Lily’s Painting of Self-Recognition: A Lesbian Reading of Woolf’s To The Lighthouse

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February 2009

C-essay 15hp
English C

English C Didactics
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Introduction

Victorian England held and enforced strict sexual codes of propriety that prohibited any deviation from heterosexual norms. Moreover, during that time, women were in the main seen as inferior to men. Against this social and cultural background, Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* alludes to desires that go beyond such heterosexual norms and that enable women to pursue independence. In particular, the character Lily Briscoe expresses her independence by working as an artist and expresses her sexual impulse in her work of art. Lily’s life is marked with love, which however, dares not name her secret desire, Mrs Ramsay; instead Lily portrays her deepest feelings towards Mrs Ramsay through her painting, as will be argued in my discussion.

Several critics have dealt with how forbidden sexual desire is expressed through clandestine ways; one of them is Eva Kosofsky Sedgwick who establishes the image of the closet, which is a metaphor used to describe a secret and its “epistemology” as the recognition of same sex desire, even when it is silenced. This acknowledgment is significant in the case of Lily Briscoe and can be seen in the novel *To the Lighthouse*, where Woolf opens possibilities regarding Lily Briscoe’s lesbian desire. In her book *The Formation of the 20th Century Queer Autobiography*, the critic Georgia Johnston states that in order to represent a lesbian narrative, the author must cover and screen the lesbian, so that the readers who do not accept its homosexual elements will not distinguish it either. Johnston also paraphrases Elizabeth Meese and states that “writing the lesbian means writing someone who does not yet exist” (19). This purposes that the authors who were trying to incorporate the plot of same sex love in their novels had to do it with great discretion to avoid censorship and society’s condemnation.

The intention of this essay is to analyze the significance of Lily’s painting and how it symbolizes her coming to terms with her homosexuality, and simultaneously her feelings towards Mrs Ramsay. This essay is divided in three parts, parallel to the structure of Woolf’s
novel. The reason for this is that such an arrangement will underscore Woolf’s textual interruptions and the associative connections between the novel’s chapters. Despite the fact that the novel’s different parts distinguish themselves in substance and length, my attempt to duplicate this structure is essential when analytically marking the events that occur. Each part represents changes in Lily’s artistic performance and the search for her sexual identity, as well as her feelings towards Mrs Ramsay. I will primarily establish the fact that Lily’s painting changes from a mother-son portrait to a symbolic representation of Mrs Ramsay, through which Lily in the beginning hides her lesbian desire and which in the end helps her to acknowledge that fact. Moreover, it will also be argued that Lily’s artistic work was a way of hiding but also admitting her own sexual orientation. I also aim to portray the complex relationship that existed between the characters Lily and Mrs Ramsay and how this affects Lily in establishing her homosexuality. Finally, the main goal of this essay is to recognize many of the underlying meanings that are textually portrayed while Lily is painting. Due to the prevailing censorship that “safeguarded” the reading public, there are no overt passages that directly support my claim since it was forbidden during Woolf’s time to affirmatively write about homosexuality.

**To the Lighthouse: Novelist and Novel**

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 and was an English novelist and essayist. Woolf’s most known works are *Mrs Dalloway, Orlando, To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One’s Own*. Throughout Woolf’s life, she had many periods of depressions, though also a very rich love life with males and females. Critics like Eileen Barret and Patricia Cramer claim that Woolf incorporated many of her own experiences and life story in her fictional works.

*To the Lighthouse* was composed and published in 1927. The novel is based to a great extent on Virginia Woolf’s family and experiences during her childhood. The book is divided
into three sections: “The Window”, “Time Passes” and “The Lighthouse”. A significant fact about the book is that the first section takes place during one day, while the second part takes place during a period of ten years. Finally the last segment is based on the events of one day. The story is seen through the perspective of an omniscient narrator and includes many flashbacks, thoughts as well a small amount of dialogues.

The narrative is about the Ramsay family and their acquaintances during their vacation at the Ramsay residence. A prominent character is the hostess Mrs Ramsay who seems to have the need to control everything that is in her surroundings. Her husband, Mr Ramsay, is a philosophical man who struggles with his need to be remembered as a great author. Another character that is of decisive importance is Mr Bankes who is an acquaintance of the Ramsay family. The most significant character from my perspective is the young painter Lily Briscoe, who makes a great effort not to fall into normative patterns of female behaviour. In the beginning of the narrative, Lily starts her painting and she immediately becomes absorbed by it. Lily’s ambition in life is to paint and she is able to do so because of the wealth of her father.

