



Universidad
Zaragoza

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Writing and the Androgynous Mind in Virginia
Woolf's Orlando

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2018

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INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was an essayist and a critic as well as a famous novelist. In fact, she began as a writer of essays and then put her theories into practice in some of her novels. In her essays, she reflected her thoughts about many topics, usually fiction and gender. Woolf is, indeed, a renowned feminist writer and her essays are a benchmark for many women nowadays. Among the subjects of her concern are the possibilities of the androgynous mind and the differences between women and men's writing, subjects that she dealt with both in some of her essays and also in her sixth novel *Orlando* (1928), a fictional biography of a nobleman called Orlando, born during Elizabeth I reign. The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse *Orlando* in the light of three of Woolf's essays —“Women Novelists” (1918), *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and “Modern Fiction” (1919)— with a view to exploring her idea that an androgynous mind is necessary to be a brilliant writer, her distinction between male and female writing and the representation of literary history in *Orlando*. Ultimately, I intend to study her style in *Orlando* to demonstrate whether her ideas are consistent or not. Does Virginia Woolf reflect her theories in her novel?

Orlando is a fictional biography which addresses topics such as gender stereotypes and androgyny, the moral values of different periods of time, and literary and British history. Woolf uses humour, irony and mockery to criticise different aspects of society she does not seem to agree with. As for her essay *A Room of One's Own*, it deals with the topic of women writers, their disadvantages due to their gender, the oppression they suffer and how these influence their work. She also proposes some solutions that would help women to prosper and flourish, famously, a room of their own, an education and economic autonomy. In “Modern Fiction” Woolf deals with her ideas about life and how they should be portrayed in fiction. She advocates distancing

oneself from tradition and claims to write from the soul, making innovations and using a more experimental style than the previous generation. Finally, “Women Novelists” is a very short essay about how works of fiction are reviewed and criticised depending on the gender of the writer and how this has an effect on women’s works.

In my dissertation, I will analyse the essays in parallel with *Orlando* in order to explore how Virginia Woolf reflects her theoretical works in her novel. I am going to focus on the importance of the androgynous mind, the differences between male and female writers, and how Orlando can be read as a personification of literary history. I will conclude with a reflection on her own personal style in the novel.

2. From Essayist to Writer

As mentioned above, I have selected three essays —“Women Novelists” (1918), *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and “Modern Fiction” (1919)— in order to analyse some aspects of *Orlando* related to gender, especially the androgynous mind. I will next summarise some relevant points Woolf makes in her three essays.

“Women Novelists” is a very short essay about the review of R. Brimley Johnson’s *The Women Novelists* (Collins, 1918). Here, Woolf criticises Johnson’s views about women writers and his idea that their novels should be judged with their sex in mind and not simply according to their abilities as writers: “Experience seems to prove that to criticize the work of a sex as a sex is merely to state with almost invariably acrimony prejudices derived from the fact that you are either a man or a woman” (Woolf, “Women Novelists” 13). Also, Woolf states that the reason why women find it hard to write is the handicap of oppression. According to her, this disadvantage and the fear of being compared with male writers influence their works in a negative way. Another interesting conclusion is that men and women write in a different way, “each sex describes itself” (17). So, they are interested in different matters and this produces differences in storyline, method and style.

“Modern Fiction” was written in 1919. This essay reflects important ideas Woolf will later introduce in her novels. She writes about what she considers good writing in contrast to the previous generation and tradition. Novelists should distance themselves from the tradition which she calls “materialist”, and be more concerned about “spiritual” rather than external issues such as plot and descriptions. She argues that authors should write as they feel and not as others tell them to write. In this essay, the principal characteristics of what would later be known as Modernism are described:

But any deductions that we may draw from the comparison of two fictions so immeasurably far apart are futile save indeed as they flood us with a view of the

infinite possibilities of the art and remind us that there is no limit to the horizon, and that nothing—no “method”, no experiment, even of the wildest—is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence. “The proper stuff of fiction” does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss. (“Modern Fiction” 2155)

In *Orlando*, as we shall see, Woolf mocks the features of a typical biographical narrator and at the end of the novel, when Orlando is living in the 1920s, she changes her style of writing into a Modernist one. Even though “Modern Fiction” does not directly approach gender issues, it could be connected with the idea that Modernist fiction has feminine characteristics: “But the political impetus of writing by such a woman as Woolf, Loy, Mansfield, Wharton, H.D., and Stein changed literary possibility and form for all” (Matthews 132), thereof the transformation of Orlando from a man to a woman makes sense from a literary point of view as well.

