

From Where Does She Speak?

Women's Artistic (Self)manifestations in Modernism: A Hermeneutics of Female Creativity

Małgorzata Holda

ABSTRACT This article investigates the rise of the feminine creative voice in the age of modernism through the lens of Virginia Woolf's fictional and nonfictional writings. Her invaluable insights into the long history of women's subjugation, as well as the fortunes of her contemporaries, provide a framework for an examination of how women established their position as capable members of society in the changing modern milieu. This essay examines Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, and her polemical essay *A Room of One's Own*, with a view to demonstrating modern women's path to creating their artistic identity. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity, I investigate women's unique way of (re) gaining their confidence and articulating their own voice during the process of self-formation. Following Woolf's lead, I consider their double status: as both an object of fascination in works of literature and a source of oppression in real life. I also use Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy of historically effected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichtes Bewusstsein*) to reveal the productive interpretative distance that can help us unravel the complexities of the historical and contingent nature of the development of the female artistic genius. An interrogation of women's imaginative self-manifestations opens the way to the discovery of crucial truths that pertain to the hermeneutics of female creativity.

KEYWORDS creativity; femininity; Gadamer, Hans-Georg; hermeneutics; modernism; Ricoeur, Paul; Woolf, Virginia

✉ Małgorzata Holda, University of Lodz, ul. Pomorska 171/173, 91-404 Łódź, Poland
✉ malgorzata.holda@uni.lodz.pl ☎ 0000-0003-3772-6297

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INTRODUCTION

The artistic self-manifestations of women in the context of modernism came as a radical response to the troubling history of subordination that had shaped them as lacking confidence in their creative capacities. Following in the footsteps of the great female writers of the Victorian era, who had rebelled against males' deprecating attitude to feminine creative art, Virginia Woolf, the greatest female modernist, called for a transgression of the simplistic understanding of the masculine/feminine dichotomy and the view of women as inferior in respect of their creative abilities. Fostering an androgyny that took the expressive form of a succinct yet powerful statement, Woolf asserted a more open, non-determinist, and multi-dimensional understanding of human creativity that includes both feminine and masculine characteristics as cooperating in the process of creation:

It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple: one must be a woman manly, or a man womanly. (Woolf 2016, 100–1)

Crucially, her inclusive attitude challenged the fossilized chauvinist way of thinking about creativity that had disavowed feminine capabilities.

The word “(fe)male,” another English word for a woman, subsumes the male component. This linguistic observation serves as a philosophically sound possibility for disclosing through language the relevance of the reversal of the patriarchal distribution of power between the two genders. The subversion of this deeply rooted scheme gives way to the notion that femininity is capable of nourishing masculinity. Such an idea looms heavily as a constructive argument in the ongoing debates about women's subjection. The stringent path followed by these female artists from submission to independence, from representation as an angelic, yet inferior and domestically bound, creature to a free human subject is illuminating. It sets into relief the challenges and potentials that are at stake in defying draconian perceptions of female creativity. In the age of modernism, the Victorian social model of submissive femininity gives way to the image of an intellectually, sexually, and socially liberated woman, capable not only of defending herself but of vindicating her rights (cf., e.g., Levenson 2011, 232–33). Imaginative creation becomes a vital space for women to express their inherent potential, enhanced by an increasingly gendered consciousness.¹ The oversimplified portrayal

1. On the complex relationship between gender and writing in modernism see, e.g., Devoken 2011.

of a woman artist as governed by impulsiveness, irrationality, affectation, and desire is replaced by one that honors her intellect, imagination, and intuition.² Moreover, women's imaginative power when it comes to writing inspires scholars to consider the specifically feminine element of that activity. Feminine writing (*écriture féminine*), with its inherent indeterminacy, fluidity, and multiplicity, is understood to be a pervasive presence in modernist aesthetics, regardless of the writer's gender (cf., e.g., Ledger 1997, 180).

This article focuses on two selected texts by Virginia Woolf that engage with the interlocking issues of women's creativity and social position: her non-fictional work *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927). They both thematize women striving for intellectual independence and financial self-sufficiency. A close reading of those texts will demonstrate how Woolf explores the sources of feminine creativity and the obstacles it encounters in the time of women's increased efforts to liberate themselves. Focusing on the figure of Lily Briscoe as the artist of the modern world (the female artist in *To the Lighthouse*) and interrogating Woolf's idea of the androgynous mind as the most prolific one, I aim to show women's inimitable role in the creation of the modern cultural milieu. Investigating Woolf's contribution to feminist philosophy, this essay acknowledges her hermeneutic sensibility. The selected texts reveal both the formative and *trans*-formative aspects of a woman's creative journey. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self emerges as an important aid in discussing the process of the creation of an artistic identity, while Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of historically effected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichtes Bewusstsein*) helps demonstrate the significance of the productive distance in interpreting texts that feature women's struggle for independence and for respect as authors and artists. Viewing Woolf's fictional and non-fictional writing through the prism of Ricoeur's and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics will enable us to flesh out her hermeneutic delving into the complexities of feminine creative potential.

LOOKING BACKWARD TO LOOK FORWARD: THE RISE OF THE MODERN WOMAN ARTIST

Women artists in the age of modernism speak from the deep recesses of their inherent creativity that has been controlled and disenfranchised by men for centuries. They echo the silenced and ignored voices of their

2. For an involving study of Woolf's creativity as exemplifying the role of woman's intuition and imagination, cf., e.g., Hague 2003, 207–75; see also Maze 1997.

mothers and grandmothers, gradually enter professions forbidden to them, and pave their way to financial independence (cf., e.g., Elliott and Wallace 2014, 65–8). The modern woman artist undergoes a massive *trans-formation*, seeing herself anew as a worthy human being. (Re)shaping her identity and self-creating, she pursues her career as an autonomous and innovative craft-woman.³ However, the trajectory of self-agency is often an arduous journey that remains in conflict with domestic limitations, financial worries, and the precepts of patriarchal society. The modern woman must speak from somewhere else than she has previously (cf. Crater 1996, 122), and the search for her own voice is a challenge. For women to self-recognize and self-create is a breakthrough. Woolf writes:

Ah, but what is “herself”? I mean, what is a woman? I assure, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe anybody that can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill. (Woolf 1931)

Woolf’s penetrating insights repeatedly transport us back in time to enable a better understanding of the reasons for and outcomes of women’s oppression. Looking backward, she inspires us to discern the behavioral patterns present in the past—not so distant for her. As a shrewd critic, she insists on saying that the treatment of women by men in the Victorian era still lingers on in her own times, and that the politics of sexist exclusion is a major struggle for women (cf., e.g., Black 2018, 5–6).

