

A Room of One's Own: Virginia Woolf's Quest for Mental Androgynous Fusion

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Abstract

This paper is mainly concerned with Virginia Woolf's theory of the androgynous mind in *A Room of One's Own*. It examines her efforts towards fusing the man-womanly and the woman-manly mind, and to eradicating gender-consciousness, thereby deconstructing the binary oppositions between both sexes. The paper also sheds light on the criticism placed on Woolf's notion of androgyny by later feminists. It argues that the contradictory argument of Woolf's goal or meaning of androgyny at the centre of *A Room of One's Own* is not an indication of Woolf's inadequacy or failure, nor an escape from her feminine identity. By way of concluding, it can be suggested that Woolf's theory of the androgynous mind underpins her theory of fusion, the theory which reinforces a positive creative fused mind that is free from gender discrimination and gender stereotype in literature.

ملخص

في المقالة المطولة (Androgynous Mind) يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة نظرية العقل الثنائي للكاتبة الإنجليزية فرجينيا وولف. و يتناول البحث جهود الكاتبة (*A Room of One's Own*) التي وجهت نحو دمج العقل الرجولي النسوي والعقل النسوي الرجولي للقضاء على التمييز بين الجنسين، وبالتالي إنهاء المعارضات و التناقضات بينها. كما يسلط البحث الضوء على الانتقادات الموجهة من بعض مؤيدي الحركة النسائية ضد فكرة وولف. ويقول إن التناقض في الآراء فيما (*A Room of One's Own*) (Androgynous Mind) يتعلق بهدف وولف من نظرية العقل الثنائي هو ليس مؤشرا على عدم كفايتها أو فشلها، ولا هروب من هويتها الأنثوية. وفي الختام (*Own*) يمكن القول أن نظرية العقل الثنائي تدعم نظرية وولف في الاندماج، النظرية التي تعزز وجود عقل ابداعي إيجابي متحد و مندمج خال من التمييز بين الجنسين في الكتابات الأدبية.

Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father. The Fascist poem, one may fear, will be a horrid little abortion such as one sees in a glass jar in the museum of some country town. Such monsters never live long, it is said; one has never seen a prodigy of that sort cropping grass in a field. Two heads on one body do not make for length of life.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Virginia Woolf's theory of the 'androgynous mind' is first introduced in *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, which essentially explores her perception of how the early twentieth-century patriarchal texts approached feminism. Her main concern in the essay is to search for evidence of an androgynous mind in which both masculine and feminine attributes work together in the absence of any degree of sex-consciousness; in other words, she looks for sexless authorship. Woolf's use of the term 'androgynous mind' demonstrates her intention to convey the merging of two different experiences - one male and one female - into a mystical moment in which this harmony is not perceived as casual, but rather as an indicator of the oneness of the writer's mind and thought. Hence, this concept embodies both male and female aspects in a single idea, in which these aspects are inextricably linked, and impossible to separate. The definition of androgyny, based on the notion of effusion, implies the breakdown of the oppositions between writers of different sex, and reconciliations where necessary, such that the writing is without sex-consciousness and gender-bias, the result being that the work of art is at its highest capacity.

The objective of this paper is to investigate Woolf's theory of the androgynous mind, and how her efforts were directed towards fusing the man-womanly and the woman-manly mind, and to eradicating gender-consciousness, thereby deconstructing the binary oppositions between both sexes. The paper also sheds light on the criticism placed on Woolf's notion of androgyny by later feminists.

In her essay, Woolf cited the Romantic poet and writer, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the first popular writers to indicate that a great mind is androgynous. It was from these beginnings that Woolf's theory of the androgynous mind began to emerge and develop. On 1st September 1832, in *Table Talk*, Coleridge expressed most clearly and succinctly the truth that "a great mind must be androgynous".¹ James Holt McGavran argues that Coleridge felt a life-long attraction to the ideal of psychic androgyny, that is:

[T]he concept that creativity in human consciousness, as in nature and the life of the body, results not from the domination of matter by mind or of emotions by reason, but from a transforming synthesis of opposing but complementary-and thus figuratively masculine and feminine-elements.²

Woolf's argument is that Coleridge was calling for a "resonant and porous ... naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided" mind that "transmits emotion without impediment" and not for, as she points out, "a mind that has any special

¹ Coleridge quoted in McGavran, J. H. "Coleridge, the Wordsworths, and Androgyny: A Reading of 'The Nightingale'" *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Nov., 1988), pp. 57-75 (South Atlantic Modern Language Association Stable), [Online], available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3200671>, [Accessed on]: 19/11/2008, p. 59.

