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Virginia Woolf and the F-Word:
On the Difficulties of Defining Woolf's (Anti-)Feminism.

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Abstract

The following master's thesis discusses Virginia Woolf's essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* from contemporary feminist points of views in order to define the nature of Woolf's feminism. The two feminist theorists Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler serve as the bases of the two most widely known branches in feminist theory today, the sexual difference theory on the one hand, and the theory rejecting compulsory heterosexuality and supporting the concept of change through performativity on the other hand. These modern theories are presented, discussed, and effectively applied to Woolf's work. In addition, the two feminist critics Elaine Showalter's and Toril Moi's opinions and debates on Woolf's feminism contribute to the attempt of defining the nature of Woolf's feminism with modern theories in mind. The paper concludes with a definition of Woolf's feminism as containing aspects of both theories presented, thus underlining the complexity and progressiveness of Woolf as a feminist writer in the early twentieth century. Her feminism cannot be strictly categorized, it is unique.

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1 Introduction

> The old names as we have seen are futile and false. "Feminism," we have had to destroy. "The emancipation of women" is equally inexpressive and corrupt.[1]

Virginia Woolf is nowadays often referred to as an early feminist writer; from the point of view of a Woolf reader in the 21st century, there seems to be no doubt about Woolf's status as a feminist. Woolf herself, however, was very critical about the term feminism, hence the term the *f-word*. Many political and social changes took place during her lifetime, achieved mainly by female activists for the women in England. The feminist goals back then appear to have been clearly formulated to today's readers of Woolf: Women were by no means equal and, consequently, the activists sought for representation and equality. However, when studying Woolf's works in detail it becomes increasingly more difficult to define what kind of feminism she represented. Did she participate in the women's movement? Did she advocate equality of the sexes? Was she a radical feminist? And even more so, considering that she claimed the word to be corrupt, was she a feminist at all? How can Virginia Woolf's feminism be defined now that feminism has taken so many different forms? These questions serve as the guidelines for this thesis with the aim at providing an overview of the nature of Woolf's feminism from different feminist perspectives. The basis are her two popular essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas,* the reason being that essays, unlike novels, supposedly present the writer's unmediated point of view.[2] Whether this assumption is correct in the case of the two essays will be discussed later in the text.

More than eighty years after the publication of the earlier essay, equality of women and men has, at least in theory, been established in the Western world. Feminist theorists have elaborated on the differences, similarities, and peculiarities between and within the sexes. Even within the subject area of feminist theory there are vast differences. The field of gender/women's studies is not at all coherent and harmonious in itself as the different theories differ to a great extent and are at times contrasting. The two most prevalent feminist theories are those of the Continental and the Anglo-American tradition.[3] The feminists of the former group base their arguments on sexual difference, whereas the theorists following the latter group advocate a rejection of the category of sex. The Anglo-American feminists thus dismiss what functions as the basis for the Continental feminists. These two contrasting feminist stands serve as points of departure in determining Woolf's feminism. In the first instance, the theories and ideas expressed by feminists in the academic field today seem

1 Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*. 1938. London: Hogarth Press, 1943, p.248.
2 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own.* 1929. London: Hogarth Press, 1949.
3 "Continental" and "Anglo-American" merely refer to the feminist directions of the respective theorists and do not mean to indicate their nationalities. The terms have long been established in the field of feminist studies.

to differ greatly from the thoughts Virginia Woolf developed in her writings. The theories today are more complex and more detailed, and naturally so, as the theorists were able to refer to already established discourses. The overall input and intellectual exchange between feminists is much greater today than it has ever been before. Their theories focus on very specific ideas and philosophies to which Woolf did not have access as they had not been recognized as such. Thus, at first view, Woolf and the modern theorists do not seem to have much in common. Interestingly enough, though, many theorists nowadays mention that Virginia Woolf's work has influenced them. Based on the two camps of feminism today Woolf's essays are read and re-interpreted concerning their feminist views.

