



Comparative Literature Studies

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Virginia Woolf in her writing room

Abstract

Virginia Woolf's work is characterized by the complexity of themes and motifs, as well as by the uniqueness of its literary formula. The essays represent a significant part in the context of her work. *A room of one's own* is one of the most important works of feminist literary criticism. Its few chapters underline the different educational experiences available to men and women and also the material differences in their lives. The false superiority of men if compared to women is a major leitmotif of this essay. Through the text, Virginia Woolf appeals to famous writers in order to emphasize her ideas (Jane Austen, George Eliot, etc.). There are numerous passages of the text which are often quoted, one of them undoubtedly being "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction".

Keywords: women's needs and rights, women writers, art and liberty, gender inequality, feminism, confession, modernism.

Regarded as a significant figure in London literary society and a member of the Bloomsbury Group, Virginia Woolf has brought a substantial contribution to the development of the modern novel, her way of writing bringing her close to Laurence Sterne, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce and Marcel Proust. Her contact with many brilliant avant-garde artists, writers and philosophers, the direct access to her father's large library, as well as her private education, highly influenced her becoming a writer. With a precocious mastery of writing, Virginia Woolf began to trifle with literature, contributing to Times Literary Supplement when still in her early twenties.

Virginia Woolf's personality is undoubtedly complex, she asserted herself as a ponderous presence in the literature, making her literary reputation as a novelist, as well as an essayist, publisher, feminist, critic. The first novels (*The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*), were rather traditional in form, but they did not benefit from a real literary attention. Beginning with *Jacob's Room*, an impressionistic novel, there is to be noticed an obvious change in her writing style, but only the three novels that followed (*Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando: A Biography*), show the new modern vision. In these novels she moves away from the use of plot and traditional structure to employ stream of consciousness, interior monologues, all of these in order to emphasize the psychological aspects of the main characters. More than that, the writer's major concern seems to have been connected with the examination of the human consciousness.

Although many critics consider *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf's highest literary achievement, in fact she extends her literary experimentalism even to her last novels (*The Waves*, *The Years*), which focus on the author's interest in her characters' subjective perception of reality. In most books, the characters represent the author's voices and various facets. The major themes of her literary fiction refer to existential issues, creation, the artists and their destiny, human loneliness, mental illness, feminism, relationships, war and death, many of these aspects being reanalyzed in the essayistic and non-fiction works. Her analytic predilection materializes in the writing of many essays, which emphasize the author's need of confession, her reflexive nature and ability to

express reality in a highly personal manner. Furthermore, in the essays she tackles a wide range of literary topics, all of them being presented in an original, sensitive and lucid way, and filtered by her unique personality.

On the whole of her creation, the essays occupy an essential position, the essayistic discourse doubles the fictional one. Virginia Woolf wrote an impressive collection of essays, such as: *The Common Reader* (1925), *A Room of One's Own* (1931), *Second Common Reader* (1931), *Three Guineas* (1938), *The Death of the Moth* (1942), *The Captain's Deathbed* (1950), *Granite and Rainbow* (1958), *Collected Essays* (1966), which reveal her as a fine observer and an intelligent commentator. The two volumes entitled *The Common Reader* and *The second Common Reader* have as a main topic not only theoretical approaches, but even some critical references to some literary works belonging to Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, Daniel Defoe, Geoffrey Chaucer etc. From the above mentioned essays, some were published posthumously, which betrays her permanent concern for writing and offers a clue for a deeper understanding of her inner thoughts.

Among the writer's concerns, there must be mentioned women's needs and rights, themes that are reflected in two major essay books *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, both of them having a great impact on a large audience. These writings base on her readings and on her preoccupation to define the position of a woman-writer as she clearly underlines in the following quote: "All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point – a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved." (Woolf, 1945:2)

In spite of the numerous interpretations, the above mentioned essay is nowadays considered a classic feminist work. It is based on lectures she had given at women's colleges at Cambridge University. Using such female authors as Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, she examines women and their struggles as artists, their position in literary history and need for independence. Her writing is, on one hand, a refuge from a violent and limited world, and, on the other hand, an exterior struggle for changing mentalities and exceeding prejudices. Her sustained efforts had a direct response in her contemporary society, as Virginia Woolf proved to be an innovative and influential 20th Century writer.

