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# **The Portrait of a Male Artist as a Young Woman: Virginia Woolf and the Asexual Writer in the Modernist Tradition**

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Roger Fry, *River with Poplars*, 1912

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout most of her novels, Virginia Woolf enquired into the nature of art produced by women. She sought to articulate a discourse about female aesthetics. At the same time, when sketching the perfect portrait of the artist, she portrayed a 'blended' mind in which, regardless of the sex of the artist, both sexes would be coexisting in harmony and in a genderless psyche. The ultimate goal of any artist would be to produce art without being strongly marked in their sexuality.

The aim of this paper is to look into the portrayal of the female artist in Virginia Woolf's novels in contrast with the male *artistes*, and justify why these portraits often appear to the reader as almost devoid of gender labels. Are these male artists asexual in their artistic production? Is gender marked in the case of the female artist and effaced in their male counterparts? In order to study this question, I will pay closer attention to the main female and male artist characters in Virginia Woolf's novels *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Voyage Out* (1915).

**"She pitied men always as if they had  
lacked something - women never,  
as if they had something"**

Virginia Woolf  
*To the Lighthouse*

## **Introduction**

Virginia Woolf's concerns about the physical and psychological constraints that limited the artistic expression of women prompted her to use her own literary works and readings as a laboratory of ideas. She not only made enquiries into the status of women until her time, but also she wanted to find out how she could become what she wanted to be: a writer in a patriarchal society. Her unconventional thoughts about religion, history and their relationship with women, among others, permeated her novels in which she killed the 'Angel in the house' and depicted a new woman who is no longer confined to domestic life, but one who is also actively participating in her social and political milieu. In *The Voyage Out* (1915), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf's developed the cornerstone of her feminist thought with her now famous line "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, 2012: 4). In these she delved into the nature of art produced by women, not only in terms of the representation between art and life but also in the elusive existence of a female aesthetics. That would become a recurrent theme in most of her novels.

When sketching the perfect portrait of the artist, Virginia Woolf portrayed a blended mind in which, regardless of the sex of the artist, both sexes would be present and in harmony as in a genderless psyche. The artists' ultimate goal would be to produce art without being strongly characterized or marked by their sexuality, since

they would ideally adapt to unconventional gender roles. Nonetheless, Virginia Woolf eventually introduced features of the artists' sexuality into their creations: while art produced by women is aware of its femininity –whether that is reflected on to the actual canvas or not– men artists do not seem to share an active male stance, and adopt a more androgynous one. Hence, male artists will seemingly be uncharacterized by their sexuality, whereas women artists will be defined by their femininity. Men may have not been aware of any mark of sexuality in their art until the moment in which women assumed an active cultural and political life. Then manhood was challenged in the artists' world.

The aim of this paper is to look into the portrayal of the female artist in Virginia Woolf's novels in contrast with the male *artistes*, and justify why these portraits often appear to the reader as almost devoid of gender labels. Are these male artists asexual in their artistic production? Is gender marked in the case of the female artist and effaced in their male counterparts? In order to study this question, I will pay closer attention to the main female and male artist characters in Virginia Woolf's novels *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Voyage Out* (1915). The definition of the woman artist that Virginia Woolf presents in her works will be narrowed down to the characters of the male artists in these works, instead of viewing the women artists in isolation as it has been the case in much of the bibliography on this subject matter. Is Virginia Woolf pointing at a form of female art, as opposed to male? Can we find traces of a male art being marked in its sexuality? This paper argues that the categories of marked female / male sexuality in the representations of the artist in Virginia Woolf are less explicit than commonly acknowledged, but are nevertheless present in textual and narrative details.

My analysis will inevitably be limited by the scope of a TFG, but it is motivated by a genuine curiosity that arose as a result of my readings of Woolf during my

undergraduate degree. This interest in Woolf's sexual paradoxes has generated an unlimited amount of bibliography. I have enjoyed the process of rummaging through it and articulating a thread that, I hope, will lead me in future endeavours towards an ever increasing research in this area.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Sketching the Portrait of the Artist**

Virginia Woolf had her first great opportunity to enter the literary world at the age of 25, when her brother Thoby Stephen, and later on her younger brother Adrian Stephen and her sister Vanessa Bell, met with his Cambridge friends. It was there where the shy Virginia Stephen, who hardly took part in the conversations when they first met, became one of them: another member of the intellectual and artistic circle known as the Bloomsbury Group that claimed the Modernist avant-garde to “rest on the extent to which it managed to translate the energies of the 'hopeful and exciting' pre-war European political and social movement into the post-war battle for Europe's future” (Froula, 2005: 8). In other words, the cause that Bloomsbury espoused was not saving civilization from totalitarianism, but a more modest one: struggling for its possibility, trying to find a plausible future according to their means in which the so-called Western civilization would help them to do so. The mind of the young Virginia Stephen underwent a major exposure of intellectual and artistic views that enhanced her prospects on the emergence of the female artist into the Modern world. The presence of many artists in the Bloomsbury group, such as Roger Fry or Clive Bell, along with her best friend and writer Lytton Strachey, reinforced and threw more light to her idea that

young women could be thinkers, writers or painters, since this was in theoretical terms taken for granted by the group.

