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"On how Virginia Woolf Disrupts the Victorian Ideal of 'the Angel in the House' in her Fictional and Critical Writings"

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Abstract: This paper explores the process of disruption of the Victorian model of 'the Angel in the House' in two works by Virginia Woolf: *The Voyage Out* and *Three Guineas*. The analysis of the character of Rachel in *The Voyage Out* has enabled us to look at the rules and norms that society set for women in their struggle to find their own role and identity in society. *Three Guineas* provides us with Woolf's arguments against the patriarchal state that have set women as outsiders. Although there is a gap of 23 years in the publication of both works, it is interesting to look at the themes and issues that arise in Woolf's first novel and how she still sees these issues as crucial well after two decades and in the interwar period in the 20th-century. For this reason, it could be argued that Woolf's representation of the consequences of patriarchal values in *The Voyage Out* is less explicit than in *Three Guineas*, where the call for an end of these values is much clearer than in her first novel.

Keywords: *The Voyage Out*, *Three Guineas*, 'the Angel in the House', Outsiders, Patriarchal Values, , 'the Paid-for Culture', 'the Unpaid-for Culture.'

Dámaris Betsabé **ASPRÓN AMAYA**

On how Virginia Woolf Disrupts the Victorian Ideal of 'the Angel in the House' in her Fictional and Critical Writings

O. Introduction

If one had to choose a word that described the 20th century, there would probably be a general agreement on the word *change*. However, even though the beginning of this century is known as the end of the Victorian Era, Victorian traces can still be observed quite clearly in the social roles of men and women. Regarding women's roles, in Virginia Woolf's terms, it might be preferable to refer to these traces as *phantoms* as shown in her work entitled 'Professions for Women.'¹ In this essay Woolf argues that there is a phantom that has been bothering her and other women writers. This annoying spirit is none other than 'the Angel in the House.'

The concept of 'the Angel in the House' is said to come from Coventry Patmore's narrative poem, originally published in 1854. Patmore presents the characteristics of the ideal woman by suggesting:

So innocently proud and fair
She is, that Wisdom sings for glee
And Folly dies, breathing one air
With such as bright-cheek'd chastity (63)

and continuing further with:

MAN must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself. (48)

These few lines extracted from the poem suggest that for Patmore and for Victorian men, women had to be *pure* and *chaste*, and their main role was *to please* men's and others' wishes rather than to fulfill theirs. According to Woolf, these features are the ones that hindered women writers to express themselves freely and they are also the reasons that led Woolf 'to kill the Angel' (PW, 286). The spirit of 'the Angel in the House' hampered her writing by encouraging her and other women to depend on male support and approval. This dependence on men and the establishment of women as 'angels' rather than individuals with their own mind placed women outside society and denied them the possibilities to have access to university level education as well as the possibility to enter professions. This essay analyses how Woolf disrupts the Victorian ideal of 'the Angel in the House' in her fictional and critical writing with a main focus on *The Voyage Out*² and *Three Guineas*.³ The former will enable us to look at the consequences of Rachel's upbringing according to the patriarchal rules and how her decisions to build her identity helped her to destroy the model of 'the Angel in the House.' The latter, will provide us with the reasons why Woolf considered necessary to kill the Angel and put an end to the patriarchal values.

¹ Professions for Women: paper read to the Women's Service League in 1931. Subsequent quotations from this work will be cited in the body of the paper, using the abbreviation PW.

² Subsequent quotations from this work will be cited in the body of the paper using the abbreviation VO.

³ Subsequent quotations from this work will be cited in the body of the paper using the abbreviation TG.

