

Deconstruction of Gender Roles: A Feminist, stylistic and Linguistic study in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf

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ABSTRACT:

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792, a period of radical reform in the wake of the French Revolution, and one of the first examples of feminist literature. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, written over a century later and published in 1929, appeared in the wake of several feminist movements, the Suffragettes of the previous century and women being given the same voting rights as men just a year before, a result from women's involvement in the First World War. An immediate discrepancy is apparent in both texts; though both address an educated audience, the levels of formality differ. They both focused their attention on the role of women in society, despite living in different historical and cultural contexts. While Wollstonecraft fought for the rights of women to have a national education, seeing it as among the universal and inalienable rights afforded to all of mankind, Woolf wanted instead to form a new cultural tradition of female writers. The aim of the paper is to trace the differences and similarity in their writings.

Keywords: Vindication, Women Oppression, Status, Feminism, Equality, Education, Space

A Vindication of the Rights of Women was a product of enlightenment philosophy, focusing on the rational basis for equality between men and women. *A Room of One's Own*, however was a product of post-World war I Britain and focused on appealing to the senses of the reader through stream-of-consciousness writing. While they both differed in their approaches and their interpretations of the needs of women as individuals, they both fought for the rights of women in a time where they were heavily and overtly marginalized and oppressed. Wollstonecraft was truly a child of the enlightenment. Writing in 1792, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was a direct response to the philosophies of the French Revolution. She believed wholeheartedly in the concept of universal rights as endowed by a god, and that enlightenment thought could improve society and the world by making the people more rational, and therefore more virtuous.

Universal rights were commonly accepted in enlightened circles, and her notion of a liberating deity was similar to John Locke's philosophy of inalienable rights as given by a creator. Further, the idea that reason could benefit society as a whole was embraced by enlightenment philosophers like Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Adam Smith, and

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Cesare Beccaria. Those who were most likely to be literate at this time were middle and upper-class men and women. Most importantly, they were generally men who imbibed enlightenment philosophy. As such, her work was written for an audience of philosophers. Yet, over a century later, another feminist writer rocked the world with her critique of women in fiction. Virginia Woolf made a much more radical argument, in many respects than Wollstonecraft. A product of the post-WWI culture, at least upon writing “A Room of One’s Own,” she approached society in a much more pragmatic way, using a strange combination of scientism and romanticism to appeal to the reader.

“To Mary Wollstonecraft, men and women needed to share these rights equally in order for women to

“emulate the virtues of man . . .” because women were just as capable of reason as a man. In her mind, virtue, having one eternal standard (that is, from Providence), could not be different for men as it is for women. That would suggest different standards of virtue. As such, their morality was grounded in the same concepts as men’s morality, or else morality was subjective. Virtue, then, was founded in truth and fortitude – that is, reason and rationality – just as it was founded for men. In this endeavour, Virginia Woolf agreed with Wollstonecraft, although not as extremely. Woolf believed that truth could not be objectively determined through emotion. In her examination of the science of sex, she concluded that “they had been written in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth,” and were therefore “worthless for my purposes” and “worthless scientifically.”

While both agreed on the role of non-fiction, however, it is Mary Wollstonecraft’s analysis of fiction that showed the most striking difference between the two women in their approach. To her, focusing on culture, as opposed to education, made women slaves to sensation; particularly, novels captured women’s attentions and distracted them, which “prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others, . . .”

Wollstonecraft continued by stating that women were caged, in a sort, by a forced sense of “innocence,” to make them more obedient and accepting of societal oppression and the oppression thrust upon them by despots and tyrants. Women were made not only weaker mentally, but weaker physically, by being expected to maintain certain sensibilities. Woolf concurred that the stereotypes thrust upon women caused a detriment to their health. She recognized the effects these standards had mentally and physically, and expressed them in her analysis of women like the hypothetical sister of William Shakespeare, Judith:

“For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.”

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Femininity and the standards that came with it created many problems for the best and brightest among women in England during their respective times, an important similarity between them. While both women accepted that stereotypes affected women in a detrimental way, they differed as to why. Woolf believed women functioned in society as a “looking glass . . . reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size;” by criticizing and demonstrating critical thought, they shrunk the reflection, making men feel small as women showed themselves as, in many respects, almost equal. As such, feminine stereotypes were designed specifically to make women internalize a feeling of inferiority to men so that they may continue to serve as a suitable human self-esteem booster. Wollstonecraft saw these stereotypes as detrimental, not because of the internalized inferiority of women on its own, but because of the lack of education given to women as a result of those stereotypes. Particularly in response to Rousseau's characterization of the ideal woman, Sophie in *Emile*, she concluded that, logically, either women were moral beings or women were weak characters subject to the “superior faculties of men;” Wollstonecraft concluded the former to be true.

To Wollstonecraft, women needed to prove their place as rational creatures. If acceptance showed their inferiority to men, then women would be inferior with a new instilled sense of virtue. To prove their place in society, they needed national, equal education. If their rationality were to be proven, then they needed to be given access to political independence, more employment opportunities to maintain a sense of financial independence, and autonomy from their husbands, who should “generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, . . .” Virginia Woolf agreed with Wollstonecraft's assessment of the need for equal opportunity, especially in employment. As she related the story of “Mary” in *A Room of One's Own*, she accounted seeing several men and women working in their day-to-day lives as she walked down the streets of Oxbridge. She pondered on why it was that the women who saved lives and took care of children earned less than, or were seen as less important than, the coal-heavers, the lawyer, or the barristers; in truth, she longed for a day when women stopped being the protected sex and took on male work roles. While Woolf only argued explicitly for financial independence and privacy for women, she advocated for a sense of androgyny in one's work, especially in fiction. She believed perfect clarity of experience in writing required that “one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” and not be wholly male or female when conveying thoughts and opinions. Otherwise, these thoughts became riddled with biases and half-truths that muddled the message of the work.