Nevertheless, Woolf's ideals were nothing but the result of her own life's events and misfortunes. At the age of thirteen, the sudden death of her mother triggered her lifelong instability and the steady nervous breakdowns she suffered until her very death. Until she was in her forties, Virginia was haunted by her dead mother: she could talk to her every day and she would even constantly feel her presence, "The presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say [...] in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four" (Woolf, 1976: 80). Her presence would be reduced and relieved later on by writing *To the lighthouse*. When her half-sister Stella, who had become her surrogate mother, also died two years later, Virginia Stephen saw how the pillars of her life had vanished. From then on she remained under her father's custody, Leslie Stephen.

Virginia Woolf's father was mainly remembered for his tireless job as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. He gave Virginia free access to his own library, where she read the great classics, and appointed his daughter his literary heiress. Yet, he withheld from her the university education that he and his other sons had enjoyed, a fact that Virginia resented all her life as another example of the exposure to patriarchal education. Despite the fact that he was an independent professional writer, she subdued her daughter to Victorian domestic practice. However, Virginia Woolf stayed in Cambridge with another woman who had a deep influence on her in 1904: Caroline Emelia Stephen. Her paternal aunt represented for Virginia the positive spirit of unconventionality. Not only did Caroline Stephen integrate into Virginia's life her growing understanding of the history of women's lives and the importance of the differences between men's and women's values, but she also taught her to transform

loneliness into a space for creativity, a room of one's own (Mepham, 1991). Caroline's rejection of the masculine voice as a preaching one and her mystical views made the two women eventually have so much in common that they established a very close relationship. Virginia Woolf would use Caroline's ideals as a model for the character of Eleanor Pargiter in *The Years* (1937). When she died in 1909, Caroline Stephen gave to Virginia Woolf's career her most important contribution: she left sufficient capital to render an income close to the famous amount of £500 a year, which would be enough for her financial stability and a necessary condition for an independent woman writer (Mepham, 1991). This was the setting for the early years of Virginia Woolf's career as a writer.

Following the Modernist principles shared by her Bloomsbury comrades Roger Fry and Clive Bell, Virginia Woolf let herself go into the conflict of regarding life as chaotic and disordered as well as organized and with patterns. That mystical and spiritual view provided her with resources that would enable the complete development of her major topics throughout her novels, especially from *To the Lighthouse* (1925) onwards. Among them, and the one this paper will deal with, is the male and female antagonism regarding their sexual features as artists.

Virginia Woolf's circumstances of her life permeate her work, not only in the choice of unconventional topics but also to the language and style she used. All the changes she underwent in her own mind, concerning the different ways in which she thought about the nature of life, were embodied by the different narrative techniques she used, which allowed Virginia to release herself and give voice to them all. Furthermore, her circle of friends from Bloomsbury and other influences she had from the artistic and creative world, along with her own thoughts and beliefs, influenced her with unprecedented notion of what male and, more important, female artists should be like,



with reformed notions of artists out of the traditional conventions, having a new viewpoint to the issue.

In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf fully developed what she had consciously reflected upon all her works until that moment. She did so until her very last work. Once she introduces to the reader the picture of what it is to be a woman writer, and all the patriarchal values female artists were involuntarily immersed into, she introduces the idea that to write freely for the female writer implies writing “as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself” (Woolf, 2012: 108). There are two sexes in the mind, she argues, and in order to write without distortion it is necessary that they are in harmony with each other. Only when both parts, the woman and the man in her mind, seem to be fused, can the mind work with all its faculties: “A writer must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (Mephram, 1991: 138).

Thus a writer or an artist, according to Virginia Woolf, is the person whose ultimate instinct is to produce art, and whose features are not strongly characterized by their sexuality. On the contrary, they have to be open-minded in terms of gender perception and be able to adapt themselves to unconventional gender roles. However, Virginia Woolf actually aligns herself with one of the sexes when she is to cast her fictional artists. Up until that moment, women had only been portrayed in their relation to men, but with the gradual emergence of women as a voice that went public, more and more women were entering political and professional life. Woolf tries to enquire into the perception of women as artists who no longer feel subject to patriarchal conventions.