The first part of this thesis concerns Woolf's feminism and the feminist movement of her time. To begin with, some important biographical aspects are mentioned in order to give an account of the events and values that influenced Virginia Woolf, especially in terms of feminist ideas. Did Woolf have a strong feminist background? In what way was she a representative of the English woman in the early twentieth century? To what extent was she different considering her family background and professional environment? The brief biographical account is by no means complete but presents facts that are relevant to the discussion. What follows is a presentation of Woolf's very own perception of feminism, which was certainly not a linear one. The main works of reference are Naomi Black's *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* as well as Quentin Bell's biography on Woolf.[4] Furthermore, Woolf's central feminist fields of interest are examined. Which feminist – or feminism related – topics was she most concerned about? The aspects mentioned in this section provide the reader with a first overview of Woolf's feminism and will be completed as the discussion moves on in the course of the thesis. The first part concludes with important benchmark data of British history concerning women's rights that aim at putting Woolf's works and her feminist ambitions into historical and political context.

Hereafter, emphasis is put on the Continental camp of feminism and its main theoretical ideas. The Italian feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti is a representative of the theory of sexual difference and the essays published in her book *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* serve as the main works of reference concerning the theories of the Continental feminists.[5] Braidotti is certainly not the most prominent representative of the theory of sexual difference. However, she manages to include and discuss various fields of feminism in her essays and does not fail to refer to other thinkers of the time and of the past. Furthermore, she has

4 Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004.
Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. I & II. London: Hogarth Press, 1973.

5 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

established a model of the three levels of sexual difference/s, which is first discussed in detail in this paper in order to be applied to Woolf's essays afterward. Braidotti's model thus provides the theoretical ground of the Continental feminists' thoughts. Parts of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* are interpreted in the context of sexual difference/s and represent examples of the nature of Virginia Woolf's feminism. This detailed analysis of Woolf's writings on feminist issues with regard to Braidotti's theoretical points enables the reader to recognize parallels and discrepancies between the two. Could Woolf's feminism be defined as advocating the sexual difference theory and if so, to what extent?

Braidotti's theories are followed by those of the American philosopher Judith Butler, who will serve as the representative of the Anglo-American feminist tradition. Butler's book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, published in 1990, presents a feminist view beyond the binary system of the sexes; its significance in the field of feminist/gender studies is immense and will thus present the counter-position to the theory of sexual difference.[6] Judith Butler questions the category of sex as a restrictive label leading to exclusion and proceeds to challenge the normative attitude towards heterosexuality in order to present the dangers of such norms. These issues are presented and discussed in the first section dealing with Butler's theoretical implementations. In addition to that, her thoughts on gender confusion as well as the concept of performativity along with its opportunities for change are subjects of her theory and of this thesis. The complex theoretical observations are then applied to Woolf's essays to examine if Butlerian thoughts are at all present in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Was Woolf familiar with the opposition of the binary system of the sexes? Was she aware of its restrictions and if so, what did she make of it? Did Woolf likewise challenge the compulsory nature of heterosexuality? Reading Woolf's two essays with two opposing modern feminist theories in mind offers very different approaches to the feminist issues discussed by Woolf in the first half of the twentieth century. The analyses provide a spectrum of possible forms of feminism taken up and presented by Woolf.

After analyzing Virginia Woolf's works with the two specific contemporary feminist theories as patterns, emphasis is put on a general debate on Woolf's feminism. Literary critics have shown skepticism regarding the author's feminist stands and some have questioned if Woolf can be considered a feminist at all. To begin with, the flaws in Woolf's feminism that seem obvious from today's feminist points of view are discussed. This is followed by opinions from Black and Braidotti, commenting on the quality of Woolf's position concerning women's rights and their empowerment. The main part of the debate, however, focuses on two positions that could hardly be

6 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1990. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.

more contrasting. On the one hand, the American literary critic Elaine Showalter's controversial point of view on Woolf is discussed in detail. In her book *A Literature of Their Own* she famously challenged not only Woolf's feminism as set out in her novels and essays but especially emphasized the author's private life as an indicator of the feminism, or rather, the lack thereof.[7] Showalter's negation of Woolf's stand on women's issues thus functions as the counterpart to Toril Moi's arguments that are in favor of the author's ambitions concerning the rights of women. The Norwegian literary critic's introduction to her work *Sexual/Textual Politics*, published a few years after Showalter's book, refers directly to the American critic's assertion that Woolf was an anti-feminist.[8] Moi's book was called a "historically incorrect anti-American diatribe" by feminist critic and Woolf scholar Jane Marcus.[9] However, both publications contain flaws that are pointed out in this debate on Woolf and that ultimately help to define the English author's feminism.

