

“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**

The concept of being “oneself” is a key literary and philosophical matter. In the context of female writers, it means to not only have an identity and sense of authenticity, but also a freedom to express oneself through writing literature, and by extension to have one’s voice heard. Prior to 1928, there were many difficulties that prevented female writers from being themselves, at both an individual and societal level. These challenges include abstract concepts of androgyny and anonymity, but also material concerns such as monetary obstacles, widespread illiteracy, and a lack of freedom, among other difficulties. While the current situation for female writers is different in many ways, there are also underlying problems such as gender stereotyping, which were critical pre-1928 and still inherent in our society. This essay will explore the form of prose fiction and specifically the novel. Virginia Woolf was especially concerned with the novel, and even in her critical essay *A Room of One’s Own*, she uses fiction and novelistic techniques to explain her argument. Moreover, in Woolf’s novels such as *Orlando*, she also examines the medium of the novel, breaking down boundaries between fact and fiction<sup>1</sup>.

If one is to define being oneself as acting naturally and according to one’s character and instincts, then it is important to consider what makes up the character of a female writer pre-1928. Aside from any other societal problems, Woolf suggests that on an individual level, for a writer regardless of male or female, it is “fatal”<sup>2</sup> to show any awareness in literature that that is the case, to display a “sex consciousness”<sup>3</sup>. She uses the metaphor of time and mortality to promote androgyny, glorifying it as an ideal and as something that “has the secret of perpetual life”<sup>4</sup>. In *Orlando*, Woolf explores this concept further deconstructing the boundary between the sexes, through a protagonist that is initially male but becomes female<sup>5</sup>. This example provides a resolution to the conflict many female writers faced, namely the challenge to have a sense of authenticity but also be detached from themselves as females. Moreover, as Woolf says in the case of *Orlando* that, “the change of sex...did nothing whatever to alter their identity”<sup>6</sup>. While even Woolf herself acknowledged the

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<sup>1</sup> Boehm. *Fact, Fiction, and Metafiction: Blurred Gen(d)Res in ‘Orlando’ and ‘A Room of One’s Own.’* (*The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 22, no. 3). 1992. p 192.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf. *A Room of One’s Own & Three Guineas*. (reprint, Penguin UK).2000. p.94

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p93

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p91

<sup>5</sup> Boehm. pp.192

<sup>6</sup> Woolf. *Orlando*. Penguin UK. Reprint 2000. p.98

“eccentricity” and fantastical nature of this work, the point being made here about clearly distinguishing between one’s sex and identity is highly significant.<sup>7</sup>

An additional key issue one has to consider is that of anonymity, and the use of pseudonyms. Arguably, if female writers are to follow Woolf’s guidance, not writing as women, and further still also give up their own name, how far can they retain a sense of identity? Charlotte Brontë is an example of a highly influential writer who arguably did not submit to such conditions. While Charlotte Brontë used a pseudonym, this was a pragmatic choice and she later revealed the true identity of herself and her sisters in a biographical note, explaining her motives by saying that “authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice”<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, she also retained her identity through her work, often using her characters as vessels of her ideas. For example in *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist Jane looks out of the window across the fields at Thornfield and she reflects that “Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel”<sup>9</sup>. Here, the aphoristic style and use of a general supposition suggest there is a deeper meaning and significance to Jane’s thoughts. Brontë expands the situation, exploring beyond Jane’s own feeling of dissatisfaction, and her suggestion of a parity of emotion between men and women could be interpreted as a proto-feminist idea. This is also reinforced by the context of this quotation as Jane is situated as a governess, which is a stereotypically female position. Jane has had the privilege of an education and she acknowledges this, yet she still yearns for more than merely domestic duties, and this dissatisfaction may be representative of Brontë’s views on the position of women in general.

A further obstacle that prevented female writers from being themselves was their access to money. Aphra Behn was an exceptional female writer who managed to earn money through her works. She was a success in her own right, prolifically writing under both her own name and anonymously she wrote fourteen works of prose fiction in addition to numerous plays, translations, and lyric poetry<sup>10</sup>. One of Woolf’s key concepts in *A Room of One’s Own* is that of having “five hundred a year”, an arbitrary figure representative of financial stability<sup>11</sup>. She deemed this paramount to female literary success, as it enabled women to think beyond financial matters and the mundane. Woolf places a strong emphasis on Behn’s financial independence, saying that this “outweighs anything she actually wrote”<sup>12</sup>. Some might argue such analysis focuses too strongly on her role as a female literary forerunner, overlooking the quality of her actual work.