A Room of One's Own, based on a lecture given at Cambridge University, was published in 1929, one year after *Orlando*. The essay compiles ideas Virginia Woolf had already expressed in previous essays and novels. In sum, what Woolf asserts is that a woman needs a room and to be financially stable in order to write. The oppression suffered by women through history is the reason why very few of them were able to develop their artistic abilities. Virginia explains this idea by telling the story of a fictional sister of Shakespeare's. However, what I find the most interesting is her recommendation of the androgynous mind, the idea that in order to be a good writer, people should forget about their sex: “it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (102).

These three essays contain ideas that Woolf drew on in order to create her novels and in this dissertation, I am going to contrast them with *Orlando*, an experimental novel about a character who turns from male to female, and who is also a writer.

Orlando: A Biography is Woolf's sixth novel, published in 1928. Orlando is a 16-year-old nobleman who is very passionate about love and writing. Heartbroken, he travels to Turkey and lives there as an ambassador. There, when he is around 30 years old, Orlando goes through a change of sex without further explanation. This event is open to different interpretations and it is going to be analysed in the following sections. After that, she lives with the gipsy community and returns to England. She gradually gets used to her female condition and all the limitations a woman had at that time. Eventually, after having life experiences with people from different social classes and genders, Orlando gets married and has a child. The character lives for more than 300 years (1588–1928), which makes of his/her life, as recounted by the narrator-biographer, a compendium of British history, its literature and its moral values from the Renaissance to 1928.

Woolf uses a great dose of humour and irony with the purpose of satirizing society through the passing of time. Besides, she also creates a character who goes beyond the limits of conventions and the values of the time. Very significantly, the conception of gender is blurred. This novel is dedicated to and based on Vita Sackville-West's, with whom Woolf had an intimate relationship. It is important to mention that it was written as a break between two dense and complex novels, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), and it is characterized by its light tone and its mockery of the biographical genre. Under its ironic surface Woolf's main themes and interests remain.

2.1. The Androgynous Mind

In the following lines, I am going to analyse and compare *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* regarding the ideas about the androgynous mind. But what does

androgynous mean? “In biology, an androgynous person, animal, or plant has both male and female sexual characteristics” (*Collins*). How does Virginia Woolf explore this idea in *Orlando*? Virginia Woolf writes mainly about gender, that is, the state of being male or female in relation to the social and cultural roles that are considered appropriate for men and women, not so much sex or sexuality. In *A Room of One’s Own* she asserts that an androgynous mind is the only way to write something brilliant: “Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated” (103). Woolf argues that some of the best writers in history, such as Shakespeare or Coleridge, had androgynous minds. But this is not an isolated idea that she expresses in one of her essays, this idea influences most of her writings, *Orlando* included: “No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (*Orlando* 87). It is key to be a genius and write something that transcends time. Woolf also states that differences between men and women are hard to define: “Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided” (*Orlando* 93). The limits between one and the other are constantly blurred in *Orlando*.

In *Orlando*, character descriptions are often inverted and contradictory. For instance, when the book begins, Orlando is described in the following terms, a reminiscence of female descriptions in traditional literature: “The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks” (4). Complementarily, when Orlando is a woman, some descriptions or events are related to traditional masculine features, or simply they question her femininity: “she fought a duel, served on one of the King’s ships as a captain, was seen to dance naked on a balcony” (142). Besides, Orlando’s love interests are very often

ambiguous, for instance Sasha the Russian Princess is described with the following words: “When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be — no woman could skate with such speed and vigour — ... Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy’s, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea” (19). There are also other examples such as Archduke Harry, who turns out to be a woman. Besides, when Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine and Orlando fall in love they exclaim “You’re a woman, Shel!’ she cried. ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried” (164). Through this ambiguity, Orlando’s sexuality is questioned as well.

Additionally, one must take into account the creation of such a complex character as Orlando, who has characteristics of both genders and at the same time does not fit in any conventional category. For instance, Orlando has some adventures cross-dressing and flirting with women and men (121). As Marte Rognstad explains (42), this is a way of challenging the common idea that each person is supposed to have some fixed characteristics and behaviours depending on their gender. At the same time, Orlando is a person who has lived through both sexes and knows better than anyone what that means. Orlando’s sex changes but her mind is able to hold together his former masculine identity and her new feminine one. S/he is a personification of the androgynous mind: “For it was this mixture in her of man and woman, on being uppermost and then the other, than often gave her conduct an unexpected turn” (121). It is social conventions that define gender and these conventions can be altered as they are not an absolute truth or inherent to the nature of each sex. Gender is deconstructed by making a difference between the physical anatomy or appearance and mentality. When Orlando becomes a woman, the narrator says: “Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been.

