VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE CONDITION OF THE WOMAN WRITER IN THE ESSAY 'A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN'

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Abstract

The article deals with the opinions expressed by Virginia Woolf in her essay 'A Room of One s Own' regarding the condition of the woman writer and the obstacles she has to surpass in order to become a creator of valuable, meaningful works in which the author to recognize her own true, innermost identity. The literary theorist Virginia Woolf manages to render her ideas by making an analogy with the social and sentimental life of the human being, where there is a marriage between the opposites. The author also calls for a feminine literature created without a prejudiced mind.

Keywords: modern fiction, the condition of the woman writer, androgynous mind, wealth and education, a room of one's own, feminine literature

Motto:

'(...) for me the signature of a woman writer who is also a feminist writer, is the mark of resistance to dominant ideologies; for the feminist critic the signature is the site of a possible disruption. To insist on a meaning that attacks the signature is to value the challenge it can bring to the institutional arrangements based on its exclusion'.

Nancy Miller, 'Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing',
Columbia University Press, 1988)

The only woman writer who is generally accepted, alongside with T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, a pioneer of modernism wrote not only fiction, but also non-fiction literature: essays, reviews, diaries and she was an important journalist as well.

Though some of the important contemporary literary critics consider that her non-fiction work does not enhance the reputation of the novelist Virginia Woolf, one cannot neglect her ideas, her strive to shape a theoretical body for her opinions on literature and writers.

John Gross, for instance, in his '*The Rise and Fall of Men of Letters*', (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1973, pp 202) considers that: 'The typical Virginia Woolf essay is a brilliant, circular flight which, as criticism, leads nowhere.'.

Other critics' opinion is more cautious and closer to what scientific research means and they admit that: 'What is missing (...) from the industry devoted to Virginia Woolf is an investigation of her essays and journalism alone, and as a corpus, as a body of writing that develops and reveals its own self-determining aesthetic dimensions as well as associated historical environment.' Mark Goldman – '*The Reader's Art*' – book entirely dedicated to Virginia Woolf.

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Virginia Woolf's permanent interest and concern in defining the condition of women writers authoring fiction is to be found in her essays on the work of Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot – writers she considered the most important and most gifted lady authors in English literature. But the essay that best defines her ideas and gathers all Woolf's arguments in favour of a strong, well represented feminine literature is '*A Room of One's Own*', the essay considered till today the first feminist literary essay. The text, written in 1929, is a mere Ars poetica, an ideological Manifesto that deals with the condition of women writers and the impact of it on their literary works, with reference mainly to women authoring novels.

Virginia Woolf's thesis states that a woman, in order to be a writer, needs her own place – a room of her own –, time and financial independence. Only when these three conditions are met is she able to define her own spiritual identity. At the same time, in terms of her inner structure, she also needs the strength and determination to give up her own feminine identity in order to become the creator of works really meaningful.

Virginia Woolf borrowed from Samuel Taylor Coleridge the idea that a writer's identity is necessary an androgynous one. From here she developed the argument by applying it to women writers and she adds to the initial assertion that a woman also has to forget about her sex when she is writing: 'Even so, the very first sentence that I would write here, I said, crossing over to the writing-table and taking up the page headed Women and Fiction, is that it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death.' ('*A Room of One's Own*')

The writer begins her demonstration from the analogy with the social and sentimental life of the human being and she considers that it is perfectly normal for the two sexes to co-operate in intellectual and artistic matters, as well 'And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly, by pausing and looking at a book or two. For here again we come within range of that very interesting and obscure masculine complex which has had so much influence upon the woman's movement; that deep-seated desire, not so much that SHE shall be inferior as that HE shall be superior, which plants him wherever one looks, not only in front of the arts, but barring the way to

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politics too, even when the risk to himself seems infinitesimal and the suppliant humble and devoted.' (*'A Room of One's Own'*)

Woolf supports her theory by giving examples of men writers in the English Letters who only valued and presented the masculine qualities, trying to impose them by describing nothing but the men's world and making use of states of mind unknown to women. The result was that their works are unable to lend themselves to a woman's mind: 'Men who are alone with their Work; and the Flag – one blushes at all these capital letters as if one had been caught eavesdropping at some purely masculine orgy. The fact is that neither Mr. Galsworthy nor Mr. Kipling has a spark of the woman in him. Thus all their qualities seem to a woman, if one may generalize, crude and immature. They lack suggestive power. And when a book lacks suggestive power, however hard it hits the surface of the mind it cannot penetrate within. But whatever the reason may be, it is a fact that one must deplore. For it means – here I had come to rows of books by Mr. Galsworthy and Mr. Kipling – that some of the finest works of our greatest living writers fall upon deaf ears. Do what she will a woman cannot find in them that fountain of perpetual life which the critics assure her is there. It is not only that they celebrate male virtues, enforce male values and describe the world of men; it is that the emotion with which these books are permeated is to a woman incomprehensible. It is coming, it is gathering, it is about to burst on one's head, one begins saying long before the end.' (*'A Room of One's Own'*)

