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Devon Thomas
Brigham Young University

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Christ the Father

Mr. Ramsay as an Ironic Christ-figure in
Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Devon Thomas

To her son these words—'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow'—conveyed an extraordinary joy.

—Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* narrates the life of the Ramsay family—primarily Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their relationship with each other and with their children—as they live in their vacation house near the sea. From the beginning of the novel, we follow their attempts to make it to the nearby lighthouse, which holds particular importance to the young James Ramsay, but not to his father. Most readers of the novel come to disdain Mr. Ramsay's insecure, self-minded character, even considering the consensus that he is a portrait of Leslie Stephen, Woolf's father. Indeed, much of Mr. Ramsay's characterization paints a man who self-imposes and seeks intellectual, emotional recognition; in "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf herself records, "How often I was enraged by [my] father" (105).

Thus, I believe these are correct interpretations of Mr. Ramsay—they are just not the whole. Instead, I suggest reading Mr. Ramsay as a metaphorical Christ-figure who reconstructs our understanding of his and Leslie Stephen's paternal roles.

Much of our existing scholarship views the novel as a means for Woolf to flesh out her religious beliefs; as Mark Gaipa wrote, *To the Lighthouse* functions as “an agnostic's apology,” a verbatim reference to Leslie Stephen's book, *An Agnostic's Apology* (3). It is well-documented that Woolf, exacerbated by her father's heavy agnosticism, deeply struggled with her religious beliefs. Martin Corner argues that within the text, though, Mr. Ramsay works as an “explicit declaration of atheism,” an “unwavering witness to the nonhumanity of the world” (415, 417). For Corner, the novel does not explore agnosticism, but atheism—a certainty that there is no divinity. And, while there are characters within the text who subscribe to atheism (particularly Mr. Tansley), Tina Barr contends that there is religiosity in the novel, specifically contained in reference to Greek mythology. Barr asserts that the text conflates Mr. Ramsay with “the Lord of the Underworld . . . a ‘king in exile’” (139). Simply, for most existing scholars, Mr. Ramsay either affirms agnosticism, atheism, or hell itself. And while I certainly agree that Mr. Ramsay appears as a negative religious symbol, I believe that if reconsidered, Mr. Ramsay acts as an ironic, metaphorical Christ-figure—a different “king in exile”—the King of Israel, exiled from Nazareth (*The Authorized King James Bible*, John 1.49, 12.13; Luke 4.28–9; Woolf, *Lighthouse* 148). So, in this paper, I will explore reading Mr. Ramsay in this attitude to revisit our perception of his—and Leslie Stephen's—fatherhood.

Understanding Mr. Ramsay's ties with Christ comes by first understanding Woolf's own ties with Christianity. While most agree that Woolf held a nuanced relationship with religion—often leaning more bitter than positive—it is important to note that her beliefs were often dichotomous and influenced by close friends. Perhaps the most influential individual was Violet Dickinson, a family friend of the Stephens. Woolf and Dickinson primarily communicated through letters in the beginning of their relationship. In the letters, Woolf emulated Dickinson's religious verbosity, writing sentences like, “I think of you and your holy life on the mount,” thus echoing Peter's recount of Christ's transfiguration on the Mount of Olives (Woolf, *Flight* 58; 2 Pet. 1.18).

Woolf's biblical language gives us a glimpse of her significant exploration of Christian ideals. In her biographical exploration of Woolf's religiosity, *Virginia*

Woolf and Christian Culture, Jane De Gay argues Woolf's letters to Dickinson provided "a particularly important forum for Woolf to speculate about the nature of God" (60). Woolf's correspondence and relationship with Dickinson allowed her to frankly explore beyond Leslie Stephen's firm agnosticism; hence, it is not surprising that in the early twentieth century, Woolf's relationship with Christianity, though often "tongue-in-cheek," also demonstrated a willingness to consider God as both real and involved (De Gay 60).

