

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**UNCONSCIOUS CONFLICT OF MRS. RAMSAY: A FREUDIAN
PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

*The present study delves deep into the intricate layers of Mrs. Ramsay's character in *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf written in 1927. The study uses Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis as a lens to highlight the psychological journey of Mrs. Ramsay. The study with the help of in-depth analysis encompasses the realm of unconscious and scrutinizes the manifestation of unconscious conflict of Mrs. Ramsay through the character of Lily Briscoe. The study by peeling back the layers of unconscious conflict navigates through the corridors of Mrs. Ramsay's mind and offers a profound understanding of her psyche, or inner world. By minutely analysing her neurotic, moral and realistic anxieties, the study bridges the gap between her inner and external actions. The data for the current study originates solely from *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf with reading and close reading as primary tools. The study through qualitative method of approach embarks upon a detailed quest to reveal the unconscious conflict and timelessness of human mind through the characters of Mrs. Ramsay as conscious world and Lily Briscoe as the unconscious world of Mrs. Ramsay.*

Keywords: *unconscious conflict, repression, anxiety, conscious, intricacies, interplay, enigmatic.*

Introduction

The discussion about human psyche, or the connection between literature and psychology, has always been of great fascination to all thinkers (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023, 2020). Intricate emotions, hidden desires and behavioural mysteries have always made living and fictional characters enigmatic alike (Akram & Oteir, 2025). It is these intricate and enigmatic characteristics of disturbing personality traits which demand closer examination as to uncover hidden inner motives which shape the living and fictional characters alike (Abdelrady et al., 2025, 2026). The intersection of literature and psychology offers a rich perspective to uncover the interplay of conscious and unconscious domains in characters throughout the narrative (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2024; Ramzan & Khan, 2024a, 2024b; Nawaz et al., 2021, 2020). Wellek and Warren (1956) in their joint venture titled as *Theory on Literature* on intersection of psychology and literature are of the opinion that we gain deeper insights into the human experiences portrayed across literature through analyzing intricacies of literary characters. And a subtle foundation is set for exploring the role of psychology in depicting the various layers of meaning in literature (p.23). *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by Virginia Woolf is one such example of harbouring hidden inner motives which shape the living and fictional characters alike. This exploration of psychological intricacies is depicted particularly in the portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. *To the Lighthouse* exemplifies Mrs. Ramsay as an external or conscious world as lived by and the character of Lily Briscoe in the same work as the unconscious world of Mrs. Ramsey as desired or yearned by her which she misses in her married conscious life. So, the character of Mrs. Ramsay grapples with her moral imperatives as defined by traditional gender roles and the hidden desire to live a life different from her defined traditional gender roles. This tug of war leaves her exhausted and drained completely. And it is this gap between her external manifestations and inner motives that make her character appropriate for Freudian Psychoanalysis. Guided by Freudian concept of repression, the study reveals the unconscious conflict as raged inside Mrs. Ramsay and depicted through the character of Lily Briscoe. The current analysis sheds light on the mysteries of human mind and gives insights into what actual driving forces are responsible behind her too sublime behaviour.

Freudian Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic criticism has been considered as an effective tool of analyzing human behaviours and their reflections in human productions. As knowledge it has revolutionized the world since its inception in 1886. The founder of Psychoanalysis is Sigmund Freud, he was an Austrian psychiatrist. In his book *An Outline of*

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Psychoanalysis (1949) Freud maintains that it is a useful way of understanding human behaviour. The discovery of Freud in 1896 is that the human behaviour could be studied and treatments, not prayers or incantations, could be devised to investigate human thought, actions and interactions. Furthermore, Freud gave the concept of the existence of the unconscious. It is the existence of the unconscious according to Freud that people are motivated most of the time. The unconscious part of mind is a repository for wounds, fears, repressed memories, instinctive drives, conflicting urges and disturbing thoughts. The things which are thrown away from conscious awareness to the unconsciousness always possess the power to show themselves back. It is this power of repressed playing out at any time is what the current analysis of Mrs. Ramsay is based upon. The study discovers how the repressed shows itself back through the character of Lily Briscoe. This exploration of the current study through its analysis will surely contribute valuable suggestions to the already existing body of knowledge.

