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‘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.

To be a writer is to communicate the elusive subjectivity of individual experience, in other words, to write as oneself. The ability to write as oneself is arguably linked to the ability to *be* oneself, which at the crux of the matter prompts the question; what is meant by being oneself, especially as a woman? In *Sexual Textual Politics*, Toril Moi suggests that Woolf held ‘a deeply sceptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity.’¹ Instead, many of her ideas about the self were influenced by Freud, the Austrian psychoanalyst published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s own publishing house, the Hogarth Press. These ideas were based around the notion of the self as a primarily unconscious entity. She believed that the self is not a singular, individualistic force; rather, it is composed of multiple unconscious influences such as fears and sexual desires, as well as social, political and ideological factors. When considering the later grouping, it becomes feasible to say that the self is largely a product of the time and environment in which it lives. This essay will explore the extent to which it was possible for female writers to be and write as themselves, both pre-1928 and today. I will also explore the relationship between gender and self in literature as well as the place that influential writing has held in female literature between 1928 and 2018.

According to Woolf, ‘Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses... reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size’² which says something salient about the social limitations on a contemporary woman's individuality. This quote, if viewed through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis (the Mirror Stage) suggests that a woman’s sense of ‘self’ (her identity) is almost unrecognised or at least seriously stunted in development, because she can never truly notice a reflection of herself all the time she is serving to reflect men and their inflated sense of self. This idea of a looking glass (or recognition of the self) as a crucial step in being and inhibiting oneself is explored in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, written 60 years before Lacan’s psychoanalysis became a popular tract. In the first section of the novel, *The Maiden*, Hardy narrates that ‘the looking glass was only large enough to reflect a very small portion of Tess’s person at one time’³, suggesting that Tess didn’t have a full conception of herself and therefore couldn’t so easily express her needs- ‘I would rather stay here... indeed I don’t quite know why’, showing that although she intuitively knows she doesn’t want to go to Alec D’Urberville she doesn’t have the conviction of self to be able to express why. This could easily be attributed to the strain of preconceptions that she feels and a duty that is pressed upon her- she is the daughter of a poor family hence she ought to go to a wealthy potential suitor as it’s

¹ Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics*

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (London: Penguin, 2004) p. 41

³ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, (London: Penguin, 2003) p.50

her duty to her family to help them better themselves. This concept of the daughter of the family being a somewhat commercial tool would have deeply repressed her ability to be herself- all the other roles she had to fill would have left little room for the role of herself. This idea of the selfless woman fits in with the Victorian ideology of a woman prioritising her family, and as Woolf puts it, 'reflecting the image of man'.⁴ This demonstrates how the dominant ideology of a society could have repressive effects on women, tendrils of repression which would have infiltrated through to her writing.

The limitations on a woman's ability to be herself leap from the pages of many novels written during and prior to Woolf's time; much of the dialogue in *Pride and Prejudice* reveals these limitations. Mary is characterised in a very negative light as prudish and uptight when the fatal flaw of her character perhaps lies instead in the quote 'Mary wished to say something sensible, but knew not how'⁵, rather than a naturally sour nature. She clearly has intention, but no means of expressing or understanding her thoughts, because of the limitations of her education. She therefore appears as the worst or most undesirable of all the sisters, all because her repressed intellectual energy manifests itself in pretension and irritability. This example shows the repressive effects a lack of education for women had on an understanding of the self and therefore an ability to channel that understanding into an active inhabiting of the self.

My opening approximation of what it is to be a writer relies on a fundamental need for communication. Pre 1928, communication to the wider public sphere would have relied chiefly on publication, and this is where the political climate became a limiting factor on a woman's ability to write as herself. The capitalist society dictated that most publishers would only publish profitable novels, therefore novels which appealed to the society in which they were written, which pre 1928 was one of intense patriarchy that repressed women. The Victorian ideology can perhaps be surmised in the image of a woman as an 'Angel in the House'⁶. Any publisher would experience such a strong internal bias on seeing a woman's name on the cover of a novel due to the expectations of Victorian women as submissive to their husbands, passive and meek and pious that it would be very difficult for a woman to get published unless she removed sex consciousness from her writing, perhaps even going as far as to publish under a male pseudonym. The Bronte sisters "had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice"⁷ and therefore published as Ellis, Curer and Acton Bell. There were also many aspects of female life such as 'childbirth and maternal psychology' which were taboo and not to be shared with men. One must consider to what extent a woman could write as herself when she had to conceal so many fundamental aspects of her person.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (London: Penguin, 2004) p. 41

⁵ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* ()

⁶ <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/coventry-patmores-poem-the-angel-in-the-house>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/14/jk-rowling-pen-names>

Of course, we still live in a capitalist society but now women are emancipated to a much greater extent. There is an audience for female writers, as well as a generally more liberal attitude, meaning that novels written by women are just as profitable for publishers as those written by men. Furthermore, in this age of technology, a woman rejected by publishers has many alternative outlets through which she can express her views such as blogs and social media sites such as Twitter. Although a certain quality of literature is perhaps lost when the rigour of publishing is removed, the rise of the self-published woman does mean that views can be put forward and exchanged with a lot more ease than was conceivable pre 1928. However, this one improved factor in allowing women to write as themselves is by no means all encompassing. The propinquity of criticism as well as the greater difficulty of anonymity in today's society surely limits a writer's confidence in writing wholly as themselves. Also, our society's heightened sense of political correctness paired with a worrying decline in freedom of speech⁸ surely has detrimental effects on the ease of writing as oneself. In the TEDtalk 'connected, but alone?'⁹ Sherry Turkle suggests that in an age of digital communication, the ability to be oneself is restricted. She believes that when real conversation is compromised, we struggle with the ability to be ourselves because interaction with others is pivotal in self-reflection which is a crucial part of the development of the self.

