

**“AH, BUT WHAT IS
‘HERSELF’? I MEAN,
WHAT IS A WOMAN?”:
RHETORICAL ANALYSIS
OF VIRGINIA WOOLF’S
FEMINIST ESSAYS**

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Abstract

The essays of Virginia Woolf are especially known for her concern about women’s condition throughout history, and her reflections on various aspects ranging from the review and assessment of works and characters, to the reference to historical and literary figures more or less recognised. In her textual practice of this argumentative genre, she follows Montaigne’s influx with regard to his trying to communicate the thoughts of a conflicted self in a digressive prose, but placed in her Modernist context. Starting from these considerations, it is especially interesting to read Woolf’s essays bearing in mind the rhetorical categories and the *partes orationis* given by Rhetoric, conceived as the science capable of analysing the argumentative discourse. In this paper, I suggest a revision of those rhetorical components, and I seek to explore various arguments and rhetorical figures found in some of her texts, for the most part dealing with different histories of the

Resumen

Los ensayos de Virginia Woolf son conocidos, sobre todo, por su preocupación hacia la condición de la mujer a lo largo de la Historia, y por su reflexión sobre varios aspectos que incluyen la reseña y valoración de obras y personajes, así como la referencia a figuras históricas y literarias más o menos conocidas. En su práctica de este género argumentativo, la autora sigue la estela de Montaigne a la hora de comunicar los pensamientos de un ser en conflicto a través una prosa digresiva, si bien situados en un contexto modernista. A partir de estas consideraciones previas, se hace especialmente interesante la lectura de los ensayos de Woolf teniendo en cuenta las categorías retóricas y las *partes orationis* que dicta la Retórica, concebida como ciencia que puede analizar el discurso argumentativo. En este trabajo, sugiero una revisión de los componentes retóricos de sus ensayos, y la exploración de los argumentos y figuras retóricas recurrentes en aquellos. En particular, me refiero a ensayos que contienen historias de mujeres inmersas en

women inhabiting Woolf's particular vision of History. Rhetorical argumentation allows the review of textual representations and their communicative effect, including the figures of writer, argument and reader.

Key words: Virginia Woolf, essay, feminism, rhetoric, rhetorical figure, argument.

la visión que la propia Woolf tiene de la Historia. La argumentación retórica permite la revisión de representaciones textuales y su efecto comunicativo, incluyendo las figuras del escritor, el argumento y el lector.

Palabras clave: Virginia Woolf, ensayo, feminismo, retórica, figura retórica, argumento.

1. INTRODUCTION

In their portrayal of writers and works, the essays of Virginia Woolf try to reflect, from a modernist perspective, the role that men and women have played in history and literature. Defending the subjective, changeful opinion, and the concern for personal and affective aspects, Woolf shows a special sensibility towards feminist issues connected with the works and circumstances of reputed women writers; on the other hand, she also dedicates herself to the rescue of the works and circumstances of non-acclaimed women writers who could yet undertake their vocation. In those texts, Virginia Woolf devotes much of her thinking to not only the literary output of those females, but also the appraisal bestowed upon them by critics. In that sense, the author is able to convey the topics that prevail in these essays: (a) the resurgence and treatment of literary aspects of women writers, both known and unknown, and their literature; (b) the study of specific aspects related to their feminine condition, with reference to their position in history and their further adjustment to the current changes (Martínez-Dueñas 1998:67).

In her short essay "The Feminine Note in Fiction," Woolf reviews a work by a Mr. W. L. Courtney of the same title.¹ In that text, Woolf complains that the critic fails to find that feminine trace that he hoped could be discovered since "more and more novels are written by women for women" (1992b:4), and she wonders, "is it not too soon after all to criticize the 'feminine note' in

¹ William Leonard Courtney (1850-1928) was the editor of the *Fortnightly Review*.

anything? And will not the adequate critic of women be a woman?" (1992b:3). I try, then, to highlight that *feminine* note in the essay, as it regards a woman writing about other women, in some of the arguments predominant in the essays selected: the argument from the cause and the consequences, argumentation from the repetition, the reasoning from the example, the rhetorical question, the opposition principle and, finally, I will refer to simile as a rhetorical figure recurring in her texts. The occurrence of these elements also characterises other numerous short essays in which women's issues are not her only purpose, and can be encountered in all the sections of the text, or *partes orationis*.