Sexuality in art goes beyond the representation of the male or the female body on the canvas. For Virginia Woolf “the artist is a woman all the more for her

polarization away from her male antagonist” (Spector, 1984: 91). In other words, woman artists become for Virginia Woolf fully sexual characters, who are completely characterized by a sexuality that goes beyond any physical representation or allegory of the female figure; whereas in this particular regard male artists are asexual, since no traits from their sexual characterization are given. In this essay, I will analyse some male and female characters, such as Lily Briscoe, Mr. Ramsay or Rachel Vinrace, from both *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Voyage Out* (1915), and I will enquire into the a-sexualisation of some male characters in Virginia Woolf’s works.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Her Body, Her Voice: The Female Artist in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Voyage Out***

In her masterpiece *To the Lighthouse* published in 1927, Virginia Woolf depicts not only an in-depth view of the lives of one upper middle-class British family while on holiday before the First World War, but also the creative process and the artist's relationship to domesticity, life and sexuality experienced by a single artist in her fiction. Lily Briscoe, the co-protagonist of this experimental novel, is an unmarried woman who paints and is a friend of the Ramsay family. Her most prominent features are “With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; but she was an independent little creature” (Woolf, 2006: 15). This description provided by Mrs. Ramsay hints at the *leitmotif* that is challenged throughout the novel: women who wished to be artists would encounter two main obstacles to overcome in order to fulfil their wishes, i.e. marriage and procreation, but as Judith Spector suggests “within Woolf’s own system, the artist is an

artist precisely because she makes mutually exclusive choices which permit her to do what she wants” (1984: 87).

By focusing on the artist Lily Briscoe and the life-artist Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf looks into the two forms of creativity available to women -painting and the traditional role of women as domestic wives and mothers- by challenging the motto of the *Angel in the house*, those of submission and self-sacrificing for their families. Both will share the same ultimate goal as artists, that of “making of the moment something permanent” (Woolf, 2006: 133), though in different ways. On the one hand, Lily Briscoe devotes herself to art and to finding the right state of mind for her artistic vision and her creations. Throughout the novel, Lily acquires the role of artist as an observer by painting a picture of Mrs. Ramsay and her son James, and such distance will allow her to be detached from others' feelings and intrusiveness so she can feel more attached to her own feelings and have her own vision. The progression of the painting closely accompanies Lily's psychological growth, and its resolution with the final stroke will symbolically reflect Lily's determination of her inner conflict between her detachment and independence from others, as well as her need for some intimacy. However, the influence of Mrs. Ramsay upon her brings pressure to bear on marriage and procreation.

Mrs. Ramsay embodies the perfect model of the Victorian womanhood: the self-sacrificing *Angel in the house* who is entirely devoted to ease her husband and children's difficulties, as well as nurture her husband's ego. Under the patriarchal society, she has been raised to accept her role and repress her feelings, pride and self-respect in favour of male attention and compliments (Mazzuchelli, 2009). She is portrayed through the eyes of several characters as the traditional wife and mother as “social artist and engineer of relationships as well as creator of enduring moments of community and order in the face of life's arbitrariness and nature's indifference to humankind”

(Ronchetti, 2004: 65). Although Mrs. Ramsay is not an artist, she is considered as being living work of art, attracting others to her as it happens to Lily Briscoe or many other characters. She becomes a kind of Madonna and an object of desire that can *convert* a single dinner –the central event in the first part of *To the Lighthouse*– into an artistic composition.

One of the most prominent aspect of Mrs. Ramsay's attitude towards female characters is her insistence that “[...] people must marry; people must have children” (Woolf, 2006: 51): from her insistence on Minta to marry Paul, to her emphasis to Lily to engage Tansley in a conversation during the dinner “William must marry Lily. They have so many things in common [...] She must arrange for them to take a long walk together” (85). Furthermore, Mrs. Ramsay admonition is that an unmarried woman “missed the best of life” (48); she sees marriage as the aim, and she is completely devoted to overcome the difficulties in the lives of her children and husband, as well as nurturing her husband's insecure ego. Nonetheless, Lily Briscoe is not interested in fulfilling her tasks in her sexual role, since, as Mrs. Ramsay will eventually realize, marriage is not a requirement for a woman's realization.

Commitment to a marriage, as well as motherhood, would occupy Lily's creative spirit, which wishes to stay in the artistic sphere, with overwhelming demands. The artistic self of the woman artist requires to be separated, in terms of attention, from the others. As it will be explained later on about Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf seems to state that for female artists emotional intimacy with men prevents one's aesthetic creativity (Ronchetti, 2004). Womanhood and motherhood seem to be incompatible for artists such as Lily since art is a liberation from the latter, and the demands that a husband or children would cause on the artists would leave her no time at all for her creative self. This selfishness is what preserves Lily's artistic role, thus it

becomes essential to the artist; all she wants is “intimacy itself, which is knowledge” (Woolf, 2006: 44). For Woolf, Lily is a mother who is giving birth to her painting, using the Platonic imagery of childbirth to describe “the process of painting that reinforces the central role Lily’s art plays in her personal development” (Ronchetti, 2004: 78). Lily Briscoe considers Mrs. Ramsay a model for her beauty, a fellow artist who has deeply influenced her, and a kind of surrogate mother, and she triggers in Lily a stream of different emotions: “She is the character who makes Mrs. Ramsay realize that her life would have more value if she had something of her own” (Mazzuchelli, 2009: 51). However, Mrs. Ramsay stands out exactly for what Lily Briscoe does not want to be tied to, namely, the restrictions of domestic life that Lily has managed to avoid.

