

# **Women in the Spotlight: Feminine Characters in Ellen Glasgow's *Virginia* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse***

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Academic year: 2020/2021



## Abstract

Ellen Glasgow and Virginia Woolf are both among the most renowned female authors of the twentieth century. Being their novels labelled as feminist literature, both writers focus their attention on women discrimination on distinct historical contexts. This paper aims to prove how the above-mentioned authors, in their novels *Virginia* and *To the Lighthouse* respectively, succeeded in portraying the role of traditional and more modern women in the Old South and in the antebellum Scotland. To a lower extent, the paper also examines how the endings of the narrations are used by the authors to forewarn women of their precarious circumstances.

To do so, characters representative of the clashing women profiles will be analysed in each of the novels. In Glasgow's *Virginia*, Virginia Pendleton will be scrutinised in regard to her Traditional Southern lady role, while Susan Treadwell, Abby Goode and Margaret Oldcastle will be examined from a New Women perspective. As for Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay clearly embodies the role of the Victorian woman, being Lily Briscoe a portrayal of the opposite, a Modern woman. Additionally, the position of each character when the novel finishes will be shortly presented, in order to demonstrate how those endings can have an effect on the perception on women discrimination in female readers.

The paper concludes that in fact, both authors triumphed in portraying an accurate reality when it came to gender issues, especially women discrimination. Among women discrimination, the novels appear to present a general picture of the two women profiles coexisting in certain historical times: the traditional women profiles and the emerging modern women. Moreover, Glasgow and Woolf succeeded, by introducing, comparing and displaying each of the chosen characters' endings within the story, to trigger female readers so that they adopt new attitudes towards the role of women, abandoning their enslavement.

**Key words:** Ellen Glasgow, *Virginia*, Traditional Southern lady, New Woman, Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Victorian woman.

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## 1. Introduction

Ellen Glasgow (1873-1945) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) are both remarkable writers of the 20th century: being the former a citizen of the American South, and the latter belonging to the British society. Nevertheless, in spite of being physically apart, the resemblance between these two writers is strong. First, both Glasgow and Woolf are known by the social criticism appreciated in their works. Those critiques differ mostly because of the geographical environment in which each of the authors was raised: Glasgow shows rejection towards the society that emerged after the Reconstruction in the Southern American states, while Woolf appears to denounce the conventions of the Victorian society. Second, both writers are usually scrutinized from a feminist perspective. In a way, it is their main aim to condemn through their novels the precarious and marginalized situation of women throughout history, mainly raising their voices on behalf of those that were unable to do so. These two traits are apparent in the novels to be examined: *Virginia* by Ellen Glasgow and *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf.

The main major objective of this paper, then, is to analyse how Glasgow and Woolf succeeded in reflecting and portraying the role and desperate situation of women in the corresponding periods they chose, together with a modern women profile emerging at those times. Moreover, it will also be mentioned the way in which the endings of the novels are a device for raising awareness among women of their unbearable situation. The novels concerned are Ellen Glasgow's *Virginia*, which focuses on the feminine discrimination in the times of the Reconstruction (1863-1877) in the Southern American states, more concretely in Virginia. The second novel to analyse is Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which portrays Victorian women's lifestyle in the Scotland of the 1910s and 1920s. In a lower proportion, this paper will also comment on the intentions of the authors of forewarning repressed women, making use of the endings of both novels.

To do so, the paper has been divided into two main sections and a conclusion. The first part is devoted to Ellen Glasgow and her novel *Virginia*. For the reader to be familiar with the circumstances, the role of women in the Old South is briefly explained. Related to that, I introduce two types of women profiles that prevailed at the time: The Traditional Southern lady and the New Woman. It will then go on to the analysis of how the two women profiles are portrayed in the novel, mainly through different characters: Virginia

Pendleton as a Traditional Southern lady, and Susan Treadwell, Abby Goode, and Margaret Oldcastle as New Women. The second section deals with Virginia Woolf and her novel *To the Lighthouse*. As in the previous part, I will present the two women profiles in force at the beginning of the twentieth century in Scotland: the Victorian women and the Modern Woman. The analysis of the novel itself comes next, focusing on some characters representative of each type of women: Mrs. Ramsay as a Victorian woman and Lily Briscoe as a Modern Woman. A brief conclusion will close the paper.

## **2. Ellen Glasgow's *Virginia***

### **2.1. Background: types of women in the postbellum Old South**

#### **2.1.1. The Traditional Southern lady**

When the American Civil war ended in 1865, and Northern American states were proclaimed winners, Southern states happened to be desolated both economically and politically. As for gender roles, the North was also one step ahead of the South, as the ideals attached to feminine standards began to change by the time of the Reconstruction (Shi and Tindall 661). Nevertheless, the precarious situation of women remained in the South as women supported a system that “upper class white men controlled and their women helped to maintain” (Wyse 28).

Those women labelled as “Traditional Southern ladies” were usually rated according to the standards of True Womanhood (Welter 152), a system with clear foundations in the Victorian England Standards (Wyse 19). This concept revolves around four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Welter 152).

Piety was one of the characteristics women needed to fulfil in order to be respected by society members. It was essential, as it was considered a kind of “tranquilizer” (Welter 153) that would keep women focused on their housekeeping duties. On the one hand, religious devotion did not threaten the power men had over women, and on the other hand, piety could be practised in the private sphere to which women belonged (Lavender 2).

