Escaping Femininity: The Body and Androgynous Painting in Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse

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Introduction

When Adeline Virginia Stephen was born on January 25, 1882 in Kensington, no one knew the great works she would come to create. Today, many years later, Virginia Woolf is known all over the world for her outstanding literary works. Even though Woolf is since long gone, her works are still alive and topical. This essay will deal with one of Woolf’s most famous works, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which among other topics treats contemporary questions of gender.

The novel is set on a secluded island off the coast of Scotland in September a year before the beginning of the First World War, and ends on the same island ten years later. The first part of the novel describes an afternoon in which a British upper middle-class family, the Ramsay’s, is on vacation on the island with some friends. Mr. Ramsay is a scholar of philosophy and Mrs. Ramsay is at home taking care of their eight children and looking after their summer guests; the widowed botanist William Bankes, the poet Augustus Carmichael, the doctoral student Charles Tansley, Paul Rayley, Minta Doyle and the unmarried Lily Briscoe who spends her time painting. In this first part of the novel a trip to the lighthouse is planned and then cancelled, Lily works on a painting, and a dinner party is taking place.

The second part of the novel focuses on the cleaning women Mrs. Mc Nab and Mrs. Bast who restore Ramsay’s house in preparation for the return of the family. This section describes in a few pages what happens during the ten years that follow the afternoon in part one. The story ends in the third part where some of the characters return to the island and their morning is described. In this part the trip to the lighthouse finally takes place and Lily is able to finish her painting ten years after she started it.

In the beginning of the twentieth century there were major differences between being a woman and being a man. The norms of how men respectively women were supposed to act differed much. Susan Bordo, a feminist philosopher who specializes in modern culture and its relation to the body, retails the feminist activist and writer Betty Friedan’s account of how women were expected to behave: “The reigning ideology of femininity . . . was childlike, nonassertive, helpless without a man, ‘content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home’” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 17).
This ideology of femininity hinders women from achieving anything outside the home and makes Lily’s attempts at being an artist a rare case.

This essay will focus on Lily Briscoe and investigate how a female painter is affected by attempting a career in painting in a time where women were supposed to be housewives rather than artists. Lily is not considered to be able to become an artist for the sole reason that she is a woman and not a man. I will argue that Lily, as a result of this, has to escape her femininity before she is able to trust her ability and be capable of finishing her painting. This essay will focus on two ways in which Lily attempts to do this; by transcending her female body and by achieving an androgynous mind.

The first part of the essay describes the situation for a female painter in the beginning of the twentieth century and provides a background to the following discussion. The second part deals with questions concerning the body and discusses how the female body for women in Western culture is seen as being an obstacle rather than a resource and thereby creates a need for women to transcend their bodies. Bordo describes how women who consciously strive for a goal can be hindered by their bodies from achieving it. According to Bordo, the female body is culturally habituated to never being sufficient, to always having to change, which leads to a situation where women attempt to transcend their bodies to achieve more. However, I will argue that an absolute separation of body and mind is not possible and that Lily thus has to embrace the idea of working through the body rather than by transcending it, if she is going to succeed with her painting. In the third and final part of the essay I will end the discussion by arguing that Lily has to achieve an androgynous mind before she is able to become a more secure painter and finally be able to finish the painting she begins in the first part of the novel.
Part One: Background

Creative Man

In order to understand Lily’s situation as a female painter we have to have an idea of what the world around her looks like, and what truths there are about painting and about women in the beginning of the twentieth century. The common belief was that women and men were of different natures, and therefore were suited for different tasks. While men succeeded as scientist, writers, poets and painters, women stayed at home and conducted the household and took care of the children.

According to Griselda Pollock “[t]he justification for making women exclusively responsible for domestic work and childcare is assumed to be the nature of women” (Pollock 25). To divide tasks between the sexes in this manner might seem unfair today, considering that a situation is created in which women are stuck at home while men are able to develop and to create.

The idea that women are considered to be of a different nature than men results in a situation where chores historically performed by men is seen as not being intended for women which creates an inaccessibility for women to many chores. Our gender beliefs are socially constructed; when we grow up we learn how women respectively men are supposed to behave and what is expected from men and women. When men are expected to behave in one way, women are often expected to behave in the opposite way. Whereas men are expected to be brave women are expected to be afraid and helpless and so on. Concerning art, this leads to a situation in which men are recognized as good artists, while the opposite is expected of women. Pollock claims that “[c]reativity has been appropriated as an ideological component of masculinity while femininity has been constructed as man’s and, therefore, the artist’s negative” (Pollock 23). This suggests that as long as creativity and painting are associated with men they will not be associated with women, and therefore not as accessible for women as they are for men.

Art itself plays a role in social construction, thus giving men an opportunity to influence the norms of society with their works of art. By providing an image of what the world looks like, paintings give the observer an idea about what his or her world ought to look like. Pollock argues that art creates norms as well as displays them:
Not only do we have to grasp that art is a part of social production, we also have to realize that it is itself productive, that is, it actively produces meanings. Art is constitutive of ideology; it is not merely an illustration of it. It is one of the social practices through which particular views of the world, definitions and identities for us to live are constructed, reproduced and even refined. (Pollock 30)

This suggests that what is illustrated in paintings can come to function as norms of how one is supposed to live. Pollock gives an account of major differences in setting between paintings portraying men and paintings portraying women. Women are typically portrayed at home, in the house or in the garden, dealing with household work or spending time with the children. Men, on the other hand, can be portrayed in a number of different social and geographical settings and are freer to move around (Pollock 56-62). If women are only portrayed at home performing household work and taking care of children, the norms developing from these paintings will encourage women to stay home and not to move around to the same extent as men. One might assume that this difference in settings entails that women were not portrayed as artists. The norms created from this art will promote women as being painted rather than them performing the act of painting.