In those instances, arguments are considered as the development of a specific point of view. They are made of linguistic patterns that transfer acceptability from premises to conclusions. In the case of rhetorical figures, they also serve as arguments because of the ways they are constructed to engage the audience through their effective nature, and their capacity for attracting attention (Tindale 2004:63). Arguments and figures represent in the essays those statements that are brought forward to support or attack a controversial opinion, foregrounding in this study that feminist brushstroke that the essayist has chosen to make us reflect on the opinions uttered for that occasion (Kienpointner 1987:275). These reasonings take on special significance in an argumentative discourse like the essay, bursting with judgemental values and opinions, not accepted truths, which can be refuted or vindicated. Actually, Woolf introduces her argument "in the awareness of a differing or opposing view" that exists in her historical background, which still considers women as men's servants (Leith & Myerson 1989:85). In the development of these views, the arguments exposed do not admit demonstrative proofs whereby true premises reach necessary conclusions; on the contrary, they contain rhetorical proofs, whose premises are just probable or credible and are only valid in specific contexts with specific aims (Arenas 1997:154). In this sense, a rhetorical analysis of these texts can reveal the effect that Woolf's words have had on literary criticism and literary history, and it becomes a tool of interest to the practitioner of the essay discourse. It also represents a different reading of her practice of the essay, based on how she communicates her thoughts through the use of rhetorical principles related to the invention of arguments, their order and disposition, and their expressive manifestation.

The Woolfian essay follows the common principles of the argumentative genre, and designs a type of standardised communicative action that will work as a model of production and reception of other texts in a literary context. Rhetoric, as the science capable of analysing the argumentative discourse, becomes the instrument that examines the context of Woolf's essays. Besides,

rhetorical argumentation combines the interaction between writer, argument and reader. The contents of her essays are inextricably linked to the form in a combination of arguments and rhetorical figures visible in the textual representation. This allows the reader to enjoy the artistic expressiveness, or *delectare* and, at the same time, be educated by the points of view proposed through *docere*, which gives the texts a justified intention aimed at meditating about the contents received. The persuasive mechanisms found in the essay are not intended for the reader's conviction about the truth of the ideas exposed, but for his or her persuasion on the soundness of the notions exposed. To this respect, the essayist justifies his or her subjective point of view about the topic discussed. The possible meditation that both a modernist and a present reader can enjoy, capable of perceiving some criticism to culture and, especially in this paper, to women's social condition in history, enhances the literary value of the essays under analysis (Arenas 1997:124-125).

2. VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE ESSAY FORM

In their feminist approach to the essay, R-E. Boetcher Joeres and E. Mittman (1993:14) argue that, despite Woolf's significance to women and, particularly, to feminists, she does not belong to the radical camp. Moreover, they state that she uses and practises the essay as Montaigne and other authors did, that is, as "a space for contemplation, measured thinking, respite from the frantic world. Hardly a battleground for rebellion, despite the energizing effect her words have since had on their readers." Woolf writes her essays as a means of artistic expression as devised by Plato, Oscar Wilde or Montaigne. She opposed her contemporary essay practitioners like Leslie Stephen, T. S. Eliot, John Middleton Murry or Desmond McCarthy, who conceived the essay as an impersonal genre (Lojo 2001:82-83). The author herself, in "The Modern Essay," offers some characteristics of this genre:

The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most varied experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation; we may soar to the heights of fantasy with Lamb or plunge to the depths with Bacon, but we never be

roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world (1992b:40).

In this tradition, Woolf develops a form of writing about the self that is part sketch and part epiphany. It participates in a meaningful change in the history of literature, when prose replaces poetry as the dominant literary form, but it is not necessarily limited to fiction (Gualtieri 2000:56). Indeed, Woolf's essay is introduced as a form of writing that "deals with what is said to be creative, appreciative and subjective. [It] most often presents embedded stories and scenes [...], where Woolf's fluid appreciation of literary genres is overtly exposed" (Lojo 2001:87). Much of Woolf's writing is accomplished in the manner of the Montaignean essay, including her particular depiction of works, fictitious characters and literary figures, male and female, occluded and recognised, from previous times and contemporary. Her subjectivity and perspectivism has opposed the dominant historical paradigm in Woolf's time, conceived as "a directly accessible, unitary past," traditionally rejecting the predominance of a totalising and comprehensive "history." On the contrary, she is in favour of envisaging the "histories" of different human constructions that represent the past at specific moments and for definite purposes (Cuddy-Keane 1997:62). Like Montaigne, Woolf needs to communicate the sense of a self in conflict with its own time and culture. Like him, she uses evocative passages and digressions as part of the argument, as I will point out below (Dusinberre 1997:43-45). Montaigne did not follow the logical divisions of an argument into premises and conclusions, reminiscent of a male education, but a circular method associated with an oral tradition of using the vernacular language as a spoken communication between equals. Woolf recognised in this speech a feminine mode of writing, and the potential for exploring new forms in which women's unspoken voices would be heard (54-55). In her essay "Montaigne" she asserts that his essays are "an attempt to communicate a soul," and emphasises this view by using a figure of repetition, the *parison*,² which shows a recurring symmetrical sequence of words:

Communication is health; communication is truth; communication is happiness. To share is our duty; to go down boldly and bring to light those hidden thoughts which are the most diseased; to conceal nothing; to pretend nothing; if we are ignorant to say so; if we love our friends to let them know it. (Woolf 1992b:62)

² I follow Brian Vickers's work for the study of the rhetorical figures I mention in this paper. He includes in the appendix of his book a wide classification of rhetorical figures and tropes, their definition and illustrations from Shakespeare's works.