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<sup>7</sup> Boehm. p.192

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/charlotte-bronts-1850-preface-to-wuthering-heights> p. 4

<sup>9</sup> Brontë. *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Classics. 2006. p.129

<sup>10</sup> Gardiner. *The First English Novel: Aphra Behn's Love Letters, The Canon, and Women's Tastes*. (Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature. vol. 8. no. 2.) 1989. p. 202

<sup>11</sup> Woolf. *A Room of One's Own & Three Guineas*. p.102

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.58

Female writers also face other problems, and historically it has been difficult for women to speak out for themselves, let alone criticise society. Austen addresses this problem in her novels through the use of irony, satirising the contemporary society through caricatures such as Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Through the use of direct speech, Austen characterises her frustration as exemplified when she says, “Nobody can tell what I suffer! But it is always so. Those who do not complain are never pitied.”<sup>13</sup>. Here, the use of emphatic words such as “nobody”, “always” and “never” suggest a wider context, generalising her complaints. Moreover, Austen short sentences and exclamation marks suggest that these remarks are emotional outbursts, adding to the sense of melodrama. The portrayal of such overt seeking of attention and sympathy suggests how far women are generally ignored, especially when they try to speak about their difficulties.

Austen also explores the expectations for women in relation to education and literature, especially through the use of dialogue in her novels. In *Persuasion*, there is a frank discussion between Anne and Captain Harville on the subject of women and education. Harville asks why it is that “songs and proverbs, all talk of women’s fickleness”, to which Anne replies that formerly men “have had every advantage” over women in “telling their own story” and that the “pen has been in their hands”<sup>14</sup>. Here, Austen compares the access to education between men and women, suggesting that women have been at a disadvantage for not having the same educational opportunities. Austen also suggests how far education has given men privilege, as it enables them to represent themselves in literature and in history, while women are at the mercy of male depictions of them, leading to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. However, arguably Austen provides some traces of hope here, as when Anne describes obstacles regarding women’s education she uses the past tense, suggesting that these have formerly been issues but leaving ambiguity around the future situation.

Censorship and self-censorship also prevented women from being themselves, and publishing their work. Woolf herself had relationships with women and was interested in female sexuality, which is reflected partly in her work. However, she faced “external as well as internal” censorship, especially in regards to the making of *Orlando*, which was radical in some sense through its blurring of lines between not only fact and fiction but also between male and female genders<sup>1516</sup>. This caused a problem for some contemporary readers, as it resulted in the exploration of non-heterosexual relationships in an overt way. After *Orlando*’s change of sex, Woolf clearly states that *Orlando* still had feelings for a former lover, saying, “it was still a woman she loved”. Censorship was enacted in Britain through *Trials of Obscenity*, which caused a problem for some female writers, such as Radclyffe Hall, whose publishers were taken to court over

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<sup>13</sup> Austen. *Pride and Prejudice*. The Samphire Press. 2010. p.83

<sup>14</sup> Austen. *Persuasion*. Penguin Classics, 2015 p.220

<sup>15</sup> Boehm. p.192

<sup>16</sup> Lee. *Virginia Woolf*.Vintage. 1997. p.525

her controversial work of lesbian literature, *The Well of Loneliness*<sup>17</sup>. Woolf herself managed to avoid such legal intervention in *Orlando* due to the unique style and genre of the novel, especially its “fantasy and jokiness”.<sup>18</sup> However there is evidence of self-censorship in *A Room of One’s Own*, as Woolf made substantial changes to her earlier drafts, especially in Chapter V, which contains material about female relationships and sexuality in literature. Former drafts of this section, from when the work was still called “Women and Fiction”, were more explicit on the subject, only thinly veiling the description of a romantic relationship between women.<sup>19</sup> However, in the final version Woolf deliberately uses more ambiguity, merely stating that “Chloe liked Olivia” and that they shared a “laboratory”.<sup>20</sup>

