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Trabajo Fin de Grado

*She for her*  
**Feminism in Modern  
Literature (Virginia Woolf  
1882-1941)**

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# ***She for Her: Feminism in Modern Literature (Virginia Woolf 1882-1941)***

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**FEMINISM IN MODERN LITERATURE:**  
**Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)**

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**1. ABSTRACT**

Virginia Woolf is considered the founder of feminist literary criticism. She was one of the first women who fought for women rights during the 19th and the earlier 20th century. The aim of this Final Degree Project is to analyze her major critical essay *A Room of One's Own*, comparing it to another of her main works *Orlando*. The unfair position of women in this contemporary society, the importance of their economical independence, the exclusion of working class women and the use of upper classes in literature together with the possible bisexuality of Woolf, are the main points that are going to be developed in this essay.

Key words: Feminism, Victorianism, Modernism, Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*.

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## 2. PART ONE: CULTURAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 VICTORIAN PERIOD

Before starting with the development of the main themes, it would be important to introduce the backgrounds that directly affected the figures involved in this analysis. The Victorian period lasted from the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837, until the beginning of the twentieth century, technically, after her death in 1901. However, there could be other possibilities about the beginning of this era. Some historians of English literature dated the end of the Romantic period and the beginning of the Victorian one with Sir Walter Scott's death in 1832 whilst others associated this change with Lord Byron's death that pointed out the end of Romanticism and therefore the beginning of the Victorian period.

This period was characterized for being a time of broad changes; the advances in technology, medicine and science and the increase of the population from 8.9 to 32.5 million, transformed the country completely. This increase was accompanied by many alterations about how people lived. In huge amounts, people left rural areas and agrarian employments looking for work in the city, most of them in the new northern and midlands centres of industrialization. (*cf.* Greenblat, 2006 (1962)).

England became one of the most solid and prosperous countries in Europe. Apart from the Industrial Revolution and the big amount of movements from rural to urban areas England was an agricultural country. There were still small agricultural communities that were governed by landlords as in the feudal system. Feudalism was the political and social system established in The Middle Ages that consisted in the holding of lands. The land was attended by a vassal in an exchange of military service.

Society in England was feudal although there were many extreme contrasts between the elegant city streets and the miserable areas surrounding lower classes. After turning to nature during the Romanticism, the industrialization forced people to work in the city life, where they lived under abominable conditions because of the pollution generated by the factories. Women, the most harmed by this situation, had to face underpayments and sexual discriminations in their labour environments. In politics, the country experienced many political movements such as liberalism, socialism and feminism.

From the 1870s until the 1940s literature portrays a world that is in transition. This was the time when writers began to revolutionize their ways of writing, questioning about religion, society, race, sexuality and of course, politics.

And now I will hazard a second assertion, which is more disputable perhaps, to the effect that in or about December 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was no sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910 (Woolf, *Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown*: 1924: 2).

In this quote from *Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown*, Woolf makes an emphasis on the change that is being developed not only in literature but also in society. In this essay, she shows the extreme variations that were taking place during the Edwardian period, supporting the aesthetic crisis and implying the unavoidable break of the Victorian conservatism.

Halley's Comet, Tolstoy's death, Freud's writings, the opening in Paris of Stravinsky's ballet "The Firebird", and the provocative exhibition called "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" that absolutely affected some artists belonging to the Bloomsbury group, as in the case of Virginia Woolf, were some relevant facts that took place in 1910. All these innovations in art together with Edward VII's death made the political system of the country unstable. Furthermore, one of the most important historical and political incidents that took place in this century was the First World War, which inspired many authors of the time, becoming one of the main topics in literature. Authors started to write descriptions about themselves, seen as rebels who wanted to break the determined rules established by the Victorian tradition: Modernism had been born. This period brought a radical shift in art and in cultural aesthetics characterized by the replacement of the hope of changing society established in the Victorian period by the melancholy and the hopelessness portrait of the post-World War feelings. Names such as Ezra Pound, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf are part of this extravagant movement in literature.

## 2.2 ADELINE VIRGINIA STEPHEN

*You cannot find peace by avoiding life* – Virginia Woolf.

Adeline Virginia Stephen (1882-1941) was born in London, England. Founder of the modern feminist movement, she is one of the most relevant authors belonging to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She was the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen and Julia Prinsep Duckworth Stephen. Her father was an important figure in her life because of his academic influence: he was a distinguished philosopher and author who founded the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a publication that influenced Woolf when she became a writer.



Fig. 1: Virginia Woolf

Woolf, together with her sister Vanessa, was educated by her parents at home with the help of some private tutors. Her family was characterized for being a little bit complex and controversial; it was formed by children belonging to three different marriages as a consequence of her previous parents' marriages. Her childhood was marked by a list of traumas that affected her mental health. At the age of six, she suffered sexual abuses by two of her half-brothers, George and Gerald Duckworth, sons of first Julia's marriage. Her half-sister Stella died, together with her mother, when she was only thirteen years old, and nine years after also did her father in 1904. Despite of her familiar struggles, Virginia was able to continue her studies at the Ladies' Department of King's College in London until 1901. This college awoke in Virginia her first ideas about the female question. (*cf.* Kirkwood, 1988: 1-25).

After her father's death, she suffered one of her typical breakdowns and she tried to kill herself for the first time. Vanessa and Virginia decided to move from their household in Kensington to Bloomsbury: "What a flourish I began 1924 with! And today, for the 165<sup>th</sup> time, Nelly<sup>1</sup> has given notice- Won't be dictated to: must do as other girls do. This is the fruit of Bloomsbury" (Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume Three*, 1980: 3); this

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf mentions Nelly Boxal, Woolf's family servant since 1916. She took her with them when they moved to Bloomsbury in 1924. (*cf.* Woolf, 1980: 3).

neighbourhood gave the name to the famous artistic association, The Bloomsbury Group. Some of its members, apart from Virginia Woolf, were John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Foster and Lytton Strachey. This group became an attractive destiny for many intellectual figures such as Arthur Waley, Roger Fry and the unique Virginia Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West. They met in 1922 and they began an affair. Their relationship lasted until the 1930s. In 1912, eight years after Leslie's death, Woolf got married with the economist and young writer Leonard S. Woolf and her husband founded in 1917 the Hogarth Press which performed an important role in the English war and in experimental literature. *Two Stories* by L. and V. Woolf was one of its most relevant volumes, together with other publications of books such as *Prelude* by Katherine Mansfield or *Poems* by T. S. Eliot. A curious fact about this press is that they published T. S. Eliot's works but they did not help James Joyce with his *Ulysses*; Woolf and Joyce did not get along very well: "I don't suppose you know how separate I feel myself from all my contemporaries" and she continues explaining in her diary by adding: "What d'you think of Wyndham Lewis, of Joyce? (V.) I don't like scolds. I like old men of 80 like Moore & Yeats who have kept their minds working" (Woolf, 1980: 242).

