

> A “New Vehicle for Writing”: Virginia Woolf’s androgynous poetics throughout her fiction and essays

> Um “Novo Veículo para a escrita”: a poética andrógina de Virginia Woolf através de sua ficção e ensaios

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Abstract

In this paper, we trace Virginia Woolf’s androgynous poetics throughout her oeuvre. We shall observe how Woolf appraises women’s trajectory through a male dominated literary canon, and how she accounts for the silencing of women poets through the figure of Judith Shakespeare. We also argue that, for Woolf, women writers should begin to devise a new sentence for their use, as well as a new genre that surpasses the novel, by incorporating poetic inflections in their writing. Finally, we discuss Woolf’s defence of androgyny in fiction, and how she maintains that it is only through writing with an androgynous mind, balanced and collective, that women authors will be able to achieve a poetic and liberating writing.

Keywords: Androgyny. Fiction. Women writers. Poetic inflections.

Resumo

Neste artigo, traçamos a poética andrógina de Virginia Woolf em sua obra. Observaremos como Woolf percebe a trajetória das mulheres através de um cânone literário predominantemente masculino, e como ela registra o silenciamento de mulheres poetas pela figura de Judith Shakespeare. Também argumentaremos que, para Woolf, mulheres autoras deveriam fabricar uma nova sentença para seu uso próprio, além de inventar um novo gênero que ultrapasse o gênero do romance, ao incorporar inflexões poéticas em sua escrita. Finalmente, discutiremos a defesa que Woolf faz da androginia na ficção e como ela sustenta a ideia de que é apenas escrevendo com uma mente andrógina, equilibrada e coletiva, que mulheres autoras atingirão uma escrita poética e libertadora.

Palavras-chave: Androginia. Ficção. Mulheres escritoras. Inflexões poéticas.

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Throughout her fictional and essayistic work, Virginia Woolf did not shy away from discussing the most urgent and controversial matters of her time. Indeed, modernist writers witnessed a moment of social uproar, political uncertainties, and shifts in cultural paradigms, as they watched major Western History events unfold in their lifetime, such as the First World War in 1914 and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. In England the social and political scene was also quickly changing, so much so that Woolf herself would famously declare in “Mr. Benett and Mrs. Brown” (1924) that “on or about December 1910, human character changed”¹. Perhaps, one of the subjects Woolf discussed most deeply was the matter of gender and women’s role in the historical scene of literary fiction, incorporating, thus, a political stance to her artistic and aesthetical arguments. As scholar Laura Marcus stated in her 2010 essay “Woolf’s feminism and feminism’s Woolf”, Post-War feminist and literary criticism regarded Woolf as a staple of feminist analysis. According to Marcus, Woolf’s work

has been used as key evidence and example in the most significant and recurrent feminist debates; ‘realist’ versus ‘modernist’ writing as the most effective vehicle for a feminist politics; the existence of a specifically female literary tradition and of a woman’s language; the place of feminist ‘anger’ or radicalism; the feminist uses of ‘androgyny’ as a concept [...] ².

Throughout this paper, we shall attempt to address some of these issues regarding Woolf’s feminist argument in some of her fiction and essayistic writings, especially “Poetry, Fiction and the Future” (1927), “Professions for Women” (1931), “Women and Fiction” (1929), *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), and *Three Guineas* (1938). In this sense, we dwell upon the author’s considerations on women, fiction, and literary tradition to investigate how Woolf devises an androgynous poetics. We shall observe that such a poetics relies deeply on an impersonal and collective expression of experience, and requires a brand new genre that supplants the limitations of the novel through the flows and creative force of poetic inflections.

Indeed, when it comes to the British literary canon, Virginia Woolf had already noticed that there was an imbalance, or inequality, regarding subjects and themes that were considered traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine, or, as she puts it in her 1929 long essay *A Room of One’s Own*,

[...] it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important

¹ Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Benett and Mrs. Brown”, 1950, n.p.