Obviously then, the conditions are not equal for male artists and female artists in the early twentieth century. Pollock describes how this inequality in opportunities affect women’s painting:

[T]here is a historical asymmetry- a difference, socially, economically, subjectively between being a woman and being a man . . . in the late nineteenth century. This difference – the product of social structuration of sexual difference and not any imaginary biological distinction- determined both what and how women painted. (Pollock 55)

The gender differences ever present in To the Lighthouse, and the effect that these have on the female painter, will be more closely examined in the following section of the essay.
"Women Can’t Paint, Women Can’t Write"

In *To the Lighthouse* Mr. Tansley states his opinion of what chores and occupations he finds appropriate for women by establishing that “[w]omen can’t paint, women can’t write” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 35). As we have seen, in the beginning of the twentieth century there was a widespread belief that women were not able to paint, so statements like these were probably frequently uttered among both women and men. One might assume that repeated statements like Mr. Tansley’s will affect Lily’s self-esteem and thus her ability to paint. Without support from the people around her, Lily is bound to feel insecure about her ability and her self-esteem is thus bound to be lowered. Lily expresses her feelings of insecurity and the extreme pressure of the outside world as a struggle against forces that attempt to steal her vision:

> [S]he often felt herself . . . struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: ‘But this is what I see: this is what I see,’ and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her. And it was then too, in that chill and windy way, as she began to paint, that there forced themselves upon her other things, her own inadequacy, her insignificance. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 14)

The “terrific odds” and the “thousand forces” Lily has to struggle against to “maintain her courage”, her self-esteem, is a society where people do not consider women as being able to paint seriously. Lily tries to hold on to her vision, her belief that she is able to paint, but still the forces compel her to feel as if she is inadequate and insignificant. This illustrates the negative effect that such ideologies that Mr. Tansley and his likes give voice to have on Lily’s self-esteem and her painting.

These gender ideologies have an effect on women’s self-esteem and therefore also affect women’s lives. In *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf describes how women’s place in the beginning of the twentieth century is at home with the children and how making a career as a woman is synonymous with struggle and a great deal of sacrifices. Woolf points out that in order to succeed as a writer one has to have money and “a room of one’s own”, which were often denied women.
Money earned by women belonged to their husbands, and even if women had rooms to sit in they were hardly their own in the sense that they could sit there for a longer period of time without being interrupted. Assuming that painting, similar to writing, requires money and a room of one’s own, there were not many women who had the opportunity to paint.

Lily, however, has greater possibilities than many women. Lily has a wealthy father and is an only child which gives her the possibility of devoting her life to painting. However, even with money and someplace to paint Lily has many obstacles to overcome before she is able to succeed with her painting. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf describes how women lack a tradition in writing to fall back on. “[T]hey had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help” (Woolf, *Room* 76). Woolf also claims that “since freedom and fullness of expression are of the essence of the art, such a lack of tradition, such a scarcity and inadequacy of tools, must have told enormously upon the writing of women” (Woolf, *Room* 77). Women did not share the same set of tools required for writing as men did and were in a situation where they had to write without these tools, which resulted in an erratic language and texts that were not as good as those written by male writers. Since neither painting nor writing were considered appropriate for women one might assume that female painters had to deal with the same problems as female writers concerning a lack of tradition and tools.

Lack of a female tradition for Lily to lean on in her painting creates insecurity and dissatisfaction with her own work. This lack of tradition is evident when Mr. Bankes describes to Lily all the pictures he has seen; paintings by Giotto, Rembrandt and Michael Angelo. Even though Lily has travelled to a few places there are many paintings she has not seen. Concerning this lack of access to a male tradition Lily reflects that “perhaps it was better not to see pictures: they only made one hopelessly discontented with one’s work” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 52). The fact that all the paintings Mr. Bankes has seen were created by male painters demonstrates the lack of tradition for female painters. One might assume that this lack of tradition and the struggle against the norms of society contributes to Lily’s insecurity and makes her unable to feel contented with her work. When Lily paints she fills the canvas with “nervous lines” and feels as if she is “hesitating on some windy
pinnacle and [is] exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 118-19). Lily’s insecurity as a painter becomes manifest in her “nervous lines” and her feeling of standing on a lofty peak with the fear of being thrust down from there by the “blasts of doubt”. One might assume that if Lily had been a male artist she would have had a greater tradition to fall back on, a broader ground to stand on where the “blasts of doubt” would not threat to thrust her down.

Thus, to repeatedly hear that “women can’t paint” is bound to have a negative effect on women’s ability to paint. Because they are not men, they will always have a voice in the back of their head telling them that “women can’t paint”. It is obvious that Lily occupies her mind with that thought when she paints: “Can’t paint, can’t write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously considering what her plan of attack would be” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 119). Lily’s murmur confirms that she reflects on women’s alleged inability to paint when she works with her painting, and the fact that Lily plans her painting “anxiously” indicates that she doubts her own capability to paint. This makes her doubt her decisions and fear that she will choose the wrong “plan of attack”. Woolf describes how there for women always have been “that assertion- you cannot do this, you are incapable of doing that- to protest against, to overcome” (Woolf, *Room* 56). Woolf also points out that “the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent . . . There must be no obstacles in it, no foreign matter unconsumed” (Woolf, *Room* 58). Mr. Tansley’s statement that “women can’t paint” represents an ideology in which women are seen as incapable of creativity. This ideology then becomes “obstacles” and “unconsumed matters”, which will make it impossible for Lily to “free the work” inside her. It seems like the “obstacles” and “unconsumed matters” depend on femininity, wherefore Lily has to find a way to escape this femininity to be able to “free the work” inside her. Since femininity is determined by the female body, transcendence of the body appears to be one way of doing this.
Part Two- The Body