The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (87). Even if Orlando has changed physically, his identity remains the same. As Rognstad elaborates, in this precise moment, even though the transformation has already taken place and she is physically a woman, Woolf uses first the pronoun “he”, then she uses the pronoun “their” to refer to both genders (51). This shows that Orlando has something of both genders inside, despite her new sex. “Woolf presents a modern view on the individual as complex and fragmented, and she criticizes the need to determine individuals after fraught identity categories” (Rognstad 53). In addition, Esther Sánchez-Pardo González states that the use of plurals is Virginia Woolf’s strategy to reveal the androgynous being that is Orlando, who, so far, has concealed his feminine side (78).

Furthermore, Orlando uses cross-dressing to challenge gender conventions. Playing with clothes implies that there are no absolute categories and that the differences between genders are rather superficial: “Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is very opposite of what it is above” (*Orlando* 121).

The idea of the androgynous mind in *Orlando* suggests that every person has a feminine and a masculine side and that s/he can let the stream of creativity flow when not oppressed by the values and characteristics of one gender or the other. A person only reaches his or her own full potential when both sides are fully accepted and balanced: “the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; ... it transmits emotion without impediment; ... it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (Woolf, *A Room* 97). Throughout the novel, Woolf develops a character who plays with gender as s/he tries to find his/her identity:

And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and in deed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirligig state of mind to be in. (Woolf, *Orlando* 100)

At the end of the novel, when Orlando has lived through both genders, the narrator describes her in the following words:

Thirty-six; in a motor car; a woman. Yes, but a million other things as well. A snob am I? The garter in the hall? The leopards? My ancestors? Proud of them? Yes! Greedy, luxurious, vicious? Am I? (here a new self came in). Don't care a damn if I am. Truthful? I think so. Generous? Oh, but that don't count (here a new self came in). (203)

And then Orlando goes on jumping from one memory to another, without chronological order, imitating the stream of consciousness. She has multiple identities at the end of the novel. All her life experiences have led to a development of character that does not fit in one or two categories, a man or a woman: That is the moment when she succeeds as a writer, she becomes famous and her poem "The Oak Tree" is recognised by everyone. She has an epiphany, a sudden revelation, recalling those typical Modernist endings. When the clock strikes midnight, Orlando reaches maturity and accepts all her different identities and feels whole: "So she was now darkened, stilled, and become, with the addition of this Orlando, what is called; rightly or wrongly, a single self, a real self" (Woolf, *Orlando* 205).

2.2. Differences Between Male and Female Writing

If Virginia Woolf thought that to be a good writer the mind should not be conscious of its own gender, that must imply that there are traditional differences in the writing of men and women: "As Mr Brimley Johnson again and again remarks, a woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine: the

only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine” (Woolf, “Women Novelists” 16). But which are these differences according to Woolf? Throughout history, men could rely on their own tradition to write. Since the time of oral tradition, men have been the ones who created their own literature and style and wrote about the themes that they considered important: “The pen has been defined as not just accidentally but essentially a male ‘tool’, and therefore not only inappropriate but actually alien to women” (Gilbert and Gubar 8). Women did not have a millenary tradition. The creation of literature was not considered appropriate for them and they found it difficult to publish their works, so they published them anonymously or using a male pen name, something that Woolf approaches in her essay “Women Novelists”. And, according to Virginia Woolf, it is very helpful to have a solid tradition behind in order to write a masterpiece:

For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are 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. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter. (Woolf, *A Room* 64)

This situation caused insecurity but also provided freedom to be unconventional and creative. According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, women writers deal with a different kind of anxiety than the “anxiety of influence” that is so common among male writers, according to Harold Bloom: the “anxiety of authorship”. Women writers lack of a literary tradition and the oppression they suffer cause fear, feelings of inferiority and insecurity. But they are also pioneers of a new creative path, something that has not happened to male writers for centuries. This anxiety is truly debilitating, especially for female writers before the 20th century, because it is based on the social inferiority of women marked by their own biology. This can cause fear, alienation and isolation when the writer tries to overcome it (50): “It was a thousand pities that the

woman who could write like that, whose mind was tuned to nature and reflection, should have been forced to anger and bitterness” (Woolf, *A Room* 58). The patriarchal oppression has always made women feel guilty of everything, especially of stepping out of the domestic realm. Writing, thinking, speaking or reading have traditionally been male activities (Gilbert and Gubar 8) and this is something that Woolf exposes in *Orlando*: “(and as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking). And then she will write him a little note (and as long as she writes little notes nobody objects to a woman writing either)” (176).