Lily Briscoe’s relationship with the male characters threatens her artistic sphere: their negative opinions and actions as consequence of their fear to lose their position of superiority in their society will provoke, through her observations, her deliberate distance and rejection towards them. Furthermore, Lily Briscoe seems not to have an heterosexual muse in which she can find something erotic, since the masculine voice is repeating her “Woman can’t write, women can’t paint” (Woolf, 2006: 42). Thus, she will not find any trace of eroticism in this selfish and hostile human being, and she will have to choose between her artistic and her sexual role. Lily’s art will also be affected by the masculinisation of the creativity and desire that comes from Western culture, enforced by the Charles Tansley’s statement mentioned above. However “Lily’s and Woolf’s art implicitly abandons the masculine model of a quest romance, generalized in the psychoanalytical account of desire, language, and representation” (Froula, 2005: 130). The male artist characters to be found in *To the Lighthouse* will be discussed in the next section, as well as the consequences of their actions upon Lily Briscoe as an artist.

Within Woolf's first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915), first known as *Melymbrosia*, there are no professional artists, fiction writers or poets, but a number of women and men amateurs with privileged background: among the women we can find the protagonist Rachel Vinrace, who is not an artist *per se* but who is very talented playing the piano; Helen Ambrose, whose piece of embroidery could be considered almost as a work of art; Miss Allan, a middle-aged scholar who is finishing a history of English literature; and Mrs. Flushing, a painter. The male artists who feature in the novel, such as the Cambridge scholar St. John Hirst, the novelist Terence Hewet, and the Cambridge don Hughling Elliot, will be discussed in the next section along with their counterparts in *To the Lighthouse*.

One of the central concerns in Virginia Woolf's novels is the constant debate of the artist's public and private life. This dichotomy is already presented early at the novel during the dinner on the shipboard with Rachel, Helen Ambrose, Clarissa and Richard Dalloway, Mr. Pepper and Rachel's father Willoughby Vinrace. During the conversation which takes place in such dinner, Clarissa Dalloway, who belongs to the upper-class society and is married to a Member of the Parliament –and hence belongs to the public life– summarises the claims of the two worlds by stating:

When I'm with artists I feel so intensely the delights of shutting oneself up in a little world of one's own [...] and then I go out into the streets and the first child I meet with its poor, hungry, dirty [...] I won't live in a world of my own. I should like to stop all the painting and writing and music until this kind of thing exists no longer. Don't you feel [...] that life's a perpetual conflict? (Woolf, 2009: 44)

This double-edged debate is embodied physically in the novel through the two main scenarios in Santa Marina: on the one hand, people such as Helen or Rachel enjoy

the solitary and the contemplative life of artists and scholars living in the villa on the hillside above the town. Those living in this tranquil environment will enjoy their freedom to follow “their personal inclinations and construct private worlds that are innately authentic and free of the distorting influence of the external world” (Ronchetti, 2004: 19). By contrast, a social life is fully enjoyed in the hotel by those hosts whose “individual identity is barraged with behavioural conventions” (19). Many characters such as Miss Allan, Mrs. Flushing, Terence Hewet or St John Hirst live in this constantly busy environment, though the last two of them will go very often to the villa in order to escape the hotel's tiresome social life and visit the Ambroses.

Rachel Vinrace, a sexually immature young girl, embodies a female version of the *Künstlerroman*. The protagonist of Woolf's first novel, and motherless as Virginia Woolf was, goes on a voyage to South America with her father and her aunt Helen Ambrose. Once there, she will mix with an English expatriate community in the local hotel, where she will meet Terence Hewet, the young aspiring writer who becomes her fiancé after the trip they take up river into the jungle. Rachel herself recounts this debate in first person: on the one hand, she is an extremely well-talented in playing the piano, as well as a very intelligent girl. Nevertheless, she seems to be an ill-educated and naïve young woman who sees herself exposed to the social life for the first time at the age of twenty-four. When she is left with her aunt Helen to “show her niece, if it were possible, how to live, or as she put it, how to be a reasonable person” (Woolf, 2009: 89), Rachel starts a psychological quest of self discovery which, theoretically, will give her more freedom and further possibilities of expansion. However, she falls into a deadly loop in which her life “devolves from relative freedom to increasing restrictions in a narrowing sphere of action, ultimately ending in her premature death from an illness following engagement to Terence Hewet” (Ronchetti, 2004: 17).