Unconscious

It is the storehouse of painful experiences, guilty desires, unrequited love, unresolved conflicts, conflicted feelings, wounds; desires, fears, and needs of which we want to remain unaware of.

Unconscious Conflict

The awareness of this material thrown in the store house may result at any time in painful feelings of being overwhelmed thus making life a terror, because it is not a passive reservoir but a dynamic entity having the power to play out at any time. Sigmund Freud (1955) defines this unconscious conflict as “when concealed becomes visible” or transforms itself into consciousness. Lois Tyson (2006) makes it clearer when she notes that unconscious harbours concealed fears, desires, conflicts and urges of which we remain unaware and this content ascertains human behaviour as a propelling force at external level known as consciousness.

Repression

This existence of unconscious originates in repressions. Lois Tyson (2006) defines it as the expunging from consciousness of all painful experiences, unhappy psychological events and traumas giving birth to unconscious. Sigmund Freud (1955) defines it as ideas sent by suppression from conscious level to unconscious level of mind. According to Barry (2017) it is an effort to fill the position of social being, where we suppress desires as to sustain conformity by resorting to artificial behaviour. Regarding the position of repression Muhammad Habib (2008) even goes to extent of saying that history of civilization is the history of repression.

Literature Review

Notably, much has been written on this novel *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. The most famous interpretations on this work presented by Nawal Al Sheikh (2024) are feminist and structural studies where patriarchal constraints are main areas of critical analysis. Philosophical and symbolism are next most discussed areas in the same novel where the themes of stability, meaning of life and subjective nature of reality are dealt with in great depth by Anya Graubard (2019). Sonia Salam and et al. (2022) in their research article A Psychoanalytical reading of Mrs' Ramsay in 'To the Lighthouse' in relation to Virginia Woolf's Personal Life explore the theme of relationship between inner selves and the external outlook on life, and note that Freudian psychoanalysis through literature focuses on what is latent through what is manifest as to respond to what makes the character do this or that. Artistic, aesthetic, and visual art through colour narrative imagery are thirds most highlighted areas of discussion through critical analysis of Suzanne Bellamy in 2014. The current study focuses the psychological experiences of Mrs. Ramsay where the unconscious mind is observed in affecting conscious behaviour and helps in understanding why people do what they do. As Tyson (2006) has noted in her book *The Critical Theory Today* that most people behave in a certain way due to past or repressed experiences that subconsciously govern their minds and lead them to do specific things.

Methods

The qualitative method of research coupled with Freudian Psychoanalysis examines the inner world of Mrs. Ramsay in the novel *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf written in 1927. The study takes the help of previous studies' findings, Freudian theoretical framework and textual analysis to understand the unconscious conflict of Mrs. Ramsay as to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lead characters' enigmatic approach to life and offer most appropriate recommendations in the light of analysis of the data available in narrative. The current study will contribute reasonably to the existing body of literature on the topic of unconscious conflict as depicted in fictional characters and their efforts on managing such pathological crisis.

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Discussion and Findings

Q: 1 How does the character of Lily Briscoe manifest the unconscious conflict of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*?

To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf is divided into three sections named respectively as The Window; Time Passes and The Lighthouse. Each section carries a different development of characters with respect to their psychological up gradation or regression. Amongst them the character of Mrs. Ramsay stands as central to the theme of novel. Virginia Woolf has depicted her as character that in spite of her inner crisis does her best to manage her duties in every aspect and keeps all people around weaved together through her presence. She considers herself under obligation as per societal norms to please everyone and cater to the needs of husband, children and guests without fail. Such behaviour is clearly visible in following lines from text of *To the Lighthouse*.

*Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection;
for reasons she could not explain, for their chivalry and valor,
for the they had negotiated treaties, ruled India, controlled finances;
finally for an attitude towards herself which no women could fail to feel or to find agreeable
and woe betide the girl.....who did not feel the worth of it, and all that it implied, to the marrow of her bones.*
(Woolf 15)

This encounter with the character of Mrs. Ramsay reveals her characteristics of being too conceding to others. It is clear that she has under the pressure of traditional role models of genders has succumbed to the role of woman where she without any fuss should accept that men are handling great responsibilities of running states, striking peace deals, managing financial crisis and sacrificing their lives in the matters of state sovereignty. This great role of men she takes as an entitlement for women to substitute by engaging themselves at home and doing all chores without any fail. She believes that a woman should take care of her husband and children selflessly. And being nonconformist in this regard will yield social disapproval and dissatisfaction. The current study takes this submissive appearance of Mrs. Ramsay as a repressed life style where she suppresses her actual desires of achieving self-hood out of fear of being socially disapproved and degraded. As Freud (1955) says that repression is product of unconsciousness and most of the people are not expert in concealing it behind consciousness for so long. It is like a time bomb the more it takes time, the harder it blasts. This view of Freud about repression as being product of unconscious is crystal clear in following lines

*When she looked in the glass and saw her hair grey, her cheek sunk, at fifty,
She thought, possibly she might have managed things better- her husband; money; his books.
But for her own part she would never for a single second regrets her decision, evade difficulties or slur over duties. She was now formidable to behold, and it was only in silence, looking up from their plates, after she had spoken so severely about Charles Tansley, that her daughters- Prue, Nancy and Rose- could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers;* (Woolf 16)

Mrs. Ramsay while looking in the mirror in fact conceals her true feelings about what she has done to herself through providing selfless services to others. She by noticing growing signs of wear and tear on her face and over all personality hides behind the regret that if she had managed things well. This regret in fact is not related to her husband, money and books as she shows apparently but the actual hidden regret is that she didn't take care of herself. Her grey hair and growing age effect on her face remind her of no self care in the process of family priorities, therefore she deliberately hides behind the desire of what if the things were managed in well proportions. Further, this unconscious restlessness with her apparent selfless family life gets reflected when her daughters stand dissatisfied with their mother's traditional life style and prefer to have a life different from their mother. This resistance on the part of her daughters in fact serves as road to the unconscious war of their mother where she weeps silently over her helplessness in detaching herself from role of traditional housewife where self sacrifice and conceding behaviour is considered a key to success.

Not only this but the study notices that constant self sacrifice has made her vulnerable to external assurances for her services to family. Mrs. Ramsay's constant conceding behaviour demands validation and admiration on daily basis. This behaviour Freud (1949) labels as result of repression which as being product of unconscious is crystal clear in following lines where Mrs. Ramsay's constant conceding behaviour demands validation and admiration on daily basis.

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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for her self-satisfaction was it that she wished so instinctively to help, to give that people might say of her, "O Mrs. Ramsay.... Dear Mrs. Ramsay, of course! And need her and send for her and admire her?" (Woolf 23)

Lois Tyson (2006) points out in her work *Critical Theory Today* that literary critics take text as dreams which mean the apparent text represses its real content behind obvious one. This is what the study discovers in the above lines where though on surface Mrs. Ramsay takes her duties and obligations as the integral part of her traditional gender role where selfless giving is considered as the natural reward of her role; whereas deep inside she desires the constant approval and admiration from every one she does the service to. And denial of such admiration results in despair in her which she shares through her stream of consciousness while sitting in front of window and talking silently about her dream of selfhood and subjectivity. Not only has this but she also ruminated on the pettiness of human relations. This silent resistance on the part of Mrs. Ramsay is more fortified in following lines

it was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life. (Woolf 63)

The study notes in above lines that Mrs. Ramsay is viewed by the rest of the characters as a source of constant sympathy available without any groan in times of darker moods especially in the context of her husband Mr. Ramsay. This constant job of reassurance and validation results in brutal emotional depletion. She in treating the insecurities of others in family causes a lot of damage to her internal stability and the desire of achieving selfhood. The study confirms through the in-depth analysis of the lines that the character of Mrs. Ramsay has two lives the one which she has chosen consciously for herself spelling conformity to societal norms and the second one where at unconscious level of mind she desires a life of subjectivity as represented by the character of Lily Briscoe. So, the character of Mrs. Ramsay is her consciousness and the character of Lily Briscoe stands for her unconscious desires and motives as repressed from the outer world. According to Louis Tyson (2006) Freudian psychoanalytic critics see the literary work as having a conscious and an unconscious meaning where characters in works like people living in societies mechanically assume certain roles or behaviors as to create a different reality which does not confirm in any way to "latent content". This "latent content" and to comprehend the unawareness on the part of real persons and fictional characters is very much clear from following lines about the character of Lily Briscoe