1. Rachel's fight against the Victorian model

Virginia Woolf's first novel *The Voyage Out*, published in 1915, depicts Rachel's search for identity, while she disrupts the ideal of 'the Angel in the House.' The first impression that the reader has about Rachel fits the ideal of an obedient and submissive woman; She is a daughter who has to please her father's will because: 'as her father's daughter she must be in some sort prepared to entertain them [Helen and Ridley].' (VO, 7) In the first chapter one notices that Helen, Ridley and Mr. Pepper are having a conversation, but later on it is only Mr. Pepper and Ridley who are talking. The fact that Rachel does not take part in the conversation and that Helen is removed from it suggests that men not only are not interested in women's opinions, but they also ignore their presence as the narrator tells the reader in chapter one:

Each of the ladies, being after the fashion of their sex, highly trained in promoting men's talk without listening to it, could think —about the education of children, about the use of fog sirens in an opera— without betraying herself. Only it struck Helen that Rachel was perhaps too still for a hostess and that she might have done something with her hands.

"Perhaps—?" She said at length, upon which they rose and left, vaguely to the surprise of the gentlemen, who had either thought them attentive or had forgotten their presence. (VO, 10)

This scene foreshadows the patriarchal values that the novel will deal with. Moreover, the fact that Helen is surprised by Rachel's stillness leads the reader to consider the character of Helen to be different from men and also from Rachel. As the reader goes on reading, s/he realizes that Helen will play a key role in Rachel's life for she will help her to unveil ideas and facts that have been eliminated from her upbringing and education in order to keep her *pure* and *innocent* as the 'model of the angel' required. This lack of information about facts that take place in real life can be seen in Rachel's reaction after Richard kisses her. When the narrator describes that after the kiss 'she did not feel exalted, but merely uncomfortable, as if she and Richard had seen something together which is hidden in ordinary life,' (VO, 67) it is clear that Rachel is not familiar with the feeling of passion and desire existent between men and women. It is very likely that her father and aunts have eliminated the existence of sexual desire so as not to corrupt her *purity* and *innocence*.

On the other hand, Swanson (1995) reads Richard's kiss as a 'sexual violation' and she suggests that it 'functions in Rachel's psyche and in the novel as a whole as a synecdoche for rape and sexual abuse of women.' (290) However, even though it is true that the act could be considered a way of abuse because Richard is the one who takes her in his arms and kisses her, to understand the kiss only as an abuse might not be completely right if one takes into account that the narrator claims that 'something wonderful had happened.' (VO, 67) that she 'liked him,' and that she 'liked being kissed.' (VO, 73) Therefore, we infer that for Rachel the kiss unveils the existence of passion and desire, and the fact that she has experienced it not only makes it become part of her reality. But it also enables her to understand other real things of life such as the fact that those women in Piccadilly are prostitutes. (VO, 72) Even though Rachel says to Helen that she was first 'terrified', when she acknowledges that she did like it, she is disrupting the model of 'the Angel in the House' and opening her eyes to reality. Thus, one infers that it is through her relationships with other people that Rachel carries out her search for identity and fights against the model. Each of the characters tries to show Rachel her/his reality and then she decides which one is going to be true for her. Taking into account this, Froula (1986) is right in claiming that:

Clarissa and Richard play a very special role in Rachel's education. Clarissa invites Rachel into conventional womanhood as she will later invite Lily Everit; playing

mother to the motherless girl, she makes Rachel desire to follow her example. (1986: 71)

It is what Froula calls 'conventional womanhood' that Rachel does not want for her destiny and what she is going to fight against during her life. The struggle against this convention can be observed in the evolution of the character of Rachel throughout the novel: she starts as a naive and obedient woman and later on she begins to experience life and to express her likes and dislikes, i.e. to express her own opinion. Thus, in chapter three the established social rules tell the obedient daughter that: 'Again, the arrival of the strangers made it obvious to Rachel, as the hour of dinner approached, that she must change her dress.' (VO, 33) Those established rules are the same ones that make Clarissa write about Helen that 'only she dresses, of course, in a potato sack, and wears her hair like a Liberty showgirl's.' (VO, 41) From these sentences one assumes that a woman's appearance was of great importance for daughters and wives of Victorian men, and it seems that these women knew when they had to change their clothes. But Rachel does evolve throughout the novel while trying to look for her own identity, and for example, the expression of her dislike for Austen when talking with Clarissa could be considered to be a way of moving away from the ideal of womanhood that Clarissa proposes her.