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf eloquently and astutely emphasizes the chasm between women as the source of inspiration for men’s creativity and the totality of their insignificance and subordination to men in real-life circumstances:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact, she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (2016, 54)

3. Any extensive research into modern British female writers and their self-creation involves taking account of the influence of Victorian and Edwardian women writers on them; see, e.g., Walls 2002; Fernand 2013; Lanser 1992.

Juxtaposing the idea of a female muse—the object of adoration and praise, exerting power upon the male imagination—with the image of woman’s powerlessness and unimportance in practical terms, Woolf evokes this shocking disparity as a continuous source of wonder, and perceptively indicates the inconsequentiality and object-like position of women throughout the centuries. Interestingly, the attitude of William Holman Hunt, a male Victorian artist, seems to anticipate Woolf’s modernist critique of the male’s questionable way of treating women: an attitude that is frivolous and irresponsible while nevertheless conveying admiration.

Women’s oppression as embodied in visual art can serve as a stimulus to (re)consider their struggle for intellectual liberation. Although created before the age of modernism, *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), a painting by the Pre-Raphaelite artist W.H. Hunt, is a classic example of a pictorial study of a female entrapped by man, a potent expression of women’s subjugation.⁴ The painting captures the bodily and mental control that a man exerts over a woman, which is emphatically indicated through the male’s flashy gaze. The picture thematizes the dual character of the female’s subordinate position—the poignancy of subordination, on the one hand, and the depth of her longing for independence, on the other. Portraying the physical closeness between the male and the female, Hunt emphasizes the man’s overpowering of the woman and his treatment of her as a beautiful possession. The woman’s springing from the man’s lap signifies her awakening to a liberated and individuated way of being, whereas the bird with a broken wing is thought to symbolize the woman’s moral plight.⁵ Staring at the sunlit garden ahead, the woman is reflected in the mirror behind her, which seems to evoke an entrancing moment of revelation. Encapsulating the Victorian woman’s desire to transcend the unbearable state of subjection to male dominance, this epiphanic moment prefigures women’s taking action to liberate themselves from oppression.

Hunt masterfully renders the woman’s subdued agency and the unspoken desire to self-determine her course of action. He offers a visual rendition of the interweaving paths of fragility, vulnerability, and agency.

4. The part of this essay that reflects on Hunt’s painting *The Awakening Conscience* is a reworked version of a fragment of a talk delivered at the International Conference “The People We End Up Being: Art, Ethics, and Agency,” 21–22 April 2022, Rijeka (online).

5. Interestingly, one can notice links with the rich bird symbolism in Kate Chopin’s novel of a similar title, *The Awakening* (1989), which potently explores women’s emancipation. The encaged bird evokes the mental imprisonment of Edna (the protagonist of the novel), her attempt to free herself from the limitations of the Victorian model of femininity and to break free from the oppressive expectations of society.

The woman's gaze expresses spiritual longing—her ardent desire to reach out for what she imagines but cannot experience, as she is overwhelmed by the masculine world. She does not have a wedding ring on her finger, and she is also not wearing a corset, which is indicative of the status of a mistress rather than a wife.⁶ Her social position is also hinted at by the image of a glove on the floor, which is suggestive of sexual exploitation. The picture could equally well have been entitled *The Awakening Consciousness*, given the closeness and/or commonality of meaning between “consciousness” and “conscience.”⁷ The woman is depicted in the moment when she gains awareness of her unfavorable state. This painting is a counterpart to Hunt's other picture, *The Light of the World* (1853/54). In a religious sense, *The Awakening Conscience* is an appropriate title. However, the picture encompasses more, and is primarily about an awakening of the self. One can think of the notion of *con-version*, a religious term, as embracing the idea of a new *version* of the self in a broader sense. The motif of conversion is a potent one: the image of the woman in the mirror connotes self-recognition and an acute sensation of lost innocence. The picture, however, suggests the possibility of change, symbolically expressed by the beam of light—the experience of a sudden epiphany.

Performing an exegesis of *The Awakening Conscience* enables us to draw upon this pictorial representation of women's double status as both source of inspiration and object of abuse as exemplary when it comes to evoking innumerable socially complex situations in which feminine creative fecundity penetrates masculine artistic performance while at the same time connoting a threat to male dominance. The male artist's unexpected perspective, consisting as it does in a thematization of women's position that remains in line with Woolf's standpoint, also brings to the mind the female visual artist—her sister Vanessa Bell and her taxing journey towards establishing herself as an artist.⁸ Like her sister's, Woolf's personal life serves as an example of the modern female artist searching for and manifesting her inimitable creative capability. The process of Woolf creating

6. For a thorough description of the picture see, e.g., “The Awakening Conscience: The Story of a Pre-Raphaelite Muse” (HENI Talks 2019).

