

***'I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anyone else. Do not dream of influencing other people.'***

**To what extent was this possible for female writers pre-1928? Ninety years on, is the situation any different? You may refer to any one form of literature in your answer.**

Staying true to one's identity and creating change are treated by Woolf as mutually exclusive events, yet both pre-1928 and in recent times, it has been the struggle to fulfil both halves of this statement, with one often necessitated by the other, that has characterised female writers' fight for a voice. Catherine's struggle in 'Wuthering Heights' between her heart and her obedience to society resonates with female writers even now.

Pre-1928, for female authors such as the Brontës and Austen, Woolf's warning appears applicable, although to varying degrees. 'Wuthering Heights', 'Jane Eyre' and 'Pride and Prejudice' all revolve around the domestic and are romances, inevitably showing how the female succumbs to the male. Jane Eyre's childhood self is like a 'rebel slave'<sup>1</sup>, an image far removed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century's traditional expectation that a child ought to be mild and well-mannered<sup>2</sup>. This sets Brontë apart. She was a female writer at a time when traditional gender roles were upheld<sup>3</sup> and used her platform for social change, both through her presentation of childhood and of family. Her description of family as 'hostile' yet evoking 'an aching heart' despite its faults seems to contradict traditionalists' insistence that the home was a sacred institution<sup>4</sup>. This seeming willingness to push the boundaries of the Victorian imagination would mark out Brontë as a prime example of a female writer gifted with influence. Austen, too, presents the faults of both the male and the female through Darcy's pride and Elizabeth's prejudice, breaking the expectations of marital bliss through the Bennetts.

Yet the limitations of these female writers in their ability to influence is soon revealed. For all the 'mortified pride'<sup>5</sup> that pushes Eyre to rebel against her family, and her promises to hold them to account for their actions<sup>6</sup>, this same wilful child grows up to tie her sense of self to Rochester<sup>7</sup>. After leaving Lowood, it is a man's employ that gives Eyre freedom and happiness, or what she considers to be so. Having led a secluded life,

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<sup>1</sup>Charlotte Brontë. *Jane Eyre*. p.6

<sup>2</sup> Sally Shuttleworth credits Brontë with '[introducing] a new voice to the world – a passionate, angry and defiant child' via her presentation of Eyre:

<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/jane-eyre-and-the-rebellious-child>

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair. *Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain*. 'Victorian men also talked endlessly about gender and generations, power and the family.'

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Brontë. *Jane Eyre*. p.18

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 'I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty.'

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 'Thank you, Mr. Rochester, for your great kindness. I am strangely glad to get back again to you; and wherever you are is my home,—my only home'

Eyre's concept of happiness and freedom is blind. Despite Eyre's insistence that she is 'a free human being with an independent will'<sup>8</sup>, she returns to Thornfield. Eyre has always been in the care of a patriarch, from her uncle, to Brocklehurst, to Rochester. Eyre's seeking a male authority is inevitable, then. Her inheritance and newfound family amount to nothing, as she turns back to The Man, blinded and crippled though he is. Despite this attachment, Eyre must suffer rather than endure the wrath of society that the marriage would incur. This previously proud woman accepts that 'cold charity must be entreated'<sup>9</sup>. This struggle is, again, reflected in 'Pride and Prejudice' and 'Wuthering Heights'. Both Elizabeth and Catherine struggle with their choice of men. Elizabeth's calmed temperament allows her a Happily Ever After; in reward for her tribulations, she 'may take liberties with her husband'<sup>10</sup>. Catherine is doomed to a short life of unhappiness for her sins against Heathcliff, despite her marriage to Linton being favourable. As she says, it would 'degrade'<sup>11</sup> Catherine to marry down, and despite the anguish that she feels, she submits to society's will rather than her own. Thus, for Catherine, Elizabeth and Jane, 'being oneself' is not a priority. If Woolf's assertion that a novel's 'values are to some extent those of real life'<sup>12</sup> is true, then for female writers pre-1928, the priority was neither to influence nor to express oneself, but to fit in with society's needs.