On the other hand, Richard Dalloway represents the English politician and patriarch willing to tell his truth to Rachel but unable to understand her. Thus, he says to her:

I never allow my wife to talk politics... For this reason. It is impossible for human beings, constituted as they are, both to fight and to have ideals. If I have preserved mine, as I am thankful to say that in great measure I have, it is due to the fact that I have been able to come home to my wife in the evening and to find that she has spent her day in calling, music, play with children, domestic duties .(VO,56)

But when Rachel tries to explain her viewpoint to Richard, he cannot understand her, and in general the communication can be perceived as a failure. Bishop (1981) suggests that:

One notices throughout Woolf's writings a constantly fluctuating regard for language: it strikes her by turns as an almost magical force, as a mere necessary evil, and as a betrayer of life. These disparate attitudes inform *The Voyage Out*, and the work is both a groping exploration on Woolf's part of the connection between reality and language, and a dramatic portrayal of the corresponding exploration in the growth of the central character. (3)

Therefore, if we assume that language is closely connected to reality and that Rachel has been deprived of real facts in life, it makes sense that neither she is able to understand Richard nor Richard can understand what she means to say. This is not the case when Rachel is talking with Clarissa. Even though Rachel cannot find the way to finish the sentence, 'it seemed that Mrs. Dalloway was able to understand without words' (VO, 52). This difference in succeeding to communicate something without words suggests that the use of language is mainly part of the masculine world that Rachel and Clarissa do not belong to. Moreover, if we consider Marcus's suggestion that 'language and culture belonged to *them* [men],' (1981: 1) it is not surprising that whereas the communication of these two different 'worlds' is seen as a failure, both women belonging to the same world can communicate because they lack the same language and culture that men possess though they have their own.

Consequently, this inability to communicate prevented women from taking part in the masculine world and set 'the house' as the place to be for daughters and wives. Moreover, since men were the only ones who were allowed to think and communicate ideas, they were the ones who had the power to take the decisions in society. Therefore, it is not surprising that Richard Dalloway expresses that he does not allow Clarissa to talk about politics, since

for him, it is the existence of the Victorian ideal telling Clarissa not to think, and limiting her duties to marriage and motherhood that enables him to have his own ideals. What Woolf is doing in *The Voyage Out*, as Froula suggests, is creating 'a fictional world in which the plot of marriage and motherhood governing female destiny might itself be challenged and changed;' (1986: 67) i.e. she is breaking the Victorian ideal of 'the Angel in the House.' This idea suggests that the ideal of 'the Angel in the House' stems from a patriarchal state whose values provide men with power over women. Bearing in mind this, we assume that in order to destroy the ideal it is necessary to put an end to the patriarchal state. This latter aspect is further argued by Woolf in her book-length essay published in 1938, *Three Guineas*. In this essay she develops the idea that the patriarchal state has placed women as 'outsiders' denying them the same rights that men had. As outsiders, women could not participate in the real world: the public world.

2. From the Outside of Society

From the idea that the world is divided into two different worlds: the public and the private, and that in one of them 'the sons of educated men work as civil servants, judges, soldiers and are paid for that work; in the other world, the daughters of educated men work as wives, mothers, daughters— but are they not paid for that work? (TG, 176) one infers that Woolf is doing two different things. On the one hand, she is underscoring that women's roles were not valued by men. On the other, she is pointing out to the fact that women's place has always been the house (the private) and therefore, they were not part from society (the public). Woolf suggests that the model of the Victorian 'Angel in the House' stems from a patriarchal state that also accounts for the existence of differences between men and women.

