

The Struggle for Individual Freedom: Examining Gender, Sexuality, and Identity in *Orlando: A Biography* by Virginia Woolf and *Odour of Chrysanthemums* by D. H. Lawrence

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Abstract — The current paper focuses on the topic of achieving individual freedom by exploring the problems of gender and identity in Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography*, and D. H. Lawrence's story *Odour of Chrysanthemums*. Placing the topic in the Modernist period of English literature, the authors' aim is to provoke both Modernist society and our contemporaries as well by proposing an issue for further examination. The main characters have to face social boundaries and expectations, challenge the limits of their minds, and search for their selves. They go through life obstacles; the authors reveal Orlando's and Elizabeth's relations with others as essential for their consciousness development. Orlando's change of gender is a really innovative topic proposed by Woolf; Lawrence's challenging the societal norms questions working class people's happiness in life in the time of the period of industrialization. After all, what can be concluded on both literary works is that it appears that ultimate freedom cannot be achieved in a suppressive world, but striving for it should never stop, because it means self-development.

Keywords—gender, identity, society, individualism, freedom

1. FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND SELF-IDENTITY IN THE MODERNIST CONTEXT

The Modernist Period in England (20th century) was marked by numerous social, cultural, and literary transformations due to the processes of industrialization and urbanization, and the aftermaths of World War I. This period breaks away from traditional ways of thinking the world, social rules and norms. Community no longer needed old values, but had to strive for the new, the unknown. This was seen in all aspects of life, including art and literature. Most literary works centered the individual, rather than society, including their needs, their advances and falls of character, their emotions, and real selves. Great thinkers, philosophers and psychologists had their influence upon Modernism. The viewpoints and works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud were outstanding. Prominent literary writers stood out, such as T. S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, David Herbert Lawrence, James Joyce, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf and others. Literary works delved into experimentation with form, structure, thematics, and viewpoint, setting some major themes as the consciousness of the individual, alienation, and search for identity.

The current essay examines two thought-provoking literary works: *Orlando: A Biography* by Virginia Woolf,

and *Odour of Chrysanthemums* by D. H. Lawrence, through the theme of the individual's right for freedom of choice of gender, sexuality and identity. Woolf and Lawrence approach the tension between individuality and societal norms in different ways. Orlando is a character who definitely breaks away from traditional social structures. The very Modernist trait of character of alienation is present here: "[...] Orlando naturally loved solitary places, vast views, and to feel himself for ever and ever and ever alone" (Woolf, 1928, p.5) [1]. The very fact that he freely switches between genders in a period of around three hundred years proves that there are no boundaries to human mind and freedom of soul. Orlando searches for his true self and comes to understand the advantages and disadvantages of being both male and female. Although the text "has within it characteristics belonging to the movement of magic realism" (Sicilia, p.2) [2], there is no doubt that the topic it explores is essential for our society. On the other hand, D. H. Lawrence's character Elizabeth Bates is an embodiment of a person deprived of free choice, having had to follow social structures. The reader could grasp the very tension between her willingness to express her true self freely, and the fact that society expects her to follow traditions in one patriarchal model of life: "It is a scandalous thing as a man can't even come home to his dinner! If it's crozzled up to a cinder I don't see why I should care. Past his very door he goes to get to a public-house, and here I sit with his dinner waiting for him——" (Lawrence, 1911, p.9) [3]. Lawrence, such as Woolf, is interested in the inner world of the characters, but in this literary work of his, he explores the internal "battle" of the woman, who faces one quite old-fashioned society with conservative norms. Of course, she is part of it, because she finds it her duty to act as it is thought to be acceptable. While Woolf presents Orlando as a free individual, for whom it is hinted in the beginning of the novel that he has a taste for different types of flowers (and here "flowers" could be examined as a metaphor for "people of different sex"): "For Orlando's taste was broad; he was no lover of garden flowers only; the wild and the weeds even had always a fascination for him" (Woolf, 1928, p.9) [4]. He at first finds it a bit strange to find himself turned into a woman after some days' sleep, but later he accepts this new self.