Early on, the reader becomes conscious that Lily’s painting has a strong connection with the character of Mrs Ramsay. As the plot proceeds, the painting becomes thematically prominent and seemingly complex in view of the fact that it changes from a portrait to a symbolic representation of Mrs Ramsay. Due to the complexity of the painting and the interaction between Mrs Ramsay and Lily, the reader perceives that the relationship between them can be interpreted as something deeper than a mother- daughter relationship. However, the physical contact between Lily and Mrs Ramsay takes an abrupt end in the novel’s second part “Time Passes” when Mrs Ramsay passes away. On the other hand, Mrs Ramsay’s presence is expressed through Lily’s painting and nevertheless remains significant throughout the novel.
Despite the above mentioned facts, the novel is to a great extent uneventful regarding physical action taking place; however, the vision of love, art, and air of secrets are maintained in a way that is multifaceted with many underlying meanings. Therefore, *To the Lighthouse* does not conform to traditional norms of plot development. Lily’s painting, where mood and consciousness are significant, serves nevertheless as a kind of alternative action and its development is an important element in the novel.

**Previous research**

Many of Woolf’s essays and novels have been examined for the existence of a homoerotic presence. Scholars have written books and articles on this concealed aspect in Woolf’s writing; however, the lesbian suggestion is not always easily distinguished since during Woolf’s time as an active author, lesbian themes were considered deviant and banned from publication.

*Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings* by Eileen Barret and Patricia Cramer deals with Woolf’s lesbianism and how it is incorporated into her novels. *Lesbian Readings* is divided in two sections where the first part discusses Woolf’s private and public experiences of same sex love and speculates how this has influenced the writing of her novels. The second section of the book deals with the lesbian readings of her novels amongst them *To the Lighthouse*. It is stated that there are undoubtedly romantic feelings between the characters Lily Briscoe and Mrs Ramsey. Barret and Cramer also depict how Woolf uses different symbols and colours to show erotic emotions between the female characters.

*Lesbian Panic* by Patricia Juliana Smith examines the concept of “lesbian panic”, which means losing one’s homosexual identity and values by means of the heterosexual norms and the power it possesses in the society. Smith traces “lesbian panic” through different literary works, especially Virginia Woolf’s. In her reading of *To the Lighthouse*, Smith tries to describe how the character Lily represents the development of a woman who eventually
rejects the heterosexual life that was obligatory, and live the life of a lesbian artist. She also writes about Mrs Ramsay, the power she posses, her complex life and struggle to maintain the normative heterosexual behaviour pattern of behaviour.

*The Formation of the 20th-Century Queer Autobiography* by Georgia Johnson is about the early 20th century autobiographical lesbian literature where emphasis is placed on different authors such as Virginia Woolf, Hilda Doolittle and Gertrude Stein. Johnson discusses and demonstrates, through various novels, how female authors incorporated their life experiences into their fiction writing. She uses different theoretical and critical approaches in her reading of the novels. Finally, Johnson highlights the significant fact about censorship difficulties faced during the Victorian period.

Despite the fact that previous researchers have studied the presence of the homosexual element in *To the Lighthouse*, my critical reading differs from these earlier critical perspectives in a specific way. My starting point is Lily’s painting where the disclosure of her sexuality emerges and, in contrast to other critical readings, finally culminates only after the death of Mrs Ramsay.
The Window – The opening of the vision

In the first section “The Window”, one is introduced to the characters Lily Briscoe, Mrs Ramsay and Mr Bankes. All three are of consequence to my critical treatment concerning Lily’s painting. Lily is a young artist who worries about the future of her painting and its critical reception. It is with feelings of self-doubt and anxiety she begins to paint, a painting full of mysterious meanings that seemingly occupy her whole being. Although not always evidently displayed, the painting, according to my reading, contains Lily’s search for her sexual identity, which can not be acted upon in real life due to the negative connotations that homosexuality had during the Victorian period in English society. The discussion below will to a great extent deal with Lily and the process of her coming to terms with her homosexual identity. As her feelings towards the character of Mrs Ramsay take form they are simultaneously portrayed through Lily’s painting. Furthermore, the transformation of the painting will be highlighted as well as reasons behind the formal changes from the traditional mother-son portrait to the abstract colour symbolism that portrait’s Lily’s true sexual identity.