This essay's text may be approached in at least three different levels, defining the question of women and fiction as being three inextricable questions: the first level describes women's nature and what they are like, the second one refers to the relation between women and the fiction they write and, finally, the third one follows women and what is written about them in men's literature. The author's conception on the ideal scenery that facilitates writing is clearly expressed in the title *A Room of One's Own*. Virginia Woolf becomes more specific with her famous word "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." (Woolf, 1945:2). Thus, the room is a symbol of a very benefic and intimate space which offers the liberty to create art in a time when women had no opportunities or legal rights. The use of the modal verb *must* emphasizes the idea of financial independence women should benefit from, as well as the real need of that private, isolated, solitary space represented by the room.

Throughout the text, Virginia Woolf appeals to imaginary characters in order to express her views, also she creates various sceneries to underline the main ideas about the differences between men and women, about education and financial issues etc. The whole essay examines whether women were capable of producing work of the quality of William Shakespeare, amongst the above mentioned themes. Thus, in the first chapter, the author creates a fictional woman, Mary Beton, emphasizing that the name is of no importance: "call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael, or by any name you please-it is not a matter of any importance." (Woolf, 1945:3). The real need of "a room" is reiterated in a wonderful passage when the narrator goes "fishing" in her mind. While walking around "Oxbridge", she is confronted with a face of horror and indignation as "he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path; only the [male] Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me. "No real harm was done", the narrator says, "still, because of the interruption, her little thought had gone into hiding." (Woolf, 1945:3). Therefore, one might assume that, if such interruptions are frequent for those lacking a room of their own and a sufficient income, it might have an effect on their ability to create.

The false superiority of men if compared to women is a major leitmotif of the essay. To be more specific, there are a few significant scenes from this point of view; the first one refers to different quality food men and women had. At men's college there were sole and partridges "with all their retinue of sauces and salads", while at the women's college "dinner was not good", the narrator says, it consisting of plain soup, cabbages and potatoes. The distinction between the two meals symbolizes the unequal educational opportunities that have existed for men and women. Another pertinent example is when the narrator's access to a public library is denied unless she is accompanied by a man or is given a letter of introduction, thus, the narrator says "that a famous library has been cursed by a woman is of complete indifference to a famous library... never will I ask for that hospitality again..." (Woolf, 1945:4). The first chapter ends with the conclusion about the safety and prosperity of the one sex and the

poverty and insecurity of the other. These thoughts will remain with her throughout the book, and with them, she leaves "Oxbridge".

A melancholic tonality characterizes the opening of the second chapter as "the leaves were still falling, but in London now, not Oxbridge." (Woolf, 1945:14). The scene shifts to London and the scope of the narrator's journey widens. Now she is in the British Museum where the narrator is absolutely overwhelmed by "thousands of questions" such as why men drink wine and women water?", "why one sex is prosperous and the other poor?", "what effect poverty has on fiction?", "what conditions are necessary for the creation of a work of art?" (Woolf, 1945:14). The narrator sees the museum as a symbol of wisdom, the only place where her search for the truth will come to an end "if truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?" (Woolf, 1945:14). To answer all these questions, she looks at books that have been written about women by men, giving a significant example in the book of Professor von X who wrote *The Mental, Moral and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*. She underlines that men's attitude is undoubtedly illogical, unjustified and limited, especially because they are dominant in power, money and influence. "Women", the narrator says, "have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting man as twice his natural size. "Without that power", she observes sarcastically, "probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown." (Woolf, 1945:19). To sum up, in these first two chapters of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf has mainly been focusing on ways in which women have been treated unjustly, either in access to benefits, such as education, or in the way they have been portrayed. Therefore, she suggests that women should think as they like and they should be considered independent human beings.

In the third chapter of *A room of One's Own*, the narrator turns to the witness of history saying that "it would be better to narrow the enquiry and to ask the historian, who records not opinions but facts." (Woolf, 1945:22). She points out that one can learn more about Women and Fiction by taking into consideration what historians have to say regarding the conditions under which women lived in the Elizabethan age, for example. As a result, the reader is introduced in that world's atmosphere characterized by violence and cruelty. On the one hand wives were beaten without recourse, "wife- beating was recognized right of man", daughters were sold into marriage, "the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room". (Woolf, 1945:23). On the other hand, this is also a period in which women become central characters in men's literature and are often referred to in an exalted manner, for example Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth. But the narrator accentuates the idea that these women are fictional, imaginatively, they are of the highest importance, practically, they are totally insignificant. Another well-known moment of this third chapter is when the author invents a fictional character Judith "Shakespeare's sister, in order to illustrate that a woman with Shakespeare's gifts would be denied the same opportunities to develop them because of the doors that were closed to women. In order to emphasize her opinion, the narrator concisely refers to the dramatic life of Judith who is refused any educational opportunities and who finally kills herself after all her life's disappointments. This tragic example demonstrates that women of genius have always existed, but unlike their male contemporaries, few women have been granted the basic material and spiritual conditions to develop their talent.