In the passage we encounter the reiteration of the word “communication,” and the syntactic symmetry of both the initial sentences and those beginning with the infinitive and the “if” conjunction. They are examples of how the textual representation is the first step in the recognition of emphasis as a communicative result. The insistence on the positive outcomes of communicating and the obligation to bare one’s soul represent an art of reading that includes the digression as the conscious construction of the essayist. It also reflects the importance of her using the dialogue as an invitation to talk to both oneself and the reader (Luckhurst 1999:42).

3. RHETORICAL ORGANISATION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF’S ESSAYS

The essays of Virginia Woolf follow a careful rhetorical organisation. This blends the semantic and syntactic distribution of elements, as given by the rhetorical categories of *inventio* and *dispositio*, with those *ornatus* or *elocutio* components that comprise the textual or verbal manifestation that the reader is able to perceive. From a theoretical point of view, the textual construction of any text comprises the two following compositional operations: (1) the *intellectio*, which constitutes the real origin of textual production. By this procedure, the author examines his or her own competence when expressing his or her observations, and considers who will receive those ideas. (2) The *inventio*, which allows the author to select topics and referential contents, that is, those semantic elements that disclose the several types of reasoning that make up the argumentative process. These operations are oriented towards the construction of literary texts in two main levels:

1. The *dispositio*, which structures semantically and syntactically the conceptual components obtained from the *inventio*, and are further incorporated to the text.
2. The *elocutio*, which expresses the author’s conceptual material by means of paragraphs, sentences and words.

The following chart represents these relations in Woolf’s essays:

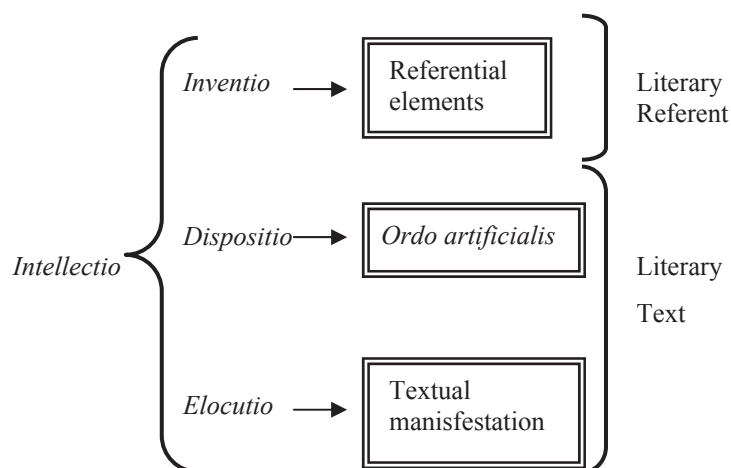


Chart 1. Textual representation

Both the selection of topics and their distribution in the text are simultaneous processes that depend on a superstructure.³ This is formulated as an abstract diagram that determines the organisation of the parts of the text and its content. In Woolf's essays four categories of the argumentative superstructure can be distinguished, the *partes orationis*, according to classical rhetoric: *exordium*, *narratio* or *expositio*, *argumentatio* and *conclusio*. The superstructure includes the rules that fix the logical and temporal order in which these categories appear in the *dispositio*. At the same time, these categories also restrict the semantic elements contained in the *inventio*. The superstructure performs an important function in the production and reception of discourse, allowing the cultured reader to distinguish a narrative from an argumentative text and a scientific treatise (Arenas Cruz 1997:142-143). In Woolf's essays, the *partes orationis* do not always follow the *ordo naturalis*, or natural order, since the sections can be transformed or altered into an *ordo artificialis* that merges the narration with the essayist's personal observations. As a result, the *narratio* does not serve as the starting point for the argumentation category, but it turns

³ This term first appears in T. A. van Dijk's work *The Structures and Functions of Discourse. An Interdisciplinary Introduction to Text Linguistics and Discourse Studies*. This was a series of lectures given at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, in 1978. I follow the Spanish edition (1991).

into the real argumentative network. In the following chart we can observe the outline of the *partes orationis* found in her texts:

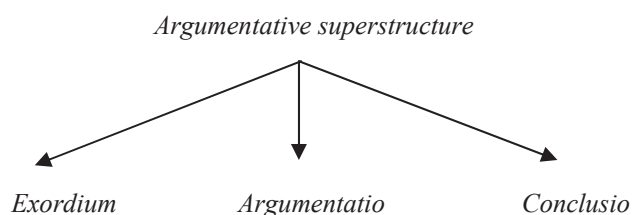


Chart 2. Argumentative superstructure

3.1. *EXORDIUM*

In this category, Woolf shows a preference for the classical tradition with topics that may attract the reader's attention, like simile, and the portrayal of some fictional scenery or little narrative as an introductory argument, as observed in "Selina Trimmer": "The gardens at Chatsworth which contained so many strange exotic plants brought by the great gardener Paxton from foreign lands, could boast, too, of one modest daisy whose surname was Trimmer and whose Christian name was Selina" (Woolf 1950:34).

