

The Happier Helen of Our Days:
Mrs. Ramsay and Helen of Troy in *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract

Mythological allusion and suggestion has been an ever-present force in literature, a tie across time that links the ancient past with the present and future. Virginia Woolf and the Modernists were no strangers to its influence. This paper examines the presence of myth in Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, specifically the interpretation of the character, Mrs. Ramsay, as an incarnation of Helen of Troy. The enduringly fascinating Mrs. Ramsay and Helen of Troy dominate the literature they inhabit, and through them Woolf connects the changing world of the twentieth century with the mythical one of ancient Greece. By equating her with Helen, Woolf reconciles the contradictions apparent in Mrs. Ramsay's character, the equal measures of beauty and fear she inspires, as well as the conflict and domestic bliss which she fosters. By drawing a parallel between Mrs. Ramsay and Helen of Troy, Woolf presents her character as a woman deprived of her identity by the conceptions of those around her, yet made powerful through a manipulation of those very beliefs. Viewing the novel through this mythical lens reveals another interpretation of the characters and message in Woolf's work as well as a new perspective on the infamous Helen.

Key words: Helen of Troy, Virginia Woolf, Modernism, myth, female representation

At first glance, the notorious *femme fatale*, Helen of Troy, and domestic angel, Mrs. Ramsay of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, do not appear to be comparable. However, a book Mrs. Ramsay received from a youthful admirer is inscribed to "the happier Helen of our days" (Woolf 27). This passing mention by Woolf suggests a specific view of Mrs. Ramsay, offering a more complete portrait that harmonizes the various and sometimes contending facets of Mrs. Ramsay's personality. Joseph L. Blotner writes that by applying myth, particularly the myth of Helen, to Woolf's novel, "what appears fragmentary or only partly disclosed in the work may be revealed as complete and explicit through the myth" (548). The enduringly fascinating Mrs. Ramsay and Helen of Troy dominate the literature they inhabit, and Woolf uses these characters to connect her chang-

ing twentieth-century world with the mythical one of ancient Greece. By equating Mrs. Ramsay with Helen, Woolf reconciles the contradictions apparent in Mrs. Ramsay's character, the equal measures of beauty and fear she inspires, as well as the conflict and domestic bliss which she fosters. By connecting Mrs. Ramsay to Helen of Troy, Woolf presents Mrs. Ramsay as a woman deprived of her identity by the conceptions of those around her, yet made powerful through a manipulation of those very beliefs.

Helen of Troy was notoriously beautiful; that is an undisputed point. Indeed, the crux of the myth surrounding her is that everyone finds her so. Emily Wilson describes her as "beautiful in some absolute and total way that defies description" (58). Mrs. Ramsay is likewise found to be irrefutably beautiful by nearly everyone she

encounters, especially the men. Pedantic Charles Tansley thinks her the “most beautiful person he had ever seen,” and even the scientific Bankes exclaims, “Nature has but little clay like that of which she moulded you” (Woolf 14, 29). The incomparable Helen, dressed in her finest robes at the duel to the death between her lover and her husband, causes the Trojans to claim she is “Marvelous, like in figure and face to a goddess immortal” (*The Iliad* 3.158). Mrs. Ramsay similarly appears like a goddess, with her “august shape” and “royalty of form” (Blotner 550). The continuous associations of Mrs. Ramsay with Greek temples and a face composed by the Graces in fields of asphodel are not unintentional on Woolf’s part (Woolf 29, 196). The beauty of Mrs. Ramsay is clearly supposed to invoke the ideals of ancient Greece and memories of the most beautiful woman in Greece, Helen.

Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty makes her a source of artistic and romantic inspiration to others. For Lily, she acts as a muse as the subject of her painting. But to Bankes, Mr. Ramsay, and even Charles Tansley, she is a subject of worship. They are described as doing “homage to the beauty of the world,” and Lily observes Bankes gazing at Mrs. Ramsay with “a rapture, equivalent... to the loves of dozens of young men” (Woolf 36, 47). Even Tansley waxes poetic in his praise of her, standing before him, “with stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets” before he wonders “what nonsense was he thinking?” (Woolf 14).