The Ramsays represent the Victorian notion of family life and values. Mr Ramsay is a dominant father figure and Mrs Ramsay is a submissive mother figure. Lily Briscoe and William Bankes differentiate themselves from the Ramsays, by not maintain the values of the Victorian period of time.

The detection of Lily’s distinctiveness comes into view when one is introduced to Lily’s painting. It largely appears to be a portrait of the characters Mrs Ramsay and James, as a mother holding her child. While Mrs Ramsay is sitting on her chair reading a story to her son James, Lily set in motion to paint. Mrs Ramsay thinks: “But the sight of the girl standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded her; she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily’s picture. Lily’s picture!” (12-13). By means of textually articulating “Lily’s picture” twice the impression is given that the artist and the
painting are something out of the ordinary. During the Victorian era, there were not many female artists and Lily’s activity as an artist immediately indicates her “otherness” in contrast to the other female characters. Lily’s artistic ambitions are however not fully appreciated since Mrs Ramsay clearly reflects on the fact that “one could not take her painting very seriously”(13); this account represents Lily in a very condescending way, and undoubtedly restrains Lily in her artistic capacity to paint what she sees and feels. Both the quoted passages above indicate that Lily Briscoe and her painting are something out of the ordinary, meaning that they fall out of the framework of the conventional Victorian society.

On this subject, the critic Eve Sorum states that, the negative annotations that Mr Tansley and Mrs Ramsay manifest concerning Lily’s painting constrain Lily’s progress in painting; her ability to paint will only progress when those influences are destroyed or rewritten. Contrary to this, Lily still proceeds with her painting; however, she does not clearly possess the self-assurance to paint her vision. Even though it is evident that the negative attitudes prevent her to see her vision, Lily is her own obstacle due to her self-restriction. She does not dare reveal the concealed meaning of her picture.

From my viewpoint, the quote where Mrs Ramsay thinks of Lily’s painting, indirectly points to the fact that the painting has the purpose of portraying Mrs Ramsay since she is supposed to hold her head still in one position to the extent that this is possible. As the plot continues, Lily makes a comment about her painting: “Even while she looked at the mass, at the line, at the color, at Mrs. Ramsay sitting in the window with James…”(12); a statement which compels the reader to imagine the portrait image since Lily also indicates that she is looking at her objects, which are Mrs Ramsay and James, while painting.

However, as the narrative proceeds, the image is displayed in another manner and the reader receives another visualization of the painting; this immediately changes the notion of the fact that there was ever an attempt at a representative likeness of Mrs Ramsey and her son.
James. In its place, one acquires the thought that the painting is considerably far from a portrait and is instead a symbolic “non-representational” form that seems to contain depth and hidden meanings. The unknown image of the painting is demonstrated in the following quote, where a conversation between Lily and Mr Bankes takes place:

> It was Mrs Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his [Mr Bankes] objection— that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. For what reason had she introduced them then? he asked. Why indeed?—except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness. Simple, obvious, commonplace, as it was, Mr Bankes was interested. 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.

> But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses too in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. (38)

As it appears, Lily states that her intention never was to portray Mrs Ramsay and James and points out that the reason for them being introduced as the main objects is due to the colour combination; the brightness and the darkness. The reason why Lily does not portray the characters as a mother holding her child lies in the fact that a mother holding her child represents the hetero-normative image that Lily calls into question. A woman holding her child is assumed by Mr Bankes as “objects of the universal veneration”, which is the imagery that Lily does not want to reproduce since she clearly states that the intention of the painting was never to paint the characters Mrs Ramsay and James in that sense. On the other hand, Lily’s intention is to signify Mrs Ramsay according to her image of her. Since Lily’s painting symbolizes her path to her sexual identity, the painting also illustrates Mrs Ramsay as a possible lesbian desire. Consequently Mrs Ramsey is deprived of her human form because everything that Mrs Ramsay stands for in her physical shape is associated with the hetero-normative way of living.

As stated in the previous passage, the painting does not represent Mrs Ramsay as a rendered portrait instead it is a symbolic place of escape for Lily to screen her secret. The
representation of secrets being concealed is described in Henry James’s *The Beast in the Closet* and analyzed in *The Epistemology of the Closet* by Eva Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose critical approach can be applied to Lily’s struggle to come to terms with her own sexual identity. Sedgwick states that the character Marcher is to some extent controlled by the notion of having a secret. This secret, according to Sedgwick, works like a closet, meaning that the closet contains the notion of the homosexual secret and not a homosexual man. As for Marcher, Lily’s painting contains the secret of her homosexual identity. The critic Penelope Ingram states that the relationship between life and art in *To The Lighthouse* is an “organic unity…. [where] Art is realized through life as life is realized through art” (no pages in the article). I argue that Lily’s painting portrays this notion since it is through the painting that she acknowledges and deals with her homosexuality. This conclusion is drawn from the fact that all her time spent seems to be absorbed with either working on or thinking about the painting. Her absorption is linked to the satisfaction of portraying the object of her desire, Mrs Ramsay. However, it is also connected to her fear that her desire will be uncovered. This is why she does not clearly state the true intention with the painting to Mr Bankes.