“A Soul Reft of Body”

Before Lily begins the act of painting she goes through a process where she becomes unconscious of the world around her and of her own body. “Always (it was in her body, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body” (Woolf, Lighthouse, 119). Lily suspects that this shift is in her sex or in her female body which implies that this process, these “moments of nakedness”, might be something only occurring for female painters and not for male ones. The process Lily goes through is further described: “Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things…and her name and her personality and her appearance” (Woolf, Lighthouse 119). Lily loses consciousness of the world around her, of the “outer things”. As we have seen earlier, this world around Lily is a world which doubts her ability to paint and which questions the fact that a woman paints at all. As stated earlier, women have to overcome the assertion that they are not capable of creating art before they are able to paint. For Lily to become unconscious of the world around her, the world in which this assertion lies, might be a way for her to overcome it in order to be able to paint.

The female body is in Western society often seen as an obstacle rather than a resource, wherefore a need for transcendence of the body arises. The idea of transcendence depends on a notion of the body and the mind as separate entities. Ellen Matlok-Ziemann describes the seventeenth century philosopher Descartes’ theory about the body-mind split. Descartes believe that the mind, the ‘I’, is separated from the body and has closer to knowledge than the body. Descartes supports his claim about the ‘I’ being separated from the body by pointing out that the ‘I’ will be fully capable of thinking even if the body loses a limb (Matlok-Ziemann 27). Matlok-Ziemann describes the consequences of Descartes’ theory: “his insistence on the essence of the ‘I’ has contributed to an understanding of the ‘I’ as a mere thinking thing, a consciousness that loses contact with things, its body and the world” (Matlok-Ziemann 27). When Lily paints she “[loses]
consciousness of outer things” and feels like “a soul reft of body” in the same manner as the ‘I’ “loses contact with things, its body and the world”. The representation of Lily as “a soul reft of body” seems interrelated with Descartes’ ideas of a body-mind split.

We have seen that the shift Lily goes through presumably is something which only occurs for women. If this is the case, men must be able to paint without focusing on the ‘I’ and becoming unconscious of their bodies, without getting closer to knowledge. Matlok-Ziemann describes Susan Bordo’s ideas about how women are able to go beyond their femininity by transcending their bodies: “new concepts of the self and world. . . have led to a radical separation of mind and body, and to the notion that transcendence of the body and nature is synonymous with transcending ‘femininity’” (Matlok-Ziemann 27). This suggests that Lily has to transcend her body in order to transcend her femininity since, as Mr. Tansley says, “women can’t paint”. Men, on the other hand, do not have to transcend their male bodies since men are considered to be potentially excellent artists. This might be an explanation why the shift Lily is going through is something “in her nature or in her sex (my italics)”, that is, occurring only for female painters (Woolf, Lighthouse 119).

If it is possible for women to transcend their femininity by transcending their bodies, it is likely that the obstacles they try to overcome by doing this are perceived as being situated in the body. The question is why female bodies are believed to restrain women and prevent them from creating. If we look at the situation in the Western world today, we discover that the female body is seldom good enough. As a celebrity you have to starve yourself to be thin, perform plastic surgery to have a perfect body and perfect facial features, put on make-up to make your face look better and use expensive products to make sure your hair is always lustrous and colorful. Such striving for a perfect appearance does not concern celebrities only, but most women. You can always go one step further in order to modify your body into perfection. Women’s bodies are always lacking in this sense; you can always make another alteration to improve and come closer to perfect. Bordo refers to Foucault’s ideas about “docile bodies”, bodies that can be improved:

Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity . . . female bodies become what Foucault calls ‘docile bodies’- bodies
whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement . . . Through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, insufficiency, of never being good enough. (Bordo, Gender 14)

Bordo states that the ideals of femininity are always changing which means that should you be able to reach perfection this would only be temporary. Fashion will change and so will the ideals which suggest a situation in which there will always be something for women to improve. According to Bordo, bodies get used to, are “habituated to”, always having to change and never being good enough which creates a feeling in women that their bodies are lacking and unsatisfactory. To carry feelings of insufficiency and lack in your body will lower your self-esteem and most likely thwart your efforts of achieving. Gender ideals then constrain Lily’s body and causes Lily’s low self esteem. By feeling as a “soul reft of body” when she paints, Lily keeps from acknowledging the lack and insufficiency which she believes situates in her body.

Lily shows tendencies of wanting to challenge the feminine ideal which stipulates that women should devote their life to family and household work. She lives alone and paints which deviates from the feminine ideal. At one point she also expresses her wish to help one of the summer guests to find a lost brooch and thereby be an adventurer: “Lily wanted to protest violently and outrageously her desire to help him, envisaging how in the dawn on the beach she would be the one to pounce on the brooch half-hidden by some stone, and thus herself be included among the sailors and adventurers” (Woolf, Lighthouse 73–4). This suggests that Lily wants to exceed her socially constructed position by being “included among the sailors and adventurers” who in the beginning of the twentieth century certainly were men.

