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IMPACT AND INFLUENCE OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S WRITINGS ON CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WRITERS

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf, a modernist writer influenced the contemporary British writers through her feminist ideology, her artistic style, her expression and her captivating literary diction. Her inner monologues i.e., her projection of stream of consciousness in her writings is highly appreciated and adapted by contemporary writers. Woolf's area of interest focuses mainly on psychological and social themes, such as the problem of subjective reality and the multiplicity of possible interpretations of reality, the fear of death the problem of identity, gender differences, the position of women in a patriarchal society, the negative effects of war, social exclusion and many more.. The aim is to demonstrate the phenomenon of Virginia Woolf's influence on contemporary British fiction and locate the concrete appearances in selected novels, namely in Toby Litt's *Finding Myself* (2003), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Pat Barker's *Life Class* (2007) and its sequel *Toby's Room* (2012).

Key-Words

Feminist Ideology, Artistic Style, Diction, Stream of Consciousness, Death Problem,
Gender Differences, Patriarchal, Effects of War.

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In this paper, I shall point out the various ways in which Virginia Woolf has influenced contemporary British fiction and analyze the connection to Woolf's life and work. The aim is to demonstrate the phenomenon of Virginia Woolf's influence on contemporary British fiction and locate the concrete appearances in selected novels, namely in Toby Litt's *Finding Myself* (2003), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Pat Barker's *Life Class* (2007) and its sequel *Toby's Room* (2012). More than thirty works of fiction from all over the world have been examined by Alice Lowe, a freelance author and a keen Woolphophile. Her monograph, *Beyond the Icon: Virginia Woolf in Contemporary Fiction* (2010), contains references to Woolf in the novels published since the 1970's up to the year 2009. The number of books influenced by Virginia Woolf increases every decade and culminates after the year 2000. The latest surge of Woolf's popularity is caused mainly by the American writer Michael Cunningham, whose bestselling novel *The Hours* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1999 and was later made into an Oscar-winning movie. A successful book and equally successful film concerning three generations of women influenced by Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), where one of the main characters represents Virginia Woolf herself affected new audiences, people who up to that point may not have known any of Woolf's writings. This could be the reason of the sudden increase of works of contemporary fiction influenced by Woolf. Lowe wrote that "her [Woolf's] iconic status contributes to her representation as a model and a symbol for high culture and artistic expression, intellectual sophistication and literary brilliance, feminist ideology and social criticism." (Lowe 10).

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Modernist novel often features the disorientation and disillusionment with the present state and changing values of the society. Modernism often tends to stress a play with language and its processes at the expense of the plot. It points out the peculiarities of language, how it sometimes fails to communicate the full meaning. Modernist writers use the stream of consciousness, a narrative device which basically records the inner processes operating in human mind. This so-called inner monologue is what Virginia Woolf is famous for. She managed to fully replace the omniscient and omnipresent narrator by filtering all information through the consciousness of the characters. The narration is enriched with character's feelings, associations, opinions, ideas and inner perceptions of life and time. The notion of the difference between clock time and psychological time based on the philosophic theory of duration underlies Woolf's modernist work. Eloquent descriptions of details and overestimation of visual perception of the world, these are predominant features of realism and naturalism that were widely criticized by modernist movement. By focusing on the precise description of superficialities the novelists are, according to Woolf, missing on the very essence of life's "luminous halo" (Bradshaw 7). Realism claims that the more detail the more real life experience the reader will get. Woolf opposed to this statement because excess surface detail does not necessarily add authenticity to the fiction work. Modernists sought for new narrative techniques in order to express new concepts. Modernism, as an artistic movement, is associated with a wide variety of arts.

The total number of works influenced by Virginia Woolf cannot be strictly determined. A glimpse into the novels written by British authors from the year 2000 to the present has been discussed. Taylor Andrew includes several peripheral references to Virginia Woolf into his historical novel *Bleeding Heart Square* (2009); they are supposed to provide "insights into the character and development of the protagonist, and offer the perspective of a reader of Woolf during the time she was actively writing and publishing" (Lowe 13). The main heroine rushes to leave her abusive husband and forgets to take with her as essential things as her toothbrush, but does not forget to take an issue of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The reading choice suggests that she is a feminist, who has been questioning her choices which resulted to her striving for independence. In *The Missing World* (2000) by Margot Livsey, the main protagonist describes her neighbor whose "silver hair was pinned up in the style that Hazel claimed made her look especially like Virginia Woolf" (Livsey 143). The description enhances reader's imagination. By using an allusion to the look of the concrete person the author makes the character more vivid. Tessa Hadley uses references to Woolf in her collection of stories as a "succinct and effective means of locating her stories in time and creating milieu for her character's actions" (Lowe 21). In the story "Mother's Son" (2007), the main character is a female teacher who is preparing a lecture on women novelists and modernism, and on that occasion she highlights Woolf as an inspiring model. Woolf's novels break the conventions of traditional fiction, show that a

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good story does not necessary need to be all about courtship and end in marriage. She argues through Woolf for women's intellectual freedom. In "*Buckets of Blood*" (2007) Hadley uses a single allusion to Woolf, the heroine reads one unspecified Woolf's novel while waiting for her laundry to be done.