One of the differences between men and women can be observed in their views on the feeling of patriotism. After looking at biographies of different men, Woolf concludes that patriotism is one of the reasons that have led men to war. By questioning if the feelings of love, pride and blessing that Lord Chief Justice of England expresses towards England⁴ are true for women, she is suggesting that war and patriotism are masculine feelings that women fail to understand. She adds that any woman would realise that 'her sex and class has very little to thank England for in the past; not much to thank England for in the present; while the security of her person in the future is highly dubious.' (TG, 233) According to Woolf, these differences in views between men and women are closely connected to the fact that English fathers' investments on their daughters' education have been very little in comparison to the money which was spent on their sons. Whereas men had access to university education ('the paid-for culture') women could only learn how to write and read their own language ('the unpaid-for culture.' [TG, 203]) These facts point to the idea that a daughter's destiny was to become a wife and a mother dependant on her husband. This difference in education makes them differ in views as Woolf suggests that:

It would seem to follow, then as an indisputable fact that "we"—meaning by "we" a whole made up of body, brain and spirit, influenced by memory and tradition— must still differ in some essential respects from "you", whose body, brain and spirit have been so differently trained and are so differently influenced by memory and tradition. (TG, 132)

This difference in the kind of influence that both sexes have had is already present in the character of Rachel when the narrator says that 'she had been educated as the majority

⁴ Lord Chief Justice of England Hewart at the banquet of the Society of St George at Cardiff: "Englishmen are proud of England. For those who have been trained in English schools and universities, and who have done the work of their lives in England, there are few loves stronger than the love we have for our country... It has been said that an Englishman's Home is his Castle. The Home of Liberty is in England... Yes, we are greatly blessed, we Englishmen." (TG, 123)

of well-to-do girls in the last part of the nineteenth century were educated.' (VO, 26) It is quite obvious that there is a difference in education between men and women, since the narrator specifies that it was an 'ordinary' education for someone of her sex. However, as it was already noted in the previous section, due to the fact that Rachel has been brought up following the Victorian model of the Angel, she lacks experience of life and she does not know anything about relationships among people. It might be fair to state that allowing Rachel (and the rest of women) to have a 'paid-for culture' would have made a difference in her life. For example, rather than getting to know a girl who was 'a religious zealot.' (VO, 7) university level education would have probably provided Rachel with facts that take place in real life.

On the other hand, Woolf argues that the values that have been taught to the sons of educated men have not been useful at all, i.e. education has been a failure. She suggests that 'education far from teaching the educated generosity and magnanimity makes them on the contrary so anxious to keep their possessions, that "grandeur and power"' (TG, 151) that if men are asked to share them, they will probably resort to violence. What Woolf assumes is that as education was built within a patriarchal society with its patriarchal values of force and possessiveness; the connection with the 'paid-for culture', the male sex and war is undeniable. That is the reason why MacKay (2003) argues that those women who were granted with an 'unpaid-for culture' are 'exempt from male militarism' and, thus, their views could be considered as 'an antidote to the "paid-for culture" that has glorified all the vices that have led to war.' (137) However, Woolf suggests that even women were educated 'consciously and unconsciously in favour of war' and that 'her unconscious influence was even more strongly perhaps in favour of war.' (TG, 160) Woolf posits that an 'unconscious loathing for the education of the private house;' (TG, 160) i.e. what we would call the struggle against 'the Angel in the House', led the daughters of educated men to help in hospitals, to persuade young men to fight and to praise those who were wounded. For her, the daughters 'would undertake any task however menial, exercise any fascination however fatal' (TG, 161) because it was a way of running from the ideal of 'the Angel'. Thus, it seems that Woolf exempts those women who helped in the war and put the blame on 'the Angel in the House' that was unconsciously pushing them to help in the war. However, what is clear is that she argues that another kind of education is needed in order to give rise to 'the new college, the cheap college.' (TG, 155) This education would enable the existence of a free society 'not parcelled out into the miserable distinctions of rich and poor, of clever and stupid; but where all the different degrees and kinds of mind, body and soul merit co-operated.' (TG, 156) The proposal of this new college defends the idea that every mind and body are welcome to be part of it, which means that women do not have to be cloistered in their houses and rather than angels, women become individuals who are at the same level than men in society. Obviously, placing women on the same level as men means that there is no room for patriarchal values in society.