However, she does not always succeed to go against the feminine ideal and sometimes ends up conforming to it. At the dinner party Lily challenges the normative femininity by not being nice to her dinner neighbor Mr. Tansley. At this point, however, Mrs. Ramsay gives Lily a pleading look which tells Lily that “[u]nless you apply some balm to the anguish of this hour and say something nice to that young man there, life will run upon the rocks . . . My nerves are taut as fiddle strings.
Another touch and they will snap” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 66). Lily does not want to hurt Mrs. Ramsay’s feelings and be part of making her nerves “snap”, why she conforms to the feminine ideal and says something nice to Mr. Tansley. This proves that even if Lily is aware of the reigning ideal, and also aware of her own attempt to challenge it, it is not easy for her to actually break these rules. Bordo believes that the female body hinders women’s attempts to go against normative femininity:

> Our conscious politics, social commitments, striving for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies- not the craving, instinctual body imagined by Plato, Augustine and Freud, but the docile, regulated body practiced at and habituated to the rules of cultural life. (Bordo, *Gender* 13)

Even when women consciously strive for change instead of conforming to the norms they are not always succeeding because they are held back by their bodies. The reason why the bodies have such strong influence is because they are habituated to transformation and constant “improvement” as stated earlier. The bodies are habituated to conform to current norms in order to constantly improve and become closer to perfect. The norms, however, are constantly changing and therefore tough to follow, why “the . . . conviction of lack, insufficiency, of never being good enough” is rooted in the bodies (Bordo, *Gender* 14). This “conviction of lack and insufficiency” creates a constant strive for becoming sufficient; for becoming good enough. The only way to manage this is by conforming to the norms of society. One might assume that this is one of the reasons why Lily cannot stand the pressure of Mrs. Ramsay during the dinner and ends up conforming to the normative femininity by being nice to Mr. Tansley. It may also be a reason why Lily feels like a “soul reft of body” before painting. If she would still be in contact with her body it would probably make her conform to the norms- according to which women should not paint- even if Lily herself is consciously striving for being an artist.

However, one might question such an absolute division between the body and the mind, or between the body and the “I”. The possibility that the mind and the body should be absolutely separated in this way seems small. Randi Koppen disaffirms the possibility of a split between body and mind and claims that Woolf in her memoir characterizes herself as “a body whose organic
growth is directly linked to, in fact constitutive of, the growth of feeling and mind” (Koppen 380). Koppen continues by maintaining that “[w]hat defines both the memoir and the fiction . . . is the insistence of bodily experience which serves to ground the abstractions in the body rather than transform the body/life/world out of existence” (Koppen 380). The growth of the body is, according to Koppen, directly linked to the growth of the mind, which means that the mind is not able to grow without the body. Koppen refers to a state in which one is able to create through the body instead of by transcending the body. She suggests that the “bodily experiences” can help extracting the “vision”, the ability to paint, through the body instead of by a process where the artist feels like “a soul reft of body” or is “unconscious of outer things” (Woolf, Lighthouse 119). This view of body and mind supports the idea that the body cannot be absolutely separated from the mind.

In the third part of the novel Lily goes through the shift described earlier, where she becomes unconscious of the world around her and feels like “a soul reft of body”. Even though Lily attempts to become separated from her “docile body” and the assertions of the world around her that “women can’t paint”, she is still not able to achieve her vision. In a despondent state of mind Lily establishes that “[s]he had been wasting her morning. For whatever reason she could not achieve that razor edge of balance . . . which was necessary” (Woolf, Lighthouse 143). This suggests that Lily does not succeed with her painting in spite of her efforts to transcend her body. If we assume that an absolute split between body and mind is not possible we can also assume that this is the reason why Lily’s attempted disembodiment cannot help her succeed in her painting.

At one point in the novel Lily reflects over the impossibility of ignoring your body entirely: “no, she thought, one could not say nothing to nobody. . . For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? . . . It was one’s body feeling, not one’s mind” (Woolf, Lighthouse 133). Lily finds it impossible to express her feelings in words, since her feelings are situated in the body. Lily goes as far as stating that the feelings are not at all connected to the mind: “It was one’s body feeling, not one’s mind” (my italics). However, thus Lily creates a division where the body and the mind are absolute separate entities, since the feelings are not in her body and in her mind, but only
in her body. This envisioned separation of body and mind might be what makes it hard for Lily to find the “razor edge of balance” and complete her painting.

In the end Lily has to avoid this attempted separation of body and mind in her painting in order to succeed. The body is a crucial factor in making the act of painting possible; the body is the only medium through which a vision can be transformed onto the canvas as art. Koppen maintains that aesthetic vision depends to a great extent on the body:

The artist does not simply impose aesthetic vision on what she sees, thereby transforming natural form into art form. Aesthetic performance is a process of alterity grounded in and performed by/through the body and the physical world. In this dialectic, aesthetic vision is not the master which transforms or transmutes. It depends on and works through the body and the world in many ways. (Koppen 383)

Koppen points to the fact that the actual process of transforming ideas and visions to the canvas cannot be performed by the vision itself or by the mind; it has to be performed by the body. Koppen maintains that the aesthetic vision thus is not the “master” but that it has to work with and through the body. When Lily transcends her body she relies only on her aesthetic vision and not her body, thus placing the vision in the position of a master in no need of the body. In order to succeed with her painting Lily has to incorporate both her body and her mind in the process of painting.

In the third part of the novel Lily manages to do this after she has had an apparition where she sees the dead Mrs. Ramsay sitting in her chair.

