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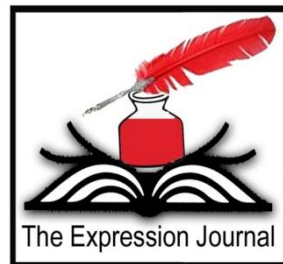
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# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

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## **A STUDY OF FEMINIST THOUGHT IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S SELECTED WORKS**

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### **Abstract**

Virginia Woolf was a prominent feminist writer of the early 20th century, who addressed various issues related to gender inequality and gender roles in her literary works. Her books, *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*, are considered significant contributions to feminist thought. *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, is one of Woolf's most famous books, which explores the theme of women and literature. The book argues that women writers have been historically marginalized and oppressed due to various societal and institutional barriers, such as lack of access to education, financial independence, and opportunities for creative expression. She emphasizes the importance of women having their own space and resources to pursue their literary ambitions and asserts that women need "a room of one's own and five hundred a year" to write freely and independently. This study is prepared to present pearls and pitfalls of the feminist thought and explains Virginia Woolf's ideas of equality between sexes.

### **Keywords**

Virginia Woolf, Orlando, Feminism, Gender Roles, Androgyny, Women Rights.

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Virginia Woolf was a prominent feminist writer of the early 20th century, who addressed various issues related to gender inequality and gender roles in her literary works. Her books, *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*, are considered significant contributions to feminist thought. *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, is one of her most famous books, which explores the theme of women and literature. The book argues that women writers have been historically marginalized and oppressed due to various societal and institutional barriers, such as lack of access to education, financial independence, and opportunities for creative expression. Woolf emphasizes the importance of women having their own space and resources to pursue their literary ambitions and asserts that women need "a room of one's own and five hundred a year" to write freely and independently.

*Orlando*, published in 1928, is another significant work by Woolf that challenges traditional gender roles and conventions. The novel tells the story of a young nobleman named Orlando, who lives for over three centuries and undergoes a gender transformation from male to female. Through this fantastical plot, she explores themes of gender fluidity, identity, and the societal expectations imposed on individuals based on their gender. While her works are celebrated for their contributions to feminist thought, they also have some limitations and criticisms. For instance, some scholars argue that her perspective is limited to the experiences of white, middle-class women and ignores the struggles of women from diverse backgrounds (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker 121). Additionally, some critics argue that Woolf's writing can be elitist and inaccessible to a wider audience (115).

Virginia Woolf was born into an intellectual and privileged family. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a writer, critic, and editor who played a significant role in shaping the literary culture of his time. Her mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen, was a painter and a member of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. However, despite her privileged upbringing, Woolf's life was marked by several tragic events that had a profound impact on her mental health. Her mother's death

when she was only 13 years old was a significant loss for her. Later, in 1904, her brother Thoby died of typhoid fever, which caused another emotional crisis for Woolf.

Her mental health struggles continued throughout her life and were often reflected in her literary works. For example, her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* explores the theme of mental illness, and her essay "On Being Ill" reflects on the experience of illness and its impact on the creative process. Despite her challenges, Woolf also enjoyed periods of great productivity and creativity. Her travels to Spain and Italy with her sister Vanessa and other members of the Bloomsbury Group, a circle of intellectuals and artists, provided inspiration for her writing and allowed her to explore her interests in art and culture.

Her feminist ideas and critiques of Victorian gender roles were influenced by a variety of factors, including her own experiences as a woman in a patriarchal society, her relationships with other women, her reading of feminist literature, and her involvement with the Bloomsbury Group, a circle of progressive artists and intellectuals who challenged traditional social norms. It is also worth noting that while her work was ground-breaking in its critique of gender norms and patriarchy, her views on race and class have been criticized by some scholars as limited or exclusionary. As with any historical figure, it is important to approach her life and work with nuance and careful consideration of context.

Woolf argues that women need economic and social independence in order to have the freedom to write and create art. She uses the image of a "room of one's own" both figuratively and literally to emphasize the importance of having a space where one can work and think without interruption. Her argument was particularly pioneering at the time of its publication in 1929, when women faced significant social and economic barriers to achieving independence and pursuing creative endeavours. She herself was a trailblazer in this regard, as she established herself as a successful writer and thinker despite the constraints of her gender and social status. In addition to advocating for women's economic and social independence, her essay also highlights the ways in which women's voices and experiences have been marginalized and excluded from the literary canon. She calls for a more inclusive and diverse approach to literature, one that recognizes the value and importance of women's perspectives and contributions.