Purity was another essential feature of Southern ladies. A woman lacking purity was considered a “fallen woman”, which is defined by the *Oxford University Press* as “a woman who has lost her chastity, honour, or standing, or who has become morally

degenerate” (“fallen woman”). This is due to the fact that women were not allowed to have sexual experiences until their marriage night (Lavender 2).

A woman must also be submissive to be considered a True Woman. Needless to say, women were dependent on their father, husband or both, as well as passive, submissive and too emotional (Welter 159). Marriage was the only act to make them happy and this need for marrying was clearly related to the belief that a woman's only commitment was to devote herself fully to her husband and family (Welter 159). Once married, every woman would be anchored to their house and duties. Economically speaking, women were also dominated by men. (Welter 161).

When it comes to domesticity, it must be said that women belonged to the private sphere as their place was at home. Emotionally, ladies needed to adopt certain manners, such as dispensing “comfort and cheers” (Welter 163) and not exhibiting their worries to their husbands. As a whole, they were the “Angel in the House”, whose obligation was to “impart moral guidance to her family” (Cruea 190). Following the standards of the “cult of domesticity”, women were expected to do ladylike activities inside their houses: needlework, housekeeping and taking care of flowers. Reading novels, on the other hand, was thought to be inappropriate for women, mainly because wives could be influenced by extravagant actions by the characters (Welter 166).

As far as education is concerned, Traditional Southern ladies were banned from receiving education. First, because as religion many times remarked, “knowledge was power”, but it was a privilege that belonged just to men (Morgan 36). Second, because “strong minded women” were considered abhorrent, as the thought of ladies abandoning their housekeeping responsibilities to educate themselves was unacceptable (Scott vi).

### **2.1.2. The New Woman**

Nevertheless, during the mid-final of the 19th century, a new profile of women started to emerge: the New Woman. It is true that the image of the New Woman was not really established until the early 20th century, but from the 1850s onwards hints that would later define the concept started to appear. (Hoffberger 2).

These New Women were characterised mainly by their freedom thirst. They were no longer wishing to marry and spend their whole lives bound to their households, but they were now demanding freedom, independence and emancipation. Consequently, their desire for “pursuing new sensation” and experiences increased in a significant way (Buzwell np).

This innovative concept of womanhood was also accompanied by the desire for education. By this time many women wished to be “intelligent career-minded” (Buzwell np). Moreover, during the second half of the nineteenth century, colleges started to open doors for women, a necessary factor to encourage them to study (Hoffberger 5). As for job opportunities it is important to mention that a few New Women began to work, mainly as teachers, nurses and social workers (Scott ix).

Innovations were also found when it came to marriage. Women moved away from the necessity of marrying a man for being honourable: the New Woman was not so interested in devoting herself to her marriage. As it was already mentioned, New Women were searching for independence, which was also reflected in their spare time. Activities such as sports and reading were now practised more often by ladies, even though some of them still preferred to devote their time to more traditional pastimes (Buzwell np).

## **2.2. Women in Ellen Glasgow’s *Virginia***

Ellen Glasgow was born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1873 and died on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, 1945 in Richmond, Virginia (Wilson 287, 289). Not exactly by coincidence, she is the author of the novel to analyse in this section: *Virginia*. Written in 1913, the work is considered an important twentieth century novel. It is set in the post Reconstruction Virginia of the 1860s and narrates Virginia Pendleton’s life, from adolescence, going through marriage and motherhood, until the time of facing the future by herself. *Virginia* carries within many topics, being the most prominent one the submission to which women in the reconstructed South were exposed to. This is mainly because Glasgow was introducing herself to women movements by the time she published *Virginia*, educating herself about the obvious inequalities between both sexes (Scura 39).



Her involvement in women's movements began to be quite active in the year 1908, (Scura 31), and the same preoccupation that led her to these movements is expressed throughout her novels, more concretely in *Virginia*. Not only does it present Virginia Pendleton's lifestyle, but the novel also introduces the characters of Susan Treadwell, Abby Goode and Margaret Oldcastle. The former is representative of the traditional Southern lady repressed by society, while the latter belong to a representation of the New Woman that was emerging at the time. By introducing these two opposed women profiles, Glasgow aimed at provoking a sense of awakening in women of her time. In a way, just by describing and comparing the characters' lives, the author wanted women to reflect upon their own circumstances. Moreover, she trusted women and believed that by showing both the tragic reality of traditional women besides the prosperous future of New Women, she would call her twentieth century comrades to awake themselves from their silent positions (Scura 34). On a deeper level Glasgow presents the "conflict between tradition and change" (Wilson 287).

### **2.2.1. Virginia Pendleton as a Southern lady**

When analysing Virginia Pendleton regarding her role as a Southern lady, the aim of the novel is for the readers of Glasgow's time to understand how repressed women used to live in the time of the Reconstruction in Virginia. Glasgow named her character Virginia for several reasons. On the one hand, the character can be considered a symbol standing for the state of Virginia together with representing the conditions under which every woman was sentenced to live in that certain state. On the other hand, and related to one of the characteristics of the Traditional lady explained later, the name Virginia is associated with the image of the Virgin and her attributes (Pereiras 19). Generally speaking, Virginia Pendleton would have been considered the perfect woman in the Reconstructed South.