Despite her early religious curiosity, after World War I, Woolf's bitterness toward Christianity returned as her take on God stemmed from local churches' beliefs and practices. Though her diaries occasionally used biblical terms, several entries described feelings of intolerance and anger—feelings quite different from the playful banter with Dickinson in 1902. Yet, on 4 November 1917, Woolf wrote, "Writing has the advantage of making a weekday out of the Sabbath, in spite of the clamour & blare of military music & church bells which always takes place at about 11—a noise which the other people have no right to inflict" (Woolf, "Diary" 71 qtd. in De Gay 65). The em dash preceding Woolf's rebuke emphasizes her conviction: anything tied to God "inflict[s]." Her specific disdain for Sundays and church bells recurs in her diaries; they make God inescapable, ever-demanding. Indeed, just weeks later on 26 November 1917, Woolf stated, "I don't like Sunday; the best thing is to make it a work day, & to unravel [Rupert] Brooke's mind to the sound of church bells was suitable enough" (Woolf, "Diary" 82). In both accounts, Woolf distracts herself from recognizing Sunday—the Sabbath—and its implications; despite her efforts, however, Woolf could not ignore God.

Further, it is important to understand that Woolf's detestation of male clergy and deity also affected her view of religion and God. As De Gay notes, Woolf ironically explicated the abhorrent sexism present in religion in the early twentieth century: "The clergymen in Woolf's novels are mostly ineffectual, opinionated and ignorant" (222). Thus, in reading Mr. Ramsay as a Christ-figure—Christ representing the ultimate clergyman—we see the "opinionated and ignorant" clergyman repeatedly. The very first dialogue we hear from Mr. Ramsay establishes him as insensitive and self-serving, in direct juxtaposition to his tender wife:

"Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," said Mrs. Ramsay.

"But," said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, "it won't be fine." (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 3–4)

Even without his interiority, we easily imagine six-year-old James' disappointment, his anger toward his father; but, when we review his interiority, we understand Mr. Ramsay's dismissal as irrevocable.

To [James] these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail, within touch . . . his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 3)

Mr. Ramsay, entirely ignorant to his child's needs and desires, dashes them to oblivion in a passing sentence; in other words, Mr. Ramsay's austerity functions only to preserve his frail arrogance. Thus, Woolf portrays male deity ironically, unaware of their own hypocrisy and cruelty.

As my brief exploration of Woolf's religious experience concludes, I want to note that notwithstanding her aversion to the idea of God, Woolf carried "surprising moments of sympathy or empathy with people of faith," as well as "much thought" to religion (De Gay 83; Yünlü and Memmedova 191). Ultimately, while Woolf "engages with [Violet's] understanding that there is a God," she "challenges [Violet] that if such a being is omnipotent it must also be cruel. Woolf makes . . . Mrs[.] Ramsay the focus of this debate too, and [Mrs. Ramsay] come[s] to a view that there cannot be a god for this very reason" (De Gay 83). Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay adopts Woolf's aversion to God and thinks, "How could any Lord have made this world? . . . With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 64). Essentially, Mrs. Ramsay not only believes that such a being *must* be cruel, but recognizes that same cruelty in her husband. Her denial of a benevolent "Lord," then, can be understood; her view of Mr. Ramsay as a Christ-figure comes because of his omnipotence, callousness—he is, therefore, an embodiment of God (64).

Mr. Ramsay's ironic characterization as God begins as he parallels God's chastisement toward Adam and Eve in a scene that echoes their fall in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3; Poresky 137–8). As Lily Briscoe paints in the Ramsays' backyard, she "kept a feeler on her surroundings lest some one should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at"—much like the realized nakedness Adam and Eve experience after partaking of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3.1–7; Woolf, *Lighthouse* 17). The specific diction—"lest someone should creep up," "find her picture looked at"—denotes Lily's fear of violation, her need for