Suddenly the window at which she was looking was whitened by some light stuff behind it. At last then somebody had come into the drawing-room; somebody was sitting in the chair . . . Mercifully, whoever it was stayed still inside; had settled by some stroke of luck so as to throw an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step . . . Mrs Ramsay . . . sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat. (Woolf, Lighthouse 149-50)
Mrs. Ramsay shows up at the exact spot where she was situated when Lily had her modeling for her picture; in the chair by the window. If Mrs. Ramsay had been a ghost she would not be able to "cast an odd shaped triangular" shadow, since in order for a person to have a shadow there has to be matter present to block the sunlight. Koppen supports this idea and maintains that Mrs. Ramsay is there in flesh; that she “materializes in corpora” (Koppen 385). There is, of course, the question whether Mrs. Ramsay can actually exist bodily. She is undeniably dead, wherefore there seems impossible for her to return as something else than a spirit. However, Lily sees Mrs. Ramsay cast a shadow in her apparition, which suggests that Lily sees Mrs. Ramsay as being there in flesh. In this case the important aspect for the analysis is Lily’s view of her apparition, thus in the following discussion Mrs. Ramsay will be interpreted as being there bodily. During this scene, Lily thinks of Mrs. Ramsay more or less constantly, so it is evident that Mrs. Ramsay exists both in body and in mind. When Lily picks up her brush and paints after her apparition of Mrs. Ramsay, she has her “vision” and completes her painting. One reason why Lily finally is able to finish the painting in this moment might be the dual existence of Mrs. Ramsay; the existence in body and the existence in mind. Mrs. Ramsay’s existence in flesh, coincidental with her existence in Lily’s mind, forces Lily to embrace the idea of incorporating both the body and the mind in the process of painting. When Lily tries to depict Mrs. Ramsay by using the image of her that Lily has in her mind she is not able to achieve a satisfactory result on the canvas. When Mrs. Ramsay is “modeling” both in flesh and in Lily’s mind, however, Lily is able to depict Mrs. Ramsay the way she wishes to. In order to finish her painting Lily has to move away from the absolute separation of body and mind and include them both in her painting of Mrs. Ramsay.

Instead of seeing the body as an obstacle, one can choose to view it as a source. Bordo describes how the American writer and journalist Joan Peter divides women into two groups, the “Transcenders”, and the “Red Bloomers”: “On the one side are the ‘Transcenders’ - for whom the female body, undermined by nature or history, can be recreated anew by feminism. On the other side are the ‘Red Bloomers’- for whom the female body is a source of pleasure, knowledge, and power, to be revalued rather than remade” (Bordo, Unbearable weight 37). Lily is obviously a
“Transcender”, believing that her body is undermined by nature or history, why she feels the need of transcending it. One might assume that an attitude towards the body that is more one of a “Red Bloomer”, where the body is seen to be a foundation for knowledge and power, will help Lily to trust her abilities and use her body as a resource rather than seeing it as an obstacle.
Part Three: Androgyny

Androgynous Art

We have by now confirmed that being a female artist in the beginning of the twentieth century is a constant struggle. As a way to manage this struggle, Lily attempts to transcend her femininity by surpassing her body. This suggests that in a time when the norms dictate that women do not paint, a woman has to move away from her femininity to be able to paint. I will argue that Lily, as another way to transcend her femininity, is striving for an androgynous mind. The definition of androgyny in Oxford English Dictionary is “union of sexes in one individual”. By moving away from femininity, Lily will be able to achieve this “union” of masculinity and femininity which will help her to finally finish her painting. Woolf describes her ideas about androgynous writing in *A Room of One’s Own* which I will again connect with painting and read as ideas about androgynous painting.

Woolf maintains that all humans have one female power and one male power in their minds. For men the male power outweighs the female power, while the opposite is true for women in whose minds the female power outweighs the male one (Woolf, *Room* 97).

Woolf argues that this situation is not a natural one, neither for men nor for women. In order to achieve a natural state of mind the male power and the female one must work together:

> The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two [powers] live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. (Woolf, *Room* 97)

Woolf maintains that the natural and “comfortable” state of mind is one where the male power is collaborating with the female power and where one power does not dominate over the other. In Woolf’s view, people shut out one part of the brain instead of integrating the two, causing an unnatural state where the male part of the brain is hindered from cooperating with the woman part of the brain. In order to be able to write, or paint, one must be in a natural state of mind; there must be communication between the two powers in one’s mind, argues Woolf. In the novel there are instances of Lily moving away from femininity, but also from masculinity, which will make her end
up somewhere in between masculinity and femininity; somewhere where, according to Wolf, the female power is free to cooperate with the male power.

It is clear that Lily has moved away from femininity when we observe her feelings to the items that surround her. Lily feels distanced from objects and places with female connotations. “Sitting alone…among the clean cups at the long table . . . [t]he house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 109). The house has strong female connotations as the place where most women spend a great part of their lives, taking care of husband, children and grimy dishes. It is also where Mrs. Ramsay, as every good wife in the beginning of the twentieth century, holds her dinner parties, takes care of her children, mends stockings and plans for marriages she is hoping for. As discussed earlier, the house and the garden are also the settings in which women are portrayed while men are freer to move around and are being portrayed in many different settings. This makes “the house, the place, the morning” strongly connected to femininity and thus Lily is feeling distanced from them, feeling like they are “strangers to her”.