7. Cf., e.g., the entry for “conscience” in the Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.

8. For an involving study of Vanessa Bell's new feminist art and the connections between the genesis of *To the Lighthouse*, discussed in the previous section, and Vanessa's establishing herself as an artist, see, e.g., Tickner 1999. An in-depth study of the interconnections between *To the Lighthouse* and the aesthetics of the circle of visual artists: Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Duncan Grant (Woolf's close friends), as well as her sister Vanessa Bell (mentioned above), can be found in Uhlmann 2010, 58–73.

her artistic self aligns with the trajectory of her relationship with her parents. The rejection of the father figure, Leslie Stephen, who proved to be a “tyrant, exacting, violent, demonstrative, self-centered, self-pitying,”⁹ precipitates her avant-garde forward-thinking. Woolf’s desire to shed the detrimental male impact upon her creativity is heightened by a similar wish when it comes to her relationship with the most important female figure in her life—her mother. Woolf’s metaphorical killing of her mother contributes to her emancipatory quest for her true self, which is also her genuine writing self.¹⁰ Her self-recognition as an artist encompasses memories and recollections masterfully rendered in memoirs and diaries, as well as her thoughts and feelings projected in her fictional imaginings. Throughout her literary career, the autobiographical elements intermingle with the fictional, building an exceptionally intriguing web, sharing the most intimate stirrings of the heart, and chronicling the bouts of creativity that resulted in her great fiction and periods of depression.¹¹

In her diaries, Woolf acknowledges the impact of her personal and artistic predecessors on her life. The genealogy of those influences prompts us to feel the need to investigate her family background, as well as the broader context of her literary ancestry throughout the ages.¹² In the (intro)spective and (retro)spective movements of attempting to discover her true self, Woolf recognizes herself as being formed in a hermeneutic dialogue between past and present. Remaining in this dialogue grants her the possibility of better understanding her artistic identity:

In *A Sketch of the Past*, towards the end of her life, Virginia Woolf was again considering her forebears and memorializing her past. She was wondering, “Who was I then? Adeline Virginia Stephen, the second daughter of Leslie and Julia Prinsep Stephen, born on 25th January 1882, descended from a great many people” (*A Sketch of the Past*: 65). She was “born into a large connection” (65), an extended family and their friends with Anglo-Indian, French and English roots and branches. The focus on Woolf’s pre-eminent place in twentieth-century literary modernism has meant that legacies from this “communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth-century world” (65) have

9. See the Virginia Woolf website, n.d.

10. For an account of the intersections of Woolf’s fictional and non-fictional writings and the symbolic killing of the mother, see, e.g., Holda 2020b, 52–66.

11. A detailed examination of Woolf’s literary career is offered, for instance, in Dalsimer 2008.

12. Woolf’s engagement with her literary past as surveyed in her major novels was examined, for instance, in De Gay 2006.

been insufficiently acknowledged. Woolf herself remains ambivalent about her lines of descent, exhibiting both nostalgia for, and affiliation with, her past; but simultaneously trying to reject, suppress and obscure its influence. She constructs an unresolved dialogue between her past and her present, figured through her divided persona “two people, I now, I then”. (75) (Dell 2015, 1)

Woolf is continuously attuned to the interplay of the past and present in the creation of her artistic self. The past is profoundly present in the present time, as nothing is forgotten but rather incorporated and worked through.¹³ She shows a deep awareness of the past as contributing to the illumination of what needs to be understood “now.” The self gains its inner knowledge in the back-and-forth movement that elucidates the path of its growth:

Woolf’s understanding that “we cannot understand the present if we isolate it from the past” is emphasized by her repeated images of cycles of time, “Slowly wheeling, like the rays of a searchlight, the days, the weeks, the years passed one after another across the sky” (*The Years*: 4). This trope both enacts continuity and recurs, with the interconnected figures of the lighthouse and the telescope, throughout her work, wheeling through *Night and Day*, “The Searchlight,” *To the Lighthouse* and into *The Years*. (Dell 2015, 134)

The significance of the voices of mothers, grandmothers, and great grandmothers in the creation of Woolf’s modern consciousness is not restricted to her natural forebears.¹⁴ Crucially, as a modern female artist, she owes much to Victorian and Enlightenment authors who suffered from the limitations imposed on them and made a brave stand against their confinement to domesticity and the role of a beautiful but muted Angel in the House.¹⁵ Suffering from mental and physical maltreatment, sexual exploitation, and a denial of fundamental rights in community life, those writers paved the way for modern, emancipated views regarding social injustice. Woolf’s

13. One of the remarkable examples of other women artists’ personal influence on Woolf is the art of her godmother, Julia Margaret Cameron, a famous Victorian photographer. We owe to Cameron many exceptionally poetic photographs of Woolf’s mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen, and Virginia. See e.g., Dell 2015.

14. Jacqueline Doyle (2009, 91) recalls the long history of citing one of the most famous lines from *A Room of One’s Own*: “A woman writing thinks back through her mothers.”

15. The phenomenon of the Angel in the House has been explored in a wide-ranging current of criticism: for attempts to address such an idea against the backdrop of domestic complexity and social class see, especially, Hoffman 2007 and Langland 1992; for a special emphasis on the unselfconscious, supportive patterns of love between Victorian women, as opposed to the formal and rather distant relationships between spouses, see Stansell 1987, 470.

feminist voice arose and grew against the backdrop of other female writers whose persistent fight for women's rights established them as undeniable feminist icons: Mary Wollstonecraft, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to name but a few.

Mary Wollstonecraft, deemed "Britain's first feminist,"¹⁶ was undeniably a very vivid example of an early feminist thinker. She was an extremely controversial figure, a radical thinker with subversive, challenging ideas about social order and sexuality. Her ferocious defense of the French Revolution's fight for a more equal society, expressed in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), was followed by *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft explored the situation of middle-class women who had been deprived of any formal education and were excluded from any significant roles in society. In her childhood, she suffered abominable abuse from her father. Her traumatic experiences of oppression and alienation shaped her character as a fighter against male dominance. Denied the privilege of education, Wollstonecraft educated herself through reading literature, history, and classical authors. Her unconventional way of living manifested itself in her carrying on an extramarital liaison and giving birth to her first child outside of marriage.¹⁷

The difficult path to autonomy that so clearly marked Wollstonecraft's life and literary output, making her a symbol as a tenacious fighter against women's maltreatment, is meaningfully echoed in Woolf's life and writings (see, e.g., Gordon 2004). Like Wollstonecraft, Woolf transcends the narrative of abuse, alienation, and the denial of equal rights. With her exceptional giftedness, she lets go of the murky past and creates her new self, contradicting the socially imposed role of a female at the mercy of a tyrannical male. In *A Sketch from the Past* (1939), she declares the necessity of liberating herself from male dominance. Sexually abused in her youth, she does not stop at the level of being victimized and determining her ego as wounded, but follows the classic path of the aggrieved self, attempting to free itself from the constrictions of the past. The personal transition from the suffering self to a mature writing self and fighter for women's position emerges as a source of illumination when it comes to conceiving narratives and essays about social and sexual emancipation.