Woolf says 'Austen pervades every word that she writes'<sup>13</sup>, her primary reason to praise *Pride and Prejudice*. To Woolf, this novel is untainted by masculinity in that it 'deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room'<sup>14</sup>, which are unduly trivialised. 'It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, it is so'<sup>15</sup>, argues Woolf. Essentially, for a woman's work to be truly deserving of the title, it must portray domestic struggles, breaking the expectation that every home is built on 'conjugal felicity or domestic comfort'<sup>16</sup>. Pre-1928, it might have seemed so, with the gender roles that Woolf speaks of being robust and jealously guarded by society. In Woolf's world, female activism was defined by women's struggle for suffrage, the start of which was granted a decade earlier<sup>17</sup>. Its primary focus, therefore, was representation, a prominent theme in Woolf's works<sup>18</sup>. This could explain her attitude towards Charlotte Brontë for her perceived breach of femininity. Woolf's description<sup>19</sup> of how a female writer's work should 'expose'<sup>20</sup> the state of femininity clearly shows this.

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<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Brontë. *Jane Eyre*. p.256

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p.327

<sup>10</sup>Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice*. p.376

<sup>11</sup> Emily Brontë. *Wuthering Heights*. p.82

<sup>12</sup> Woolf. p.74

<sup>13</sup>Ibid

<sup>14</sup>Ibid

<sup>15</sup>Ibid

<sup>16</sup>Jane Austen. p.231

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/case-study-the-right-to-vote/the-right-to-vote/birmingham-and-the-equal-franchise/1918-representation-of-the-people-act/>

<sup>18</sup>Christopher Wiley. 'WHEN A WOMAN SPEAKS THE TRUTH ABOUT HER BODY':ETHEL SMYTH, VIRGINIA WOOLF, AND THE CHALLENGES OF LESBIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

<sup>19</sup>Woolf. p.73

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

Woolf's distaste for 'Jane Eyre' stems from her feeling that 'There was a flaw in it... She had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others' <sup>21</sup>. However, the ability of environment to influence one's thoughts and beliefs has always been contested. Even in 'To the Lighthouse', Woolf explores the parallels between life and art <sup>22</sup>. This altering of values, then, could be argued as not a flaw, but an inevitability. As a woman, Charlotte Brontë would have been held to the same standards as Austen, shown by the same motif of dependency on a patriarch featuring heavily in 'Pride and Prejudice' and 'Jane Eyre'. This directly contradicts Woolf's assertion that Brontë did not write 'as women write' <sup>23</sup>, but rather with the voice of The Man. Attempting to set criteria for what is 'women's writing', could be seen as an unfounded assumption on Woolf's part that Charlotte Brontë felt the same way as every woman, lived the same life, thought the same thoughts, and admitted that she was 'only a woman' <sup>24</sup>. To push Brontë into the role of the everywoman robs her of her right to 'be oneself' <sup>25</sup>.

Woolf also targets George Eliot, the alias of Mary Ann Evans, dismissing her as having 'settled down in the shadow of the world's disapproval' <sup>26</sup>. Whilst Evans' usage of an alias may be seen as a failure to accept her status as a female and, by extension, accept herself, it could be argued that taking on such a role was necessary to be afforded the same respect as her male counterparts. After all, the same Emily Brontë whose 'genius' <sup>27</sup> Woolf praises initially published 'Wuthering Heights' under the pseudonym 'Ellis Bell'. If it is, as Woolf argues, 'much more important to be oneself than anyone else' <sup>28</sup>, then Evans' and Brontë's sacrifice was a necessary evil. Without the security of masculinity, albeit artificial, their pens would have been restricted. The same struggle that Catherine feels in 'Wuthering Heights' between her heart and her obedience to society, was felt by these two women. For Evans, this was doubly significant; the woman who seemed to laugh in the face of society by living in a relationship with a married man and had the audacity to criticise the works of respectable women<sup>29</sup> inevitably gave in and admitted society's power <sup>30</sup>.

This friction between the self and the group comes across, too, in Mary Shelley. Unlike their contemporaries, both Evans and Shelley explored the plight of the woman beyond the domestic, allowing themselves wider scope for influence. For these two women, 'being oneself' was more difficult as they lived with the knowledge of society's disapproval and the damage done to their reputations. This same difficulty allowed them to write so freely and have the influence that they hold today, over men and women alike.

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<sup>21</sup>Woolf. p.75

<sup>22</sup> Embodied Form: Art and Life in Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse

<sup>23</sup>Woolf

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. p.74

<sup>25</sup>Ibid

<sup>26</sup>Ibid

<sup>27</sup>Ibid

<sup>28</sup>Ibid

<sup>29</sup>George Eliot. *The Silly Novels of Lady Novelists*.