privacy; yet, with Mr. Bankes, she feels comfortable amid her exposure. Lily and Mr. Bankes' vulnerability, though, becomes problematic when, like Adam and Eve, "they hear God's voice," Mr. Ramsay's voice, "as he walks through the garden": "*Some one had blundered*" (Gen. 3.9, 13-4; Poresky 137-8; Woolf, *Lighthouse* 18). These scenes, while quite similar, differ on a critical point: in Genesis, Adam and Eve disobey God and are thus punished; in *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay—the stand-in for God—"blunders in his awkward appeals for sympathy and in his thoughtless pronouncements that the family will not visit the lighthouse" (Poresky 138). God justly judges and punishes Adam and Eve; His perfection and omniscience allow Him to be the angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament. Yet, Mr. Ramsay unjustly judges and punishes Lily and Mr. Bankes; his glaring imperfection transforms his retribution into irony, as ultimately "he judges himself" (Poresky 138). Truly, as Louise A. Poresky argues, Mr. Ramsay believes the "delusion that he is God, the angry God of the Old Testament," and thus excuses himself of all consequences (Poresky 138). Simply, through this self-deification, Mr. Ramsay both justifies his moral condescension and avoids the repercussions for it.

Mr. Ramsay's characterization as an ironic Christ-figure continues primarily through Mrs. Ramsay. When Mrs. Ramsay protests that the weather "often changed" and could permit a trip to the lighthouse the next day, Mr. Ramsay spits "Damn you" in response (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 31-2). In turn, Mrs. Ramsay scrutinizes his "astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings," and "dazed and blinded, she bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked" (32). Interestingly, though, her anger transitions as she bows her head, submits her will to her husband's, and thinks, "There was nobody whom she revered as she revered him" (John 6.38; Woolf, *Lighthouse* 32). Truly, Mrs. Ramsay's submission deifies Mr. Ramsay through the repeated affirmation of her "reverence" for him. Specifically, the Oxford English Dictionary distinguishes "reverence" as an approach of "veneration as having a divine or sacred character; (more generally) to worship" ("reverence, v."). Ostensibly, Mrs. Ramsay views Mr. Ramsay as a God. And, while the novel does not connote insincerity in Mrs. Ramsay's actions, Woolf's approach to God *does* paint Mr. Ramsay as an ironic, unworthy Christ-figure. We can almost hear Woolf scathe: "What a terrible grip Xtianity still has—[Mrs. Ramsay] became rigid . . . at once, as if God himself had her in his grasp. That I believe is still the chief enemy—the fear of God" (Woolf, *Diary* 165). Indeed, for Woolf, Mr. Ramsay fits his role as a God-figure; God holds Mrs. Ramsay

“in his grasp,” and perpetuates the cruelty that, for Woolf, hallmarks deity. So, while Zehra Yünlü and Beture Memmedova argue that “the Ramsay household survives handily without benefit of a God,” I believe Woolf asserts that the Ramsays suffer *because of* the presence of a God (190).

Shortly after Mr. Ramsay’s outburst and Mrs. Ramsay’s submission, our perception of Mr. Ramsay as a Christ-figure starts to become ambivalent, just as Woolf’s own view of God was often inconsistent and clashing. While Mr. Ramsay ruled as the oppressive God in the garden and in the exchange with his wife, his characterization starts to ameliorate; Mrs. Ramsay’s continued devotion shifts their relationship from coercion to discipleship. Moments after the first time she considers her reverence toward him, she thinks, “There was nobody she revered more. She was not good enough to tie his shoe strings, she felt” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 32). On a superficial level, we understand her piety; yet, her deification of Mr. Ramsay becomes clear when we align it with John the Baptist’s (almost verbatim) prophecy about Christ: “He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose” (John 1.27). Biblical narratives, particularly John 1, denote John’s complete submission to Christ, the recognition of His divinity, and their kinship. When John is beheaded, Matthew 14 records Jesus’ grief over the loss of His friend, His disciple: “When Jesus heard of it, he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart” (Matt. 14.13). Simply, Christ and John the Baptist were friends; however, most renowned was John’s discipleship and faithfulness. The same can be said of Mrs. Ramsay’s self-imposed role as disciple of Mr. Ramsay—hence her almost verbatim echo of John’s words: she proclaims her loyalty.

