

Feminist Ideas of V. Woolf on The Material of the Essay “A Room of One's Own” and “Professions for Women”

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ABSTRACT

The term “feminism” (from Lat. *femina* – woman) was first introduced by French socialist theorist Charles Fourier in the beginning of the 19th century. Fourier wrote how what he called the “new woman” had the potential to change social life and the role of womanhood. He went as far as stating that “the empowerment of women is the main source of social progress”. Parallel to this new era of critical understanding, art needed to take not only new forms, but also contain completely new content. It is therefore not surprising that a peculiar refraction of the female image in English literature became reflected in the work of the leading figure of modernism - Virginia Woolf. Writing at the turn of the century, Woolf reimagined the place of women writers in literature, proclaiming for the first time women's right to express their own vision and experience, their right to write and to think differently. Women's literary works were perceived extremely critically by male writers specifically and the Victorian society at large. The target of Woolf's later essays would, therefore, be this very attitude towards women's intellectual creativity.

In this article, our purpose is to consider Virginia Woolf's ideas in her essays “A Room of One's Own”, and “Professions for Women” in the context of the feminist movement in England at the turn of twentieth century, determining their significance in the development of feminist critical literature.

Keywords: [feminism, feminist ideas, women's right, feminist movement]

INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf's “A Room of One's Own” is considered a pioneering feminist work, recognised today as the most important early text of feminist theory. The essay is based on Virginia Woolf's two speeches at the University of Cambridge on the current topic of the status of women in literature and the question why there has been no great women writers. For the first time in history, the essay publicly declared the right of women to express 'women's vision and experience, the right to equal attention to the value of women's writing, and the natural right of a woman to think and write differently. It is believed that in “A Room of One's Own”, Woolf outlined her own feminist position and theory. Raising the importance of economic independence for women, the essay touches on their position in a patriarchal culture and the specificity of the female literary tradition. Since its publication in 1929, it became one of the programmatic works of the first wave of Western feminism and has since repeatedly reviewed and analysed by literary critics the world over.

DISCUSSION

“A Room of One's Own” and the problem of women's literature

“A Room of One's Own” is based on a question Woolf asked herself: “What would it be like if Shakespeare had a sister no less gifted than he?” Through a literary and societal analysis of women's role in history,

Woolf answers the question with the conclusion that Shakespeare's sister would not have been able to realise her talent as it would have been suppressed by society, her life ending in tragedy. Reflecting on the possible fate of this heroine, Woolf outlined the main feminist theses and ideas of women's societal position.

As one of the first influential feminist texts, "A Room of One's Own" reveals the reasons for the creative failure of women in the literary field. The limited number of women writers up to the 19th century is explained by material realities of women, such as absence private space (a room of one's own) and independent income (Berezhnaya, 2017). Woolf herself puts it most succinctly: "Every woman, if she is going to write, must have funds and her own room" (Woolf, 1929). The image of one's own room serves in the essay as a symbol of the female space of private solitude; it is opposed to the male space (office, library) regarding access to information and time in solitude.

At the same time, the room serves as a metaphor for female identity. Speaking about women's creativity, Woolf writes: "For millions of years women have been locked up, so that today the walls themselves are saturated with their creative power, which has already exceeded the absorption capacity of brick and lime to such an extent that it requires an outlet for brushes and feathers, deeds, politics" (Woolf, 1929). So, your own room is not only your personal space, but also a place free from pressure and gender stereotypes. It is a place where a woman can write truthfully about herself. An office or a library are gender-marked spaces to which women were denied access throughout the centuries; these spaces are supported by a patriarchal ideology aimed at asserting the power and autonomy of men. The study is a privileged place, "the most closed room of the house, a place where a writer can reflect on life without direct intervention in it" (Berezhnaya, 2017). Therefore, her own room becomes for Woolf an image of the

beginning of female creativity. It is the principle starting point for a conversation about a woman and her creativity can be started.

The image of the room allows Woolf to express the idea of the socio-cultural restrictions of women established in a patriarchal society: "A middle-class woman, even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, could not even dream of her own room, not to mention quiet or closed from strangers ... she never had relief ..." (Woolf, 1929). At the same time, one's own room becomes a metaphor for the financial, and therefore social independence of women.

Reflecting on the history of the female literary tradition in England, Woolf concludes that it is impossible to find manifestations of female genius: until the 19th century, women were deprived of personal space and free time, burdened with heavy housework and raising children. With rare exceptions, history does not find evidence of the creativity of middle-class women: "She does not write memoirs, hardly a diary; only a handful of letters survived. How can we judge her if she left behind neither plays nor poems?" (Woolf, 1929). The writer emphasises the fact that women began to work from an early age, "forced by their parents and all the power of the law and way of life", respectively, there was no question of intellectual creativity. All these factors, Woolf argues, hindered the development of women's literature.