I also find rhetorical questions, general statements about the subject matter and the opinion of authorities related to the argument in progress, as when Mr. Murry affirms that "as writer of short stories Katherine Mansfield was *hors concours*. No one has succeeded her, and no critic has been able to define her quality" (Woolf 1958:73).⁴ Other topics contain the essayist's judgement or opinion about the issue she is to reveal, the quotation of some famous character's words, and her reasons to write about a certain subject. The explanation of the title is also present, as when she justifies, in "Women and Fiction," the intentional ambiguity of the title, adding that it can be read in two ways: "It may allude to women and the fiction they write, or to women and the fiction that is written about them" (1958:76). Something similar is observed in

⁴ Woolf refers to John Middleton Murry (1889-1957), English writer and critic who married Katherine Mansfield in 1918. He edited her work after her death.

A Room of One's Own (1929) where, admitting the questioning about women and fiction, she asks: “What has that got to do with a room of one's own? I will try to explain” (Woolf 1992a:3).

3.2. ARGUMENTATIO

In the *argumentatio* category, the account of these womanly views in essays concerned with women and literature rely on the use of a main argumentative technique, the interaction between a person and her acts (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1989:§68). This procedure prevails in the rhetorical organisation of Woolf's essays, and it is the framework from which my other arguments unfold.

In this interaction, the reaction of the act, which I parallel in this case to an author's literary work, upon the person or writer, is meant to modify our conception of that individual. Everything that is said about a person is justified by how that person manifests herself in life and in her artistic production, be it recognised or not. The essayist follows a similar perspective to the historian when portraying a known person through his or her deeds (Perelman 1979:149-50). However, the former is allowed to hold a subjective perspective, full of nuances and subtleties, even fictional, which are not permitted to the latter. In her essays “[Woolf] turns away from formal exposition to tell a story,” and this practice allows her the basis for women's introspection, foregrounding those thoughts related to a feminine condition that hinges on a masculine culture, as seen in this extract from “The Duchess of Newcastle” (Bowlby 1997:31):

No fears impede her. She has the irresponsibility of a child and the arrogance of a Duchess. The wildest fancies come to her, and she canters away on their backs. We seem to hear her, as the thoughts boil and bubble, calling to John, who sat with a pen in his hand next door, to come quick, ‘John, John, I conceive! And down it goes –whatever it may be; sense or nonsense; some thoughts on women's education– “Women live like Bats or Owls, labour like Beasts, and die like Worms... the best bred women are those whose minds are civilest.” (1992b:110)

Woolf does not only refer to the writer's works as her only acknowledged manifestation but she prefers, largely, to relegate her most notorious aspects in favour of personal life, through the account of anecdotes and experiences. Therefore, we acquire a different perspective from that given in a history or

literature handbook. These views are in agreement with Woolf's conception of history, for she prefers to focus on those unspoken voices that an inclusive history should take notice of, to the detriment of canonised works of major authors, making a difference between "history as it is written" and "history as it is lived" (Cuddy-Keane 1997:61). Through the interaction of those little known figures, especially women, and their creation, the essayist is able to subvert the established forms of traditional history, which stresses the presentation of canonical works and recognised personalities following a chronological linear pattern (61). In "Women and Fiction," for example, Woolf draws our attention to the lack of writing by women before the eighteenth century, and associates their creation being "locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, half-obliterated in the memories of the aged" with their living as the obscure, "for very little is known about women." She argues that the history of England is the history of the male line, but "of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, what remains? Nothing but a tradition" (1958:76), referring to the idea of their sole existence as that of wives and mothers. This can be one of the reasons why the essayist imagines scenarios where fiction enhances the gaps in the historical documentation, as a means to raise questions about truth claims that emphasise a factual reconstruction of the past. The construction of these scenes also reveals a wish to explore the possibilities of the essay genre as one reflecting some continuity between memory and invention, and the contrast between objective and subjective truths. It entails a critique of the conventional limits of historiography, usually defined as the reconstruction and record of the events that constitute a particular historical phenomenon (Gualtieri 2000:357).

Woolf's particular vision about women writers frequently amounts to the starting point of argumentation, and helps foresee certain unknown actions we could not otherwise discern, be it to interpret those already known facts, or be it to transfer the commentary upon that person to her proceedings. Indeed, in essays on major writers she prefers to evoke their private selves before their public personae as the performance of everyday flaws (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997:283). In her essay "Sterne," a review based on this writer's life and works, some interesting notions about the interaction between the famous author and his creation come to light. Woolf explains in the introduction that "it is a custom to draw a distinction between a man and his works and to add that, although the world has a claim to read every line of his writing, it must not ask questions about the author" (1958:167). Yet she does not agree with this distinction, and says that we sacrifice an aesthetic pleasure and raise frontiers where they should not be erected, for "a writer is a writer from his cradle; in his dealings with the

world; in his affections, in his attitude to the thousand small things that happen between dawn and sunset [...]” (1958:167).