Though Mrs. Ramsay acts as chief disciple, Mr. Tansley and Mr. Bankes also consider Mr. Ramsay in worshipful terms. Again, however, the characters’ perceptions of him continue in ambivalence; while at one moment Mrs. Ramsay “brace[s] herself” against Mr. Ramsay’s presence, she shortly joins Mr. Tansley and Mr. Bankes in their awe toward her husband (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 37). As Mr. Ramsay walks out to the shore alone, we learn:

It was his power, his gift, to shed all superfluities, to shrink and diminish so that he looked barer and felt sparer, even physically, yet lost none of the intensity of his mind . . . it was in this guise that he inspired William Bankes (intermittently) and in Charles Tansley (obsequiously) and in his wife now . . . reverence, and pity, and gratitude too, as a stake driven into the bed of a channel upon which gulls perch and the waves beat inspires in merry

boat-loads a feeling of gratitude for the duty it is taking upon itself marking the channel out there in the floods alone. (44)

This scene clearly echoes the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, as recorded in John 19 and Luke 23. The crucifix imagery of Mr. Ramsay appearing as a “stake driven into the bed of a channel” parallels Christ’s own declaration: “They pierced my hands and my feet” (Ps. 22.16). So, though Mr. Ramsay’s suffering remains emotional instead of physical, the narration conflates him with the cross, a symbol of Christ and His redemption. Thus, just as Christ’s followers “bewailed and lamented” the crucifixion of Christ, so too do Mr. Ramsay’s disciples feel “reverence, and pity, and gratitude too” for his sacrifice (Luke 23.27).

While this passage strengthens Mr. Ramsay as a Christ-figure, the introduction of him as one willing to “shed all superfluities” and atone for others seems unfounded; certainly, we can follow the biblical narrative that Christ willingly, as part of His sacrifice, endured scourges and blows (John 19.1–3). But a sacrificial Mr. Ramsay—particularly one conflated with a God—seems intensely ironic.

Even years later, just before the trip to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay continues to paint himself a God. While waiting for Cam and James to get ready, Mr. Ramsay approaches Lily as she paints, for “this was one of those moments when an enormous need urged him . . . to [get] what he wanted: sympathy” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 150–1). Mr. Ramsay’s insatiable need for sympathy and outside reassurance occurs throughout the novel, just as Leslie Stephen often required it. However, this unfolding scene marks itself significant for several reasons. Consider that Mr. Ramsay again approaches someone in the name of a self-proclaimed “grand” sacrifice. “Such expeditions,” Mr. Ramsay tells Lily, “are very painful. . . . They are very exhausting” (151–2). So, while Mr. Ramsay proclaims the trip to the lighthouse—“such [an expedition]”—a sacrifice, Lily only thinks, “This great man was dramatising himself,” affirming Poresky’s assertion of Mr. Ramsay’s “delusion that he is God” (Poresky 138; Woolf, *Lighthouse* 152). Woolf illustrates this “delusion” when she shortly portrays him as “a lion seeking whom we could devour”; and, while Mr. Ramsay almost certainly construes himself as Christ—often symbolized as a lion—it becomes clear Woolf uses the Bible ironically (Gen. 49.9; Woolf, *Lighthouse* 156). Though Christ is known as the Lion of Judah, Woolf’s phrasing mirrors nearly verbatim a New Testament description of the devil: “as a roaring lion, [he] walketh about, seeking whom

he may devour" (1 Pet. 5.8). Woolf thus extrapolates biblical language to affirm that the deification of Mr. Ramsay is fueled by himself. Further, in "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf writes that her father "was the pacing, dangerous, morose lion; a lion who was sulky and angry and injured; and suddenly ferocious, and then very humble, and then majestic; and then lying dusty and fly pestered in a corner of the cage" (116). Simply, Woolf's biblical language again affirms the ironic divinity of Mr. Ramsay.

Yet, despite Lily's criticism of Mr. Ramsay's self-deification, she later thinks, "there was that sudden revivification, that sudden flare . . . when it seemed as if he had shed worries and ambitions, and the hope of sympathy and the desire for praise, had entered some other region" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 156). Truly, it seems, to brand both Mr. Ramsay and Leslie in pure negativity is inaccurate, for when Lily does, it "made her ashamed of her own irritability" (156). And, while Woolf paints a fairly critical picture of her father, she also notes "He had a godlike, yet childlike, standing in the family" (111). Thus, Mr. Ramsay's characterization does not remain entirely critical, as seen at the novel's close.