<sup>30</sup> 'Sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them'

'Middlemarch' has been argued to be the greatest novel ever written in the English language<sup>31</sup>, and Shelley's 'Frankenstein' is considered the first true science fiction novel<sup>32</sup>. In extending their writing beyond the domestic, Shelley and Evans made their writing accessible to both sexes. Art imitates life. By writing novels concerned with male-dominated spheres, Shelley and Evans combatted the 'ignorance' of women that so concerns Woolf<sup>33</sup>. The rise of periodicals allowed Victorian women to derive knowledge that they were otherwise deprived of<sup>34</sup>. Their more conventional contemporaries pigeonholed themselves in writing only of 'feminine' issues, as they maintained the status quo rather than utilising their novels as platforms for exposing new ideas to this audience. This also perpetuated the belief that the voice of The Man has more authority than a woman's. In going against the grain, Shelley and Evans expanded their ability to influence.

It is this perpetual struggle against the patriarchy, felt so keenly by Shelley, the Brontës, Evans/Eliot and their contemporaries that characterises what it is to be a woman, has always done so, pre-1928 and now. Therefore, Austen's primary virtue, that she 'pervades every word that she wrote'<sup>35</sup>, is not necessarily at odds with Charlotte Brontë's flaw of writing 'of herself where she should write of her characters'<sup>36</sup>. Yes, Charlotte Brontë was 'at war with her lot'<sup>37</sup>, but it has been a pre-requisite of every female writer to be so.

To be a female writer and to be oneself, then, will inevitably allow influence over others for the same reason that Woolf looks up to Aphra Behn: 'it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds'<sup>38</sup>. Woolf states, 'masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common'<sup>39</sup>. This commonality of thought may seem contrary to the spirit of 'being oneself'. However, when the thought is that society must change and give way to individuality, female writers have always been at the forefront to allow an abstract feeling of discontent to form a sentence, an ideology, a movement. The invisibility of the female is challenged. In the words of Carolyn See, 'Every word a woman writes changes the story of the world, revises the official version'<sup>40</sup>.

Arguably, this role of female writers has grown over the last 50 years. The values of second-wave feminism, upheld by the likes of Greer<sup>41</sup>, Friedan<sup>42</sup> and de Beauvoir<sup>43</sup>, were propagated via their writing, and continue to influence the feminist voices of today<sup>44</sup>, in a

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<sup>31</sup><http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20151204-why-middlemarch-is-the-greatest-british-novel>

<sup>32</sup><http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/aldiss.html>

<sup>33</sup>Woolf. p.74

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/victorian-readers>

<sup>35</sup>Woolf. p.68

<sup>36</sup>ibid. p.70

<sup>37</sup>ibid.

<sup>38</sup>ibid. p.66

<sup>39</sup>ibid.

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.bustle.com/articles/25017-25-quotes-about-writing-from-amazing-women-writers>

<sup>41</sup><http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/fight-rights/womens-rights/germaine-greer-female-eunuch>

<sup>42</sup><https://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/biographies/betty-friedan>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/30/books/excerpt-introduction-second-sex.html>

<sup>44</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/16/book-that-made-me-a-feminist>

direct parallel to how Mary Wollstonecraft's works fuelled the fight of the Suffragettes<sup>45</sup>. For the women of then and now, it has been the ability to propose an alternative that gives them influence. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg says, revolutionaries have always been necessary 'at times when old paradigms prove obsolete and new visions are required'<sup>46</sup>. Without an alternative, one cannot influence; they are merely maintaining the status quo.

Although representation of women is not necessarily the primary focus of female writing today, it continues to be a goal in all spheres. Unlike before, female writers are allowed more autonomy, and therefore allowed to be themselves. Elena Ferrante, despite choosing to remain anonymous, retained her status as a female successfully, being named one of Time's 100 Most Influential People in 2016<sup>47</sup>. However, this power continues to be limited. J.K. Rowling, like Evans/Eliot and Emily Brontë before her, felt the need to exude a false masculinity to sell her 'Harry Potter' series, choosing to use her initials, not her full name<sup>48</sup>. This disparity can be explained by Ferrante's and Rowling's individual genres- Ferrante writes, like Brontë, of the journey of girls into adulthood, whilst Rowling's fantasy novels are directed at both girls and boys. Arguably, it is this breadth that allows Rowling more influence than Ferrante, just as it allowed Shelley and Evans more influence than Austen and Brontë. Rowling has entered cinema and theatre, as well as literature, becoming a household name, a status which has yet to be awarded to Ferrante.