² Laura Marcus, “Woolf’s Feminism and Feminism’s Woolf”, 2010, p. 142–143.

book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room³.

In this sense, these “values” that Woolf perceives as ingrained in the British literary tradition could be translated as the traditional and historical roles and positions that had informed men’s and women’s gendered performances in patriarchal society, which, in turn, valued and honoured the masculine ones while dismissing the aspects assigned to the feminine role. Therefore, we adopt this vocabulary as well in order to highlight and discuss matters of gender in Woolf’s oeuvre.

In her 1929 essay “Women and Fiction”, Virginia Woolf, while pondering on women’s trajectory throughout British Literature, wonders why it is that Elizabethan Literature is, in her words, “exclusively masculine”⁴. In an age in which theatre and poetry walked hand in hand on the London stages, women, she seems to argue, were silent. She adds that after the 18th century, however, women pervaded the literary scene, and they took upon fiction and the brand new genre of the novel as their favourite form of expression.⁵ The reason for such a poetic silence, Woolf proceeds to argue, lies on “Law and custom”, that is, on the fact that the 15th century ordinary woman had her liberty entirely cut away from her, and her possibilities were strictly controlled by a husband or father, being thus impossible to wield a pen in her oppressive seclusion.⁶ She illustrates this idea in *A Room of One’s Own* by narrating the story of the hypothetical Judith Shakespeare, who, possessing the same amount of talent and poetic genius as her celebrated brother William Shakespeare, is then silenced. Firstly, she must tend to domestic obligations at the family home, which prevents her from leaving her hometown to the big city, as her brother had done. Against her family’s wishes for her, she runs away to London to initiate her career as a poet and playwright, but women were not allowed to work in theatres. With no other options to survive there, Judith submits herself to the protection of the actor-manager Nick Greene, who has a child with her and forces her into a private, domestic life. After having her poetic voice shut by the circumstances of “law and custom”, Judith “killed herself one winter’s night and lies buried at some crossroads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle”⁷. Woolf’s tale of the forgotten and silenced Judith seems to account for numerous anonymous, ordinary Elizabethan women, a collective of silenced poets who might have been.

³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 102.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction”, 2008c, p. 133.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction”, 2008c, p. 133.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction”, 2008c, p. 133.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 72.

Thus, Woolf argues that the lack of ordinary Elizabethan women poets represented in the pages of History books was due to the silencing and anonymity enforced upon them by patriarchal laws. As she concludes, “Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman”⁸.

Woolf argues in the same essay, however, that the cultural and literary scene changed from the 18th century onwards. She declares that the first prominent women writers credited in the English canon chose the novel and prose as their outlet for expression because of their domestic upbringing. For her, their training would come from the privacy and seclusion of the family home, from an informal education whose backbone was the experience they had in the common sitting-room of the house, where they observed the many human interactions that would take place there.⁹ For Woolf, the constant domestic interruptions that these women writers had to endure while writing their manuscripts would favour their choice for the novel as a genre. As she explains in “Women and Fiction” (1929):

A novel is the least concentrated form of art. A novel can be taken up or put down more easily than a play or a poem. George Eliot left her work to nurse her father. Charlotte Brontë put down her pen to pick the eyes out of the potatoes. And living as she did in the common sitting-room, surrounded by people, a woman was trained to use her mind in observation and upon the analysis of character. She was trained to be a novelist and not to be a poet¹⁰.

However, even though the first women writers who were recognized as such in English literary history were novelists, Woolf clarifies that it did not mean that no woman wrote poetry before them. In *A Room of One’s Own*, the author remarks that the first impulse for women in literature was to write poetry instead of prose.¹¹ She mentions Anne Finch, also known as Lady Winchelsea,¹² and Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle-upon-Tyne,¹³ as early examples of women poets. Both were 17th century women, members of the aristocracy and, above all, both had to practice their writing in secrecy. For Woolf, even though their choice was poetry, these women committed a grave error: they wrote in anger about the injustices and misfortunes they experienced as women, that is, “in both burnt the same passion for poetry and both are disfigured and deformed by the same causes. Open the duchess and one finds the same outburst of rage

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 73.

