Motherhood Rules : An Angel or a Queen in the House?

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Motherhood Rules: An Angel or a Queen in the House?*

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Introduction

In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), we can see the reflections of the memory of Woolf's childhood, especially the images of her parents, Leslie Stephen and Julia Stephen. They are the models for Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, who both consider that men's minds are essentially different from women's minds. Mrs. Ramsay believes that all women can become happy only through marriage and should be obedient to men. However, the hierarchy in her home is actually different. She is like a queen, who rules the home and controls the members of the family and guests, as long as she is inside the house. Though she is devoted to her husband and brings up many children, she also has power over her children, arouses love and respect from young followers of her husband, and tries to make maiden ladies "angels in the house" apparently like her.

Yet after the death of Mrs. Ramsay, the people who were united by her are dispersed, and her palace, the house in the Isle of Skye, becomes desolate. After ten years' interval, Mr. Ramsay and the grown-up children voyage out from the house and succeed in reaching the lighthouse. This accomplished voyage to the lighthouse suggests the release from the rule of Mrs. Ramsay and her old gender values. This study deals with Mrs. Ramsay's queenliness: her dominant power in the house, her desire to possess her children, and her encouragement of young women to become

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angels in the house. I shall then argue that the bereaved become free from Mrs. Ramsay's control. Only after her death can they fulfill themselves individually. At the moment James arrives at the lighthouse, Lily finishes her painting. The coincidence suggests that his journey and her quest are equal in significance.

I. Tyrannical Maternity and the Power to Unite People

Mrs. Ramsay is quite like a queen and her house is equal to her palace, because she controls other people and is in command of the ménage. In fact, she is often compared to a queen. Ann Ronchetti and some critics also point out that Mrs. Ramsay has the character of the Great Mother:

> As an earth-mother figure in service to a patriarchal culture, Mrs. Ramsay privileges the men in her family over her daughters, feeling that women had "something" which men lacked, and were therefore capable of caring for themselves: . . . (Ronchetti 66)

However, she is not a complete embodiment of a goddess, because her power is not always almighty. Now, we see the idea of Hermione Lee:

> Mrs Ramsay [. . .] presides over a mythical world. Her powers seem to be those of a pagan goddess or a fairy-tale witch. But she has to work magic within the confines of the fierce, scientific world of real facts ruled by her husband, by Charles Tansley, by William Bankes: the masculine world of which Andrew would have been, and James will be, the inheritor. (Lee 18, emphasis added)

Hence, her power was restricted under the patriarchy, so that she is not as mighty as a goddess, while she is indeed mythical. She is rather a queen than a goddess, just as Woolf expresses her mother as the former. We should be sure that "queen" in this study doesn't mean one like Elizabeth I but like Victoria, who is known as a good wife. There are figurative expressions connecting Mrs. Ramsay to a queen. Some of them which include the word "queen" are as follows:

> her extreme courtesy, like a Queen's raising from the mud a beggar's dirty foot and washing it (11)

> [S]he . . . stood quite motionless for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter; . . . (17)

On the other hand, a figurative expression without the word "queen" is used in her walking to the nearby town with Charles Tansley.

Tansley is an enthusiastic follower of the philosopher Mr. Ramsay and is such a male-chauvinist that he insists women are inferior to men in almost all fields. However, a change comes to him during this walk. Tansley, though he believes in men's priority, comes to love and respect her deeply:

> Charles Tansley felt an extraordinary pride; felt the wind and the cyclamen and the violets for he was walking with a beautiful woman for the first time in his life. He had hold of her bag. (19, emphasis added.)

Thus, Mrs. Ramsay gains love and respect from the young follower of her husband, like a queen in a romance who is loved and respected by her king's knights. Lily, a single painter, is displeased by Tansley's slighting remark on women and this makes the atmosphere unfriendly.

> Sitting opposite him [Tansley] could she [Lily] not see, as in an X-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself lying dark in the mist of his flesh – that thin mist which convention had laid over his burning desire to break into the conversation? But, she thought, screwing up her Chinese eyes, and remembering how he sneered at women, 'can't paint, can't write', why should I help him to relieve himself? (99)

By contrast, it is evident that Mrs. Ramsay's submissiveness toward men can embrace the patriarchal value which often suppresses women.

