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Angels Without Wings

– The Feminine Ideal and its Consequences in
Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Lessing's "To Room
Nineteen" and Munro's "Too Much Happiness"

Emma Nilsson

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Supervisor: Birgitta Berglund

Abstract

In this essay, the feminine ideals in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" and Alice Munro's "Too Much Happiness" are analysed and compared to the ideal of the Angel in the House – an ideal that originates from Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* and was popularised by Virginia Woolf's paper "Professions for Women". In addition, the consequences of this ideal for the characters of Mrs Ramsey, Susan and Sofia are discussed. The essay is based on a close reading of the three literary works, and concludes that Mrs Ramsey, Susan and Sofia all try to live up to the ideal of the Angel in the House. The consequences are that the women diminish and neglect their own needs in order to be able to prioritize the wishes of their husbands and children. The fact that literature incorporates women who struggle to conform to or break the ideal of the Angel in the House suggests that the ideal to some extent continues to exist even in the 20th and 21st centuries.

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Introduction

What is a woman? What is a *good* woman? What does it mean to be feminine? The answers to these questions may of course vary depending on time, religious context and geographical aspects. In 19th-century Victorian Britain, *The Angel in the House*, an epic poem written by Coventry Patmore between 1854 and 1862, may represent that era's answer to these questions. Patmore wrote that

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself. (Patmore 74)

In other words, the perfect woman during the Victorian Era was one who sought to be a devoted wife. She should be loving, self-sacrificing and pure. Living up to this ideal might not always have been easy, and from a juridical perspective, the situation for women was not much better. A woman was more or less thought of as a man's property, and men were allowed to abuse and lock their wives up. The view of the ideal woman, in combination with the lack of rights such as suffrage and divorce, lead the way to the first wave of feminism (McDowall 162-163).

One of the foremost female writers during the first wave of feminism was Virginia Woolf. In 1931, she read her paper called "Professions for Women" to the Women's Service League as a response to Patmore's poem, claiming that "[k]illing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a women writer" (151). One of the characters in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, originally written in 1927, might be seen as an example of this attitude. In the novel, which takes place during the Ramsey family's summer holidays in Scotland between 1910 and 1920, Mrs Ramsey is the perfect woman, wife and mother. She is an angel in the house, pure, sympathetic and unselfish and spends her days pleasing her family. However, the character of Mrs Ramsey dies half-way through the novel, giving way instead to Lily Briscoe, a woman with a different view of marriage, motherhood and female freedom.

Doris Lessing, one of the most influential writers in the second wave of feminism, was often concerned with the feminine identity in a male-dominated society (Antler Rapping 29). In Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen" from 1963, which takes place in the second half of the 20th century, the main character Susan Rawlings pushes herself to live up to the

expectations of being the perfect wife, mother and home-maker. However, she struggles to keep her own identity while doing so, and starts to retreat to a hotel room to be alone, to manage her emotions and to feel in control over her life. Finally, however, she kills herself in the hotel room, apparently not able to combine her need for selfhood with her attempts to live up to the feminine ideal. Lessing's story could be seen as an indicator of the fact that the ideal of the Angel in the House affected society's structures, engaging writers and activists during the second wave of feminism.

Another character that illustrates the feminine ideal and the struggle this creates is Sofia Kovalevsky in Alice Munro's short story "Too Much Happiness" from 2009. Munro can be considered a writer of the third wave of feminism, and in "Too Much Happiness", she uses Sofia's life as a scientist in the late 19th century to demonstrate the challenges of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Since Sofia does not conform completely to the feminine ideal, she is excluded from many contexts. At the same time, she herself tries to diminish her own success and the recognition given to her work in order to please her soon-to-be husband Maxsim, who does not react well to Sofia's scientific progress. This self-reducing process may be seen as an attempt to live up to the ideal of the Angel in the House. Finally, weakened by the problematic relationship and the exclusion, Sofia dies. Munro's short story could be interpreted as a critique of the ideal of the Angel in the House, suggesting that the ideal still affects society's norms even in the 21st century.

In this essay, I will investigate the feminine ideal as presented in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" and Munro's "Too Much Happiness" and its consequences for the characters Mrs Ramsey, Susan Rawlings and Sofia. It will be argued that the feminine ideal of "The Angel in the House" affects the three women's identities and life-choices and that it controls their fates to the point where it actually seems to kill them. As mentioned, this feminine ideal has existed in the Western world for a long period of time and the fact that it can still be seen in contemporary literary works indicates that Woolf was correct when she stated that "[i]t is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality" ("Professions for Women" 151), meaning that an ideal can live far longer than any human. *To the Lighthouse* has been examined extensively, whereas there is little research on "To Room Nineteen" and barely any about "Too Much Happiness".

Before the analysis, I will provide a brief background of feminist theory and the ideal of the Angel in the House. The analysis will start by examining the feminine ideals and the expectations on and of the characters in the literary works. After that, the ideals and

expectations will be compared to *The Angel in the House*, and lastly, the consequences of the characters' attempts at living up to the ideals and expectations will be analysed. In the conclusion, I will summarize and discuss the results.