Virginia Woolf is mentioned in Linda Grant's *The Clothes on their Backs* (2008) Vivien is hired to review books for *The Times* and she rates her first assigned book very low by writing about the author: "I couldn't understand why someone who had a double first from Somerville College, Oxford, should lower herself to write such tripe, when she had the example of Virginia Woolf and George Eliot" (Grant 122). Although this reference could be classified as mere name-dropping, it has a powerful potential, it requires the reader to have critical knowledge of Woolf and Eliot to fully understand this allusion.

The allusion here offers an extra dimension to the character, it indicates that the woman read Woolf's novel and presumably, enjoyed reading it, for she recalls her memories and associations connected to the story. Bone is here adding a cultural marker to a story. The book tells about a group of artists and intellectuals, hence the reference to Woolf's milieu.

Woolf's presence in Pat Barker's novels is rather marginal; however, there are certain hints suggesting her significance. Woolf and Barker both advocate the possibilities of pacifism in their work, but also concede and chronicle the considerable social forces which continue to advocate manliness and crush conscientious objections (Vickroy, 102). They both criticize the stereotypes of patriarchal culture and create strong female characters to challenge them.

In *Life Class* Barker uses Bloomsbury as a refuge for her heroine and through her she presents her own pacifism and attitude towards war. *Toby's Room*, as the title suggests, is written partly as a tribute to Woolf (Lee, Guardian). It echoes the title of Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room* and features the loss of her beloved elder brother as well. Virginia Woolf in Barker's novels represents both a respectable female icon and a medium through which she can communicate their shared perspectives. Toby Litt declares himself an unabashed Woolf admirer (Lowe 28). He studied creative writing under Malcolm Bradbury, and is known for his innovative ideas. He also took part in the interactive project *We Tell Stories*, designed to popularize reading among the computer generation. *Finding Myself* is written completely in a female voice and is highly experimental in form and narrative. In the interview for *3 AM Magazine* he stated the reasons why he chose Virginia Woolf as a muse and role model for his main heroine, Victoria, in *Finding Myself*: "She wrote novels where her skill and empathy were astonishing. It's also an attempt at a genuine female aesthetic which has just been taken as one of a repertoire of ways in which women can write now. This is what tends to happen. But she was doing something genuinely difficult." Victoria tries very hard to imitate Virginia's literary style and she does it in unduly obvious way. She

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names the draft of her novel *From the Lighthouse* and attempts to write about gathering of people, which are wrongly treated as fictional characters. Virginia Woolf plays prominent part in his novel because she stands for ultimate female writing, "writing that is incredibly insightful about people and their inner lives" (Lowe 28). Woolf was essential for creating the character of Victoria, she stands for everything what Victoria intended to be and also serves as a contrasting device, ridiculing all Victoria's attempts of serious writing.

Finding Myself is a light summer reading, it would easily classify as chick lit - sub branch of urban fiction usually featuring a female-focused story driven by the heroine's desire to find a mate. By implanting Woolf into the popular genre, Litt contributes to the popularization of her persona.

Woolf's presence is also notable in the work of Ian McEwan. She is directly named in his most famous novel *Atonement* and she left her imprint on the literary style of the main protagonist, Briony, Woolf's admirer. Fragmentation of time, leitmotifs and variety of perspectives, the strategies typical for modernist writing, are applied with almost "Woolfian" precision. Groes infers that McEwan sees Woolf as "representing the rejection of the centrality of plot and character" which he compensates while "extending focus on consciousness and complex temporalities" (98) Virginia Woolf acts "both as a positive and negative influence on this novel" (Finney) Briony's writing style was tended to imitate Woolf's, which turned out to be rather a burden. McEwan points out the ethics of writing and questions the ideology of modernism. However, at the same time, he pays a tribute to Woolf's immortal work.

Another McEwan's book often discussed to be connected with Woolf is *Saturday*. The structure of the novel, capturing one day in the life of a neurosurgeon, reminds strongly of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although there are many similarities between these two novels and *Saturday* seems like a variation on Woolf's classic, Ian McEwan clearly stated that: "[t]he 24-hour novel has a long literary provenance. I was certainly not thinking at any point of Mrs. Dalloway though the readers have noticed a correspondence or a parallel" (McEwan for Washington Post). However, the image of the city and the relation between the private and public time in *Saturday* suggest, that there are some similarities with Woolf's novel that cannot be ignored.

