

A Feminist Approach to the Work of Virginia Woolf: Orlando and A Room of One's Own.

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ABSTRACT

The following paper: A Feminist Approach to the Work of Virginia Woolf: *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* focuses on the analysis of two works of great importance, regarding on the feminist vision of her author, applied on her texts. Both texts were highly important for the development of the Feminist Movement in that time, whose influence still remains today.

The main elements and sub elements of this paper are divided in eight different parts. The first section includes a social context, taking into account the cultural and political frame of the author. The second one deals with some biographical aspects of Virginia Woolf, mainly centred on her professional career rather than personal aspects. The third section deals with a brief explanation about the Bloomsbury Group, an intellectual circle that significantly influenced on the works analysed in this paper. The fourth part of this paper gives a wide explanation about the background of Virginia Woolf, one of the first promoters of the Feminist Movement of Modernism. Before the analysis of the chosen works of this essay, the fifth section corresponds with a clear explanation of the whole work of the author.

On the other hand, the sixth point of this essay corresponds with a brief explanation about the two works which will be analysed in the following part of this paper: section number seven. The section number seven consists of a deep analysis of the two main works of this essay: *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*, regarding on the

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feminist point of view of the author applied on her works. The analysis counts with a big number of passages; examples taken from the original text. Finally, the eighth section shows the correspondent reached conclusions which globalise the main important aspects of this essay.

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INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this essay is to give a general feminist approach of two different works written by Virginia Woolf. The principal objectives expected to reach with the reading of this paper is the acknowledge of the world and society by which the author was surrounded. With this purpose, the paper counts with a panoramic vision easily to understand about some very important elements that conditioned the general work of the author: A panoramic vision of her career, a general background of her role as the first promoter of the feminist movement as well as brief and interesting explanation about the influence of the Bloomsbury Group in her work and ideology.

On the other hand, the analysis of the two works of Virginia Woolf corresponds with the second part of this essay. Both analysis deal with the fundamental points of the feminist vision of the author. The analysis of both works has a clear methodical order. Firstly, the work is opened with a gripped title or thesis statement. This title is followed by clear explanations of the particular aspects of Virginia Woolf's ideology. These particular aspects are identified with some features of the novel. This correspondence between the ideological aspects of the author and many characteristics of the contents is very important. In this way, the correspondence helps the reader to understand better what Virginia Woolf thought about Feminism. These points are exemplified in this paper with a large number of passages taken from the original texts.

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1. Context.

1.1. The Socio-cultural and Political Frame of Virginia Woolf.

Virginia Woolf is considered nowadays to be one of the major exponents of Modernism in Britain. In English Literature, a lot of eminent writers are included, such as James Joyce or T.S. Eliot. However, Virginia Woolf is maybe one of the most important writers who left the biggest trace in the experimentation in Modernist English Literature. Modernism was a cultural movement of experimentation in all arts. Modernist writers looked for innovation, trying to get rid of the typical old rules of the Victorian age (1837-1901).

The childhood of Virginia Woolf was greatly influenced, although not directly, by the rules of the social system of that time. This was an age characterised by the austerity in all senses: a society marked by hard work, loyalty and strong religious beliefs. This was a society also marked by a strong patriarchal system, in which women's rights were highly restricted. The role of women was limited to the domestic life: mother and submissive wife. In that time, women were totally separated from the intellectual life, and they could not give their opinion in public. The Modernist movement was a period of changes and experimentation in literature and also among other artistic areas. Women were not included at all in the intellectual circles of society. The Brontë sisters or Jane Austen were examples of women who struggled against the exclusion of women in the world of literature. They first promoted the integration of women in the intellectual life of Britain. On the other hand, some years later, at the end of the First World War, something very important happened.

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Women were first allowed to vote in Britain. (1919). Being allowed to vote was something very remarkable for women because this action let them to become integrated within public life and enabled them to promote their basic rights as women.