Feminist History and Theory

The first sentence in the introduction of this essay was "What is a woman?". Many different women have asked this question many times before – among them Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf. While Woolf claims not to know the answer to this question, and even doubts whether or not there is an answer to be found ("Professions for Women" 151), de Beauvoir initially gives an opinion that might not have been unusual in her time, namely that "woman is a womb" (de Beauvoir 13). However, de Beauvoir adds that mere female biology does not seem to be enough to be considered a woman, since it is sometimes claimed that "femininity is in danger" (de Beauvoir 13). This brings us to the notion of femininity, which is related to the second sentence of the introduction; "What is a *good* woman?". Femininity seems more closely related to the social construct of gender, that is, the characteristics that are thought to be desired in a woman based on the traits that traditionally have been assigned to the female sex, than to biology. Discussing questions like these by examining texts is part of what feminist theory is concerned with.

Turning back to the first question, "What is a woman?", it is possible to say that for a long time, "a writer" was not a likely or suitable answer. In fact, female writers have been so badly represented in literary history that during the second part of the 20th century, feminist critics actively began to look for more of them, since many critics had failed to bring them up previously. Therefore, the first of the two questions usually connected with feminist literary theory is how or what women have written. This question includes what media they have written in, what opportunities to write they have been given as well as what they have written about. Mary Eagleton (88) argues that the novel became an important medium for female writers in the 19th century. Because it lacked status and was thought to be less intellectually demanding than for example poetry, it was possible for women to establish themselves within this field. In other genres, the ostensible absence of female writers can be explained by the fact that it has not always been easy for women to write. Sometimes this may be due to a lack

of education, sometimes to a lack of access to writing media and sometimes to attitudes. Indeed, in her essay “Professions for Women”, Woolf confirms that in the beginning of the 20th century there were “many prejudices to overcome” for a female writer and that it was hard for a woman to “sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain” or “a rock to be dashed against” (153).

These prejudices and phantoms are related to the second question from the beginning of the introduction, “What is a *good* woman?”. For a substantial amount of time, probable replies have been connected with motherhood and being a respectable wife. Why is this? One of the assumptions which feminist theory is based on is that texts both depict and prescribe. This means that texts both reflect the society that they are written in and create it. Because of this, the second question that feminist theory deals with is how women have been written; that is, how women are portrayed in texts and how this is connected to societies’ feminine ideals. If texts are part of the constructions of ideals in society, then texts can change our ideas of femininity. This is what Laurie A. Linke argues, that feminists try to “influence the direction and velocity of change” (10) of the view of gender. Robin Truth Goodman asserts that one way of doing so is by writing literature, since it offers a way of visualizing, introducing and normalizing “identities that may not inhabit recognizable norms” (2) through fictive characters. Truth Goodman also reasons that feminist literature therefore is essential to feminist theory (3), and vice versa. The claim can be strengthened by the fact that Ellen Moers (28) insists that many of the well-known woman writers in the 19th century knew feminist social activists, and that the activists influenced the women’s writing. This suggests that in feminism, there is a close relationship between texts, theory and reality.

Applying the relationship between text and reality to Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel in the House*, it is possible to say that the woman portrayed in the text – who is pure, sympathetic and the perfect wife – is a reflection as well as a creation and construction of the ideals in Patmore’s time. According to the Victorian era’s feminine ideal, a woman’s place was in the home; she was supposed to be a pleasing wife and abide to the rules of that role, which did not require extensive education. In fact, proper education was even argued to be damaging to women; since they did not have the need for intellectual training, receiving it might lead to inadequate or insufficient performance of their household duties (Morgan 36). Women were expected to encourage “public virtue” (Morgan 39) – by inspiring and influencing the men with admirable behaviour, the entire society would become moral. The construction of the Victorian feminine ideal was based on both religious prescriptions and on

cultural phenomena, and Patmore's poem can be seen as an example of a cultural influence, as his figure of the angel affected the domestic ideal (King 11). The struggle that this ideal has imposed on female rights and the effect it has had and still has on the attitude towards the woman's role will indirectly be discussed in this essay.

The essay will primarily focus on the second of the two main questions of feminist theory – that is, how women have been written, since it will investigate how women are portrayed in three different texts. To some extent, however, it will also deal with the first question, how women have written, since the authors' view of their characters and the concept of femininity sometimes will be taken into consideration.

The Expectations of Mrs Ramsey, Susan and Sofia

It is not always easy to describe a fictive character, and the three women of this essay are no exceptions. However, starting with their appearance, one thing the three women seem to have in common is beauty. Mrs Ramsey is described as “the most beautiful person [...] ever seen” and it is also mentioned that there are “stars in her eyes” (Woolf 11). The fact that beauty is an important aspect of a woman's ability to attract men in the novel becomes evident when Mrs Ramsey considers the likelihood of Lily Briscoe ever getting married: “With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry” (Woolf 14). Ferhat Ordu and Murat Karakaş argue that in a patriarchal society “all a woman needs is being beautiful” (104) and that this attitude is reflected in the portrait of Mrs Ramsey, who perceives Lily's lack of beauty as a hindrance to her possibilities of getting married.