Toby Litt's *Finding Myself* is an excellent example of a work inspired by Woolf. Although it is a popular fiction and the story may seem slightly superficial and shallow the second look reveals hidden postmodern features. It is a novel about the novelist struggling to meet the expectations of her readers, her editor and, finally, the highest expectations of her own. Victoria, the hero or rather antihero of the story, is a confident young woman who would do anything to produce a successful bestseller. She has read Woolf through and through and calls her openly a Muse (Litt 29). She intends to write a novel based on the real life situations. She invites eleven guests to stay with her in a house by the sea for one month,

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when looking for the perfect setting she considers the Woolfian aesthetics: "The place has all the atmosphere one could desire. I kept expecting Virginia Woolf herself to waft round the corner, silk gloves in hand" (Litt 27). By mentioning Virginia Woolf in the characteristics of the house, the author assigns certain features to the place. Woolf is usually associated with exquisite taste in interior design. Somehow or the other Victoria manages to fit the citations from Woolf's diaries into her personal work notes. She writes down her favorite passages and then comments on them: "She is such a snob, thank God!" or "Virginia is so naughty; I'm surprised people let her get away with it" (Litt 29). Later in the book she makes complains about how people have no longer time to be emotionally complicated she says "not in the old way - the way of Jane Austen, Henry James and Virginia Woolf. (Litt 108) When Victoria seems to be lacking in her inspiration, she reverts to the pen and paper writing because "[i]t seems more fitting to the spirit of Virginia" (Litt 209).

All four novels are to some degree relating or referring to texts written by other authors; however, only one mentions explicitly the work of Virginia Woolf. *Finding Myself* is written in the form of metafiction, Toby Litt makes the reader think that the book is an outcome of someone else's work. Victoria, the fictional author of the novel originally intends to publish the book under the title *From the Lighthouse*, which immediately evokes that the book might be a variation on Woolf's classic. Only when it becomes obvious that her plans were too ambitious, her editor changes the title to *Finding Myself*. Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* plays a significant role in the novel. The setting of Victoria's novel is a very detailed imitation of the summerhouse on the coast near the lighthouse. Victoria sees herself as an embodiment of Mrs. Ramsay and cannot bear the fact that no one else does. For the novel is supposed to give the impression of an unfinished draft, it is written as a fragmentary record of the daily events with spontaneous notes about the environment or mood. The form of the epistolary novel echoes the influence of Woolf's *Letters* and *Diaries*. Victoria often quotes her favourite passages and attempts to imitate Woolf's specific style. Woolf is writing with a touch of gaiety, gossip and delicate malice, unfortunately, Victoria misinterprets it as snobbery.

Intertextual references in the other three novels are rather less explicit and are used mainly to provide certain background to a story or support an argument. In Pat Barker's novel, *Toby's Room*, Virginia expresses her attitude towards the war and her discontent with the difficult position of women in wartime Britain. Woolf as a character in the book says: "As a woman it [war] didn't concern me" (Barker, Toby's 71) which according Hermione Lee reflect on *Three Guineas* (1938) where Woolf formulates similar view by saying "As a Woman I have no country" (234). The title of the book could be understood as allusion to Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, where the story is built, as well as in Barker's novel, around the death of a beloved brother.

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The Intertextual link between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Saturday*, although these two novels are often juxtaposed, has never been officially admitted by the author. However the influence of Virginia Woolf on Ian McEwan's *Saturday* could be demonstrated on several following examples. Apart from the style analogies, the two novels are similar in many more aspects; they are both progressing towards a party, both include a character affected by a mental disorder or disease; there is a great impact of war and violence, they both take place in London and both include pieces of autobiographical information.

Except *Saturday*, all the selected novels contain allusions to Bloomsbury Group and its members. This strategy is being used to provide the characters with extra depth. Woolf wrote once that "fiction is like a spider's web, attached to life at all four corners" (Woolf, Room 41). The links reaching out from the novels to the real life are purposely inserted into the text to embrace the reader's imagination and enhance the work's meaning in context. In all the four selected novels the story takes place, at least partly, in London. What all the characters have in common is their higher social status which corresponds with Woolf's class focus. Although *Saturday* does not include any direct reference to Woolf's social milieu, the novel is commonly perceived as the modern-day rendering of *Mrs. Dalloway*, therefore it is the most "Woolfian" reading of all four as regards the story.