1. Virginia Woolf: Biographical aspects.

Adeline Virginia Stephen (London 1882- Lewes, Sussex 1941), (Virginia Woolf) was a very important and influential British writer of the modernist period English literature. She grew up in an environment frequented by intellectual people (artists, painters, etc). Her family belonged to the upper social class of Britain. They had an economically buoyant life. Her father was a very important intellectual. Her parents had always been worried about giving their children a good education. Virginia received an excellent education. She received her schooling at home as along with the rest of her siblings. Adeline Virginia Stephen was constantly surrounded by intellectual people. She was still in contact with the England of the Victorian Period. She married the economist Leonard S. Woolf in 1912 and they both founded the Hogarth Press publishing company in 1917. After writing for some years in her youth, she decided to break away from the canonical rules of the Victorian Period. She was the most important member of the Bloomsbury Group, founded along with her sister Vanessa after the death of her father.

The Bloomsbury Group was an intellectual grouping of artists of all kinds. They were against the canonical rules of the Victorian Period and there was a huge exchange of knowledge among all members of this group, such as T.S. Eliot or Virginia's sister Vanessa Bell. This was a very revolutionary group in all senses. After being influenced by the intellectual figures of Modernism, Virginia published in 1922 *Jacob's Room*.

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However, Virginia Woolf reached her maximum popularity when she published *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928) or *The Waves* in 1931.

These publications established her as one of the most representative figures of the experimental English novel. Another important role which characterised the figure of Virginia Woolf was her deeply interest for the rights of women. She promoted the creation of a female identity. She struggled against the old patriarchal system of the Victorian Period, defending the conditions and rights of women.

2. Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group.

The Bloomsbury Group was a circle of intellectuals of all kind (painters, writers...) created after the death of Virginia Woolf's father in 1904; the group's site was located in the London District of Bloomsbury. Virginia Woolf along with her sister Vanessa Bell and their siblings established this group when their father died in 1904, shortly after the end of the Victorian Period in 1901. Leonard Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey or Duncan Grant had been some of the members of this Group. They were known as the "Bloomsberries". Virginia Woolf was the most influential and important member of this intellectual circle.

The ideology of the Bloomsbury Group refused the canonical rules and values of the Victorian age. For them, Victorian Society was narrow-minded and they promoted several values and new ideals in order to get rid of the strict and decorous life of Victorianism. They had an attitude which was highly liberal and progressive. This group was the only one that was in favour of the rights of homosexuals. They also

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supported the integration of women in the world of arts and they were pacifists. They were in favour of those people who decided live their sexuality openly. Therefore, they supported open marriages and the ideal of each one living his/her sexuality without inhibitions or ideological obstacles.

Virginia Woolf saw herself as being greatly influenced by this circle of intellectuals. In this group, she could express her liberal ideology openly, without prejudices or restrictions for being a woman. Virginia Woolf shared a lot of new ideals with the rest of members of this group. They celebrated parties in which they talked about everything they wanted, sharing their opinions openly. Virginia Woolf contributed a lot in this sense and, for that reason, she is considered the most important member of this revolutionary Group. As it was said before, they supported the integration of women in the world of arts. This was an ideal very important for Virginia Woolf because she was the key figure of the feminist Movement of the period. She strongly believed in the capacity of women to compose literature of other kind of art. Women were able to create art and innovate as well as men. She believed in women as intellectuals. She promoted the idea that women could also travel while they learnt new things, habits and cultures.

3. Virginia Woolf as the key figure of the Feminist Movement.

After the publication of her essays, especially the publication of *A Room of One's Own* in 1922, Virginia Woolf became established as one of the first and most important promoters and symbols of the Feminist Movement. Many people catalogued her as “feminist” in the “bad” and strict sense of the concept. However, she always tried to

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make clear her way of thinking about this aspect: She did not think that women were superior to men. She promoted the equality of genres and thought that women could have the same rights as men because all we are human beings and all we have rights.

The Victorian Age was a period which can be considered to be backward in this sense. Women could not express their opinions in public and education was restricted. Neither could they live their sexuality openly because this would be like treason for the pure and decorous life of Victorian values. Victorian Society was full of prejudices, all of these deeply rooted, and these were mainly caused by the strong religious beliefs of the age. Virginia Woolf wanted to break away from these values and defended the basic rights of women. She was almost concentrated on the intellectual life of women. Virginia Woolf did not consider women superior to men. In fact, she thought that both sexes only belonged to different natures but we should appreciate them in an equality manner. She promoted the mixing of these two different natures, promoting the equality in gender.