The sense of self that is so essential to women's struggle against the patriarchy has been under continuous attack. In politics, male commentators attempt to delegitimise the roles and authority of female politicians. Theresa May has been labelled 'the Maybot'<sup>49</sup> for her apparent lack of personality. Her similarities with previous female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, have also been repeatedly mentioned<sup>50</sup>, robbing May of her own legacy and sense of self. Hillary Clinton, too, faced speculation surrounding her relationship with husband Bill Clinton after the Monica Lewinsky scandal<sup>51</sup>. As a professional, regardless of sex, one might expect her individuality to be respected. Yet, as with Shelley before her<sup>52</sup>, Clinton was reduced to an extension of her husband, limiting her influence. Men, however, aren't scrutinised at this same level. The complications in Boris Johnson's personal life<sup>53</sup> are

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<sup>45</sup>Barbara Taylor. *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*.

<sup>46</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*

<sup>47</sup><http://time.com/collection/2016-time-100/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1349288/Harry-Potter-and-the-mystery-of-J-Ks-lost-initial.html>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/10/making-maybot-theresa-may-rise-and-fall>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2016/07/10/the-tory-party-may-have-found-another-iron-lady-in-theresa-may/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/03/us/politics/hillary-bill-clinton-women.html>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/13/frankenstein-at-200-why-hasnt-mary-shelley-been-given-the-respect-she-deserves->

<sup>53</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/02/boris-johnson-white-privilege-black-woman>

considered separate from himself, a luxury not afforded to his female counterparts. This accountability means that women must be more conscious of their actions and may give rise to more women using their work to influence.

A continuation of Woolf's description of 'the tone of voice'<sup>54</sup> of novels showing 'that the writer was meeting criticism'<sup>55</sup> still exists. This accountability seems inescapable, regardless of genre, leading to novels such as 'The Hunger Games', 'The Handmaid's Tale' and 'The Power'. Despite following separate plotlines, all three share strong feminist overtones. 'The Hunger Games', for example, though aimed at teenagers, is dissected for political messages<sup>56</sup>. For escaping the domestic setting that is expected of female writers, they must then compensate with their feminist views to justify their transgression. The use of dystopia by all three writers demonstrates a common consciousness of the structural faults of the patriarchy, and the need for an alternative. To write freely, they must change the beliefs of others. Thus, 'being oneself' and 'influencing others' are not mutually exclusive. Instead, the need for acceptance necessitates change.

The public seeks to strip Ferrante of her anonymity, even questioning her sex<sup>57</sup> in efforts to delegitimise her success. For a woman, one's sense of self has never truly been separate from her ability to influence, as society will not allow it to be so. A woman is public property. A female writer will always come through in their work; as with Atwood, Collins and Alderman<sup>58</sup>, it is through writing that they create change. Austen, then, who so 'pervades every word that she wrote'<sup>59</sup>, is every woman. Writer or politician, a woman is inevitably judged by her personal life, not her public actions. Woolf's warning that 'it is much more important to be oneself than anyone else'<sup>60</sup>, then, is more important now than ever. In expecting each woman to represent her sex as a whole, we rob her of her right to individuality, reducing her to nothing more than The Woman.

As Woolf says, 'Anon... was often a woman'<sup>61</sup>. Without an identity and a sense of self, these female writers signed themselves into invisibility. However, in today's world, privacy is a luxury. In Ferrante's own words, to give away her anonymity would be to shut herself up in 'a literary gynaeceum'<sup>62</sup>, a feeling shared by Evans/Eliot before her. Both pre-1928 and today, it has been the tradition of female writers to remain anonymous. However, whilst for Evans/Eliot it was to allow them to express themselves honestly through their work,

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<sup>54</sup>Woolf. p.74

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup><https://www.tor.com/2012/03/21/why-katniss-is-a-feminist-character-and-its-not-because-she-wields-a-bow-and-beats-boys-up/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/02/elena-ferrante-speculation-she-could-be-man-italian-novelist>

<sup>58</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/02/the-power-naomi-alderman-review>

<sup>59</sup>Woolf. p.68

<sup>60</sup>Ibid. p.109

<sup>61</sup>Ibid. pp.50-51

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/exclusive-elena-ferrante-interview-the-full-transcript-20151222-glt1op.html>

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unhindered by their femininity, today it is to separate a writer from their work. The same representation of the fairer sex that female writers once strove for has also been proven to bind them.

Word count: 2500

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