One might assume that Lily, who is feeling distanced from objects and places with female connotations, is also feeling distanced from people with strong female connotations, such as Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay is a woman who lives by the feminine ideal and thus her association to femininity is strong. In order to believe in her own ability to paint and finish her painting, Lily has to create a distance between herself and Mrs. Ramsay by triumphing over Mrs. Ramsay, showing that her efforts of creating marriages have failed, and thereby in a way also triumph over Mrs. Ramsay’s femininity. Lily imagines Mrs. Ramsay standing “at the end of the corridor of years” and urging people to marry:

> And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes. They’re happy like that; I’m happy like this. Life has changed completely. At that all her being, even her beauty, became for a moment, dusty and out of date. For a moment Lily, standing there, with the sun hot on her back, summing up the Rayleys [and their marriage that had run out of love], triumphed over Mrs. Ramsay, who would never know how Paul went to coffee-houses and
had a mistress. . . how she stood here painting, had never married (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 130).

The fact that Lily is happy as unmarried and content with her artistry, and that the Rayley’s are happy in their loveless marriage, makes Lily feel as if she has triumphed over Mrs. Ramsay, managing to show that her way of life is just as good as (or better than) the way of life Mrs. Ramsay is constantly promoting. Ann Ronchetti maintains that this triumph makes it possible for Lily to believe in herself and trust her abilities: “Mrs. Ramsay has been demythologized; . . . Paul Rayley’s marriage to Minta Doyle has failed. Lily’s assertion of her identity now takes center stage, filling the space formerly defined by her feelings of emptiness and personal inadequacy (Ronchetti 78). This shows how Lily, by taking another step away from femininity, replaces insecurity of her own ability with self-confidence.

As stated above, men in the beginning of the twentieth century do not have the same obstacles to overcome as women when it comes to painting. There are no prejudgments on men’s ability to paint and men’s art is consistently assessed as better than women’s art (Pollock 26). With this and Lily’s movement away from femininity in mind, it would be natural to assume that the state Lily is moving towards when she moves away from femininity is masculinity. However, I believe that Lily is not moving towards masculinity but towards androgyny, and that she thus creates a distance towards masculinity in the same way as she creates a distance to femininity.

When Lily describes her painting to Mr. Bankes they discuss that the painting can be interpreted in different ways. In this scene it is obvious that Lily does not aim for the masculine way of interpretation but a different one. Mrs. Ramsay is not portrayed in the traditional way where the painter attempts likeness. Instead Mrs. Ramsay is represented by a purple shadow, which confuses Mr. Bankes who expects to see a picture of Mrs. Ramsay in the traditional figurative sense. When Lily tells him that the triangular shadow is a representation of Mrs. Ramsay and her child, but a representation “with no attempt at likeness”, Mr. Bankes is confused and asks Lily “for what reason [she had] introduced them then” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 38). To help Mr. Bankes understand Lily tries to explain: “But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses,
too, in which one might reverence them” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 38). Lily shows an awareness of the fact that there are different senses, and not just Mr. Bankes’ sense. Instead of portraying Mrs. Ramsay in the traditional masculine sense she makes use of another sense. We have already stated that women do not have a tradition of feminine painting behind them since artists in the past had almost exclusively been men; that there is no feminine way of painting in the same way as there is a masculine one. This leads us to the conclusion that it is not possible for Lily to portray Mrs. Ramsay in the feminine sense, since there is no such thing. The fact that Lily does not paint in the masculine sense, and not in the feminine one either, supports the idea that Lily is aiming for an androgynous way of painting rather than a feminine or masculine one, provided that the other “senses” Lily is talking about is not only a description of the shift towards modernism which was initiated during the end of the nineteenth century.

By her movement towards androgyny Lily deviates from other women and thereby becomes less desirable for men. Most men seem to be apprehensive of Lily and keep themselves distanced from her. Mrs. Ramsay explains men’s disinterest of Lily by pointing to the fact that there is something special with Lily: “There was in Lily a thread of something; something of her own which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 75). This “thing of her own” might be Lily’s striving for an androgynous mind. The fact that women’s art have always been valued less than men’s means that the masculine way of painting has never had any competition. In contrast to women’s art which was less valued, pieces created in the androgynous way of painting that Lily is striving for might pose a threat to masculine art that has previously never been challenged. This potential threat to men that Lily is posing would explain why Mrs. Ramsay is fond of Lily but thinks that no man would ever like her.

In the novel there are several instances of imagery which supports the idea that Lily is moving towards an androgynous way of painting. During the dinner Lily occupies her mind with her painting and figures out how she will continue her work. Lily decides that what needs to be altered in the picture is that a tree has to be moved further to the middle of the painting. In order to not lose this thought Lily moves the salt cellar in an interesting way: “She took up the salt cellar and put it
down again on a flower in the pattern in the table-cloth, so as to remind herself to move the tree” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 61). John R. Maze claims that the salt cellar is a phallic symbol, based on the shape of the salt cellar and “its function of pouring out a white stream” (Maze 89). Flowers are traditionally seen as symbolizing the vagina (Maze 89), which makes the act of putting the salt cellar on a flower an act of placing the symbols of the two sexes in a common place. This can be interpreted as Lily realizing that what she needs to do in order to finish her painting is to achieve an androgynous way of thinking. She has to find an androgynous sphere, a place where her female power is able to cooperate with her male power. She reminds herself of this by putting the salt cellar, symbolizing the male power, on to a flower, symbolizing the female power, and thereby creating a spot on the tablecloth where the two symbols are put together and where they are able to cooperate.

Another instance of imagery supporting the idea that Lily is trying to achieve an androgynous mind is when Lily tries to figure out a way to connect two masses in the picture: “It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 39). Maze points to the fact that the mass on the right consists of trees which are “always a potential image of male sexuality” (Maze 97) while the mass on the left side consists of the house. As earlier mentioned the house has strong female connotations, which means that the effort to connect the mass on the right with that on the left is an effort to connect the masculine and the feminine. In other words, Lily is striving for a connection between the male and the female power; she is striving for an androgynous mind.