The second of the three women, Susan, can also be considered a beautiful woman with her “round, candid, pleasant face with clear dark brows and clear grey eyes” and her “thick black hair” (Lessing 79). It is also evident that even when she is feeling bad and thinks that there must be something wrong with her, her husband focuses on her appearance and answers her: “Surely not, Susan? You look marvellous – you're as lovely as ever” (Lessing 72). It is remarkable that to her husband Matthew, her pleasant appearance is a sufficient confirmation of her health. He is either not capable of comprehending that Susan can feel bad in spite of looking good, or he understands but chooses not to investigate the matter further, which would indicate that he does not care about her well-being as long as she looks good.

Thinking about the situation in her home, she feels “as if her shell moved here” (Lessing 83) and she is surprised that no one seems to notice or react to this. The fact that she feels like her shell lives in the house implies that she feels empty, which I will return to in the third part of this analysis.

Beauty seems to be important in the third story, “Too Much Happiness”, as well, which can be seen when Urey, a friend of Sofia’s, explains why his father’s girlfriend was not introduced to her: “She is as ugly as a sewer rat, that’s why he didn’t want you to meet her” (Munro 263). There is a tendency among the male characters in this short story to not introduce women who are not beautiful to their friends, and by the fact that Sofia is introduced to Maxsim’s friends, it can be concluded that she is not ugly. However, she might not be considered as beautiful as the other two women – Mrs Ramsey and Susan – are by their surroundings, since Sofia “has a childishly large head” and “has begun to look worn” (Munro 246). Nevertheless, she seems to compensate for it with her thick dark curly hair and “an eager, faintly pleading” expression (Munro 246). The description of her head as “childishly large” is worth noticing, and comparisons with children are not unusual in the three stories.

In fact, there are several examples in the three stories where the women are compared to children, or where it is stated that their mental capacity is inferior to the one of a man. For example, during a dinner party, Lily observes Mrs Ramsey gesticulating and laughing and thinks of how “childlike” she is (Woolf 93). However, since Lily adds that she is “irresistible” at the same time and that she always “got her own way in the end” (Woolf 94), the overall impression from Lily’s point of view is not that Mrs Ramsey lacks intelligence. However, Mr Ramsey’s attitude is quite different from Lily’s. He even seems to enjoy the idea of Mrs Ramsey not being intelligent:

And he wondered what she was reading, and exaggerated her ignorance, her simplicity, for he liked to think that she was not clever, not book-learned at all. He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought. She was astonishingly beautiful. Her beauty seemed to him, if that were possible, to increase. (Woolf 113)

Ordu and Karakaş argue that according to the ideal of the Angel in the House, a woman “does not need to be educated at all” (104). And indeed, Mrs Ramsey’s physical beauty seems sufficient to please Mr Ramsey. Believing that this is her only strength gives him the opportunity to feel intellectually superior.

Women's allegedly faltering rationality is an issue in Lessing's story as well. When Susan says that she needs to go on a holiday, she feels that Matthew has "diagnosed her finally as *unreasonable*" (Lessing 78). The word "diagnosed" indicates that irrationality and not being reasonable is seen as some kind of disease, perhaps a form of mental instability. Linda H. Halisky argues that Susan feels the need to express her inner self and that she has learned from society "to label the expression of that self 'madness'" (49). Susan herself considers her need to be alone and her feelings of emptiness "utterly ridiculous" (Lessing 72). In "diagnosing" Susan, it would seem that Matthew shares her view.

Although Sofia in "Too Much Happiness" is not labelled as mad, there are occasions when her mental capacity is questioned. Apart from the example mentioned earlier, where her head is described as "childishly large", which could be seen as subtle and suggestive way of criticising her intelligence, it is clear that she has a hard time finding employment (Munro 246). Despite her scientific success, the Swedes are "the only people in Europe willing to hire a female mathematician" (Munro 252). Sofia reflects on her situation and concludes that most people would not think of hiring her any more than they would of "employing a learned chimpanzee" (Munro 266). Cristina Nicolaescu says that Munro's literature often includes "an awareness of the significant role played by gender" (1064), whether its focus is a domestic environment, work issues or society as a whole. Sofia's situation would be an example of a work issue. Even though she is a talented mathematician, the characteristics usually connected with her gender – being childish, irrational and emotional – hinder her from being hired.