Therefore, it is to be said that identity and freedom of oneself are very clearly examined by the two authors, having in mind the new laws of Modernism. Individuality

is seen as something wanted, cherished, and yet, sometimes not easy to achieve.

2. GENDER - FLUIDITY OR FIXITY

Modernists skillfully depicted 20th century life. Virginia Woolf's innovativeness and interesting way of examining the world through her characters makes her one of the most prominent writers of the time, part of the Bloomsbury Group. This is a gathering of writers, artists and intellectuals, who stand against Victorian morality and behavioral norms and traditions, examining provocative topics such as interpersonal relations, gender, sexuality, feminism, a person's self, and family life. Other outstanding figures are part of this gathering, including E. M. Forster, Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf (Virginia Woolf's husband), and others. Their influence on literature is enormous. Other literary figures of the period explore these topics as well, which is another proof that society needed change and new values.

But let's begin with *Orlando: A Biography* by Woolf and the fate that befalls him. We witness the development of this character in a period of around 300 years (from the end of the 16th till after the beginning of the 20th century). Although it is a long period of time, Orlando ages only thirty-six years of age. He is part of the Court of Queen Elizabeth; then he falls in love with a Muscovite woman, gets disappointed, "explores" the lower class society, but the major event which is the aim of the topic is his shifting of gender, which he starts accepting as normal and even changes into male or female clothes on different occasions. First of all, let me make it clear what the typical understanding of gender is: "[it is] the state of being male or female typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones). To put it clearer, gender does not correspond to the sex (being male or female biologically speaking) of the person rather to the cultural and social characteristics of a person, for example: the clothes and manners" (Sicilia, p.3) [5]. In other words, Orlando, despite being first described as of male sex, is given the opportunity to change his gender numerous times on different occasions. What is more, even before the reader comes to this point of the text, they are given a hint of what is to follow:

"[...] a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity. The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish – coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person. Images, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in his mind [...] When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be—no woman could skate with such speed and vigour—swept almost on tiptoe past him, Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question. But the skater came closer. Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth

like that; no boy had those breasts [...]" (Woolf, 1928, pp.12-13) [6].

The Gods of Truth, Candour and Honesty and the Ladies of Purity, Chastity and Modesty visit Orlando while he is half-dead, half-alive, save him from real death, cast their veils upon him and what happens is the revelation of Truth! He does not die. He wakes up a woman, which metaphorically means that an individual cannot escape his fate; one cannot live a life denying his or her own self. Orlando has to endure this hardship in order to understand his real being. And it happens: the novel proposes the viewpoint that a person could have a few identities and one can live through all of them. Of course, it might be surprising that such an occurrence as shift of gender could happen, but it seems as if society and the main character himself gradually accept it: "The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove [...]" (Woolf, 1928, p.51) [7]. Thus, we may say that gender, as mainly presented in Woolf's novel is fluidity. Yet, there is a very brief example, where it is pointed that a woman is formed and regarded as such by society: a woman should spend time dealing with her outer appearance, should not decide on important matters, should keep her chastity, etc:

"She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled. 'Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires,' she reflected; 'for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature. They can only attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline. There's the airdressing,' she thought, 'that alone will take an hour of my morning, there's looking in the looking-glass, another hour; there's staying and lacing; there's washing and powdering; there's changing from silk to lace and from lace to paduasoy; there's being chaste year in year out... [...]' 'Better is it', she thought, 'to be clothed with poverty and ignorance, which are the dark garments of the female sex; better to leave the rule and discipline of the world to others'" (Woolf, 1928, pp. 58-59) [8].

A woman is shaped by others and their expectations, but Orlando feels free to move between genders, which is grasped as no intrinsic truth but social identity, and it makes him able to express his true self, which has no gender, but only understanding on the world.