In 1928 Britain, women obtained parity in voting rights, Woolf wrote *A Room of One’s Own*, and globally there was movement towards greater equality between the sexes. Ninety years on one could argue that the situation is different, and there are greater opportunities for female writers to be themselves. One key aspect of this is the overcoming of censorship, which following the obscene publications act in 1959 became less of a prominent issue for female writers.<sup>21</sup> However, it is also important to look beyond English society, and the decrease in censorship and self-censorship over the last century has been a global phenomenon. For example in the context of Indian literature, Mridula Garg argues that “a universal effect of feminism was to redeem women writers from self-censorship”<sup>22</sup>. This paper suggests that self-censorship was a big problem for women writers, and notes the importance of a decrease in this type of censorship as a signifier of progress.

Overall, there is now an increased access to education for women, and for many female writers, Austen’s metaphorical pen is now in their hands. Yet while the problem of female illiteracy is of a different magnitude than it was a over a century ago, there is still more progress to be made. For instance, according to UNESCO, globally there are still “31 million girls of primary school age not in school”, which is 4 million more than the number of boys out of school.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, even for those women who have access to education and become writers, there are still further obstacles to overcome. For example, Mridula Garg says there are a few questions that current female authors are “bound to be asked”, such as whether they “write as a woman”, and whether “woman writing can be treated as a separate genre”.<sup>24</sup> The mere fact that women have to answer this style of questioning, which doubtless men do not, suggests that there is still

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.526

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.524

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.525

<sup>20</sup> Woolf. *A Room of One’s Own & Three Guineas*. p.75

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Obscene-Publications-Act>

<sup>22</sup> Garg. *Intervention of Women’s Writing in Making of Literature* (Indian Literature, vol. 57, no. 4). 2013. p. 184

<sup>23</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/girls-factsheet-en.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Garg. p.182

some sexism in society. Moreover, on a personal level, Garg also says of her own work, “even though I may not write as a woman, people read me as a woman and react differently”. This succinctly suggests how the problems of anonymity and androgyny mentioned earlier in reference to past literature, are still inherent in our society today.

Currently women, and by extension female writers, still face problems regarding the use of language and its gendered connotations. For example, through the use of Implicit Association Tests, in which words relating to career and family, and different people’s names, have to be categorized and the speed and accuracy of this is measured.<sup>25</sup> This test commonly exposes an unconscious bias against women, as generally linking female names and family together is faster and more accurate than other categorisations, suggesting that making this association between women and domesticity is what comes naturally to people. This suggests that traditional gender roles are still inherent in our society today, and in the context of female writers this can create problems, as it may dissuade women from seeking literary careers. In a wider sense, gender stereotypes in language are a problem, especially in relation to women’s position and their ability to voice their opinion. Mary Beard emphasises that women who speak out are often called “strident”, and that they “whinge” and “whine”.<sup>26</sup> Here, the connotations of the words are important, as “whinging” suggests an irritating complaint, such as one a child may make, and “strident” implies the speaker is voicing their opinions too forcefully. Through infantilising and criticising women in such a way, it becomes increasingly difficult for women, and indeed female writers, to have their voices heard and express themselves. Moreover such dismissal of female voices in society demonstrates that the same problems many women faced centuries ago when they tried to voice their views, as exemplified through Austen’s Mrs Bennet, are still prevalent today.

To conclude, it is unfortunately only to a limited extent that female writers pre-1928 were able to be themselves. This is due to many different challenges that female writers have had to face at both the individual and societal level. While there is some evidence to suggest that the current situation is different, especially in regards to a release from the constraints of censorship, ultimately the underlying problems of access to education use of language and gender stereotypes are still inherent in our society today. In the current ‘post-truth’ society, it is now more important than ever to ‘be oneself’, and have a sense of authenticity in the face of rising personal superficiality. Moreover, what better way to explore this concept than through the novel form, indeed, as Woolf herself says, “fiction [...] is likely to contain more truth than fact”<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/312fXcsr5T1V9p509XNMYC4/why-are-even-women-biased-against-women>

<sup>26</sup> Beard, Mary, *Women & Power*, Profile Books Ltd, 2017 pp.29

<sup>27</sup> Woolf. *A Room of One’s Own & Three Guineas*. p.4

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