Education was not the only field that women did not have access to. According to Woolf, another fact that prevented women from being part of the public world was that during the nineteenth century the only profession available to them was marriage. (TG, 160) Fathers expected their daughters to depend on them until they got married as Woolf demonstrates with the case of Sophia Jex-Blake. When Sophia tells her father that she has been offered to be paid for a tutorship, her father argues that she cannot accept it because 'it would be quite beneath' her and he adds that her case is totally different from those men that she mentions. (TG, 189) Moreover, not only does he take for granted that she will get married, but he adds that she will do so as long as it is of 'his liking'. The fact that 'all the professions for which a university education fitted her brothers were closed to her' (TG, 146) reminds us that university education plays a key role in order to enter professions. The case of Sophia's father depicts that the struggle was between daughters and fathers, i.e. between women and the patriarchal state. It was in the year 1919 when the Sex Disqualification Removal Act 'lifted various restrictions on women's access to professions and education'

(Hall, 2000) that women saw a different future for themselves. Since then, 'she need no longer use her charm to procure money from her father or brother' (132) because she could earn her own money providing her with the possibility to express her opinion. However, the search of equality between the sexes would take a long time.

Having discussed some of the main arguments in *Three Guineas*, it might be interesting to analyse how some of the differences between men and women that Woolf points out in her essay were already present in her earlier novel *The Voyage Out*.

3. *Three Guineas* in *The Voyage Out*

As it has been already noted in the previous section, women and men were not granted with the same kind of education. Apart from the fact that the narrator specifies the 'ordinary' education that Rachel had, there are other instances that show that women like Rachel did not have the same opportunities that men had. In chapter sixteen not only does Terence Hewet show his awareness of the presence of the patriarchal values in society, but he also argues as Woolf does in *Three Guineas*, that it is due to this patriarchal state that women did not have access to university education and professions:

I believe we must have the sort of power over you that we're said to have over horses. They see us three times as big as we are or they'd never obey us. For that very reason, I'm inclined to doubt that you'll ever do anything even when you have the vote... It'll take at least six generations before you're sufficiently thick-skinned to go into law courts and business offices. Consider what a bully the ordinary man is... the ordinary hard-working, rather ambitious solicitor or man of business with a family to bring up and a certain position to maintain. And then, of course, the daughters have to give way to the sons; the sons have to be educated; they have to bully and shove for their wives and families. (VO, 196)

Even though Terence seems to be against the patriarchal state and he considers himself to be different from the rest of men (VO, 197) the fact is that he, as a man, is part of that society. This idea becomes clearer when he expresses 'I'd like to be in England' (VO, 194) and Rachel does not understand his feeling. The reasons why Rachel does not share the homesickness that Terence feels can be found in *Three Guineas*. When Woolf says that if a woman calls into question what England has done for her, she will realise that "'throughout the greater part of its history [it] has treated me as a slave, it has denied me education or any share in its possessions'" and she as an outsider will end up thinking that "'in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.'" (TG, 234) Thus, as Woolf suggests in *Three Guineas*, Rachel as a woman does not share the feeling of Englishness that Terence feels. Johnson (2001) argues that when Terence describes England to Rachel 'so that she became very anxious to go back to England,' (VO, 282), he "sets about constructing the English identity that Rachel so clearly lacks. Rather than enhancing her free and open exploration of identity, Terence helpfully tries to provide his fiancée with the very boundaries beyond which she struggles to define herself." (79)