Lily’s reverence for Mrs Ramsay is based on admiration and respect; she sees Mrs Ramsay as an exceptional person, no one could compare with her. However, at the same time, she perceives her in a negative manner since Mrs Ramsay speaks of marriage as an obligation. Mrs Ramsay states that an “unmarried woman has missed the best in life” (36). This puts a strain on Lily’s thoughts about Mrs Ramsay, since Lily has no intentions of marriage. Lily’s outlook on Mrs Ramsay differs to a great extent from Mr Bankes’ sense of Mrs Ramsay’s beauty. In addition, Mr Bankes considers Mrs Ramsay’s unawareness of her beauty and he is amazed by this, especially when she is sitting with James on her lap. In my opinion, Mr Bankes’ view of Mrs Ramsey’s differs from other male characters in the novel because he is a
homosexual man. Mr Bankes sexual orientation gives him the ability to look beyond Mrs Ramsay’s physical appearance and focuses more on her as a person. The reason why Mr Bankes and Lily hold different images of Mrs Ramsay has to do with the fact that Lily desires Mrs Ramsay in a way that Mr Bankes is not able to do.

Returning to the above quote, another key term in the passage is *tribute*, the word has the connotation of worship, which Lily undoubtedly feels about Mrs Ramsay. On the other hand, the word also suggests an obligation to be paid, here in terms of loyalty, meaning that the painting will always portray Lily’s emotions in the unspoken closet of her lesbian desire. This explains why Lily claims that the painting had to be a tribute.

Despite the fact that the painting is a tribute to Mrs Ramsay, Lily makes people in her surroundings believe that the painting is simply a portrait because she does not want anybody to uncover the true intention of the painting for fear of revealing her inner feelings and desires, something she struggles with at this point. Instead, Lily uses different colours and shapes whose representation is unknown to the eyes of those viewing her painting. Critics like Barrett and Cramer have studied Woolf’s use of different colours and metaphors to indicate same sex desire. They argue that Woolf uses specific colours, such as the colour purple, to indicate lesbian desire. In Lily’s painting, Mr Bankes asks Lily: “What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, ‘just there?’”(38). Even though the colour purple arguably indicates lesbian desire, I believe that Woolf in Lily’s case used the symbol of the triangle as well as the purple colour to indicate a homosexual notion. I suggest that the triangle stands for the *mons pubis*, the female gentile above the pubic bone. Since Lily’s secret of her homosexuality lies in her painting, I argue that the purple triangle is the symbol of the female gentile and it symbolically codes a desire that is forbidden.

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1 The notion of Mr Bankes being gay is stated by Barrett and Cramer in *Virginia Woolf, Lesbian Readings*. 
Sedgwick’s statement about Marcher’s homosexual secret being in control of his life can be equally noticed in Lily’s condition. Similar to the mask of Marcher’s genteel life of a bachelor, Lily conceals her homosexual secret in her painting. As for Marcher, Lily’s painting withholds the homosexual secret, which in my opinion can be revealed in Lily’s use of colours and symbols as well as her fear of somebody accurately interpreting her painting. In the following quote Lily reflects on the fact that Mr Bankes sees her painting: “But it had been seen; it had been taken from her. This man had shared with her something profoundly intimate”(39). The word intimate in this quotation indicates her feelings for Mrs Ramsay, which are veiled from herself and from those in her surroundings at this point in the narrative. The fear of someone seeing the painting does not lie only in the fact that the viewer is going to dislike it; the fear also represents, in my opinion, the secret of the lesbian desire. Lily’s anxiety lies primarily in the fear of somebody discovering her homosexual feelings.

Lily’s mixed feelings towards somebody discovering her secret (her painting) are however not only present in the moment when the painting has been discovered; they are frequently felt before this incident and continue to be in attendance after it as well. The thought of Mr Bankes approaching the painting is highlighted in the following passage which introduces Lily’s feelings towards displaying her painting to her friend.

