

## ***Reconstructing Virginia Woolf's Feminism***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the feministic views of Virginia Woolf in view of the literary Victorian legacy she inherited. It explores some of the many precursors Woolf had, and focuses on the necessity of examining Woolf's claimed status as the initiator of feminist literary criticism. Related conjectures are reviewed to avoid putting matters into a false perspective. The paper employs biographical and historical approaches.*

*The paper also traces some expressions of the change that characterized the Victorian attitude towards women and towards the role they played in the national issues. An inevitable consequence was thus a change in the nature of the relation between the sexes, and a feeling was persistent that a new start ought to be made, in politics and in society, as well as in art and literature.*

### **ملخص البحث**

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة آراء الكاتبة و الروائية البريطانية فرجينيا وولف بشأن قضايا المرأة و ذلك في مقالتها المطولة *A Room of One's Own* . كما يهدف إلى إستقصاء أبعاد الجدل المتواصل حول موقعها المزعوم كرائدة من رائدات الأدب النسوي في الغرب .

و يهدف البحث أيضا إلى دراسة مدى مساهمة هذه الكاتبة في التعبير عن نضال المرأة في سبيل تحقيق ذاتها في المجتمع و الوصول إلى المكانة التي تليق بقدراتها في الفن و الأدب .

و تعتمد الدراسة على منهج مقارنة يرصد الباحث من خلاله موقع فرجينيا وولف في سياق الأدب النسوي و خصوصا في ضوء كتابات من سبقها من الأدباء .

**Key Words:**

Virginia Woolf, feminism, *A Room of One's Own*, Victorian legacy, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, *The Cry of the Children*, modern, post-modern, criticism, education, male domination.

**Introduction:**

In her extended essay, *A Room of One's Own*, where the availability of a private space and a private income, is seen as almost the major prerequisite for the development of a female writer's creativity, Virginia Woolf articulated her own feminist theory and position. Since then feminism has developed a range of sophisticated approaches to reading literary works, and critics have recognized the importance of Woolf's leading role in modern feminist criticism. In fact, Woolf has given feminism a modern voice and terminology, and she will always be remembered – along with other women writers – for the special place she holds in the history of feminism. However, in postmodern feminist criticism, one may think that the feminist views of the kind Woolf offers in *A Room of One's Own* might have been haunted by the literary Victorian legacy she inherited; and that she had many precursors. In this paper I'm concerned with this issue and with the necessity of examining Woolf's claimed status as the initiator of feminist literary criticism. I intend to examine related conjectures, hoping to avoid putting matters into a false perspective. I have in mind, of course, the fact that feminist criticism has scarcely left any stone unturned, not only as far as modern and postmodern eras of English literature are concerned, but in relation to older periods, too. I also understand that the searching critiques employed by feminist writers make it impossible for researchers who step into the field to fall back on a given, standardized set of researching methods. My main critical approaches in doing this are based on

biographical and historical considerations. This is due to the fact that ‘it is particularly fitting to view Virginia Woolf in context because she was one of the first writers to consider seriously and at length the relationship between an author’s historical and personal situation and his or her work’ (Shaw 156).

### **The Looming Modernism against a Victorian Background:**

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the period immediately preceding the rise of Virginia Woolf to fame, England was a scene of the bitterest criticism of the Victorian way of life. Victorian conceptions, particularly of the family and education, were now indicted and the call for change became louder than ever. Nonetheless, this change – especially as far as the position of women and their right to higher education were concerned – was also growing in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. It was marked, for example, by the fact that

...there have been at least two colleges for women in existence in England since the year 1866; that after the year 1880 a married woman was allowed by law to possess her own property; and that in 1919 – which is a whole nine years ago – she was given a vote (*A Room* 2213).<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that the reference here is made to the issuance in 1882 of the Married Women’s Property Act; the admission of women to universities; and the women’s fight for suffrage.<sup>2</sup> These were, in fact, obvious expressions of a change in the Victorian attitude towards women and towards the role they played in the national issues. An inevitable consequence was thus a change in the nature of the relation between the sexes, and a feeling was persistent that a new start ought to be made, in politics and in society, as well as in art and literature.