The following passage shows an opinion about Virginia Woolf taken from the book *Feminist Destinations*, written by Rachel Bowlby in 1988:

“Among feminist critics who approve her work, she is seen as exemplary both in the sense of exceptional- a unique heroine, a foremother, a figurehead – and as an example, in some way representative or typical of something called “women’s writing”. Among those who dislike her work, it is taken as not matching up to the criteria of women’s writing, but fitting in all too well with the patriarchal norms, literary or social, to which authentic women’s writing should by definition be opposed”

(Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf. Feminist Destinations*. 1988: 12)

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4. The Literary Work and Influences of Virginia Woolf.

In 1905, Virginia Woolf started to write professionally. After writing a large number of essays, she began to establish herself as novelist. Her first novel was *The Voyage Out* (1915). The first novels and essays she wrote in her professional career did not help her to establish herself as a well-known novelist.

However, Virginia Woolf started to be influenced by many writers and intellectuals belonging to the Modernist Period: Henry James or the philosopher Henri Bergson for instance. In this way, Virginia Woolf could feed her imagination and her undoubtedly talent. She began to break off the canonical style of the Realism (s.XIX). Realist novels were focused on a particular action, in which the time-line had to be accurate. These novels had a fixed plot and the story shall be accurate as well as the role of characters. However, Modernist writers wanted to make the difference and to break with all the canonical and old devices used by the Realist writers. The main feature of Modernist Literature was the experimentation. They wanted to innovate and renovate the old-fashioned style of Realist Literature. *Jacob's Room* (1922) was the first experimental novel written by Virginia Woolf. This work promoted her career as experimental novelist. However, she actually reached great popularity when she published *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1925.

One of the most important and revolutionary devices used by V. Woolf was the device called *stream of consciousness*. This device was very innovative and typical in the experimentation of modernism. This device usually showed entirely the emotions of characters. The reader had a big knowledge of all what characters felt and

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thought during the novel. A good example of Virginia Woolf's novel in which *stream of consciousness* device can be found notoriously is *To the Lighthouse* (1927). This novel is based on the childhood of Virginia Woolf. A lot of images and symbols are present in this work; devices also typical of modernism. Images, sounds, symbols...in which prose ends up to evoke a kind of poetry or a lyrical frame. Virginia Woolf was influenced by the Modernists of her time and gifted with a enviable talent. She had the brilliant capacity of turning the prose into a special poetry, using the rhetorical device of symbolism magnificently. She also consolidated herself as the pioneer of the Feminist Movement of that time.

Orlando (1928) established her at the height of her career as defender of the social freedom for women. This success was even more consolidated with the publication of the essay *A Room of One's own* (1929). This work dealt with the proclamation of women as writers. In this essay, Virginia Woolf promoted economic independence for women and the right of them to take part of the intellectual world as equal as men. This work also shows the evolution of the feminist ideology of Virginia Woolf.

The last works of V. Woolf were focused on the use of modernist rhetorical devices such as the *stream of consciousness* and the symbolism. *The Waves* (1931) was another very important novel of this writer where the symbolism and the use of images, sounds and colours is very remarkable. Some of the last important works of her career are *The Years* (1931), *Three Guineas* (1938) and *Between the Acts* published in 1941, shortly before her death.

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5. Brief explanation of the two works to be analysed: *Orlando* and

A Room of One's Own.

6.1. *Orlando* (1928)

By Virginia Woolf.

Orlando (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929) are the two main works to be analysed in this paper. One novel and one essay written by Virginia Woolf, in which the feminist approach of the author can be noticed notoriously.

On the one hand, the work *Orlando* had a big polemic, especially in the 70's. The character of Orlando is based on Vita-Sackville-West, a famous member of the Bloomsbury Group. Virginia Woolf and this one were lovers and Virginia made a sort of parody inspiring herself on this character.

