning has been taking place and moving forward will follow.

In the simplest terms, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a slow-moving novel about a family that suffers from multiple losses before finally arriving at a lighthouse. When deconstructed, it reveals itself to be a novel centered on grief, slow-moving due to the characters' lack of mental and emotional readiness and hope-restoring for the ultimate success of the journey. By the novel's end, every character either comes to or begins to move toward understanding some of the most difficult things in life to understand. Mrs. Ramsay as beauty and Mrs. Ramsay as death help her loved ones to resolve their own paintings by leading them from the purplish view in the window to the lighthouse.

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