From the very beginning of the novel, Virginia Pendleton is moulded as a traditional Southern woman. Glasgow states that "it was easy to discern that she embodied the feminine ideals of the age" (10). During the novel, there are some other fragments in which Virginia is judged as being a Southern lady. For instance, her friend Susan Treadwell labels her as a Southern Belle, expressing that she wants to be nothing like

Virginia. In a way, Glasgow is inviting the readers to compare both characters and reflect upon their role in society, giving rise to a possible mass awakening. The extract, which says the following “You are disappointed because I’m not a belle like Abby Goode or Jinny Pendleton” (61), is also aimed to see how mothers, who, in fact, have already been Traditional Women, try to encourage their daughters to follow their path, giving rise to conflict between keeping tradition or giving rise to change. As a matter of clarification, it must be said that despite the fact that Abby Goode is labelled as a Traditional Southern lady at the beginning of the novel, she presents several characteristics which are not particularly traditional as the story develops. In other words, she does not convey the traditional women profile, but she is rather a modern woman, as it will be later discussed.

Mothers of women in the South were thought to be responsible for their situation in the South, as they “helped weld her own chains” (Scura 35). This idea is clearly illustrated by Glasgow with Mrs Pendleton’s, Virginia’s mother’s thoughts: “And as she spoke she looked gently down on the Problem of the South as the Southern woman had looked down on it for generations and would continue to look down on it for generations still to come - without seeing that it was a problem” (30). More concretely, the author wants to highlight that women were not even able to recognise their repressing conditions as problematic, condemning future generations to maintain the role of the Southern lady. Throughout the text, there are many other evident instances of Virginia Pendleton accepting the lack of independence of women, as when she agrees with her husband about the dependence of women: “He saw woman as dependent upon man for the very integrity of her being, and beyond the divine fact of this dependency, he did not see her at all. But there was nothing sardonic in his point of view, which has become considerably strengthened by his marriage to Virginia, who shared it” (Glasgow 160).

Another feature that characterises Southern ladies, and consequently Virginia Pendleton, is purity. The virginal embodiment of Virginia Pendleton can be perceived throughout the narration by three main sources: Virginia’s clothes, the adjectives describing her character and by her name itself. As far as her apparel is concerned, from the very beginning of the story it can be seen that she wears “white lawn dresses” (Glasgow 10), the colour in which morally pure characters have been portrayed (Sherman and Clore 1019). When it comes to her personal traits, she is many times described as having “virginal sweetness” (Glasgow 23) and “virginal shyness” (Glasgow 75). The

clearest instance of Virginia Pendleton conforming to the standards of traditional womanhood is her name itself: Virginia.

When portraying Virginia Pendleton as a Southern woman, Glasgow also introduces the characteristic of submission. As Glasgow indicates: “this “happiness” meant to her only the solitary experience of love” (79). In fact, devoting her whole life to someone rather than to herself does not cause any kind of discomfort in Virginia. Instead, she finds it exciting: “[Virginia] thought of the daily excitement of marketing, of the perpetual romance of mending his clothes, of the glorified monotony of pouring his coffee, as an adventurer on sunrise seas might dream of the rosy islands of hidden treasure” (Glasgow 106). In short, “her whole existence should perpetually circle around this single centre of thought” (Glasgow 107), the thought of owing dedication to Oliver. This extract is an adequate illustration of it: “What could be more beautiful or more sacred than to be “given” to Oliver - to belong to him as utterly as she had belonged to her father?” (Glasgow 106).

Economic dependence typical of Southern ladies is also apparent in Virginia Pendleton, being her husband Oliver now the one managing the finances. Finances managed by a husband meant leaving no access to the wife to handle money, which is clearly stated by Virginia in the following instance: “He has always paid the bills, but he never gave me a cent in my life to do as I pleased with” (Glasgow 63). There is, in fact, a single case in the novel of Virginia using money for herself, which is portrayed as a revolting action provoked by Virginia’s jealousy for Abby Goode. This clearly depicts the perspective Southern society had about women spending money on themselves: it was a selfish behaviour caused by the obsessive nature of women. Leaving aside her fright for spending money, Glasgow expresses: “[it] came to her to go in and buy it while she was still desperate enough to act foolishly and not be afraid” (Glasgow 167).

Southern Women as Virginia Pendleton also needed to present passive behaviours, obliging themselves to suffer in silence and not raising their voices over their personal matters. Virginia shows many instances of passive attitudes throughout the novel, being this the most remarkable one: “For, in spite of the fiery splendour of Southern womanhood during the war years, to be feminine, in the eyes of the period, was to be morally passive” (80). The main character also depicts the obligation of maintaining her

worries aside in order to commit herself to her family: “I keep all my worries, big and little, in the background” (Glasgow 112).

There is a point in the novel, however, where a sense of revolution can be perceived in the character, by revolution meaning an attempt of Virginia to think of herself. She realises that she had spent too much time caring about her family, leaving herself aside: “For eight years she had hardly thought of herself, for eight years she had worked and saved and planned and worried, for eight years she had given her life utterly and entirely to Oliver and the children” (Glasgow 167). The endeavour goes no longer than this chapter, as her son falls ill, and she returns to devoting herself wholly to her family. The character of Virginia Pendleton also comforts the ideal of domesticity required of women. This can be seen in the case of Oliver, that he requires from her wife to devote herself totally to her home. He explains: “I like a woman to be wrapped up heart and soul in her household” (Glasgow 130), clearly expressing his will of keeping Virginia, his wife, at home.