She would have snatched her picture off the easel, but she said to herself, One must. She braced herself to stand the awful trial of someone looking at her picture. One must, she said, one must. And if it must be seen, Mr Bankes was less alarming than another. But that any other eyes should see the residue of her thirty-three years, the deposit of each day’s living mixed with something more secret than she had ever spoken or shown in the course of all those days was an agony. (38)

Evidently, Lily feels anxiety in displaying her painting; she repeats “one must, she said, one must” to indicate that she is aware of the fact that the time will come when she will be obliged to exhibit the painting; she must portray its meaning. Lily’s thoughts strengthen the previously stated fact of the strong fear of her homosexuality being exposed, when she says:
“the deposit of each day’s living mixed with something more secret than she had ever spoken or shown in the course of all those days was an agony” (38). It is evident that Lily’s “secret” is central element in her painting, the secret which in my reading indicates her lesbian desire for Mrs Ramsay.

The reason why it is Mr Bankes who is allowed to view the painting is that he is a friend of Lily’s, someone who is “less alarming”, and a person who will not judge her. According to Barrett and Cramer, the strong relationship between Lily and Mr Bankes is based on the shared secrets of their homosexuality through which they have developed a life-long friendship. Whether this statement is of significance is questionable; nevertheless, it does not change the outcome when Lily shows Mr Bankes her painting. The strong friendship between Lily and Mr Bankes has no positive influence when he sees the painting; the result of her painting being seen is devastating even though Mr Bankes, her closest and maybe her only friend, is the viewer. The fact that Cramer and Smith talk about a strong friendship, is seemingly on a level where Lily’s and Mr Banke’s homosexual desires cannot be uncovered, and that is why Lily reacts so strongly to her painting being viewed.

The passage where Lily debates whether to show her painting to Mr Bankes or not is an example of what Smith refers to as “lesbian panic”, meaning that the character is unable to reveal her own lesbian desire to others but also to herself. This, then, results in strong aggressiveness towards oneself as well as others. In agreement with Smith, I believe Lily is going through lesbian panic when the painting has been seen by Mr Bankes. Earlier the thought of someone seeing her painting was not so threatening because Lily still remained in control over her presumed sexual identity. Throughout this part of the novel, Lily’s life circles around the painting and her obsession over the compositional placement of different objects; this is a psychological way of controlling her situation.
**Time Passes - The period between**

In the second section of the novel called “Times Passes”, Lily and her painting are not a part of the action described. However, due to the fact that the painting is held in her mind over a period of 10 years, “Time passes” is of importance since it depicts events during a time that are of decisive significance in the following section “The Lighthouse”. Events that occur during this period help Lily to acknowledge her homosexuality in this section.

“Time Passes” is a period marked by war and death. One of the main characters during the first part of the novel Mrs Ramsay passes away, which undoubtedly affects Lily and her ability to express her homosexuality in her painting. Mark Gaipa, in *An Agnostic’s Daughter’s Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism, and Ancestry in Woolf’s To the Lighthouse*, quotes Woolf who states that “I have to give [in “Time Passes”] an empty house, no people’s characters [sic], the passage of time and eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling on”(2). Lily’s distance from the house, enables her to have a time-space with nothing to hang on to; this gives her a period to come to terms with her emotions without participants, such as Mrs Ramsay and Mr Bankes, who held her back when she was trying to paint her vision. However, the notion of these characters departing does not mean that they disappear from Lily’s mind; they only give her time to comprehend her emotions without them affecting her with their physical presence.

During the 10 year period of which “Time Passas” takes place, Lily first and foremost has time to reach an insight about Mrs Ramsay’s importance in her life and becomes conscious of the fact that to finish the painting and to clearly see the meaning behind it is to return to the point where it all began. Lily must revisit the place where the painting was started and where it will now be refined.
“The Lighthouse”- The discovery of the vision

In the final section called “The Lighthouse”, Lily undergoes a transformation from being the artist who could not make sense of her painting, its meanings and shapes, to an artist that completes her quest. However, the road to finding her vision is long. For Lily to perceive her vision she must overcome Mrs Ramsay’s negative opinion concerning the painting and the fear of someone discovering her true sexual identity. Eventually, however, Lily finds her vision, a vision that acknowledges her homosexuality.