In trying to find her place in the world, Rachel Vinrace encounters another obstacle which prevents her from stepping out of patriarchal expectations: marriage and motherhood. Again, as it happened in *To the Lighthouse* to Lily Briscoe, marriage is seen as the ultimate aim for women, and motherhood as a way to ensure their continued subjection to the system. Marriage is not an option, but an obligation, if women want to have greater choices as middle-class citizens and get higher social status. As an example of this domestically-centred system Helen Ambrose, Rachel's aunt, plays the role of the married woman who fulfils her duties as a good Victorian wife. Despite the fact that Helen produces creative activities, such as embroidery, she is more devoted to her role as wife and mother. She projects Rachel's fears when thinking about the consequences of her own marriage, since Helen is the vivid image of the "married woman confined to a narrow social role who serves as an omen for Rachel" (22).

At the same time, Rachel finds in another character the consequences that a female artist who does not marry has to endure if she is to devote herself to her own artistic skills. Miss Allan, a middle-aged scholar who is responsible for completing a book on the history of English literature, is the closest representation of what Virginia Woolf depicted as the ideal model of an independent woman who lived with dignity within the patriarchal society. Though profoundly admired by Woolf, Miss Allan is described as an intelligent and powerful woman who leads a solitary and tough life with a tint of masculinity –thus reinforcing the androgynous profile that Woolf saw as the perfect artist. These components of a blended, genderless mind that Virginia Woolf considered to be essential for artists are to be found in Miss Allan, who is however described as "a femme manquée [...] an example of the ideally androgynous individual except for a curiously asexual quality that denies her full humanity" (23).



Rachel Vinrace prefers to devote her time to music, and she sees her incoming marriage as a threat and an assault to her world. In a particular scene where she is playing the piano while Hewet is taking notes for his novel *Silence*, Rachel feels irritated, “No Terence, it's no good; here am I, the best musician in South America [...] and I can't play a note because of you in the room interrupting me every other second” (Woolf, 2009: 340). She is not sure of her own marriage throughout the novel, and she just imitates Hewet's responses so she can pretend she is the perfect *Angel in the house* since “'we love each other', Terence said 'we love each other', she repeated” (316). As I have stated above with Lily Briscoe, motherhood for Rachel Vinrace is also inconceivable since the demands that children require, just as in marriage, would weigh on Rachel's shoulders and would leave her no time for her creative self. Playing music takes many different roles in Rachel's life, among them as a surrogate child to which she is dedicated. Furthermore, as it happened with Lily Briscoe and her painting, music is a way of retreating from “emotionally disturbing experiences in the external world, supplying her with the reassurance provided by a familiar activity and reaffirming her identity as an individual” (Ronchetti, 2004: 72).

Due to these various obstacles that Rachel has to overcome, she finds it difficult to come to terms with her everyday life, since her surroundings are meant to inhibit her artistic impulses and confine her into an upper middle class full of hostility and reluctance towards artists. Even as Rachel's environment is subduing her into a forced state of artistic deprivation, she has many difficulties in formulating an identity for herself since Dalloway's assault and the tensions she experiences with her incoming *fiancée* presents the male gender as a “threatening dimension in the heterosexual relationship, a destiny she increasingly resists” (21). This rejection from Rachel to the opposite sex is apparent when Woolf portrays most of the women in the novel as clever

and creative individuals who cannot realize their potential as artists because marriage and domesticity are the causes of their failure.

As Virginia Woolf said to her friend Lytton Strachey in a letter, this novel was written to give voice to some of the perplexities of being a woman. Not only marriage but also motherhood jeopardize the development of the artistic self in a woman artist, so Virginia Woolf depicts in her female artist characters that “celibate life might be the one most favourable for, and even necessary to, full artistic creativity for women” (Ronchetti, 2004: 23). Going against the pre-established conventions may cause the women’s ultimate fall, and this is exactly what happens to both Mrs. Ramsay and Rachel Vinrace: since they refuse to adhere to social expectations, they both die. Thus, in the end of the novel, Rachel cannot accomplish the voyage out, it is impossible to finish the journey into adulthood.

At the same time, male artists from the upper-middle classes enjoy freedom in all the areas that make their lives easy. However, as we will see in greater detail in the next section, male characters have an attitude of anger, displeasure and disdain towards women. The continuous negative opinions they project against them are even socially accepted in everyday speech. Nonetheless, a new kind of woman is emerging that finds a public voice. Virginia Woolf depicts in many female characters, and especially in Lily Briscoe, “[...] a number of traits of the new fictional artist-hero” (12), a female artists who rejects this masculine voice which imposes orders on her. The female artists fear the opposite sex because the male characters threaten her safe, and consequently her intellectual creative power (Spector, 1984). Thus, female *artistes* won't find any kind of appeal in male arrogance, and, as a consequence, a rejection of the opposite sex will take place. Women artists in Woolf's novels believe in their own talent and they don't have the feeling of needing the umbrella of a male who nurtures their ego or their

sexuality; they will be self-sufficient regarding their identity as women, as we see when Lily believes that women are “infinitely finer” than men (Woolf, 2009: 287).