Saturday by Ian McEwan is, similarly as *Mrs. Dalloway*, almost exclusively mono-perspectively focused. A neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, is distracted from the concerns of daily life by a sequence of events which took place in a single day. The entire day is viewed subjectively through Henry's mind. He adds to the narration a very impressing medical insight, instead of describing people he presents the reader with detailed diagnosis. Science and medicine make him feel secure, but also put limitations to his perspective. The importance of art is best presented by the character of Lily Briscoe in Woolf's classic *To the Lighthouse*. Her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay is the leitmotif of the novel. She starts painting at the beginning and finishes at the end of the story. Her characters keep developing throughout the novel and the changes are apparent in her painting. Art helps her overcome her insecurity and anxiety.

Art plays a key role in *Life Class* and *Toby's Room*. It features a group of art students who struggle to continue painting after their studies were disrupted by the war. Elinor has to face a moral dilemma whether to paint or join the supporting war industry, in the end she makes a compromise and employs her painting skills and knowledge of human anatomy to help reconstruct the faces of soldiers with facial injuries. Paul and Kit managed to gain the title of official war artist. Disillusionment comes when they are only allowed to paint landscapes, for the paintings were to be displayed publicly and the sight of blood covered men with missing limbs would be too much disturbing. Both children of Henry Perowne in *Saturday* build their professional careers on the grounds of art. His son, Theo, is a musician and his daughter, Daisy, is a promising young poet. Daisy's talent and extensive

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knowledge of poetry most probably saved the lives of her family. When Baxter forced her to read a poem from her book she rather chose to recite *Dover Beach* by Mathew Arnold, she felt that this particular poem has got the power to change Baxter's mood. Awareness and fear of death is the theme Virginia Woolf dealt with in her novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

All the main characters are somehow preoccupied with death and mourning. Woolf often pondered over the relationship between life and death and based her novels on the simple thesis, that someone's death makes the others value or evaluate their own life. Thoughts of death play their part in all four novels. In *Finding Myself*, the summer house is haunted by a ghost of a little girl, daughter of the owners. Most of the guests find the fact that someone died in the house very disturbing. Later in the story, when the guests find out that Victoria uses spy cameras to watch their private moments, they lock her in the attic for almost three days with no food or water. Victoria fears that her guests will let her starve to death. The threat of death makes her realize how selfishly and recklessly she acts.

In both Pat Barker's novels, death lurks constantly beneath the story line, mainly because the story takes place in the Western Europe during World War I, and it is partly set on the front. The characters fear death but, more importantly, they fear losing their family and friends. The plotline of *Toby's Room* is driven by Elinor's incapability to accept her brother's death.

This theme is apparent also in *Saturday*. The story takes place in London in the year 2003, less than two years after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. There is a certain tension felt that the world is no more a safe place and anyone can anytime become a victim of terrorism. This tension can sometimes cause slight paranoia, for instance when Henry saw the plane crash and automatically started making conclusions, and assigned a great importance to this random sighting. Different angle of the theme is represented by Baxter, who is desperately trying to fight his fast progressing degenerative disease. Under the guise of revenge, he violently invaded the privacy of Henry's family, secretly hoping for finding a cure. Henry's wife later describes the notion of psychological time when she could not guess how long she had been facing death with Baxter's knife on her neck. Despite the terrifying experience, the incident led to the family reunion.

Since Woolf's extensive work touches on certain themes which are still relevant today, her thoughts and statements are considered to be valuable input to the discussions of matters relating to a whole range of social topics. Woolf's area of interest focuses mainly on psychological and social themes, such as the problem of subjective reality and the multiplicity of possible interpretations of reality, the fear of death the problem of identity, gender differences, the position of women in a patriarchal society, the negative effects of war, social exclusion and many more. The timelessness of each of her topics only confirms the high status of Woolf as a social thinker. There is no doubt that there may have been

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other very influential female writers, the reason why it is more convenient for the authors to allude particularly to Woolf is that besides her novels and short stories, her heritage contains also nonfictional texts, such as letters, diaries and essays. These in particular, are crucial for complete understanding of Woolf's ideas and theories and they offer extended commentary to her personal beliefs and fictional works. The contemporary writers use the persona of Virginia Woolf and the allusion to her work to bring an image of strong woman with her own idiosyncratic literary style and furthermore everything she may stand for, mainly feminism, scholarship or sophistication and elegance. The increasing number of references and intertextual allusions both to the persona of Virginia Woolf and her work well reflect the iconic status of her personality. As shown on the multiple examples, Woolf's influence over contemporary British authors is significantly growing. Every time when her name or a title of her book is referred to in the contemporary fiction, her market value rises. This tendency serves to perpetuate her continuing popularity and relevance of her work. Virginia Woolf, as it is clear from the outcome of this paper, both influences and enriches the contemporary British fiction.

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