An examination of Woolf’s choice in flowers in this passage only bolsters the connection to Greek myth and the enigmatic Helen. Violets are associated with faithfulness and modesty. They were also a mythic flower associated with the goddess Aphrodite and a symbol of mourning that appeared at the death of heroes, which Helen often arguably caused (Reismiller). They can be read as a symbol of Helen’s constant love for her husband and mourning for her lost home of Sparta. Yet there is also an ironic twist to this choice of flower, because, willing or not, Helen is also painted an adulteress, driven to inconstancy by forces outside her control. The other flower, cyclamen, likewise symbolizes a steadfast love, but they are also poisonous and sacred to the goddess of witchcraft, Hecate. The ancients also believed that love potions could be created from them (Impelluso100). In this description, Mrs. Ramsay, if she is to be viewed as Helen, appears arrayed in flowers symbolic of constancy, but also of love and the manipulation of such

feelings. Mrs. Ramsay accepts such feelings of homage by her male admirers as if she is a queen or goddess; she is used to such displays and even demands them (Woolf 82). Helen, a daughter of the all-powerful Zeus, likewise inspires devotion, prostration, and worship in those around her, especially the men. Though she does expect these feelings and the actions they inspire, she also recognizes their power, power that could be hers should the need arise. On an artistic level, Helen has proved an inexhaustible source of inspiration for centuries, the subject of endless paintings, sculptures, sonnets, and novels. Mrs. Ramsay and Helen of Troy are both unquestionably beautiful, a seemingly divine source of inspiration, yet their remarkable beauty is never explicitly described. Even Lily’s painting of her muse presents her as nothing more than a purple triangle (Maguire 19). Their beauty, which is so indistinct, so malleable for the readers’ imagination, also serves as a disguise for the woman beneath. In *The Iliad*, Helen veils herself before going out, and Mrs. Ramsay is also associated with veils in Tansley’s romanticized description (*The Iliad* 3.141). Yet even without the veil, these women are inaccessible. Laurie Maguire describes Helen as “remote, self-contained, sealed in her beauty, the narrative equivalent of the Mona Lisa smile” (19). Mrs. Ramsay is hidden behind her beauty, leaving those around her to wonder whether it was a great tragedy or lost love that made her as she is, or, they wondered, “was there nothing? Nothing but an incomparable beauty which she lived behind” (Woolf 28). Lily expresses the belief that fifty eyes were needed to fully see Mrs. Ramsay, wondering if there “must be one that was stone blind to her beauty” (Woolf 198). Despite the wall her beauty has built around her, Mrs. Ramsay is the center around which the whole story revolves; even after she has died, her presence shapes the remaining characters. Helen is a presence throughout the whole of the *Iliad*, yet in other works, such as Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, she does not even appear, despite being the agent of the plot. Whether they are present or not, alive or dead, Mrs. Ramsay and Helen, wrapped in their indescribable, remote beauty are the axis upon which the plot turns (Maguire 19).

Mrs. Ramsay and Helen frequently use their looks and their feminine charm to bend those around them to their will. Lily finds Mrs. Ramsay almost frightening, citing, she “was willful; she was commanding . . . All this she would adroitly shape; even maliciously twist” (Woolf 49). Mrs. Ramsay is here accused of a desire

to dominate and control people. Mrs. Ramsay herself thinks this unjust, but Woolf does not come down fully upon either side (Conradi 444). Mrs. Ramsay relentlessly demands as much praise and admiration—as her husband; in fact, she is hurt that Carmichael does not like her and that Bankes feels treacherous and fearful at the dinner table that she should find out that in that moment he did not admire her (Woolf 41, 90). She even admits that she helps others in order to win more praise and adulation for herself (Woolf 41).