In the conclusion, the results from the previous analyses of the feminist theorists Braidotti, Butler, Black, Moi, and Showalter are summarized in order to present an attempt at defining the nature of Woolf's feminism as well as the reasons for the difficulties involved in such an undertaking.

2 The feminism of Virginia Woolf and her time

2.1 Important biographical aspects

Adeline Virginia Stephen was born in 1882 as the third child of Julia and Leslie Stephen. She and her siblings were home-schooled by their parents and several private teachers; unlike her brothers, she and her sister Vanessa were not sent off to school after their elementary school years.[10] Nonetheless women's education was of great importance to the Stephens. Still, Virginia's parents cannot be referred to as feminists: Leslie was against the right for women to vote and Julia supported the 1889 "Appeal against Female Suffrage;" the decision to educate their daughters at home coincided with Julia's disapproval of sending girls to school.[11] At the age of nine, Virginia started a newspaper with her elder siblings Thoby and Vanessa, a project that was encouraged by their parents, and that reflected the children's talents and appreciation for literature and the arts.[12] When Virginia was thirteen, her mother Julia died; at age fifteen she lost her half-sister and mother

7 Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977.
8 Moi, Toril: *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory.* 1985. London: Routledge, 1991.
9 Marcus, Jane: "Pathographies: The Virginia Woolf Soap Operas." *Signs*, 17.4 (1992), p.815.
10 Cf. Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. I, 1973, pp.26-27.
11 Cf. Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, p.36.
12 Cf. Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography,* Vol. I, 1973, p.28.

figure Stella; in 1904, her father Leslie died, and in the year 1906 her brother Thoby passed away. These losses had a great effect on Virginia's life and were said to have led to several breakdowns and a suicide attempt.[13] Her health was constantly at stake. Not only did Virginia suffer from severe depression but from phases of anorexia, too.[14]

On the subject of feminism, Quentin Bell writes:

> She had, for a long time, been in sympathy with the feminist cause, but it was not until 1 January 1910, Janet Case having put the arguments for political action with unanswerable force, that Virginia wrote to her saying that she could neither do sums, nor argue, nor speak, but would like in some humbler way to be helpful.[15]

Thus, unlike her mother Julia, Virginia supported the feminist movement. She was convinced of the aims but refused to be politically involved to an extent that would require attending public events or making public statements. The work for this suffrage group remained her only activity for a group promoting women's rights. Virginia's sense for equality is reflected in her plans for a changed living situation in 1911 when she was eager to move into a house with three men: Her brother Adrian Stephen, the economist John Maynard Keynes, and her future husband Leonard Woolf. Every individual was to have their own floor; they were to be independent from each other, except at meal times.[16]

Virginia Stephen and Leonard Woolf got married in 1912. The couple spent hours writing novels side by side; letters from both of them draw a picture of their marriage as an equal union of man and woman. It was a “solid and happy marriage” despite the fact that no overly physical affection was involved.[17] Virginia's strong rejection of any kind of sexual activity is said to be linked to her half-brothers Gerald and George Duckworth. In 1973, Quentin Bell called George's behavior a “misconduct;”[18] today it would be called child abuse and pedophilia. When Virginia was six years of age, twenty-year-old George examined her private parts. “Virginia felt that George had [spoiled] her life before it had fairly begun. Naturally shy in sexual matters, she was from this time terrified back into a posture of frozen and defensive panic.”[19] Contrary to Bell's assumption that only George was involved in this abuse, it was Gerald who undertook said examination of six-year-old Virginia. George began to molest Virginia by laying down in her bed repeatedly against her will after her mother's death in 1895.[20]

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13 Cf. Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography,* Vol. I, 1973, pp.89-90 & 190-195.
14 Cf. Briggs, Julia: *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life.* London: Allen Lane, 2005, pp.21, 37, 43.
15 Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography,* Vol. I, 1973, p.161.
16 Cf. ibid., p.175.
17 Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. II, 1973, p.204.
18 In *Virginia Woolf: A Biography,* Vol. I, 1973, p.228.
19 Ibid., p.44.
20 Cf. Poole, Roger: *The Unknown Virginia Woolf.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, pp.27-34.