Since Virginia Woolf – whose father, Leslie Stephen, was a Victorian critic, philosopher, biographer, and scholar – was among those artists and writers who theorized the new change, her attitude should not be taken in isolation. Both personal and cultural factors – if taken into consideration – will shed light on the immediate background for such a stand. Highly significant in this respect is the fact that young Virginia, though denied the formal education allowed to men, was able to educate herself in her father's abundant library, to observe his writing talent,<sup>3</sup> and to grow up among many of his fellow intellectuals. Surrounded by conversations of circles of the Victorian intelligentsia, she took the first step into the world of writing. In 1897, she began her first diary; and over the next several years she developed a sort of strong admiration for women writers.<sup>4</sup> Coupled with her admiration for strong women was her growing dislike for men's domination in society.<sup>5</sup> After her father's death, however, she felt freed from his shadow, a feeling that helped her show how much she changed and how much she rebelled against her father's Victorian frame of mind.

But the change she demonstrated did not rise out of nowhere. In the Edwardian era, she announced, human character had changed, marking new beginnings and rejections of the past.<sup>6</sup> This announcement, actually, came at a time when a sort of cultural questioning, that had been initiated earlier, was – to borrow Andrew Sanders' words – 'accentuated' by the Great War and its 'immediate aftermath'.<sup>7</sup>

In the midst of this change, and as a natural consequence of her close engagement in, and concern with, the cultural world around her, Woolf firmly moved into the profession of writing.

### **A Room of One's Own**

In her life, both on personal and professional levels, Virginia Woolf was interested in the cause of women, especially

professional women, and the conditions they suffered under. She wrote several essays on this, including the essay under examination here, *A Room of One's Own*. In this essay, which has been considered the first major work in feminist criticism, Woolf wanted to examine the reasons why women had not written as much as men, why some of what women had written was flawed, and why drama and poetry, in particular, had hardly been written by women at all. But her examination of these reasons came from a contextual angle:

Here am I asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age ...It would have been extremely odd ... had one of them suddenly written the plays of Shakespeare. I concluded, and I thought of that old gentleman, who is dead now, but was a bishop, I think, who declared that it was impossible for any women, past, present, or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare. He wrote to the papers about it. He also told a lady who applied to him for information that cats do not as a matter of fact go to heaven, though, they have, he added, souls of a sort. How much those old gentlemen used to save one! How the borders of ignorance shrank back at their approach! Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare (*A Room* 2177)

In this context Woolf wants to emphasize the major points she addressed in this essay. She, therefore, utilizes a number of techniques – including historical and sociological analyses, and fictional hypotheses. This is significant in relation to her attempt to say that poverty and lack of privacy cripple women's creativity:

For it is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary [Elizabethan] literature

when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet. What were the conditions in which women lived, I asked myself; for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible; Shakespeare's plays, for instance, seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in midair by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in (*A Room* 2174-5).

Then Woolf repeatedly focuses throughout the essay on the point that a woman must have five hundred pounds a year and a room of her own if she is to write as creatively as men. 'All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point – a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.' A minor point? Yes, because 'that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and the true nature of fiction unsolved'. The problem then is left unsolved. Why? Because

...these difficulties were infinitely more formidable. In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble...[And] Since her pin money, which depended on the good will of her father, was only enough to keep her clothed, she was debarred from such alleviations as came even to

Keats or Tennyson or Carlyle, all poor men, from a walking tour, a little journey to France, from the separate lodging which, even if it were miserable enough, sheltered them from the claims and tyrannies of their families (*A Room* 2181).

So, these material difficulties were formidable, but much worse were the immaterial. The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility. The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of your writing? (*A Room* 2181).

Yet, Woolf still believes, and insists, that 'She has told you how she reached the conclusion – the prosaic conclusion – that it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry.' She also insists that women have the genius that should be promoted so that they tower in writing to a level equal to that men have already reached, men who have 'the quiet rooms looking across the quiet quadrangles. And ...the deep armchairs and the pleasant carpets ...the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space.' Men have 'seized' the opportunities available to them, Woolf emphasizes, and it is the responsibility of society that women 'get' equal ones.