² "Coleridge, the Wordsworths, and Androgyny: A Reading of 'The Nightingale'", p. 59.

sympathy with women" (AROO, 128). What Woolf insists on is that to be an ideal writer, one's mind should be either man-womanly or woman-manly or, in other words, should be androgynous. In helping to convey her concept, Woolf introduced the word 'fusion' in Chapter Six of *A Room of One's Own* (1929):

For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural *fusion*. (AROO, 127)³

If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this *fusion* takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly, by pausing and looking at a book or two. (AROO, 128)

When we look at those photographs some *fusion* takes place within us; however different the education, the traditions behind us, our sensations are the same. (AROO, 165)

From Woolf's usage of the word *fusion* in these instances, it is clear that she employs the concept to indicate the merging and the melting of different, separate, and divided elements or ideas into one entity - a union of the original components.

Moreover, she perceives the combination of masculine and feminine elements to be perfectly obtainable, believing that all individuals and especially artists, should desire this, as she demonstrates in *A Room of One's Own*:

³ My emphasis added in the three paragraphs by bolding and italicising the word 'fusion'.

[...] in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her [...]. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties (AROO, 128).

Woolf's concept or vision of the androgynous mind in *A Room of One's Own* is quite a controversial topic which has received mixed reactions from critics who have argued the specifics of her characterisation of the idea.

In the quotation above, we can place Woolf in a controversial dialogue with Rachel Bowlby. Woolf believes that the ideal writer is mentally androgynous, "if one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her"; Bowlby, however, argues that "[f]or the man, there is only a 'woman' part of his brain, whereas the woman has the 'man' entire in her". She concludes that the combination of the masculine and feminine elements in the ideal writer is not a union of two separate, equal and different elements, but rather "the masculine dominates as whole to part, and we have returned to another version of the patriarchal structure".⁴ Along with Bowlby, in "One Male and Female Principle", Linda Thurston argues that cosmic principles like good and evil, light and dark, male and female should not be confused. Thurston argues that the cultural dominant view is based largely on the idea of 'the

⁴ Bowlby, R. (1997), *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 39.

opposition of opposites': "*There is One and there is Other which embodies all the opposite characteristics of One*. Each is seen as isolated and separate from its Other. [...] In this view the goal of life is the victory of One triumphing over its Other (Good over Evil)".⁵ Thurston does not mention how One triumphs over Other; this triumph or victory is the result either of the destruction of the Other or of the fusion of the One and the Other, which Woolf calls for in *A Room of One's Own* as mentioned above: "in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man". She asserts that the normal state of being is the harmony of the male and female parts of one's mind such that any hierarchy resulting from gender difference is transcended (*AROO*, 128).

In the 1970s, Elaine Showalter, a well-known critic of Woolf, read Woolf's vision of androgyny, defining this as the "full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements",⁶ an escape from the body: "a myth that helped her evade confrontation with her painful femaleness".⁷ Showalter categorises this vision as one of desexualisation, accusing Woolf of using it as an inhuman concept and as an escape from fixed gender identities. She writes: "her vision is inhuman. Whatever else one may say of androgyny, it represents an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness".⁸ Regarding Woolf's

⁵ Thurston, L. "One Male and Female Principle", *The Second Wave*, 1 (Summer 1971), 38-42.

⁶ Showalter, E. (1999), *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), p. 263.

⁷ *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, p. 264.

⁸ *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, p. 289.

concept of androgyny as negative, Showalter perceives Woolf's greatest sin to be her abandonment of the exploration of feminine identity in a patriarchal world: "Even in the moment of expressing feminist conflict, Woolf wanted to transcend it. Her wish for experience was really a wish to forget experience".⁹ Furthermore, Showalter construes Woolf's insistence on the androgynous nature of the great writer as a way to flee from a disturbed feminism: "[...] her criticism and her theoretical prose moved away from a troubled feminism toward a concept of serene androgyny".¹⁰

Like Showalter, Roger Poole argues for the impossibility of the androgynous mind. He considers men and women to be physically existent in the world in such a different way (their embodiment is so radically different), that they must perceive the world quite differently. He sees Woolf's concept of androgyny simply as "a happy resolution" and as nothing other than "a conceptual possibility".¹¹ Similarly, Ellen Bayuk Roseman claims that the androgyny passage in *A Room of One's Own* undermines Woolf's feminist discourse. She writes: "Although the placement of her comments on androgyny towards the end of the book suggests that it represents the culmination of her thinking, it deflects her emphasis on women into a different argument altogether".¹²

It is clear that explanations of Woolf's concept of androgyny as a desexuated selfhood are mistaken. Despite the fact that Woolf is addressing an

⁹ *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, p. 282.