Going back to the character of Virginia herself, there are also several instances of her being devoted to ladylike activities, most of which were taken at home. Like a good Southern woman, Virginia appears to be fond of practicing needlework and sewing, portrayed in the novel while she writes in one of her letters: “I sew almost all the time” (Glasgow 115).

Emotionally speaking, Virginia depicts the character traits required by Southern Ladies. Among those traits were cheerfulness, which, in fact, is defined in the novel as a “characteristic of the women of her age” (Glasgow 29), and others such as “the patience, the sweetness, the unselfish goodness” (Glasgow 264). All those characteristics are used in the novel in order to describe Virginia, showing more instances of a traditional lady.

Related also to the fact that women spent much of their time at home, it is important to highlight that they were not encouraged to educate themselves nor to read. This image of the uneducated Southern woman is clearly depicted by Virginia, who owns just a few books: “there was a cheap little bookcase of walnut which contained the only volumes she had ever been permitted to own” (Glasgow 32). Even though Virginia herself owns a pair of books, she thinks that “it is a waste of time to read when there are things about the house that ought to be done” (Glasgow 116), implying that women are not made to spend their time reading. It is also interesting to note that Virginia Pendleton, as most

Southern Ladies at the time, is educated so that she avoids education. Glasgow notes: “Her education was founded upon the simple theory that the less a girl knew about life, the better prepared she would be to contend with it. Knowledge of any sort ... was kept from her as rigorously as if it contained the germs of a contagious disease” (18). Virginia also expresses rejection towards the idea of her daughter going to college. The idea is summarised in the following lines: “I never saw that it could possibly do a woman any good to go to college” (Glasgow 209).

Altogether, Glasgow intended to portray the undesirable ending of Virginia Pendleton, which serves as a forewarning for women on her time. She is abandoned by her husband, as Oliver is attracted to a determined and strong-minded woman, Margaret Oldcastle in this case. Moreover, her beloved children are already grown up, leaving Virginia in a desolate and desperate state. This portrayal clearly shows how even sacrificing oneself for the family may be in vain, and how devoting one’s life wholly to other people does not guarantee any kind of happiness. In a way, this is a warning sign from the author who tries to awaken women from submissive states, as seeing Virginia’s desolate outcome may encourage women to abandon their obedient behaviours.

### **2.2.2. Susan Treadwell, Margaret Oldcastle and Abby Goode as New Women**

Contrary to the Traditional woman portrayed by Virginia Pendleton, Glasgow introduces several other characters to depict the profile of New Woman emerging at the time. As it will be discussed, Susan Treadwell is the character that best represents the virtues of modern women. Nevertheless, characters such as Margaret Oldcastle and Abby Goode also convey many progressive traits when it comes to the roles of women, that is to say, the image of the New Woman is constructed in the novel by gathering pieces and traits found in several characters at the same time. Those women, according to the standards of the moment, were judged for not sticking to tradition. In addition, as most women surrendered to their established roles, New Women were seen as rare. This generalised view that society as a whole supported is expressed in the novel: “With Susan she had failed, because the daughter of Cyrus Treadwell was one of those inexplicable variations” (Glasgow 18).

When portraying New Ladies in the novel, Glasgow opts, first, for showing the free spirit and will of freedom that characterises them. She succeeds in capturing their essence in these two extracts. On the one hand, Susan is described as a “free-spirit” woman, being “as free from coquetry as she is from the folderol of sentimentality” (Glasgow 56). On the other hand, Margaret Oldcastle is also representative of the profile of the New Woman, not only because she is also a free-spirited woman, but because she is even regarded as being at the same level as man when it comes to independence. The evidence of that male supremacy can be clearly seen in the following quotation: “She stood not only for the elemental forces, but for the free woman; and her freedom, like that of a man, had been built upon the strewn bodies of the weaker” (Glasgow 249).

The novel also presents the profile of a New Woman rejecting a marriage-centred life. Throughout the narration Susan shows little worries about marriage, but she also expresses discomfort with those wives living an enslaved life. She, in fact, sees no point in basing her happiness on an engagement or in the opinion a man could have on her. Showing her independence and self-centred philosophy, she expresses: “I’ve a life of my own to live, and I’m not going to let my happiness depend on how many times a man looks at me” (Glasgow 61).

Education also plays an important role in the characterisation of a New Woman. Susan Treadwell, following her will of educating herself, shows self-determination to go to college. Quite at the beginning of the novel Susan gives some thoughts to the idea of asking her father for permission to go to college. It is true that due to the stereotypes and so rooted traditional gender roles, Susan appears to be scared by the mere thought of requesting for permission, mainly because she knew beforehand that her father would decline her petition. Regardless of Susan being convinced of her father’s refusal, she expresses her will quite intensely: “I should almost be willing to starve if only I might go to college” (Glasgow 59). As the novel progresses, Susan takes courage and expresses: “Father, I want to go to college” (Glasgow 87). This quote does not simply indicate a growth of the character herself, but it also represents how society was starting to change when it came to gender roles. Being her father a symbol of society itself, Susan decides to overcome her fear of it and fight for her own education.