To promote her theme, Woolf argues that historically women have been deprived of education, and that poverty and lack of privacy have prevented them from writing with genius. She quotes Professor Trevelyan's *History of England*<sup>8</sup> as stating that women – in the fifteenth century – were locked up, beaten and flung about the room. Two hundred years later, it was still

the exception for women to choose their own husbands, and when the husband had been assigned, he was lord and master. Even in the seventeenth century, Woolf regrets, women did not seem wanting in personality and character. Although 'some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips, in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.' One example Woolf uses here to demonstrate her viewpoints is Charlotte Bronte, whose situation was so frustrating that her books were 'deformed and twisted' and that "She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot." Then Woolf bitterly wonders: how could Bronte, who would never get her genius expressed whole and entire, 'help but die young, cramped and thwarted?'

Woolf's argument is further promoted when she raises the question of why there has not been a female Shakespeare. "Let me imagine," says Woolf, "since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderful gifted sister, called Judith, let us say." The answer comes crystal clear that Judith was unable to survive in the Elizabethan male world, and thus killed herself because no one could tolerate "the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body."

### **The Era and the Place:**

Now, after establishing the context of the changes that had paved the way for the feminist movement in Britain to tower, it seems to me essential that one should examine the conditions prevailing at the time when Virginia Woolf delivered her essay. In this respect, one may say that, though the feminist movement at this time was relatively subdued, as Marion Shaw

states<sup>9</sup>, the year 1928 was crucial in Woman's history in Britain. Women became – for the first time in that country – entitled to vote, and higher education was within reach, at least for some.<sup>10</sup> Woolf herself had, by that time, become an established writer. She earned money<sup>11</sup> and had all the space and privacy she could wish for.

But why, as Marion Shaw wonders, was Woolf still fretting about women and fiction?

Perhaps because Virginia Woolf still had a lingering resentment at her "cramped and thwarted" background, (Shaw 159) and this resentment is a central point in my reading of Woolf's essay. It focuses on Woolf's own feminism and its roots in her Victorian education, but – more importantly – it lays bare the fact that there had been other female writings decades before *A Room of One's Own*. Charlotte Bronte, for example, was angry at her position as a woman who had no money, no privacy, and no dignity:

She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. She remembered that she had been starved of her proper due of experience— she had been made to stagnate on a parsonage mending stockings when she wanted to wander free over the world. Her imagination swerved from indignation and we feel it swerve (*A Room* 2192).

These lines constitute one single example of Virginia Woolf's extensive reference in her essay to Bronte's experience, and to the Victorian novel in general, and, therefore, I thought I might broaden the perspective and examine the work of another woman writer and another genre. I have in this regard Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and her poem, *Aurora Leigh*, as my focus. I want to investigate how much feministic her poetry had been, decades before Woolf's feminism.

### **Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Social Concerns:**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was known for her fervent moral sensibility and, like Virginia Woolf, for her energetic and deep involvement in the issues of her day. Although she tended in her early poems to use what critics call visionary modes of Romantic narrative poetry, and despite the personal difficulties she faced under a tyrannically protective father, she later turned increasingly to contemporary political and social topics. She used her poetry as a tool of social protest, and a clear example is her poem *The Cry of the Children*,<sup>12</sup> in which she bitterly indicts the appalling use of child labour. This, I believe, is one single example of a broader context in which her poetry should be viewed. As I mentioned earlier, she was deeply concerned with the political and social reform in England, a proper point of departure for understanding her feministic overtures.

Championing the cause of poor children was only one phase of her concern about the poor in general and, to borrow Paul Nye's words, about the virtual slave labour of women and children in factories and mines (Nye 11). She was also increasingly aware of the growing racial tensions between blacks and whites in America and other problems in other parts of the world, problems and issues that highlight the suffering of women as they occupy the second 'hemisphere'. Her strong views in this regard are illustrated forcibly, as Nye suggests, in poems such as *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point* and *A Curse for a Nation*. It is the cause of women that is frequently observed in her poems, the cause of those women who were victimized on the hands of 'faithless' and 'disloyal' men. In many of her poems, particularly *Bianca Among the Nightingales*, *Proof and Disproof*, *Void and Law*, and *Catarina to Camoens*, Browning questions the relationship between men and women, lamenting the wronged women in a society dominated by men.

However, Browning's views should not be taken isolated from the social context of the day. Her personal and family history shows that at a time when women were still not expected to be widely educated, she vied – as Nye puts it – with her brothers to be on as equal footing as was possible and acceptable. This also "helped to counterbalance the stultifying situation at home where her father ruled without question" (Nye 38).