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 94.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction”, 2008c, p. 134.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 92.

¹² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 83.

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 87.

[...]”¹⁴. When discussing the works of George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë in “Women and Fiction” (1929), Woolf locates the same sex-derived anger. In her own words,

In *Middlemarch* and in *Jane Eyre* we are conscious not merely of the writer’s character [...] but we are conscious of a woman’s presence – of someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights. [...] It introduces a distortion and is frequently the cause of weakness. The desire to plead some personal cause or to make a character the mouthpiece of some personal discontent or grievance always has a distracting effect, as if the spot at which the reader’s attention is directed were suddenly twofold instead of single¹⁵.

For Woolf, the effect that this personal, angry, authorial voice entails is a lack of relatability and shared collective experience, which, in turn, hinders the poetic force in a work of art. As the author clarifies in a 1925 essay, “Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights”, when a reader no longer meets the characters in a story, but the voice of an author who says “I love, I hate, I suffer”¹⁶, it means that the novel has failed in conveying multiplicity. For Woolf, then, the danger of writing in reactionary anger is that of becoming self-absorbed, a trace that she identifies as a characteristic of a purely masculine writing. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf argues that a masculine mind produces a writing marked by “a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I’”¹⁷. This writing would bring forth a narrative ego that obliterates all possibilities of different subjectivities that might surface in a narrative. When comparing Charlotte Brontë to her sister Emily in “Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights”, Woolf understands that the lack of an “I” in Emily’s story renders it relatable and timeless, since it goes beyond her own misfortunes: “But there is no ‘I’ in *Wuthering Heights*. There are no governesses [...]. Emily was inspired by some more general conception. The impulse which urged her to create was not her own sufferings or her own injuries”¹⁸. Thus, we could imagine ourselves alongside Emily Brontë’s characters even as 21st century readers, since they are neither dated nor limited by the problems of one identity position at one certain age. Therefore, the “I” on the page is further proof that the Victorian writers who wrote in anger, such as Charlotte Brontë, only reproduced and made use of the masculine tools already existing in language instead of devising one for their own use. In this sense, the problem seems not to lie so much in anger itself, but in the central “I” that it produces in writing.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 87.

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction”, 2008c, p. 135.

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, “Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights”, 2011, p. 8.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 133.

¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, “Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights”, 2011, p. 9.

As a matter of fact, Margot Kotler (2018) discusses the expression of anger in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* in the light of Woolfian scholar Jane Marcus’s “Art and Anger: Elizabeth Robins and Virginia Woolf” (1978). According to Kotler, Marcus argues that the expression of emotions is a feminist tool to challenge and disturb patriarchy. Kotler defends that what we see in Woolf’s works is not a lack of anger or any other negative emotion, but a sort of impersonal anger that produces identification with collective experiences. The author defends that instead of refraining from expressing anger completely, Woolf refuses to manifest it in a personal way, which would, consequently, consist in a rather more “sophisticated methodology on anger”¹⁹. After all, as Kotler affirms, “focusing on ‘weaker’ negative feelings is not meant as an avoidance or invalidation of Woolf’s anger, but as an attempt to shift the focus from discovering its source to paying close attention to the way that she uses language to convey affect as part of a feminist methodology”²⁰. Indeed, in *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf refuses to accede to her male interlocutor’s request for her to join his society in favour of peace. She imagines and devises her own society for women instead: the “Outsider’s society”²¹. Woolf refuses to be part of an exclusionary, masculine society, one that “enjoys the dubious pleasures of power and dominion, while we, ‘his’ women, are locked in the private house without share in the many societies of which his society is composed”²². In this sense, instead of manifesting her personal grievances in authoritative anger, Woolf chooses to speak in name of all “the daughters of educated men”²³, of all the women who were outside the public and masculine world of warfare. She expresses her anger, thus, in favour of her collective society.