16. See, e.g., the BBC website, n.d.

17. For Wollstonecraft's legacy in respect of Woolf see, e.g., Lee 2010, 103; Andrew 1994. A brief account of Wollstonecraft's remarkable life and importance for the development of feminism is offered, for instance, in: "Mary Wollstonecraft: 'Britain's first feminist'" (See the BBC website, n.d.)

Interestingly, Woolf does not blame men solely for inequality, but instead regards them as victims of the culture of male dominance. She points to women's silent acceptance of the idea that they should perform a passive and subordinate role. With agitation and passion, in her essay *Professions for Women* (1931), Woolf muses about women writers who must kill in themselves the Angel in the House, whose haunting presence deconstructs their creative capacities whenever they set themselves to write. The metaphorical figure of an angelic woman confirms the culture of submissiveness, puts on a show, and consents to a model of a beautiful, decorous creature whose creative capability is diminished and whose entire energy is used to comply with the will of her husband, father, and brothers, according to the master and slave scheme. The position of silent obedience and the fulfillment of male whims and desires is what Woolf ridicules and condemns. Beth Daugherty comments on the famous lines from *Professions for Women* expressing such an attitude thus:

...she [Woolf] claimed to have killed the Angel in the House early in her career as a book reviewer: "If I had not killed her, she would have killed me—as a writer." The Angel, a phantom more difficult to kill than any reality, holds women back, even when outward barriers have disappeared, because it is an internalized, insidious voice, seductively crooning, "whatever you say let it be pleasing to men" (*Speech* xxxi; *Professions* 288). (1991, 290)

Woolf's voice, reverberating powerfully at a time of seminal changes associated with the era of modernism, makes us fully aware of the reasons for women's subordinate position and their massive struggle to work against the pattern of defining themselves in an effort to please men. A closer look at Woolf's two works *A Room of One's Own* and *To the Lighthouse* will exemplify how women's creative work not only aspires to be an expression of their feminine capabilities but also serves as a genuine manifestation of their new voices and attitudes.

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN, WIRKUNGSGESCHICHTE'S BEWUSSTSEIN, AND THE ROLE OF PRODUCTIVE DISTANCE

Woolf's proto-feminist thought is explicitly articulated in her collection of essays *A Room of One's Own* (1929). This collection contests the limit-edness of a misogynist perspective upheld by her male contemporaries. In this thought-provoking, insightful, but also fabulously humorous text, Woolf famously states that a woman's financial security, and her having a place of her own, are the necessary conditions for sparking the feminine

creative impulse (cf., e.g., Smith 1995, 310–27). Woolf's landmark piece of writing paves the way for the acknowledgment of the irreplaceability of the female artist's voice in the age of modernism. At the same time, its reach extends beyond the age of modernism and is highly relevant to women of subsequent periods in their daily struggle for a space in which to be able to be creative and thrive (cf., e.g., Hekman 1991; Hague 2003; Goldman 1998). This special creative space is symbolically encapsulated in the word "room."

Woolf picks up on women's voices that preceded hers, and though not a revolutionary like Mary Wollstonecraft, her opinions are those of an influential writer who argues that women are not genetically inferior to men. It is the external and unfavorable circumstances, and mostly the fact that women have been denied education, that have made them painfully silent, disadvantaged and lacking in power (cf. Winterson 2021). In the first place, Woolf is concerned with women's position as writers, paying attention to the silencing or even suffocating of their voices.¹⁸ With witty criticism, she ponders women's enforced anonymity and the absurdity of men expecting women to remain a mere reflection of the male genius:

It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century. Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus, they did homage to the convention, which if not implanted by the other sex was liberally encouraged by them (the chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of, said Pericles, himself a much-talked-of man) that publicity in women is detestable. (Woolf 2016, 49)

Woolf, a courageous social thinker, is also deeply aware of reality's contingency while hermeneutically acknowledging that it is not objective but rather dependent upon the circumstances of one's world. The Gadamerian notion of historically effected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichtes Bewusstsein*) (Gadamer 2013, 285–303),¹⁹ which potently expresses the fact that objective reality does not exist but is contingent upon historical context,

18. To explore the intricate connections between feminist thought and modernism, see, e.g., Fernald 2013; Lyon 1994; Lanser 1992; Ziarek-Plonowska 2012.

19. Gadamer famously says: "Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. Only in the multifariousness of such voices does it exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part. Modern historical research itself is not only research, but the handing down of tradition. We do not see it only in terms of progress and verified results; in it we have, as it were, a new experience of history whenever the past resounds in a new voice" (Gadamer 2013, 285).

sheds an important light on Woolf's understanding of male and female reality as dependent on history and deep-seated social patterns.