At the same time as the women are thought to be irrational, childlike and emotional, they do not seem to be allowed to express their thoughts, opinions and emotions without being judged. When Mrs Ramsey states that the winds might change and that it might be possible for them to visit the lighthouse, "[t]he extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women's minds" (Woolf 28) enrages Mr Ramsey. Here, Mrs Ramsey's "irrational" idea that the weather might change causes irritation. A rather extreme example of being denied the right to one's feelings is when Susan's husband Matthew cheats on her. She feels "pierced as by an arrow from the sky with bitterness" but reminds herself "that bitterness was not in order, it was out of court" (Lessing 66). Later, when she tries to communicate some of her needs to her husband and expresses that she needs to be alone sometimes, she sees in his eyes "what she had been dreading: Incredulity. Disbelief. And fear" (Lessing 72). This fear might be connected to what was argued earlier, that Matthew diagnoses his wife as lacking in rationality. According to Elaine Showalter (n.p.), a lack of sense, or madness, is in a

patriarchal society seen as one of few acceptable excuses for a woman to feel hostile emotions, such as bitterness, which Susan experiences. Through the fear that his expression portrays, it is evident that Matthew is not capable of understanding Susan's emotions. He might even fear that she has lost her mind.

A similar lack of empathy can be found in Sofia's partner Maxsim. On one occasion, when they are travelling together, Sofia feels "a disastrous pressure of tears" (Munro 253). However, she reminds herself that "[w]eeping in public is something he finds despicable. (He does not think he should have to put up with it in private either)" (Munro 253). Apparently, tears or sadness are not things Maxsim finds acceptable in any environment. Possibly, he sees tears as signs of weakness and therefore he does not want to be forced to deal with them. It would seem that all three women are expected to repress their ideas, thoughts and emotions, and focus on playing their roles impeccably.

Another thing that the three women have in common is their, at least initially, positive view of marriage. Mrs Ramsey seems thrilled by the idea of marriage. Lily Briscoe feels that Mrs Ramsey sees women and thinks that "they all must marry" since "an unmarried woman has missed the best of life" (Woolf 45). Her impression does not seem to be incorrect. One day, Mrs Ramsey observes Lily going for a walk with a friend and immediately assumes that the two will marry, even though Lily is in her thirties and her walking-partner in his sixties: "Ah, but was that not Lily Briscoe strolling along with William Bankes? She focussed her short-sighted eyes upon the backs of a retreating couple. Yes, indeed it was. Did that not mean that they would marry? Yes, it must! What an admirable idea! They must marry!" (Woolf 65). However, Lily's view of marriage is quite different. She feels that "she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation" (Woolf 95). María Isabel Arriaga (8) asserts that Lily breaks the social conventions of the time by thinking this way. And indeed, Lily's attitude is an exception both in the novel and in this essay.

Susan in "To Room Nineteen" perceives marriage as a sensible decision. In marrying Matthew and having four children with him, she does "[e]verything right, appropriate, and what everyone would wish for, if they could choose" (Lessing 63). The opinion of others seems important to Susan and some of the decisions she makes regarding her marriage are due to "humorous concession to popular wisdom" (Lessing 63). The people in her surroundings seem to approve of her and her husband's decisions and "their friends' delight was an additional proof of their happiness" (Lessing 62). Rula Quawas suggests that Susan is "a woman who has been caught up in the enmeshing web of the social roles of her

community” (115), and the fact that the opinion of others seems to affect the decisions she makes strengthens this argument. Her view of marriage as a sensible choice that leads to happiness is partly based on the beliefs of the people that surround her.

Another woman who connects marriage with happiness is Sofia. When Maxim proposes to her, she writes to her friend, telling her that “it is to be happiness after all. Happiness after all” (Munro 253). Later – closer to the wedding – she writes to another friend, asking her for help with “selecting whatever costume would suit that event which the world might consider the most important in a woman’s life” (Munro 258). This sentence from Sofia’s letter makes it evident that she is aware of the world’s expectations on her as a woman; she is supposed to get married and she is supposed to see the wedding as the most important event in her life.

After having married, taking care of the husband and the household seems important in all of the three stories. For Mrs Ramsey, this means constantly confirming her husband. One example of what Mr Ramsey needs from his wife can be seen in the following passage from the novel:

It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his bareness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life – the drawing room; behind the drawing-room the kitchen; above the kitchen the bedrooms; and beyond them the nurseries; they must be furnished, they must be filled with life. (Woolf 33)

Mrs Ramsey fulfils her husband’s needs perfectly. Lily is also aware of the fact that it is women’s duty to confirm men. However, her attitude to this fact is different from Mrs Ramsey’s. This becomes evident during a dinner party, where Lily reflects on what is expected from her as a woman, and is amused by the thought of not living up to the expectations, which dictate that she should confirm the man sitting opposite to her:

There is a code of behaviour she knew, [...] that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself; as indeed it is their duty [...] to help us, suppose the Tube were to burst into flames. [...] But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things? So she sat there smiling. (Woolf 84)

This is not the only time when Lily refuses to live up to what is expected from her. On one occasion, when Mr Ramsey needs her to confirm his worth, Lily neither wants to nor is

capable of forcing herself to do so: “His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet” (Woolf 141). As indicated by the word “sinner”, Lily knows that she is not behaving in the manner desired by others. Instead, she acts in the way she herself desires, which is very different from Mrs Ramsey’s habits.