The *narratio* or *expositio*, whose main function is to illustrate by means of a short narration or exposition, the subsequent argumentative progression, is usually fused with the argumentation in Woolf’s essays. This takes place especially in the case of those texts aimed at characterising an author and her work. The essayist’s commentaries are nurtured by narrative and expositive digressions that become the argumentation itself, as in this extract from “Professions for Women:”

But to continue my story. The Angel was dead; what then remained? You may say that what remained was a simple and common object –a young woman in a bedroom with an inkpot. In other words, now that she had rid herself of falsehood, that young woman had only to be herself. (Woolf 1942:238)

In another essay, entitled “Madame de Sévigné,” we know about a letter writer and probably a great novelist had she lived in Woolf’s age. In this passage the narration also blends into the *argumentatio*:

Sometimes, therefore, Madame de Sévigné weeps. The daughter does not love her. That is a thought so bitter, and a fear so perpetual and so profound, that life loses its savour; she has recourse to sages, to poets to console her; and reflects with sadness upon the vanity of life; and how death will come. Then, too, she is agitated beyond what is right or reasonable, because a letter has not reached her. Then she knows that she has been absurd; and realizes that she is boring her friends with this obsession. (1942:53)

3.3. CONCLUSIO

Finally, in this category I observe some topics common in this part of the argumentative superstructure. Those referring to the contents represented include the description of a suggesting scene. Furthermore, the imaginary evocation of an absent or invented character, or *prosopopeia*, is also present, as when she praises, in “Mary Wollstonecraft,” this defender of women’s rights by saying that “she is alive and active, she argues with experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living” (Woolf 1959:163). Other topics dealing with keeping the reader’s interest incorporate a final peroration or amplification filled with conjectures and predictions, as I will show in the argument from the consequences. I also include here the use of

rhetorical questions, anecdotes and the linguistic interruption, or *aposiopesis*, which signals a final pause in the text:

The writing has been done in kitchens, at odds and ends of time, in the midst of distractions and obstacles –but really there is no need for me, in a letter addressed to you, to lay stress upon the hardships of working women’s lives. Have not you and Janet Erskine given your best years –but hush! You will not let me finish that sentence and therefore, with the old messages of friendship and admiration, I will make an end. (1992b:147)

4. ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL ARGUMENTS AND FIGURES

The following section introduces some recurrent argumentative techniques and rhetorical figures, present in all the categories of the *partes orationis*. They stress Woolf’s interest in women’s material scarceness and lack of opportunities. They reinforce her ever-present notion of their being deprived of good fortune in their personal and professional accomplishments. Her communicative intent arises as a result from the complexity of elements posed by her textual representation, leading into units of information that the reader should perceive in this contextual consideration of her texts (Martínez-Dueñas 2002:25).

4.1. THE CAUSAL ARGUMENT

It presents in the essays the reason why some episode that she is digressing from at some point has occurred and, now and then, the possible effects deriving from that affair. It relies on an assumed or accepted shared belief about what can cause what. When explaining the causes so as to understand a certain effect and satisfy our curiosity, such explanations can become arguments because opposite versions can be constructed (Fahnestock & Secor 2004:183). In “Women and Fiction,” where Woolf wonders why there is no continuous women’s writing before the eighteenth century, she states that fiction is “the easiest thing for a woman to write. Nor is it difficult to find the reason. A novel is the least concentrated form of art. A novel can be taken up or put down more easily than a play or a poem” (1958:78). In persisting with the idea about why

women have not been able to accomplish a writer's career or, for that fact, any other career, she observes: "Women have had less intellectual liberty than the sons of the Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That's why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own" (1992a:141). The lack of wealth is recurring in those texts that try to seek the origin for the absence of women's careers, although in "Professions for Women" she argues that "the cheapness of writing paper is [...] the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in other professions" (1942:236).

Occasionally, she likes to conjure up the life of a brilliant female writer through the character of Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*, a talented woman poet if only had she had the opportunity to show her gift. The essayist affirms that "she lives in you and me, and many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die" (1992a:148). The important point, if it is indeed the case, is to be able to write what one wishes, and not only for the sake of money, as she declares in *Three Guineas* (1938), the long essay in which she replies to three letters that ask for her political and financial support for different causes:

But to sell a brain is worse than to sell a body, for when the body seller has sold her momentary pleasure she takes good care that the matter shall end there. But when a brain seller has sold her brain, its anaemic, vicious and diseased progeny are let loose upon the world to infect and corrupt and sow the seeds of disease in others. (1992a:290)

4.2. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE CONSEQUENCES

Drawn sometimes from those causes Woolf offers, this argument advocates considering an act or event depending on the positive or negative result of that effect. It is featured as the reasoning that accepts the truth or falsity of a proposition when stating the consequences of that possible acceptance. In our case, this sort of reasoning usually appeals to the reader's emotions, and its presence is remarkable in the concluding sections of her essays, in the form of hypotheses, conjectures, predictions, promises, and warnings (Walton 1992). This occurs in "The Intellectual Status of Women," a series of letters in which Woolf answers back Desmond MacCarthy, who reviews Arnold Bennett's collection of essays entitled *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex-Discord*. In these

essays, Bennett denies the intellectual equality of men and women. In the conclusion, Woolf urges on him a different view for “[she] cannot doubt that if such opinions prevail in the future we shall remain in a condition of half-civilized barbarism [...]. For the degradation of being a slave is only equalled by the degradation of being a master” (1992b:39). Indeed, she predicts, in “Professions for Women,” that “it will be a long time still [...] before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against” (1942:241).