In 1928, Virginia's friend Vita Sackville-West explained her frigidity with a simple but strong aversion to male domination.[21] It was with Sackville-West that Virginia ostensibly had a love affair over a period of four years, beginning in 1925. Virginia was attracted to her personality and, more notably so, to her beauty. There was a physical attraction that had not been articulated by Woolf before. This love affair with Sackville-West, however, did not affect Virginia's love for Leonard.[22]

With Leonard, she founded the Hogarth Press in 1917, enabling both of them to publish their own writings directly and with the most possible freedom. The printing press purchase had been planned for a long time and required a financial plan. The Woolfs were not poor but Leonard refused to pay for the press with his securities. Despite this, the two writers were members of the upper-middle class; they employed servants, were well-educated, and relatively well-off. Before the first Hogarth publication, their income was based on minimal earnings from novels, on Leonard's savings, and on Virginia's several inheritances.[23] The Hogarth Press did not only publish writings by the Woolfs themselves but other important works by writers such as T.S. Eliot, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Naomi Black refers to Hogarth as "feminist-friendly," indicating that it was supportive of feminist writings, among other things.[24] As mentioned above, the Woolfs' marriage was very much based on equality. Leonard can be referred to as feminist given the fact that he was convinced that men and women should have equal rights and that the suppression of women needed to be abolished.[25] Throughout her life, Virginia had always been surrounded by friends and acquaintances supporting the women's movement either actively or via silent approval.[26]

On 28 March, 1941, at the age of fifty-nine, Virginia Woolf wrote a letter to her husband, beginning with the words "Dearest, I feel certain I am going mad again,"[27] alluding to her assumption that yet another manic-depressive phase was on its way. On this day she went to a near-by river and committed suicide by drowning, with heavy stones in her pockets to make sure that this attempt would be her last.

2.2 Virginia Woolf and the f-word

Woolf's essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* are nowadays referred to as feminist pieces of writings. Neither of them can be put entirely into the category of non-fiction, though,

21 Cf. Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. II, 1973, p.6.
22 Cf. ibid., pp.116-117.
23 Cf. ibid., pp.38-41.
24 Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, p.101.
25 Cf. ibid., p.149.
26 A list of feminist activists in Woolf's immediate as well as larger environment can be found in: Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, pp.35-36.
27 Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. II, 1973, p.226.

because Woolf managed to create non-fictional essays with fictional elements. The essays have narrators; it is not Woolf herself speaking with her own voice. However, the narrators resemble the author to a great extent and the feminist views presented conform with those of Woolf herself.[28] Her nephew and biographer Quentin Bell would later say that "in *A Room of One's Own* one hears Virginia speaking,"[29] meaning that the ideas presented reflect her own thoughts on the matter. This is why, in the following and for the sake of readability, I refer to "Woolf" more so than to "the narrator", unless it is important to make that distinction in the respective context.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf explicitly calls for the destruction of the word feminism as, to her, it is no longer of any use:

> Let us invent a new ceremony for this new occasion. What more fitting than to destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete? The word "feminist" is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means "one who champions the rights of women." Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. And a word without a meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word.[30]

To feminist and non-feminist readers alike today, this statement sounds cynical, especially considering that Woolf is generally associated with feminist literary writing. However, cynicism was not intended as the following remarks by Woolf on the terms feminism and feminist will show. Woolf's aversion to these words and the meanings she associated with them were genuine. The right she thought was the most important right to be achieved by women had successfully been fought for. Theoretically, women now had the same opportunities as men. In reality, or in practice, that is, this was not the case and, somewhat paradoxically, this is exactly what Woolf criticizes in *Three Guineas*. She was well aware of the ongoing suppression of women. Women earned considerably less money when they worked in the same positions as men, i.e. if they actually happened to *be* in the same position as men. Even though the professions were now open for men and women alike, women were still discriminated against in most fields of work. So why did Woolf still think that the word feminism was obsolete when at the same time she knew that men and women were not equal in reality? The reason for her statement is simple: Her definition of feminism was confined to the law alone, it seems. Feminism is theory, and, theoretically, women now had the same rights as men. They were equal before the law. To Woolf, it was still important to fight patriarchy but she did not call this undertaking an issue of feminism. The narrow definition of feminism as "one who champions the rights of women" required a new word describing what had to be done for equality's sake in practice after the law had established equality. Woolf even goes as far as to refer to the word