¹⁰ *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, p. 282.

¹¹ Poole, R. (1995), *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, fourth edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 261.

¹² Roseman, E (1995), *A Room of One's Own: Women Writers and the Politics of Creativity*, (New York: Twayne Publishers), p. 111.

audience of women in *A Room of One's Own*, she is aware that her address will be overheard by men whom she fears will reject her tone. In her diary entry of 23rd October, 1929, Woolf seems to explain this point:

I will here sum up my impressions before publishing *A Room of One's Own*. It is a little ominous that Morgan [E. M. Forster] won't review it. It makes me suspect that there is a shrill feminine tone in [*A Room of One's Own*] which my intimate friends will dislike. I forecast, then, that I shall get no criticism, except of the evasive jocular kind, from Lytton [Strachey], Roger [Fry] and Morgan; that the press will be kind and talk of its charm and sprightliness; also I shall be attacked for a feminist and hinted at for a Sapphist; Sybil [Lady Colefax] will ask me to luncheon; I shall get a good many letters from young women. I am afraid it will not be taken seriously. Mrs. Woolf is so accomplished a writer that all she says makes easy reading [...] this very feminine logic [...] a book to be put in the hands of girls. I doubt that I mind very much. The Moths; but I think it is to be waves, is trudging along; and I have that to refer to, if I am damped by the other. It is a trifle, I shall say; so it is; but I wrote it with ardour and conviction.¹³

Woolf's suspicion of 'a shrill feminine tone' means that her concept of androgyny emphasises the importance of both femaleness as well as maleness; she does not concentrate on, or ignore, one side. Thus, the controversial point of later twentieth-century literary criticism and readings is whether Woolf's conception of androgyny sexualises or desexualises artistic subjectivity and whether her conception undermines her feminine side in *A Room of One's Own*.

¹³ Woolf, L. A (1954), *A Writer's Diary*, (London: The Hogarth Press,), pp. 148-49.

In contrast to those who accuse Woolf of desexuating artistic subjectivity, Carolyn Heilbrun celebrates Woolf's theory of androgyny as both a humanist and feminist ideal. She states that the concept "did not mean hermaphrodite, nor [...] bisexual or homosexual". Rather for Woolf, it meant to be "fully human": "instead of referring to androgyny and individuals, we [should] call them simply 'fully human men and women'".¹⁴ She also points out that the Bloomsbury group was the earliest proponent of "such a way of life in practice"¹⁵ in which "masculinity and femininity were marvelously mixed in its members" and these friends, Heilbrun adds, were the first to "live their lives as though reason and passion might be equal ideas".¹⁶ For Heilbrun, who considers androgyny as the concept of an "unbounded and hence fundamentally indefinable nature",¹⁷ it is quite clear that androgyny is important for women's liberation: "androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate".¹⁸

Writing at the same time, Nancy Topping Bazin, who has provided a thorough analysis of Woolf's concept of androgyny, believes that for Woolf the androgynous mind is the mind in which the masculine and feminine elements are united harmoniously to produce creative works:

¹⁴Heilbrun, C. "Further Notes Towards a Recognition of Androgyny", *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2 (Winter, 1974), (London: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers Ltd.), p.p. 144-146

¹⁵Heilbrun, C. (1973), *Towards Androgyny: Aspects of Male and Female in Literature*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.), p.115.

¹⁶*Towards Androgyny: Aspects of Male and Female in Literature*, p. 118.

¹⁷*Towards Androgyny: Aspects of Male and Female in Literature*, p. xi.

¹⁸*Towards Androgyny: Aspects of Male and Female in Literature*, p. x.

