

EXPLORING THE TRANS LIFE THROUGH VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO: A BIOGRAPHY*

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to examine how transgender identity is portrayed in Virginia Woolf's "*Orlando*." Published in 1928, the novel narrates the tale of Orlando, a figure who experiences a gender transition from male to female and lives for centuries, exploring many historical eras and social norms. The primary objective of this thesis is to shed light on the complexity of trans identity and its investigation in literature by analyzing how Orlando's transgender journey is portrayed by Woolf. It is an examination of Orlando's metamorphosis as well as the experiences and difficulties the character endured after that.

This research paper examines how Woolf challenges conventional ideas of gender and investigates the fluidity of identity by analyzing the novel's themes of gender, identity, and societal standards. The paper concludes by arguing that "*Orlando*" is an important literary work that not only defies social standards but also provides a sensitive and nuanced depiction of transsexual realities. This study adds to the larger conversation on trans representation in literature by analyzing Woolf's treatment of gender and identity from Orlando's perspective and emphasizes the ongoing significance of Woolf's investigation of the trans life.

Exploring the Trans-life Through Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*: A Biography

The field of transgender literature explores the lives, identities, and struggles of people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. This domain addresses themes of self-discovery, societal acceptance, and the intersections of gender with other aspects of identity such as race and sexual orientation. One of the recurrent motifs of twentieth century literary representation of transgender is the ways in which gender identity is attained, confirmed or normalized through the construction of “others”, whose experiences are mediated through the discourses of colonialism, empire and race.

In the limelight of Virginia Woolf's sixth major work *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), one can examine the ways in which a fictional narrative reflects, molds, or transforms evolving understandings on gender. A wonderful historical biography, the book accurately depicts transsexualism along with raising questions on the conventional ideas about human identity, sexuality and love. Orlando, the protagonist of the novel, is a well-to-do aristocrat who enjoys adventure and arts. Over the course of the story's more than 300 years, Orlando only ages thirty six.

Based on Vita Sackville-West, Woolf's real-life love interest, Orlando shares West's beliefs, which are profoundly ingrained in his upbringing and those of his long line of noble ancestors. Orlando is able to consider the various viewpoints and experiences of each gender by switching genders (from male to female) midway through the book. She is a thoughtful person who yearns for both life and love and considers poetry to be one of her greatest source of fulfilment. Orlando is only restricted by the present, which terrifies her because of the potential for danger. She discovers in the present that she is made up of multiple selves than

just one. With the help of her love of nature, her various selves, experiences, and multiple perspectives, Orlando is able to deconstruct her true orientation as well as the sense of self.

Orlando employs the fantastic genre to examine the viewpoint of a person who has experienced both being a man and being a woman, thereby arriving at a conclusion that a character who combines both male and female traits would form a better individual. In Western countries, the predominant understanding of gender assumes a causal link between sex, gender, and desire. It is assumed that there is first a sex, which is conveyed through a gender, and that is followed by a sexuality. *Orlando* examines the effects of preserving memories of one's former sex after transition as well as some of the psychological changes associated with coming to occupy a body or a gender identity that is subject to distinct social expectations than one's sex at birth. This is done by following Orlando's divergent experiences as a man and a woman across various periods in English history.

Orlando raises subjectivity-related questions that are identical to those that have been covered in a great deal of recent writing on transgender people. A postmodern perspective to the body can be seen in Orlando's sequence of self-conscious denials of assigning a reason for the most important transformation in his life. Orlando enters a seven-day trance during his time in Turkey serving as King Charles' ambassador. He awakes completely naked and transformed: "He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! We have no choice left but confess – he was a woman" (132).

Orlando accepts multiplicity and contradiction rather than requiring narrative consistency or the reminding of a significant gender expression to make sense of the protagonist's subjectivity. Even though the transformation may be argued to fall under the recognized realm of transsexuality, the narrative repeatedly proposes a more elastic

embodiment of gender, in which Orlando's transformation would be a singular, static crossover from male to female. Orlando engages in what is commonly referred to as "passing" in transgender literature, in order to acquire a "normal" gender status. She needs to put in a lot of efforts to pass as her new gender, which shows how being a normally sexed person is in fact a contingent accomplishment. Orlando must make an effort to establish her femininity in a self-conscious manner, in contrast to "normal" women or men, who believe what they are doing is just natural. She thus exposes a lot of the unspoken rules that govern the development and sustenance of our two-dimensional gender system. However, the brilliantly transformed Orlando and modern transgender and transsexual people vary slightly from one another. Orlando's physical attributes and way of presenting herself are easily recognised as feminine and female, thus they do not outwardly disrupt the gender hierarchy.

