

**‘The *Feminist* Note in the Essay’: Some Rhetorical
Devices in the Essays of Virginia Woolf**
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Abstract

The essays of Virginia Woolf have traditionally transcended for their emphasis on women’s position throughout History as regards their continual lack of intellectual and material opportunities in a men-ruled world, which have prevented them from accomplishing their yearnings. Woolf expresses these views assembling a whole of rhetorical elements, in which arguments and literary figures are interwoven in such a way that the common reader should recognise her opinions and reflect upon them, alongside the literary value of the texts. Consequently, in this paper we select and describe some of her most relevant argumentative devices present in a number of these essays possessing a feminist stance, so as to convey a glimpse of the style of her essays.

In her short essay *The Feminine Note in Fiction*, Woolf reviews a work by a Mr. W. L. Courtney with the same title. In that text, Woolf complains that the critic fails to find that feminine trace that he hoped could be discovered since “more and more novels are written by women for women” (1992a: 4), and she wonders, “is it not too soon after all to criticize the ‘feminine note’ in anything? And will not the adequate critic of women be a woman?” (1992a: 3). It is true that, in her essays, Virginia Woolf devotes a great deal of her concern to write about women and literature, not only about those works they wrote but also about the works others wrote about them. In this sense, the author is able to convey those elements that prevail in most of her essays: the resurgence and treatment of literary aspects of women writers, both

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known and unknown, and their literature; and the study of specific aspects related to their feminine condition with reference to their position in history and their further adjustment to the current changes (Martínez-Dueñas, 1998: 67). In doing so, she presents her impressions and reflections following a careful rhetorical organisation that blends the semantic and syntactic distribution of elements, as given by the rhetorical categories of *inventio* and *dispositio* (Arenas, 1997), with those *ornatus* or *elocutio* components that comprise the textual manifestation that the reader is able to perceive, and which allows him or her to take pleasure in a literary text. Accordingly, those linguistic structures that can be isolated as rhetorical figures hold, at the same time, an aesthetic and argumentative function, helping to describe the style of her essays.

In this paper, we will focus on some relevant arguments and figures taken from several of her so called “feminist” essays by the critics, even if they do appear in other texts in which her position towards women’s condition is not the subject matter. In fact, from their feminist approach to the essay, R-E. Boetcher Joeres and E. Mittman argue that, despite Woolf’s importance for women and, particularly, for feminists, she does not belong to the radical camp, and state that she uses and practises the essay as Montaigne and other authors did, that is, as “a space for contemplation, measured thinking, respite from the frantic world. Hardly a battleground for rebellion, despite the energizing effect her words have since had on their readers” (1993: 14). In this tradition, Woolf develops a form of writing about the self that is not organised into a narrative, which is part sketch and part epiphany, and which constitutes for her the ‘personal’ essay (Gualtieri, 2000: 56), a form of writing that “deals with what is said to be creative, appreciative and subjective” (Lojo, 2001: 87). Yet in the examples selected, the argumentative technique foregrounds the feminist brushstroke the essayist has chosen to make us reflect on the opinions uttered for that particular occasion.

This is the case of the argument from the cause, which presents in the essays the reason why some episode that she is digressing from at some point has occurred and, now and then, the possible effects deriving from that affair. In “Women and Fiction”, where Woolf wonders about the woman’s lateness for writing, she states that fiction is “the easiest thing for a woman to write. Nor is it difficult to find the

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reason. A novel is the least concentrated form of art. A novel can be taken up or put down more easily than a play or a poem” (1958: 78). In persisting with the idea about why women have not been able to accomplish a writer’s career or, for that fact, any other career, she observes: “Women have had less intellectual liberty than the sons of the Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog’s chance of writing poetry. That’s why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one’s own” (Woolf, 1992b: 141). The lack of wealth is recurring in those texts that try to seek the origin for the absence of women’s careers, although in “Professions for Women” she argues that “the cheapness of writing paper is [...] the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in other professions” (Woolf, 1942: 236).

Drawn sometimes from those causes she offers, there also abound instances of the argument from the consequences, which urges the addresser to consider an act or event depending on the positive or negative result of that consequence. Their use is remarkable in the concluding sections of her essays, in the form of hypotheses, conjectures, predictions and promises. In “Women and Fiction”, Woolf considers this time the lack of adequacy of the sentence as one of the difficulties a woman writer must face, for “it is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman’s use” (1958: 81), and she concludes: “So if we may prophesy, women in time to come will write fewer novels, but better novels; and not novels only, but poetry and criticism and history” (1958: 84). However, this will occur provided that they have “leisure, money and a room to themselves”.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, the long essay in which Woolf defends these same postulates, the consequences include the subtle deduction, as when she thinks that, in a hundred years, “women will have ceased to be the protected sex. Logically they will take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them. The nursemaid will heave coal. The shopwoman will drive an engine” (1992b: 52). But in this text we can also find stronger predictions like the final one stating that “[...] if we live another century or so [...] and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own [...] then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which

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she has so often laid down” (1992b: 149). However, it is in *Three Guineas*, the essay in which she replies to the three letters that ask for her political and financial support for different causes, where we encounter the sharpest consequences as far as they range from restrained cajolery to plain warnings, and brazen threats. An illustration of the former appears when Woolf replies to her addresser about the possibility of funding a society that promotes the entry of women into the professions:

For if your wife were paid for her work, the work of bearing and bringing up children, a real wage, a money wage, so that it became an attractive profession instead of being as it is now an unpaid profession, an unpensioned profession, and therefore a precarious and dishonoured profession, your own slavery would be lightened. (Woolf, 1992b: 317)

The repetition, in this case, of the word “profession” at the end of this sequence of phrases, or *epistrophe* (Vickers, 1988), also characterises the texts we are regarding. The use of this rhetorical principle entails a communicative value as much as we associate it with the emphasis and the insistence (Martínez-Dueñas, 2002: 68) of the thought being uttered and, therefore, apprehend it either for its implication or for its pleasure. This also occurs in the case of the *poliptoton*, a figure that repeats a same word with different forms and which, in the essay “Thoughts of Peace in the Air Raid”, makes analogous women’s social slavery with men’s oppression: “[Women] are slaves who are trying to enslave. If we could free ourselves from slavery we should free men from tyranny. Hitlers are bred by slaves” (Woolf, 1942: 245). Then again, so as to insist upon the alleged tastefulness a woman writer should always display as decreed by men, Woolf presents an *anaphora*, which repeats the same word at the beginning of a period:

They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular,

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that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, like some too conscientious governess, adjuring them [...] to be refined. (Woolf, 1992b: 97)

Finally, in an attempt to let us know, in *Three Guineas*, what little power women possessed, Woolf introduces a *parison*, which shows a recurring symmetrical sequence of words: “[...] Influence of the kind that can be exerted by the daughters of educated men is very low in power, very slow in action, and very painful in use” (Woolf, 1992b: 170).

Another crucial mode of reasoning in the essays is the rhetorical question (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1989: 42), a mechanism that permits the author a nearly continuous need of asking herself why everything occurs, be it the artistic evolution of an author and his or her work, be it the reasons that have prevented women from being judged as authors as well. Due to the absence of an explicit answer, the questions are posed so that the reader may elicit some sort of response in the course of his or her reading. As we are trying to show, the urgings mastered by Woolf prove themselves more significant when discussing gender issues. In “Professions for Women”, she complains about the difficulty that women have to carry out certain jobs. She argues that it is not only money and a room of their own what they need but “how are [they] going to furnish it? How are [they] going to decorate it? With whom are [they] going to share it, and upon what terms?” (1942: 242). The author adds that these are questions of the greatest importance but, unfortunately, we provide no answer. The same happens in the text “Memories of a Working Women’s Guild”, where a group of working women cannot aspire to great endeavours despite earning a salary and having some education: “But how could women whose hands were full of work, whose kitchens were thick with steam, who had neither education nor encouragement nor leisure remodel the world according to the ideas of working women?” (Woolf, 1992a: 145). This painful, unfair situation leads to another one expressed in *A Room of One’s Own*, in which the question gets insufflated by a subtle irony, for “what had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us? Powdering their noses? Looking it at the shop windows? Flaunting in the sun at Monte Carlo?” (Woolf, 1992b:

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26). Undoubtedly, the patriarchal society must be responsible for such a misdeed, which has only allowed our “fathers and their fathers before them”, not to any of our mothers, “the great art of making money” (Woolf, 1992b: 27).

The last reasoning we foreground in this paper is the simile, a metaphorical comparison Woolf excels at and that constitutes an indispensable device for introducing her reflections, in our case, about the woman’s condition. Both the simile and the metaphor represent a defining element in the essays organisation, an instrument whose cognitive intricacy makes us perceive reality differently. Hence, when describing women’s austere reality in “Memories of a Working Women’s Guild”, she claims that “their very names were like the stones of the fields, common, grey, obscure, docked of all the splendours of association and romance” (Woolf, 1992a: 137). It is in this reality, dejectedly deprived of literature, as agreed in “Women and Fiction”, where “the virtue of women’s writing often lay in divine spontaneity, like that of the blackbird’s song or the thrush’s” (Woolf, 1958: 84). This continual idea is protagonist in *A Room of One’s Own*, where she comments upon the women’s difficulty to create due to the conditions they lived in. She affirms that fiction, “imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners” (Woolf, 1992b: 53). And this task can be accomplished, by her fictional self, Mary Carmichael, with a sensibility that “responded to an almost imperceptible touch on it. It feasted like a plant newly stood in the air on every sight and sound that came its way” (Woolf, 1992b: 121). She attributes this character a feat expressed by means of a *plöche*, a figure that repeats the same word, as celebrating that “she wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman” (Woolf, 1992b: 121), rejoicing at the idea of her not being conscious of her sex in her writing. Our last example, taken from *Three Guineas*, shows three of the figures we have just analysed, the *parison*, the rhetorical question and the simile, to stress her criticism to the patriarchal state in its attainment of women’s lack of education, profession, and personal fulfilment.

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Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed. The one shuts us up like slaves in a harem; the other forces us to circle, like caterpillars head to tail, round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred tree, of property. It is a choice of evils. Each is bad. Had we not better plunge off the bridge into the river; give up the game; declare that the whole of human life is a mistake and so end it? (Woolf, 1992b: 261)

In this final quotation we perceive the essence of the essay of Virginia Woolf, as far as a masterful combination of the exposition of ideas fused with the artistry of the rhetorical figures, which should help the reader to capture, simultaneously, the intellectual value of the utterance and the delightful quality it is transmitted with.

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