Another important factor to consider when assessing to what extent a woman can write as her self today is the idea of gender in relation to self. In the modern day, the most lauded novels written by women are very sex conscious, striving to convey a feminist message but as Woolf presents it, one must break free from the shackles of binary gender in order to truly write well- "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex... Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished."¹⁰, or as Coleridge put it 'A great mind must be androgynous'.¹¹ This could be the bane of the modern day female writer. The culture of 'girl power' and, as Dua Lipa declared in her Brit Awards acceptance speech 'women taking over the world'¹² means that it is hard to look outside of the boxes of gender and 'think of things as they are' rather than in relation to a gender battle. It is like Woolf's allusion to Charlotte Bronte. She 'died young, thwarted by her lot'¹³ and left her novel to 'attend to some personal grievance'¹⁴: her resentment at the repression of women. In fact, the meddling anger she felt at the limitations of her sex- at being 'made to stagnate in a parsonage mending stockings'¹⁵ could be paralleled with the anger that the 21st century woman could let thwart her work, except today it may be instead an anger about inequality in the workplace, or

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/21/freedom-of-speech-online-witch-hunts-law--bbc>

⁹ <https://www.ted.com/search?q=connected+but+alone>

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (London: Penguin, 2004) p. 120-121

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.113

¹² <http://www.nme.com/news/music/dua-lipa-dedicates-brit-award-win-women-taking-world-2246669>

¹³ *Ibid* p.85

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid*

the objectification of women that a woman could let subject her novel to personal anger. What Woolf seems to be insinuating is the vitality of writing objectively, 'thinking of things in themselves'¹⁶. This style of writing is realised in *Mrs Dalloway*. It is written from the shifting perspectives of men and women alike, following their individual journeys in the first person, with none of the 3rd person omniscience which seems so intrinsically linked with the phallic arrogance of the male writer. The conviction Woolf had in androgyny as the best way to write seems slightly discordant with her belief that 'it is much more important to be oneself than anyone else'¹⁷ when writing because gender is so closely linked to identity. It is as if she is suggesting that true self lies somewhere deeper than gender identity. This idea both promotes and rejects the hypothesis that a woman is more able to write as herself today than pre 1928. The concept of the self being deeper than gender supports the statement if one considers the relatively fluid and malleable attitude our modern society has towards gender in comparison with the iron edged boxes in which Victorian gender was locked. However, it is also arguable that today, with the advent of social media, gender ideals are more ensnaring and prevalent than ever, with extreme female beauty ideals constantly thrust in the susceptible faces of the younger generation.¹⁸ This obsession with female body image and form could very easily get in the way of a realisation of the self.

The leap off the cliff of binary gender seems to work in connection with Nietzsche's theory about the death of God. He used nihilism to re-evaluate the foundations of human values; when God is dead we fall until we discover true moral values, not those pre imposed by Christianity¹⁹, much as when binary gender is taken from under our feet we fall until we discover our true self, not that which is pre imposed by society.

Today, women have freedom. Their writing is no longer confined to social observation and romantic novels. They have the capacity and opportunity to influence. Moreover, women can now equally write about women and their lives, examples of these authors include Maggie O'Farrell, Penelope Lively, Helen Dunmore who, much like Jane Austen and Emily Bronte, 'wrote as women write, not as men write'. However, these modern authors had their way paved and made easier by the toils of female writers of 2nd wave feminism such as Toni Morrison, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood. These authors influenced and broke free from societal constructs. They wrote with the intention of conveying a message, with the intention of influencing. 'All women together ought to let flowers fall on the tomb of Aphra Behn'²⁰ much as female authors of the 21st century must pay homage to the toils of women in a more difficult time (Toni Morrison etc.) and they to the women before that, to Virginia Woolf and George Eliot. Perhaps in Woolf's time, it was too much even to 'dream of influencing others'²¹, but 2nd wave feminism provided a platform

¹⁶ Ibid p.128

¹⁷ Ibid p.128

¹⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/kimkardashian/>

¹⁹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/>

²⁰ Ibid p.76

²¹ Ibid p.128

for women to write in order to influence and the influence of these women allowed women three decades later to write more wholly as themselves, with the freedom of choice to write to influence, or to entertain, or to inform. An example of this is Maggie O'Farrell. Her novels are sharp social commentaries that delve into the knotty psychology of human relationships but it is arguable that these stories were only able to surface due to the novels and works of previous writers that influenced society and emancipated the future generation.

In 1928, when Woolf found herself saying 'briefly and prosaically' that it was more important to be oneself than anyone else, the societal, political and ideological limits on a female writer were so densely oppressive that this would have been extremely difficult. Today, so much of this oppression has been alleviated that these external influences on the unconscious self are much less stifling. However, the self is not solely a product of the society in which it lives. The fabric of self is also undeniably influenced by multiple internal factors such as reason, logic and a consciousness of consequence meaning that for as long as humans have a concept of self they will experience inhibitions. However, the degree to which women are repressed by these inhibitions should be much less today than it was in 1928. Therefore, I must conclude that it is now much more possible for a woman to follow Woolf's exalted peroration, to write as herself.

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