According to Gadamer, the chasm between the time of conceiving a literary work and its interpretation is a hermeneutically productive distance that furnishes a creative possibility of understanding. In the process of understanding, the past and the present are in continuous interaction (cf. Warnke 2003, 19–23). The gulf between the past and the present gives us

the opportunity to understand the events of the past from the perspective of the present situation and what has happened in-between is, hermeneutically speaking, the way of understanding, and it means an event of understanding the phenomenon in question in its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. (Wierciński 2022, 29)

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf engages the voices of nineteenth-century female writers as part of the modern feminist debate.²⁰ Woolf's interpretations of her famous female predecessors' temporally distant literary works are the site of a *sui generis* encounter between emerging feminist thought and her own sophisticated thinking, which opens up a possibility for understanding women's past oppression and their attempts to assert themselves through the prism of the modern struggle for recognition. The messages imbued in the narratives of women's subjugation shine forth with renewed power. The distance between the historical time of the creation of the texts by early feminists (Mary Wollstonecraft, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning) and Woolf's interpretative endeavor furnishes a creative opening to arrive at a better understanding of women's embittered striving for intellectual independence. Woolf's essay mediates between the versatile female writings that preceded hers and her own. In her critique of women's privation (in the sense of their having lacked, historically, privacy and autonomy), Woolf "absorbs" the voices of the past and reflects on how they bear on modern feminist literary and philosophical discourse. Satiated with feminist ideas, her writing reveals the bridge between women's historic intellectual subjection and what she experienced in her own time.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf sketches the fictional character of Shakespeare's sister—an example of a woman of genius whose imaginative powers are subdued by her life circumstances (Woolf 2016, 46–9). In so

20. Laura Marcus underlines the significance of the relationship between Woolf and feminism, dubbing it a symbiotic one (Marcus 2010, 142). She dwells on Woolf's implicit engagement with feminism in her fiction, as well as her overt involvement in women's movements, such as the Women's Social and Political Union and the People's Suffrage Organization (Marcus 2010, 145).

doing, she (re)creates a space for women artists to reclaim their autonomy in the face of the firmly rooted patriarchal conventions that belittle or disregard the feminine capacity for creation. Woolf encourages women to transcend their lack of confidence, oppose denials of their relevance, and heighten trust in the irreplaceability of their attitudes and convictions. She invites us to imagine Judith, Shakespeare's sister, a bright and observant woman who would be equal or rival to the greatest living playwright. She is intended to exemplify the mind of a female genius suppressed by men and hampered by domesticity:

She [Judith] lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. (Woolf 2016, 109–10)

Because of the traditionally masculinist system of recognizing human creativity, Judith is relegated to an underprivileged position, which ultimately leads her not only to the destruction of her creative capability but also spurs her suicide. Significantly, in Woolf's creative imagination, Judith is metaphorically resurrected:

Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again, she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. (2016, 109–10)

The reappearance of Judith, her taking on a body, figuratively expresses the revival of women's mental capability. In every woman, the rejuvenation of her unique, creative self is possible and marks the birth of a new woman—the modern woman.²¹

The image of a talented female counterpart to a male genius is supplemented in Woolf's essay with an assortment of other witty images. She argues that the continuing oppression of women, as well as their silent

21. This analysis of the fictional character of Judith is based on a fragment of my talk entitled "The Female Genius and the Narrative of Entrapment: Virginia Woolf's Story of Judith Shakespeare," delivered at the first "New Voices: Women in the History of Philosophy" Conference, 25–26 February 2022, Paderborn University (online).

agreement, can be explained through a mirror image—women play the role of a mirror, reflecting and magnifying the male self:

Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of our wars would be unknown . . . For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgment, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up, and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is. (Woolf 2020, 35–6)

Undeniably, men appear as empowered subjects due to women's continuous boosting of their supremacy and authority.²² If the male figure in the mirror is to "shrink," women must stop pretending and start telling the truth about their abilities. Woolf's metaphorical image of the unevenness in gender relations unravels an important truth: women should cease to play the role of a less capable sex. Woolf is in equal measure concerned with men's outrageous abuse of women's capacity for giving psychological support and with their compliance with the demands of the "over-inflated" male ego. She criticizes females for their ineffectiveness in opposing the psychology of domination.

Importantly, the reflection of the female self in the male gaze is shown by Woolf to be one that is abominably belittling with respect to the capabilities of women. The figure of Lily, the artist in *To the Lighthouse* discussed in the next section, fittingly exemplifies the intimidation and inner withdrawal that women experience under the judgment of the male gaze. However, Woolf encourages women to disentangle themselves from masculine dominance and express exactly what they think, either in writing or in any other form of art. In a brilliant and persuasive way, she alerts women to the need to exercise their freedom and fight for their security and self-sufficiency.

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE AS KÜNSTLERROMAN: NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND THE FORMATION (BILDUNG) OF CREATIVE CAPABILITY

Woolf's feminist stance is powerfully instantiated in her novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The proximity of the publication dates of the two texts (i.e.,

22. A cogent commentary on Woolf's employment of the mirror metaphor in explicating the specificity of the relationships between men and women can be found, for example, in Squier 1981, 272–88.

the novel just mentioned and the polemical essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) discussed in the previous section), as well as their evocation of a set of similar ideas, inspire us to study them in tandem. *To the Lighthouse* is a prime example of a *Künstlerroman* examining the complexities of a female artist's capacities;²³ of the intermingling paths of an ability and an (in)ability to confidently accommodate her creativity and engage in self-appreciation (cf., e.g., Viola 2000, 272). The novel examines the modern woman's urge to (self-)manifest her imaginative potential, which brings into play both the interior and exterior conditions that bear on becoming an artist. This specific coming-of-age, the route towards becoming an artist, is the pathway of *Bildung*—the (self-)educative and (self-)formative process wherein a woman's character undergoes meaningful changes. In the novel, Lily Briscoe, the woman artist, opposes the disparaging influences of despotic or insecure males who attempt to curtail and subjugate her creative powers.²⁴

Fittingly, in order to express the process of development and self-improvement *To the Lighthouse* adopts the form of a *Künstlerroman*. The latter, a sub-genre of the *Bildungsroman*, retains elements of the *Erziehungsroman* ("novel of upbringing") and the *Entwicklungsroman* ("novel of character development"), while sensitizing us to the most essential elements of the shaping of an artistic persona. The thematic scope of the *Künstlerroman* recalls the well-known pedagogical concept of *Bildung*,²⁵ which embraces a formative reality that goes beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge or skill and is expressed in two German words: *Erziehung* and *Ausbildung*. *Bildung* connotes the in-depth, all-embracing, and lifelong development that opens an individual up to the possibility of self-fulfillment. It entails a form of character development in which self-esteem and self-confidence contribute to true care for the soul and the formation of a solid personality structure (cf., e.g., Redfield 1994, 17–21). *To the Lighthouse*, like two other novels published by Woolf's contemporaries (James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*), can be identified as an autobiographical novel of education that evokes the theme of the formation of the creative persona. The imaginative account of the emergence of a young artist is what links the three novels together (cf. Bell

23. cf. e.g., Gurfinkel 2008, 555.