Furthermore, in the literary tradition, men often write about women as love affairs or in relation to them: “Every man, it was said, had been a Prime Minister and every woman, it was whispered, had been the mistress of a king” (Woolf, *Orlando* 127). Women are not represented as individuals with their own desires and aspirations. In contrast, women create more complex feminine characters. Woolf advocates that women should write about themselves: “Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer!” (Woolf, *A Room* 82).

On the other hand, according to Hélène Cixous, the absence of a female tradition in literature could be considered an advantage for the emergence of women’s fiction. ‘Écriture féminine’ is a term used by Cixous which means that women are now freer to create a new kind of writing: “She must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing” (Cixous 880). Women have always been in a position of otherness in Western cultures, so they can distance themselves rather easily from the patriarchal discourse. This allows them to be experimental and playful in their writings. But this is not only for art’s sake, by challenging writing conventions, women also

intend to rebel against social structures as well as challenge conceptions about women that are oppressive (879). Another aim is to “return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her” (880). By writing, women can move forward and be part of history.

Woolf anticipates Cixous’ use the female body in writing, in the sense that women find it easy to adapt their writing to their bodies: “The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women’s books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work” (Woolf, *A Room* 76). Woolf urges women to write, to find their own style, write about the subjects that matter to them to the point of shaping literary tradition and social conceptions about womanhood: “Therefore, I would ask you to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast” (107).

Due to the differences in their historical background and experiences, men and women have different perspectives and expectations. Topics, methods, and style may differ and therefore, as Woolf highlights in her essay “Women Novelists”, women and men depict themselves in the way they write (17). Thus, it is harder for a woman from previous centuries to write something extraordinary. They have been deprived of education and training. In addition, writing was considered a taboo activity for respectable women. A woman writing is controversial whereas a man writing is not. Men’s writing, consequently, is straightforward and shows a self-confidence that could not be possible without encouragement and a solid tradition. Men have been raised and educated to believe their perspective is the one that matters, as Woolf states in her essay *A Room of One’s Own* (98). In contrast, women could not write freely nor express themselves and were strongly influenced by men’s opinion, especially the first female writers. This repression deeply influenced women’s writing: “The effect of these

repressions is still clearly to be traced in women's work" (Woolf, "Women Novelists" 15) So, in this context, women should apply what Virginia Woolf proposes in "Modern Fiction", in order to create, women should distance themselves from the masculine tradition: not write exclusively from the mind but mainly from the soul.

Orlando clearly criticises differences between genders and the oppression women suffer in every aspect of their lives. Woolf not only criticises male social constructs but also parodies femininity. In Sánchez-Pardo's words, in Woolf: "The impossibility to attain masculinity and the parody of femininity invalidates the generic possibility that is always seen as a social construct, or as a performative act. ... Gender is described as a cultural process that has to be learned, and is not inherent to sex" (84).

Since Orlando becomes a woman, she has to face different obstacles. Hers is a journey where she will learn the burden of her gender and, having experienced what is like to be a man, she now will realize how wrong he was about women:

She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled. 'Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires,' she reflected; 'for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature. (*Orlando* 99)

Some of the circumstances that make Orlando develop are, for instance, when she comes back to England as a woman to discover that she has been sued: "The chief charges against her were (1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing" (107). Here Woolf, compares being a woman to being dead, that is, a woman and a dead person have the same rights and the same visibility, that is, none. Besides, Orlando suffers from the 'anxiety of authorship' that was mentioned before: "She wrote. The words were a little long in coming, but come they did. Ah! but did they make sense? she wondered, a panic coming over her" (173). In Constantinople, when she is

living with the gipsies, she has to hide her manuscript. She is always puzzled by the contradictions between what she feels and what society says she must feel. Also, she is very conscious about her sex when she is close to a man. For instance, the first time she talks to the captain of the boat that takes her to England: “it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck, that she realised with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position” (97). When she is a woman she is acquainted with famous writers and poets, but she soon realizes that she is just a muse, an ornament: “A woman knows very well that, though a wit sends her his poems, praises her judgment, solicits her criticism, and drinks her tea, this by no means signifies that he respects her opinions” (137). But the most important aspect about Orlando is that she keeps writing despite every obstacle and at the same time she keeps questioning conventions, especially about marriage:

Yet, she could not deny that she had her doubts. She was married, true; but if one’s husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts. (173)

Eventually, she finishes her book and becomes a renowned writer. Historically, women always had more difficulties to be a writer and achieve fame and recognition. Woolf, in her essays as well as in her novel, encourage women to keep writing and defy the limits imposed by patriarchy.