Indeed, in *Three Guineas*, Woolf seems to defend that the road towards peace will be achieved when women are finally allowed in the public sphere that is, only if they leave the recesses of their secluded homes to take part in formal education and choose their professions. For Woolf, women participating in public affairs would not only configure a cultural change, but an aesthetic one as well. As she declares in “Women and Fiction”,

The change which has turned the English woman from a non-descript influence, fluctuating and vague, to a voter, a wage-earner, a responsible citizen, has given her both in her life and in her art a turn toward the impersonal. Her relations now are not only emotional; they are intellectual, they are political. [...] Hence her attention is being directed away from the

¹⁹ Margot Kotler, “After Anger: Negative Affect and Feminist Politics in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*”, 2018, p. 36.

²⁰ Margot Kotler, “After Anger: Negative Affect and Feminist Politics in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*”, 2018, p. 37.

²¹ Virginia Woolf, “*Three Guineas*”, 2019, p. 232.

²² Virginia Woolf, “*Three Guineas*”, 2019, p. 231.

²³ Virginia Woolf, “*Three Guineas*”, 2019, p. 231.

personal centre which engaged it exclusively in the past to the impersonal, and her novels naturally become more critical of society, and less analytical of individual lives²⁴.

In this sense, if being impersonal and leaving the self-absorbed “I” behind is a staple of poetic writing, allowing women to take part in public life becomes a step towards it. Writing freely and poetically would require, then, removing women from their private spheres, but also removing from them the intrinsic moral and patriarchal impediments that had been internalised for so long. Virginia Woolf dwells upon such impediments for women writers in her 1931 essay “Professions for Women”, which originated from a lecture that she gave to the National Society for Women’s Service. According to Woolf, the impositions made by a masculine-ruled society upon women’s minds become an inner voice that would urge the modern woman, for example, to achieve the standards of a perfect Victorian wife, characterised not only by a life of devotion to home and family but also by a meek subservience and sympathy towards the husband and men in general in order to please and flatter, or, in other words, to uphold the functioning of patriarchal society. In “Professions for Women”, Woolf calls this ideal the “Angel in the House”, a Victorian standard immortalised by Coventry Patmore’s homonymous poem (1854). Its main function would be to impede the free expression of one’s mind and hinder writing, in Woolf’s own words,

For, as I found, directly I put pen into paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt openly by women²⁵.

Woolf suggests that she found it necessary to kill the angel in order to put an end to its influence on her own writing²⁶. However, killing the Angel, and therefore, eliminating the pressures of the Victorian moral expectations placed upon women, was not the only measure necessary to free women’s minds for poetic expression. For Woolf, there was also the matter of a linguistic barrier that prevented women’s creativity from embracing poetry. Language was heavily informed by masculine values and had been crafted for and by that masculine “I” that obliterates and casts its shadow upon other subjectivities in the narrative.²⁷ As she puts it in “Women and Fiction”, “...there is a technical difficulty – so simple, apparently; in reality, so baffling. That the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous

²⁴ Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction”, 2008c, p. 137–138.

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”, 1970, p. 238.

²⁶ Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”, 1970, p. 237.

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 134.

for a woman’s use”²⁸. In this sense, the English sentence would be unsuitable for women writers, since, being crafted by men to be used in a dominantly masculine literary canon, it could not convey the particularities of feminine experience. According to Woolf, the masculine sentence

ran something like this perhaps: ‘The grandeur of their works was an argument with them, not to stop short, but to proceed. They could have no higher excitement or satisfaction than in the exercise of their art and endless generations of truth and beauty. Success prompts to exertion; and habit facilitates success’. That is a man’s sentence; behind it one can see Johnson, Gibbon and the rest²⁹.