Orlando is a story of fantasy. The life of Orlando is represented in four different periods of the British History. At the beginning of the story, Orlando is a noble man who has everything: all what a man could have in the Elizabethan Period. He travels, writes, falls in love, he is ambassador, etc until he turns into Lady Orlando: This belongs to the second part of the novel and this one is the most important part because the process of adaptation in the sexual identity is the key element of this feminist work. Orlando feels comfortable being a man and being a woman. This fact reflects clearly the feminist vision of Virginia Woolf, her belief in the sexual ambiguity: what is actually important for her is the essence of being, not the genre. And all of these ideas are reflected in this work: a modernist novel characterised by a notorious feminist approach, in which the

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sexual identity, the ambiguity of sexes as well as the equality of genre are the key elements that Virginia Woolf shows brilliantly in this masterpiece of the Modernism English literature.

6.2. *A Room of One's Own* (1929),

On the other hand, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is an essay based on two lectures given in October 1928 in the Literary Society of Newham and the Girton **Odtaa**.

(**Odtaa**: “One damn thing after another”)

In this essay, Virginia Woolf shows in a very direct manner, her personal beliefs about the rights of women. She uses the rhetorical device of the *stream of consciousness*, showing a continuous mental process, until reaching some conclusions about the topic. This essay is maybe one of the most important works of Virginia Woolf in which the feminist ideology of the author is undoubtedly highly marked.

In this essay, Virginia protests and talks about the restricted rights of women; these ones influenced by the patriarchal system of the period. She investigates about the role of women in the past times of Britain and realises that women lived anonymously in all of the aspects of life. They were obliged to marry else one, they were economically dependent, had children voluntarily or involuntarily, suffered mistreatment by their husbands, etc. They could not give their opinion openly and education was forbidden for them. Therefore, women could not accede to the intellectual circles of Society. Women rights were limited to the domestic life: mother and submissive wife. This tradition was rooted during several centuries. Virginia Woolf thought that the old fashioned patriarchal system was the main reason of the backward in the British society, specially the limited social role attributed to women.

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7. *Orlando* (1928)

By Virginia Woolf.

In this polemical novel, the topic of sexual identity is very remarkable. Sexual identity in *Orlando* can be soon associated by the reader with a feminist halo, inspired by the personality and thoughts of the main character of the novel: Orlando. The first part of the novel corresponds with the presentation of the character as an aristocratic young man with all the privileges that a noble man could have in the age of the Queen Elizabeth I. However, the topic of sexual identity associated with Feminism appears in the second part of the novel when Orlando turns into a woman. Some of the thoughts and reflections of Orlando show this idea.

For instance, when Orlando leaves the gypsy camp, she embarks in the *Enamoured Lady* : the ship that would lead her again to England. She is getting used of her new body and she feels still confused of her sexual identity. She remembered her experiences lived when she was a man and regrets of not being able now to do the same things she did when she was a man. This idea reflects in a way her dreams about can be able of doing the same things she used to do as a man, but with the appearance of a woman. This idea shows the feminist side of the sexual identity in Orlando's thoughts. The following passage of the novel is a clear example of this idea:

"And I shall never be able to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth, or draw my sword and run him through the body, or sit among my peers, or wear a coronet, or walk in procession, or sentence a man to death, or lead an army, or prance down Whitehall on a charger, or wear seventy-two different medals on my breast. All I can do, once I set foot on English soil, is to pour out tea and ask my lords how they like it." (Orlando:106)

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However, as the novel progresses, Orlando feels herself more and more comfortable being a woman and in a way, she changes her mind about her desires of doing the same things men do. She is proud of being a woman and feels herself satisfied with this idea. In the fourth chapter, when she gets up in the morning, the idea of the feminist vision can be appreciated in the thoughts of Orlando. The following excerpt of the novel is an example of this:

'Ignorant and poor as we are compared with the other sex,' ... 'armoured with every weapon as they are, while they exclude us even from a knowledge of the alphabet... 'still —they fall from the mast-head.'
(Orlando:107)

Furthermore, something also remarkable to point out is the use of irony as a rhetorical device used by Virginia Woolf in this novel. In fact, the novel itself is totally ironic in style and content. Some passages of this novel show the feminist vision of Virginia Woolf reflected in the thoughts of Orlando when she is a woman. Orlando seems to be pleased about being a woman but in a way, she refuses the decorous life women must carry out in that time. The following passage exemplifies this idea as well as the usage of Irony:

'Better is it', she thought, 'to be clothed with poverty and ignorance, which are the dark garments of the female sex; better to leave the rule and discipline of the world to others; better be quit of martial ambition, the love of power, and all the other manly desires if so one can more fully enjoy the most exalted raptures known to the human spirit, which are', she said aloud, as her habit was when deeply moved, Contemplation, Solitude, Love... 'Praise God that I'm a woman!' (Irony very marked).
(Orlando:108)

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Moreover, when Orlando arrives to her mansion in Blackfriars (Chapter 4), her servants adopt a different attitude towards her, all of that because of her sexual identity. Now, she is a woman and therefore, she must get used to the rules imposed to women in that age. She lives in a different historical period, in which the rights of women are much more restricted. Her servants see her as a woman, and therefore, they think her duties must be only associated with the domestic life and submissiveness. The following excerpt exemplifies this idea:

"...which, said Mrs Grimsditch, and for her part, a very great comfort; for what with the towels wanting mending and the curtains in the chaplain's parlour being moth-eaten round the fringes, it was time they had a Mistress among them... 'And some little masters and mistresses to come after her,' Mr Dupper added". (Orlando:114)

However, Orlando does not accept the rules imposed to women in that age. She does not believe that women's life must be restricted to a decorous lifestyle. She believes in the independence of women and she takes her own decisions freely, without being conditioned by the social conventions of the period. She meets again with the Romanian Archduchess who confessed to her that she is actually a man and had fallen in love with her when Orlando was a man. However, he decided to change his appearance to a woman in order his love. In this case, freedom in the sexual identity and sexual duality are two important features that make this novel a revolutionary work of the time. The Rumanian archduke tries to win the love of Orlando but this one believes in her own ideas and she does not want to marry him following the conventionalisms that she does not actually respect.

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The following passage taken from chapter 4 exemplifies this idea:

“As the sound of the Archduke’s chariot wheels died away, Orlando felt drawing further from her and further from her an Archduke (she did not mind that), a fortune (she did not mind that), a title (she did not mind that), the safety and circumstance of married life (she did not mind that), but life she heard going from her, and a lover” (Orlando:124)

Another important point worthy of highlighting is the assertion that Orlando wants to live her sexual life freely. She does not want to become engaged to a man merely for having economical support. She wants to be an independent woman as it can be noticed in the previous example taken from the fourth chapter. Furthermore, Orlando sees herself rounded by the high class of the London Society of that age: eminent writers such as Jonathan Swift or the poet Pope. In this case, she must pretend that she is comfortable being a decorous woman that follows the conventionalisms of Society. She goes to a lot of parties celebrated in London and although she pretends to be satisfied with the treatment of men, she actually refuses and hates in a way this kind of life. She is a woman and does not like the life that she presumably must carry out because of her sexual identity. She does not want to pretend, she actually wants:

“a life and a lover” (Orlando:128)

*“She might, indeed, have found herself gravely discommoded by the pressure of the crowd — **she had forgotten that ladies are not supposed to walk in public places alone — had not a tall gentleman at once stepped forward and offered her the protection of his arm.**”* (Orlando: 128)

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'I don't care if I never meet another soul as long as I live,' cried Orlando, bursting into tears. Lovers she had in plenty, but life, which is, after all, of some importance in its way, escaped her.

(Orlando:131).

'Is this', she asked but there was none to answer, 'is this', she finished her sentence all the same, 'what People call life?' The spaniel raised her forepaw in token of sympathy. (Orlando: 131)

7.1.1. Equality in gender: The Feminist Vision of Virginia Woolf reflected on the Sexual Duality of the character Orlando.

As mentioned in the previous sections of this paper, Virginia Woolf thought women were not superior to men. She actually believes that both sexes belonged to a different nature and they merely had different characteristics. She believed in the intellectual mixing of men and women. This reflection of the author is highlighted in the character Orlando. After been frequenting a lot of parties in London, surrounded by the highest class of society, she decided that she wanted live her sexual life freely, being a woman or a man. For her, the only thing that differentiates both genres is clothing, the most superficial exterior of a human being.

"Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex...Different though the sexes are, they intermix...In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (Orlando: 127)

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The following passage exemplifies the ideology of Orlando. A woman or a man are not differentiated by their clothes, but their being.

“A woman knows very well that, though a wit sends her his poems, praises her judgment, solicits her criticism, and drinks her tea, this by no means signifies that he respects her opinions, admires her understanding, or will refuse, though the rapier is denied him, to run her through the body with his pen”

(Orlando: 143)

Orlando feels comfortable being a woman and also being a man. She believes that both sexes could have some differences, but the human essence was the same for both.

The feminist vision of Virginia Woolf can be appreciated in Orlando's ideology. After a brief walk around the garden of her mansion, Orlando decides go back home and wear some clothes belonged to her age as man. After that, she leaves the mansion during the night looking for some loving adventure freely and without worries.

“Now she opened a cupboard in which hung still many of the clothes she had worn as a young man of fashion, and from among them she chose a black velvet suit richly trimmed with Venetian lace.

It was a little out of fashion, indeed, but it fitted her to perfection and dressed in it she looked the very Figure of a noble Lord” (Orlando: 144)

Therefore, Orlando decides to live her sexuality freely (being a man or being a woman) adopting an open mind ideology. When Orlando arrives at Leicester Square that night, she meets a prostitute and Orlando decides staying the night with her. In this scene, we can see clearly the sexual duality. At the beginning, Orlando adopts a masculine attitude towards Mrs. Bell. Orlando feels herself confident and comfortable with her attitude:

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“A Young woman who sat dejectedly with one arm drooping by her side, the other reposing in her lap, on a seat beneath a plane tree in the middle of the square seemed the very figure of grace, simplicity, and desolation. Orlando swept her hat off to her in the manner of a gallant paying his addresses to a lady of fashion in a public place.” (Orlando:144 -145)

However, the young woman was not comfortable with the presence of Orlando because apparently, she was a man. This action, exemplified with the following excerpt, is an example of the feeling of intimidation of some women towards men's companion in that time. This is something that belonged to Virginia Woolf's ideology and she wanted to reflect that point on this particular action of the novel.

“Through this silver glaze the young woman looked up at him (for a man he was to her) appealing, Hoping, trembling, fearing. She rose; she accepted his arm” (Orlando: 145)

When Mrs. Nell and Orlando arrives at Nell's house, Mrs. Nell starts to prepare herself for making love with Orlando. At the end, Orlando confessed her that she is a woman, not a man. In this moment, Nell started to laugh and this one feels more comfortable. With this action, we can see the difference between Mrs. Nell and Orlando. Before Orlando's confession, Mrs. Nell was not comfortable with the presence of a man. However, Orlando was comfortable all the time with her, being a man and being a woman. With this point, Virginia Woolf wanted to reflect the idea of equality in gender; that women and men have differences among them but the original human essence is always the same. Therefore, this is exemplified with the enjoyable time both women experienced while they were talking, shouting and laughing.

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Orlando followed being a man and being a woman. For her/him, there were not limits between both sexes. It was a question of the essence of being, equal in both sexes.

Orlando behaved politely with the rest of people but not thinking if she was a man or a woman, she did not need a man to get engaged with and she/he wears the clothes that she/he liked or enjoyed wearing at that moment.

*“So then one may sketch her spending her morning in a China robe of **ambiguous gender** among her books; then receiving a client or two (for she had many scores of suplicants) in the same garment; then she would take a turn in the garden and clip the nut trees — for which knee breeches were convenient; then she would change into a flowered taffeta which best suited a drive to Richmond and a proposal of marriage from some great nobleman; and so back again to town, where she would don a snuff-coloured gown like a lawyer’s and visit the courts to hear how her cases were doing — for her fortune was wasting hourly and the suits seemed no nearer consummation than they had been a hundred years ago; and so, finally, when night came, she would more often than not become a nobleman complete from head to toe and walk the streets in search of adventure.” (Orlando: 148)*

8. A Room of One's Own (1929)

By Virginia Woolf.