Mr. Ramsay's trip to the lighthouse with Cam and James has generated much scholarly debate, as it should; the novel itself takes its title from this journey, and the dialogue, interiority, and actions of the characters offer many possible understandings. Specifically, Corner argued the eventual landing at the lighthouse as "an explicit declaration of atheism" within Mr. Ramsay, an opportunity for Woolf to declare it as "something toward which his whole life has been a preparation" (417). However, I do not believe this really explicates Mr. Ramsay's purpose, particularly in his affiliation with theology. And, while De Gay believes Mr. Ramsay "redeems himself" through the trip to the lighthouse, I believe he really redeems the Ramsay family (210).

So, while Mr. Ramsay's earlier declaration of self-sacrifice appears pompous and assumptive, interpreting the journey as an atonement changes that. Consistent with all of her writing,

[Woolf's] characters' most heightened and ineffable experiences are moments of profound, if fleeting, spiritual connection—between self and other, self and the circumambient world. These interstices form the site of the mysterious in much of Woolf's work. (Groover 218)

Indeed, even before the redemption fully begins, Woolf indicates its certainty through a single, bracketed section—an everyday moment: "[Macalister's

boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea]" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 180). Though short, these sentences communicate profound information. Even its format—bracketed text, separated from other paragraphs by intentional spacing—denotes its importance. As in *Jacob's Room*, Vara Neverow summates, Woolf "emphasizes" an everyday moment through the brackets and "the work shifts in significance" (203). Woolf not only "emphasizes" this everyday moment, but uses it to signal the start of Mr. Ramsay's atonement for his family; simply, the bracketed blip signals the "[shift] in significance," because it is *through* the excerpt that we receive an initial indication of Mr. Ramsay's atonement, his self-sacrifice of pride, on behalf of his children.

I believe we understand the excerpt's role as we consider its biblical origins and implications. Within the account in Matthew 13, Jesus shares several parables with His apostles; speaking parabolically on "the kingdom of heaven," He compares it to "a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: Which, when it was full, [the fishermen] drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away" (Matt. 13.47–8). Essentially, Macalister's boy acts out the parable: he casts, catches, and uses the fish—the good, beneficial part—and "cast[s] the bad away." The parabolic link becomes fully pointed as we finish the parable: "So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just" (Matt. 13.49). And, so shall it be to the lighthouse: Mr. Ramsay will "cast the bad away" and "[gather] the good into vessels"—"vessels," then, referring to Mr. Ramsay, Cam and James, and the boat itself ("recipient, n. and adj."). In other words, Woolf isn't merely alluding to the parable; she is recreating it, through Mr. Ramsay.

Truly, Mr. Ramsay's metaphorical atonement redeems his family through everyday actions. The trip begins as James watches his father, and thinks he "looked very old . . . as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both of their minds—that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 202–3). James's harsh observations peak and thus revive his boyish tendency to patricidal rage; however, when he sees the lighthouse from the boat, he finds it "satisfied him" (203). James's observation that the lighthouse contented him—although it is a decade late, with his father instead of his mother—demonstrates the start of his ten-year

“grudge [being] exorcised with the completion of the much-anticipated journey” (Tneh Cheng Eng 100). Simply, the redemptive healing begins.

While the Ramsays continue toward the lighthouse, Lily stays behind to resume her ten-year-old painting. As she does, she ponders the nature of redemption, of clarity. Ultimately, she decides, “The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 161). Lily’s revelation, woven into the Ramsays’ journey, becomes significant as we see that the Ramsays’ redemption comes through “little daily miracles” in a wholly unexpected way.

The lulled silence back on the boat becomes pierced with Mr. Ramsay’s invitation:

“Come now,” said Mr. Ramsay, suddenly shutting his book.

“Come where?” Cam wonders. “To what extraordinary adventure? . . . To land somewhere, to climb somewhere? Where was he leading them?” For after his immense silence the words startled them.

“There’s the lighthouse. We’re almost there.” (204)

Of course, Mr. Ramsay’s sudden invitation startles his children; he’s read in silence the entirety of the boat ride. However, I believe the surprise Cam and James feel comes from the abrupt break from Mr. Ramsay’s lifelong “immense silence” as their father.