If we observe where Lily is situated when she paints we see that she puts up her easel on the lawn, between the lighthouse and the house. While the house is strongly linked to femininity, the lighthouse on the other hand is linked to masculinity. The lighthouse, I will argue, is a place for men, and women in the novel seem to have to ask men in order to go there. In the beginning of the novel Mr. Ramsay decides that there will be “[n]o going to the Lighthouse” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 11) even though Mrs. Ramsay wishes to go, and at the dinner Lily asks Mr. Tansley if he can take her there (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 62) and he tells her that she cannot go. In addition, Maze maintains that
the lighthouse because of its shape is a symbol for male genitals (Maze 89). Based on this evidence, we can state that the lighthouse has male connotations while the house has female connotations. Lily chooses to stand in between these places when she paints; she chooses to stand between masculinity and femininity, which implies that Lily strives for androgyny. Emery advocates that “[Lily’s] position when she paints in the garden, between the feminized house and the masculinized lighthouse, suggests an androgynous space” (Emery 229). An androgynous space is needed in order for Lily to be able to succeed with her androgynous painting, and on the lawn between the lighthouse and the house she has found one.

In the first part of the novel there is a moment when Lily feels as if she is drawn towards the lighthouse, but at the same time feels demanded to stay where she is.

With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke . . . Here she was again, she thought, stepping back to look at it, drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people into this presence of this formidable ancient enemy of hers- this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her, emerged stark at the back of appearances and commanded her attention. She was half unwilling, half reluctant. Why always be drawn out and haled away?

(Woolf, Lighthouse 118)

In the last part of the novel Lily follows Mr. Ramsay’s journey to the lighthouse from a distance and we find Lily observing the boat several times. In order to see the boat Lily would have to face the sea and thus the lighthouse when she paints, why we can assume that when Lily is “urged forward” she is urged towards the lighthouse. The fact that the lighthouse has strong links to masculinity suggests that Lily is, when urged towards the lighthouse, in fact urged towards masculinity. Lily’s strive for an androgynous mind would explain why Lily “must hold herself back” from the masculinity of the lighthouse in order to stay in an androgynous sphere.
The androgynous place where Lily is situated is described as “this other thing, this truth, this reality” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 118). This suggests that with an androgynous mind Lily can finally see the truth. However, despite the fact that Lily can see reality and truth in her androgynous state of mind she is “half unwilling, half reluctant” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 118). Returning to Bordo and her ideas about docile bodies we find an explanation to why Lily, when she finally attains an androgynous state of mind, is feeling unwilling and reluctant. As mentioned, Bordo states that “[o]ur conscious politics, social commitments, striving for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our . . . docile, regulated bod[ies] practiced at and habituated to the rules of cultural life” (Bordo, *Gender* 13). Thus, even though Lily is drawn out of community her body is still habituated to the rules of cultural life”. Therefore her “conscious striving for change,” her striving for an androgynous mind, is hindered by her body and creates feelings of unwillingness and reluctance when she finally finds her androgynous space.

Lily’s mind at last overcomes her body, which attempts to undermine her mind, when Mr. Ramsay reaches the lighthouse in the final section of the book. However, we see that the process of overcoming the docile body is tough; it leaves Lily “completely tired out”: “He [Mr. Ramsay] must have reached it,” said Lily Briscoe aloud, feeling suddenly completely tired out. For the Lighthouse had become almost invisible, had melted away into a blue haze, and the effort of looking at it . . . had stretched her body and mind to the utmost” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 154). It is evident that it is the action of looking at the lighthouse which puts Lily in this exhausted state. The lighthouse has “melted away into a blue haze” and has become “almost invisible”. The haze consists of water, which, according to Maze, is an eminent symbol of femininity (Maze 89). As mentioned, the lighthouse is a symbol of masculinity. The way the symbols of femininity and masculinity are intervened seems to be representative of androgyny. The fact that the lighthouse is not distinguishable from the haze can be interpreted as there being no masculinity or femininity distinguishable in Lily’s androgynous mind, but that these two have melted together. The effort of looking at the lighthouse had “stretched [Lily’s] body and mind to the utmost”. The word stretch suggests that a tug-of-war has taken place between the body and the mind. Returning to Bordo
again, we remember that when we are consciously striving for something we can be hindered by our bodies from achieving our goal (Bordo, *Gender* 13). This would explain the tug-of-war between the body and the mind where the body has to be defeated before Lily can achieve an androgynous mind. When she finally does she has become “completely tired out” from the struggle of her mind and her body.