28 Cf. Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, pp.79-80.
29 Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. II, 1973, p.144.
30 Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, p.184.

in question as a destructive term that is “vicious,” indicating that the word alone caused a lot of negative commentary wherever it appeared. The term is a label and labels “kill and constrict.”[31] It separates men and women because men tend to feel excluded by it. The author Naomi Black claims that “Woolf contributed to views of herself as [anti-feminist] and also, unfortunately, helped to discredit the key term itself.”[32] Ironically, Woolf's statements contributed to the negative connotation of the word feminism while she still argued vehemently for the empowerment of women. It is documented that she was much involved in the Women's Co-operative Guild, “a major suffrage and reform organization,” over a period of twenty years, starting in 1913.[33] For Woolf, fighting for women's empowerment and simultaneously demanding the destruction of the term feminism was not a contradiction. This can only be understood by taking into consideration her personal narrow definition of the term, which was a juridical goal that had been reached and, according to Woolf, lost its meaning in consequence.

Three Guineas was published in 1938 but the rejection of the word feminism was not new to Woolf. As early as in 1924, she had stated that she was not a feminist any more, thus implying that at one point in her past she did see herself as such.[34] Eight years before, in January 1916, she wrote a letter to the feminist Margaret Llewelyn Davies, saying that she would “become steadily more feminist” due to reading the news about the war, which she linked to masculinity and patriarchal structures.[35] The Woolf scholar Black defines her feminism as follows:

> […] [*S*]*ocial feminism*, based on women's differences from men, is derived from women's distinctive experience and characteristics. The goal is more than just equality or equal treatment. Virginia Woolf belongs among the social feminists, because of her valorization of women's “[civilization]” as a basis for social and political transformation.[36]

The only time Woolf employs the term feminist in *A Room of One's Own* is when she quotes a man who refers to Rebecca West as an “arrant feminist [who] says that men are snobs[.]”[37] What follows is Woolf defending West by saying that she might have been right in her assumption. What remains is the negative connotation of the word 'feminist'. The man quoted by Woolf uses it as an insult and Woolf does not make an effort to defend it. Nowhere else does the term appear in the essay itself; it can only be found in some introductions of more recent editions. In the 2001 Vintage edition, Hermione Lee introduces the essay as follows: “*A Room of One's Own* is probably the most

31 Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, p.250.
32 Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, p.23.
33 Ibid., pp.38-39.
34 Cf. Woolf, Virginia: *The Diary of Virginia Woolf,* Vol. 2. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. London: Hogarth Press, 1978, p.318.
35 Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, p.19.
36 Ibid., p.10.
37 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.53.

influential feminist essay of the twentieth century."[38] The woman who wanted to destroy the word feminism is now considered an influential feminist. On another occasion, namely one day before the essay's publication, Woolf noted in her diary: "I forecast, then, that I shall get no criticism, except of the evasive jocular kind […]; that the press will be kind & talk of its charm, & sprightiness; also I shall be attacked for a feminist [...]. I am afraid it will not be taken seriously."[39] The diary entry shows that not only Woolf herself had an aversion to the f-word. Her critics used it as an insulting term with a negative connotation as well; it served them as a weapon. That, at least, was what Woolf expected in the reviews that were to be written; being referred to as a feminist was her fear.

