*The focus on Lily Briscoe makes To the Lighthouse an instance of the so-called Künstlerroman. Read up on this genre and select and comment on relevant passages from the text.*

*Künstlerroman* refers to novels that follow a character’s artistic development from early naivety to maturity. While this genre has historically emphasized the artistic journey of male characters, *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates a clear feminist approach via the focus on Lily Briscoe. Lily’s early artistic endeavors are clouded by a “fear of authorship” that stems from the gendered societal norms and voices surrounding her (including Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Tansley, and others); ten years later, she develops – upon her return to Hebrides – a sense of self-empowerment that helps her find harmony with her non-traditionalist position and overcome the early voices and doubts.

Throughout the novel, Lily deals with a tension between her own independence/artistic desires and Mrs. Ramsay’s overpowering voice. For Mrs. Ramsay, women’s role in society is to provide self-assurance (and sympathy) to their husbands and keep the household running (while, admittingly, being able to keep a sense of autonomy and self-pride at the same time). Her relationship with Lily is marked by these values in that she mainly perceives Lily according to her “eligibility” for marriage. As she sits for one of Lily’s paintings, Mrs. Ramsay says, “one could not take her painting very seriously” (13) and simultaneously insists that Lily won’t marry (implying her artistic desires negatively affect her “marriage eligibility”). However, once she sees Lily away from her painting and walking with Mr. Bankes, she immediately fantasizes about Lily marrying, saying, “Ah, but was that not Lily Briscoe strolling along with William Bankes? […] Yes, indeed it was. Did that not mean that they would marry? Yes, it must! What an admirable idea! They must marry!” (64). Later on, Lily confirms how influential Mrs. Ramsay’s strong voice and desire for her marriage were, admitting, “Perhaps, had [Mrs. Ramsay] lived, she would have *compelled* [my marriage to Mr. Bankes]” (164, my emphasis).

Mrs. Ramsay’s belief that women must provide self-assurance (and sympathy) to men also creates tension for Lily who wishes to step out of that role. At the dinner party, Mrs. Ramsay, with a “glance in her eyes” (83), “tells” Lily to be kind to Mr. Tansley, even though Lily does not want to. Similarly, when she returns to the Hebrides, she refuses to provide Mr. Ramsay with the sympathy he comes to her looking for, but immediately feels a sense of guilt about it. Even after her death, the influence of Mrs. Ramsay voice and traditional values affects Lily’s self-confidence.

Alongside the influence of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily deals with the sexist voice of Mr. Tansley. While painting the portrait of Mrs. Ramsay and James, Mr. Tansley whispers to her, “Women can’t paint, women can’t write” (43). This comment haunts Lily. It stays in her mind throughout the years and helps form fears about her arts (hypothetical) lack of influence. Statements such as, “it would never be seen; never be hung even” (43), or “it would be hung in the attics, […] it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa” (169) reveal this artistic anxiety. She is ultimately unable to finish the painting at this time.

As mentioned, when Lily returns to the Hebrides ten years later, she is still conflicted by the tension between her desire for individuality (artistic and other) and the voices of Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Tansley. She ultimately decides to take up the portrait she never finished. In doing so, Lily is able to contemplate the past and the influential voices that have affected her, reimagining their hold on her. In reaching her “artistic maturity” – shown in her self-examination and self-empowerment – she is able to find a level of peace with her art outside of the voices that held her back. In reference to her portrait, she says, “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. […] 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.” (196). She is now able to complete the painting according to *her* vision and can feel a balanced sense of sympathy for Mr. Ramsey without it being forced.

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994.