In addition to Mrs. Ramsay's obedience, her maternity also charms Tansley. He respects her as if she were a queen and shows the desires to be watched over by her at the same time:

> He [Tansley] would like her to see him, gowned and hooded, walking in a procession. A fellowship, a professorship, -- he felt capable of anything . . . . (15, emphasis added)

This image of his future recalls that of James's which Mrs. Ramsay imagines:

> [T]his mother, watching him [James] guide his scissors neatly round the refrigerator, imagined him all red and ermine on the Bench or directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs. (7, emphasis added)

In addition, the figurative expressions which show Mrs. Ramsay's queenliness by using the word "queen" almost all describe her queenliness viewed by her children or Tansley, who regards her as the mother. Owing to these, it is apparent that the queenliness and the motherliness of Mrs. Ramsay are inseparable.

Next, Mrs. Ramsay's influence upon her children should be examined for what it reveals about her maternal rule. While she looks forward to the future of her children, she wants to keep them under her protection. During the outing with Tansley, she leaves her favorite James at home even though she does not want to do so. Moreover, it is also important that she persists in keeping every door closed:

> But it was the doors that annoyed her [Mrs. Ramsay]; every door was open [. . .] and certainly the window on the landing was open, for that she had opened herself. That windows should be open, and doors shut – simple as it was, could none of them remember it? (32-33)

If she dislikes only the house's being damaged, this is inconsistent because an opened window can bring in the cause of encroachment; however, the inconsistency can be resolved when we pay attention to the fact that a door connects inside and outside; the children can go out through it. The house in the Isle of Skye is both palace and castle of Mrs. Ramsay. Keeping every door closed means blocking intruders (the cause of encroachment) and escapees (the children). This persistence in keeping doors closed proves her desire to dominate the children.

Furthermore, it is important that Mrs. Ramsay knits socks. Sakamoto Tadanobu points out that "knitting socks" plays a role as a buoy floating on the stream of consciousness; since this real act is done concurrently with thought traveling through time, it lets us know how much time has really elapsed. In addition, the knitting signifies her desire for possession. She knits them for the child of the

Lighthouse keeper, but they are not likely to be given, so that they are virtually for James, the model of their size. Socks or shoes often show their owner's personality or growth in *To the Lighthouse*:

> [I]n each other's arms were Paul and Minta! kissing probably. . . . She [Nancy] and Andrew put on their shoes and stockings in dead silence without saying a thing about it. [. . .] All the same it irritated Andrew that Nancy should be a woman, and Nancy that Andrew should be a man and they tied their shoes very neatly and drew the bows rather tight. (84, emphasis added.)

Though they wear shoes and stockings to distract themselves from the uncomfortable feeling toward awareness of their gender differences, this awareness is indeed a process of growth. Mrs. Ramsey's knitting socks does not make much progress, and she sighs over the shortness of the socks. The former reflects her desire to possess James; the latter intimates that she will die early without seeing him through to adulthood.

Mrs. Ramsay also has the power to unite people in the house. It is remarkable at the dinner. Jane Lilienfeld considers this ability in relation to her character as the Great Mother:

> She (Mrs. Ramsay) starts the fires of life which unite her guests in a fashion peculiar to herself: she pities Mr. Bankes and in rescuing him, she feels her creative energies flow toward him. The flame licking the newspaper suggests the central fires The Great Mother tends in her cave. (Lilienfeld 37)

However, this is also due to her queenliness annexed to matrimony. She is a good wife, and only through being a good wife to her husband, is she able to gain love and respect from young men. Besides, she does not have a strong identity as an individual in society: she has no elucidated name (she indeed has one), money and room of her own, which are indispensable to women's independence as Woolf argues in *A Room One's Own* (1929). She needs her husband's protection to live, and almost all queens have husbands on the throne, while the Great Mother and

goddesses need not to have one. Therefore, her mighty power originates in queenliness rather than divinity.

Her power protects people inside her own sphere of influence against the outside world, and this means that she is able to use it only in the house. It is remarkable that Augustus Carmichael, who usually lies on the grass outside, is not charmed by her power. Considering that, together with the fact that she leaves her favorite son at home and hates opened doors, her ruling area is limited to the house, of which Mrs. Ramsay is the queen.

II. The Production of "an Angel in the House"

We have seen Mrs. Ramsay's queenliness, which includes the character of a good wife and wise mother. Now, we will examine how she tries to make other young women "angels in the house." As mentioned above, her position depends on her husband, so that she should not be identified with the Great Mother; in addition, her obedience to men can be seen in walking with Tansley. Rachel Bowlby suggests that Woolf regards walking as the experience to step into male society; women should not walk alone in those days. Her walking with Tansley, a trivialized picture of androcracy, shows that she is under surveillance of men as if she insisted that she needs men's protection and is willing to accept their management. In addition, Mrs. Ramsay thinks that intellectual activities belong to men, and she participates in society through welfare activity.