It is important to note that feminism is a diverse and multifaceted movement with a wide range of perspectives and goals. At its core, feminism is based on the principle of gender equality, advocating for the social, political, and economic rights of women and challenging the patriarchal systems and norms that have historically oppressed women. While there may be differences in how individuals or groups approach feminism, it is important to recognize that the movement as a whole is fundamentally focused on promoting equality and empowering women.

That being said, like any social movement, feminism is not without its flaws or criticisms. Some critics argue that certain branches of feminism have prioritized the experiences and perspectives of white, middle-class, cisgender women over those of other marginalized groups. Others argue that some feminist approaches can be essentialist, reducing women to a singular, monolithic identity rather than acknowledging the diversity of women's experiences and identities. However, it is important to note that these critiques do not necessarily negate the importance and validity of feminism as a movement. Rather, they highlight the need for continued discussion and reflection within the feminist movement in order to address these issues and strive towards a more inclusive and intersectional feminism.

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Virginia Woolf's essay "Three Guineas" is a scathing critique of the male-dominated society of her time. In this essay, Woolf uses a series of letters to respond to an inquiry from the anti-war group, the Women's Co-operative Guild, about how they can prevent another war. She argues that the root cause of war is the patriarchal system, which values aggression, competition, and domination. She argues that men have historically been the primary perpetrators of war and that women must resist this patriarchal system in order to prevent future conflicts. Woolf also highlights the ways in which women have historically been excluded from positions of power and influence, both within the political system and in other areas of society. She argues that women must have access to education, economic independence, and the ability to participate in the public sphere in order to challenge patriarchal power structures and prevent war. "Three Guineas" is a powerful and insightful critique of the gender inequalities and systemic oppression that continue to shape our society today. By exposing the ways in which patriarchal systems and structures perpetuate violence and aggression, Woolf makes a compelling case for the need to challenge these systems in order to create a more just and peaceful world.

*The Voyage Out* is Virginia Woolf's debut novel, which was published in 1915. The novel follows the journey of Rachel Vinrace, a young woman who sets out on a voyage from England to South America with her aunt and uncle. Throughout the novel, Woolf explores themes of identity, gender roles, and the societal expectations placed on women. Rachel's journey serves as a metaphor for her own personal and emotional development, as she navigates the complexities of relationships, desire, and self-discovery. The novel also features Woolf's signature stream-of-consciousness style, which allows the reader to delve deep into the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters. Through this technique, Woolf is able to capture the complex and often contradictory nature of human experience. *The Voyage Out* is a fascinating exploration of the human psyche, and a powerful commentary on the societal constraints that limit individual freedom and expression. As Woolf's debut novel, it sets the stage for her later works and establishes her as a masterful writer of modernist literature.

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"The Years" is a family saga by Virginia Woolf that follows three generations of the Pargiter family in London. The novel is structured around a series of family gatherings, from a dinner party in 1880 to a birthday celebration in 1937. Through the Pargiter family, Woolf explores the shifting social and political landscape of early 20th-century England, from the Victorian era to the interwar period. The novel is notable for its fragmented and non-linear narrative style, which reflects the characters' shifting perspectives and the passage of time. While the novel does contain some sweet moments within the family, it also delves into the



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deeper conflicts and tensions that arise within any family, such as generational differences, class conflicts, and personal ambitions. Through her nuanced portrayal of the Pargiter family, Woolf captures the complex and often contradictory nature of human relationships and the ways in which individuals are shaped by their social and historical contexts. "The Years" is a rich and complex work that showcases Woolf's mastery of narrative structure and her ability to capture the nuances of human experience. It is a powerful exploration of family, memory, and the passage of time, and remains a significant work of modernist literature.

*Mrs Dalloway* is a novel that maps out a route into the consciousness of its characters. Through the use of stream-of-consciousness narration, Woolf allows the reader to enter the minds of her characters and experience their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in real time. The novel takes place over the course of a single day in June 1923 and follows the preparations for a party hosted by Clarissa Dalloway, a socialite in post-World War I London. Through Clarissa's perspective and that of other characters, such as the shell-shocked war veteran Septimus Warren Smith, Woolf explores the impact of war, social class, gender roles, and the passage of time on her characters' lives. Woolf's prose in *Mrs Dalloway* is both poetic and highly descriptive, capturing the sights, sounds, and sensations of the urban landscape of London. The novel is also notable for its themes of memory and the passage of time, as the characters reflect on their past experiences and their hopes and fears for the future. "Mrs Dalloway" is a deeply introspective and psychologically complex work that offers a unique window into the minds of its characters. Its innovative use of narrative technique and its exploration of themes such as memory, time, and the impact of war make it a significant work of modernist literature.