In the 1920s Woolf wanted to break the conservative canon established in literature by the Victorians and she published *Jacob's Room* in 1924. She also wanted to make an emphasis in the differences between the Modernism and Victorianism with the publication of her essay "On or about December, 1910". In 1932, after Lytton's death, the Bloomsbury Group started to disappear. Together with the death of another member of the group, Roger Fry, most of Woolf's friends died, which led to the deepest depressions that she suffered along her life-time. She lost her confidence as a writer when she wrote *Between the Acts* in 1941. With the feeling of not being able to write anymore or to find any reason to stay alive, she wrote a letter to her husband in which she explained her reasons for committing suicide. Finally, she killed herself by filling her coat's pockets with stones and throwing herself to the River Ouse. Her body was found a month later.

During her life time, Virginia Woolf wrote novels as well as essays. Her literary career started in 1900 when she published her first journalistic writing about the Brontë family. Her first novel was *The Voyage Out* (1915). Her profession as a writer reached its peak during the time she worked for the Hogarth Press. *The Voyage Out* was followed by many other publications such as *Night and Day* (1919), *The Mark on the Wall* (1921), *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), *Jacob's Room* (1924), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Light House* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *A Room of One's Own* (1929), *The Waves* (1931) and *Between the Acts* (1941).

### 2.3 A MODERNIST LANDSCAPE

About her literary style, Woolf was influenced not only by the modern tradition but also by the Victorian literature as a consequence of the contact that her family had with this period. As mentioned before, Woolf was the founder of feminist literary criticism. She broke the canon established in the Victorian period and set up a new way of seeing literature under a modernist point of view. Modern literature split the traditional ways of feeling the world. Experimentalism was one of its main virtues, together with individualism. The First World War was the stimulus for the birth of this new tradition and as explained above, it opened many fresh landscapes that authors such as Virginia Woolf or James Joyce portrayed in their literature.

The employment of modern techniques such as inner monologues, subjectivism in the narration, the psychological access to the character's minds, the development of taboo topics and the famous and troublesome stream of consciousness, were some innovations that Virginia Woolf applied in her writings. Putting an extra emphasis on this last concept, stream of consciousness could be briefly defined as a literary technique that consists on the narrative representation of the characters' thoughts and feelings. Characterized by the lack of organization and structure, some of its brave precursors were Laurence Sterne<sup>2</sup>, James Joyce, William Faulkner, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf.

As a consequence of her continuous dissatisfaction with the way of seeing literature and also the world at the Victorian period, she decided to create her own technique that expressed her own and personal vision of life. Her several depressions and her mental illness contributed in her way of perceiving literature, adopting a different perspective. The aim of her novels was the exploration of the unknown, the forbidden, and the inner thoughts that during the Victorian literature, authors were not allowed to describe. That is why in most of her novels what the reader is going to find is an exploration of the characters' consciousness, having access to their minds and even empathizing with them. Homosexuality, feminist critiques, female relations, lesbian erotic themes, sexual events and the critic to the male gender are some of the main subjects that Woolf reflected in her works. All these topics and modern techniques could be found not only in her novels but also in her personal diaries and letters that she wrote during her life time:

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<sup>2</sup> *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767) by Laurence Sterne is one of the first works which presents this innovative literary style of narration.



Last night we dined at 3 Albert Road Mary's new villa. I like the new year to begin with warm friendly feelings—& it was a superb dinner. There were the children too, a nice girl & boy; a girl with lovely *woman's* eyes, sympathetic, startled; & wild like a girl. (I want to begin to describe my own sex.) What do I mean about the expression? Extreme youth, & yet, one left, this feeling has been existing forever, very feminine (Woolf, 1980: 3).

In this extract from her personal diary, dated in 1925, the reader can appreciate a few characteristics typical from Woolf's writing style. Apart from the use of the stream of consciousness to create a portrait of what she is thinking about in the text, she employs rhetorical questions, personal opinions and she also mentions some of her favourite themes to exploit in her literature: femininity and sexuality.

#### **2.4 WOOLF'S REVELATIONS: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE, VITA SACKVILLE-WEST AND OTHER PERSONAL ISSUES**

*As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking* – Virginia Woolf.

There were many women who wrote relevant works along the history of English Literature. It could be said that the first manifestations of women as writers appeared in the Medieval Period. During the Renaissance and the Restoration periods, the number of female writers increased and it was during the Victorian and Modern stages when they reached their highest peak. Many of these authors<sup>3</sup> were feminist but nobody defined and supported this idea like Virginia Woolf did. It must be taken into account the fact that she expressed her ideas about the conception of the world in a very tense period of time: the transition from the conservatism tradition that characterized Victorianism to the liberalism of the Modernism.

Woolf was undoubtedly concerned with the problem of women's access to the labour and academic world because she, herself, experienced these struggles in her own house. She never received an education at the university while her brothers and half-brothers did.

Another female question that she wanted to change was the inequality between men and women in marriages. This idea is partially portrayed in her work *To the Light House*, in which the main characters are related to the figure of her parents. This monopoly that men applied towards women is criticized in one of her essays previously mentioned: *A Room of One's Own*, in which she exemplifies this imbalance between both genders by using the

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<sup>3</sup> Referring to some of the authors that Woolf mentions in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë or Christina Rossetti; they were identified as female writers with slight feminist inclinations in their literature.

figures of Shakespeare and his sister Judith, among others. Finally, sexuality was the most exploited theme by Woolf in her works.

As explained before, Virginia Woolf married Leonard Woolf. However, at the same time, she had an affair with Vita Sackville. It could be said that she was not only in favour of expressing her sexual desire for men but also for women. This involvement of the author with Vita influenced her literature, making homosexuality one of her main topics in many of her writings. Nevertheless, this idea of sexual liberalism is going to be explained below.

*But oh my dear, I can't be clever and stand offish with you: I love you too much for that.* –  
Vita Sackville-West.

Something changed in Virginia's conception of her inner life when she met Vita Sackville-West at the Bloomsbury Group. They met in 1922 and even though both women were married, they started an affair that lasted more than eight years. "I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia. I composed a beautiful letter to you in the sleepless nightmare hours of the night, and it has all gone: I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way" (Sackville-West, 1926).

Victoria Mary Sackville-West (1892-1962) was born in London. She belonged to an aristocratic family formed by Victoria Sackville-West and Lionel Edward Sackville-West. She married Sir Harold Nicolson in 1912 when she was 27 years old. Their marriage was a little bit uncommon by the time they were living; in other words, it was an open-marriage. Both of them were allowed to have sexual relationships with different people.



Fig. 2: Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West

When they joined the Bloomsbury Group these sexual encounters with other people became a daily life habit. Sir Harold had homosexual relationships with some of the artists belonging to this group and so did Vita<sup>4</sup>. Since the moment Woolf and Sackville met for the first time at a dinner party in 1922, they started sharing letters. At first sight, it seemed that Woolf did not get impressed by her but as the time went by, Vita's intelligence, beauty and

<sup>4</sup> (cf. Glendinning, 1984).

her aristocratic heart starting to call Woolf's attention as it could be appreciated in the following quote extracted from Virginia Woolf's diary:

*Monday 7 December (1925)*

Well it is partly that evil Vita. No letter. No visit. No invitation to Long Barn. She was up last week & never came. So many good reasons for this neglect occur to me that I am ashamed to call this a cause for weeping. Only if I do not see her now, I shall not –ever: for the moment for intimacy will be gone, next summer. And I resent this, partly because I like her; partly because I hate the power of life to divide (Woolf, 1980: 48).