As far as entertainment is concerned, New Women innovated in many aspects. The interest for reading that aroused among these ladies is depicted in the novel, once

more, by Susan Treadwell. This willingness for reading can be related to the fact that women were now looking for independence, which could be, in a way, achieved by knowledge. Virginia, from a traditional point of view as the one society had, does not really understand how Susan could read that much, taking into account that Virginia supported the ideal of women's duties being the ones related only to domesticity. Virginia's thoughts say: "the number of books she [Susan] read has always shocked Virginia a little, who felt that time for reading was obliged to be time subtracted from more important duties" (Glasgow 228). On the other hand, Abby Goode spends her time practicing sports, which causes discomfort in men. Oliver argues that "she doesn't seem womanly", just because "she's too fond of sports and all that sort of things" (Glasgow 160). Men saw that activities practised outside the household could threaten their control over women, being that the main reason for rejecting sportswomen.

Lastly, what Glasgow does to present the profile of the New Woman throughout several characters is recount their character traits. By describing the personality of characters, she depicts New Women as being "strong, capable, conquering" (Glasgow 125), as well as owning "an energetic and capable mind" (Glasgow 10). They are also characterised for their "hard work, self-denial, and discipline" (Glasgow 227), mainly shown in order to demonstrate their capacities.

As a whole, Glasgow makes use of the favourable outcome of New Women representative characters in order for women to realise which path to follow. Characters such as Susan Treadwell, Abby Goode and Margaret Oldcastle prioritise themselves before devoting themselves to husbands or children. They become free-spirited women who follow their wishes before comforting others. Glasgow is anticipating the future of women if they opt for dedicating time to themselves before getting involved in motherhood, which also serves as a forewarning of their possible submission. A clear example is the case of Susan Treadwell, as it is only after educating herself that she decides to form a family. The same happens with Margaret Oldcastle, who becomes a determined actress first, engaging herself later in a relationship with Oliver. As for Abby Goode, she follows her ambitions regarding sports, which, in fact, makes her satisfied and fortunate.

### **3. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse***

#### **3.1. Background: types of women in antebellum Scotland**

##### **3.1.1. The Victorian woman**

Before World War I detonated, around 1910, Scotland was a developing country whose main economic activities changed drastically to more industrialised ones. Demographic changes resulted from industrial development, but still the society of the beginning of the twentieth century was absolutely marked by gender ideals (Jessop 1). Being the Victorian woman the symbol of the Victorian age, certain conventions were imposed upon women to be respectable in the era. In the case of wives and daughters, virtues such as being the “Angel in the House” and devoting themselves totally to marriage and motherhood were valued above any other qualities (Hughes np).

According to the ideals of Victorian Womanhood, the image of woman was totally bound to the idea of domesticity (Hughes np) and of *Separate Spheres*, which supported that women had to stay within the private sphere which was their home. Staying at home meant for women to receive an education previous to their marriage so that when the time arrived, they were ready to attend to all the needs. That education was mainly based on everyday activities (Hughes np) centred on works that were categorised as “womanly”: washing and ironing clothes, washing floors, preparing food... (Abrams 3).

Marriage also played a crucial role in the lives of Victorian women. It was their duty to fully dedicate themselves to their husbands, as marrying respectable men was the only way for wives to gain respectability. In order to maintain their reputations, it was necessary for wives to show “constant devotion to her husband, as well as to her God” (Abrams 2).

Victorian womanhood also implied the necessity of learning mothering, that not only provided women with children, but it also served as a way of confirming their identity as mothers (Abrams 5). In short, women achieved their whole emotional fulfilment once they gave birth. On the other hand, wives refusing motherhood were considered “a failure or ... abnormal” (Abrams 5).

Physically women were also asked to follow certain conventions, as well as their clothing is concerned. The feminine apparel of the 19th century began to reflect their position and role in society, reducing to the minimum the available pastimes for women



(Abrams 4). Among those were the stereotypical tasks related to the 19th century ideals such as embroidery: pastimes that helped develop a woman's patience and perseverance (Abrams 4).

As for the education Victorian women received, they were just taught through the so-called "accomplishments". According to those, women needed to execute their tasks in a "graceful and feminine manner" (Hughes np). Any other kind of education meant to be taken outside one's home was considered a men's world, so it was not allowed for women to take it (Appell np).

### **3.1.2. The Modern woman**

Contrary to the Victorian woman profile, the Modern Women began to challenge the imposed double gender standards in several ways. By rejecting the old and adopting new habits, women demonstrated that practices such as painting and writing were possible for women too. Not only that, but the emergence of a modern woman profile has been considered by many the "predecessor of the suffrage movement" (Schindler and Oesterreich 6).

Changes happened in fields such as marriage and motherhood. On the one hand, the century shift brought the opportunity for women to keep their property and earnings for themselves, without the need of entrusting them to their husbands (Schindler and Oesterreich 6). On the other hand, women were now able to divorce from abusive husbands, making it possible for them to maintain the custody of children (Lambert np).

As for education, women were now more interested in receiving a professional education, even though it was still a bit of a challenge. Colleges such as Oxford and Cambridge opened their doors to women in the early twentieth century (Schindler and Oesterreich 6). Not only regarding education but advances also happened in the field of work. Several professions became accessible for women workers, allowing them to work as vets, accountants and magistrates (Schindler and Oesterreich 7).

With the twentieth century also came a growth of public participation involving women. Movements in favour of women's rights started to arouse, many of which are still widely known. Among the highly regarded ones it is the women's suffrage

movement, which “came to its climax among the tense and changing atmosphere of the early twentieth century” (Lesch np).