This stands in stark contrast to the story *Odour of Chrysanthemums*, in which gender roles are completely and strictly fixed. D. H. Lawrence juxtaposes societal expectations to the inner world of Elizabeth (though in her mind and actions she is not entirely freed from them). What I would like to express is that, on the one hand, 20th century society expects that a woman should be inferior to her husband, should take care of the house, the children, tackle the domestic chores, etc.; on the other hand, Elizabeth, despite doing all these mentioned, tries to express her will, her emotions, and find her true self: "Don't they smell beautiful!" Her mother gave a short

laugh. “No,” she said, “not to me. It was chrysanthemums when I married him, and chrysanthemums when you were born, and the first time they ever brought him home drunk, he’d got brown chrysanthemums in his buttonhole [...] Eh, what a fool I’ve been, what a fool! And this is what I came here for, to this dirty hole, rats and all, for him to slink past his very door. Twice last week—he’s begun now——” (Lawrence, 1911, pp.10-11) [9]. Two things of importance are to be mentioned here: first – the symbolism of the flower: typically chrysanthemums are thought to bring good luck, being connected with long and happy life. It has protective and healing powers. Therefore, when we examine the life of the family and whether the flower’s symbolism represents reality, we might deny it, because the family is suppressed by industrialism, poverty and the uncertainty of the future. They live in a mining district. The setting of the story and the time of the year give the reader a feeling of deathliness and misery. Chrysanthemums are autumn flowers, and from a cultural point of view, autumn is connected with the death of greenery, with lethargy, losing of hope, and even death. These flowers have always been part of the family’s life. Even Elizabeth has some of it in her apron when the children realize that she is pregnant (it is a metaphor of the doomed child to live an unhappy life), and they are present when the father is brought home dead. Here Lawrence masterfully implies the connection between the flower and death: “There was a cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums in the room. Elizabeth stood looking at the flowers” (1911, p.19) [10]. Death is pre-determined in the poor minor’s family. The always drunk father Mr Walter Bates is marked by isolation, not caring much about the family, and he is later found dead in a cave-in. Therefore, we may gradually continue to the second major idea of the quote above: Elizabeth’s life does not seem a happy one. Her social role is fixed: she is a woman, she takes care of the children and their home, she is the one to make the fire. The father’s role is fixed as well: his place is either in the coal-mine or in the inn with the other males. Even the mother mentions that the boy resembles his father, which is connected with pre-determination of gender and social roles: “[...] you’re as bad as your father if it’s a bit dusk” (Lawrence, 1911, p.10) [11]. On the one hand Elizabeth is not content with this life; on the other hand, she has as if accepted this role and needs to fulfill her duties. One of her duties is the cleaning of the dead body of her husband:

“Elizabeth embraced the body of her husband, with cheek and lips. She seemed to be listening, inquiring, trying to get some connection. But she could not. She was driven away. He was impregnable. She rose, went into the kitchen, where she poured warm water into a bowl, brought soap and flannel and a soft towel. “I must wash him,” she said. [...] Life with its smoky burning gone from him, had left him apart and utterly alien to her. And she knew what a stranger he was to her. In her womb was ice of fear, because of this separate stranger with whom she had been living as one flesh. (Lawrence, 1911, pp.22-23) [12].

Nevertheless, Mrs Elizabeth Bates finds herself responsible for the preparation of the dead corpse. Jacques Derrida wrote excessively on the matter of death, tradition,

and responsibility. In his book *The Gift of Death* he says: “The gift of death would be this marriage of responsibility and faith” (1996, p6.) [13]. Elizabeth is searching for her self, but she is bound to traditional societal norms and expectation, and that is why she is next to her dead husband, taking care of him. It sounds as if she is torn between social norms and willingness for freedom. What is more, there is another example of a female’s fixed gender role, represented by the role of Walter’s mother. She is the one who cries almost throughout the whole story, her tears fall near the corpse of her son – that is to say that she is mourning, but it is also a social norm for a mother to grieve about her kid. She compares him to “a lamb”, and says that he has died peacefully. Derrida also implies that death will be understood as something lacking tragedy only when proper care and faith for the future are present. But where do we find faith in this story of Lawrence? There are three brief sentences, which bring great meaning to the future of the family: “She turned to consider the children. At any rate she was absolutely necessary for them. They were her business” (Lawrence, 1911, p.17) [14]. It means that faith is not entirely lost and, although she feels the child in her womb a bit distant, due to the fact of the dead father and the prior alienation between the parents, she needs to take good care of her kids.