It is in 1925 when Woolf realizes that she really misses Vita during her absence, to such an extent that she recognizes her affection to Sackville. Even though she was married, they became lovers.

Her relationship became closer and closer as days passed: “I like her & and being with her, & the splendour –she shines in the grocers shop in Sevenoaks with a candle lit radiance” (Woolf: 1980: 52). It is in one of the letters that they used to share where Virginia shows that she was falling in love with her: “I have been dull; I have missed you. I do miss you. I shall miss you. And if you don't believe it, you're a long eared owl and ass” (Woolf, 1926)<sup>5</sup>. Vita became an essential figure in Woolf's life, being her inspiration for writing one of her most important works: *Orlando* (1928), in which lesbian themes costumed as metaphors appear.

About Vita's literary career, some of her most important publications were her autobiographical novel *The Edwardians* (1930) and *All Passion Spent* (1931). Her literature was characterized by containing many sensual and erotic connotations.

In spite of the influence of Vita's figure and the female questions in Woolf's literature, it would be important to highlight other occurrences that directly affected Woolf's life and works: her mental illness and her suicide. Her childhood was not easy at all. She had to suffer her father, mother and sister's loss apart from the sexual abuse from two of her half-brothers. Her familiar struggles produced on her terrible breakdowns and depressions. To these issues, it is also added the dissolution of the Bloomsbury Group that also increased Woolf's depression, driving her into a terrible existential crisis during her last years of life.

Many of the members belonging to this literary group died during the 1930s and Woolf, desolated, started to think that she had lost her gift of writing. Without being able of writing any coherent passage, she decided that there were no more reasons to stay alive so she

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<sup>5</sup> This quote belongs to the letters that Virginia Woolf and Vita Sakville-West shared during their affair. See the references in the bibliography at the end.

attempted against her life trying to drown herself but she failed. However, after writing a letter to her husband explaining the reasons of her suicide, she tried again to kill herself and this time she succeeded.

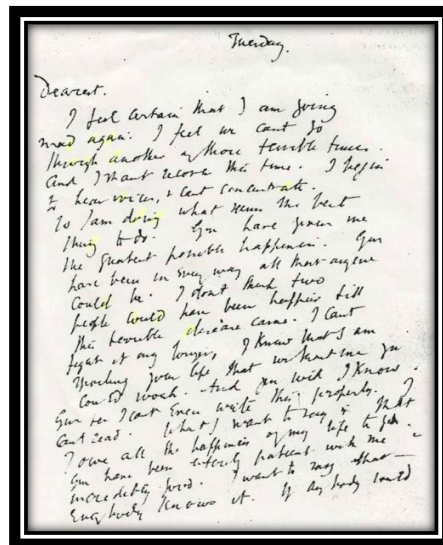


Fig. 3: Virginia Woolf's suicide note to her husband.

Dearest,

I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer (Woolf, 1941)<sup>6</sup>.

Virginia Woolf's body was found on April 18<sup>th</sup> and a few days later, she was cremated. Her husband, Leonard published her diaries after her death and took care of her writings until the day of his death: "If I died, what would Leo make of them? He would be disinclined to burn them; he could not publish them. Well, he should make up a book from them, I think; & then burn the body (Woolf, 1980: 67).

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<sup>6</sup> Quote extracted from *Virginia Woolf's Handwritten Suicide Note: A Painful and Poignant Farewell* (1941).

### 3. PART TWO: INTRODUCING WOOLF'S LITERARY CREATIONS

#### 3.1 *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN* (1929)

*A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction – Virginia Woolf.*

Virginia Woolf's critical essay was written between the years 1928-1929. *A Room of One's Own* is a thesis in which Mary Beton, Seton, Carmichael or any kind of name that the reader wants to give to the voice of the essay, explains her investigation about the female question at Oxbridge. "Mary" in her research uses figures such as Christina Rossetti, Rebecca West, Jane Austen, Mary Carmichael or Shakespeare to exemplify the social exclusion of women by the time she was living. She also uses as an example her personal experiences at Oxbridge College in which women and men are not seen as equals.

It has been very difficult to classify the characters of this work due to the fact that it is a critical essay in which the main voice exposes her feminist ideas and critics so there are a lot of literary figures that the narrator mentions along her criticism. This variety of characters could be grouped in two main different groups: female and male characters. Although it is almost impossible to mention all of them, it would be important to highlight the following names:

- ❖ The person who gives voice to the thesis. It is supposed to be a woman because of the numerous references to the feminine gender that she gives along the whole work. The "I" character is named as Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name that the reader may want to use: "Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please – it is not a matter of any importance)" (Woolf, 1929: 6-7). She is the one who researches for more information to support her theory about the inequality between women and men. She is Virginia Woolf hidden under an anonymous and invented name and she narrates the story in first person narrator.
- ❖ Mary Seton is a real student and a narrator's friend who attends Fernham College. This woman is named as one of the fictional names that Virginia wanted to give to the narrator of the essay.
- ❖ Mary Seton is the narrator's aunt and she has the responsibility of supporting her economically speaking.

- ❖ Mary Carmichael is the novelist that Woolf uses for backing her theory about the sexual liberation of women by mentioning her book *Life's Adventure*.
- ❖ Judith Shakespeare. Probably one of the key characters of this thesis. William Shakespeare's sister who suffers discrimination in her own family just for being a woman. The narrator reproaches the fact that Judith, just for the fact of being a girl, has no right of receiving any kind of academic education, even though she was as intelligent as her brother William Shakespeare.
- ❖ Mr. A is one of the few male characters involved in this narration together with The Beadle, a security official who works at Oxbridge.

Virginia Woolf makes use of these characters for a reason: almost all of them develop an important role associated to what she wants to expose in her essay; for example, in the case of Woolf's fictional character Mary Beton, main protagonist of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf presents through her the main point of her thesis: "I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions - *women and fiction* remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems" (Woolf, 1929: 6). Then, characters such as Mary Carmichael, who represents the importance of an economical support mostly for women, or Judith Shakespeare, who portrays the imbalance between both genders and the controversial androgyny of his brother, have also their relevance in the narration. As it can be noticed, the majority of them are female characters but apart from these names, Woolf employs a list of male and female authors together with their correspondent works to elaborate her thesis: Christina Rossetti, Jane Austen, Joanna Baillie, Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Russell Mitford, Charlotte Brontë or Rebecca West among many others.