### **3.2. Women in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse***

Virginia Woolf, who was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1882 and died on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March, 1941, is considered one of the most prominent twentieth-century women writers (Whitworth 1, 29). Being *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* her best-selling novels, she dealt with topics many times related to gender and feminism. An example of it is the novel to analyse in this section: *To the Lighthouse*. In spite of being written in 1927, the novel is set in Scotland between 1910 and 1920. It relates the story of the Ramsay family, but on a deeper level, *To the Lighthouse* covers topics such as the marginalisation of women, mainly perceived through her known stream of consciousness. This term refers to the expression of momentary thoughts that cross the characters’ mind (Steinberg 423).

It is true that even though the novel to analyse introduces the whole Ramsay family, Woolf intended to highlight the precarious situation in which women were condemned to live. This portrays undoubtedly Woolf’s increasing interest in achieving equality between men and women. It was not by mere coincidence that Woolf involved herself in movements in favour of the emancipation of women, but due to certain events that moulded her vision: her mother being an example of the enslavement of wives at home, and the fact that her two brothers, Thoby and Adrian, were receiving an enviable education in the well-known University of Cambridge awakened her interest in gender issues (Podgorski np).

Her concerns when it came to mainstream gender roles were portrayed in her works. To do so, she introduces two opposite models of women in *To the Lighthouse*: the Victorian woman portrayed by Mrs Ramsay and the Modern Woman represented by Lily Briscoe. The image embodied by Mrs Ramsay clearly coincides with the characteristic of the Victorian woman mentioned in a previous section, while Lily Briscoe characterises a free-spirited woman.

It can be deduced, then, that Mrs Ramsay symbolises the ideals to which Woolf wanted to confront, which in a way also corresponded to the role her mother had.

Conversely, as Lily Briscoe represents an independent woman as it will be explained below, she can be perceived as what Woolf herself embraced.

### **3.2.1. Mrs Ramsay as a Victorian woman**

The character of Mrs Ramsay must be examined in regard to her role as a Victorian woman. Many characteristics will be considered when doing this analysis. However, before going into depth, it must be noted that Woolf selected the name to address the character with extreme care. The fact that her first name is unknown, and that she is referred to as *Mrs* already gives the reader a hint of the role that woman would be playing in the novel: the role of a submissive wife whose name is irrelevant.

What mostly characterised a Victorian woman was her domesticity: thus it is the case of Mrs Ramsay. As it is mentioned in *To the Lighthouse*, “domesticity triumphed” (Woolf 27). However, not only is Woolf’s intention to introduce the idea of domesticity from the very beginning, but it is also a form of demonstrating that if domesticity succeeded, Mrs Ramsay would adopt a sense of submission and surrender to her conventional role of the “Angel in the House”. Related also to this notion, it is interesting to see how Woolf, in order to mould Mrs Ramsay as a Victorian woman, introduces the views of some male characters towards the role of women. This insight is depicted in the following example: “He liked that men should labour and sweat on the windy beach at night, pitting muscle and brain against the waves and the wind; he liked men to work like that, and women to keep house, and sit beside sleeping children indoors” (Woolf 152). Additionally, Woolf reflects in Mrs Ramsay the passivity with which women were supposed to behave at home, not really contributing to anything more than housekeeping. As Woolf remarks: “Mrs Ramsay ... sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow in the step. There she sat” (188).

Being marriage the only way of becoming a respectable woman, Mrs Ramsay adopts the attitudes of her own oppressors by saying: “marriage [is] needed” (Woolf 55). She is condemning not only herself, but all women to marry a man that they probably do not like just for the sake of their reputation. Consciously or not, Mrs Ramsay represented a collective attitude towards marriage, as she is constantly obsessed about it. The text

says: “What was this mania of hers [Mrs Ramsay’s] for marriage?” (Woolf 162). It is not surprising that Victorian women took this behaviour towards marriage, mainly because it was their only solution. Being Mr Ramsay’s wife also implied to devote herself just to her husband and to God, as it happened to Victorian women. On the one hand, being to the mercy of Mr Ramsay required much of herself, as it is her duty to “protect” (Woolf 34) their husbands, as well as being their moral supporters: “It injured her that he should shrink. It hurt her” (Woolf 37). Not only is she worried for her husband, but she even feels his reasons for desperation as her own ones. On the other hand, Mrs Ramsay, hence all Victorian women, is required to dedicate herself to God, as Woolf expresses: “We are in the hands of the Lord” (58).

As essential as marriage was the matter of being a mother. Mrs Ramsay embodies unquestionably the Victorian image of having offspring, as though having children is her only commitment in life. In fact, she has “eight sons and daughters” (Woolf 6). This fact can also be connected with the traditional belief that sexual intercourse was only aimed at bringing descendants. On the contrary, women rejecting motherhood were seen as abnormal, and Mrs Ramsay appears to be of the view that “people must have children” (Woolf 55), implying that those who do not have them might have been rejected by society.

Woolf also includes more trivial details when characterising Mrs Ramsay as a Victorian woman. When it comes to the apparel of the time, Mrs Ramsay’s clothing is not directly described in the text. Instead, Woolf adds Mrs Ramsay’s opinion about certain clothes that were considered inappropriate for the time. She says: “She [Minta] wore more sensible clothes than most women. She wore very short skirts and black knickerbockers” (Woolf 68). Consequently, it can be deduced that, as Mrs Ramsay does not agree on women wearing risky or provocative clothes, she sticks to Victorian standards, showing once more her representation of that profile.