In the works of Homer, Helen appears not only as beautiful, but also capable of wily machinations, an ability Mrs. Ramsay also possesses. Helen frequently uses her looks to dodge the consequences of the situations she is placed in, escaping the wrath of both the Trojans and the Greeks. One author writes of her “purely female plan, using female tricks, such as mendacity, persuasion, and deception” to get her way (Tsakitopoulou-Summers 39, 42). This is perhaps an unfair description of Helen’s wiles, but the point is that she takes advantage of the means available to her, the foremost of which is her beauty. Tsakitopoulou-Summers refers to Helen as “a dangerous character who is able to influence men’s perceptions, sway their feelings...and win them over as allies and protectors when they should be seeking her punishment” (37-8). Nevertheless, Helen’s entire life has been shaped by the hands of others, whether those of the men in her life or the gods, and thus far she has existed as little more than a prize to be won. Helen’s machinations arise out of a desire to dominate, yes, but also from a streak of self-preservation. Life was not easy for women in either ancient Greece or twentieth-century England. Both Mrs. Ramsay and Helen of Troy use what means they possess to expand their limited realm of power. John Stuart Mill wrote that “An active and energetic mind, if denied liberty, will seek for power; refused command of itself, it will assert its personality by attempting to control others” (qt. in Lilienfeld 158). Mrs. Ramsay and Helen are both powerful women, even frightening women, to those that recognize their manipulative capabilities, women who push back against the boundaries set for them, testing their power on the men that worship them.

One of the less obvious similarities between Helen of Troy and Mrs. Ramsay is the way they fulfill gender roles within the domestic sphere. Mrs. Ramsay appears in *To the Lighthouse* as the quintessential wife and mother. She represents everything that is feminine, a model of

beauty and fertility contrasted with the bone-dry sterility of her husband. She wears a green shawl, and is frequently found kneeling in her garden, encouraging new things to grow, or managing her eight children (Blotner 550, 553). More overtly, Mrs. Ramsay embodies the Victorian ideal of the “Angel in the House,” a specter Woolf found herself constantly at odds with. Woolf describes her as “intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish...She was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own” (qtd. in Rose 201). Woolf’s mother, Julia Stephen, was one of the major inspirations for Mrs. Ramsay, and she very much fulfilled this ideal. She died when Woolf was thirteen years old and became a lingering phantom of femininity and womanhood that would haunt Woolf for much of her life. Woolf battles and kills this angel when Mrs. Ramsay dies in *To the Lighthouse* (201, 207). Helen of Troy is hardly an ideal of female domesticity. By some accounts she freely abandons her family for a young prince; in others, she is kidnapped by said prince, but still remains unfaithful, though by coercion, to her husband. If Mrs. Ramsay is seen as the traditional maternal stereotype, the Angel in the House, Helen could be seen as the nightmare of the Victorian male, an irresistibly seductive woman, whose charms made kingdoms go to war. However, in Homer’s epic, Helen expresses multiple times her sorrow at coming to Troy. She misses her husband Menelaus and her daughter, and she resents her lot (*The Iliad* 3.140). There is much ambiguity in dissecting the character of Helen. She could be seen as the classic damsel in distress, used by men, and as hapless a victim as any that fell on the sands of Troy. In this sense, she appears not unlike Woolf’s characterization of the Angel in the House described above, charming, sympathetic, and unselfish—the unfortunate pawn of a will outside her control, be that male or divine. If she appears to lack “a mind or a wish of her own,” it is because her desires are of little consequence to those who decided her birth, her marriage, and her eventual flight to Troy (qtd. in Rose 201). Yet there are some who choose to cast Helen as the seductress who caused a decade-long war through her lust, while to others she is an early feminist, the agent of her own fate. Mark Haddon in his play, *A Thousand Ships*, provides an insightful monologue from Helen reflecting on her confusion of identity, “The truth is no one cares who I am. You read the stories. You read the poems. You haven’t got a clue. Nothing fits...I have no character. I’m a sorceress, a vic-

tim, a whore, a wife. I'm the devil. I'm an angel. I'm every woman that ever lived (qtd. Maguire 19).

Centuries later, Mrs. Ramsay experiences a similar upheaval of self. She is a wife, a mother, a homemaker, a sexual object, a goddess, a force of nature, and an adroit manipulator. But what is she to herself? Alone and gazing at the lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay shrinks to a "wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (Woolf 71). Yet this description provides no clearer illumination of her identity than the impressions of others. In her innermost self, Mrs. Ramsay can identify nothing more than darkness, an imperfectly described void. She becomes an empty image, like Helen, to be fashioned and filled according to the whims of those around her.