Considering that Rachel lived a cloistered life with her aunts who brought her up following the model of 'the Angel in the House,' it might be fair to state that the rejection of Englishness helps her to fight the patriarchal values that have established the Victorian ideal that women had to follow. But as noted in the previous section, these patriarchal values stem from men who have set them in order to have power over women and benefit themselves. In Woolf's novels 'the primary villains are fathers, brothers and husbands' (Schlack, 52) who keep their daughters, sisters and wives in the house and exclude them from the public world. In fact, when one analyses the character of Willoughby Vinrace considering the narrator's and Helen's descriptions of him, it seems that Rachel's father does look like a villain as Schlack suggests. Firstly, his physical description as a 'tall burly man'

with a face described as a 'large framework' might lead the reader to think of Willoughby in terms of superiority and dominance over others. This becomes clearer when the narrator describes the scene when Willoughby 'still holding Helen's hand, he drew his arm round Rachel's shoulder, thus making them uncomfortably close'. Moreover, when Helen analyses him she ends up blaming Willoughby 'of nameless atrocities with regard to his daughter, as indeed she had always suspected him of bullying his wife.' (VO, 17) Schlack points out that 'the use of a word like *atrocities* makes this father-daughter relationship a battlefield' (53) as Woolf would similarly argue in *Three Guineas* that 'the struggle with her own father [Sophia's Jex Blake father] was over.' (TG, 189) Thus, in order to fight against the imposed ideal of 'the Angel in the House' that Rachel's father wants her to follow, she decides to be herself (VO, 75) and go to the Ambroses' villa so that her father will not be able to bully her.

On the other hand, even though she gets engaged to Terence, the fact that she dies before actually marrying him might be considered as the accomplishment of her search of identity that she will probably lose if she marries him because of Terence's manly qualities. As noted before, Terence, as a man, is part of the patriarchal state and even though sometimes he seems 'to have something of a woman in him' (VO, 234) he cannot avoid thinking as a patriarch. This fact can be observed in the moment when after Rachel suggests Terence to write music rather than novels, Rachel 'became less desirable' for Terence 'as her brain began to work.' (VO, 195) This feeling suggests that Terence might consider Rachel to be more attractive or suitable for him if she does not show that she has a mind of her own,⁵ this implies that to a certain extent, Terence seems to want her to fit the ideal of the Angel that she is fighting against. For this reason DeKoven (1991) argues that 'as it turns out, death is Rachel's only road to freedom—her voyage out of cultural and textual constraint must also be a voyage out of life;' (128) This means that even though it is the phantom of the patriarchal values that leads her to death, Rachel's death can be interpreted as the triumph of her identity over 'the Angel in the House' that she has been struggling with.

4. Conclusion

The analysis carried out in this essay has enabled us to look at the way in which Woolf disrupts the Victorian ideal of 'the Angel in the House' in both her fictional and critical writing. *The Voyage Out* has provided us with the consequences of raising a girl following the patriarchal values whose aims consisted of keeping a woman's innocence and purity of both, mind and body. Through the presentation of different characters like Richard, Clarissa, Helen, Terence and their attempts to have influence on Rachel, Woolf enables the main character to evolve and take decisions that will help her to destroy the model of the Victorian angel and build up her own identity and ideals. Moreover, the presentation of male characters such as Rachel's father, Richard and even Hewet, allows Woolf to suggest that men's power over women prevented them to be active individuals with their own minds and placed them outside the society as she also argues in *Three Guineas*. Woolf claims that it is necessary to put an end to the patriarchal state since for her the patriarchal state not only has led to the establishment of women and men in two different worlds, but it has also made them have different views, experiences and possibilities that resulted in a world of inequalities. Thus, women's destinies involved becoming submissive wives rather than being able to study at university and earn their own lives. By calling for an end to a state of inequalities between the sexes, Woolf is destroying the ideal of 'the Angel in the House' that has led to Rachel's death in *The Voyage Out*.

However, even though Woolf declares herself against the patriarchal values, given that she does make a direct connection between masculinity and dominance, it might be interesting to think about whether she suggests that men can disassociate themselves from that feeling of superiority that leads Terence to consider Rachel less attractive when she

⁵ From "Professions for women": 'Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own.' (p.285)

chooses to express her opinion. In other words, is Woolf suggesting that these masculine ideas of superiority have become so rooted in them that they cannot avoid feeling them? This might be another interesting issue to be explored in Woolf's works.

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