

Virginia Woolf and Feminist Criticism

A Thesis Submitted

By

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To

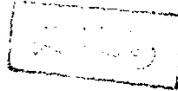
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Abstract

Woolf the feminist has always been seen as opposed to Woolf the artist. Feminist criticism of Woolf has overlooked many of the aspects of Woolf's feminism. This thesis points out that Woolf's consciousness as a woman shaped all her writings. Her vision as an artist foreshadows her feminist ideas. Thus her contribution to modern feminist critical theory is profound. Her ideas prepares the way for modern feminist ideas. Besides, Woolf's feminist ideas incorporate both French feminism as well as Anglo-American feminist concerns. The first chapter deals with Woolf's social and political feminism as well as the influences behind Woolf's early interest in feminism. The second chapter deals with the concept of the difference between the sexes and the distinction of women as an important idea in feminist critical theory. The third chapter deals with woolf's concept of androgyny together with feminists' opinions on this concept. The final chapter presents a survey of "feminine style" stressing that it is possible to have a feminine or a revolutionary style regardless of the sex of the author.

Preface

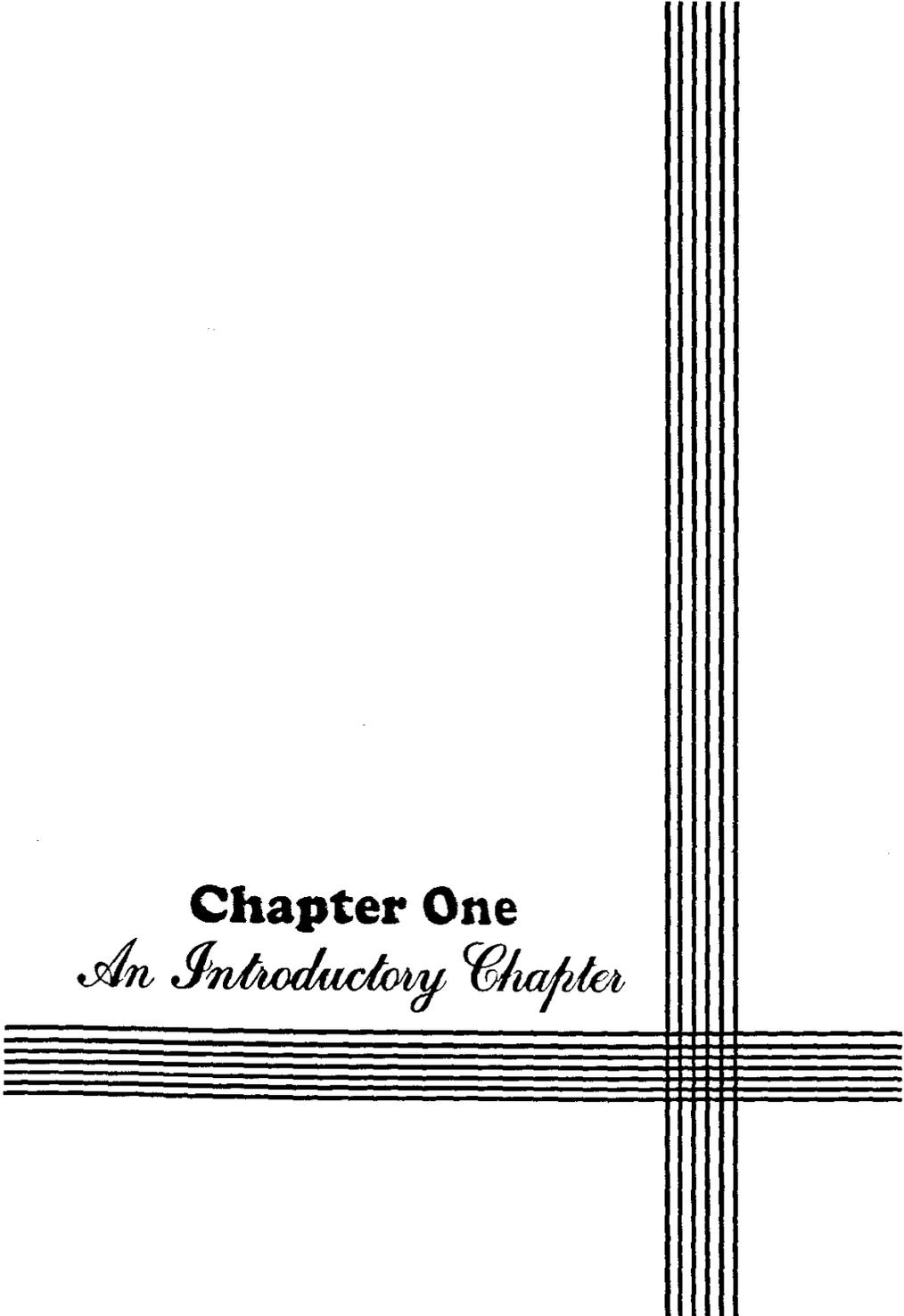
Woolf's feminism is a controversial issue. Feminist critics have responded differently to Woolf's ideas. The object of this thesis is to present a survey of the varied and at times opposed feminist writings on Woolf. The thesis also undertakes to explore the argument that Woolf is a pioneer feminist whose views have exercised a significant impact on latter feminists. Today, those views are still valid.