In proof of all sorts of restrictions on patriarchal Society for Women's Art, "A Room of One's Own" discusses an excerpt from the memoirs of a relative of Jane Austen: "How did she manage to write everything, because she did not have her own office, and for the most part she had to work in a general a room where there was some kind of interference all the time. She vigilantly watched so that the servants or one of the guests would not guess about her occupation – in a word, strangers" (Woolf, 1929).

In societies with strongly defined gender roles, such as Victorian England in which

Woolf was born, traditions were passed down from mother to daughter, from father to son. As researcher K. Binder (2014) writes: "... the purpose of educating girls was to prepare them for marriage and married life, while for boys, education meant preparation for their future professional activities and careers". For Woolf, the literary tradition was both a source of pleasure and a constant reminder of the downgrading of the intellectual abilities of women enshrined in her culture. In the search for their identity and their place in the world, women have had nothing to rely on and navigate, unlike men, behind whom stands "tradition, and behind others (by women) – emptiness ..." (Berezhnaya, 2017).

In contrast to the fictitious colleges in the essay - Oxbridge - a male educational institution with unlimited financial possibilities, keeping under its walls "whole treasures" granted by kings, bishops and entrepreneurs, and Furnham – a college, the money for the construction of which was collected by women "slowly, overcoming resistance, spending forces, health, time...". Wolfe builds thereby up her theory that history and literature are created by men, and the importance of women in them is traditionally belittled.

The characters and locations in the essay are references to episodes in Woolf's own biography; for example, Furnham is Newham College in Cambridge, where the writer gave a course of lectures, and the heroine Mary Seton, explaining to Mary Beton the reasons for the low material security of educational institutions for women, is Katherine Stephen, a cousin of Woolf's, who had experience managing a college (Berezhnaya, 2017). The contrast of college meals – rich in abundance at Oxbridge and sparse at Fernham – also symbolises the isolation of women in the traditional "male" cultural tradition.

The very creation of the first women's educational institutions required overcoming the strong resistance of the patriarchy. A woman who belonged entirely

to the family could not afford to learn "the great art of making money and bequeathing it to her daughters for titles and scholarships, as fathers did for their sons," and the right to dispose of her own finances was acquired by law as late as in 1880 (Woolf, 1929). Speaking about the situation of her contemporaries, Woolf notes that society remained hostile to women's creativity, with women writers being "upset in every possible way, insulted with lectures and sermons". In the 19th century, women were still limited in terms of freedom of action and access to information, their life experience limited by the four walls of the parental home. Here the concept of "one's own room" is contrasted with the concept of a "common room", inhabited by family members, devoid of the personal, unique and creative. According to Woolf, the ability to have one's own income, one's financial independence, taught a woman "to freely look at the world".

In terms of its contribution to the feminist movement, "A Room of One's Own" is significant in its encouragement of women writers to "revolt" against the dominance of patriarchy by finding their own voice and their own literary history and tradition. The writer urged her contemporaries not to be content with "their corner in the common room", but "to settle down in our rooms, developing in ourselves the habit of expressing thoughts freely and openly, finally recognizing the fact that there are no supports, we are walking alone ..." (Woolf, 1929).

As mentioned earlier, since the publication of the essay "A Room of One's Own" has been analysed by many critics and literary scholars. Writer A. Bennett and literary critic D. Deychez are among the authors who attempted to analyse the essay from the point of view of feminist criticism. However, the results of their research turned out to be the opposite. Bennett came to the conclusion that "A Room of One's Own" was not a feminist work; the author denies the idea of the political nature of Woolf's reasoning about women and reduces the

essay to the writer's thoughts about women and fiction. D. Deychez, on the contrary, argues that the essay is feminist, and, moreover, covers not only the position of women in literature and society, but also all gifted people who are deprived of the opportunity to develop their talent due to material limitations. While Bennett denies having a feminist position in Woolf's essay, D. Deychez defines her feminism as universal.

Thus, the analysis of Woolf's essays, and specifically the essay "A Room of One's Own", leads researchers to this day to draw completely different conclusions. Nevertheless, the fact holds that Woolf's writing contained an understanding of the feminist program, set out in the works of previous authors, such as M. Wollstonecraft, J. S. Mill, as well as the formation of their own position, which influenced the development of feminist criticism.

"Professions for Women" and women's writing in the context of the English literary tradition

During the critical period of English literature around the turn of the 20th century, the so-called women's issue gained relevance and the concept of the "new woman" as a response to the political feminist movement initiated changes in the position of women in art and public life. The "new woman" had many faces: she was an activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragist poet, a literary character, and, more generally, a cultural phenomenon of the late 19th century. This image of the new woman, associated with the rethinking of the role of women in history, art and literature, is also reflected in Virginia Woolf's work.

Published in 1931, the essay "Professions for Women" presents Woolf's discussion of the social obstacles for women to a successful career and self-realisation, writing in a time directly succeeding when women's opportunities were limited to the roles of wives and mothers.