Yet, James’s hope lives only a moment before the father he knows returns. When Macalister remarks to Mr. Ramsay that James navigates the boat “very steady,” James thinks, “But his father never praised him,” and his bitterness toward his father resurfaces (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 204). But, Cam perpetuates her hope: ““This is right, this is it,’ Cam kept feeling as she peeled her hard-boiled egg” (205). Though Cam never expounds what “it” is, we glimpse the implication as she thinks, “It was very exciting—it seemed as if they were doing two things at once; they were eating their lunch here in the sun and they were also making for safety in a great storm after a shipwreck” (205). Of course, they are not literally “making for safety” after a disaster—the family is merely spending time together, connecting. Cam, then, reaffirms Kristina Groover’s assertion that Woolf’s characters find healing in everyday events (218): in this moment, eating a hard-boiled egg and a sandwich.

Cam's perception of her father continues to ameliorate through Mr. Ramsay's engaged parenting. When Cam goes to dump the remainder of her sandwich into the sea, Mr. Ramsay "told her, as if he were thinking of the fisherman and how they lived, that if she did not want it she should put it back in the parcel. . . . He said so wisely, as if he knew so well all the things that happened in the world" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 205). Again, though an everyday event, Mr. Ramsay's gentle instruction affects Cam profoundly, so "that she put it back at once," thus giving way for them to connect; "he gave her, from his own parcel, a gingerbread nut . . . He was shabby, and simple, eating bread and cheese; and yet he was leading them on a great expedition" (205). Interestingly, while Woolf, through Mr. Ramsay, has conflated Christ—and thus, her father—with cruelty and selfishness, this depiction differs: Mr. Ramsay is now patient, selfless, generous, humble, exemplary. Further, this interaction mirrors that of Jesus' with His disciples, post-resurrection, at the Sea of Tiberias. In the narrative from John 21, Christ stands on the shore and invites His disciples to "Come and dine," and as He eats bread and fish, He "taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise" (John 21.12). Mr. Ramsay's nonverbal invitation for Cam to "Come and dine," alongside his humble food and generosity, makes him appear like the God of the New Testament—not the Old.

Mr. Ramsay's shift from the God of the Old Testament to that of the New solidifies as he heals his relationship with James. "Estranged from his father since he was six years old," James's bitterness only makes sense (Tneh Cheng Eng 100). Though the lack of his father's praise at his steering causes a surging rage, Mr. Ramsay again surprises his children when "at last he said triumphantly: 'Well done!' James had steered them like a born sailor" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 206). "At last," like the master in the Parable of the Talents, he praises, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25.21). And, like the servant, James then "enter[s] . . . into the joy of [his] lord" (Matt. 25.21). On this, Cam notes,

"You've got it at last." For she knew that this was what James had been wanting, and she knew that now he had got it he was so pleased that he would not look at her or his father or any one. . . . He was so pleased that he was not going to let anybody share a grain of his pleasure. His father had praised him. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 206)

“His father had praised him;” Mr. Ramsay redeemed their family, “shed worries and ambitions, and the hope of sympathy and the desire for praise,” and thus completed his atonement (156). David Tneh Cheng Eng summates, “[Lily] could visualize how Mr. Ramsay has finally reached the island and James received the so much needed affirmation from his father”; thus, she concludes, “It is finished,” a verbatim repetition of Christ’s last words as He hung on the cross (John 19.30; Tneh Cheng Eng 102; Woolf, *Lighthouse* 208). Thus, it is with this declaration that Mr. Ramsay finalizes his role as the God of the *New Testament*; in other words, his character becomes changed. He is now the God that hangs on the tree in Calvary, who sacrifices for His people, rather than Himself; this phrase—“It is finished”—thus comments both on Mr. Ramsay’s redemption of his family and, consequently, of his fatherhood.