In *A Room of One's Own* [Woolf] suggests that every mind is potentially bisexual. But she finds that among writers, and particularly among her contemporaries, most men tend to develop only the analytic, 'masculine' approach [...] and most women only the synthetic, 'feminine.' [...] in her opinion, however, to be truly creative one must use the 'whole' mind. [...] [T]he greatest writers are 'androgynous': they use and harmonize the masculine and feminine approaches to truth.¹⁹

In addition to reading Woolf's concept of androgyny as a union of masculinity and femininity, Bazin also reads it as a balance of "the evanescent masculine and the eternal feminine"²⁰ and asserts that in Woolf's concept, "the masculine and feminine should be balanced but not fused".²¹

Recently, feminist deconstructionists have defended Woolf's psychic and textual androgyny against Showalter. They see Woolf's concept of androgyny as a sexuation of artistic subjectivity. In *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), Toril Moi suggests that Woolf invokes androgyny to deconstruct the metaphysical belief in two relatively mixed, immutable and complementary but opposing genders. She states that "[Woolf] has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle is most precisely to be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity".²² Moi understands Woolf's androgyny as recognition of the way in which fixed gender identities falsify metaphysical nature, and not as fleeing from gender identities as Showalter claims. Then, Moi's argument is that Woolf's

¹⁹Bazin, N.T. (1973), *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, New Jersey), p. 3.

²⁰*Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, p. 201.

²¹*Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, p. 23.

²²Moi, Toril, (2002), *Sexual/Textual Politics*, (London: New York Routledge), p. 14.

concept of androgyny is a way of deconstructing the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity.

Like Moi, Makiko Minow-Pinkney perceives Woolf's androgyny as sexuating the feminine and breaking down the conventional beliefs about sexual identity: "The feminist text must call into question the very identities which support this pattern of binary opposition. The concept of androgyny then becomes radical, opening up the fixed unity into multiplicity, joy, play of heterogeneity, a fertile difference".²³ According to Minow-Pinkney, Woolf's aim in her concept of androgyny is "to achieve a balance between these two forces [female and male]".²⁴ Sharing Moi's deconstructionist view and Minow-Pinkney's "heterogeneity", Mary Jacobus states that Woolf's androgyny is defined as a process of asserting or negotiating 'difference' and one that opens up heterogeneous possibilities for sexual differences. Androgyny, Jacobus argues, is "a simultaneous enactment of desire and repression by which the split is closed with an essentially Utopian vision of undivided consciousness".²⁵ This suggests that androgyny necessitates the repression of and the unconsciousness of gender difference. Along with Moi, Minow-Pinkney, and Jacobus, Elizabeth Abel agrees that Woolf 'feminises' the concept of androgyny:

Despite Woolf's declaration that 'some marriage of opposites has to be consummated,' she calls into question the heterosexual prototypes of women's literary maternity

²³Minow-Pinkney, M (1987), *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, (The Harvester Press), p. 12.

²⁴*Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, p. 15.

²⁵ Jacobus, M (1986), 'The Difference of View' in *Reading Women: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (London: Methuen), p. 39.

by never representing a marriage with the masculine, and by including no women in her list of androgynous writers.²⁶

My argument is that Woolf's concept of androgyny embodies another fundamental dilemma, that being whether it implies balance or fusion. Mona Fayad argues that the function of androgyny would ideally be to provide "a third term that neutralises the gendered way in which the subject is constructed".²⁷ Annis Pratt defines this internal androgeneity as a delightful interchange between qualities usually set in opposition to one another, "the aggressive and the gentle, the adventurous and the nurturing faculties residing in each personality".²⁸ Pratt's definition implies that there is a balance of male and female elements, and this balance means that the female and male side of the brain must interact equally without either side dominating or subsuming the other.

From the very beginning of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's aim towards the idea of fusion clearly appears in projecting a new subjective reality into "Oxbridge", the term which is the outcome of uniting and fusing Oxford and Cambridge, which represent advanced institutions of elite culture and knowledge:

The spirit of peace descended like a cloud from heaven, for if the spirit of peace dwells anywhere, it is in the courts and quadrangles of Oxbridge on a fine October morning. Strolling through those colleges past those ancient halls the

²⁶ Abel, E. (1989), *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 108.

²⁷ Fayad, M. "Aliens, Androgynes, and Anthropology: Le Guin's Critique of Representation in the Left Hand of Darkness", *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 30, (Sept 1997), <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>.

²⁸ Pratt, A. "The New Feminist Criticism", *College English*, 32, (May 1971), p. 878.

roughness of the present seemed smoothed away; the body seemed contained in a miraculous glass cabinet through which no sound could penetrate, and the mind, freed from any contact with facts ... was at liberty to settle down upon whatever meditation was in harmony with the moment (*AROO*, 7).