Virginia Woolf was one of the first promoters of the Feminist Movement in England after the Victorian Period. *A Room of One's Own* is maybe the best work that exemplifies magnificently the feminist ideology of the author. This essay is based on two lectures given in October 1928, in the literary Society of Newham and Girton

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Odaa. The lectures were totally aimed at women rights. It is a protest about the patriarchal system of that period. The essay focuses on the social prohibitions for women and the obligation for them of carrying out a decorous lifestyle: economically dependent, they could not accede to the work world, exceptionally some jobs only “suitable” for women. These kinds of jobs were, in a way, socially associated with the female genre. Virginia Woolf told in this essay that all of these prejudices and Victorian values ended up creating a terrible backward in terms of women integration in society. All of those centuries in which women had been socially anonymous (in politics, literature or in the social life) marked an irremediable backward that affected directly to the issue of women rights. This backward still remains today. Virginia Woolf’s ideology was a key element of influence for the feminist movements created recently.

8.1. The use of the *Stream of Consciousness* in *A Room of One’s Own*.

Virginia Woolf asked herself: Why women were socially margined in that period? : The feminist vision of the author.

One of the key rhetorical devices used in this essay is the called *stream of consciousness*. It is very frequent in Modernist literature. Virginia Woolf was one of the creators and promoters of this literary device. In this essay, Virginia Woolf says that some women asked her for the issue of women and the novel. She decides to relate the mental process she experienced until reaching some conclusions about this point. She affirms that the role of women in society will always be a very controversial point. Virginia Woolf shared her deeply thoughts and reflections about women rights. Her

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most significant idea was focused on the right of women for writing and being intellectually accepted as equal as men. She believed in the intellectual woman writer. A woman economically independent; a free woman that could be able to express her opinion without social obstacles. But why women were so socially excluded?

Virginia Woolf, through the rhetorical device of the *stream of consciousness*, shares her opinion about this. The first chapters of this essay show how Virginia Woolf had investigated about the social problem of women. She imagined along with her friend Mrs. Seton what would happen if the mother of this one had been occupied making money and writing, instead of having eight or nine children. Virginia Woolf claims that this has no answer because women were a kind of property for men. Women did all what men wanted. Therefore, all money were controlled by men. Women were economically dependent. The following passage shows this idea, exemplified with Virginia Woolf's thoughts: the rhetorical device of The Stream of consciousness:

“Moreover, it is equally useless to ask what might have happened if Mrs. Seton and her mother and her mother before her had amassed great wealth and laid it under the foundations of college and library, because, in the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned. It is only for the last forty-eight years that Mrs. Seton has had a penny of her own. For all the centuries before that it would have been her husband's property” (A Room of One's Own: 13)

On the other hand, Virginia Woolf makes a protest against the patriarchal system that invades England. She hyperbolizes this idea saying that all things and all people in the world are dominated by men. Women are totally excluded from society and Virginia

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Woolf wants to make clear this idea. The following passage shows this hyperbole made by the author, complaining about the patriarchal system. This excerpt is very important because Virginia Woolf explains her beliefs in a very direct style:

"...that England is under the rule of a patriarchy. Nobody in their senses could fail to detect The dominance of the professor. His was the power and the money and the influence. He was the proprietor of the paper and its editor and sub-editor. He was the Foreign Secretary and the judge. He was the cricketer; he owned the racehorses and the yachts. He was the director of the company that pays two hundred per cent to its shareholders. He left millions to charities and colleges that were ruled by himself. He suspended the film actress in mid-air. He will decide if the hair on the meat axe is human; he it is who will acquit or convict the murderer, and hang him, or let him go free. With the exception of the fog he seemed to control Everything." (A Room of One's Own: 20).

In spite of Virginia Woolf makes a clear complaint in this essay about the restricted role of women in society, she also makes clear one aspect: She does not think women were superior to men. She thinks that both sexes are genres of different nature and she even believes in a possible intellectual mixing of both. This idea of the mixing genres belongs to her ideology and it is also reflected on the work *Orlando* (as it was mentioned in the first analysis of this paper). Therefore, Virginia's ideology about this point is also reflected in *A Room of One's Own*.

She believed in the equality of genres:

"So imperceptibly I found myself adopting a new attitude towards the other half of the human race. It was absurd to blame any class or any sex, as a whole. Great bodies of people are never

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responsible for what they do. They are driven by instincts which are not within their control.