"To the Lighthouse" is a novel that explores the mundane family life of the Ramsay family as they visit the Isle of Skye. The novel is divided into three parts, and each part focuses on a different time period and perspective. The first part of the novel, "The Window," takes place over the course of a single day and focuses on the Ramsay family and their guests as they prepare for a dinner party. The second part, "Time Passes," jumps forward ten years and describes the changes that have taken place in the lives of the characters and in the world around them. The third part, "The Lighthouse," returns to the present and follows the Ramsay family as they attempt to visit the lighthouse on the island. Woolf's prose in "To the Lighthouse" is highly experimental, incorporating elements of stream-of-consciousness narration, fragmented imagery, and vivid descriptions of the natural world. Through these techniques, Woolf is able to delve deep into the thoughts and feelings of her characters, exploring themes such as the passage of time, memory, and the nature of human relationships. "To the Lighthouse" is a novel that challenges traditional narrative structures and offers a highly introspective and impressionistic view of the world. Its exploration of themes such as the passage of time and the complexities of human relationships make it a significant work of modernist literature.

Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* follows the inner lives of six characters from childhood to middle age, exploring their friendships, struggles, and existential crises. The novel's stream-of-consciousness style and poetic prose create a sense of fluidity and continuity, blurring the boundaries between the characters' individual experiences and their collective consciousness. *The Waves* is considered one of Woolf's most experimental and challenging works, showcasing her mastery of modernist literature.

Virginia Woolf has published a novel *Between the Acts*. The book takes place during a summer pageant at a country house in England, where various characters from different social

classes come together to perform a historical play. Woolf uses the pageant as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of human history and the passing of time. The novel also explores themes of gender, class, and identity, as well as Woolf's signature use of stream-of-consciousness and shifting narrative perspectives. Overall, "Between the Acts" is a complex and thought-provoking work that showcases Woolf's skill as a novelist.

Virginia Woolf's experiences as a young woman growing up in a male-dominated society greatly influenced her views on feminism. She was deeply affected by the gendered expectations of her time, and was frustrated by the limited opportunities available to women for education, employment, and self-expression. In particular, Woolf's experiences with sexual abuse and harassment within her own family and social circles inspired her to become a vocal advocate for women's rights. She believed that women needed economic and social independence in order to achieve true equality with men, and argued that women should be free to pursue their own passions and interests, including creative pursuits like writing.

Woolf's feminist theories can be seen in her works, including her famous essay "A Room of One's Own," in which she argues that women need both economic resources and a physical space of their own in order to have the freedom to write and create. Her novels, such as "Mrs. Dalloway" and "To the Lighthouse," also explore themes of gender, power, and identity from a feminist perspective. Overall, Woolf's experiences as a woman in a patriarchal society deeply informed her feminist views and shaped her literary works.

In her essay "A Room of One's Own," Woolf argues that economic independence is crucial for women to be able to write and succeed as writers. She famously states that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Woolf believes that women's lack of economic and social independence has historically prevented them from pursuing careers in writing and other artistic fields. She advocates for women's financial autonomy as a means to empower them and allow them to reach their full creative potential.

A feminist approach to the work of Virginia Woolf examines the ways in which she challenges traditional gender roles and patriarchal power structures in her writing. Woolf was an important figure in the feminist movement, and her work is often seen as a response to the limitations and injustices faced by women in her time. One of the main themes in Woolf's work is the struggle for women's independence and autonomy. She argues that women must have economic and social independence if they are to achieve their full potential and break free from the constraints of traditional gender roles. This theme is central to many of her works, including "A Room of One's Own," which argues that women need a physical space and financial means to be able to write and create.

Woolf also explores the ways in which gender roles and expectations affect relationships between men and women. Her novel "Mrs. Dalloway" examines the limitations placed on women's lives and the impact of societal norms on their experiences. "To the Lighthouse" explores the tensions and dynamics within a family, highlighting the ways in which gender roles and expectations impact individual relationships. Overall, a feminist approach to Woolf's work highlights the ways in which she challenged traditional gender roles and patriarchal power structures, and advocated for women's independence and autonomy. Her work remains an important and influential part of feminist literature and continues to inspire contemporary feminist discourse.

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