When Lily finally has achieved an androgynous mind she is able to finish her painting after ten years of struggle. After looking at the lighthouse surrounded by blue haze, Lily finishes the painting the next time she draws a line on the canvas. Before this moment she looks at the canvas and imagines what destiny that will await her painting when it is finished:

> There it was- her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps: they were empty; she looked at her canvas: it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 154)

Lily observes the painting and ponders over “its attempt at something”. This attempt can be interpreted as Lily’s effort to achieve an androgynous mind. Lily does not care if her painting will be destroyed or “hung in the attics”, which implies that the main reason with the painting has been fulfilled: Lily has achieved her androgynous mind. When Lily lifts her brush and draws her final line, “there, in the center” she connects the mass on the right with the mass on the left. As earlier stated the mass on the right, the trees, is symbolizing masculinity, while the mass on the left, the house, is symbolizing femininity. By drawing the final line Lily finds a way to connect femininity with masculinity. This can be interpreted as Lily building a bridge between the male and the female power in her mind. After drawing this line Lily lays down her brush in “extreme fatigue” which again implies how demanding the act of achieving an androgynous mind is for a woman in the beginning of the twentieth century.
When Lily through the achievement of an androgynous mind finally finishes her painting we see a beginning of what might be a new image of women where they are not limited to being housewives and mothers. However, one might question whether this is actually a step forward or a step back. Lily finishes the painting through her androgynous mind and not through her femininity which leaves us at a point where women are still not able to paint as women but only through achieving an androgynous mind, while men are still able to succeed as men, without the process of androgyny. Before women are able to paint, write, do research or whatever they wish to do as themselves; as women, there will be no equal society. Toril Moi is critical of Woolf’s ideas about androgynous writing because of the fact that women are said to be able to succeed only through androgyny, and not as feminine women:

In my view, if a woman’s vision of the world is strongly marked by her gender, that is as potentially interesting as the absence of a gendered view. The whole point, after all, is to avoid laying down requirements for what a woman’s writing must be like. Every writer will have to find her own voice, and her own vision. Inevitably, a woman writer writes as a woman, but as the (highly specific and idiosyncratic) woman she is. (Moi 268)

Moi points to the fact that women should be able to write (or paint) as they are; as women, and that Woolf through her ideas of androgyny only creates more requirements for how women are supposed to write (or paint) instead of creating a freedom to create as the women they are. As Moi argues, women will inevitably write as women, and thus have to find their own voice as women and as themselves.

The fact that Lily succeeds as a painter through androgyny leaves us close to where we started, in a time where women are not able to succeed with painting as women; but only as women with androgynous minds. However, the fact that Lily manages to finish her painting, even though it is under the requirement of an androgynous mind, is a step away from the narrow role which women held in the twentieth century. Through the characterization of Lily, To the Lighthouse
provides a representation of women as able to create and accomplish outside the home, thus
demolishing the image of women as limited to being only housewives and mothers.
Conclusion
Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* is set in the beginning of the twentieth century, in a time when women were considered to be of a different nature than men. It was in women’s nature to conduct the household and care for their family, while men’s nature allowed them to leave home and succeed as scientists, poets, authors and so on. Women were, as a cause of this, not considered to be able to paint, write, perform science or devote their time to any of the chores in the alleged male domain. This situation makes Lily’s efforts to paint a constant struggle. Lily’s self-esteem is negatively affected by the constant reminder that she is a female trespasser in a male tradition of painting. Since artists generally are men, she has no tradition of female painters to fall back on, wherefore she becomes an insecure painter and feels discontented with her work. Thus, Woolf’s representation of the aspiring female artist displays the struggles a woman in the beginning of the twentieth century has to go through if she wishes to exceed her socially constructed position. This struggle concerns women only and thus depends on femininity, whereby a situation is created where women try to escape their femininity to go beyond their position as housewives and mothers. In the novel Lily attempts to break away from her femininity by transcending her female body and achieving an androgynous mind.

Before Lily paints she goes through a shift where she feels like a “soul reft of body” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 119) which indicates that Lily has a wish to transcend her body. Bordo describes how “docile bodies” have become habituated to a constant strive for living by an unattainable feminine ideal, and how this strive memorizes on the body a feeling of lack and insufficiency. In Bordo’s opinion, the docile body is able to hinder women from achieving what they are consciously striving for. Such ideas seem relevant to women who wish to exceed their role as housewives and mothers, since they by transcendence of the body might be able to avoid being hindered by it in their quest. However, one might question whether an absolute division between the body and the mind, where the body is completely transcended, is helpful or even possible. Koppen suggests a state in which one creates through the body rather than by transcending it. Importantly, Lily in the end manages to
finish the picture after being able to incorporate both her body and her mind in the act of painting, thereby creating *through* her body and not by transcending it.

There are more reasons why Lily is able to finally finish her painting. Woolf describes androgyny as a “normal and comfortable state of being” (Woolf, *Room*, 97) in which the female power and the male power in the brain are able to cooperate. The thesis of this essay is that Lily is able to finish her painting when she achieves an androgynous state of mind. Lily begins her striving for an androgynous mind by moving away from femininity. Lily challenges social norms by living alone, painting and refusing marriage and distancing herself from objects and people with female connotations. The state of mind Lily is moving towards is not masculinity but androgyny. There are several instances of imagery in the novel which support this. When Lily finally finishes her painting by “[drawing] a line there, in the centre” it is immediately after looking at how the lighthouse, representative of masculinity, has become undistinguishable from the blue haze surrounding it, representative of femininity. In this study, this unification of masculinity and femininity is interpreted as Lily finally having achieved an androgynous mind. Only then can Lily succeed as a painter, which amounts to the fact that women in Woolf’s twentieth century fiction are still not able to paint simply *as women*, but only through androgyny. However, the novel manages to provide a picture of women as capable of creating and achieving what they are striving for. As Pollock argues, art creates norms as well as displays them. Assuming that this is true also for literary works, *To the Lighthouse*, when it was published, introduced an image of a competent woman in a world where competence was ascribed men. The representation of Lily, a woman who is able to paint and achieve her goals, will then amount to new norms in which women are not limited to being housewives and mothers but are, to the same extent as men, free to be whoever they want to be. Thus, with *To the Lighthouse* Woolf manages to write women out of their limited position and into a world of possibilities.
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