There exists, besides, the lack of adequacy of the sentence as one of the difficulties a woman writer must face, as revealed in “Women and Fiction,” for “it is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman’s use” (1958:81), and she concludes: “So if we may prophesy, women in time to come will write fewer novels, but better novels; and not novels only, but poetry and criticism and history” (1958:84). However, this will occur provided that they have “leisure, money and a room to themselves” (1958:84).

In *A Room of One’s Own*, the essay in which Woolf defends these same postulates, the consequences include the subtle deduction, as when she thinks that, in a hundred years, “women will have ceased to be the protected sex. Logically they will take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them. The nursemaid will heave coal. The shopwoman will drive an engine” (1992a:52). But in this text I can also find stronger predictions like the final one stating that “[...] if we live another century or so [...] and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own [...] then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down” (1992a:149). However, it is in *Three Guineas* where I encounter the sharpest consequences as far as they range from restrained cajolery to plain warnings, and brazen threats. An illustration of the former appears when Woolf replies to her addresser about the possibility of founding a society that promotes the entry of women into the professions:

For if your wife were paid for her work, the work of bearing and bringing up children, a real wage, a money wage, so that it became an attractive profession instead of being as it is now an unpaid profession, an unpensioned profession, and therefore a precarious and dishonoured profession, your own slavery would be lightened. (1992a:317)

4.3. THE REPETITION ARGUMENT

The repetition of the word “profession” above, at the end of this sequence of phrases, or *epistrophe*, also characterises the texts I am regarding. The use of this rhetorical principle entails a communicative value as much as we associate it with the emphasis and the insistence of the thought being uttered (Martínez-Dueñas 2002:69). When the repetition occurs in the openings and closings of phrases and clauses, it creates patterns that can apparently be selected or registered in the experience a text (Fahnestock 1999:158). Another example of this reiteration is the *poliptoton*, a figure that repeats the same lexical root with different forms and which, in the essay “Thoughts of Peace in the Air Raid,” makes analogous women’s social slavery with men’s oppression: “[Women] are slaves who are trying to enslave. If we could free ourselves from slavery we should free men from tyranny. Hitlers are bred by slaves” (1942:245). Then again, so as to insist upon the alleged tastefulness a woman writer should always display as decreed by men, Woolf presents an *anaphora*, which repeats the same word at the beginning of a period:

They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, like some too conscientious governess, adjuring them [...] to be refined. (1992a:97)

With the *ploche*, where we encounter the repetition of the same word or words, the author wonders about the impossibility of reading a certain type of book:

Women do not write books about men –a fact that I could not help welcoming with relief, for if I had first to read all that men have written about women, then all that women have written about men, the aloe that flowers once in a hundred years would flower twice before I could set pen to paper. (1992a:35)

A more ingenious figure is the *antanaclasis*, where a word is usually repeated twice in two or more of its senses. In the example below, taken from “Professions for Women”, Woolf has fun recalling how she did kill the Angel in the House, who represents the stereotype of the domestic and charming woman without a mind of her own, trying to foil her attempt to put her words into writing:

I now record the one act for which I take some credit to myself, though the credit rightly belongs to some excellent ancestors of mine who left me a certain sum of money –shall we say five hundred pounds a year?– so that it

was not necessary for me to depend solely on charm for my living. I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. (1942:237)

Finally, in an effort to let us know what little power women possessed, the author introduces a *parison*: “[...] Influence of the kind that can be exerted by the daughters of educated men is very low in power, very slow in action, and very painful in use” (1992a:170).

4.4. THE EXAMPLE ARGUMENT

It constitutes, in these essays, a fundamental way of illustrating a distinct idea or point of view about some issue of literary criticism, including the mention of authors and works that contribute to developing the initial topic. Hence, examples make up the proof or support to both defend and refute her views, allowing the reader to look at one example in light of another. This rhetorical element may become a discovery process, by which some judgement pertaining to things that are not what they seem is found (Olmsted 1997:240-241). In the texts, a primary supply of examples deals with literary personalities that are introduced to be compared and contrasted with other authors; another group of examples helps to portray a particular period through facts, anecdotes, and people that somewhat have had a say in the creation of a historical period. In this paper, I lay stress on those instances referred to as a feminist stance as they, more often than not, convey a criticism to women’s poor conditions.

In “Profession for Women,” we can see the account of some female writers as examples of women who have been able to devote themselves to literature: “For the road was cut many years ago –by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau, by Jane Austen, by George Eliot– many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps” (1942:235). However, this has not always been the case as, for instance, in *A Room of One’s Own*, in which I have already commented upon the story designed to enlighten us as to what would have happened to Shakespeare’s hypothetical sister had she wanted to turn into a writer. We can view that narration as an example emphasising the notion that the Elizabethan woman, and no other woman before and after this historical period, could lean solely on writing for survival.