It is not only confirmation of himself that Mr Ramsey needs. In the words of Ordu and Karakaş, one of Mrs Ramsey’s duties is “keeping the balance in the house” (105). Mr Ramsey wants his wife to fill the house with life, to nurture the ones who are in it and make sure that everyone feels her warmth. It is her responsibility to create a homely atmosphere. This is the case for Susan in “To Room Nineteen” as well. She feels that she exists “for the sake of Matthew, the children, the house and the garden – which unit would have collapsed in a week without her” (Lessing 63). After a while, the family hires a cleaning lady to ease Susan’s burden. However, she still experiences pressure. In fact, having an employee only seems to have increased the feeling of responsibility: “[f]or she knew that this structure – big white house, on which the mortgage still cost four hundred a year, a husband, so good and kind and insightful, four children, all doing so nicely, and the garden where she sat, and Mrs Parkes the cleaning woman – all this depended on her” (Lessing 72). It is clear that Susan feels responsible for her house and family. Sofia’s attitude in Munro’s story is different. She observes two of her female friends who care for their sick brother “[k]nitting mufflers, mending the linen, making the puddings and preserves that could never be trusted to a servant” (Munro 278) and thinks that she “would go mad” (Munro 278) if she had to do the same. At the same time, she feels that she has “a responsibility to entertain and generally take care of” Maxsim (Munro 247). It is clear that Sofia does not want a life similar to the ones that the two women are living. Nevertheless, she feels that it is her obligation to care for her soon-to-be husband.

Their husbands and homes are not the only things that the women are expected to take care of. The notion of motherhood as a central focus of a woman’s life is evident in all three stories. Mrs Ramsey cares very much for her children and even states that “[s]he would have liked always to have had a baby” because “[s]he was happiest carrying one in her arms” (Woolf 54). In Lessing’s text, Susan is, at least initially, very involved in the upbringing of her children. It could even be argued that since her husband works a lot and therefore at times is absent, she is “a single parent who has to handle with raising her children alone” (Rabelo

Câmara and Rabelo Câmara 235). Her commitment to her children is so commanding that she feels that her soul is “not her own [...] but her children’s” (Lessing 67). The fact that she at times feels trapped can be illustrated by her description of a hug from her twin children as a “human cage” (Lessing 74). In Munro’s text, Sofia’s attitude can be seen as a development of this feeling of sometimes being trapped by the responsibility that comes with having children. She dedicates herself to her studies in mathematics and her love for Maxsim, but her daughter is not mentioned very often. However, she is aware of what is expected of her. When Maxsim suggests that she should go back to Sweden, since her students and her child need her, she instantly reacts: “A jab there, a suggestion familiar to her, of faulty motherhood?” (Munro 250). The use of the word “familiar” suggests that it is not the first time someone has questioned her and her priorities or insisted that she should dedicate herself to her daughter.

In conclusion, *To the Lighthouse*, “To Room Nineteen” and “Too Much Happiness” all portray a female protagonist who wants to be and is expected to be the perfect woman, wife and mother.

Three Women, How Many Angels?

The examination of the three women shows that they are all beautiful, and according to the ideal of the Angel in the House, a woman should be just that. The woman in Patmore’s poem has “large, sweet eyes, clear lakes of love” (22) and is “so simply, subtly sweet” (25). The description of her eyes is similar to the one of Mrs Ramsey’s, who has “stars in her eyes” (Woolf 11). Both use elements of nature to describe immense beauty. Both Susan and Sofia have beautiful hair, and so does the woman in the poem:

The far-fetch’d diamond finds its home
Flashing and smouldering in her hair. (Patmore 41)

This time, a product of nature is used to describe the beauty, perhaps emphasizing that female beauty is natural, not merely a product of cosmetics or other artificial means. Patmore’s ideal woman has another thing in common with Sofia. The “pardon in her pitying eyes” (Patmore 75) can be compared to Sofia’s “eager, faintly pleading” expression mentioned earlier (Munro

246). This means that the ideal woman was not only beautiful; she was also forgiving and keen on pleasing her husband.

The ability to forgive leads us to the subject of dedication to marriage. A good woman should be loyal and faithful to her husband, which the following lines demonstrate:

At any time, she's still his wife
Dearly devoted to his arms;
She loves with love that cannot tire. (Patmore 75)

In "To Room Nineteen", Susan's dedication to her marriage is tested when she finds out about her husband's adultery. It can be argued that since she stays, she is loyal to her husband. However, she does not love "with love that cannot tire", as Patmore suggests that a good wife should. After the adultery, she is "more and more often threatened by emptiness" (Lessing 67). It is clear that Patmore's "At any time, she's still his wife" is the case legally in "To Room Nineteen". Yet, the emotional part, "Dearly devoted to his arms", is not possible for Susan to feel after Matthew's affairs. Mrs Ramsey seems to handle a similar situation in a quite different manner. When she sees Mr Ramsey looking at a young, newly engaged girl during a dinner party and understands that "he, her husband, felt it too – Minta's glow; he liked these girls, these golden-reddish girls, with something flying [...] some lustre, some richness, which attracted him" (Woolf 91-92), she only feels jealous for a moment. An instant later she concludes that "she was not jealous, only, now and then, when she made herself look in her glass a little resentful that she had grown old, perhaps, by her own fault" (Woolf 92).