How could a woman novelist express herself, then, if the form of the sentence did not suit her experience? In “Women and Fiction” (1929), Woolf argues that what they needed to do was to craft a new sentence, one that would naturally capture the distinctiveness of their feminine experience without being distorted, or recaptured, by the affectations of personal anger.³⁰ For the author, Jane Austen was an example of a novelist who could do such a task perfectly, as she mocked and laughed at her male contemporaries’ masculine sentences with her own sentence, while expressing her feminine experience as she voiced it collectively. As Woolf puts it in *A Room of One’s Own*, “Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching”³¹. As Brazilian scholar Davi Pinho affirms in his *Imagens do Feminino na Obra e Vida de Virginia Woolf* (2015), Woolf sees in Austen’s sentence a glimpse into the lives of early 19th century women as they were; it is a sentence that brings to light a feminine universe by laughing at the masculine values of her time — war, education, commerce — and by replenishing the absence of these values with feminine ones instead³².

But if the sentence itself was unsuitable for conveying feminine experience, the very genre of the novel was also unfitted for women who desired to write it, for it would be already tainted with the marks of a masculine language, since it had been broadly used by a masculine canon and tradition. As mentioned above, for Woolf, it was the poetic aspect of writing that could free women from the limitations of personal and authorial anger, and, consequently, from the marks and restrictions of the masculine dominant ego in the narrative. Thus, Woolf also defends that the articulation of poetic inflections in prose narratives could generate this new genre fit to encompass aspects of the feminine experience and

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction”, 2008c, p. 136.

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 105.

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction”, 2008c, p. 136.

³¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 95.

³² Davi Pinho, *Imagens do Feminino na Obra e Vida de Virginia Woolf*, 2015, p. 136.

mind.³³ After all, the author argues that women had been barred from expressing themselves poetically due to the moral codes that informed historical constructions of femininity through the “Angel in the House” ideal. Therefore, besides encouraging women novelists to rearrange the common sentence, Woolf also defends that they should bring poetic inflections to their work in order to establish this new genre. In Woolf’s words in *A Room*, “no doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and providing some new vehicle, not necessarily verse, for the poetry in her. For it is the poetry that is still denied outlet”³⁴. Thus, by reclaiming poetic inflections in their writing, women would not only innovate and challenge generic conventions but also pave the way for the past and future Judith Shakespeares of the world to flourish back in their words.

Moreover, Woolf herself declared that poetry needed not be expressed “necessarily in verse”, as discussed above, which demonstrates her attempt to undo genres and escape their constrictions. In her 1927 essay “Poetry, Fiction and the Future”, for example, Woolf discusses the specificities and differences between poetry and prose. According to her, the poets of her age could not manage to express their conflicts, fears and doubts in the form of lyrical poetry. For them, prose would become the main means of expression, since, as Woolf declares, prose can harness in its form the ugly and the material facts of life. We might understand, then, that Woolf seems to exhort modern artists to search for a new form and genre that could combine the lyricism of poetry with the ugliness and practicality of an era rife with conflicts, or, as she states in “The New Biography”, to produce “the perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow”³⁵. Indeed, as Modernist and Woolfian scholar Jane Goldman affirms, as she analyses the lyricism in four of Woolf’s major novels in “From Mrs. Dalloway to The Waves: new elegy and lyric experimentalism” (2010), Woolf had strived to convey, through her poetic style and experimentations with literary genres, the most pressing, material and objective matters of her age. As Goldman states, Woolf’s “experimentations with the poetical in her novels are bound up with her feminist interventions in the politics of gender, class and empire”³⁶.

Still in “Poetry, Fiction and the Future”, Woolf demonstrates that a poet must have a certain “attitude to life”³⁷ if they are to express themselves poetically.

³³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 106.

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 106.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography”, 2008a, p. 100.

