

Virginia Woolf - Androgyny

Virginia Woolf discusses many of the issues which later feminist critics focus on. She is considered by many feminists as the “founding mother” of the contemporary debates on feminism. Her works continually discuss the problems facing women writers and examine the social and economic obstacles to their literary ambition. In one of her key texts, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) she argues that women's writing should explore female experience in its own right and not form a comparative assessment of women's experience in relation to men. This she says because she sees women's many material disadvantages to men. She is also conscious of the restricted education they receive and limited experience they are allowed to have. She sees how this limited experience is also tailored to develop a particular kind of feminine consciousness.

Hence, whereas on one hand, Woolf talks of exploring female experience in women's writing, on the other hand she also rejects a female consciousness, or a gender specific consciousness. She sees the problems of the idea of maleness or femaleness in writing. Flowing prose, circular narratives and a focus on interior landscapes are associated with a feminine balance, whereas outward-looking adventure narratives, and a preoccupation with the material world are put down to the male account. These traits have become gender-identified not through any innate propensities but via gender-specific socialization. Woolf believes that the powers which are associated with the male and female preside in all human beings. Therefore, for her the writer's creative mind should go beyond the socio-historically created gender stereotyping.

Bloomsbury Group

A group of artists and writers who lived or worked near London's Bloomsbury area in the early twentieth century. They came to be known for their bohemian lifestyle, liberal politics and their modern attitudes towards sexuality. The group was formed of intellectuals like Virginia Woolf, her husband Leonard Woolf, artist Vanessa Bell, her husband Clive Bell, artist Duncan Grant, artist and critic Roger Fry, economist John Maynard Keynes, critic Desmond MacCarthy, writer Lytton Strachey and writer E. M. Forster.

knowledge and experience are wider than either mode of perception alone and the artist must be sensitive to the full range of human insight. Androgyny in a writer is defined, then, by the width of perception rather than by single, universal mode of knowing. The androgynous mind would therefore be free from the confirming sex stereotypes which society imposes.

However, ever since Woolf introduced her theory of the androgynous mind the concept has also caused contention among critics. It has been criticized by some feminists, like Elaine Showalter. Showalter sees Woolf's concept of androgyny as a passive withdrawal from the conflict between male and female sexuality. Toril Moi disagrees with this criticism as she sees Woolf's androgyny not as a passive withdrawal from gender stereotyping, rather she sees it as a complete displacement of gender identities. According to Moi, Woolf dismantles essentialist notions of gender and rejects that type of feminism which is simply an inverted male chauvinism. Further, in the third wave feminism, decades after the publication of Woolf's book, Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance has something in common with Woolf's idea of androgyny.

Key Points

- The powers which are associated with the male and female preside in all human beings.
- The traits which have become gender-identified are not innate or biologically determined but have formed because of gender-specific socialization
- The writer's creative mind should go beyond the socio-historically created gender stereotyping, this will be the androgynous mind
- The androgynous mind is a fertile mind because it brings together the qualities of what are considered to be the male and the female
- Androgynous mind is about cross-pollination, the harmony of togetherness of both the male and female residing within the mind
- It will be free from confirming sex stereotypes

... “... in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. **The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating.** If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. **It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought.**” (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*)