As stated above, Mrs. Ramsay is really an angel in the house, and she is also engaged in arranging marriages. In fact, Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle get married as her intends, and she also wishes William Bankes and Lily Briscoe would do so. She believes that marriage is happiness for women, and wants the daughters to be good wives like her; she admonishes them to have sympathy for men living as isolated as the Lighthouse keepers, just as she does for the husband. As for this problem, it is remarkable that they succeed to something from the grandmothers: Mrs. Ramsay's recipe and Minta's broach were both left them by their respective grandmothers. Ronchetti interprets the significance of Minta's possession and

accidental loss her broach:

> The brooch is not merely symbolic of Minta's virginity, which is about to be sacrificed on the altar of marriage; but also of the legacy of the bonds of love and nurturing between women which have been eroded as a result of centuries of patriarchal domination. (Ronchetti 75)

Considering the fact that Minta's marriage fails, this means she also fails to take over the role as a good wife and wise mother. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay educates her daughters and urges young ladies around her to get married so as to produce good wives along the maternal lines. Her maternity requires her not only to possess the children, but also to increase angels in the house in order to keep the patriarchy and to pull strings in the house.

It is Lily who resists Mrs. Ramsay. She is single and a painter, living with her widowed father. She reflects Woolf and her sister Vanessa, while Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay reflect Woolf's parents. Her character is opposite to Mrs. Ramsay's: Lily's eyes are Chinese and Mrs. Ramsay's face is Greek; Lily does not want to get married, and has her own work unlike Mrs. Ramsay, a mere housewife; while Mrs. Ramsay is a little bit child-like, Lily's behavior is old-maidish. These differences show the symbolical conflicts between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay. Lily's view of life, influenced by Mrs. Ramsay, changes after her death. While Mrs. Ramsay lives, Lily feels inferior about being single because Mrs. Ramsey preaches about marriage; she feels her life as only a painter poorer than that of a wife and mother. Lilienfeld points out that Lily potentially hopes to be embraced by Mrs. Ramsay, who is a picture of maternity because she has lost her own mother:

> Lily needs Mrs. Ramsay because she is a motherless spinster living in shabby respectability with an aging father. In her circumscribed life, Lily lacks the very thing she loves in Mrs. Ramsay, the principle of generativity, the need to turn like artichokes toward the sun, toward the heart of life. (Lilienfeld 29)

This passage also shows Lily's desire to depend on the mother and the longing for married life which brings her the stream of love to the Ramsays.

The accident of Minta's broach also stirs Lily's inferiority complex. She is shocked because Paul refuses her help to find the lost broach, and this is the same as when Susan is shocked by Jinny's kiss to Louis in *The Waves* (1931): Lily does not love Paul, and she feels herself to be cut off from love and to be lacking in feminine attractiveness. While she doubts Mrs. Ramsay's eudaemonics and fears the violent side of romantic love, she cannot dismiss the longing for a life as an ordinary woman.

Lily, who has a pride in her lifework, feels hostile toward Tansley because "he sneer[s] at women, 'can't paint, can't write.'"(99) Nevertheless, she accepts Mrs. Ramsay's nonverbal request of treating him kindly. Lily as a rebel is not able to ignore the mistress's order. Ronchetti explains this in the following way:

> In fact, Mrs. Ramsay exploits the unspoken feelings of affection and identity between women to coerce them into aiding her in this role, as when she silently urges Lily to engage Tansley in conversation during the dinner. (Ronchetti 73)

After all, she never resists Mrs. Ramsay; on the contrary, she is about to lose her pride and to be drawn to becoming an angel in the house.

After Mrs. Ramsay dies, Lily laments her absence. This is because she regards her as her mother. However, she is not to marry Bankes as Mrs. Ramsay wished, and finishes painting the picture. This resolves her inferiority complex, and also shows the fact that she gains a positive view of her own life. Mrs. Ramsay is the model of the picture, and its completion shows that the essence of her in Lily's mind is ejected and fixed on the picture. Due to this, Lily is able to recognize what kind of person Mrs. Ramsay is. Thus, the completion makes her free from Mrs. Ramsay's influence and lets her have a pride as a painter to live her life.