Throughout the process of coming to terms with the meaning and point of the painting, Lily is haunted by the thought of Mrs Ramsay. In the first section of the novel, “The Window”, Mrs Ramsay is alive and she is by Lily’s side most of the time while Lily is painting. By the third section “The Lighthouse”, Mrs Ramsay has passed away, but she still remains present in Lily’s painting since the painting is all about Lily coming to an insight about her feelings for Mrs Ramsay and discovering her homosexuality.

In the section “The Lighthouse”, Lily still struggles with her thoughts concerning her feelings while she paints. In the following passage Lily has an inner dialogue concerning her emotional path while she is painting.

Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. Why then did she do it? (118-119)

Lily feels that there lies a deliverance just before she is about to paint, the language indicates this release with the use of words like “nakedness”. In addition, while she is painting her picture she can be who she wants to be without any pressure from the world that tells her how she is supposed to act. In Embodied Form: Art and Life in Virginia Woolf’s To The Lighthouse, Randi Koppen refers to the critic Fry and Woolf who state that “emotions are mediated quite simply and very directly by the body: they are manifested in the body and
translated by bodily movement into shape and form” (382). This statement is linked to Lily in the sense that she experiences a bodily sensation due to the fact that her painting expresses the desires that her body in life cannot. Her usage of words as “the unborn soul, a soul reft of body” signifies an absence in real life yet made possible in some moments while she paints. Moreover, Lily can not act upon her inner desires at this point since the woman whom Lily desires does not exist in life anymore; it is only in her memory where Lily can pursue her emotions. However, even if Mrs Ramsay would have been alive, there is no evidence that Lily would have acted upon her feelings due to the values that Mrs Ramsay held regarding the heterosexual norm.

The painting permits Lily to live an imaginative life and it enables her to escape from a reality which does not allow her to express her emotions. In One Drifts Apart: To the Lighthouse as Art of Response, Penelope Ingram claims that Lily’s art is tied to her life since she can only perform her artistic acts when looking into the past. This statement is central in Lily’s relationship to her painting and her sexual orientation. It is through the painting that she portrays her sexual identity and it is by looking to the past that she can come to terms with her feelings towards Mrs Ramsay. This indicates, I believe, that the past is of decisive importance for Lily since it is with the notion of the past that she can negotiate her inner feelings and desires without the interference of the present.

Lily alters her emotions towards Mrs Ramsay; at one point she expresses sorrow while she at times feels anger towards Mrs Ramsay. These emotions are displayed through the following quote:

Really, she was angry with Mrs Ramsay. With the brush slightly trembling in her fingers she looked at the hedge, the step, the wall. It was all Mrs Ramsay’s doing. She was dead. Here was Lily, at forty-four, wasting her time, unable to do a thing, standing there, playing at painting, playing at the one thing one did not play at, and it was all Mrs Ramsay’s fault. She was dead. The step where she used to sit was empty. She was dead. (112)
According to the critic Eva Sorum, the quoted passage above indicates coexistence between anger and desire for Mrs Ramsay. With the aim of completing her painting, Lily must reclaim her own perspective and not follow Mrs Ramsey’s principles. Simultaneously, Lily’s anger towards Mrs Ramsay does portray a desire, as Sorum states, and a part of her anger lies in the fact that the character of Mrs Ramsay only wanted people to live according to Victorian values (38). However, I argue that the emotion of anger lies also in the fact that Lily never could display her desire for Mrs Ramsay since she was uncertain of them during the time Mrs Ramsay was alive, which also is the reason why Lily thinks of her age and that “she wasted her time, unable to do a thing”. Lily cannot move on with her life since Mrs Ramsay is always present in her mind; the struggle of her inner emotions is hard to bear since she cannot concretely actualize her desire because Mrs Ramsay is no longer alive.

Repeatedly, while Lily is painting, she creates a world of her own; she steps out of what we normally consider the real world and moves into the past, where she embraces memories that are filled with thoughts and emotions, memories that are mostly about Mrs Ramsay. From my viewpoint, at this stage of the novel, Lily is trying to gain insight regarding her emotions, which also is the reason why she recalls so much of the past while painting. It is only when she is painting that she dares enter the world of the unknown, and the centre of her memories that she is trying to cope with. This offers insight to Lily in the manner that she can work on her memories without the influence of Mrs Ramsay and her prescriptions about how Lily should live her life.