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Androgynous-Male Artist**

In the aftermath of the First World War, many changes in the structure of society affected men and women alike. With the Representation of the People Act of 1918, and as a political gesture of acknowledgment of the role of women in helping the war’s efforts, women could vote in Great Britain in 1918. Women's movements were taking shape in many suffragist parties, such as the *Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)*, and they started to enjoy their complete acceptance into the political, social and artistic world. As it has been stated in the previous section, female artists are depicted by Virginia Woolf as human beings fully aware of their sexuality, no longer repressed in a society that they see as patriarchal. They reject the Victorian conventions imposed on women. On the other hand, men were also affected by these changes: the system they had been ruling is falling into pieces, and so their male conventions, “the rise of feminism [...] provoked a variety of responses, and prompted what we might call a crisis of masculinity... traditional gender definitions were challenged and these structural shifts affected microstructural relations” (Kimmel, 1987 cited in Mazzuchelli, 2009: 28).

Thus, men artists will typically throw negative opinions about their female counterparts since their manhood is being challenged by what was supposed to be the weaker sex. Now that men do not seem to have full control of the system, they wonder what has been the reason why it has happened, and they even start to reflect on their

male attributes which configure them as such. Mr. Ramsay, Augustus Carmichael and Charles Tansley are the three male artists within *To the Lighthouse* who depict this internal, and steadily external, conflict in the artistic sphere. According to Mazzuchelli, they all will use women as "looking glasses" in which they are reflected twice their size (28), and as Virginia Woolf herself stated in *A Room of One's Own* "Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown [...] For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished" (Woolf, 2012: 41-42). Through this device, not only their feelings of superiority are kept and so their self-confidence and beliefs, but also the reassurance that they are not lost, since they strongly fear losing their superior position. Virginia Woolf depicts this very clearly in the example of the professor Von X in *A Room of One's Own*, when she states "England is under the rule of a patriarchy. Nobody in their senses could fail to detect the dominance of the professor. He was the power and the money and the influence [...] with the exception of the fog, he seemed to control everything. Yet he was angry" (39). The narrator is asking himself why such a man, with his granted superiority, is to feel inferior and, therefore, incompetent. The behaviour of men such as professor Von X is the result of an unconscious learning for centuries, in which the protection of the male superiority has been their priority in a non-deliberated way; hence the impossible recognition to accept their fear of losing it in the event it happened. When men fear that their superiority can be taken away, they blame the weaker member, women in this case.

Mr. Ramsay is a metaphysical philosopher whose work has not succeeded as much as he expected to. When trying to figure out what has been the reason to his failure, Woolf suggests that domesticity and his responsibilities as *paterfamilias* have disqualified Ramsay's creative ability as a philosopher. Mrs. Ramsay, as the *Angel in*

*the house* who has interiorized her feelings and blame herself for all her husband's misfortunes, believes that Mr. Ramsay “would have written better books if he had not married” (Woolf, 2006: 58). Mr. Ramsay himself is aware of this fact, and he thinks that if he could regain some solitude he could do a better job, but he has major duties as the father of so many children. In order to keep his ego, Mr. Ramsay uses his wife as the looking-glass in which he is reflected at more than double his size, and so she gives him the constant sympathy and attention that he needs to nurture his insecure ego; provoking to Mrs. Ramsay some ideas such as her husband's great intelligence “The energies of his splendid mind” (30), or making her feel much inferior “She did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband” (35), and staying at her husband's shadow “She wanted only to be like other people, insignificant” (27).

When Mr. Ramsay is with Lily Briscoe, he faces the opposite of what his wife represents: Lily is very critical with Mr. Ramsay's egocentrism and his constant demand of his wife's attention. He sees Lily as the great challenger of his masculinity, and he starts to wonder whether “If Shakespeare had never existed, he asked, would the world have differed much from what it is today? Does the progress of civilization depend upon great men?” (37). Mr. Ramsay feels as if something were threatening manhood, and he states that “possibly the greatest good requires the existence of a slave class [...] the arts are merely a decoration imposed on the top of human life; they do not express it” (37). In Mr. Ramsay's statement the idea of an inferior class is embedded: in order to maintain hierarchy, Mr. Ramsay believes that an inferior human being is needed in order to keep the structure of society. Up until then Mr. Ramsay and, by extension male artists in general, were not aware that they had an actual threat that could distort the boundaries between them and female artists, and he fears that such event may be impeding the actual work he does as a scholar-philosopher. Until that moment they had

taken for granted that manhood was the only way through which artists could succeed, but the emergence of a female voice is making them realize that traits of masculinity in art were absent. Male artists were lacking sexual traits, as if they were androgynous entities.