The reviews, however, were mostly positive. Not only the critics but also Woolf's close friends were mainly in favor of the work. Apart from the critical success, the essay was a financial success as well.[40] *Three Guineas* sold equally well but was less popular among critics. Woolf received appreciative letters mostly from women but at the same time, the friends closest to her remained silent or critical.[41] Even though Woolf had expected negative reviews and harsh reactions to *Three Guineas* - "I'm going to be beaten, I'm going to be laughed at, I'm going to be held up to scorn and ridicule"[42] - she was still disappointed by her friends' ongoing silence.[43]

2.3 Which feminist topics was Woolf most outspoken about?

Feminism takes a lot of different directions and people fighting for women's rights obviously do not all put emphasis on the same topics. Likewise did Woolf write more extensively and passionately about some topics while she neglected others. One of her central concerns was the problematic phallogocentric order of society as presented in both *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. The patriarchal structures serve as a weapon of oppression for women and suggest their inferiority. Woolf's earlier essay argues that the inferiority of the female mind is a myth created and encouraged especially by men of influence.

A feminist question of great importance today is that of how to manage both motherhood and a career. Woolf hints at this difficult problem when she speaks about Mrs. Seton, the mother of Mary Seton, who is one of the four narrators in *A Room of One's Own*. What possibilities would someone like Mrs. Seton have had at the time? Could she have made money? The answer is yes, but

38 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, London: Vintage, 2001, vii.
39 Woolf, Virginia: *The Diary of Virginia Woolf,* Vol. 3. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. London: Hogarth Press, 1980, p.262.
40 Cf. Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. II, 1973, p.150.
41 Cf. ibid., pp.204-205.
42 Woolf, Virginia: *The Diary of Virginia Woolf,* Vol. 5. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. London: Hogarth Press, 1984, p.64.
43 Cf. ibid., pp.169 & 193.

she could not have been a mother at the same time.[44] This issue is further discussed in *Three Guineas* when the novelist Margaret Oliphant's life and its influence on her work are presented. Woolf points out that Oliphant had to sell “her brain, her very admirable brain, prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty” as she had to write what would be marketable in order to feed her children and enable them to get a good education.[45]

Another current topic to be found in Woolf's writings is that of the sexes' unequal pay for the same work, which today is called the gender pay gap. Woolf compares the positions men and women have in church and observes that even though some positions were very similar, requiring similar responsibilities and attentions that is, the pay gap was tremendous.[46] The same criticism concerns the unequal pay in the civil service: “It is true that women civil servants deserve to be paid as much as men; but it is also true that they are not paid as much as men.”[47]

Furthermore, Woolf notices the inequalities occurring between the sexes in higher ranks, which is now referred to as the glass ceiling in economics. Thus, men are far more often represented in higher positions than women regardless of the theoretical opening of these higher professions to women. Woolf explains this disparity as resulting from the lack of sufficient education that women still have to cope with. Instead of going to university like their brothers, they are forced to stay at home to take care of the family.[48]

The fact that an insufficient education for women leads to a very narrow spectrum of opportunities is a recurrent theme in both of Woolf's essays. It is regarded as the foundation of an independent life. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf demands that new women's colleges be founded and that those colleges reject the curricula established by men, the reason being that they cannot possibly represent the contents and means that are of value and interest for women.[49] At this point she famously links patriarchy to war, thus contradicting pacifism and men's dominance.[50]

2.4 Women's rights and feminism in England at the beginning of the 20th century

At the beginning of the 20th century, women in England were far from being socially or legally equal to men. Women from the working class and the middle class worked predominantly in the fields of teaching and nursing, whereas it was socially not acceptable for upper middle class and

44 Cf. Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.33.
45 Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, p.166.
46 Cf. ibid., p.225.
47 Ibid., p.95.
48 Cf. ibid., pp.86-90.
49 Cf. ibid., pp.61-63.
50 Cf. ibid., pp.97-98.

upper class women to work for pay at all. Instead, they worked voluntarily for organizations and charities and remained economically dependent on their husbands.[51] Professions of higher rank in the civil service were not opened for women until 1919. With the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act women were given the right to enter such upper ranks but at the same time this ostensibly equalizing right did not include the right to equal pay, as women who were to work in the upper ranks of the civil service were not granted the same pay as men in the same position.[52] It took another fifty years until the Equal Pay Act was introduced in 1970.[53]