Coming back to Woolf's literature, one of the main characteristics of this essay is that it belongs to the Modern period. At the beginning of this analysis, it has been clarified the meaning of the term Modernism. However, it would be necessary to point the modern features that Woolf employs in this critical text. Firstly, the obvious use of the first person narrator together with a subjective point of view, are two of the main aspects that should be taken into account. As René Descartes said "Cogito ergo sum", meaning "I think, therefore I am", or "I am thinking, therefore I exist" (*cf.* Descartes, 1637: 16), the base of subjectivism consists on focusing on individual experiences and feelings instead of believing in an objective perspective. This theory has been an important influence in Modernist and Postmodernist Literature in the sense that the main characters or subjects are governed by their emotions, feelings, intuitions or mystical experiences. *A Room of One's Own* is narrated under a

women's point of view; the "I" character or the voice of the text is the one who explains the hypotheses and ideas about the female question by using literary examples that support her theories: "I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money" (Woolf, 1929: 6). The narration is influenced by the voice's own point of view. The way she has to express those examples and theories clarifies the characteristic subjectivism in this narration.

Irony is another important modernist feature that should be mentioned in this part of the analysis. Woolf's work is full of irony. Through it, the author communicates serious ideas and of course, critics about the inequality between both genders: "We burst out in scorn at the reprehensible poverty of our sex. What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us? Powdering their noses? (Woolf, 1929: 22). The ironic questions and commentaries about women are, obviously, critiques to the society of the time and to the unfair position of women. She questions the facts that took them to that improper situation and she wonders that maybe it was their mothers' fault that did not do anything to change these conditions in the past. However, the most ironical concepts about this narration are the use of a woman as a narrator for the story, together with the fact that Woolf is always addressing women in her thesis: "I turned the page and read... I am sorry to break off so abruptly. Are there no men present? Do you promise me that behind that red curtain over there the figure of Sir Chartres Biron is not concealed? We are all women you assure me?" (Woolf, 1929: 112). The narrator, as a woman, wants to change the unfairness of the female situation in a world dominated by male figures: "I had been drawing a face, a figure. It was the face and the figure of Professor von X engaged in writing his monumental work entitled *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*" (Woolf, 1929: 32). The lines that follow this quote are a kind of claim dressed up with a costume made of irony. Woolf criticizes the atrocity that this author commits in his work by describing the image that she has already drawn: "His expression suggested that he was laboring under some emotion that made him jab his pen on the paper as if he were killing some noxious insect as he wrote, but even when he had killed it; and even so, some cause for anger and irritation remained" (Woolf, 1929: 32-33).

Finally, it is essential to mention the famous modern feature called stream of consciousness. This type of narration consists on narrating the story throughout an autonomous monologue in which the narrator's inner mind is expressed. All the narrator's thoughts, feelings and opinions are portrayed in the text as if, somehow, he or she was

thinking out loud. This method was one of the main characteristics of the celebrated modernist author James Joyce. In Joyce's works, as for example in his *Ulysses*, he reproduces perfectly this stream of consciousness literary technique. In Virginia Woolf's narration, there could be found many examples of this narrative style:

As I regained the path the arms of the Beadle sank, his face assumed its usual repose, and though turf is better walking than gravel, no very great harm was done. The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that in protection of their turf, which has been rolled for 300 years in succession, they had sent my little fish into hiding (Woolf, 1929: 8).

The "I" character is stopped by a parish officer in Oxbridge for being on the lawn of the college. Women are forbidden to be there and as a consequence of this interruption, the main character forgets completely the idea she was thinking about before. She is sure about the fact that the idea was not as important as the reader may think. However, this lost idea will never come back: "What idea it had been that had sent me so audaciously trespassing I could not now remember" (Woolf, 1929: 8).

Dealing now with the ideological dimension of the work, it must be mentioned that there is no heteroglossia<sup>7</sup> in a superficial level. The heteroglossic feature of a text simply means that there are different ways of narrating the story, including different narrators and perspectives. However, in this essay, Virginia Woolf, personified as Mary Seton inside the plot, is the only one that has the right of exposing her opinions and ideas without allowing other characters to do so. Although it is true that Woolf mentions and includes some theories and opinions from other authors to contrast them with her own arguments, she never allows them to form part of her essay in a direct way: "Every page in my notebook was scribbled over with notes. To show the state of mind I was in, I will read you a few of them, explaining that the page was headed quite simply, WOMEN AND POVERTY, in block letters;" (Woolf, 1929: 30) and she continues by adding some of her notes that she used to write in her personal notebook:

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<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin (cf. 1934-1935: 262) defines heteroglossia in his *Discourse in the Novel* (1934-1935) as "[t]he internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups".



Strength of affections of,  
Vanity of,  
Higher education of,  
Shakespeare's opinion of,  
Lord Birkenhead's opinion of,  
Dean Inge's opinion of,  
La Bruyère's opinion of,  
Dr. Johnson's opinion of,  
Mr Oscar Browning's opinion of, ...  
(Woolf, 1929: 31).

No matter how many authors she mentioned along her essay, her point is clear from the beginning until the end and it is not going to be changed by any of these author's arguments, although they add some kind of debate for Virginia Woolf and of course, for the readers.

The narrator shows to the reader in a direct way her own point of view by using different modal structures such as modal auxiliaries, sentence adverbs, evaluative adjectives, verbs of knowledge and evaluation and verbal sentiendi. "His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path" (Woolf, 1929: 8); this use of verbs helps the reader to sympathize with the character's feelings and make easier their involvement in the essay: "Certainly it was a shock (to women in particular with their illusions about education, and so on) to see the faces of our rulers in the light of the shell-fire" (Woolf, 1929: 17).

The psychological dimension is characterized by the internal narration. As illustrated above, the main voice of the story is the narrator herself. The use of the first person narrator, the subjective points of view, the access to the main character's mind and the stream of consciousness formed the main elements of the psychological analysis of this work.

To conclude this formal development of Woolf's essay, it would be important to mention its speech and thought presentations together with some examples that can be found in the text. The main speeches and thoughts that Virginia Woolf uses in her narration are indirect speech and indirect thought. The employment of these speech and thoughts presentations creates a deeper subjectivism in descriptions and gives more importance to the narrator than to the other protagonists that appear in the text: "But for my part, I agree with the deceased bishop, if such he was – it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius" (Woolf, 1929: 50).

## 4. PART THREE: ANALYSIS OF WOOLF'S MAIN THEMES AND COMPARISONS WITH *ORLANDO*

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

*Sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought –*  
Virginia Woolf.

Water has been characterized as a female symbol by many critics<sup>8</sup> along the history of symbolism. It is important to highlight the use of this element not only in her works, as for example in *A Room of One's Own*, but also its influences in her private life: Virginia committed suicide by throwing herself to a river. This interpretation of water will help to introduce and to summarize the contents that will appear in the following explanations. The head of these topics could be summed up in just one concept: femininity. Chevalier and Gheerbrant divided water into two main groups: superior water (rain) and inferior water (sea and rivers). This conception of water could be applied to the differences established between both genders: superior water will be associated with the powerful and superior male gender whilst the inferior ones will correspond with the female or weak gender and its inferiority in comparison with the other sex. (cf. Ráez, 2015: 124-125) This inferiority of the female gender is one of the main ideas that are going to be explained in this section together with some other topics.