Daily activities performed by Mrs Ramsay are also characteristic of the Victorian woman. Going back to the concept of public and private spheres, Mrs Ramsay is required to adopt pastimes that could be performed within the private sphere: at home. She is allowed, for instance, to practise knitting. Woolf highlights it throughout the whole novel, mainly to perceive how rooted the idea of keeping women at home was. She, who is condemned to spend most of her time at home taking care of both the children and of the

house, is not permitted to leave the house, not even for her spare time. Mrs Ramsay, as portrayed in the novel, is “knitting her reddish-brown hairy stocking” (Woolf 26). Not only that, but Mrs Ramsay also shows in *To the Lighthouse* her interest in flowers, which also serves for the characterisation of a Victorian woman (Bilston 1). Many instances can be found throughout the text, as the one that says: “she likes flowers” (Woolf 162) or the one in which Lily Briscoe describes Mrs Ramsay: “She could see her, ..., stooping over her flowers” (Woolf 127).

As far as education is concerned, Victorian women received no more education than the one about ladylike accomplishments (Hughes np), and it can be deduced by a passage in the novel that Mrs Ramsay indeed had learned good manners. The extract mentions that ladies had to wait for a male hand that would help her to raise from a boat and proceed into shore. Mrs Ramsay appears to be acquainted with the situation, and she knows that a gentleman must accompany her. Woolf expresses: “Letting herself [Mrs Ramsay] be helped by him [Mr Ramsay]” (184). Academically speaking, on the contrary, Mrs Ramsay is portrayed as an unclever lady from the very beginning: “Mrs Ramsay did not quite catch the meaning, only the words, here and there ... She could not follow the ugly academic jargon” (Woolf 9). Furthermore, it is her own husband who describes Mrs Ramsay as unintelligent: “he liked to think that she was not clever, not book-learned at all. He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought” (Woolf 113). Additionally, Victorian women such as Mrs Ramsay do not have time to read. Woolf refers to it in the following lines: “Books, she thought, grew of themselves. She never had time to read them” (23). As it was mentioned above, women were forced to keep their pastimes at home, and even though reading did not require women to leave their private sphere, knowledge acquired by her readings could make Mrs Ramsay more powerful. Nevertheless, “she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband” (Woolf 35), which leads Mrs Ramsay, together with many other ladies, to leave her education aside.

Lastly, when analysing the character of Mrs Ramsay in a more emotional level, it is essential to mention that her character traits also coincide with the ones of Victorian women. Silence and passivity, for instance, are characteristics apparent in Mrs Ramsay, as seen in *To the Lighthouse*: “she never spoke. She was silent always” (Woolf 25). Not only that, but in many other sections Mrs Ramsay remains in silence not to disturb her husband: “she bent her head (...). There was nothing to be said” (Woolf 28). This passivity

of not interrupting her husband and remaining in silence is also portrayed by Mrs Ramsay while “she waited, passively” (Woolf 76). Quite ironically, even though women must be in silence, Woolf introduces in the novel some references of Mrs Ramsay being described as excessively emotional. They say as follows: “she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions” (Woolf 28) and “she had no control over her emotions (...). Women hadn’t” (Woolf 70). What also characterises Mrs Ramsay emotionally is her disposition to assist people. She always appears to be willing to help, as Woolf states: “she wishes so instinctively to help” (37). With “instinctively” Woolf makes a clear reference to the assumed feminine nature, which will be later on challenged by the character of Lily. Not only that, but Mrs Ramsay is also considered to be one of those women who sacrifice themselves for the sake of their family. This is expressed in this quote: “Giving, giving, giving, she had died” (Woolf 138).

Altogether, it must be said that Virginia Woolf also aimed at warning women of potentially unhappy lives if conforming to the Victorian standards, as it is the case of Mrs Ramsay. Woolf shows a woman profile that sticks to tradition and devotes herself to her family and household. In this case, Mrs Ramsay dies after spending her whole life helping and giving, that is to say, not living for herself nor prioritising her ambitions. This portrayal that Woolf presents is aimed at women who identify with Mrs Ramsay and want to confront their precarious situations.

### **3.2.2. Lily Briscoe as a Modern woman**

Totally opposite to the character of Mrs Ramsay, Lily Briscoe is a clear representation of the Modern Woman profile that emerged during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Adopting a more independent and less male-centred lifestyle, Lily Briscoe opposes the established standards opting for a more self-centred life experience. Taking into account the influence feminism had on Virginia Woolf, it can be deduced that Woolf’s portrayal of the Modern Woman was a representation of the ideal woman profile that had to replace the traditional one, a character through which Woolf’s denial towards “the Victorian patriarchal dominant policy” can be perceived (Khrisat 142).

To create this difference between the traditional and the modern women, Woolf opts for labelling Lily Briscoe for her own name and surname, and not by using Mrs, for instance. What she wanted to remark was that women can stand by themselves without the support of a male figure. Lily Briscoe, with her name and surname is a person on her own capable of achieving her desired life without a husband that stands in front of her.

