

The Angel in the House and the Androgynous Self: A Revisit of Virginia Woolf's Profession for Women

Dr. Amit Tewari¹

Assistant Professor, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Government Degree College,
Bhadohi

raam.aaynic@gmail.com

Dr. Santosh Kumar Mishra²

Assistant Professor, Kashi Naresh Government Post Graduate College, Gyanpur,
Bhadohi

Paper Received on 25-06-2025, Accepted on 29-07-2025
Published on 30-07-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.3.325

Abstract

In her essay, "Professions for Women" (1931), Virginia Woolf claims to have killed the angel in the house continuously interfering in her writing, telling her to be more sympathetic towards men. But what was the angel in the house a reality? If it was, was she really able to get her out of her mind? And what remained after she killed this fictional angel? This question shall be examined in this research paper. Along with the above questions, this paper also endeavors to explore the subconscious pattern of Woolf's mind in which she appears to be androgynous. She talks about the fears and impediments that women have faced in comparison to men in the field of writing. She recalls the great women writers who, anyhow, crossed the bridge of inferiority against male supremacy.

Keywords: Androgyny, subconscious pattern, inferiority, women writers, male supremacy.

According to Virginia Woolf, she was finally successful in eliminating the fictional angel who always suggested that she be sympathetic towards male writers when she was writing reviews of books written by men. This angel stood as a symbol of all the traditional ideas that were prevalent about women in the Victorian Age and before, which expected them to carry forward the gender roles that they were assigned. She was supposed to sacrifice for the family and pretend to be foolish, having no mind of her own. She was not supposed to think for herself; rather, she was expected to flatter

men who acted as her guardians. She was supposed to do this to continue receiving favours from men, as she was not allowed to take up a job for her living. For ages, she has served as a lens to enhance the image of a man, she writes '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 (Woolf:35).

In the essay, the writer was supposed to speak about those experiences that were peculiar to women, although the problems that she spoke about cannot be said entirely to be of women alone. Flattery of successful men is a thing that is not necessarily expected only from women. However, for a woman entering into the field of writing, every experience is liable to be regarded as one particular to women, as she has no prior idea of the problems that are faced by her male counterparts. Men have been eulogizing women for ages, and women have gotten used to those lies so much that they find it difficult to do the same for them. The continuous flattery has fanned their egos so much that they cannot even praise men for the drudgery they have done since the beginning of time to protect their families. If they had a sinking ship, they asked their wife and children to leave before happily settling down at the bottom of the sea. Accepting in her own words, 'He thought her beautiful, believed her impeccably wise; dreamed of her, wrote poems to her, which, ignoring the subject, she corrected in red ink'.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the father of Judith Shakespeare was labelled as the bad guardian and was depicted as a symbol of patriarchy while his children always loved their mother more. He earned a bad reputation while he was trying to safeguard his daughters from being abused by people like Nick Green. It was not his fault that Nature created her with the merits and demerits of a woman. In restraining her, he had no hidden interest. Most probably, he did so with the advice of his wife, though it is likely that the people who were encouraging her to run were guided by the lust of her body.

Woolf is slightly confused at the beginning of the speech, where she says that women have little experience in the field of writing, and then she lists several female writers while mentioning that the path has already been made smooth by them:

My profession is literature; and in that profession there are fewer experiences for women than in any other, with the exception of the stage--fewer, I mean, that are peculiar to women. 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. (Woolf, 149)

At the beginning of the essay, she implies that writing was chosen by her as a profession because of the cheapness of paper, but reveals later that she has an yearly allowance of 500 pounds left by her ancestors, 'the cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in the other professions, (Woolf, 148). A woman with such an allowance can choose any profession, or she can choose not to work. But this advice does not apply to the common woman, who has to work along with their husbands to meet the requirements of their family. Being the daughter of a well-known person, she admits that she is unaware of the day-to-day struggles of the common folk:

But to show you how little I deserve to be called a professional woman, how little I know of the struggles and difficulties of such lives, I have to admit that instead of spending that sum upon bread and butter, rent, shoes and stockings, or butcher's bills, I went out and bought a cat – a beautiful cat, a Persian cat, which very soon involved me in bitter disputes with my neighbours. (Woolf, 148)

If the motive behind writing a book review is buying a Persian cat, and it includes the flattery of one man, then writing a novel to buy a car might involve the flattery of a thousand. A female writer cannot displease men and hope to become a bestseller. Probably this is the reason behind many female writers taking male pen names, for if they wrote with their original female names and spat anger towards men, their writings would be deemed as biased. A writer who hopes to buy a motor-car with the royalties earned through his writings cannot pretend to be a revolutionary, and has to continuously amuse and entertain both sexes, and prominently, men.