### **Aurora Leigh Grounding A Room of One's Own:**

Years after the appearance of her poetic social critique, *The Cry of the Children*, Browning wrote her poem, *Aurora Leigh*,<sup>12</sup> which marks a turning point in the history of feminist writing in Britain. In this verse novel, the longest and most ambitious poem she wrote, Browning generally champions the right of women to intellectual freedom, which Virginia Woolf saw – seventy-one year later – as the major prerequisite for women to write creatively. Browning is concerned in this poem with the poet's mission and sums up what she sees as the poet's purpose in participating in the desired social changes.

But, more important in this regard is the fact that *Aurora Leigh* 'anticipates Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in its strongly feminine affirmation of an independent viewpoint'; and is "a female Prelude... a portrait of the artist as a young woman committed to an art which embraces social and political realities" (Carter & McRae 327). What is established here is historically significant as it positions Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the right place as one of the earliest female writers, who, like Charlotte Bronte, and Elizabeth Gaskell, for instance, tackled the social responsibilities of the woman writer. The reality of her being, to borrow Virginia Woolf's words, 'the true daughter of her age' is not a mere complementary gesture. Her work, particularly the poem under consideration, demonstrates her gender consciousness, as she clearly believed that women were

derogated and that most of them were angry and insecure about their inferior status in society. Browning recalls, for example, in Book 1 of *Aurora Leigh* that:

...I was just thirteen,  
Still growing like the plants from unseen roots when she  
suddenly awoke  
To full life and life 's needs and agonies,  
With an intense, strong, struggling heart beside  
A stone-dead father.

And although the last word she heard from her father is 'love', her anxiety lies in the fact that:

...none was left to love in all the world.

So she belongs to a generation of young ladies who – perhaps like Judith Shakespeare – have hearts filled

With flame, that it should eat and end itself  
Like some tormented scorpion.

And they have eyes that cannot see because

...all things blurred

### **A Time for Reexamining Criticism**

Now, having examined this 'female prelude', one would feel the necessity of reexamining notions that Virginia Woolf initiated "feminist literary history and literary criticism" (Brosnan 2) with her essay, *A Room of One's Own*, and that the essay itself "has become a classic statement of feminism" (Carter & McRae 422). Nonetheless, I do not intend here to rule out the fact that Brosnan's bold statement that Woolf is "Now ... invoked as an idol of feminism," is a true statement, neither do I intend to even think that *A Room of One's Own* is a sole plea for privacy, leisure, and education. But, actually, I have been concerned about the fact that Elizabeth Barrett Browning is overshadowed in the criticism of many modern feminists, perhaps, just because her work has not been fairly valued. Thus,

and to do justice to Browning, I may claim that her feminist agenda should be judged as far as its influence is concerned; and I may recall that, fortunately, Virginia Woolf herself paved the way for postmodern criticism to make a historically important point of departure towards highlighting the recognition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's feminist voice. Woolf's significant contribution to this recognition came from her confirmation that masterpieces are not single and solitary births, but the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. I may draw upon that to claim that Browning's dealing with social and political inequalities in her time has established a platform from which those who came after her took off.

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, and to put things in their right context, I may claim that it is the established tradition of women's writing that counts; and it is befitting, absolutely here, that I may again borrow Virginia Woolf's words to say that masterpieces – including *A Room of One's Own* – are not single and solitary births. It is also here where I may borrow Woolf's words for the third time and claim that the tradition established by women writers, including of course Elizabeth Barrett Browning, would eventually force open a way for the woman writer to see human beings "not always in relation to each other but in relation to reality; and to the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves."<sup>13</sup>

### **Notes:**

1 All references to the Essay's text are based on the one included in the seventh edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* referred to in this paper.

2 See a detailed account of these issues and their context in Sanders, 1996; Carter & McRae, 1997; and Abrams, 2000.

3 The same year Virginia was born, her father began the huge undertaking of editing the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

4 An early example was her admiration of the novelist Madge Vaughan, who would later be Sally Seton in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

5 Virginia's father and mother were very strong personalities by whom she would feel overshadowed for years. Also important here is what she revealed in 1941, the last year of her life. In a letter to a friend, she wrote about the shame she felt when, at the age of six, she was fondled by her stepbrother, George Duckworth, who was then at the age of 20. The incident she referred to in her letter haunted her throughout her life. The third significant point here is Virginia's decision in 1909 to accept a marriage proposal from Lytton Strachey, who later in that year broke off the engagement.