2.3. Orlando As a Personification of Literary History

One of the main topics in Woolf, both in her novels and her essays, is the history of literature. Her educational background —having grown up among books and intellectuals— offered a vast knowledge of classical writers and genres. This knowledge is reflected in her works and reviews, especially in *Orlando*. Woolf’s works reflect an

evolution in literature from a period of time with no solid tradition of women writers to Modernism, her own period. In *Orlando*, Virginia narrates the life of a character through 300 years, from the Renaissance to 1928. According to Jeanette Winterson, “When Woolf chases Orlando through continents of history and geographies of time, she is giving herself the freedom to explore the different ages of England and the changing role of women”.

Woolf, along with the main character’s adventures and the narrator, describes Britain’s history reflected in events, literature, characters and writing style. Orlando meets Queen Elizabeth and lives the Great Frost of 1608. She lives through the 17th and 18th centuries having acquaintances such as Alexander Pope and other celebrities of the period. Then, the novel describes a change of era, the Victorian Era, which entailed a change of morality and, more importantly, a change in the conception of the feminine. Finally, Orlando lives in the 1920s, where the narrative style changes drastically, from a satirized biographic narrator to featuring a Modernist style, reflecting the period of time both Woolf and Orlando are living and their own mentality.

Virginia Woolf illustrates this evolution not only in plot but also using different devices such as a change in the narrator’s voice, time and style. In order to explain the evolution of Orlando into Modernism, I will start by explaining the basic characteristics of Modernist fiction. This period breaks with the Victorian values, according to Steven Matthews, there is a tension between the past and the present and a consequent change of ideology represented in what later will be known as Modernism (8). It explores new forms of expression to fit the new mentality of the 20th century along with social changes, industrialization, new scientific discoveries which lead to new philosophical views about life and psychological ideas (Kuiper). In order to illustrate all these changes in their works, experimentation in literature was very common and writers

found new techniques such as the interior monologue, in order to narrate directly from the mind of the character so as to capture the flow of mental processes and emphasize the subjectivity of reality. This literary experimentation is related to gender issues because women's feelings, desires and thoughts were a field to explore for modernist writers, both men and women (Matthews 18). The Modernists were mainly concerned with the consciousness of the individual. Plots were not that relevant and very often writers used open endings. Symbolism and cryptic messages were used as well. Regarding time, the Modernists did not follow the classic structure with a beginning, middle and ending and very often a chronological pattern was not followed. They mixed memories with events in the present moment. They used to focus on a very short period of time in the life of the character: one day or a few hours (Ali).

At the beginning of *Orlando*, Woolf draws on the style of a traditional biographical narrator, satirizing the established notions about literature: "Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore" (4). Here Woolf criticises the subjectivity and censorship of biographers (Mikonnen 45). Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father, was a renowned editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, so this may be seen as an act of defiance (Ackroyd xi). However, the narratorial style changes depending on the literary period Orlando lives in at the moment. At the end of the novel, when Orlando lives at the beginning of the 20th century, the style of the narrator changes. It is still an external third-person narrator, but now using technical devices closer to Modernism in its attempt to depict the character's stream of consciousness. The thoughts of Orlando seem to come directly from her mind, jumping from one thought to another, mixing past events with the present and becoming more and more abstract and cryptic: "It was not necessary to faint now in order to look deep into the darkness where things shape

themselves and to see in the pool of the mind now Shakespeare, now a girl in Russian trousers, now a toy boat on the Serpentine, and then the Atlantic itself, where it storms in great waves past Cape Horn” (214). This aspect is not only reflected in the narratorial style but in Orlando’s writings as well. “The Oak Tree” keeps changing throughout the novel, following the fashion of the time he or she is experiencing (50).