Both Augustus Carmichael and Charles Tansley also fear that they might lose pre-eminence in their society: the young philosopher Mr. Tansley invokes a psychological device to cherish his ego, that of verbally abusing women with his negative opinions about them, especially towards the rebellious Lily with his famous statement "Women can't write, women can't paint" (42) or with his thoughts "They did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat. It was the women's fault. Women made civilization impossible with all their 'charm', all their silliness" (70). His misogyny triggers Lily and Mrs. Ramsay's rejection, the former stating that he is a "miserable specimen [...] all humps and hollows" (10). Nonetheless, such claims are nothing but Tansley's fear of losing his manhood and confidence, and his response to this threat is anger and hatred: his artistic activity is being threatened by women's appearance in the artistic sphere, and he is portrayed, as well as Mr. Ramsay, as childish and unable of being artists.

On the other hand, the poet Augustus Carmichael seems deceiving at a first glance compared to the rest of the characters due to his silent demeanour. However he still poses a threat to female artists and "imposes negative energy on the pyramid of anger" (Mazzuchelli, 2009: 34). Mr. Carmichael depicts the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete, preferring his own artistic company to that of others, though he is ready to defend himself as male artists if his work is to be challenged by the weaker sex. William Bankes is not an artist but a botanist, though his creativity in science is seen as a form of art which however curbed by his obsessive need for control. He, as Carmichael, is

struck by Mrs. Ramsays' beauty, since "Nature has but little clay [...] like that of which she moulded you" (Woolf, 2006: 27). But this is used as a way to exchange flattery for women's unconditional reverence to them. Furthermore, he is indirectly blaming her for preventing Mr. Ramsay from being the great philosopher he could have been if he were not married with her, to "depend so much as he did upon people's praise" (22). According to Mr. Carmichael, Mrs. Ramsay has destroyed Mr. Ramsay's creative impulse, as well as his friendship with Carmichael himself. Their masculine traits are being challenged by the female presence in the artists sphere, by their attempt to balance both sexes "he had seen him divest himself of all those glories of isolation and austerity with crowned him in youth cumber himself definitely with fluttering wings and clucking domesticities. They gave him something [...] but that had also, his old friends could not but feel, destroyed something" (22).

In Virginia Woolf's first novel *The Voyage out* (1915), a mixed style of comedy and social satire, Terence Hewet, St. John Hirst, Hughling Elliot and Ridley Ambrose complete the main cast of male artists; however only the first two, who have recently down from Cambridge, will be analysed in these pages. Terence Hewet, Rachel Vinrace's fiancé, is an ambitious novelist who is writing a novel with the self-explanatory title of *Silence or the Things People don't say*. Hewet appears to be the portrait of the nexus between the sphere of social interaction and public life: his constant need of companion as well as social involvement points him out as a social creature while he continues with his artistic activities; thus "Hewet represents the emergence in embryonic form of the engaged artist-figure who practices his or her art while living fully among others" (Ronchetti, 2004: 28). Although he seems more charitable and understandable with others, Hewet cannot avoid to interfere with Rachel's artistic activity through marriage: in the scene mentioned above when Rachel

is interrupted by Hewet when she is playing a Beethoven sonata, Hewet is seemingly taking some notes for his novel. Nevertheless, he is constantly voicing his real thoughts about women: "Women I've written: 'Lack of self-confidence at the base of most serious faults. Dislike of own sex traditional, or founded on fact? Every woman not so much a rake at heart as an optimist, because they don't think' What do you say Rachel?" (Woolf, 2009: 339). Since Rachel remains in silence at the first accusation, Hewet continues: "It's the fashion now to say that women are more practical and less idealistic than men, also that they have considerable organizing ability but no sense of honour - query, what is meant by masculine term - 'honour'? - what corresponds to your sex? Eh?" (340). She finally bursts out with such accusations, and reclaims that though being one of the best musicians in South America she has to bear all that negativity about women. Hewet realizes that male pre-eminence in art is being challenged by the emergence of a new woman artist. He feels frustrated and tries to defend himself through attack "God. Rachel, you do read trash! [...] And you're behind the times too, my dear" (341). Hewet acts as a child who does not know how to face the situation, and the only way he finds to counterattack is through psychological aggression.