When the author suggests imagining, “since facts are so hard to come by” (1992a:60), what would have occurred, she adds that “had she survived,

whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination” and, most probably, “her work would have gone unnoticed” (1992a:64). In that sense, Virginia Woolf invented this gifted woman trying to find an answer for the lack of a female Shakespeare (Ezell 1990:241). From *Three Guineas* I may extract a similar illustration, this time from a real source, as regards the fruitless effort of the daughter of an educated man to gain economic independence:

The campaign was opened in the year 1869 under the leadership of Sophia Jex-Blake. Her case is so typical an instance of the great Victorian fight between the victims of the patriarchal system and the patriarch, of the daughters against the fathers, that it deserves a moment's examination. (1992a:246)

4.5. THE RHETORICAL QUESTION ARGUMENT

It is a crucial mode of reasoning in her essays, a mechanism that permits the author the need to constantly ask herself why everything occurs (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1989:§42). Rhetorical questions are used as a means of putting forward standpoints. They can also be analysed as proposals for a common starting point at the beginning of a discussion, as shown in the title of this essay, with queries about the female nature in “Profession for Women.” The addresser thinks that his or her proposal will be accepted by the other party, and this presupposed acceptance often provides an argument (Snoeck Henkemans 2009:15-17). In these texts, the questions can be about the artistic evolution of an author and her work, or the reasons that have prevented women from being judged as authors as well. Due to the absence of an explicit answer, they are posed so that the reader may elicit some sort of answer in the course of his or her reading. Indeed, these unanswered questions constitute an effective device for involving readers in dialogue with writers, as is often the case in Woolf's essays. As I am trying to show, the urgings mastered by Woolf prove themselves more significant when discussing gender issues. In “Professions for Women” she also complains about the difficulty that women have to carry out certain jobs. She argues that it is not only money and a room of their own that they need but “how are [they] going to furnish it? How are [they] going to decorate it? With whom are [they] going to share it, and upon what terms?” (1942:242). The author adds that these are questions of the greatest importance but, unfortunately, we provide no answer.

The same happens in the text “Memories of a Working Women’s Guild,” where a group of working women cannot aspire to great endeavours despite earning a salary and having some education: “But how could women whose hands were full of work, whose kitchens were thick with steam, who had neither education nor encouragement nor leisure remodel the world according to the ideas of working women?” (1992b:145). This painful, unfair situation leads to another one expressed in *A Room of One’s Own*, in which the question gets insufflated by a subtle irony, for “what had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us? Powdering their noses? Looking it at the shop windows? Flaunting in the sun at Monte Carlo?” (1992a:26). Undoubtedly, the patriarchal society must be responsible for such a misdeed, which has only allowed our “fathers and their fathers before them,” not any of our mothers, “the great art of making money” (1992a:27).

4.6. THE OPPOSITION ARGUMENT

It entails a central element in the rhetorical organisation of the texts, particularly the opposition pertaining to feminine vs. masculine (Sánchez Cuervo 2006:6-8). The opposition of ideas is a creative process by which the confrontation and balance of contrary elements should be acceptable to the reader or listener. Nevertheless, this conflict is not so clear in essays like *A Room of One’s Own*, where she wonders whether the mind is in possession of two sexes that correspond to those of the body and, therefore, she devises a plan that allows us to have two powers, masculine and feminine, both of them coexisting harmoniously.

Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly, by pausing and looking at a book or two. (1992a:128)

In this extract she seems to favour an androgynous ideal, the same as in “Indiscretions,” where she discusses that some authors do not write as men or women would do, “but they appeal to that large tract of the soul which is sexless” (1992b:90). Yet these more idealistic thoughts change drastically in her polemical *Three Guineas*. In her digressions about the male impediment to the female progress, she sets up an ideal society in which the daughters of educated men, herself included, found “*the Outsiders Society*,” abided by certain obligations:

It follows that an outsider must make it her business to press for a living wage in all the professions now open to her sex; further she must create new professions in which she can earn the right to an independent opinion. Therefore she must bind herself to press for a money wage for the unpaid worker in her own class –the daughters and sisters of educated men who, as biographies have shown us, are now paid on the truck system, with food, lodging and a pittance of £40 a year. But above all she must press for a wage to be paid by the State legally to the mothers of educated men. The importance of this to our common fight is immeasurable. (1992a:315-16)

Wrath is one of the reasons why Virginia Woolf wishes to change this situation and, hence, plans a transformation of culture and society (Silver 1991:351). When Woolf says that women must fight for their rights and try to transform society, she is trying to defend an opinion, and the opposition becomes a technique of argumentation. Yet we should add that her politics lay on the pacifist view that stressed women’s education and was against militant methods (Park 2005:126). If I attend to the linguistic structures related to the principle of opposition, we find the *antithesis*, seen as the rhetorical figure that expresses the dialectical nature of rhetorical systems better (Valesio 1980:103). The quotation below illustrates perfectly the opulence of one gender and the scarceness of the other:

Your class possesses in its own right and not through marriage practically all the capital, all the land, all the valuables, and all the patronage in England. Our class possesses in its own right and not through marriage practically none of the capital, none of the land, none of the valuables, and none of the patronage in England. (1992a:175)

4.7. THE SIMILE ARGUMENT

This reasoning, as a comparative structure which Woolf excels at, shows a concept related with its more often than not metaphorical resemblance. It constitutes an indispensable device for introducing her reflections. Simile has been defined as an “overt comparison,” for it specifies the domain and degree of the comparison, in contrast to metaphor, seen as a “covert comparison” (Leech 1969:153-157). Both arguments represent a defining element in the essays organisation, as instruments whose cognitive intricacy makes us perceive reality differently. Hence, when describing women’s austere reality in “Memories of a Working Women’s Guild,” she claims that “their very names were like the

stones of the fields, common, grey, obscure, docked of all the splendours of association and romance” (1992b:137). It is in this reality, dejectedly deprived of literature, as agreed in “Women and Fiction,” where “the virtue of women’s writing often lay in divine spontaneity, like that of the blackbird’s song or the thrush’s” (1958:84). This continual idea is protagonist in *A Room of One’s Own*, where she comments upon women’s difficulty to create due to the conditions they lived in. She affirms that fiction, “imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners” (1992a:53). And this task can be accomplished, by her fictional self, Mary Carmichael, with a sensibility that “responded to an almost imperceptible touch on it. It feasted like a plant newly stood in the air on every sight and sound that came its way” (1992a:121). She attributes this character a feat expressed by means of a *ploche*, as celebrating that “she wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman” (1992a:121), rejoicing at the idea of her not being conscious of her sex in her writing.

The example below, taken from *Three Guineas*, shows three of the figures I have just analysed, the *parison*, the rhetorical question and the simile. They highlight her criticism of the patriarchal state in its attainment of women’s lack of education, profession, and personal fulfilment. We can perceive the essence of the essay of Virginia Woolf, as far as a masterful combination of the exposition of ideas fused with the artistry of rhetorical figures, which should help the reader to capture, simultaneously, the intellectual value of the utterance and the delightful quality it is transmitted with.

Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed. The one shuts us up like slaves in a harem; the other forces us to circle, like caterpillars head to tail, round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred tree, of property. It is a choice of evils. Each is bad. Had we not better plunge off the bridge into the river; give up the game; declare that the whole of human life is a mistake and so end it? (1992a:261)

5. CONCLUSION

With this analysis of rhetorical arguments and figures, I have sought to illustrate a different perspective of the study of Virginia Woolf’s feminist

essays. The consideration of arguments as the advance of a specific point of view has been taken in this paper to consider the role that other women have had in History and Literature. The opinions exposed have been deemed rhetorical to the extent that an attentive reader understands how plausible premises can derive into debatable conclusions. The literary essay as an argumentative text fosters the inclusion of these reasonings that can be contested at any time, providing the existence of an opposite or different view. Woolf practises the essay writing influenced not by her Modernist male contemporaries, but by the sixteenth-century ideas of the French essayist Montaigne. His texts convey a subjective standpoint that favours the digressive argument and the need to converse with oneself and the reader, in an attempt to challenge the norms of his time. Likewise, Woolf defies previous historical practices based on the predominance of a linear history which does not usually include little-known and unpublished works and authors.

Both arguments and figures contain linguistic structures that are represented textually. But the communicative value of those reasonings wherein writers and readers take part are achieved in a contextual analysis. This attempt is mainly exploited in this study through the interaction between these women and their acts, a mechanism that allows reconstructing and reinforcing women writers as reflected by their work. This categorisation is further supported by other schemes that either justify or refute her viewpoint at that moment, such as the cause and the consequence arguments. They reflect in the examples above those reasons for the obstacles to women's writing, and the effects which will hopefully bring them the same opportunities as men's. With the repetition argument, Woolf refers to a feminine issue while calling the reader's attention through the use of some reiterative pattern. In the case of the example reasoning, the mention of real and hypothetical female characters and situations helps to clarify the essayist's viewpoint. The rhetorical question is introduced as a way of making the reader ponder on sometimes unanswerable queries. The opposition of ideas is focused on the difficult conflict existent between men and women. Finally, simile is introduced as a metaphorical comparison which also entails a cognitive dimension.

Woolf's endeavour with these essays has been to transmit a parallel reading to that of the mere report of happenings, anecdotes and possible failures or feats of the heroines. The rhetorical analysis allows for a complementary interpretation by which emphasis is placed on how readers recognise the most frequent arguments and how they are constructed. Therefore, they can be persuaded of the value of the judgements exposed, formulated as "an aesthetic

end in itself” and “the expression of personal opinion” with which to address a message which is, more than ever, present today (Lojo 2001:78).

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