It is Lily's personality and appearance which really differentiates her from a traditional woman. Her very first introduction summarises her essence as a Modern woman in the following lines: "With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; ... she was an independent little creature, Mrs Ramsay liked her for it, and so remembering her promise, she bent her head" (Woolf 14). Woolf mentions that she is independent, a characteristic also representative of New Women. She also refers to topics such as marriage, which will be later on discussed. As opposed to traditional women, Lily is of the view that "beauty was not everything" (Woolf 164), which also favours the characterisation of the Modern woman that Woolf wanted to achieve. Lily's personality also belongs to a woman who is far from dependent on a man. As portrayed in *To the Lighthouse*: "not always taking care of some man or other" (Woolf 4), but she prefers to adjust to her needs and maintain her life true to herself. Related to the idea of living a pure life, Lily relates her will of living a more daring life than those of traditional women. She expresses throughout the novel that she wants "a wilder life" (Woolf 4) and "a sense of adventure and escape" (Woolf 175). Once seen the example of Mrs Ramsay and her domestic life, she opts for a less conventional but more satisfactory lifestyle. Furthermore, Lily is described by Woolf as being "wilful" (44), which could be perceived with negative connotations. However, if understood as being a determined person, Lily really fights for her wishes. Needless to say, these traits that characterise Lily Briscoe as a Modern woman are not admired by men, who appear to be of the view that a woman must conform to the traditional standards. The following lines depict the idea: "There was in Lily a thread of something; a flare of something; something of her own which Mrs Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would" (Woolf 96).

A wider range of everyday activities also characterises Modern women as Lily Briscoe. Among those, painting is the most obvious in her. Several lines throughout the text make reference to Lily being a painter, as for instance: "Lily Briscoe went on putting her brushes" (Woolf 42). She appears to be determined to polish her painting, and she indeed completes it as it is seen at the end of the novel: "There it was - her picture" (Woolf

194). What is more, one of her motivations to finalise her painting was to prove that Mr Tansley's view of "women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf 44) is inaccurate. Lily Briscoe seems to feel offended when he says those words. Not only offended, but she seems to be accustomed to hearing those discriminating words, as she does not present any instance of surprise. This is portrayed in the following lines: "and there was Mr Tansley whispering in her ear, "Women can't paint, women can't write... "" (Woolf 44).

As far as marriage is concerned, Lily Briscoe clearly portrays the attitudes Modern women had towards engagements. They were of the view that women need no man to maintain themselves, and that they can perfectly be alone. Lily is described according to those views: "she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that [marriage]" (Woolf 45). Modern women preferred to focus on their occupations and on enjoying themselves, rather than being preoccupied with seeking potential husbands. Woolf expresses: "For at any rate, she said to herself, catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern, she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle" (Woolf 95). In fact, Lily appears to be truly relieved for not needing a man. What is more, the final sentence that Woolf introduces expresses the priority Lily gives to her work, that even while she reflects on marriage her work remains in her mind.

Generally speaking, Woolf introduces Lily Briscoe's character, as she is considered to be a model woman for her. This is because Briscoe follows her ambition of painting throughout the whole novel, regardless of the other character's opinion. In fact, the end of the novel shows how she succeeds in finishing her painting, which can encourage female readers to pursue their desires, but also to reject obedience to men.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Ellen Glasgow and Virginia Woolf, being widely-known twentieth century writers, addressed the matter of women's' roles in their novels, *Virginia* (1913) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) respectively. The twentieth century was a changing time as far as gender standards were concerned, which enabled writers to raise their voices on behalf of those women who found it impossible.



All the points mentioned above demonstrate that Glasgow and Woolf accomplished their intentions of presenting two opposite women profiles, mainly to describe and denounce the desperate position of women in society. To do so, Ellen Glasgow introduced in *Virginia* both the profile of the Southern lady embodied by Virginia Pendleton, and the figure of the New Woman characterised by Susan Treadwell, Margaret Oldcastle and Abby Goode. The former is representative of the traditional trapped and enslaved women, and also the character who meets all the requirements indispensable in Southern ladies: a submissive, passive and uneducated woman. The latter conveys free-spirited woman profile that was emerging: women that live for themselves and not to obey. As for Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* introduces the image of the dependent Victorian woman embodied by Mrs Ramsay, whose Victorian woman essence can be perceived in her domesticity and passivity, among others. Woolf also characterises Lily Briscoe as the representative of the Modern woman about to emerge, who, first prioritises her job, and second, does not conform to the traditional idea of marriage being essential.

The paper also proves how both writers, by using the ending of the novels as a device, succeeded in raising awareness and warning women of the consequences the positions they adopt towards their roles might have brought. The development of Virginia Pendleton as a woman and the desolation that she suffers at the end of *Virginia* serves to give women fair warning of what their future might look like if deciding on conforming to traditional standards. The same happens with Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, as Woolf presents her life as a time-consuming, unchanged and aimless experience: an undesirable future for women. On the contrary, the fortunate future of both the New Women and Modern Women representative characters is adequate to give women encouragement to prioritise themselves and to fight for their dreams. The images of Abby Goode, Margaret Oldcastle and Susan Treadwell, but also of Lily Briscoe are used as triggers for women to consider themselves as a prime concern.

Future research might be done on how not only female, but also male characters contribute to the portrayal of a patriarchal society. Their behaviours, together with their thoughts depicted in literary works are helpful to approach the topic of gender issues from another perspective, which may also contribute to further explanation, up to a certain extent, of the taken behaviours.

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