The exclusion of working-class women, the association of this subject with the importance given to the space and the significance of the economical acquisition, are three first connected topics that will be explained in initial position. The following theme will deal with a brief description about the figure of Shakespeare in Woolf's work, making a comparison of his image in both *A Room of One's Own* and in her *magnum opus Orlando*. Finally, in the last part of this passage, women will be the main protagonists again. Homosexuality will become the subject matter at this point, associating this concept with Woolf's private life and her relationship with Sackville. Focusing on the literary figure of Mary Carmichael, in chapter five of *A Room of One's Own*, Mary's fiction characters Chloe and Olivia are going to take an important role in the development of this sexual interpretation: "Chloe liked Olivia...Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own

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<sup>8</sup> Some of these critics mentioned above were Bachelard, Chevalier and Gheerbrant, Cirlot, Kalnická or Schneider. (cf. Ráez, 2016: 124).

society that these things sometimes happen. *Sometimes women do like women*” (Woolf, 1929: 81).

## 4.2 EXCLUSION OF WORKING CLASS WOMEN IN WOOLF’S WORKS

*One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well* – Virginia Woolf.

In the previous part, the aim of *A Room of One’s Own* has been summarize: its main characters and some of its formal aspects. However, it is necessary to make an emphasis in other techniques such as the form of metaphor that Woolf employs to avoid, somehow, what she is really criticizing. The use of an impressionistic method of writing and how she wanders in her explanations are some characteristic features of this author. One of these hidden topics is the exclusion of working-class women. In *A Room of One’s Own* the “I” character clearly presents a kind of rejection to working-class women. Woolf’s omission of lower social classes is contradictory to what she is trying to criticize during her whole essay: she pretends to make a critic about the unfair position of women throughout history by excluding, at the same time in her narration, part of this female family.

This discrimination and also her materialistic conception of the world are represented in many of her works; one good example that portrays these features is one of her short stories: *The Duchess and the Jeweller* (1938), in which the main character, Oliver Bacon, is a sophisticated jeweller whose past was not as successful as his present. He came from a poor family but step by step he became one of the most well-known jewellers in England. The figure of a higher class woman appears when the plot focuses on the second character, The Duchess Lambourne. Here comes Woolf’s use of women belonging to higher classes: “Then she loomed up, filling the door, filling the room with the aroma, the prestige, the arrogance, the pomp, the pride of all the dukes and Duchesses swollen in one wave” (Woolf, *The Duchess and the Jeweller*, 1938: 3). The Duchess’s function in the story is to manipulate the jeweller. She cheats on Oliver when she sells to him fake pearls in an exchange with a romantic encounter with her daughter Diana, another woman who belongs to the aristocracy. Woolf represents a clear battle between both sexes “they were friends, yet enemies” (Woolf, 1938: 3), and she also makes an emphasis on the importance of the economic purchase and of belonging to higher-social classes by giving the plot’s strength to two rich women that control the situation along the whole story: “Oliver stretched out and took one of the pearls between

finger and thumb. It was round, it was lustrous. But real was it, or false? Was she lying again? Did she dare?" (Woolf, 1938: 3). To clarify the value that Woolf gives to economy and to higher social classes, she also employs flashbacks narrated by Oliver himself about his past with the purpose of showing the reader the evolution from an extreme poverty to a prosperous but foolish present; and by foolish it means that Oliver has been cheated by a woman. As a consequence he does not represent the social influence and power that men stereotypically had towards women: "Are they false or are they real?" asked Oliver, shutting his private door" (Woolf, 1938: 4). Oliver is referring to the fake pearls that the Duchess has given to him; so apart from the materialistic connotations this quote shows the smartest part of the female gender, being superior to the male one: "And again he was a little boy in the alley where they sold dogs on Sunday" (Woolf, 1938: 4).

In spite of all these aspects presented in the short story, the main point of this text is the importance of The Duchess Lambourne and her daughter, both rich and smart women. The absence of women belonging to lower-classes as characters of the plot is obviously noticed in this story but also in other Virginia Woolf's works such as, for example, in *Orlando* (1928), which is going to be illustrated afterwards in relation with other topics.

Coming back to *A Room of One's Own* and in order to explain the elitist but probably accidental point of view that Woolf employs in her essay, it would be necessary to pay attention to Woolf's background. The judgement towards lower-class women in society could be a consequence of the life-time influences that she experienced. As has been noted before Virginia Woolf was a lady belonging to a high position in the Victorian society although her success went down when her father died and she had to move to another neighbourhood belonging to the upper-middle class. Nevertheless, Woolf was considered a woman with privileges because she had the right of studying at home without being forced into domestic charges. The influence of her Victorian family was probably one of the main causes of this exclusion to working class women.

What Woolf does during her essay is to focus on these inequalities between men and women but only having into account women belonging to her own social class. As a consequence, many women are excluded in the sense that they do not take part in this analysis: "But these contributions to the dangerous and fascinating subject of the psychology of the other sex –it is one, I hope, that you will investigate when you have five hundred a year of your own –were interrupted by the necessity of paying the bill" (Woolf, 1929: 38). The materialistic point of view employed in this quote illustrates the emphasis on the importance

of belonging to a high or middle-social class and also the significance of having a good job and a great salary.

In the analysis above it has been mentioned the possible influence of her family as a main cause of this type of discrimination. However, there could be another possibility such as the large number of economical developments that took place during the Victorian Period and that produced a huge change in its society. At the beginning of this essay, it was explained that the Victorian Period was characterized by many economical, social and political changes. The processes of urbanization and industrialization were some of these alterations produced during this period. Many people had to move from their agricultural areas to the urban and modern cities if they wanted to find a job in the new factories settled in the main cities. The social class most affected by those changes was the middle-class. Probably, this idea of changing their way of life also altered the way of writing of many authors as happened to Woolf. The importance of the middle-class was established by their merits and their worthiness instead of being given by birth as it happened in higher classes. Woolf grew up in a family that did not have to suffer the struggles of fighting day by day to get merits because she had them already since the moment she was born. People belonging to the middle-class were the ones that had to work in factories and to suffer the most.

At the same time, middle-class women had to take domestic services as assistants in their families: “Up until 1945 domestic service was the largest female occupation and in the typical middle-class household approximately 80% of the domestic staff were women (xv)” (Jayakrishna, 2011: 4). Though Virginia Woolf never suffered this kind of responsibility, in *A Room of One's Own*, she wants to encourage women (never forget that she only worries about wealthy women) to take control of their lives and to make them rise in their social position.

I thought, and find her among her children perhaps or with a piece of embroidery on her knee. —at any rate, the centre of some different order and system of life, and the contrast between this world and his own, which might be law courts or the House of Commons, would at once refresh and invigorate; and there would follow, even in the simplest talk, such a natural difference of opinion that dried ideas in him would be fertilized anew (Woolf, 1929: 86).