24. Antonia Losano discusses Woolf's creation of Lily, drawing attention to the woman artist as an important continuator of the Victorian woman painter. According to Losano, Lily's artistic activity is a powerful social and political tool, playing a similar role to one that was strongly admired by George Eliot in Lily's Victorian predecessors (Losano 2008, 19–22).

25. An interesting survey of the origin and history of the notion of *Bildung* can be found, for instance, in Horlacher 2015.

1976, 670). However, in contrast to the two other examples, *To the Lighthouse* explores the aesthetic development of a young woman.

Lily, the *Künstler*, is both modeled on Woolf's sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, and stands for the novelist herself.²⁶ She is a modern artist who struggles to overcome the sexist view of female ingenuity that lingers on as a remnant of the Victorian era and its patriarchal worldview.²⁷ The denigrating attitude to women's intellectual and artistic prowess is encapsulated in the narrative by Lily's male opponent, Charles Tansley, with his laconic, harsh, and overtly biased statement that "Women can't write, women can't paint" (*To the Lighthouse*, 35—hereinafter: TTL 35). Lily seeks and achieves her equilibrium as an artist through a sequence of re-configurations. Her initial self-doubt, magnified by the apprehension of a male gaze—being hyper-sensitive, she hesitates to reveal her pictorial work-in-progress to others, especially men, for fear of being sneered at—is redescribed, via the artistic distance she attains, in terms of something greater than a power-play between females and males. Her creative career gets refined and crystallized against the backdrop of the terrors of the Great War. In the concluding part of the novel, her primary disequilibrium, gradually transformed through a more detached attitude, evolves into a mature, rhapsodic self-confidence that allows her to bring her accomplishment to its rightful end: "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished" (TTL, 209).

Lily's incontestable role in the novel is to evoke feminine capability. However, Woolf provides a broader and deeper understanding of female creativity by conjuring up the figure of another artist—the artist of everydayness—Mrs. Ramsay, Lily's *alter ego*: someone whom she truly adores as both the mother figure to be loved and the role model impossible to follow. In the creation of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf embodies her mother, who died when Virginia was thirteen years old. The fictional representation of Woolf's mother is of great significance for both the exploration and the rejection via the literary imagination of the inequality of rights and exigency of empowering women:

Woolf fuses her personal, feminist, and artistic aims to restore her mother, a woman destroyed by the patriarchal myths of Mary and Eve, to her own

26. The mutuality of the influence between the two sisters: Virginia and Vanessa, is captured in, for instance, Dunn 1990; see also Sasseen 2018.

27. The study of the connections between Woolf's modern aesthetics (i.e., her fascination with post-impressionism) and feminism can be found in Goldman 2006; see also De Gay 1999.

identity.... Woolf empowers her mother, herself, her characters, and ultimately us; Woolf's feminist power removes the patriarchal myths strangling Mrs. Ramsay so that *there*, emanating from the page, is the power of a woman *as she is*. (Daugherty 1991, 289)

In the figure of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf comes to terms with her mother, towards whom she had an ambivalent attitude. The importance of the relationship between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay cannot be underestimated. Lily discovers and recognizes her creative power thanks to Mrs. Ramsay. The young artist's creativity is molded in the shadow of the older woman—the object of love. Lily meditates on her intimacy with Mrs. Ramsay and the passionate feelings that she harbors, attempting to understand her personality and to emulate the older woman:

But why different, and how different? she asked herself, scraping her palette of all those mounds of blue and green which seemed to her like clods with no life in them now, yet she vowed, she would inspire them, force them to move, flow, do her bidding tomorrow. How did she differ? ... She was like a bird for speed, an arrow for directness. She was willful; she was commanding (of course, Lily reminded herself, I am thinking of her relations with women, and I am much younger, an insignificant person, living off the Brompton Road). She opened the bedroom windows. She shut doors. (So, she tried to start the tune of Mrs. Ramsay in her head). (TTL, 34)

The relationship between the two women follows the pattern of a mentor–disciple relationship: Lily looks up to the more experienced artist, Mrs. Ramsay—the artist of the beauty of daily life (cf. Richter 2010, 2–3).

Significantly, the figure of Mrs. Ramsay has prompted many questions and critical assessments, with the latter ranging from considering her a sweet, saintly, and submissive female to construing her as someone who demands, and can exact, domination (Silver 2009, 259–61).²⁸ One might ask whether Mrs. Ramsay, idealized by Lily because of her loveable looks and impeccable personality and portrayed as the quintessence of femininity, is not an instance of the blend of femaleness and maleness that Lily pursues as central to her creative capabilities. If we take Lily's artistic pathway to resemble Woolf's then we can, in *To the Lighthouse*, isolate elements of education (*Erziehungsroman*) and development (*Entwicklungsroman*) that

28. An insightful examination of Woolf's complex relationship with her mother is offered in Lilienfeld 1977.

are characteristic of the *Künstlerroman*. Exemplifying the modern attitude, Lily responds to the call for women to self-educate and self-develop. She epitomizes the modern woman who would rather sacrifice her personal life than abandon her vocation for creation (cf., e.g., Wirth-Nesher 1977, 71–2). In the process of developing her perceptive skills, Lily builds her artistic self. The act of creating the family portrait that spans the novel provides, at the same time, the conduit for the recognition of Lily’s artistic identity and illuminates the process of spiritual and mental maturation.