III. The Encroachment on the House and the End of Maternal Rule

Mrs. Ramsay, who influences people, leaves her husband and eight children behind her. In her absence, the house in the Isle of Skye sinks into ruin, but there are signs of it deteriorating even during her lifetime. This encroachment shows that Mrs.

Ramsay's power gets weaker. Of course, the reason why the house is shabby is that Professor Ramsay's salary is low to support such a big family in a regal style. However, Mrs. Ramsay thinks that the reason why the house is damaged is mainly that the children bring sand and creatures from outside in order to satisfy their own interest; this proves that each child has his/her own identity. Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay is not ignorant about her children's individual natures. For example, she is anxious about Rose's sensitiveness before dinner, and this scene supports Mrs. Ramsay's queenliness, so that this does not show the decline of her power.

> She [Rose] had some hidden reason of her own for attaching great importance to this choosing what her mother was to wear. What was the reason, Mrs. Ramsay wondered, . . . And Rose would grow up; and Rose would suffer, she supposed with these deep feelings, . . . (89)

This choosing jewels is based on Woolf's memory with her mother, and so Rose must have this in mind as the happy memory. However, it is noteworthy that Mrs. Ramsay fulfills Rose's interest. In this scene, Mrs. Ramsay can grasp Rose's individual nature and satisfy her interest, and so this supports her queenliness; meanwhile she cannot be concerned in what the children do outside, and the outside activity is contrary to choosing jewels. Hence, what the children bring from outside damages the house and also weakens Mrs. Ramsay's power. Furthermore, the encroachment on the house closely connects to her irritation about the children:

> She [Mrs. Ramsay] looked up – what demon possessed him, her youngest, her cherished? – and saw the room, saw the chairs, thought them fearfully shabby. (31)

Hence, Mrs. Ramsay's power gets weaker owing to the growth of the children, and at the same time, the house also gets shabbier. Furthermore, she hates keeping doors open as mentioned above. For one thing, her children escape through them; for another, something which damages the house comes through them. The waste of the house is namely that of her palace. The encroachment on the house is closely related to the weakening of Mrs. Ramsay's power.

In order to prevent this, Mrs. Ramsay needs to fix the broken parts. It is also

noteworthy that she wraps a sheep's skull on the wall with her green shawl. The color of the shawl, like that of Mrs. Dalloway's dress and Susan's eyes, represents life. Accordingly, wrapping the skull with the green shawl is equal to resisting death or degeneration. It eventually falls down on the floor after sometime in the years following her death. This also means that she is defeated by death and time, and loses the power.

IV. Two Sides of Things Viewed by Each Sex

We can know that Woolf idealizes androgynous mind or thought when we read her works such as *Orlando* (1928). Now, I examine six men and women in *The Waves*. They can be broadly divided into three groups, which represent each subject: fertility, love, and strife with life. Both Bernard and Susan have their families; he lives in the city, and she lives in the country. Besides, they can be linked in terms of words because he is a poet, and she is a muse who ironically has a poor vocabulary. Neville and Jinny live the life with love: his love is homosexual and depends on the heart, and hers is heterosexual and depends on the body. Louis and Rhoda both suffer from many things in the world. In order to protect themselves, Louis gets aggressive, while Rhoda gets timid.

The way to describe something from both masculine and feminine views is also seen in *To the Lighthouse*. Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay take on the male or female part of the subjects: paternity and manhood, or maternity and womanhood. Their children also share roles between the sexes. There are four couples in the Ramsay's children, and this study examines only two of them. Andrew and Prue are the eldest, and the members of the group holding old values like their parents. Lee refers to this problem:

> [B]eneath the main current of the book there is another story, to be fully expressed in *The Years*, of the second generation's attempt to escape their nineteenth-century background. And the future the Ramsays set in motion is also a means of judging them. In the last part of the novel Mrs Ramsay is dead, and so are the two children of brightest promise:

> Andrew, whom Mr Ramsay had said "would be a better man than he had been," and Prue, whom Mrs Ramsay intended to be "happier than other people's daughters." (Lee 14)

Andrew participates in the imperialism by going off to war; meanwhile, Prue, who respects her mother more than her sisters, is interested in Minta's impending marriage. In addition, Mrs. Ramsay thinks that she should let her understand how important it is to comfort men. Furthermore, both Andrew and Prue die from circumstances peculiar to their own sexes: he, in battle, she in childbirth. This fact shows that they belong to the old-line world with its different gender-roles. In comparison with them, James and Cam embody new values. They resist parental control; both of them hate Mr. Ramsay's habit of behaving outrageously and demanding others, in particular women, to comfort him. (He seems to have the invisible power, which attracts people of the opposite sex as Mrs. Ramsay's does.) However, they make peace with their father through the voyage to the lighthouse.