6 See Woolf's paper, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, 1924.

7 For more details, see Sanders, 1996, pp. 505-6.

8 G. M. Trevelyan's *History of England* (1926) long held its place as the standard one-volume history of the country. [Woolf's footnote]

9 Shaw compares the conditions with the pre-war excitements of the suffrage campaigns. In 1918, the Parliamentary Qualification of Women Act allowed women to be elected as members of parliament; and in 1919, the Sex Disqualification Act abolished all existing restrictions upon the admission of women into professions, occupations and civic positions. For details see Marion Shaw, pp. 157-162.

10 Those female students who listened to Virginia Woolf were being educated almost to the same level as men. And although Cambridge, for example, did not permit women to be awarded degrees until 1944, they were allowed in 1928 to take the degree examinations. The year also saw the opening of the

Shakespeare's Memorial Theatre in Stratford-on-Avon and this reminder of the greatest English writer raises the question of why there has not been a female Shakespeare.

11 Her income from writing in that year was 1434 pounds.

12 E. B. Browning wrote the poem in 1843 when a parliamentary report, written by her friend R. H. Horne, had exposed the exploitation of children employed in coal mines and factories. Many of the details of the poem derive from the report.

12 The poem, a verse novel published in 1857, depicts the growth of a women poet and is thus, as postmodern critics observe, the first work in English by a woman writer in which the heroine herself is an author. The subtitles Browning gives to the several books of the poem show the range of social focuses that haunted the woman writer at that time: from 'the feminine education of Aurora Leigh' in Book 1, to 'poets and the present age' in Book 5. When Browning first envisioned the poem, she wanted it – as James Joyce's portrait of the artist as a young man – a portrait of the artist as a young woman committed to a socially inclusive realist art.

13 See more details about Woolf's statements in Sanders, 1996, p. 517.

A note on the in-text parenthetical citation style adopted in this paper

The documentation and in-text parenthetical citation style followed in this paper draws upon the most up-to-date version of the Modern Language Association (MLA) guidelines. These guidelines, with Duke University Libraries' 2010 version as practical example, stress the basic elements of the MLA style. This requires that researchers should cite the quotations, summaries, paraphrases, and other material used from sources within parentheses typically placed at the end of the sentence in which the quoted or paraphrased material appears. The

parenthetical method replaces the use of citational footnotes. These in-text parenthetical citations correspond to the full bibliographic entries found in a list of references at the end of a paper or a book. Unless otherwise indicated, on-line sources follow the same pattern as print versions (Duke Libraries, Research and Reference 1). However, the new MLA version states more points to be observed. Following are some of the most important ones:

1. When a single author is named in parentheses, it will be followed by the number of the page(s). No punctuation mark should precede the page number. Example: (Eliot 224).
2. When a single author is named in a single phrase, only the page number should appear in parentheses. Example: It is not for nothing that T.S Eliot complained that "whatever may have been in the literary scene in America between the beginning of the century and the year 1914, it remains in my mind a complete blank" (329).
3. When two or more works by the same author appear, the old guidelines suggest citing the year of publication in parentheses. This is not valid any longer. The new guidelines suggest citing the title after the author's name and then the page(s) number. Example: (Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* 5). (This requires that when a title is mentioned for the first time, it will appear as a whole. However, when it is mentioned afterwards, it will appear shortened).
4. In dealing with secondary source of a quotation, i.e. when an author is quoted within the text of another author, the parenthetical citation will reflect that as in the following example: (qtd. in Bentley 55).

In this paper, in addition, the major MLA style changes have been observed. The first important among these is determining the Medium of Publication (print, web, etc.). Example: Langbaum, Robert. *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity*

*of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. **Print**.

The second major change concerns electronic sources. Providing the URL of an electronic source is now optional – it is no longer required for citations. The third change relates to the documentation of encyclopedias or other reference books that are well known and widely used, such as *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *New World Encyclopedia*, the *World Book Encyclopedia* and others. The new version of the MLA style suggests that the publication information of such sources can be omitted.

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