Freudian criticism of Woolf’s *oeuvre* examines her deep awareness of the necessity to break with the mother figure that she cherishes long after her premature death, and distance herself from the father, whose apodictic attitude left a scarring impact.²⁹ The metaphorical killing of Woolf’s parents facilitates the empowerment of her writing capabilities. Like Woolf, Lily goes through a massive struggle to discover her creative self. The death of Mrs. Ramsay (Lily’s “substitute mother”) is a dramatic watershed dividing the life of a young artist into two halves. It is only when Mrs. Ramsay passes away that Lily’s creative expressivity takes on a mature form (cf., e.g., Crater 1996, 128). Re-configured in her attitude to her imaginative capacity after the death of the object of love, Lily undergoes other meaningful changes. The war is taking its toll and precipitates her intellectual maturity. Blossoming during the passing years, Lily’s creative capability reaches its peak at a moment that coalesces with a trip to the lighthouse, representing the fulfillment of the characters’ multifarious longings.

Evoking the process of picture making, Woolf captures the journey of self-recognition and self-confidence.³⁰ The portrait becomes the aesthetic locus of self-improvement. Lily’s artistic self is shaped over time, during which she becomes increasingly aware of her own creative capabilities. Her identity is formed not only in her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay but with

29. Cf., e.g., Smith 1995, 310–27; see also Munca 2009. Daniela Munca surveys feminist and psychoanalytic writings to discover the modelling of Lily upon Woolf’s own relationships with her parents. She explicates how Woolf portrays her own threat of the father’s killing her creativity in the relationship between Lily and Mr. Ramsay. She writes: “Lily fetches herself a chair, pitches her easel on the same spot she was standing on ten years ago and tries to put together ‘the wall, the hedge, the tree’ (Munca 2009, 147). According to Martin Gliserman, Lily sees Mr. Ramsay as “intrusive and voracious-infantile,” and the way she arranges her easel is a “barrier,” even if “frail,” which serves to protect herself from Mr. Ramsay (Gliserman 1996, 123–24). However, Lily cannot find that “relation between masses” which she “had borne in her mind all these years,” as Mr. Ramsay was “bearing down on her;” every time he approached, Lily could not paint, as he was bringing with him “chaos” and “ruin” (Munca 209, 282).

30. An investigation of the exigency of self-recognition in women’s intellectual emancipation is offered, for example, in Holda 2020a, 7–24.

other characters. The dramatic events for the Ramsay family, Andrew's death in the war and Prue's death during childbirth, featured in the novel's second part, "Time Passes," impact Lily's imaginative activity. With an increased awareness of finitude, Lily becomes capable of seizing the gist of her artistic performance. In Part Three, "The Lighthouse," she reflects on the events of her life from a position of hindsight and recognizes the central role of Mrs. Ramsay's death in the development of her artistic personality.

Having recourse to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self and, more specifically, his notion of narrative identity, can shed interesting light on the formation of the artistic self. Ricoeur differentiates between two elements of identity—*idem* identity (same, identical), which expresses the unchangeable reality of who we are, and *ipse* identity (one and the same), which accounts for the identification of self as it changes in time (cf. Ricoeur 1991a, 425–38; 1991b, 73–81; see also, e.g., Hořda 2018, 122–4). His dialectic of identity allows us to view everything that influences the self as formative and *transformative* and, thus, as constitutive of the self. Seen in this light, we can grasp more deeply the point that the maturation of Lily's artistic identity spans a range of changes, culminating in the concluding lines of the novel when she attains her vision. It is a process in which she retrospectively *re-vision*s her path of development and, thus, can better comprehend who she is. Lily's reexamination of her life, in which she gains inner knowledge of her artistic persona, amounts to the *ipse* constituent of her identity. It expresses the becoming of her artistic self. She continually strives to go beyond the first level of perception, which seems to be expressive of her femininity, and attain a more inclusive, perhaps androgynous approach:

She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner, subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general; becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children—her picture. It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. (TTL, 37)

As the narrative moves forward, Lily's persistent focus on the family portrait begets new possibilities of perception and comprehension. She is maturing as an artist while her picture is in progress:

It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses. And she began to lay on a red, a gray, and she began to model her way into the hollow there. (TTL, 119)

Woolf shows the paths of the creative process and of self-development as inextricably interwoven. The *ipseity* of Lily's subjecthood embraces not only her becoming an artist as realized over time, but also her maturation as a female in relation to another female character in the novel and the key figure in her life.

Haunted by the absence of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily remains in the shadow of her spiritual presence as she is profoundly attuned to the qualities represented by the person she loved and adored. The acutely felt bodily emptiness is filled with Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual presence in the act of painting, whose closure also marks a point of maturity in Lily's self-formation:

She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision (TTL, 145).

Lily's self, creatively open to the Other, under the influence of Mrs. Ramsay, is now raised to the high level of individuality that comprises her former and present self. At the novel's onset, Lily is introduced to the reader as an artist, but also, she is shown as becoming an artist. The *ipse* and *idem* constituents of human identity, explored by Ricoeur, seem to furnish an answer to the query about the high dynamic of Lily's maturation and, at the same time, the affirmation of her identity as being an artist already.

The evocation of the process in which female creative capabilities are formed is interwoven in *To the Lighthouse* with its focus on the theme of human subjectivity and the notion of androgyny. Significantly, Woolf's keen interest in feminine and masculine creativity overlaps with her engagement with the idea of a fluid identity, powerfully explored in the tale of an intriguing, imaginary hero, the eponymous character of *Orlando*, the novel published in 1928, only a year after *To the Lighthouse* and shortly before *A Room of One's Own*. Much ahead of its time, *Orlando* reveals that, despite the commonly acknowledged strict differentiation between two genders, a mixture of feminine and masculine traits can be discerned in each one of us readers. One might also be surprised by the degree of the opposite element in one's mental composure:

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being, a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness. (Woolf 2012, 189)³¹

31. The topic of androgyny is powerfully presented in Kaivola 1999, 235–61. The critic draws our attention to the active rather than static nature of androgyny: "If Orlando's identity

However, Woolf's understanding of androgyny is not only expressive of a more open approach to human subjectivity. Significantly, her insight into gender distinctions probes the question of human creativity as fundamental to identity.