In other words, death in Lawrence’s story is presented in a binary way: typically it is an occurrence, which brings grief and tears, but the other assumption of it prevails – i.e. the death of Mr Walter is the re-birth of Elizabeth’s self. One quotation proves it: “Elizabeth turned without answering, though she strove to weep and behave as her mother-in-law expected. But she could not, she was silenced. [...] peace sunk heavy on her heart, she went about making tidy the kitchen. She knew she submitted to life, which was her immediate master. But from death, her ultimate master, she winced with fear and shame” (Lawrence, 1911, p.25) [15]. She finds herself at peace now, but she would not forget that death is part of life, and one should be cautious of one’s deeds while alive.

To summarize, both literary pieces center the topic of gender: in *Orlando: A Biography* Virginia Woolf defines it as fluidity, as something which cannot be fixed; something which takes forms, changes clothes, changes places of being, while Lawrence’s story depicts gender as fixity – i.e. a person is born one sex, grows up only as male or female, and the gender role comes with certain social expectations and duties.

2.1. FREE WILL VS. SOCIAL DETERMINISM. GENDER BINARY

Gradually, there we come to the point of discussion of free will and social determinism. Life in the English Modernism is highly influenced by socio-cultural factors, external forces, which provoke an individual’s understanding of the world and the self; psychology and the (sub) conscious are vital as well. Therefore, many people strive to follow their will freely, no matter what the social outcome would be, while others are suppressed by determinism, and cannot overcome this huge boundary. The topic of gender interests Modernists. As described earlier, Orlando chooses to follow his will and find his real self. Although first aimed to be just an imaginary piece describing Orlando’s life and struggles, it develops into a

text, delving into the depths of a human's thoughts, emotions and feelings. In Woolf's novel we notice free will as a characteristic trait of the main character. The main character as if "flies" through centuries, witnessing changes in the world and the people. He searches for the essence of his real being, and comes to the conclusion that he feels comfortable as both male and female. It is true that he continues to love women, but accepts his own changes quite quickly. "Even after Orlando's actual sex change, he continues to switch between clothes of both genders. This motif functions in the novel to emphasize the similarities between men and women, despite the different clothes society would have them wear. Once she has experienced what it is like to be a woman, Orlando does not want to give this up, yet she longs for the freedom she had as a man. Here, Woolf suggests that perhaps society is too rigid with regard to the roles it forces men and women to play. Because they are so alike underneath their clothes, the genders should be allowed more freedom in their actions" (Yazdani and Cheraghi, 2014, p.474) [16]. It is obvious that individuals are forced to "play" a social role. This is the idea of social determinism and gender binary. *Orlando: A Biography* implies this idea as well: "Women are but children of a larger growth...A man of sense only trifles with them, plays with them, humours and flatters them', which, since children always hear what they are not meant to [...]. A woman knows very well that, though a wit sends her his poems, praises her judgment, solicits her criticism, and drinks her tea, this by no means signifies that he respects her opinions, admires her understanding [...]" (Woolf, 1928, p.79) [17]. In this sense, the author tries to provoke the reader by proposing that the overall assumption of the century was that a woman lacked intellectuality. The very fact that she is compared to a child means that society does not accept females as equal to males. The passage is a critique to the superficial view that women are deprived from wit and intellectual qualities. This is why Virginia Woolf decides to depict the change of Orlando's gender, so that to show that a person can easily navigate a world of strict personal and social roles, and highlights the necessity of self-identity. Orlando is close to death, but he does not physically die. What dies are his restrictions. The day he wakes up a woman is the day of the symbolic burial of restrictions of his mind, which society placed. Thus, Derrida's theory on death as a gift applies in its symbolic meaning as follows: "How does one give it to oneself in the sense that putting oneself to death means dying while assuming responsibility for one's own death, committing suicide but also sacrificing oneself for another, dying for the other, thus perhaps giving one's life by giving oneself death, accepting the gift of death [...]" (Derrida, 1996, p.10) [18]. We may distinguish symbolism in the words "suicide", "sacrificing oneself", and "life". They all mean that the main character's old self metaphorically "dies" in order to give birth to the new one, the individually freed one, having no concrete gender, but switching between female and male on different occasions.

