

Femininity and the Psychology of Clothing in the Work of Virginia Woolf

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ABSTRACT

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The following thesis examines the relation of 'femininity' to clothing in the work of Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf is a writer whose work tries to establish a self-reifying image of woman that guarantees political visibility for women. Her construction of women's new identity and image depends on securing a feminine image divorced from the traditional phallogocentric notion of male versus female. Woolf tries to set up a feminine self free from gender constriction and construction. This dissertation draws attention to the diversity of ways in which, in her work, images of clothing are central to Woolf's exploration of the nature of 'femininity'.

Woolf's use of clothing varies in every novel as she explores different aspects of femininity each time. On one level she shows how clothes are a symptom of the phallogocentric system and on another level she allows images of clothing to evoke epistemological questions as to how far the costume is part of the female body/self and gender and to what extent clothes mould the heart and brain. As Orlando puts it: '[Do] clothes wear ... us ... [or] we them?' (O 117).

Chapter 1 offers a survey of costume between 1880-1940. The following chapters 2 to 5 focus on the female body and the costume that conceals it. Mrs Dalloway, To The Lighthouse and Orlando address whether femininity is masquerade or whether femininity is something women are born with. Chapters 6 and 7 examine Woolf's shift from searching for the 'I' of the individual to the communal 'we' of society as World War II approaches. Her writing takes the form of a historical chronicle as she concentrates on the danger of women's image in promoting war in the following novels: The Years, Three Guineas and Between the Acts.

Woolf uses images of clothing to enhance the battle between the sexes which she argues forms the slave/tyrant relationship; in other words, tyranny starts at home.