Woolf emphasizes the fusion of feminine and masculine characteristics in the process of creation. The idea of the androgynous mind figuring overtly in *Orlando* is also explored in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (discussed in the previous section). In this text, however, the stress is placed on the cross-fertilization of the male and female characteristics that results in the empowerment of the human self and its creative capacity:

Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine. . . . [Coleridge] meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided. (Woolf 2016, 95)

Nevertheless, Woolf's enticing idea of following the androgynous model is not viewed by all critics as an effective tool on the pathway to an acknowledgement of female creativity. Elaine Showalter notes:

Nagged by the shade of her father, and conscious of the power of male disapproval, Virginia Woolf developed a literary theory which had the effect of neutralizing her own conflict between the desire to present a woman's whole experience, and the fear of such revelation. It is a theory of the androgynous mind and spirit; a fusion of masculine and feminine elements, calm, stable, subtle, unimpeded by consciousness of sex or individuality. She meant it to be a luminous and fulfilling symbol, but like most highly principled projections, her vision of the serene androgynous imagination lacks zest and vigor. Whatever else one may say of androgyny, it represents an escape from the confrontation with femininity. (1972, 341)

Nevertheless, Woolf's scrutiny of the idea of the androgynous mind certainly shows itself to be an important element in discussions of the well-spring of feminine creativity and modern female intellectuals' manifestations of their creative abilities.

is androgynous, that androgyny is mobile, not static: presenting not a smooth synthesis of oppositions but a more chaotic 'hermaphroditic' intermix—Orlando's gender and her desires—constantly change" (Kaivola 1999, 235).

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the writings of Virginia Woolf, this study has examined the imaginative self-manifestations of modern women with a view to uncovering important truths about the hermeneutics of female creativity. It recognizes the radical departure of the modern woman from the role of a silent and insignificant figure. Such an investigation of Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, and her polemical essay *A Room of One's Own*, encourages us to acknowledge the power and indispensability of female imaginative creation in the age of modernism. The elements of the *Künstlerroman*, which Woolf employs while conceiving *To the Lighthouse*, stimulate us not only to reflect on the process of self-recognition and self-formation of a woman artist, but also on the pivotal role that an increase in self-esteem, self-appreciation, and self-fulfillment can play in shaping women's modern consciousness. The arduous journey that women had to undergo over the centuries in order to gain confidence in showing their creativity in a time of accelerated changes associated with modernism brings them ultimately to the position of free, unconstrained, and empowered human subjects capable of adequately expressing their creativity. In contrast to eighteenth and nineteenth-century female writers, modern female artists self-manifest powerfully, revealing their needs and abilities. No longer in the shadow of their male contemporaries, they can combat unfavorable social and sexual mores through their creative work. By excelling in their performance, they demonstrate their unique way of thinking and creating.

Woolf's meticulous interrogation of the female genius sensitizes us to the remarkable changes women underwent in order to get to a position of being able to show their intellectual prowess openly. The maturation process leads from brilliant but anonymous articulations of artistic selves to the self-assured performances of talented and self-aware human subjects. The modern female artist is free to discard the limitations of domesticity, engage positively with public matters, and thrive in intellectual and artistic circles. Her identity shifts from someone subdued to someone independent. In the self-transformative process, the modern female artist seeks to shape her identity as a thinker who is rebellious, questioning, and challenging. The social situation of women in the age of modernism is the outcome of a gradual process: a long history of women transcending their impoverished possibilities to overthrow conditions that were unfavorable to them. The modern woman feels called to challenge the rigid mental frameworks that oppress her and put her at a disadvantage. The need for independence, on the other hand, is balanced by the need for love. This love is also a flourishing self-love and self-empowerment, and a reclaimed self-confidence.

The modern female artist considers self-education and self-development the crux of her existence. She speaks from the vast residue of the past and calls on the female voices that preceded hers in opposing her undesirable social situation. Opening symbolically the door of her home, she transcends the restrictions imposed on her and seeks to be recognized outside of the confines of her household. Her artistic identity is the result of a long formative and trans-*formative* process in which her self-appreciation and self-confidence lead ultimately to self-fulfillment. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self provides an important insight into the processual character of the creation of a woman's artistic identity. The radical break with the realities imposed on women discernible in their capacity to manifest their needs and rights in the age of modernism is preceded by the repugnant history of their subjugation. The history of oppression is present in the modern woman's self-assertion: her taking a risk and working out the necessity to live an independent, self-reliant, and meaningful life. The time distance between the creative expressions of women's subjection and the moment of their interpretation and appreciation allows us to entertain a greater versatility of understanding. The employment of Gadamer's notion of historically effected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichtes Bewusstsein*), which is consonant with the fundamental practice of hermeneutics while revealing the possibility of a deeper insight into historicity and contingency, sheds light on the female artist's position in modernism. The supreme emergence of the feminine voice is the hermeneutic coming into existence of the uniqueness of feminine intellectuality, spirituality, and creativity. Looking backward, the modern woman looks forward to the fashioning of her inimitable creative self.

It is worth remembering that modern art is elitist. It safeguards its own lofty position and does not surrender to lowbrow mass culture. Women are no longer cast in the shadow of men, and they can speak in their own distinct voice, which inspires awe. Acclaimed male writers now pay tribute to great female writers and their literary accomplishments. T.S. Eliot's salient words deftly express this altered attitude—the reverence for a capable, modern woman artist:

Without Virginia Woolf at the center of it, it would have remained formless or marginal . . . With the death of Virginia Woolf, a whole pattern of culture is broken. (Eliot 1941)

The age of modernism thus witnessed a remarkable change in creative sensibility, in which women's voices shifted from their former marginal

position to the limelight and so came to exhibit the vitality of what counts as an outstanding artistic achievement.

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