The tendency to accept and even take the blame for their partners' undesirable behaviour can be seen in all three women. In Patmore's poem, this phenomenon can be demonstrated by Patmore's declaration that the perfect woman sees her husband's mistakes or flaws, tries to make up for them and even "seems to think the sin was hers" (74). This behaviour can be seen in the character of Mrs Ramsey, who not only understands her husband's flirtatious behaviour, but also takes responsibility for his faltering self-esteem. When she thinks about her husband's need of constant approval and encouragement, she concludes that it might be "her fault that it was necessary" to continuously reassure him of his worth (Woolf 100). Susan likewise blames her lack of rationality for not being able to suppress the emotions she feels after Matthew's adultery and accepts the thought that "[s]he would have to live knowing she was subject to a state of mind she could not own" (Lessing 73). A similar acceptance is evident in "Too Much Happiness" as well, when Sofia thinks of

the occasion when Maxim “had pointed out [...] that she had no rights, no hold on him” (Munro 266) and reasons that there is nothing she can do about it, since he disapproves of “jealous fits”, “female tears” and “scoldings” (Munro 266).

According to the Victorian ideal, women should be “tamed and mastered” (King 36), and it is possible to say that the three women discussed here are just that, albeit to varying degrees. In addition to the differences in the degree of independence, there also seems to be a difference in terms of what motivates the women’s behaviour. Mrs Ramsey is very firm in her beliefs regarding the perfect woman, whereas Lily, Susan and Sofia sometimes seem to question the values that are prominent in their societies and that either force them to behave or hinder them from acting in certain ways. The use of the word “tamed” is worth noticing, since something that needs to be tamed is initially wild. If Victorian women were wild, and the ideal of the Angel in the House was a way of taming them, it can be concluded that the ideal is not something that is naturally typical for women, but rather something that is created and forced upon the female gender. Jade McKay claims that the fact that literature depicts characters that try to live up to this ideal illustrates that “cultural mechanisms to ensure female conformity remain in place” (42). Thus, the characters that try to behave differently may attempt to break the conventions.

Motherhood is another important aspect of being the perfect woman. In Patmore’s poem, this becomes clear in the following lines, which show the angelic woman’s pride in her child:

Lifted his hat, and bow’d and smiled.
And fill’d her kind large eyes with joy,
By patting on the cheek her child,
With, ‘Is he yours, this handsome boy?’ (Patmore 192)

In this passage, the woman and her family have met one of the man’s old college-friends, and when that friend praises the son, the woman is filled with delight. Mrs Ramsey has a similar passion for her children. Her joy and dedication to their upbringing is strong throughout the novel, and she often holds her son James by the hand and reads to him when he does not feel like playing with his siblings (Woolf 6). She takes care of her own eight children, and in addition to that, she also knits for the lighthouse keeper’s boy (Woolf 23). Mrs Ramsey undoubtedly cares immensely for children. This is not completely true for the two other women, Susan and Sofia, who at times perceive their children as hindrances to their

independence. However, their continuous habit of neglecting their own needs and giving way instead to their children or husbands might be explained by the following sentences, taken from Virginia Woolf's essay "Professions for Women", in which she describes the ideal of the Angel in the House. The expectation on the Angel in the house to be self-sacrificing, self-denying and altruistic is clear. Prioritizing one's own needs is not an option, or even a wish, for the perfect woman, wife and mother, described in the following way by Woolf:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (Woolf, "Professions for Women" 150)

In summary, Mrs Ramsey is the perfect mother, wife and home-maker; in all respects she behaves according to the ideal of the Angel in the House. Lessing's Susan tries to behave in a similar manner, but is sometimes not completely able to, despite being constantly aware of what is expected of her. Although she is not always successful, it is evident that she has a desire to live up to the ideal of the Angel in the House. Last but not least, Munro's Sofia at times seems to actually enjoy not living up to the norms of femininity. Nevertheless, it is clear that she sometimes feels the pressure from society, from Maxsim and from herself to behave differently – more like the ideal of the Angel in the House. All three women are expected to behave in a certain way, and there are only a few examples of exceptions in their ways of acting. In the following section, these exceptions will be discussed more closely, since they are related to the consequences of the expectations on and of the three women. For instance, the Angel's tendency to sacrifice herself – which was debated by Virginia Woolf – will be exemplified.