It is clearly seen that Woolf's aim behind this unification of Oxford and Cambridge is to create a place of knowledge for both males and females, the place which is monopolised by males only:

It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me. Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me (*AROO*, 6-7).

In this passage, Woolf depicts Oxbridge as a male bastion that is jealously guarded by the beadle who rushes to remind Mary Beton that this is a restricted place, only men are allowed in and hence, women must not trespass into this masculine sphere. This notification is delivered again and reinforced when Woolf tries to enter the door of the library:

I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the college or furnished with a letter of introduction (*AROO*, 9).

Woolf attempts to resolve the site of gender difference and conflict through the ‘unity of the mind’ or through the androgynous fusion which is established by her famous statement of the “woman-manly or man-womanly” person (*AROO*, 136).

When Woolf speaks of “natural fusion”, when she speaks of the reconciliation of the opposites, and when she considers the voice of the artist, we see that she offers androgyny as a way of reconciling the sexes:

For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion (*AROO*, 127).

I will argue that the reconciliation that Woolf offers is really a definition of androgyny based on fusion rather than balance, the fusion which tends to destroy the uniqueness and the ambivalence of the other sex. So there must be a careful distinction between balance and fusion, in order to have a thorough understanding of Woolf’s concept of androgyny. By concentrating on the intellectual likeness of male and female instead of on physical or sexual differences, Woolf reaches her understanding of fusion. Furthermore, Woolf’s portrayal of “[t]wo heads on one body” (*AROO*, 135), which means fusing male and female bodies into one head, establishes the ideal androgynous human being. She links this vision to Coleridge, who, she says,

perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine [...] (*AROO*, 128).

Woolf's exploration of the idea of the co-existence of the sexes in the body as well as in the mind, implies the idea of the transcendence of gender. Moreover, the idea and the significance of the co-operation of both sexes present in Woolf's concept of androgyny suggest the existence of two distinct identities; a man and a woman. So, Woolf attempts to create an interchangeable relationship between the two sexes and this has much to do with a universal state of mind:

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 happiness (*AROO*, 127).

In addition, Woolf replaces the image of the gender discrimination at the door of Oxbridge library by the image of a man and woman quickly entering the taxi-cab and intermingling with the city traffic. In the taxi-cab, the couple unite in what Woolf calls a 'natural fusion', which leads her to consider "whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness?" (*AROO*, 127-128) Furthermore, the scene of a woman and a man coming down the street and boarding a taxicab illustrates Woolf's concept of androgyny as the idea of unity and inter-changeability between the opposite sexes in society. She writes, "[t]he sight of two people coming down the street and meeting at the corner seems to ease the mind of some strain, I thought, watching the taxi turn and make off" (*AROO*, 126). Her thoughts, sparked by the vision of this man and woman entering a taxi, caused her to consider that "[p]erhaps to think, as I had been thinking two

days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind” (*AROO*, 126). That is to say that the taxi embodies the sense of inclusion rather than exclusion, unlike the Oxbridge library which includes men to the exclusion of women. So, through the medium of the taxi, Woolf provides a place where the sexes complement each other and fuse in a woman-manly and man-womanly sphere.

Woolf questions the meaning of the ‘unity of the mind’, on the grounds that the mind is always changing its focus. The unity of the man and woman in the taxicab is satisfying, as the mind contains both a male and female element, and for complete satisfaction and happiness, these two opposites must live in harmony – hence, the ‘unity of the mind’ refers to an ideal mental androgyny. Woolf’s concept thus suggests the idea of the duality of the sexes, frequently evidenced in her use of the term ‘double soul’. In itself, this indicates that Woolf directs her aim towards mental fusion of the male and female souls whilst retaining the distinction of sexual difference without that difference implying any hierarchy:

[...] this creative power [of women] differs greatly from the creative power of men [...] It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if the two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with only one? Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences rather than the similarities? (*AROO*, 114)

For Woolf, there are two sides of the soul present separately, but in harmony and in close relationship. The androgynous individual copes with the two

sides without destroying or subordinating the other and simultaneously breaks down all the obstacles that work to separate reason, emotion, and relation. Mary Daly's description of androgyny has a similar sense:

The adequate meeting of the two worlds, then, cannot be imagined as a simple one-to-one relationship between representatives of humanity's two halves, for half a person really never can meet the objectified other half. The adequate 'cosmosis' will require a breakdown of walls within the male psyche as well as within the female. It will require in men as well as in women a desire to become androgynous, that is, to become themselves.²⁹

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf explains to the reader the characteristic or the content of the male sentence which is written by men themselves:

The sentence that was current at the beginning of the nineteenth century 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 rest (*AROO*, 99-100).