Various references to Woolf's novels are made in this thesis to highlight and support the basic argument. However, the study of the novels per se is beyond the scope of this work.

The thesis is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One discusses Woolf's social and political feminism, the influences that justify Woolf's status as a feminist and Woolf's contributions to feminist critical theory. Chapter Two of the thesis discusses the idea of the difference between the sexes as conceived by Woolf and later by feminist critics. From the difference between the sexes arises the question of defining the feminine and masculine. One of Woolf's suggested solutions for this dilemma is digging out a female literary tradition from which women can establish their own sense of identity. Chapter Three explores the concept of androgyny, a concept which helped dismiss Woolf as a feminist. The chapter presents a survey of feminist critics' discussion of this concept.

Chapter Four discusses whether women write differently or the same as men. It also presents an analysis of some of the features of Woolf's style which are considered feminine.

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Chapter One
An Introductory Chapter

Woolf as a feminist poses a number of problems. Until recently, criticism has tended to concentrate on the modernist aspects of her work. Her feminism has been limited to her attack on patriarchy as well as her appreciation of the potentials of women as human beings and citizens in the community. **A Room of One's Own** and **Three Guineas** were pointed out as feminist - oriented works and were thus isolated from the rest of her work. It is my argument that such an attitude is misleading. The problematic nature of Woolf's feminism arises from the fact that she never stated her views directly but always used a multiplicity of voices. Her feminist views were dismissed from the front door only to be allowed to slip in from the back door. Moreover, her statement in **Three Guineas** that the word 'feminism' is "a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete" (117) added to the problematic nature of her relationship with feminists and feminist criticism.

Woolf's contemporary male critics pointed out that "there are spots of feminism all over her work" (*Sprague (ed) 3*). At the same time, Herbert defined her feminism as "an intense awareness of her identity as a woman, [as well as] an interest in feminine problems". (*Marder 2*).

In spite of such views, feminist critics differ greatly in their responses to Woolf's feminism. **Firstly**: there are critics who refuse to call her a feminist altogether arguing that she writes from a sex specific perspective and neglected the presentation of female experience. This attitude is chiefly represented by Showalter and Stubbs. **Secondly**: there are critics who glorify Woolf as a remarkable feminist; "a guerrilla fighter in a Victorian skirt" (*Marcus, New*