Consequences of Being, Trying to Be and Failing to Be an Angel

One of the consequences of the feminine ideals is that the women repress their own emotions. Since the responsibility of creating a welcoming atmosphere rests on Mrs Ramsey, she is unable to relax during dinner parties. On one occasion, however, she lets herself relax for a

moment. Suddenly, she feels as if “a shade had fallen” and she sees “things truly”, realising that she sees “no beauty anywhere” (Woolf 77). Quickly, she represses the feelings of pointlessness and returns to her role as the perfect hostess. Susan too ignores her emotions, using rational thinking. As expressed in Lessing’s story, her intelligence forbids “quarrelling, sulking, anger, silences of withdrawal, accusations and tears” (67). A similar aversion to feelings can be seen in Sofia’s relationship with Maxsim, who finds crying “despicable” (Munro 253). Because of his attitude, Sofia forces herself “to reabsorb her tears” and is rewarded by Maxsim for doing so as “he folds her into his capacious well-cut garments with their smell of manliness” (Munro 253). The women do not only ignore their emotions and change their behaviour in order to live up to the ideal; they also deny or diminish their own needs in order to be able to adapt to others’ wishes. This is prominent in the women’s view on careers. In the following passage, Mrs Ramsey reflects on what is needed on the island where the family spends their summers: “A model dairy and a hospital up here – those two things she would have liked to do, herself. But how? With all these children?” (Woolf 53). It is clear that she has dreams, and that she does not pursue them since she thinks that between herself and Mr Ramsey, he is “infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible” (Woolf 35).

Susan has a similar attitude. She thinks that when the children start going to school, she will be able to begin her transformation from “hub-of-the-family into woman-with-her-own-life” (Lessing 67). She hopes that by going back to having a career, she will get rid of “that anguishing sensation that she is losing her time by devoting herself only to others, forgetting about her own life and old dreams” (Rabelo Câmara and Rabelo Câmara 236). Nevertheless, she prioritizes her family over her own needs and never gets the chance to fulfil her dreams. This is different from Sofia, who does pursue her goals. However, she too sometimes ignores her own work and prioritizes Maxsim: “He takes up too much room, on the divan and in one’s mind.[...] I am neglecting not only my Functions but my Elliptic Integrals and my Rigid Body” (Munro 248). When her scientific progress is acknowledged, she is not able to enjoy her success, since it affects her relationship with Maxsim. She starts to think that “The Bordin Prize was what spoiled them” (Munro 249) when Maxsim begins to distance himself from her because he is “envious” (Munro 254) and “had felt himself ignored” (Munro 250). Next time he comments on an essay of hers, she does not remind him that it already has been finished – she merely accepts the lessening of the importance of her work, thereby consenting to it being inferior to Maxsim’s.

In diminishing their own needs and wishes, the space these women assign to themselves becomes smaller and smaller. Having less and less room for themselves combined with constantly being accessible creates a desperate need in the women for being alone. In *A Room of One's Own*, originally published in 1928, Woolf argues that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (6). A similar attitude can be found in Lessing, who according to Quawas believes that a woman “must find a room of her own and spend some time discovering who she really is” (Quawas 117). However, having a room of one's own is hard to combine with the ideal of the Angel in the House. The women's need for being alone is an exception from behaving according to the ideal, and it results in guilt. When the children have gone to bed, Mrs Ramsey is relieved, “[f]or now, she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of – to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone” (Woolf 56). When she sits by herself and thinks, her husband observes her and says that he does not “like to see her look so sad” (Woolf 62). Immediately, Mrs Ramsey regrets her behaviour, thinking that “[h]ad she known that he was looking at her [...], she would not have let herself sit there, thinking” (Woolf 62). She blames herself for having upset her husband and regrets having spent some time on her own.

A similar sensation of guilt and shame can be found in Lessing's story, when Susan tries to spend some time alone:

She would lock herself in the bathroom, and sit on the edge of the bath, breathing deep, trying to let go into some kind of calm. Or she went up into the spare room, usually empty, where no one would expect her to be. She heard the children calling Mother, Mother, and kept silent, feeling guilty. (Lessing 72)

Susan feels embarrassed of her need for being alone and of having fled from her duties as a mother. The spare room is eventually turned into “Mother's Room” (Lessing 74). Ellen Brown sees a similarity between Susan's daily life in the periphery and this extra space that she sometimes uses when she needs some time on her own (13). Both Susan and the room are parentheses in the family's daily life. Munro's Sofia also disregards her responsibilities as a mother, when she rejects her child Fufu. The child “brought her jam on a plate, asked her to play a child's card game. ‘Leave me alone. Can't you leave me alone?’ Later she wiped the tears out of her eyes and begged the child's pardon” (Munro 251). It is clear that Sofia, just

like Mrs Ramsey and Susan, feels guilty, shameful and embarrassed for having felt the need to be alone and for having expressed that need.

One last severe consequence of the ideal for the three women seems to be death. All of the three women discussed in this essay die. Mrs Ramsey's death can be analysed both from inside and outside the novel. Inside the novel, Lily argues that Mr Ramsey "wears Mrs Ramsey to death" (Woolf 21) and observes "[h]ow old she looks, how worn she looks" (Woolf 77). This suggests that the pressure of living up to the ideal of the Angel in the House is too exhausting for Mrs Ramsey and that she eventually dies from it. Outside of the novel, Woolf's opinions can be taken into consideration, and Mrs Ramsey's death can then be seen as a result of her will of living up to the ideal. It is possible that Woolf felt the need to kill the character of Mrs Ramsey, since she declares in her essay "Professions for Women" that the ideal of the Angel in the House needs to be killed, stating that "[h]ad I not killed her she would have killed me" (151). Woolf is referring to the smothering and oppressing effect that the ideal of the Angel in the House could have on her and her writing, not unlike Lily's situation in the novel. Lily is constantly told that women should not and cannot paint or write (Woolf 44). In killing Mrs Ramsey – and thereby the ideal woman – Woolf gives herself, Lily and other women who might wish to break the norms a chance to do so.