This controversy is difficult to understand in the sense that she claims for better rights and equalities for women but she is forgetting part of the female community in her declaration: “At the thought of all women working year after year and finding it hard to get two thousand pounds together, and as much as they could do get thirty thousand pounds, we burst out in scorn at the reprehensible poverty of our sex” (Woolf, 1929: 22). She is talking about the

“poverty of our sex”, making reference to all women who have to work very hard just for a few pounds per year, but, what about real poor women? Those women who did not have the right to work, to earn money or who were locked up in their houses by their husbands: Woolf accidentally excludes them in her literature.

Leaving behind this nonappearance of working class women in Woolf’s works and being more general about all the inequalities that women had to suffer in comparison with men along the history, in *A Room of One’s Own*, she mentions multiple times not only how women have suffered this social discrimination “one does not like to be told that one is naturally inferior of a little man – I looked at the student next to me – who breathes hard, wears a ready-made tie, and has not shaved this fortnight” (Woolf, 1929: 33), but also a strong literary inferiority or, in other words, censorship: “But for women, I thought, looking at the empty shelves these difficulties were infinitely more formidable” (Woolf, 1929: 54). Most female writers were restricted and excluded from the literary world:

But what I find deplorable, I continued, looking about the bookshelves again, is that nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century. I have no model in my mind to turn about this way and that. Here am I asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age, and I am not sure how they were educated (Woolf, 1929: 47).

Some of them hide themselves under male pseudonyms or published their works anonymously.<sup>9</sup> That is why Woolf complains about the lack of literary works written by women until the eighteenth century: “Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman” (Woolf, 1929: 50-51). She continues her debate about the lack of female presence in literature by showing and contrasting some examples of the first Victorian female and feminist writers that got published their works such as Jane Austen and Emily Brontë: “they wrote as women write, not as men write” (Woolf, 1929: 75). Woolf’s feminist and materialistic points of view go together with the significance for women to have private spaces. Here comes the second theme, closely connected to the already explained one.

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<sup>9</sup> Currer Bell, George Eliot or George Sand, all of them women and obliged to use male names if they wanted their works published during the nineteenth century. (cf. Woolf, 1929:52).

### 4.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SPACE: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACES

*Give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave a book one of these days – Virginia Woolf.*

Woolf's idea about promoting women to take control of their own lives is one of the main objectives and characteristics from this work. This thought includes a curious reflection about the restriction of the female gender to the private atmosphere, including both lower and higher classes. Woolf reproduces this discrimination making an emphasis in the differences between having private and public spaces.

Over the years, public spaces were associated to the male gender. Women were restricted to make their lives indoor, working in their home labors whereas men were free to go wherever they wanted to. Although this situation was typical during the Victorianism, these practices changed along the years. At the end of the nineteenth century, women were allowed to go out and shopping, which was one of the most typical activities for the female gender apart from their lives at home. However, only men were able to go out to bars and pubs. What Woolf does in her essay is to turn the tables in her literature by giving another meaning to this symbolism associated to the space. Women have always been oppressed by the male gender. She denounces this situation by creating private spaces in her essay where men are not allowed to enter. It is some kind of claim that criticizes all the times that men had penetrated in women's personal bubble: "In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century" (Woolf, 1929: 54). In this quote, Woolf makes an emphasis on the fact of having a private and quiet room where women could be relaxed without the presence of men. However, this intention is somehow a daydream for the female gender: if they wanted privacy, they would need to have money, so women belonging to low and middle classes would not have the possibility of enjoying this isolation.

In most cases she relates private spaces to independence, intellectual freedom and strength. Women are able to control their own lives when they "have five hundred a year of your own" (Woolf, 1929: 38) and when they have their own personal space where men are not allowed. She announces this concept in the first chapter of her essay: "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 later, "I am going to do what I can to show you how I

arrived at this opinion about the room and the money” (Woolf, 1929: 5-6). Due to the fact that most women had to live under terrible economic situations, Woolf wants to highlight the importance of the money and to relate it with the possession of private spaces. Women belonging to higher social classes had the possibility of acquiring hundreds of pounds per year as well as afford private rooms for them although they were captivated by their husbands. Those private spaces are a symbol of freedom where men are not allowed to enter.

#### **4.4 FAMILIAR ISSUES: WILLIAM AND JUDITH SHAKESPEARE**

*Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare – Virginia Woolf*

In order to defend her theories, Woolf employs different literary figures such as for example the character of Shakespeare, not only in *A Room of One's Own* but also in *Orlando*. Woolf portrays this author as a feminist writer whose works besides are, somehow, incomplete. To make it easier to understand, it would be important to start this analysis by mentioning the introduction of Woolf's essay where the feminist writer exposes some questions about literature, fiction and women's socio-cultural position:

The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light (Woolf, 1929: 5).

In this introductory extract it can be found the key points and obstacles that the essay is going to present.

The exploration of these questions and mysteries about women and fiction and their exclusion in society are cleared up by using her theory about William Shakespeare. Woolf focused her attention on Shakespeare's sister, Judith, who apparently, as has been mentioned in previous sections, was as smart as her brother. The difference is that Shakespeare was able to develop his writing skills while Judith could not because she was a woman:

Meanwhile his extraordinary gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil” (Woolf, 1929: 48-49).



The imbalance between men and women not only in society but also in the literary world is clearly represented in this quote where the unfair treatment towards women is carried by the character of Judith. On the one hand male authors like Shakespeare did not have any kind of problem in publishing his literature because he was a man, but, on the other hand, female writers had to face many difficulties and obstacles to create their literature. They did not even have the right of having any kind of education or privacy and Woolf uses Judith as an example of this situation.

She wanted to make a general overview about the general exclusion of women by using the case of the Elizabethan writer: “Reviewing the story of Shakespeare’s sister as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at” (Woolf, 1929: 51); referring to all women who were accused of being crazy or even worst, witches, just because they wrote or they wanted to write and to form part of the literary world. This social discrimination terrified female writers; seeing their impossibility of publishing their works, they were obliged to isolate themselves from the rest of the world. This fear that women had to experience was not only characteristic in British writers. The figure of the American writer Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), for example, is a nuance about the struggles that women had to face along the history if they wanted their works published. In the case of this American poet, she got published one of her poems, becoming one of her best well-known works during the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> For Virginia Woolf the representations of women in literature have been essential for the incorporation of them to society, in order to make an emphasis in the predominant role of men in literary and cultural traditions.

Apart from the differences established by Woolf between Shakespeare and Judith, the imbalance between both genders is exemplified with the use of other figures. Without moving on from her essay, at the beginning of chapter 3, she describes how she acquired the knowledge for the production of her thesis. In one of her searching for readings, looking for some signals or steps of women in the past she finds a history book:

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<sup>10</sup> *The Author to Her Book* by Anne Bradstreet narrates in iambic pentameter the story about the publication of one of her most well-known poems called *The Tenth Muse* (1650). The poet did not want to publish her poem because she was afraid of been rejected as a consequence of being a woman. However, their friends decided to publish it anyway without her consent.

'Wife-beating', I read, 'was a recognized right of man, and was practiced without shame by high as well as low... Similarly,' the historian goes on, 'the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion (Woolf, 1929: 44).