³⁶ Jane Goldman, “From Mrs. Dalloway to The Waves: new elegy and lyric experimentalism”, 2010, p. 50.

³⁷ Virginia Woolf, “Poetry Fiction and the Future”, 2008b, p. 75.

She admits it to be a vague statement, but we may interpret it as a stance adopted by poets who are aware of and open to external impressions in order to strike the reader with a transformative emotion. Interestingly enough, Woolf resorts to Elizabethan drama in order to exemplify her argument, as this formative period in English literature would reveal a form that was able to capture and disclose such an attitude of poetic expression: “[...] we must reply that there was a form once, and it was not the form of lyrical poetry; it was the form of the drama, of the poetic drama of the Elizabethan age”³⁸. Therefore, for Woolf, it is not so much a matter of advocating poetry as a genre, but of implementing poetic inflections into different genres in order to devise a new form of expression.

As previously mentioned, Woolf praises women novelists like Emily Brontë and Jane Austen for their capacity of attaining a poetic prose. We could affirm that, though differently, Woolf achieves such an effect in her own writing as a novelist as well. As Goldman argues, from the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* onwards, Woolf “identified a growing poetic tendency in her writing”³⁹. We may recall how she struggled to classify her own novels in her diaries, since “novel” alone, as a genre, did not encompass the poetic attempts with which she imbued them. She often evokes different genres to define them, as we see in one of her entries in 1925, when she was writing *To the Lighthouse*: “But while I try to write, I am making up to *To the Lighthouse* – the sea is to be heard all through it. I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant ‘novel’. A new ... by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?”⁴⁰. *The Waves*, which Woolf terms a “play-poem”, also comes to mind, as it breaks with the formal characteristics of prose and aims at a poetic account of six different individuals as they subjectively apprehend the world around them⁴¹.

As we have been arguing throughout this paper, Virginia Woolf seems to defend that the woman writer who wishes to write poetically must do so collectively, as Jane Austen did when she used her singular experiences to paint the life of her fellow ordinary 19th century women, and impersonally, abandoning angry expressions of any personal and individual grievances that befall on them for being women, otherwise she would make the mistake of creating a distorted and oppressive “I” that impedes multiplicity, the very aspect that Woolf denounced as the mark of the exclusively masculine writer. For Woolf, then, a

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, “Poetry, Fiction and the Future”, 2008b, p. 74.

³⁹ Jane Goldman, “From Mrs. Dalloway to The Waves: new elegy and lyric experimentalism”, 2010, p. 49.

⁴⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, 1953, p. 78.

⁴¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, 1953, p. 107.

poetic work must achieve balance and integrity by bringing the feminine and the masculine together, similar to how her new genre of poetic prose would conjoin the ugliness and the ineffable of life. As she affirms in “Women and Fiction”, “The vision becomes too masculine or it becomes too feminine; it loses its perfect integrity and, with that, its most essential quality as a work of art”⁴².

In this sense, Woolf devises what we argue to be her ultimate response against the stiff, masculine tradition of canonical Literature that had pervaded the English literary scene and prevented the anonymous Judith Shakespeares from thriving. A response that would, consequently, destabilise the dominance of patriarchy over language and society: her defence of androgyny. As Woolf presents her very poignant and material arguments in favour of women’s economic independence and emancipation in *A Room of One’s Own*, she starts to develop her claims towards an androgynous poetics from the very first chapter. The narrator, attending a luncheon party at the fictional university of Oxbridge, spots a cat without a tail walking in the yard as she looks outside the window. She instantly notices an imbalance, and an awkwardness arises in the back of her mind: “It was as if someone had let fall a shade. Perhaps the excellent hock was relinquishing its hold. Certainly, as I watched the Manx cat pause in the middle of the lawn as if it too questioned the universe, something seemed lacking, something seemed different”⁴³. The sight of this lacking, distorted creature is followed by the narrator’s reflections upon the group attending the party and how the sexes interacted now, in her own time, versus how they interacted in the past. She resorts to Literature in order to try to understand what the difference was, or the strangeness, she felt underlying the way men and women talked to each other in the days before the war in events like those. She finds her answer in Romantic poetry as she imagines the men of the past humming something like Lord Alfred Tennyson’s “Maud” (1855) – in which the speaker exhorts his beloved Maud to go to him by ejaculating “Come into the garden, Maud”⁴⁴ – while women would hum Christina Rossetti’s “A Birthday” (1862) – in which the speaker is absolutely thrilled since, after a long wait, her beloved has finally arrived, as she says “Because the birthday of my life is come/ My love is come to me”⁴⁵. After pondering on the roles of these commanding men and waiting women, Woolf’s narrator realises that, very much like the disjointed vision of a tailless cat, a divide existed – and continued to exist in her own day – in the relationship between men and women, in both art and life. In this sense, we may interpret that Woolf seems