Susan's suicide can be interpreted in a similar manner. It can be seen as the result of the oppression and the anxiety created by constantly having to behave in a certain way, since Susan tries to act according to the ideal of the Angel in the House, but does not feel alive or satisfied in that role. This can be illustrated by the following passage, where Susan has been alone for a moment and then notices the burden she feels when "she returned to the family, wife and mother, smiling and responsible, feeling as if the pressure of these people – four lively children and her husband, were like a painful pressure on the surface of her skin, a hand pressing on her brain" (Lessing 72). This behaviour of sacrificing herself, suppressing her emotions and adapting her behaviour to what is expected from her can be summarized by Quawas's argument that Susan's "traditional feminine virtues of endurance, renunciation and compassion which uphold the patriarchal status quo weigh her down" (114). In this interpretation, the ideals associated with femininity crush a woman who does not want to lead the life she is supposed to. Alternatively, Susan's suicide can be seen as a way of regaining control of herself by defying what is expected from her. This is also argued by Quawas, who emphasises that Susan's death is "a means of resisting her culturally conditional roles and the

crushing, culturally enforced image of Woman” (120). This interpretation makes Susan a symbol of feminism rather than a victim of traditional values.

Sofia’s death, however, could be seen as the result of failing to live up to the ideal of the Angel in the House. McKay (43) argues that female characters either try to live up to the ideal of the Angel and conform to the feminine script, or they try to break the norms and are punished for it. It could be argued that Sofia in some ways belongs to the second group. Although she sometimes tries to adapt to what is expected from her, she breaks many norms by prioritizing her scientific work, and she is punished for it in the form of exclusion. As a matter of fact, the women seem to be the most excluding, since the great scientists’ wives, like “watchers on the barricade”, “preferred not to meet her, or invite her into their homes” (Munro 266). Because of the fact that she fails to live up to the ideal of the Angel in the House, she is ostracised. Munro uses cold as a metaphor, and the emotional cold is reflected in an actual physical cold. The metaphorical cold she experiences – not only the women’s but also Maxsim’s lack of empathy and warmth – is mirrored in Sofia’s death, since she dies from a severe case of pneumonia. When she starts to shiver, she thinks that “[p]erhaps it was necessary to shiver”, since “she had collected so much cold in her body” (Munro 296). She feels as if “[i]t had been stored inside her, the cold, and now she could shiver it out” (Munro 296). However, shortly after having started to shiver, Sofia experiences “a pain in her chest” (Munro 297) and starts to cough. She tries to get rid of the ache in her heart and chest by coughing as if “[s]he was trying to cough something out of her chest. The pain, out of her chest” (Munro 297). However, it does not work, and in her funeral, the symbolism of cold is used one final time as Sofia is buried “in the afternoon of a still cold day when the breath of mourners and onlookers hung in clouds on the frosty air” (Munro 302).

Conclusion

The feminine ideals portrayed in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen” and Munro’s “Too Much Happiness” have been discussed and compared to the ideal portrayed in Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel in the House*. It has been argued that the ideal of the Angel in the House affects Mrs Ramsey’s, Susan’s and Sofia’s identities,

behaviours and life-choices. In addition, the consequences of the feminine ideals in the three stories have been exemplified and analysed.

In summary, Mrs Ramsey, Susan and Sofia are all expected to and sometimes want to be the perfect woman, wife, mother and home-maker. They are expected to be beautiful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing and self-denying – always prioritizing the needs and wishes of others instead of their own. In other words, they are expected to live up to the ideal of the Angel in the House. According to how some feminist theorists view the relationship between text and reality, the fact that authors write about women following or trying to break the feminine norms suggests that the ideal of the Angel in the House still exists to some extent. Mrs Ramsey succeeds in living according to what the ideal dictates, while Susan and Sofia sometimes struggle to do so. The consequences of the feminine ideal in the three literary works are that the women neglect, deny and diminish their own emotions and needs, giving way instead to the wishes of their husbands and families. Finally, the three women die, directly or indirectly from trying to live up to the ideal of the Angel in the House. Mrs Ramsey's death can be interpreted as both a consequence of the pressure of the feminine ideal and as an effect of Woolf's opinions as a writer. Susan's suicide can be understood as the death of a woman who has tried to live up to the ideal of the Angel in the House. Alternatively, it can be seen as Susan's way of refusing to conform to that ideal. Sofia's death is a consequence of being ostracised for not behaving according to the ideal of the Angel in the House. The metaphorical cold is reflected in the disease that kills her, namely pneumonia. In completely signing themselves over to others and trying to turn themselves into perfect Angels, the three women's wings have been cut off, and angels without wings cannot fly.

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