After the Trojans have been defeated, Helen does return with Menelaus to fulfill her domestic role as a wife and mother. Like Mrs. Ramsay, Helen emerges symbolized by bountiful nature, a giver of life, rather than the catalyst for a war that killed thousands. Helen would eventually become the center of a fertility cult, worshipped "for fertility in the stationary and permanent environment of the family" rather than love or sex (Tsakitopoulou-Summers 52). The Modernist poet H.D. calls her "Helen of the Trees" or "Helen Dendritis." Mrs. Ramsay could also be described as "a special kind of domesticated earth-goddess" (Conradi 437). When the whole of Helen's journey is taken into consideration, despite a detour, she does return to the place assigned to her as a wife and mother. Furthermore, Helen's and Mrs. Ramsay's domestic roles also have symbolic meaning (Conradi 436). Mrs. Ramsay and Helen are the "critical point in the symbolic orderings" of their worlds; everyone and everything else turns about them. They stabilize the plot much as a woman maintains order in her home (Conradi 436).

Both Mrs. Ramsay and Helen also show particular skill at weaving and storytelling. Mrs. Ramsay is knitting a stocking for the lighthouse keeper's boy while she sits with James, reading him the story of "The Fisherman and His Wife." In *The Odyssey*, when the character, Telemachus, visits Helen and Menelaus in Sparta, Helen is found weaving with a distaff of gold and violet wool, a perfectly placid domestic image (4.134-6). Earlier in Homer's *Iliad*, she also weaves in her chamber at Troy, but this time she creates scenes of war and battle (3.124-5). Destruction and death infiltrate even the private chambers of a woman's weaving. For Mrs. Ramsay,

despite her knitting, her gardening, and her feminine ordering of her world, war and death also creep in. Her son, Andrew, dies in World War I and her daughter, Prue, dies in childbirth, a woman's natural realm (Blotner 558). Joseph L. Blotner writes that the duty of women is "to ameliorate or mitigate the effects of male violence, hate, and destructiveness" (562). Mrs. Ramsay tries to do this, covering the boar skull in her children's room with her verdant green shawl, but its eyeless sockets, its bleached bones are still there. A woman's best intentions cannot hold death at bay (Woolf 115). Helen, in her own way, despite being the catalyst of so much destruction, tried to accept the inevitability of death, at least towards herself. And though she may have saved herself, she cannot defeat death. She may go from weaving scenes of death to scenes of gold and purple, but she has not done away with violence.

Mrs. Ramsay and Helen are also similar in their relationships with men. Mrs. Ramsay states that "she had the whole of the other sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain, for their chivalry and valour...for an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to find agreeable, something trustful, child-like, reverential" (Woolf 6). Similarly, at the funeral of Hector, Helen weeps, "I bewail thee...and with thee... for another is not to be found in broad Troyland /Kindly or friendly to me" (*The Iliad* 24.773-5). The attitudes of both women towards men are directly dependent on men's treatment of them. Because men care for her and admire her, Mrs. Ramsay values them. Because Hector was kind to Helen, she weeps for him.

Both Helen and Mr. Ramsay are able to dominate their husbands when necessary. Neither of their marriages are without conflict, though the Ramsays' marriage is decidedly happier than that of Helen and Menelaus. Helen's relationship with Paris has made Menelaus a cuckold in the eyes of Greece. Upon once more encountering Menelaus, Helen exposes her breasts to avert his rage and win her way back into his favor ("The Little Iliad, fragment 13"). This behavior makes it clear that Helen has the power to sexually dominate her husband, even as he comes at her, sword in hand. Despite the dishonor which he has suffered, Menelaus takes Helen back with little argument. He has been emasculated by "a woman who is so powerfully feminine that she comes close to achieving likewise masculine kinds of authority" (Wilson 58). Those around him believe that Mr. Ramsay was also crippled by marriage. Bankes be-