⁴² Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction”, 2008c, p. 135.

⁴³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 27.

⁴⁴ Lord Alfred Tennyson, “Maud”, 1992, p. 48.

⁴⁵ Christina Rossetti, “A Birthday”, 1995, p. 84.

to be indicating that the exclusively masculine mind, as well as the exclusively feminine one, would be in constant imbalance.

This androgynous seed will culminate in *A Room*’s last chapter, when the narrator witnesses another scene by the window, but this time, instead of distortion and strangeness, it evokes unity and completion. She sees a man and a woman walking down the same street, coming from opposite directions, after a moment of suspension. They share a taxicab, and then everything resumes its movement:

At this moment, as so often happens in London, there was a complete lull and suspension of traffic. Nothing came down the street; nobody passed. A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river, which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along, as the stream at Oxbridge had taken the undergraduate in his boat and the dead leaves. Now it was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxi-cab; and it brought all three together at a point directly beneath my window; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere⁴⁶.

Thus, the players in this scene – a man and a woman who represent the binomial masculine/feminine as roles cast by Patriarchy – seem to merge inside the non-human taxicab as a sign of androgyny. Woolf seems to indicate that only through an androgynous mind can the constrictions of writing under the rule of gender disappear, making one free to express/imagine a different experience. Being free to express such an experience for the empirical woman would be, then, in a patriarchal society, a triumph over years and years of constraints imposed by reason and language as they are dominated by the sentence of masculine language. In this sense, it is only when artists incorporate this androgynous stance to their writings and free themselves from the restrictive individuality of their own gender that they can achieve a true poetic expression. Therefore, the idea that seems to underlie Woolf’s arguments in *A Room* is that this new genre that she is trying to put forth, this “new vehicle” for literature that she advocates in her essays, should perform precisely like the taxi-cab in the scene, that is, accept both the feminine and the masculine sides of the mind actively and naturally. When Woolf’s narrator leaves the window, she seems to conclude that when the poet accepts both masculinity and femininity, their mind is sufficiently at ease to express their particular experiences collectively:

⁴⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 129.

But there may be some state of mind in which one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back. And this perhaps, I thought, coming in from the window, is one of them. For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxicab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion. The obvious reason would be that it is natural for the sexes to co-operate. One has a profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness⁴⁷.

Thus, it is by bringing the feminine language to the light of the public world, it is by removing it from the seclusion of the private realm, that is, by enunciating it, that feminine writing will finally pervade and dismantle the binary masculine language of the public world. Only then can this subversive modernist form of androgyny be achieved in a deferred future. Woolf’s androgynous poetics, then, becomes a liberation for women writers and feminist thinking. It allows the “Angel in the House” to roam free out in the open instead of being constricted to its domestic seclusion; it releases the silenced poet Judith from her forgotten bones, allowing her to live and to speak through the impersonal and collective voices of all the women writers from past, present and future.

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⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 2014, p. 131.

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