Starting at the end of the 19th century, the number of women's organizations was increasing though. Women formed groups and thus joined a feminist movement that became larger and larger. In the 1930s, the organizations counted a total of more than two million members, a rapid development proving that women were more than eager to achieve inclusion.[54] Politically, women had been excluded until 1918, even though John Stuart Mill tried to give women the vote, and failed, as early as in 1866.[55] Finally, in 1918, the Representation of the People Act was introduced. All men over the age of twenty-one were granted the right to vote. However, the enfranchisement of women was restricted. Women had to be thirty years of age and, in addition to that, they had to prove land ownership, or an income of at least £5 per year. This restriction yet again excluded a great number of women, especially those of the working class.[56] One decade later, these restrictions were abolished: The 1928 Equal Franchise Act enabled women to vote at the age of twenty-one without any further restrictions.[57]

With these important new laws, women were given more opportunities than ever before, theoretically, that is. Exemplary statistics show that there can be gross differences between theory and practice: “By 1911, women made up only 6 per cent of the higher professions, a proportion which had risen only to 8 per cent by 1951.”[58] By “higher professions,” the author means professions outside the civil service. Professions were legally open to women but the law did not protect women from other kinds of sex discrimination.

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51 Thane, Pat: “The Social, Economic and Political Status of Women.” *20th Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change.* Ed. Paul Johnson. London and New York: Longman, 1994, pp.98-101.

52 Cf. Montgomery, Fiona A.: *Women's Rights. Struggles and Feminism in Britain c.1770-1970.* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006, pp.23-24.

53 Cf. ibid., pp.30-30.

54 Cf. ibid., pp.187-188.

55 Cf. ibid., p.154.

56 Cf. Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own,* 1977, p.32: The fact that women were granted the vote at all supposedly resulted from women's devotion and strengths during World War I. The vote served as a reward for their efforts.

57 Cf. Montgomery, Fiona A.: *Women's Rights,* 2006, p.11.

58 Thane, Pat: “The Social, Economic and Political Status of Women.” 1994, p.100.

3 The theory of sexual difference/s

3.1 Rosi Braidotti and her model of the three levels of sexual difference/s

Rosi Braidotti is a representative of the theory of sexual difference; in "Sexual Difference as a Nomadic Political Project"[59] she starts out by mentioning the history of difference in Europe and the negative connotation the term has as it is afflicted with exclusion. It is of great importance to her "to think through difference."[60] Braidotti describes herself as a nomad and advertises nomadism not as a physical way of moving but as moving between entrenched discourses and questioning as well as connecting them. The nomadic condition is explained as the decomposition of said discourses.[61] As the title of Braidotti's essay suggests, nomadism to her is linked with the theory and thinking of sexual difference, which means that established discourses are reconsidered in the light of this feminist theoretical idea.

Braidotti explicitly criticizes gender studies by saying that gender assumes the symmetry of the sexes by *not* focusing on women's studies. Men's studies are included, the focus shifts away and thus changes. This symmetry of the sexes is described as an "illusion" as the sexes are historically dissymmetrical.[62] Even though gender theorists – like sexual difference theorists – are in favor of abolishing the patriarchal structures along with the stereotypical roles of men and women that have evolved from this patriarchy, their means are different. They advocate androgyny and thereby reject the notion of the sexes. This idea is questioned because a female feminist subject has never existed as an independent and equal counterpart to the male subject and can thus not be rejected in the first place. A rejection would leave women behind as the ever inferior sex. To sexual difference theorists as Braidotti, androgyny cannot be the solution since this would most likely mean that women would adopt masculine modes of thought because that mode is the predominant and known one. A feminine mode of thought is not common since it has never been allowed to be established to the fullest.[63] The means of the sexual difference theorists to abolish patriarchal structures are to empower women by strongly encouraging female identities.