In the following quote, Lily remembers Mrs Ramsay during a time she in Lily’s memory was happy, and discusses the insignificance of relationships:

Mrs Ramsay sat silent. She was glad, Lily thought, to rest in silence, uncommunicative; to rest in the extreme obscurity of human relationships. Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge? Aren’t things spoilt then, Mrs Ramsay may have asked (it seemed to have happened so often, this silence by her side) by saying them? Aren’t we more expressive thus? (128)
Once again, Lily uses the word *intimacy*; however, this time she utters it in connection to Mrs Ramsay and poses it as a question instead of offering answers and showing uncertainty. By asking questions, Lily is coming to an insight about herself and her sexual identity which is beginning to surface. Lily also talks of silence; this then, immediately, is linked to the first section “The Window” where silence was a significant part of the unspeakable remaining unspoken. To form these reflections, Lily looks beyond her canvas. Urmila Seshagiri in “Orienting Virginia Woolf: Race, and politics in *To the Lighthouse*”, states that Lily looks beyond her painting to determine its worth and that the picture breaks free from the hierarchal world of the Ramsays. I can agree with the fact that Lily, to an extent, breaks away from the vision of Ramsays’ world by not following in their footsteps. However, Seshagiri seems to miss Lily’s own reasons for doing so. I argue that Lily’s cause for looking beyond her painting is to envision a life that has no secrets, a life of declaring her true sexual identity in the real world as well as in the painting. This would also prove valid if one accepts Lily’s quest to understand her sexual orientation with her vision of a life without secrets.

As stated previously, Lily recalls Mrs Ramsay continuously whilst painting; however, her feelings toward Mrs Ramsay often suggest sorrow. This is evident in the following quote: “Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!” she cried, feeling the old horror come back—to want and want and not to have” (150). Lily undoubtedly speaks of Mrs Ramsay as a desire she could not have while she was alive, which is why she uses the phrase “the old horror”, meaning that the horror is Mrs. Ramsay dead and not present. The notion of pronouncing “to want and want and not to have” enhances the fact that Lily confesses to herself that her desire is in fact Mrs Ramsay.

In my opinion, the ultimate acceptance of Lily’s sexual identity is portrayed in the last page of the novel when she fully becomes conscious of her vision and finishes the picture that took her more that one decade to paint.
She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (154)

At this point in the narrative, Lily becomes a woman who has dissociated herself from a hetro-normative way of living and acknowledges the fact that she is a lesbian woman. The reason why this vision does not appear earlier lies in the fact that many people stopped her from expressing her emotion. Mrs Ramsay, the woman Lily was in love with, wanted to force upon her a heterosexual life by constantly uttering “they all must marry, since in the whole world whatever laurels might be tossed to her (but Mrs Ramsay cared not a fig for her painting)” (36). In the quoted passage above, Lily talks about the vacant steps, the same ones Mrs Ramsay used to appear on in her imagination. The reason why Lily no longer needs to visualise Mrs Ramsay on these steps is because Lily now acknowledges her sexual orientation and no longer is dependent upon the sexual draw of Mrs Ramsay. The steps that Lily looks at can thus have a metaphoric reference as the gradient incline she makes toward her lesbian identity.

In the end of the novel, Lily realises that she is the only one who can determine her way of living and that she is the only one in control of her sexual identity. Finally, the ending indicates her (impossible) union with Mrs Ramsay as the love lost. According to Julia Patricia Smith’s reading of the last passage, Lily has in the end negated the traps of gender and “acquired the potential to create artistically and to love another women” (69). Smith states also that Lily has moved beyond lesbian panic. However, this is proved valid only to an extent. Smith seems to neglect the fact that time and circumstances have led to this notion. I argue that the final stroke portrays Lily’s recognition of her sexual identity directed by the events that have occurred along the way. When Smith speaks of the fact that Lily has “acquired potential” to create artistically, I disagree. It has been evident throughout the novel that Lily has potential to paint all the time. Nevertheless, the reason for her not doing so has
been because she has not seen her vision clear enough because she did not acknowledge the fact of what the vision meant. Lily is able to overcome suppressed feelings of her sexuality only when she comes to terms with Mrs Ramsay’s impact on her, both by being the source of her desires and by Mrs Ramsay’s condescending thoughts of Lily’s painting. However, these feelings are acknowledged in the end. According to Ingram, Lily’s final stroke in the painting is not a realization of the different masses with a line in the centre; it is a representation of her vision, namely Mrs Ramsay. I agree with Ingram to the extent that the realization of the vision has small significance to the artistically performed line on the canvas. Her final vision does however involve Mrs Ramsay but more in the sense that she resolves the dilemma of her own emotions and her sexual identity than portraying the image she has of the character.