Cam remembers that she entered his library and tried to satisfy her intellectual curiosity, a desire which is exclusive to men according to Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf was annoyed that facilities for scholarship such as colleges or libraries were not open to women, so that this memory is quite remarkable, because it describes that a girl is taken into the world of knowledge. This means the release from the old customs. On the other hand, it is evident that James still belongs to his mother even after her death because he recalls that his father wounded his mother's heart as if he had actually hurt her. Though he hates his father more obviously than Cam, he becomes able to make peace with his father after he praises James verbally. In front of the lighthouse, he understands that it has two faces: the imagined one, which he saw with his mother, and the real one, which he sees nearby with his father, and both of them are true. A. D. Moody points out that the lighthouse has two-facedness which combines Mr. Ramsay's rational reality and Mrs. Ramsay's intuitive reality, which James accepts:

> At the beginning of the novel James had hated his father . . . . Now he has changed, as the lighthouse itself has changed with their closer

> approach. He had thought of it in terms associated with his mother. . . . Now he sees it "as it really is." But at the same time he perceives that both views are possible and true. . . . In this way the lighthouse, and James himself, establish Mr Ramsay's rational reality, and Mrs Ramsay's intuitive reality, in a relationship which admits the validity of both, and implies the necessity of both. (Moody 41-42)

James gains the androgynous essence after he achieves his long-cherished dream to arrive at the lighthouse. He opens the door to Woolf's vision of an androgynous self that is both male and female, rational and intuitive. In addition, Mr. Ramsay also steps into the new world. Till then he was only "given" something: he demanded his wife to comfort him and to understand him without words. However, he "gives" James the praise verbally on the ship for the first time. He sloughs off the old-line situation which Mrs. Ramsay prepared, despite the fact that it is comfortable for men.

As mentioned above, Mrs. Ramsay's power is lost because of her death and the encroachment on the house by the outside world. However, this does not mean that everything belonging to her disappears. Lilienfeld points out that Mrs. Ramsay is compared to the ship, which protects people against raging waves:

> The diners are the sailors, and the darkened sea on which they are perched makes their position precarious. Mrs. Ramsay encircles them, she protects them, but the small ship is no match for the turbulent sea which at any time may swamp the boat; and throughout the dinner party Mrs. Ramsay exerts her powers to the full to keep her guests unified and safe from "the watery vastness" outside the candle-lit windows. (Lilienfeld 38)

This comparison has much to do with the fact that the sea trip brings the great changes to the father and the children. The boat carries them safely on the sea, and also arrives at the lighthouse with them. When we remember that James discovers the two-facedness of the lighthouse, his arrival does not mean he has become independent of his mother, but also that he has acquired androgynous values.

Conclusion

While Mrs. Ramsay is a good wife and wise mother, she has the desire to possess her children and a mighty power to control people. However, it is a limited power, which she can use only in the house. Through obeying men as an angel in the house, she gets the power as a queen in return. Her desire to possess her children is so strong that she keeps every door closed for fear that they will escape and something which damages her palace will come in; further, she cannot finish knitting the socks because that will mean James has become more independent.

She also tries to arrange marriages, and educates her daughters and maidens around her about the importance of marriage for women; this is indeed the project to increase angels in the house. This attempt of Mrs. Ramsay is connected to the merit of obeying men. Though Lily tries to resist it, Mrs. Ramsay's power is so strong that she cannot be free from it during Mrs. Ramsay's lifetime.

Thus, Mrs. Ramsay has a strong influence on others, but she dies early and so do the eldest son and daughter, Andrew and Prue, who belong to the old-line world. In the third chapter, the marital life of Paul and Minta breaks down, and Lily lives as a single painter. These facts show that Mrs. Ramsay's attempt to produce new angels in the house fails in consequence.

By finishing the picture, Lily cuts off Mrs. Ramsay's essence which remains in her. Lily gives form to that "essence" in her painting, and in doing so she fulfills herself as an artist. Mr. Ramsay, James and Cam depart from the house which was once Mrs. Ramsay's palace, and arrive at the lighthouse, whose two-facedness James accepts. This means that they become free from Mrs. Ramsay's rule, and gain the new value which is neither paternal nor maternal but androgynous, and yet Mrs. Ramsay also accompanies them in their journey, being symbolized as the boat which carries them to the lighthouse.

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