The concept of gender androgyny is typical for this novel. It signifies that a person should try to express themselves as they need to, regardless of what societal restrictions are. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the word "androgyny" as "the quality or state of being neither specifically feminine or masculine: the combination of

feminine and masculine characteristics: the quality or state of being androgynous" (Merriam Webster) [19]. Therefore, Woolf is really innovative in presenting the problem of social determinism and that people might overcome it through the search of their individuality. At the very end of the novel it becomes clear that Orlando marries a person called Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire. It is a very natural sequence of events; although Orlando earlier in the novel mentions that he is nature's bride, he comes to the conclusion that it is good if a person marries another and has a soul mate. Hence, Marmaduke, astonishingly, is of male appearance but was a woman before this transformation. It implies the idea that many people in society are in the search of their true identity.

David Lawrence's story comments on gender binary as well. Elizabeth is the one who takes care of the children, their home, the warmth and piece in the family, while many men (including her own - Mr Bates) are placed in either the coal - mine (or coming home from it), or in the inn, drinking and having fun. The man's duty appears to be his work, therefore providing for the family. But Mr Bates happens to spend some money on alcohol: "she laughed bitterly. "He gives me twenty-three shillings." / "Aye, it's a nice thing, when a man can do nothing with his money but make a beast of himself!" said the grey-whiskered man" (Lawrence, 1911, p.7) [20]. While other men are already at home, Walter is still missing. Elizabeth and her two children wait for him at the dinner table, but he does not appear. Gradually, Mrs Bates' anger turns into a revelation of her life. She realizes that she had not loved her husband. They shared one bed and have children, but there was lack of emotions, intimacy and understanding between the two. The very Modernist topic of alienation could be found in their relationship. It is as if the spouses were together so that only to fulfill their social role-i.e. to get married, to build a family, and to have children: "[...] it had become hopeless between them long before he died" (Lawrence, 1911, p.24) [21]. Elizabeth Bates realizes the illusion of her control over her own life and it is the first step towards the discovery of her identity and individuality.

Both literary works' characters encompass the problems of free will, social determinism and gender binary in a society which tries to suppress the individual, providing strict norms and laws. It is precise to say that one's faith depends on one's own perception of the self and the surrounding reality.

3.CONCLUSION

British Modernism is a period for gradual changes, placing the individual, his/her needs, emotions, and thoughts in the center of life. Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence are two prominent authors, whose characters are larger-than-life. *Orlando: A Biography* questions the constructions of sexuality, gender roles and freedom of choice by giving the main character the opportunity to become familiar with life as being of male and female gender. In contrast to this, Lawrence explores the life and relations in one working class family, the alienation between a husband and wife, and the realization that life in the context of the suppressive reality of industrialization is just existence. The character of Elizabeth Bates embodies the ideas of striving for self-expression and individualism,

but she is not ready to liberate her mind from societal boundaries. I decided to explore the similarities and the differences between the two characters mentioned above so that to show that Modernism evokes the need for freedom in people. This freedom could be expressed in different contexts and in particular ways. A further development of the topic is possible: the symbolism of death in both literary pieces can be centered (as I mentioned it briefly in this paper) and a comparison with the story *The Horse-Dealer's Daughter* by Lawrence may be related with the topic of social determinism; relationships between people of different classes could be pondered over (including *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by Lawrence) and the idea of free choice might be found in other works by these authors (for example *Mrs Dalloway* by V. Woolf) or other Modernists. It might be concluded that a change, no matter what type of, begins from within. A person's points of view and interpreting reality are of utmost significance for a new life.

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