Such she often felt herself-struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: " But this what is what I see; this 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. (Woolf 34)

Lily Briscoe as being the representation of unconscious conflict of Mrs. Ramsay clearly indicates in above lines taken from the Window phase of novel the inner voice for selfhood and subjectivity of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily Briscoe gives importance to her existence and self identity over everything else and rejects the idea of how other people make opinion of her. She considers this concern of what others or society would say as a threat and main reason of insecurity which most of the time leads women like Mrs. Ramsay to self doubt and paralysis. Lily Briscoe is unconscious of Mrs. Ramsay made conscious by Virginia Woolf.

She addressed old Mr. Carmichael again. What was it then? What did it mean? Could things thrust their hands up and grip one; could the blade cut; the first grasp? Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air? Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life?-startling, unexpected, unknown? (Woolf 277)

In these lines the war inside Mrs. Ramsay gets revealed as Lily Briscoe bursts into so many questions in front of Mr. Carmichael who as a poet and keeps reflecting as a mirror on other characters' perceptions. She seems very resilient in these above lines because she believes that life is unexpected, very surprising and sometimes unknown. Even she goes to the extent of saying that there is no guide, shelter or any miracle whatsoever. The pain, the regret, unrequited desires they all keep gnawing inside you. Mrs. Ramsay lived this unknown, unexpected and startling life without any groan at surface but deep inside she kept burning and this burning consumed and exhausted her so much that even when she looks at herself in the mirror while noticing her grey hair, sunken eyes and fading beauty comments in such a startling way which not only surprises the

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study but also the readers: *She thought, possibly she might have managed things better- her husband; money; his books.*

Conclusion

The application of Freudian Psychoanalysis to Mrs. Ramsey's character in *To The Lighthouse* reveals the intricate interplay between her concealed self and manifest self. Her character as a matter of fact embodies the conflict raging inside her where she straddles at the threshold between the role of traditional role model of woman and an emerging desire of an independent woman in the character of Lily Briscoe. On one hand she proudly confirms to the societal norms as the perfect example of wife, mother, and host, but at the same time deep inside she desires the respect, freedom, love and independence in most of the matters as encompassed by the character of Lily Briscoe. Her stream of consciousness serves as a window where the character of Mrs. Ramsay ventilates her deep seated conflicts governed by Freudian dynamics. Virginia Woolf by portraying the two different characters of ideal housewife in Mrs. Ramsay and the independent woman in the character of Lily Briscoe the painter, she has made a wonderful effort of first showing the contrast between the apparent submissive life style of Mrs. Ramsay and her vulnerabilities and insecurities through the resilient way of Lily Briscoe who as a character symbolises the unconscious conflict of Mrs. Ramsay. And according to the in-depth analysis of the novel the study comes to the conclusion that Mrs. Ramsay on the surface was living the life of compromise where she believed that fitting into the traditional gender roles is all peace and success but at the same time deep inside she yearns a different life which is beautifully depicted by Virginia Woolf through the character of Lily Briscoe who symbolically makes conscious what is unconscious in the character of Mrs. Ramsay. This study as a valuable contribution suggests to the readers that giving too much to others selflessly results in infertility and barrenness in the life of the person, and causes emotional overloading or extreme exhaustion. Consequently it increases the gap in the co-ordination between what is conscious and unconscious. The study suggests that people should take time to realize that what they actually want? The mechanically assumed certain roles or behaviors as to create a different reality which does not confirm in any way to "latent content" this means life they apparently have decided to live or the life they suppressed inside them. And more importantly early efforts should be made to strike a deal between ones conscious and unconscious world before it acquires a monstrous proportion.

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Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

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