believes Mr. Ramsay's relationship with his wife put an end to his great work, and Lily blames Mrs. Ramsay for her husband's embarrassing need for constant validation, which she perceives as an unmanly need (Woolf 21, 149). They believe Mrs. Ramsay has emasculated her husband, enabling him to become a crippled, dependent shadow of what he once was rather than the great thinker he could have been (Lilienfeld 149). Though she would never admit it, Mrs. Ramsay enjoys ruling over her husband. When he desires her say that she loves him, she will not, at least not outright. Mr. Ramsay thinks her heartless, but Mrs. Ramsay feels she has "triumphed" over his demands (Woolf 124). Her behavior is not unlike that of Helen, whom the goddess of love herself, Aphrodite, accuses of being hard-hearted when she will not go to Paris (*The Iliad* 3.411-13). Despite Mrs. Ramsay's idealized representation of a wife, on the occasion of Paul and Minta's engagement, she thinks, "for what could be more serious than the love of man for women, what more commanding, more impressive, bearing in its bosom the seeds of death; at the same time these lovers, these people entering into illusion glittering-eyed, must be danced round with mockery, decorated with garlands" (Woolf 100). Here are dual images from the stories of Mrs. Ramsay and Helen: love and death hand in hand, the seriousness of marriage juxtaposed with the mockery and hollowness of it.

If Mrs. Ramsay is a modern Helen, what of her husband and son? Much is made of the Oedipal triad comprising Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and their son, James. Given his feelings toward a powerful and beautiful woman, the Oedipus figure of James could also represent the young lover Paris, with Mrs. Ramsay as Helen and Mr. Ramsay as Menelaus. Both pairs of men, James and his father and Paris and Menelaus, one young and one older, are striving for the affections of the Helen/Mrs. Ramsay figure. Paris is an effeminate character, nearly as lovely as Helen herself (Wilson 58). He is made more so by his relationship with Helen who mocks him, saying, "Well then! Back from the fight! If only thou rather hadst perished/Vanquished by the great warrior, who *was my* husband aforetime!" (*The Iliad* 3.428-9). James is a child in the beginning of Woolf's novel, a boy, not a man, who is still very attached to his mother. It is not necessary for Mrs. Ramsay to emasculate James because he has not yet emerged as a masculine figure. Paris and Menelaus eventually duel over Helen, ending with the unsuccessful Paris whisked away to the safety of Helen's cham-

ber. James throughout the novel has an image "of taking a knife and striking his father to the heart" so that his mother may be his alone (Woolf 184). Like Paris, James does not succeed against his father: indeed, he never really engages him. And Helen and Mrs. Ramsay remain at the center of both triangles, the passive center to the battle waging around them.

With her implicit comparison of Mrs. Ramsay to Helen of Troy, Woolf overlays all of the ambiguities and evolutions of this mythical character on another woman just as complex and controversial. It would be easy to dismiss one as the quintessential *femme fatale*, the beautiful woman that is the downfall of men, and the other as the Victorian ideal for wife and mother, the Angel in the House. However, readers should not obscure the importance of the analogy by invoking stereotypes or saying that the women are only superficially alike. After all, we meet the two women at different points in their stories. Helen is a young woman placed in an impossible position but who does eventually return to her proper place in the eyes of her society. Little more is told of Helen's life; she remains suspended in perpetual youth in numerous tales and poems. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, is closer to the end of her life, a woman of about fifty who actually does die in the novel. Woolf does not provide us with much information about her past. Who can say that Mrs. Ramsay did not once behave as wildly as Helen before settling down as a goddess of domesticity? Herein lies the problem: to some degree both Helen and Mrs. Ramsay are unknowable, shaped by those around them into what they wish them to be isolated behind a façade of beauty. Yet when looking at the way these women mirror one another, do they suddenly become more knowable? Both women are defined by the way in which they defy definition, at least the conventional definitions pressed upon them. Through their beauty and femininity, they create a space of power for themselves, arousing both fear and love in those around them. The fortunes of hapless Helen provide an explanation for the woman Mrs. Ramsay has become, a woman shaped by the demands and illusions of others who has learned to manipulate these beliefs to her advantage. And the character of Mrs. Ramsay offers Woolf's interpretation of what Helen's ultimate fate might have been, a restoration of respectability and domestic tranquility, but a confusion of self, an identity mangled and fractured by the interpretations thrust on her.

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