Time is a major issue in Modernism and very relevant in *Orlando* as well. Niina Mikkonen argues that the linear structure of the novel is broken when Orlando becomes a woman (52). According to Julia Kristeva’s theory of women’s time, women subjectivity is represented in circular and cyclical time: “As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations. On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature” (Kristeva 16). Additionally, Mikkonen argues that when the male version of Orlando achieves the highest status in society as a duke in Constantinople his story reaches a dead-end, so to continue he must become a woman (56). It is at this moment that his life becomes very repetitive, following the same routine every day. It is a cyclical time that seems to anticipate his transformation: “For, no sooner had the Ambassador despatched on such a visit, than another had to be undertaken. The same ceremonies were gone through in precisely the same order six or seven times over” (*Orlando* 77). When Orlando comes back to England a new cycle of her life starts. She has to face the reality of being a woman in British society. She becomes aware of her sex and starts to dress and behave accordingly (Mikkonen 60). In the end, time in *Orlando* becomes slower and slower, ending with a few pages describing the strikes of the clock at midnight, something usual in a Modernist work.

Orlando is born as a male in Elizabethan times and he is transformed into a woman in the 18th century, significantly when women's writing started blooming. In her essay "Women Novelists" Woolf writes about the challenges women writers have suffered through history and she states: "What, for example, was the origin of the extraordinary outburst in the eighteenth century of novel writing by women? Why did it begin then, and not in the time of Elizabethan renaissance?" (14). This idea coincides with Orlando starting his life as a man and then changing into a woman around the same time female writers flourished. This seems to connect literary evolution with a change from a tradition characterized by male features to an era when experimentation and innovation are fundamental aspects of literature. At this moment, and along with the flourishing of woman writers, both events intermingle in a period where women started to influence the main tradition: "If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter, the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter" (Cixous 888).

In "Modern Fiction", Virginia Woolf describes a way of writing that will later be known as Modernism:

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. (2152)

Notice the parallelism between this description and what Woolf states in *Orlando* about the way a woman thinks: "(and if it is rambling talk, disconnected, trivial, dull, and sometimes unintelligible, it is the reader's fault for listening to a lady talking to herself; we only copy her words as she spoke them, adding in brackets which self in our opinion is speaking, but in this we may well be wrong)" (202). Thereof, it could be said that

Modernist techniques and features are natural to women writers, and also those writers who have distanced themselves from the male, patriarchal and traditional style.

Here, there are evident connections between what Virginia considers good writing and a woman way of thinking. If a woman writer distances herself from the male tradition and writes as she feels, from within, then the result will be very close to a Modernist work of fiction. In the following words, Woolf expresses her outlook on life which can be extrapolated to her way of writing:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. (Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 2152)

In sum, *Orlando* can be interpreted as a humorous approach to literary history through the use of historical events, famous characters, a change of narrative style and playing with time. Along with these aspects, Woolf plays with gender in its main character, transforming Orlando into a woman in the middle of the novel. S/he is a personification of the historical events represented in the novel. By doing so, Woolf makes the issue of women writers and feminine literature visible and relevant, especially in modern fiction.

3. CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have analysed how Virginia Woolf's novels, more precisely *Orlando*, are a reflection of the ideas that she exposes in her essays. Firstly, I have analysed the androgynous mind, a term Woolf reflects on in her essay *A Room of One's Own*, and how this concept is explored in her novel. Secondly, I have explained the differences in writing between male and female writers, mostly due to social conventions, an idea which is explored in the essay mentioned above and in "Women Novelists". Thirdly, I have analysed the essay "Modern Fiction" and how these innovative ideas are used in *Orlando*, despite not being a typical modernist novel.

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is a compilation of her ideas regarding various topics such as literature, feminism, gender, women's oppression, history, etc. Orlando's experience living as a man and then becoming a woman makes this character an example of a possible androgynous mind. At the same time, s/he is a personification of literary history, from a male tradition to an age where women find it easier to write, publish their own works and find their own style. Orlando becomes a recognized author when she lives in the early 20th century, a period of time open to experimentation and new forms of writing, where women had a lot to offer. This is not only portrayed in the character but in Woolf's writing style as well. She plays with conventions and starts with a parody of a traditional narrator, to the last chapter where the reader can find a Modernist style. Virginia Woolf writes in her essays about the social oppression women experience every day, in every period of time and encourages them to keep writing in order to contribute to literature and express themselves.

To conclude, the topics Woolf approached in her essays are perfectly reflected in plot, characters, time and style in *Orlando*, so, in this case, her ideas are consistent throughout her fiction and non-fiction works.

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