
The Oedipus Complex In “to The Lighthouse” By Virginia Woolf

“To the Lighthouse” by Virginia Woolf examines and exemplifies Freud’s ideas about love. “[T]here is nothing more tedious, puerile, and inhumane than [love]; yet it is also beautiful and necessary. Well then, well then? She asked, somehow expecting the others to go on with the argument as if an argument like this one threw one’s own little bolt which fell short obviously and left the others to carry it on. So she listened again to what they were saying in case they should throw any light upon the question of love.” (Lily’s thoughts into the Lighthouse, p. 103)

Freud in his book, Civilization and its Discontents, talks about love and its role in civilization. Connecting Freud’s definition of love, Virginia Woolf uses his ideas to show what love is in his book through the use of two characters: James Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Sigmund Freud categorizes love into two different categories in his book “Civilization and its Discontents”: “Parental Love” and “Sexual love”. He describes love as a way humans try to find happiness as love is a form of escape we constantly yearn for to escape the pains we suffer in our everyday lives. Love is actually influenced by a range of factors and is actually very complex. Freud states, “ I do not think that I have made a complete enumeration of the methods by which men strive to gain happiness and keep suffering... I am, of course, speaking of the way of life which makes love the center of everything... It is that we are never so defenseless against suffering...or its love” (Freud 51-52). Freud is stating how love occurs naturally in all human beings. Love is a major force that unifies human beings, making it so that civilization does not crumble, helping towards human evolution and human progress. At the beginning of the book, Freud states, “It is impossible to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurements- that they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate what is of true value in life”.(Freud 23). Here Freud talks about that in nature humans are all narcissistically creating within people a high sense of ego. Contrary he states,” But, Love is the only factor that subdues the compulsions and ego’s of humans”. Love is a factor that subdues the high ego that every human possesses. This statement goes against of what love means and is in “To the Lighthouse”; Love is actually selfish and is driven by the ego of humans as seen through the characters James and Lily. James Ramsay embodies Freud's definition of both “Parental” and “Sexual” love for his own selfish definition of love. James Ramsay's notion of love is unique to only him as seen throughout the book.

The relationship between James Ramsay and his Mother, Mrs.Ramsay represents the Oedipus complex. Even though the relationship between James and Mrs.Ramsay is paternal, Woolf

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sexualizes the relationship between the two characters. At the beginning of the book, James' intent is clear: he wants to go to the lighthouse. After his father makes some comments on the weather being bad the disparity of feelings he has for his father and mother is prevalent. James states, "Had there been an ax handy....would have gashed a hold in his father's breast and killed him"(Woolf 8). He has ill feelings towards his father so much to the point he has thoughts of murdering him over a petty comment over the weather. Unlike his dad, his relationship with his mother shows clear fondness as he states his mom was "who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought)"(Woolf 8). But this fondness is not limited to only Freud's notion of parental love but also his notion of sexual love. "James as he stood stiff between her knees, felt her rise in a rosy flowered fruit tree laid with leaves....the arid scimitar of his father, the egotistical man....demanding sympathy"(Woolf 41-42). This scene shows that James's relationship with his mother is the same as with Mr.Ramsay towards Mrs.Ramsay. Essentially Mrs.Ramsay gives in to the typical patriarchal role given to women at that time. She acts like a mother figure who is completely submissive to Mr.Ramsay. You can say that Mr.Ramsay owns Mrs.Ramsay. But we also see that James Ramsay's Oedipus Complex reinforces Mrs. Ramsay's patriarchal role in the family. James's definition of love is inherently selfish to the point that he wants to support his mother's patriarchal role in the family by killing his father so he can be the only male in the family to suppress his mother. Another character that represents Freud's definition of love is Lily herself. Unlike Mrs. Ramsay, Lily goes against the notion of the typical patriarchal roles set by the time period. Throughout the book we see Lily focus on her artistic skills and her efforts towards her painting. Lily's subsequent efforts towards her painting are supposed to represent her rejection of the patriarchal roles of women not being able to draw or write. But I think the painting actually represents something greater than the rejection of patriarchal roles. Lily's painting represents the feelings she has towards Mr.Ramsay. Lily's love is inherently selfish and she does not want to show this to others. She spills out her emotions onto her canvas weary of the fact that someone will see her painting making her vulnerable. "As if any interruption would break the frail shape she was building on the table she turned her back to the window lest Mr.Ramsay should see her....be alone somewhere"(Woolf 151). Lily when working on her painting only bears the thoughts of no one other than Mr.Ramsay. She feels discomfort when working on her painting afraid of the fact that Mr.Ramsay might be nearby looking. This scene truly shows the hidden feelings she possesses for Mr.Ramsay. Lily is insecure about her work afraid of all the criticism she might get if she reveals it to others. Just like her feelings towards Mr.Ramsay, she is insecure about revealing it to him. Rather, painting is a form of escapism she takes to hide from the world. This idea shows that Lily's love is also inherently selfish much like James Ramsay. Both of their motifs are driven by jealousy as Lily can't have Mr.Ramsay because of Mrs.Ramsay and James can't have Mrs. Ramsay because of Mr. Ramsay. Unlike Freud's definition of Love, Virginia Woolf provides us with the fact that Love is actually selfishly driven by the egos of humans through the use of two characters: James Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. James Ramsay's Oedipus complex towards his mother is selfish as he only wants her to himself. Lily Briscoe uses art as a way to

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contain her selfish love onto a canvas hoping that no one will ever have access to it.

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