This comment taken from Professor Trevelyan's *History of England* pictures that women were not only oppressed in the branch of literature but that they also suffered all kind of aberrations, mostly performed by the male figures and by the conservative society in which they were living. Finally, in *Orlando* and also in *A Room of One's Own*, she supports this argument by changing the main character from a man to a woman, in the case of the novel and representing the figure of Shakespeare, the playwright, as an androgynous figure in her essay. These androgynous images highlight the limitations of authors in literature according to their sex, giving an importance to the absence of female roles in this world of art.

#### **4.5 ANDROGYNY: WOOLF'S EXPLORATION OF GENDERS**

*Perhaps the androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than the single-sexed mind – Virginia Woolf.*

The presence of Shakespeare in both works has been a complex and interesting topic for many literary critics.<sup>11</sup> In the previous explanation it has been illustrated the image of Shakespeare as an admirable but incomplete playwright. The term incomplete makes reference to the lack of exploration of women's world in its complete sense: "But Shakespeare does it for pleasure; Mr. A, as the nurses say, does it on purpose. He does it in protest. He is complaining about the equality of the other sex by asserting his own superiority" (Woolf, 1929: 99). Seen as some kind of role model in literature associated with female topics, Shakespeare suffers a deep deficit of knowledge about women. Woolf defends that a perfect state of mind needs to be a mixture of both genders. She supports this idea with the help of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: "Coleridge certainly did not mean, when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a mind that takes up their cause or devotes itself to their interpretation." And she continues by adding: "Perhaps the androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than the single-sexed mind" (Woolf, 1929: 97). What she is trying to defend by exposing these testimonies is that minds are naturally creative and free; the best way of seeing the world of literature is by

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<sup>11</sup> As for example for Julia Briggs in her critical essay *Reading Virginia Woolf* (2006).

considering different perspectives and not allowing the author's sex to create any limitation to the writings: "Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives. But some of these states of mind seem, even if adopted spontaneously, to be less comfortable than others" (Woolf, 1929: 96). Although Virginia tries to see Shakespeare as an androgynous figure, she knows that there are some aspects about his literature that are limited to his male and light sexist point of view: "It is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. It was not born today in England among the working classes." (Woolf, 1929: 50). The use of the word "genius" in this quote seems to be ironical. Probably she is claiming the fact that he is a genius in literature because he was born as a rich man who did not suffer any kind of discrimination or exclusion and who had the right of being educated while her sister did not. To illustrate some of these hypothetical sexist connotations and limitations that may appear in Shakespeare's works, it would be necessary to focus on his *magnum opus Hamlet*, in which its main character, Hamlet, appears to have some struggles with the female gender. Firstly, Hamlet thinks that her mother is guilty for the death of his father and blames her because of her sudden marriage with Claudius. Secondly, Ophelia, who is completely in love with Hamlet, suffers, apart from the bipolar and unstable Hamlet's mood, a terrible lack of affection from his part.

Androgyny is another link between *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*. In *Orlando*, Shakespeare appears as a pattern to follow for Orlando because he thinks that his poetry goes beyond sex. However, the best way of exemplifying this androgyny is by using the change that the main character of this work develops along the story. At the beginning of the plot Orlando is represented as a man, "HE – FOR THERE COULD BE NO DOUBT of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it – was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (Woolf, 1928: 1); but as the reader continuous reading, he becomes a woman: "Even Orlando (who had no conceit of her person) knew it, for she smiled the involuntary smile which women smile" (Woolf, 1928: 141). Orlando seen as a woman represents perfectly the issues that the female gender had to face during those centuries. This change of gender is connected with the topic that follows: sexual freedom.

#### **4.6 SOMETIMES WOMEN DO LIKE WOMEN: WOOLF’S PORTRAIT OF HER OWN SEXUALITY**

*Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women – Virginia Woolf.*

Everyone loves love stories and love affairs. They are passionate, exciting and emotional. Somehow, love affairs wake in readers their deepest and most affectionate parts. Everybody knows that feeling of finishing a love story with a happy ending. Shakespeare said once “Journeys end in lovers meeting”<sup>12</sup> and what a remarkable quote; most stories about love are about people who fall in love with each other. However, not all types of love affairs have been as happy or easy as Shakespeare thought they would be. The LGBT community has suffered persecutions, censorship and all types of oppressions throughout history. There were many famous figures that had to hide their sexuality or their religious beliefs in order not to end with their careers and reputations. The novelist Oscar Wilde and the scientist Alan Turing, among others, were some relevant names that did experience the punishments and bounds that society established towards them by the time they were living. The Age of Enlightenment (1650s – 1780s) was the first step for the approval of homosexual connotations and nudes in literature by using Greek and Roman models. Despite this little progress, homosexuality was still a taboo during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Authors had to be very careful with the introduction of gay themes in their works if they did not want to be imprisoned, to such an extent that they could be punished even with their deaths. Fortunately, for Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville, those difficulties did not directly affect them because they decided to keep their love relationship in secret until the time was right. However, their affair did affect their literature. These two women and the relation with Woolf’s works are going to be the main themes in this last section.

As it was illustrated in the first part of this essay, they shared an affair and, luckily, they did not have to face the oppression that many partners belonging to the LGBT did. Sexual liberalism in the form of homosexuality, bisexuality or heterosexuality, was one of the topics that Woolf explored and studied in most of her writings. Most members belonging to the Bloomsbury group were supporters of gay rights. In fact, many of them considered themselves openly gay. Victoria Sackville-West, who married Sir Harold Nicolson, both of them members of this literary community, was an example of this sexual liberalism because

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<sup>12</sup> This quote belongs to William Shakespeare’s comedy *Twelfth Night*, Act II, Scene III “O Mistress mine, where are you roaming?” (1601-1602).

they shared an open-marriage. In the case of Vita, she started an affair with Virginia Woolf. This relationship was the key point for Woolf's literature: there is an obvious link between her private life and her works.

Focusing on Woolf's private issues and mostly in her association with Vita, Woolf's perspective of seeing the world changed completely when she first met her. Although this part of Woolf's life has been previously explained in a deeper way in Woolf and Vita's biographies, it would be important to remark again some aspects of their relationship by mentioning some extracts from Woolf's diary and quoting some letters that they wrote to each other. These writings explain how they met and how they fell in love little by little, without realizing what it was really happening between them:

*Tuesday 23 February (1926)*

Vita is a dumb letter writer, & I miss her. I miss the glow & the flattery & the festival. I miss her, I suppose, not very intimately. Nevertheless, I do miss her, & wish it were May 10th; & then I don't wish it; for I have such a razor edge to my palette that seeing people often disgusts me of seeing them (Woolf, 1980: 59).

In this quote from her diary, dated 1926, Woolf knew that something in her marriage had changed since the moment she met Vita. In fact, in 1912 Virginia wrote some letters to her husband in which she warned him that she did not feel anything at all for him. On the other hand, with Vita her sexual passion and desire were more than evident as time passed: "Also I like her presence & her beauty. Am I in love with her? But what is love? Her being 'in love' (it must be comma'd thus) with me, excites & flatters; & interests" (Woolf, 1980: 87). They started their relationship as friends and they remained as that for a few years but they finally became lovers in 1925.