Woolf expresses her ideas about female self-identity through the lens of personal experience using symbols and images. For example, the writer introduces the image of the Angel in the House – the traditional idealised representation of the Victorian woman as an integral part of the concept of the "patriarchal family", who "kills" in the course of the story in order to find her own personality, her own "voice". In the essay, she writes: "It was a valuable experience, and it fell to the lot of all the writers of that era. The murder of the Angel in the House was for a woman an integral part of her studies in literature" (Woolf, 1931). The keeper of the Angel in the House, urged Woolf to "be meek, flatter, hypocritical", working on a criticism of a book written by a male author, so as not to question the authority of male opinion, according to the writer, destroys women's ambitions and individualism.

Discussing the place of contemporary female writers in English literature, Woolf writes: "The girl woke up from her dreams. Speaking figuratively, she came up with some truth about the human body, human passions, which she, a woman, was not supposed to talk about. Men, her mind told her, would be scandalised. Imagining what exactly men would say about a woman who spoke openly about her passions, she woke up from an artistic trance. And I couldn't write anymore" (Woolf, 1931). Women are, in Woolf's words, hindered by the conservatism of the opposite sex: "Men allow themselves a lot of freedom in this regard, and they are doing the right thing, but they unconsciously get into a terrible rage and cannot control themselves when it comes to similar freedom for women" (Woolf, 1931).

As Woolf noted in her essay "A Room of One's Own": "For centuries, a woman has played the role of a mirror endowed with a magical and deceptive property: the figure of a man reflected in it was twice more than natural size" (Woolf, 1931). In "Professions for Women", the writer further develops the idea of the patriarchy's forcible

suppression of female identity, freedom and talents out of the need for self-affirmation and fear of men's inconsistency with the ideas of male superiority established by the same patriarchy as inherent in nature. In addition to the image of an angel, the Angel in the House, the writer uses parallelism to strengthen the concept of a "new woman" – a new definition that marked the end of the limitations of female individuality and career opportunities. "I am really a woman and I really work," Woolf writes about herself while noting that literature is one of the most accessible women's professions, but only because it does not require large material costs. Thus, the essay shows Woolf's sceptical attitude towards the "merits" of the feminist movement, recognised only at the legislative level: career opportunities for women, in theory, really expanded, however, women were still in a subordinate position in relation to men, and there was no question of actual equality. Formally, women were allowed to work, to have ambitions, but these ambitions should not be limitless, their success should not overshadow the success of men; female writers, as mentioned earlier, had to stay within the literary conventions set by men, which limited their creativity and freedom. At the end of the essay, Woolf therefore notes that "a woman has to overcome many ghosts, fight many prejudices" and that "the time is still far off when a woman starting to work on a book will not have to crush phantoms and smash her forehead against a stone wall" (Woolf, 1931).

Another equally topical issue raised by Woolf in "*Professions for Women*" is the problem of female self-identification. Changing the place and role of women in society is associated with the inconsistency of her existence: "Having gotten rid of falsehood, the woman remained herself. Yes, but what is she herself? What is a woman?" (Woolf, 1931). Thus, the murder of the "Angel in the House" opens the way for a woman to discover her individuality, to gaining an understanding of one's true nature, needs and desires." For the writer,

the question "what is a woman?" remains open: to find the answer to it, women need to "express themselves in all the arts and professions available to the human race" (Woolf, 1931). At the same time, this path of finding one's "I", according to Woolf, will be fraught with difficulties for a long time, with prejudices that women will need to overcome in search of the truth about themselves.

CONCLUSION

The English feminist movement begun in its right first in end of the 18th century. An outstanding representative of the literature of modernism, Virginia Woolf a significant figure for the first wave of the feminist movement and also for women's literature. It was Woolf who first openly demanded women to have access to free creativity, to create their own literary tradition independent of the patriarchal tradition. Woolf was the first writer who spoke about women's issues through the prism of personal experience, and generalised it to the general social experience of women. The essay "A Room of One's Own", which became the programmatic work of the first wave of feminism, touches on the problem of the position of women in a patriarchal culture and the specificity of the female literary tradition. Herein, Wolfe finds the cause of the problems of development of the women's literary tradition. These are the socio-cultural restrictions of women, established in a patriarchal society, which continue for centuries and deprive women of the chance to achieve equal positions with men. In terms of contribution to the feminist movement, the essay "A Room of One's Own" is significant in terms of encouraging women writers to "revolt" against the dominance of patriarchy by finding their own voice, their own literary history and tradition.

In the her later essay "Professions for Women", Woolf continues the theme of the subordinate position of women writers in the literary tradition created by men, talking about socially

determined barriers to women's path to successful careers and self-realisation, about the time when their opportunities were limited only by the roles of wives and mothers. Her idea of killing "the Angel in the House", the image of the ideal woman in the Victorian era, echoes the emergence of a new female ideal in England during a critical era – the "new woman". This image, a lifestyle that was gaining popularity among English women, was a kind of response to the feminist movement, and marked the beginning of changes in the status of women in society and art.

The evolution of Virginia Woolf's feminist idea is clearly visible in the two essays "A Room of One's Own" and "Professions for Women": beginning with the rights of women to material independence and professional self-realisation and ending with the importance of women's participation in the political life of the country.

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