Orlando's situations and the text's rhetorical style are relevant to transgender studies though they do not directly mirror those of modern transgendered people.

People who have lived through timelines other than the typical, forward-moving, linear timelines that society has imposed on them have started to embrace the critical idea of 'trans temporality'. It refers to the intricate ways in which transgender experiences are positioned over time, challenging traditional ideas of a linear and stable understanding of identity. Transgender and transfeminism researchers have looked at the expectations and realities of trans people and their transitions (or existence outside of a linear schedule of transition) using the trans temporality discourse. Trans temporality recognizes that the journey of recognizing and accepting one's gender identity is a procedure that unfolds across different temporal stages. Dealing with the past, present, and future facets of their gender identity is a common temporal terrain that transgender people navigate.

The major focus of the work concerning the idea of trans temporality is the perceptions and narrative of transition, which forces trans people to follow a linear development of change. Such a linear narrative of transition strengthens binary views of gender through the creation of a straight chronology from desired sex to born sex, in which only one static transformation takes place. The author subverts preconceived notions of femininity and masculinity by entwining alternate temporality and gender flexibility. Woolf adapts typical trans temporality throughout several of her contemporary works, frequently using the structure of her works to highlight the rift between identity and time in post-World War I England. Trans temporality acknowledges the existence of transgender identities across history and embraces historical perspectives. The manner in which people relate to their gender has changed over time as a result of the increased awareness and acceptance of transgender experiences.

Through the character, she investigates centuries of bourgeois experience in both male and female in addition to offering a distinctive perspective into the history of England. When associated with works that examine temporality as frequently experienced by trans identifying people, Woolf's use of time and Orlando's shift between feminine and male ways allow a fruitful discussion of the non-linearity of transgender existence. Orlando is able to defy gender and sexual standards of the time throughout the book because of Woolf's manipulation of temporality, which is visible in Orlando's extended lifetime. Woolf starts to critically evaluate the notion of linear temporality across all realms through Orlando's existence and subjective perception of time. Orlando, who is alone and dealing with issues, discovers that,

“his whole past, which seemed to him of extreme length and variety, rushed into the falling second, swelled it a dozen times its natural size, coloured it all the tints of the rainbow and filled it with all the odds and ends in the universe” (99).

Orlando's examination of desire, gender, and body clearly matches with modern feminist and transgender ideologies. *Orlando* shares common elements with numerous transgender narratives, both autobiographical and theoretical works. The novel's contribution to transgender studies is not in examining the motivations behind bodily transition, but rather in suggesting that a "trans-feminist" politics could be developed by examining the effects that gender inequality has on trans experience. As the trans people represent a space "in between" or rather outside of a rigid gender binary, Woolf's depictions of Orlando who becomes both masculine and feminine, align closely with the modern concepts of transfeminism.

The feminism at work in Woolf's parody of British law do not deem her novel irrelevant to transgender studies. Instead, they draw attention to analogies between Orlando's legal status and the challenges transgender people still face today, who are frequently vulnerable to the whims of organizations that rely on a binary concept of gender. Although the male Orlando never dresses in women's clothing, the female Orlando often dresses as a man, cross-dressing to allow her to move freely through the society. Orlando's efforts to challenge conventional ideas about gender and sexuality can be interpreted as an effort to stop the binary gender system. It aims to cause a rearticulation of the norms of legitimacy and intelligibility that would lead to the expansion of gender system outside the constricting frameworks of heterosexuality and male dominance.

Woolf shows how the law has the authority to interfere with how a person expresses their gender and how it desires and is able to force gender fluid people to conform to binary gender in order to be considered a good citizen in the state's eyes. Although Orlando's birth into the British aristocracy gives him access to riches, ancestry, and tradition that other, less fortunate trans people, the law still has a significant impact on the character. When the court

rules that Orlando's sex is unquestionably female, the character's fluidity and open vacillation slow down and she starts to follow a more heteronormative schedule.

Overall, transgender literature continues to be an essential medium for promoting consciousness, empathy, and a more complex understanding of gender variation as the literary environment changes. The novel itself can be read as a trans text that rebels against the rigid gender norms of time through the character's own gender instability. It brings attention to the existence of equivalent socio political and historical issues concerning gender in the modern era. By toying with gender stereotypes, Woolf undermines the rigidity of the distinct categories of male and female and further demonstrates that gender is not ultimate. Orlando now exists between the living and the dead, royalty and commoners as a result of her transition from male to female, placing her in a philosophically uncertain situation. Orlando encourages us to view sexism, homophobia, and transphobia as discrete yet related issues in the world.

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