It must be mentioned that her love story was not made public until Virginia Woolf died and her diaries and letters were published. Woolf's husband knew about the sexual encounters that both women had but he did not object anything; he wanted her to be happy and that is why in her suicide letter she makes an emphasis on her unconditional love for her husband, who loved and took care of her. Woolf's relationship with Vita inspired many of her works. Concretely speaking, these connections with her private life certainly appear again in both of her main works: in *Orlando* and in *A Room of One's Own*: "But, alas, I had done what I had determined not to do; I had slipped unthinkingly into praise of my own sex" and she

continues “to praise one’s own sex is always suspect, often silly; moreover, in this case, how could one justify it?” (Woolf, 1929: 84-85).

Described as a tireless social and political activist, she fought for women’s rights and also for their right of choosing their own sexuality. In her essay she portrays a lesbian affair and the right of sexual freedom for women throughout Mary Carmichael’s first novel: *Life’s Adventure*. She focuses her attention in two fictional characters called Chloe and Olivia: “Chloe liked Olivia, I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. Cleopatra did not like Octavia. And how completely *Antony and Cleopatra* would have been altered had she done so!” (Woolf, 1929: 81). As can be appreciated, the figure of Shakespeare reappears in this chapter of Virginia’s essay. Woolf creates an hypothetical plot for the work of the playwright by altering the tragedy. Instead of a representation of the negative and antagonist relationships among female characters, “Cleopatra’s only feeling about Octavia is one of jealousy” (Woolf, 1929: 82), she replaces it by imagining the chance of a probable attraction between these two female characters. By exposing the example of Cleopatra, Octavia, Chloe and Olivia, Virginia tries to highlight the fact that hateful relationships among women do not really help for the facilitation of women’s rights.

“Sometimes women do like women” (Woolf, 1929: 81). This affirmation is, somehow, a little bit ambiguous. Woolf affirms in her essay that women could be friends instead of hating each other as in the example in the previous paragraph. However, the extract could be a portrait of Virginia Woolf’s own sexuality: “The truth is I often. I often like women. I like their unconventionality. I like their completeness. I like their anonymity. I like –but I must not run on this way. That cupboard there, –you say it holds clean table-napkins only; but what if Sir Archibald Bodkin were concealed among them? (Woolf, 1929: 109) Woolf’s sexuality and her possible attraction to women are represented in this passage. Living in a society that was clearly tied to a heterosexual canon, Woolf rejects this patron or model in her literature and she creates this new idea about sexual liberalism shown before. Apart from her affair with Vita, another reason that took Woolf to this situation of claiming women sexual liberation could be settled on her childhood. Characterized by a list of traumas, Woolf’s state of mind probably was influenced and strongly affected by the sexual abuses that she suffered by her half-brothers when she was just a child.

One of her most visible and notable narration of her opinion about sexual freedom is represented in *Orlando*. The change of sex that the main character experiences along the story proclaims that kind of love that goes beyond gender boundaries or limits. Settled in the center

of the novel, this change of gender allows Orlando to enjoy both sexual worlds in detail, becoming an androgynous figure and being able to cross the heterosexual border. This main character starts an affair with a Russian princess, Sasha: “It recalled the feeling of indescribable pleasure with which she had first seen Sasha, hundreds of years ago.” (Woolf, 1928: 116) This work is full of lesbian eroticism. She focuses her attention on sexual emotions rather than in physical or specific acts and that is how she creates this metaphor of sex, hiding, in a soft way, all these lesbian connotations. In fact, *Orlando* seems to be inspired by her lover, Vita Sackville-West: “It might be a way of writing the memoirs of one’s own times during people lifetimes. It might be a most amusing book. The question is how to do it. Vita should be Orlando, fantastic” (Woolf, 1980: 157). In the process of writing one of her most memorable novels, she wanted to approach her writing to her personal life by creating a portrait of her lover in the main character of the story. This biographical work represents, as well as Woolf’s love, desire and admiration that she had for Vita, a possible affair that Vita could have had with another woman: Mary Campbell.

Furthermore, apart from the undeniable connection of this story with the author’s personal life, the presence of Virginia Woolf in the novel is also notable. Although the main focus of the analysis is Orlando’s relation with Vita because of their physical resemblance, it can be noticed that she sometimes is consolidated with Orlando. There are some parts along the novel in which both figures became just one person that reflects Vita and Woolf’s romance and Woolf’s fear about being abandoned by her lover: “It was through this accident that Orlando and the Princess became acquainted” (Woolf, 1928: 23).

Her obsession for Vita reflected in *Orlando* and her sexual orientation questioned in *A Room of One’s Own* are the key elements that summarize this last part of the analysis.

## 5. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Along history, women have been oppressed not only in literature but also in their daily lives. Step by step they have been able to introduce themselves into society, marking paths for the different cultural fields. All these changes were achieved thanks to all female figures that fought for their rights and their freedom. An example of this family of female fighters was Virginia Woolf. Traumatized by all the abuses and misfortunes that took place in her childhood, she was brave enough to change the traditional and conservatism perspective of the world by the time she was living. She knew from the beginning what she wanted to claim: freedom to all women and the equality between both genders. *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*, among other Woolf's works, were involved in this feminist impact on society that Virginia developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in England. Characterized for being not only innovative but also controversial, their main themes were homosexuality, androgyny, equality and the end of the hetero-patriarchy. However, one of Virginia's most characteristic techniques was hiding behind metaphors all these taboo issues, in order to avoid censorship and oppressions.

From a personal point of view, Virginia is undoubtedly the founder and the head of what nowadays we call *feminism*. Both of the works that have been mentioned before and analyzed along this essay are, in my opinion, complementary: they reflect, without any doubt, the basis for the construction of a balanced world in which both sexes are seen as equals, without persecutions, discriminations and or any type of abuse.

To conclude, I would like to finish this writing with one of my favorite quotes from *A Room of One's Own* and also to dedicate this B.A. to all victims of the mass shooting in Orlando (12/06/2016): "Here I would stop, but the pressure of convention decrees that every speech must end with a peroration. And a peroration addressed to women should have something, you will agree, particularly exalting and ennobling about it" (Woolf, 1929: 109).



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❖ **IMAGES:**

- ✓ Fig. 1: Virginia Woolf. URL: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/George Charles Beresford - Virginia Woolf in 1902.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/George_Charles_Beresford_-_Virginia_Woolf_in_1902.jpg) (Accessed on 3/04/2016).
- ✓ Fig. 2: Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. URL: <https://static.betazeta.com/www.belelu.com/up/2016/07/o-VITA-AND-VIRGINIA-facebook.jpg> (Accessed on 3/04/2016).
- ✓ Fig. 3: Virginia Woolf's suicide note to her husband. URL: <http://cdn8.openculture.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/handwriting-virginia-woolf-10921544-600-870.jpg> (Accessed on 3/04/2016).