They too, the patriarchs, the professors, had endless difficulties, terrible drawbacks to contend with. Their education had been in some ways as faulty as my own. It had bred in them defects as great” (A Room of One’s Own: 23).

Moreover, the author also wants to show in this essay the bad treatment given to women, particularly in the end of the fifteenth century. This idea reflects that men did all what they want with women. Women were treated like objects or even like animals. Virginia also talks about the premeditated marriages, a tradition very cruel and unfair for women because a woman was obliged to marry a man to whom she probably did not love. Women had to be submissive. All decisions were taken by men and women had to obey all what they imposed to them.

‘Wife-beating’, I read, ‘was a recognized right of man, and was practised 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. Marriage was not an affair of personal affection, but of family avarice, particularly in the “chivalrous” upper classes. . . . Betrothal often took place while one or both of the parties was in the cradle, and marriage when they were scarcely out of the nurses’ charge.’

(A Room of One’s Own: 25)

The author also highlights that in spite of were “presumably inferior”, women were very present in many works and poems of eminent writers. This point reinforces the idea of women as objects: They were obliged to marry with else one, to have children, to raise

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them, be submissive with their husbands, etc. They were also used as “objects” in literature and behind the world of literature and art, men had a horrible treatment towards them. Women were used as ornament among writers.

“Not being a historian, one might go even further and say that women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time--Clytemnestra, Antigone, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Phedre, Cressida, Rosalind, Desdemona, the Duchess of Malfi, ...Emma Bovary, Madame de Guermantes--the names flock to mind, nor do they recall women 'lacking in personality and character.' Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact, as Professor Trevelyan points out, she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room.” (A Room of One's Own: 26)

Another point worthy of highlight in this essay is the allusion made to a hypothetical Sister attributed to Shakespeare. Shakespeare is an icon in the English literature of all times and the author imagines how would be the life of Shakespeare's sister, having this one the same talent and the same anxious to success as well as her brother.

“...Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly but was careful to hide them or set fire to them. Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighbouring wool-stapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father.” (A Room of One's Own: 29)

“How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began, according to Professor Trevelyan, almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom? Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes” (A Room of One's Own: 29).

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CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, we can say that the feminist ideology of Virginia Woolf was something crucial for the development of the different feminist societies which exist today. Her contribution to the feminist ideology was a key fact for the proliferation of what nowadays we know as Feminism. Although Virginia Woolf was greatly influenced by the social restrictions of the Victorian Period, she always felt confident about her beliefs and thoughts. She founded the Bloomsbury Group along with her sister Vanessa and shared a lot of knowledge and new ideas with all members of that Revolutionary Group. A Group mainly revolutionary because their liberal ideologies and their fight against the old-fashioned values of the Victorian Period. She became established as one of the first promoters of the Feminist Movement of that age and she was deeply interested in women's rights.

She started to write professionally in 1905 and after writing some essays and novels, she established herself as one of the most important writers of the experimental novel with the publication of *Jacob's Room* in 1922. However, her most important and prolific novels were focused on her feminist ideology. This ideology is reflected on the two works analysed in this paper: *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*. In the work *Orlando*, the feminist vision of the author is reflected on the sexual identity of the protagonist. He/She feels confused sometimes by her/his sexual identity, but, at the end, Orlando ends up to be comfortable being a man or a being a woman. About this point, the equality of

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gender defended by the author is reflected. She believed in the essence of being and this is reflected in other elements of the novel such as the sexual duality of Orlando.

On the other hand, *A Room of One's Own* is a protest about the old patriarchal system of the Victorian Period. In this essay, Virginia Woolf defends the rights of women: being economically and emotionally independent as well as having the right of integrate themselves in the intellectual life of the British Society. Virginia Woolf's feminist ideology is very marked in *A Room of One's Own*. The *stream of consciousness* is the fundamental rhetorical device used in this novel. This literary device let her to show all the mental process and investigation that helped her, in order to reach conclusions about the topic of the woman and the novel.

To finish these conclusions, it can be said that the general works and the social Contributions for women of Virginia Woolf were considered key facts for the Prolific development of what we know nowadays as Feminism.

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