Terence Hewet repeatedly tries to subdue Rachel to her new corresponding social role as his future wife, which according to him should take precedence over her musicianship. He succumbs to the stereotypical male behaviour when she is trying to get rid of the Angel, and because of the threat it represents to his artistic activity. His novel entitled *Silence or the Things People don't say* seeks "to see what sort of person the writer is [...] the way one's seen the thing, felt about it" (249), however as Rachel listens to his speech she realises that "as he talked of writing he had become suddenly impersonal" (249). In Hewet's writing there are no marks of sexuality; that is something



detached and genderless, an artistic creation but empty. In contrast, Rachel's music is a communion with her sexual self as a woman:

Absorbed by her music she accepted her lot very complacently [...] Inextricably mixed in dreamy confusion, her mind seemed to enter into communion, to be delightfully expanded and combined with the spirit of the whitish boards on deck, with the spirit of the sea, with the spirit of Beethoven Op. 112 [...] Like a ball of thistle-down it kissed the sea, rose, kissed it again, and thus rising and kissing passed finally out of sight [...] and when it passed out of sight she was asleep. (35)

Rachel's representation of her wish for freedom as an artist is represented through the sea, a *motif* traditionally used to depict a woman's desire for freedom. This image has usually been related to the boundless horizon that modern women want to achieve as a way to get their independence, as a rebellion against a misogynistic society. This fragment resonates with that of Edna Pontellier falling asleep in Madame Antoine's cottage and awakening (physically and symbolically) to a new self-awareness in Kate Chopin's masterpiece *The Awakening* (1899).

Hewet's scholarly Cambridge friend, St. John Hirst, is characterized as a spontaneous artist who can produce a poem or a play out of the blue. He is physically not very attractive "For the ugliness of St. John Hirst, and the limitations that went with it" (150) and despite his difficulties to relate to women "the immense difficulty of talking to girls who had no experience of life" (171), he thinks that men philosophers are the ones who give him strength and inspiration to carry on his creative artistry. Not women, since "they gave him, certainly, what no woman could give him, not Helen even. Warming at the thought of them, he went on to lay his own case before Mrs. Ambrose" (234). He does not think that women contribute something interesting to art, probably because he sees them as dangerous creatures who threaten his work. He

presents himself as a quiet arrogant and intelligent individual: "And of course I am - immensely clever [...] I'm going to be one of the people who really matter [...] At Cambridge, of course, I should inevitably become the most important man in the place, but there are other reasons why I dread Cambridge" (180). According to Virginia herself, St. John Hirst is a fictional portrayal of his Bloomsbury friend and biographer Lytton Strachey, author of the novel *Eminent Victorians* (1918).

Men artists in Virginia Woolf's novels feel threatened by women's emergence into the art world, and it is then when they feel that female artists jeopardize their work that they seem to realize how their sexuality has been overshadowed until then. It has been impersonal, androgynous, genderless, and "Possibly, for psychological reasons which seem to me very interesting, a man, in the present world, is not a very good judge of his sex" (Woolf cited in Briggs, 2006: 21). The works of male artists are not marked in their sexuality, whereas women make sure to reclaim their rights and place in the world through their artistic activities while circumventing the socially imposed conventions on their sex.

## **Conclusions**

### **The Sex of Angels and Artists**

Virginia Woolf sketched the structure of *To the Lighthouse* as two blocks joined by a corridor, and the latter would depict the tunnel that connects the past with the present. In this second part of *To the Lighthouse*, which is a much shorter and lyrical section, shows the deadly consequences of war upon human consciousness as well as to the Ramsays. In this passage, Mr. Carmichael stays awake until late at night while reading Virgil: he was in Dante's *Divine Comedy* his guide through hell and purgatory.

Once he finishes, he extinguishes all the lamps and starts what it seems a descent to a complete darkness, a parallelism that resembles Dante's travel through purgatory: "a downpouring of immense darkness began [...] Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say 'This is he' or 'this is she'" (Woolf, 2006: 103).

All the characters seem to look for some light; they seem to be diving into darkness and ignorance of themselves, they cannot distinguish between the furniture, their paths, or their sexuality. In trying to open up a path using the classical reference to Virgil's light and knowledge, Woolf's characters seek enlightenment. Thus female artists are receiving some light, they are gaining a voice in the "hegemonic patriarchal economic, social, and educational institutions" that up until then had depicted "women's dehumanization" (Scherr, 2002: 258). The breach with the conventions of the angel in the house and the Victorian marital model enable female artists to capture their sexuality within their creations; and even Woolf "is investigating the *nature* of women' art, in terms of the relation between art and life, and seeking 'the appropriate female form'" (Caughie, 1991: 372).

Nonetheless, this foray of the female voice into the artistic sphere of men poses a real threat to male pre-eminence: men had not been aware of the sexuality permeating their works since they were the dominating party; they may be genderless and androgynous, as in the case of angels, whereas the art produced by women is highly influenced by their sexuality. Both Lily Briscoe and Rachel Vinrace are "*examples of female artists working in a destructive medium-life*" (Spector, 1984: 91). This is a direct effect of how different women and men have been brought up within the patriarchal society. Virginia Woolf is aware of the fact that for her female artists, "there is nothing erotic [...] in a union with a hostile selfish creature struggling to fulfill only his own

needs" (85), but she supplies them with strongly marked sexual traits that extrapolate into their artistic creations. "She pitied men always as if they lacked something - women never, as if they had something" (Woolf, 2006: 70), states Mrs. Ramsay, as if women were often aware of their huge step towards freedom.

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