

Student's Name  
English 335  
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## Virginia Woolf's Concocted Disparity Between Married and Single Women

### I. Introduction

A. The reader uncovers that the single women described in Virginia Woolf's novels, especially *To the Lighthouse*, *Jacob's Room*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*, actually lead a superior lifestyle compared to that of married women through Woolf's implications that it is better to be a liberated single woman rather than a married woman trapped in a hollow identity.

II. Married women in Woolf's novels are treated significantly better than single women, yet she portrays maritally committed women in the early twentieth century as fostering a fake self-identity and as unhappy in their relationships with their spouses.

A. As women were considered most useful in the household, married women were given more respect than single women, thus suggesting they were socially superior.

1. Mr. Tansley treated Mrs. Ramsay with much more respect than Lillie.
2. Sandra, a married woman whom Jacob admires, is given much more credit for her thoughts and the text indicates that the other women Jacob dates are less admired and intellectually attractive.
3. Clarissa is better liked among men than Lady Bruton, which is exemplified when Mr. Dalloway and Mr. Whitman share their thoughts on the woman who hosted them for lunch.

B. The portrayals of several different marital relationships display women who are unhappy with themselves as a result of their marriages.

1. Mrs. Ramsay loves raising her children and finds the ultimate happiness through the maternal relationships, yet displays several instances of hatred and contempt towards her husband.
  - a. Lillie's thoughts about Mrs. Ramsay reveal to the reader that Mrs. Ramsay would be an unknown figure if it weren't for her husband.
  - b. Also, Mrs. Ramsay hasn't developed a true identity to self because she is always trying to please and tend to her family.
  - c. One criticizing this argument might confirm that Mrs. Ramsay made the decision of self-sacrifice for her children's sake, as she provided for them a more nurturing upbringing that wasn't within her husband's capability.
2. The couple Jacob meets in Italy, Sandra and her husband, have a very distant relationship.
  - a. Upon meeting Sandra, Jacob is attracted to her intellect, which spurs a relationship between the two and uncovers a quality in her that is recognized by Jacob and not her husband.
3. Clarissa has become "Mrs. Dalloway," a hollow, materialistic, and emotionless being who is in denial of her feelings.

C. Other modernist authors depict weak marriages, where the woman is drastically negatively affected.

1. A woman kills herself in *A Painful Case* by James Joyce because a man, other than her husband, leaves her heartbroken.
  2. The widow in *Odour of Chrysanthemums* by D.H. Lawrence feels liberation and regret when her husband's dead body is being hauled into her living room.
- III. Compared with the disheartening depictions of married women, Woolf's portrayals of single women lead the audience to perceive these women as both stronger willed and more connected to life.
- A. Single women, especially those who are considered past the expiration of accepted marriage age, are not treated very well among society.
    1. Lillie Briscoe's oppression is seen through her artwork and the men who condone such an activity for a woman.
      - a. Mr. Tansley and Mr. Ramsay both comment that Lillie's artwork is work of an amateur and that it is useless for a woman to partake in such an activity.
    2. Mr. Banks counters this argument as an example of an understanding man, which is uncommon for that time.
      - a. His tolerance for her artistic and intellectual characteristics contrasts the intolerance of society, allowing a modern reader to become sympathetic of Lillie and her situation.
  - B. The single women in Woolf's novels are treated poorly among society, yet glorified by Woolf.
    1. With characters like Lillie Briscoe and Sally Seton, Woolf shows how women who don't conform to society are more interesting.
      - a. Lillie Briscoe's narration and deep insight to the family drama at hand in *To the Lighthouse* prove to the audience that she has the utmost connection with life.
      - b. Lillie's conversations with Mrs. Ramsay show that Lillie has more insight to the Ramsay family than Mrs. Ramsay herself.
      - c. When Lilly comments that Mrs. Ramsay would starve if she were to be all of sudden shut out from the home her husband provides, the audience is given a clear image of the two women's differing circumstances.
      - d. Sally Seton is portrayed as a very influential figure in Clarissa's life.
      - e. Sally is described as "masculine" for her smoking habits and highly regarded for her ability to hold conversation and is admired for her unconventional behavior.
      - f. On the other hand, Sally got married and claimed she was happier than ever.
  - C. Virginia Woolf's failed marriage may have reflected her admiration for the single woman.
    1. Remaining single may have saved her life.
      - a. *Who's Afraid of Leonard Woolf: A Case for the Sanity of Virginia Woolf* by Irene Coates suggests it was the fault of her husband that led her into misery.
    2. She, like other women, was so reluctant to remain single because it was a social norm to marry and led a life of unhappiness as a result of her marriage.

VIII. Conclusion including summary of contrasting arguments and rebuttal, as well as an overall view of the argument at hand.

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Introduction

As women in the United States were witnessing the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, just over the Atlantic Virginia Woolf was diligently writing about the liberation of the female self. Today, women are treated equally, hold many of the same professions as men, can support themselves, and are free to have aspirations other than those pertaining to the household. A modern day reader of Virginia Woolf would admire her attempt at glorifying women in a society where they were looked at as inferior beings, as well as commend her contemporary ideas about the self-sustainability of single women. One can imagine that Woolf's ideas regarding the empowerment of single women at the time she wrote *To the Lighthouse*, 1927, and *Jacob's Room*, 1922, were conceived as absurd and outrageous among early twentieth century society. Virginia Woolf by no means criticizes the lives of single women, but through her portrayal of both married and single women she allows the reader to see that those women not tied down to a husband are in fact the stronger women. Because Woolf permits the audience to read in depth to the thoughts of women and she realistically portrays the way both married and single women would have been treated, the reader is given two very different views of two different types of women. Virginia Woolf's contrasting portrayals between married and single women develop a clear disparity where the single woman is empowered intellectually and emotionally, while the married woman leads a socially superior life. The reader uncovers that the single women described in Virginia Woolf's novels, especially *To the Lighthouse*, *Jacob's Room*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*, actually lead a superior lifestyle compared to that of married women through Woolf's implications that it is better to be a liberated single woman rather than a married woman trapped in hollow identity.