Woolf talks about the female experience using the analogy of a fisherman, who, coincidentally, is also a man. She is not writing out of first-hand experience, but most probably using a poetic idea of the fishing profession, possibly created by a male poet. This analogy is not new as Robert Lynd has already used it in his essay 'On Forgetting'. Woolf thinks that first-hand experience is an important factor in writing, and women were not allowed to have such experience. Paradoxically, she also talks of privacy and comfort when she complains about women not having a room of their own. She believes that a woman should have a hefty allowance if she has to succeed in the profession of writing:

He wants to see the same faces, to read the same books, to do the same things day after day, month after month, while he is writing, so that nothing may break the

illusion in which he is living--so that nothing may disturb or disquiet the mysterious nosings about, feelings round, darts, dashes and sudden discoveries of that very shy and elusive spirit, the imagination. (Woolf, 149)

In doing this, she slightly undermines the fact that to achieve success, a person has first to get out of their comfort zone, regardless of gender. She mentions the fact that writers like Tolstoy excelled in the art of writing because they had a great deal of experience, but the fact that there were many writers, including Shakespeare, who didn't have verifiable experience of the things that they were writing about effectively. They were successful in compensating for this drawback with their imagination. Also, aspiring for having the privacy of a motor car and 'a room of one's own' cannot lead a writer to have experience that is earned only by travelling, the kind that is possessed by great writers such as Tolstoy.

While Woolf claims to have killed the angel in the house, it is seen continuously lurking in the background of her essay. She is still afraid to talk about her deep bodily desires out of the fear of displeasing men. She is shaken out of her dreams when trying to delve deep into the dark and unexplored sea of the unconscious, thinking about her passions, a thought of shocking men awakens her. At a place, she dumbfounds many when she, perhaps unintentionally, juxtaposes the profession of writing with that of prostitution, 'Writing is like sex. First, you do it for love, then you do it for your friends, and then you do it for money'.

Perhaps the exorcism of the angel in the house is not possible for Woolf, or for any other feminist writer. Like Lady Macbeth, she can loudly claim that she can kill her baby while it is suckling her bosom, and glorify murder, finding it hard to cope when the murder is committed in reality, 'The consciousness of--what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer'. (Woolf, 150)

The psyche that Woolf addresses as 'Angel in the House' is probably the same thing termed as the androgynous self that is found in some male writers according to her in works such as *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Psychologically, men cannot be differentiated from women as they are raised in a similar system, comprising fathers and mothers. It is their life experience that changes their perception later on and teaches them to modify their approach towards each other.

If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have an effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties.

The resistance that Woolf shows through her exploration is very close to establish androgynous self. She does not want writers to adhere the philosophy posed by male writers, rather they should delimit the boundaries of female writings. Woolf wishes to navigate the insipid and hidden power towards the freedom that may change the present as well as future. The strict roles set by society can be dismantled by androgynous self of women. It is, perhaps, not to set aside the artistic self of male writings but to construct the female strong self in response. It is based on the idea of equality and feasibility of gender identity. The text brings out the oblivious self of women and enhances their scope of creativity.

Therefore, it is observed that Virginia has been, at large, unsuccessful in killing 'the angel in the house'. It is fused together with her psyche and has been termed as the androgynous self. Any damage done to the angel would only affect the spontaneity and the beauty of her writings as well as the writings of female writers. The literature that she creates is possibly the result of the intercourse that takes place with the male part of her subconscious.

Citations

Woolf, Virginia *A Room of One's Own*. Hogarth Press, 1929

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Hogarth Press, 1925

Woolf, Virginia. *The Death of Moth: And Other Essays*. Hogarth Press, 1942