
Virginia Woolf's Exploration of Creativity: An Analysis of the Relationship between Creativity and Mental Illness

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the intersection between creativity and mental illness with reference to Virginia Woolf. It focuses on Woolf's struggle with depression and the impact of her illness in shaping her creative process, with special emphasis on her manic episodes. The paper discusses Woolf's writings not only as simply escapist modes in response to stresses but also as insights into the author's concerns such as her emphasis on the changed roles of women to achieve greater independence in contrast with the roles determined by the Victoria models of femininity.

Keywords: Modernism, Mental disorder, Creativity, Madness, Stress

Introduction:

Virginia Woolf was highly creative and imaginative and one can understand what kind of writing she was trying to attempt. The process through which a writer goes while creating something original is known as the creative process, "creativity is the capacity to produce something new/novel and appropriate/useful within a certain sociocultural context" (Zhao et al. 2). The writer keeps in mind the historical setting as well as the text. It is a movement beyond the old order which is deliberately done by Woolf in order to create something new with the English novel. Woolf in her writings developed a new style and questioned the methods of her predecessors.

Biographical Accounts of Sylvia Plath, Carrie Fisher, Amy Winehouse and others show the intersection between mental illness and creativity, "Rybakowski and Klonowska for instance, experimentally contrasted patients with bipolar disorder with healthy control participants to examine their potential differences in creativity... and provided support for the madness creativity nexus by showing higher scores among bipolar patients" (Zhao et al. 2). Writing for women is a cathartic escape-valve as a safety valve into which the rage against patriarchal injustices perpetually perpetrated upon the female sex can be vented when appropriate channels and opportunities are not provided in social exchanges or are treated

dismissively and without empathy.

Gustavo Figueroa in the essay “Virginia Woolf as an example of a mental disorder and artistic creativity” describes the main source of her productive work as her illness or, in other words, that it was during the period of her episodes of illness related to depression and hypomania when she was productive. Simon O Lesser in the article “Creativity versus Death: Virginia Woolf” talks of the psychological problems experienced since childhood and relates it with Woolf’s genius. Her genius constantly seeks perfection which results in dissatisfaction and illness. Her illness played a very important role in her creativity, “research published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research* found that people in creative professions are more likely to suffer from certain mental health conditions compared to the general population” (Delta). According to Gillian Gill, “Pleasure is a challenge for a literary biographer: Pain reads much better as a block to creative expression, but happiness and comfort can be just as destructive to the work ethic” (The New York Times). Louise DeSalvo in *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on her Life and Work* suggested that Virginia Woolf tried to recuperate through her writings. She attempted suicide several times, often corresponding to her manic episodes. In between these attempts, there were several releases of her books. Research on her works is often accompanied by a dissection of her often already-fragmented narrative to scrape out evidence of her mental projections as stated in an article:

At many times in her writing, especially in her autobiographical work, Woolf comments on the need to use creation as an escape from illness. As she said in April 1929, she considered writing to have a life of its own, and to be a witness of something real beyond appearances, which she could put into words, and in this transformation, they lost their power to hurt her. Writing became a way to escape from what distressed her, what horrified her. (Ballester-Roca and Noelia)

It is believed that a great work of art has years of experience and struggle behind it. She had a mastery of writing in different styles like diary, letters, novels and essays. She used to write letters to relax from the strain of writing fiction. Her style of writing is opaque, controlled and lyrical. According to Leonard Woolf, Woolf’s output is more prolific than Jane Austen, Fanny Burney or the Brontës. Sometimes she is involved in fiction, sometimes in novels and at other times, in letters and diary, though she was a slow writer. Writing helped her to control her madness, “For creative people, depression can be both a source of inspiration and a significant barrier to productivity. The intense emotions and introspection associated with depression can lead to profound artistic expressions” (Delta) and to express herself in words what she felt inside.

One of the most distinctive features that make a literary piece successful is its style of writing. Modern contemporary writers employ various techniques and methods in order to enhance their works and to make them quite engaging. Modern writers have their own intricate and unfamiliar style. Woolf represented an era when art was significantly incorporated into the society. T.S. Eliot in Obituary describes for Virginia, “Without Virginia

Woolf at the center of it, it would have remained formless of margina... With the death of Virginia Woolf, a whole pattern of culture is broken" (Svendsen and Pericles). She gave a new perspective of writing by becoming a pioneer of using stylistic features of Interior Monologue and Stream of Consciousness. Her novels are also known as 'psychological novels' that depict how the style helps in creating a new way of understanding. Woolf knew that in order to be creative, you need to quiet the mind. In *Professions for Women*, she writes: [A] novelist's chief desire is to be as unconscious as possible. He has to induce in himself a state of perpetual lethargy. He wants life to proceed with the utmost quiet and regularity [...] so that nothing may break the illusion in which he is living — so that nothing may disturb or disquiet the mysterious nosings about, feelings round, darts, dashes and sudden discoveries of that very shy and illusive spirit, the imagination. (Literature Cambridge)

Woolf enables her reader to experience the significance of the past of the characters. Often in the course of the narrative, a similar event, situation or phrase is invoked repeatedly which gives an impression that it has happened a long while ago and borne importantly upon the psyche of the characters and this literary technique recreates the same impression in the minds of the reader. After reading her novels we see 'the outline, not the detail' which is a way to know the characters. It is believed that anger produces beautiful writing. A female undergoes a drastic transformation after a long suppression and the outcome is a 'terrible beauty'. This oxymoron given by W. B. Yeats is directly related to Virginia Woolf's personality which is terrible in the sense that it consumed Woolf yet it was beautiful because Woolf was reborn as a writer. She adds anger to the fuel of her writing power to redefine her character as a woman. Her creativity involved the process of self-analysis, of understanding one's feelings and defining identity. in this context Ballester-Roca asserts,

Writing became a way to escape from what distressed her, what horrified her... In 1925 she wrote a text at T. S. Eliot's request, «On being ill», in one of the first topics, she touches on the suspicious absence of illness among the great literary leitmotifs, and she wonders why literature does not describe the everyday tragedy for body and mind when we are convalescing... Faced with a feeling of vulnerability, creation gave her the protection she sought, as a sort of buffer against the passing of time or the relationships with people she held dear, among others. But when that failed, she fell back into the pit. (Ballester-Roca and Ibarra-Rius 226)

Woolf's place in modernism is secured by her movement away from the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel and the spoken or unspoken rules and expectations regarding the art of literary creation. Coherence, linearity and certainty are abandoned in favour of in-the-moment exploration from within, "The idea that creation is not an analytical, heady, controlled process was pretty revolutionary in Woolf's time. Creativity is instead "mysterious nosings about," which might even require lounging about, doing nothing. Perhaps Whitman described this process when he wrote, "I loaf and invite my soul" (Thoen). For a female to be a great writer, it is very important to kill the angel in the house and be a madwoman. This is the case with most of the female writers as they express themselves.

Madness in a way is an accepted means to express anger and hostility in a social set up. Woolf's illness had a significant impact on her creative process; a supposition which is lent credence by her output produced during the phases where she was troubled the most by anxiety and suicidal ideation.

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