Feminist Essays 6). Those critics emphasize Woolf's social and political feminism and they tend to ignore other aspects of her work. This group is mainly represented by Marcus and Black. *Thirdly* : Moi, Shalack and Kolodny concentrate on Woolf's contributions to feminist critical theory without any attempt to glorify or reject her views. The difference among the three groups of critics can be traced to their different attitudes to feminism and feminist criticism in general. On the one hand, Showalter and Stubbs are concerned with sexism, the need to study women as a separate sex and the female experience articulated in literary production by women. They search for models for women to emulate. They attack Woolf because she lacks social and political commitment and because she presents passive women characters such as Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Dalloway. On the other hand, Marcus and the others concentrate on Woolf's call for a female literary tradition and a sisterhood among women writers. They admire Woolf's notion of a utopian existence for outsiders. They see in Woolf's ideas about elevating women's social status, a similarity with their own social leanings. However, Marcus at times attempts to over-interpret parts of Woolf's work in her endeavour to stress Woolf as a social feminist. Finally, Moi and the others are influenced by the need to dissolve the eternal opposition between the sexes and the need to find a place for women as well as the necessity of developing women into full and responsible citizens who can actively share in politics. According to them, Woolf was successful to a great extent in her feminist political ideas that are still valid.

However, a systematic study of feminist criticism of Woolf was rather difficult for a number of reasons. *Firstly*,

feminist critics defy theoretical frameworks which result in the absence of basic tenets. *Secondly*, they adopt widely varied critical tools. Some adopt the deconstructionist method giving feminist twists to Woolf's ideas and thus producing new meanings; while others attempt to decode what Woolf tried to express and investigate to what extent it has been noticed by readers. Others simply refuse all available critical discourse stressing the need for a method of their own which so far has not materialized.

This chapter attempts a survey of feminist critics' attacks on and defences of Woolf in the context of her political and social feminism as well as her alleged detachment from female experience. The chapter also includes a discussion of the causes behind Woolf's feminism as well as her contributions to feminist critical theory.

In spite of some objections from feminist critics Woolf's feminism was crucial to her life and work; it was also a vision of life. The fact that Woolf was hesitant in admitting her feminist leanings and in adopting an explicit way to express them was partly attributed to her fear of patriarchal resentment and her refusal to be committed to any notion, organization or movement.

In one of her letters, she wrote : "If I am a feminist but I am beyond that now." (*Letters*. 3. 117) Here she admitted that at least she was once a feminist but she felt that what she wanted was more than what feminism gave her so she crossed over searching for a new domain. In her formative years, Woolf suffered immensely from patriarchal domination to the extent that her feminism "is too often... assumed [to be] a traditional form of rebellion against a Victorian father's oppression". (*Marcus, New Feminist*

Essays xviii) Virginia's father, Leslie Stephen, was no normal Victorian father for he was obsessed with the idea of chastity in women and highly sensitive about masculinity.

He was over - demanding from his wife and Virginia believed that he caused her death by his excessive reliance on her. When the mother died and he turned for his daughters for sympathy, Virginia was disgusted with masculinity in general. Her resentment increased when she was excluded from Cambridge on account of her femaleness. Besides, she was not allowed to travel or to free herself from the restrictive Victorian social world. As a result the communion of intellects was closed to her while it opened to her brother Thoby because he was a man. Since Thoby was a man, all opportunities were available to him and she could no longer tolerate "the separate spheres... dictated for men and women". (*Marcus, New Feminist Essays 4*) Woolf realized that she had to work hard to prove herself to the world and to herself. Adventuring, excursing and even writing were anti-patriarchal acts," a storming of the citadel of male dominance. Men impeded her halting progress." (*Marcus, New Feminist Essays 4*).

Not only her father but also her half brothers Gerald and George Duckworth were an embodiment of patriarchal vices Her half-brothers' sexual assaults on her fed her disgust and resulted in a fear of men and a disgust with her sex. Thus her feminism could be deeply rooted in her personal experience. Her insecurity was connected in her mind with her femaleness. Men's self-confidence was systematically nurtured by British society whereas women were systematically attacked. This culminated into her resentment of patriarchy and her fear of the criticism of others. This