Woolf demonstrates that men write with the male side of their brains, and is critical of women for reading men's writings. She reinforces her argument by giving the example of the imaginary character, the poetry critic, Mr. B, whose sentence "falls plump to the ground – dead" (*AROO*, 132), purely because of his

²⁹ Daly, M. (1973), *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, (Boston: Beacon Press), p. 172.

emphasis on the male side,unlike Coleridge whose androgynous mind produces a sentence that “explodes and gives birth to all kinds of other ideas”. This type of writing as Woolf asserts, is the only kind that has “the secret of perpetual life” (*AROO*, 132). Woolf also introduces another sign which indicates the sexed male mind, this being the use of the male ego represented by the letter “I”, which lies on the page as a “straight dark bar” with a “shadow” “shapeless as a mist” (*AROO*, 130).

Woolf has directed her readers’ attention to the fact that despite the sexed writing of male writers, which clearly favours their own sex and is unsuited for women’s adaptation, many female writers have unconsciously fallen into the trap: “Charlotte Bronte, with all her splendid gift for prose, stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in her hands. George Eliot committed atrocities with it that beggar description” (*AROO*, 100).According to Woolf, the lack of education and support prevents most women from fulfilling their desire to write with an incandescent mind. Anger and bitterness, Woolf asserts, detract from their writing. About the novels of Charlotte Bronte, Woolf writes, “if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted” (*AROO*, 90).In contrast, Jane Austen, Woolf praises, found this sentence improper for her use, managed to shape the proper one and never departed from it. Moreover, she wrote with an undistracted mind argued Woolf who when writing about Austen, says she wrote “about the year 1800 without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching” (*AROO*, 88). That is why, Woolf argues, she succeeded while Bronte and Eliot did not: “Thus, with less genius for writing than

Charlotte Bronte, she got infinitely more said" (*AROO*, 100). Woolf argues that if readers compare Shakespeare and Austen, they may find that "the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare" (*AROO*, 88).

Reading along these lines one would come to the conclusion that Woolf is aware that "curious sexual equality [...] comes only when sex is unconscious of itself" (*AROO*, 121), and she reminds us that one must put in his/her mind elements of both sexes in order to be productive: "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple" (*AROO*, 136). The logic which holds these two arguments is that the forgetting of one's sex does not erase differences between sexes, and the androgynous mind is possible only on the basis of the existence of two distinct genders - male and female. What Woolf aims for is the situation where a writer writes without consciousness of his/her sex, since then the piece of work is seen for itself not as its author. For instance, when she reads the angry writing of any man about women, Woolf finds herself thinking "not of what he was saying, but of himself" (*AROO*, 43). Thus, the reader will be aware of who is writing, not what is written. So the sex of the author must be ignored in order for the success of writing to be achieved, and this is primarily the reason why Coleridge and Shakespeare have both become literary geniuses: "the mind of the artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent, like Shakespeare's mind" (*AROO*, 73), and indeed the reason why Woolf herself has become one of the most famous and successful authors of the twentieth century.

As Herbert Marder puts it, Woolf was proud of being called “the most brilliant pamphleteer in England”.³⁰

Showalter has claimed that the concept of androgyny advocated by Woolf is not a solution to the problem of sexual and literary life, but rather a denial of those problems’ existence; not evidence of mastery over complex and dangerous sexual feeling, but rather, evidence of Woolf’s escape from that feeling into a refuge of an inhuman ideal. This suggests the inadequacy of Woolfian androgyny as a sexual goal.

My conclusion is that the contradictory argument of Woolf’s goal or meaning of androgyny at the centre of *A Room of One’s Own* is not an indication of Woolf’s inadequacy or failure, nor an escape from her feminine identity, but rather an artful and skillful strategy to deconstruct the binary oppositions between the sexes that underpin Woolf’s theory of fusion, the theory which reinforces a positive creative fused mind that is free from gender discrimination and gender stereotype in literature.

³⁰Marder, H. (1974), *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 1.

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