The most striking difference between Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf was what they considered to be the most important emancipator for women in society. Wollstonecraft saw education as the ultimate liberator for women, while Woolf believed that privacy and financial independence would naturally change their status. While Wollstonecraft touched on numerous topics in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she focused most of her attention on education. She believed education was at the root of virtue, and so women needed to be educated to act in moral ways and to teach their children right from wrong. Through virtue, all things became possible. These virtues would make women better wives, better role models for their children, and more effective educators. Political participation, which needed righteous thought and the ability to reason,

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would become feasible. Workplace inequity would be a thing of the past. Virtue could improve society drastically. It was, as such, the greatest emancipator. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, took a different approach to life. She saw education as a necessary step to the progress of women, to be sure, but she believed that the true emancipator for women started at home. By 1929, the year *A Room of One's Own* was published, women already had greater opportunities than women in 1792. Woolf chastised women for not taking advantage of their new-found privileges to go to college, own their own property, save money, and vote. Judith Shakespeare, to Woolf, lived in every woman. If women would use these advantages to improve themselves, she would “walk among us in the flesh.” While women had these new privileges, they still were not free from the stereotypes thrust upon them. They were clearly important to Virginia Woolf, but not what would liberate women from these societal standards. In truth, “freedom and fullness of expression are of the essence of the art of writing . . .” in short, women needed the freedom to express themselves. In order to accomplish that, they needed the privacy and financial support to free themselves of the responsibilities of life and produce great works. In essence, women needed to escape the looking glass role thrust upon them by men by seizing their financial independence, privacy, and education, which decreased the sense of male superiority in society. Only by doing that could progress be made for women.

The use of semi-colons to create verbose complex sentences are in direct contrast to Woolf's frequently shorter compound and complex sentences, despite even employing numerous semi-colons; “I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; ‘I’ is merely a convenient term for somebody who has no real being.” Woolf's sentences, being shorter, remain more coherent than Wollstonecraft's frequently prolix passages, reflect a change in the standard of accessibility of texts, a 20th Century audience demanding concise information opposed to the 18th Century style of formal and complex language (indeed, the Romantic poetry movement of Wollstonecraft's era called for an end to the ‘pretentious’ and exclusive styles of writing favoured by authors of the time).

Woolf also uses grammar in the lowering of her tenor, using the second person pronoun “you” to refer to the reader directly, something the Wollstonecraft text declines to do, as well employing the impartial first person “one” (“One can only give one's audience...”) for an aloof, comedic effect. Though the use of ‘one’ may be expected in the archaic, more formal text of Wollstonecraft, it is omitted. Instead, both texts are similar in their frequent use of the first person ‘I’. As both texts aim to convey the authors' views, this is hardly surprising, though the frequency in which it appears in Woolf's text outstrips Wollstonecraft's usage – again implying a change in the expected formality of their respective eras. Woolf's use of non-standard grammar (in opening sentences with a conjunction – “But however small it was...”), dashes (“... a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex is that – one cannot hope to tell the truth.), to give a sense of spontaneity, and parenthetical remarks all give *A Room of One's Own* an almost conversational tone – unsurprising considering it being based on a series of lectures given by Woolf.

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Again, this difference in language reflects the moving social trends – Wollstonecraft would have been unable to give lectures, or even allowed inside a university, and the language in *Rights of Woman* reflects this; Wollstonecraft makes no use of parenthesis or dashes, and so the text lacks Woolf's spontaneity. A direct example of change in grammar is Wollstonecraft's "an habit". An' is the older form of the indefinite article (whereas in Woolf's text and the modern day both 'a' and 'an' would be used depending on pronunciation), originating from the German 'ein', reflecting the change in influence of other languages on English from the 18th Century.

Woolf's inclusion of the semantic field in her rhetoric again suggests a more relaxed attitude towards language in the 20th Century compared to the 18th – considering the 'ground-breaking' natural philosophy and metaphysical aspects of Wollstonecraft's contemporaries' poetry (the Romantics, such as Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley), it is hardly surprising there is a lack of richly decorated language and personification in *Rights of Woman*; as a persuasive text, it would not have been taken seriously. Lexically, further differences show a change in language. Wollstonecraft frequently makes use of emotional lexis, such as; "... he physical and moral evils that torment mankind, as well as of the vices and follies that degrade and destroy women..." This suggests that what influences language has also changed. Wollstonecraft's references to 'evil' and 'vices and follies' suggest a spiritual influence on language, not unsurprising considering the importance of the Bible in the 18th and 19th centuries. The decline of this influence can be seen in Woolf's text, where no mention of moral or spiritual matters are made, instead suggesting it is "the ideas, the prejudices" of people that are responsible for the hindrances facing women writing fiction.

CONCLUSION:

It is the context of the two texts that determines the differences and language change. As society's attitudes towards both language and feminism relaxed, so did the language, and this is reflected in the change of tenor between the two texts. Further contextual factors include education and women's rights – Woolf, though not sent to school, received a literary education from her wealthy parents, and this high level of literacy and relaxed attitudes towards feminism shows in the rich language of *A Room of One's Own*. While Wollstonecraft was writing it was still considered unthinkable for a woman to act outside the norm (after Wollstonecraft's death, her husband's recounts of her love affairs caused such a scandal her posthumous reputation was left in tatters), and as such *Rights of Women* is consistently written in a formal tenor, avoiding language that would be considered inappropriate. Thus it could be concluded that every text written by women remain aloof from problems related to women of their age and there is also a remarkable difference in their language , content and expression compares to their counter parts.

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