In the next chapter, Virginia Woolf examines the careers of several female authors, including Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot, considered of a great importance as they leave their marks on the beginning of feminine literature. The essayist also underlines that women are different from men, both in their social history as well as in freedom, and that each of these differences has had important effects on the development of women's writing. With Aphra Behn, for example, who is the first English woman to support herself as a professional writer, we meet "not a woman who was shut among the folios writing without an audience or criticism", but one "who rubs shoulders with ordinary people in the streets." (Woolf, 1945:34). In addition, Mrs. Behn success in the 17th century led to very many women earning money through writing in the 18th and 19th centuries. Referring to the writers in the early 19th century, the narrator wonders why they were all novelists despite their apparent differences in temperament. The answer she finds has its origins in the social role women had, the daily activities being more easily put to use in a novel than elsewhere in fiction. Domesticity, thus, was not always a disadvantage for women.

Jane Austen is another author Virginia Woolf makes reference to, pointing out the idea that the writer may well have been quite content to deal only with the complexity of social life while Charlotte Brontë yearned for wider horizons "I longed for a power of vision", Brontë wrote, "which might reach the busy world... full of life that I have heard but never seen... I desired more of acquaintance with variety of character than was within my reach." (Woolf, 1945:37). A novel has "integrity", the narrator says, it rings true, when it matches in some indirect way with reality, and being unable to experience the fullness of the world, as Brontë lamented she was unable to do, has often compromised the integrity of women's fiction.

In Chapter Five, Woolf considers what is distinctive about women and their writing in the modern era, a period in which there are almost as many books written by women as there are by men, and in which female authors experienced various literary formulas from poems, novels, plays, biographies to books with a scientific, philosophical or economic character. This is a time in which women might be able to make contributions that are only possible because they are women. In the course of the chapter, the narrator considers two such contributions: first, the ability to portray women in a manner which goes beyond the way in which they are characterized by men, second, the skill to present features of men that the last mentioned ones are unable to see about themselves. The vehicle for the author's exploration in this chapter is the fictional "Life's Adventures", by Mary Carmichael, whose work is regarded as significant as "the last volume in a fairly long series... from Lady Winchelsea's poems and Aphra Behn's plays and the novels of the four great novelists." (Woolf, 1945:43). The narrator concludes that men and women can be useful to one another because they are so very different and that they should take benefits from this major distinction, in a positive way.

The final chapter opens and ends with images that stress the writer's literary talent. The beginning of the passage introduces the reader into the atmosphere of a solitary morning in London, on the 26th of October. The impression of an abandoned world is dominant as "nothing came down the street, nobody passed. A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street." (Woolf, 1945:51). The narrator looks out the window and notices a very ordinary sight: a man and a woman come down the street, meet at the corner and get into a cab together. It's a common image, but one that the narrator finds herself investing with a "rhythmical order". It was a picture, she felt, of cooperation, even fusion between the two, and seemed somehow to ease her mind. The image in the taxi suggests to her that "there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the sexes in the body, and they [may need to] be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness." (Woolf, 1945:52). More than that, the narrator makes reference to Coleridge and to what he meant when he said that a great mind was androgynous. She agrees that some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before creation can be accomplished. With this statement, the author leaves the narrative voice returning to her own persona. Virginia Woolf concludes the book with a return to her most famous image, suggesting that Shakespeare's sister lives in the person of the modern woman, and that she can flourish if women face reality and work to make an environment conducive to such a genius: "I told you that Shakespeare had a sister... she died young... she still lives... in you and in me... Shakespeare's sister can be born... she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worthwhile." (Woolf, 1945:60).

To sum up, *A Room of One's Own* is one of the most significant works of feminine literary criticism. Virginia Woolf's essays hardly need any recommendation. They reveal the writer as a complex personality, as a fine and conscientious artist, dealing with themes that are universally human in a fairly modern way. The concern for style is a major characteristic of her work as every single page emphasizes the art of description, the minuteness of analysis, the beauty of the adjective and the originality of expression. Moreover, the writer proves a very wit spirit and mind in the succinct bits of irony and criticism that are noticeable throughout her work.

As Virgil Stanciu emphasized in the book entitled *The Transition to Modernism in English Literature*, Virginia Woolf has had an essential contribution to the development of English literature, being referred to as one of the innovators in literary formula, comparable with James Joyce: "linking the twenties and the thirties, and apparently undisturbed by the turmoil, were the innovators in the literary technique: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, among others. Their activity appears to be the strangest expression of the vivacity and power of literary creativeness." (Virgil Stanciu, 2007:145).

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