Portraying Mrs Ramsay would mean only coming to terms with the representation of Mrs Ramsay. Unquestionably, Mrs Ramsay is the main object of Lily’s painting but only in the sense that Lily, through her desire for Mrs Ramsay, finally acknowledges her homosexuality. When Lily fully becomes conscious of her vision, she does not only accept her homosexuality, she also relinquishes the strain that consumed her mentally in “The Window”, which was the fear of the painting being neglected and never shown to others. Lily’s affection for Mrs Ramsay will not cease since it will constantly exist in the image of the painting. Therefore, in Lily’s mind it does not matter whether the painting will be seen by other viewers or not; her work of art functions merely as a way of understanding her inner self.

According to Tammy Clewell in “Consolation refused: Virginia Woolf, the great war and modernist mourning”, Lily divides her canvas into two parts, to highlight the past and the present that can not be united mutually and that “…the painting’s central line [vision] distinguishes a time characterised by Mrs Ramsay’s presence and another by her absence, inviting us to read Lily’s final gesture as a sign of the impossibility of fully assimilating the past as redeemed present” (218). Contrary to Clewell, I argue that the central line (vision)
represents rather the acknowledgment of the past and the view of the present, meaning that when uniting what has happened and what is happening, Lily can recognize her sexual identity and feel satisfaction with what she has achieved. Urmilla Seshagiri quotes Woolf who states that “one has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold design together” (75). Woolf’s remark supports my reading if one thinks of the line in the painting as that which holds the lesbian vision together.
Conclusion

Slicing the truth by means of screening ones own sexual orientation discloses unfairness to ones own identity. The identity one creates depends to a great extent on how one is perceived by other people. Lily’s path of self-recognition started in the first part of the book as a mask of hiding her identity from her surrounding but also from herself. The painting worked as a closet for hiding her identity in order to maintain the ideals of Mrs Ramsay but also to frame a way of living that was not even recognized by herself. Lily uses the painting as an intermediary to come to terms with her homosexuality and her secret desire for Mrs Ramsay. From the start, it is indicated that the painting is a portrait of Mrs Ramsay and her son James. However, this representation changes and the painting becomes a symbolic sign of her vision of Mrs Ramsay. Lily in “The Window” is characterized as an artist that is tremendously affected by Mrs Ramsay’s Victorian values. This idea suspended Lily’s ability to envision the meaning and the secret behind her painting and what significance it might have on her life. Despite this fact, Lily is absorbed by her painting and she portrays her secret. Lily uses colours and symbols to indicate a secret that she dares not depict as she envisions it. In addition, Lily struggles with the fact that someone will see the painting, a fear that mostly lies in the fact that someone will discover her sexual orientation which paradoxically is not clear to her either, since she is influenced by Mrs Ramsay and the society.

Secondly, in the part “Time Passes” which extends over a 10 year period, Lily is given time to think and comes to better understand her identity after the death of Mrs Ramsay. During this period of time, Lily is not in contact with her picture’s meaning. She does physically see it but she does not paint. Nevertheless, Mrs Ramsay’s absence changes the situation for Lily because the person of her secret desire is no longer alive. This fact affects Lily in many ways. First and foremost it gives her inspiration to return to the place where she
started the painting to eventually finish it and realize what has always been hidden, her lesbian vision.

In the third part of the novel when Lily returns to the place where she started her painting, she becomes the main character of the narrative and simultaneously of her life, since the character of Mrs Ramsay is no longer present to act as a hindrance in Lily’s completion of her picture. However, Mrs Ramsay still plays a significant part in Lily’s life. Lily reminisces over Mrs Ramsay while slowly coming to terms with her vision. Lily portrays altering emotions; she goes from anger to sorrow whilst always showing a desire for Mrs Ramsay. As time passes, Lily comes to an insight about her sexual orientation. This is possible in Lily’s mind because Mrs Ramsay no longer affects her with notions of Victorian values. Her absence allows Lily to create her own life and this is why she can acknowledge her lesbian identity. However, when Lily comes to terms with her vision, she does not only acknowledge the fact that she is a lesbian woman; she also abandons the need to publicly exhibit her picture because the painting has fulfilled its primary mission. It has called into being her lesbian life and the painting has functioned as a tribute to her emotions for Mrs Ramsay. Reading to the Lighthouse as merely one of Woolf’s feminist novels would ignore the rich homosexual imagery that is portrayed in Lily’s painting. However, opening our eyes to what Lily finally sees is a way for readers to recognize something new and other in the canvas of Woolf’s words.
Works cited