I do, however, want to establish that to argue Mr. Ramsay merely shifts from an ironic Christ-figure to a positive Christ-figure misconstrues Woolf’s views; to say so would be an oversimplification and an error. De Gay articulates,

It is inaccurate to describe Woolf as atheist: she speculates far too often about the existence and nature of God for us to say that she had a thoroughgoing and consistent conviction that God did not exist. It is inaccurate to describe her as irreligious: she shows far too much empathy with believers and far too much curiosity about religion for this. It is also inaccurate to describe her as consistently anti-religious, although she certainly voiced anti-religious sentiments at times. Equally, it would be disingenuous to suggest that Woolf had leanings towards Christianity: for all the fascination she shows towards its cultural expressions, her responses are always tempered with resistance and a sense of dissatisfaction with its answers on matters of key importance. (220)

In essence, I have tried to demonstrate what De Gay asserts: Woolf’s beliefs on Christianity were multifaceted and were primarily influenced by her personal experiences. Still, it is clear from Woolf’s letters, diaries, and novels that, while uncertain, she often held God in disdain. So, the portrayal of Mr. Ramsay as an ironic, metaphorical Christ-figure makes sense, as we know that Woolf often struggled with her father. Ultimately, I suggest Mr. Ramsay’s characterization as a Christ-figure—first negative, then positive—demonstrates Woolf’s view on the complexity of the human character, particularly within her father. And, though some scholars feel the novel’s ending “sound[s] a hollow, anticlimactic note,” I contend the closing

provides sincere, new insight into Mr. Ramsay and Leslie Stephen as fathers (Ludwigs 1). Marina Ludwigs, in particular, argues the novel ends “almost too perfect in the way . . . narrative strands come together and reinforce each other in their mutual culmination” (1). I believe Ludwigs is right if we only consider that the strands achieve resolution; when we heed the details, however, there are still imperfections within the resolutions. I believe these imperfections actually establish the conclusion of the novel, like the rest, as authentic.

Consider, for example, despite Mr. Ramsay’s miraculous and metaphorical transformation from the Old Testament God to the New Testament God, he still falls short as a father. Particularly, though he stops Cam from throwing the remnants of her sandwich into the sea, moments later, “he sprinkled the crumbs from his sandwich paper over [the water]” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 206). He is hypocritical: he breaks a rule he had just set with Cam. These imperfections within the characters and plot demonstrate the humanity and authenticity of *To the Lighthouse*: Mr. Ramsay *did* redeem his family, but even afterward, he still made mistakes.

This representation of humanity, in spite of Mr. Ramsay’s and Leslie Stephen’s link with deity, helps us appreciate their efforts. Though the beginning of the novel paints him as cruel and self-serving, Mr. Ramsay earns paternal redemption through his atonement for his family. Mr. Ramsay gains a final opportunity to heal his family, to praise James, to gently course-correct Cam; Leslie gained that opportunity in time.

Revealingly, Woolf frequently thought of Leslie in religious, deific terms. It seems this ironic portrayal of Mr. Ramsay—and thus, of Leslie Stephen—arose from a lens Woolf viewed him through: in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf records that Leslie was “Christian; but shed his Christianity—with such anguish, [a friend of Leslie’s] once hinted . . . that he thought of suicide” (108). Through her characterization of Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, then, Woolf ironically manipulates Leslie’s ambivalence toward Christianity—and thus shows her own uncertainty toward Christianity and her father. Woolf demonstrates this as she later recalls in “A Sketch of the Past”:

There was a Leslie Stephen who played his part normally, without any oddity or outburst . . . Still, I cannot conceive my father . . . hearing everything that was said, and making jokes . . . I remember my amazement, my envy, when the Booths said their father took them to dances. How astonished I

felt when Charles Booth said something humorous about 'shepherding my flock.' (114)

Simply, for Woolf, her father embodied everything she felt about God: he was sometimes engaged, but prone to rage, and often absent in her life. Woolf's "amazement, [her] envy" comes because neither her father nor the Good Shepherd seem to want to herd their sheep (John 10.11, 14). Mr. Ramsay's characterization demonstrates this nuance: he is curious about his children, but simultaneously belittles their dreams. Again, though, his characterization is not simple, nor is it persistently negative. We truly cannot discount the great transformation that takes place in Mr. Ramsay; to ignore the change in Mr. Ramsay's role as a Christ-figure and father is to ignore his and Leslie's paternal redemption (220).

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