Virginia Woolf gives her point of view in as much as the solution is concerned, namely that of 'a marriage' between the opposites, for the work of art to be impeccably finished and presented to the reader. The reader, in his turn, has to be the owner of a generously open mind if he intends to understand the writer, to perceive all the subtleties in one literary text, and then the revelation, a magic experience may take place: 'Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace. Not a wheel must grate, not a light glimmer. The curtains must be close drawn. The writer, I thought, once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness. He must not look or question what is being done.'

For Woolf the external reality is inconclusive and irrelevant from the artistic point of view. What she calls **reality** (the matter that gives birth to significant literary works) is to be found only in a human being's subjective perceptions and emotions, in his sensitivity. From her point of view it is not the actions that define a character in a novel, but the respective character's innermost universe which has to be explored. She also considers that the modern novel does not need heroes and intricate plots that dissipate the significance and true meaning the author is trying to reveal. As a creator of fiction she managed to illustrate for the reader the kind of novel she militates for in her essays. Her novels show an instable balance between the narrative and the lyrical art in a psychological continuum and not a chronological sequence of the events.

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The two compulsory and of utmost importance conditions to accomplish, in Virginia Woolf's opinion, for a writer to be considered a creator of quality fiction are integrity and intellectual freedom. In order for the above mentioned requirements to be met, a writer has to be well-off and well educated, things which had been for centuries refused to a woman.

'Next I think that you may object that in all this I have made too much of the importance of material things. Even allowing a generous margin for symbolism, that five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate, that a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself, still you may say that the mind should rise above such things; and that great poets have often been poor men. Let me then quote to you the words of your own Professor of Literature, who knows better than I do what goes to the making of a poet. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch writes' ('*The Art Of Writing*', by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch) «What are the great poetical names of the last hundred years or so? Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Landor, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Morris, Rossetti, Swinburne – we may stop there. Of these, all but Keats, Browning, Rossetti were University men, and of these three, Keats, who died young, cut off in his prime, was the only one not fairly well to do. It may seem a brutal thing to say, and it is a sad thing to say: but, as a matter of hard fact, the theory that poetical genius bloweth where it listeth, and equally in poor and rich, holds little truth. As a matter of hard fact, nine out of those twelve were University men: which means that somehow or other they procured the means to get the best education England can give.»' ('*A Room of One's Own*')

The awakening of the women writer's conscience took place in England in the XVIIth century, with Margaret of Newcastle and Lady Wincheslea, exceptional poets whose works were received with hostility by men poets like Pope and Gray. In fact, this hostility was present in the attitude of the entire English society, which made the strive of women to express themselves as artists even more demanding. The cause of this hostility is, in Woolf's opinion, the men's complex since, for centuries, they had been considered as looking glasses for the men around them. Virginia Woolf demonstrates the impediments her forerunners women novelists had to cope with and fight against in the following paragraph.

'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would he unknown. We should still be scratching the outlines of deer on the remains of mutton bones and bartering flints for sheep skins or whatever simple ornament took our unsophisticated taste. Supermen and Fingers of Destiny would never have existed. The Czar and the Kaiser would never have worn crowns or lost them. Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are

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under her criticism; how impossible it is for her to say to them this book is bad, this picture is feeble, or whatever it may be, without giving far more pain and rousing far more anger than a man would do who gave the same criticism. For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgement, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is? So I reflected, crumbling my bread and stirring my coffee and now and again looking at the people in the street. The looking-glass vision is of supreme importance because it charges the vitality; it stimulates the nervous system. Take it away and man may die, like the drug fiend deprived of his cocaine. Under the spell of that illusion, I thought, looking out of the window, half the people on the pavement are striding to work. They put on their hats and coats in the morning under its agreeable rays. They start the day confident, braced, believing themselves desired at Miss Smith's tea party; they say to themselves as they go into the room, I am the superior of half the people here, and it is thus that they speak with that self-confidence, that self-assurance, which have had such profound consequences in public life and lead to such curious notes in the margin of the private mind.'

The conclusion Virginia Woolf reaches is that women writers should – in an ideal situation, she admits – keep creating as they feel and see the world around, without allowing their work biased by anyone's opinion, with dignity, detachment and confidence.

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