According to Braidotti, the Western world is dominated by a phallogocentric system in which men and women are culturally constructed in an asymmetrical way. Men are transcendent and women are immanent. Eventually, this circumstance led to the development of the theory of *sexual difference*, where the female subject needs to be reformulated.[64] The term "female feminist subject" implies autonomy and self-determination, and suggests that women as female feminist subjects are

59 In Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994.
60 Ibid., p.147.
61 Ibid., p.5.
62 Ibid., p.151.
63 Cf. ibid, p.153.
64 Cf. ibid., p.152-153.

a relatively new manifestation.[65] Thus, female feminist subjects have not existed for a long time, whereas women as female subjects, defined as the inferior other and as such not really subjects but objects, have prevailed in the past. Braidotti uses the term to refer to all women today. When she claims that there is a "need to recode or rename the female feminist subject not as yet another sovereign, hierarchical, and exclusionary subject but rather as a multiple, open-ended, interconnected entity,"[66] she means that the old image of women is obsolete and requires recoding in order to *become* a female feminist subject in the first place. The idea of avoiding the formulation of another hierarchical subject will be pushed to an extreme that will be dealt with later in the text. It is important to establish a female feminist subject that is equal, responsive, and in favor of its differences. Male and female subjects are considered as counterparts in a dualistic system of sexual difference, in which both sexes/genders exist and are equal.

Braidotti proceeds to elaborate on the "new complex feminist subjectivity,"[67] her emphasis being on the woman's complexity as opposed to a narrow established stereotype. She creates three levels of sexual difference: Differences between men and women, differences among women, and differences within each woman.[68] Braidotti's main idea is not that of reinforcing a binary system of the sexes rather than pointing out the complexity that is as much inherent in womanhood as it is in manhood. Her three levels of sexual difference "involve[...] both the critique of existing definitions and representations of women and also the creation of new images of female subjectivity."[69]

The first level is concerned with man as subject and woman as the other, whereas the woman is not present inside the system of phallogocentrism because the man as the "universal notion of the subject"[70] is the only kind of subjectivity possible. This first level of sexual difference does not represent Braidotti's ideal view on the two sexes but the traditional conservative view, which has developed during the time of complete male dominance, i.e. the long time that women have been absent as subjects in history. The theorist only aims at describing the stereotypical images of the differences that have long existed of men and women. Braidotti underlines that her project of the three levels of sexual difference aims at embracing differences and at emphasizing female strengths instead of having women adapt to a stereotypically masculine way of thinking. Women should not have to accommodate themselves to men and imitate their behavior but instead they should try "to elaborate alternative forms of female subjectivity, in a process that is also described as asserting the

65 Cf. Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, p.3.
66 Ibid., p.158.
67 Ibid., p.158.
68 Cf. ibid., pp.159, 162, 165.
69 Ibid., p.158.
70 Ibid., p.159, table 1.

positivity of sexual difference".[71] If they just imitated male behavior they would only wear masculine masks and hide their female selves, which is not concomitant with the agenda of sexual difference theorists. The Belgian sexual difference theorist Luce Irigaray, who is of great influence to Braidotti, even goes as far as to say that men would certainly benefit from adopting stereotypically female characteristics.[72] The sexual differences Braidotti portrays in her model's first level is the result of feminist observations of the dichotomy of the sexes. The differences presented in this first table are to be understood as criticism towards patriarchal structures in which women were confined to the image men created of them. The importance of this level should not be underestimated; "the new is created by revisiting and burning up the old."[73]

The second level presents the differences among women, that is those of the women as the other (as opposed to male subjectivity) and real-life women. It becomes clear that the *woman as the other* is significantly less complex than what Braidotti refers to as *real-life women*, who have diverse identities, experiences, and backgrounds. The woman as the other is a "cultural imago" whereas "real women [are] agents of change."[74] This distinction is essential for the theory of sexual difference because it ascertains that women are not subjected to generalizations but recognized as diverse human beings, which is, to put it simply, reality, as women are indeed not all the same. Feminism concerns all women but not all women are the same or equally concerned, and thus their different standpoints have to be heard in order to allow empowerment for women of all ethnicities, ages, classes, etc.: "Attention to the *situated* as opposed to the universalistic nature of statements is the key idea."[75] Depending on where a woman is situated, her experiences, concerns, and interests will be different from those of other women. Generalizations need to be avoided. At this point, Braidotti could also be said to welcome the different theoretical points of views within the feminist studies as she underlines the importance of taking diversity in general into strong consideration. The Anglo-American group represents feminists situated differently than Continental feminists, thus leading to different opinions on how women's empowerment shall be achieved.

The third level poses the differences within each woman as a female feminist subject. Multiplicity does not only exist among women but within each woman as well; constant new impressions form an ever-changing web of experiences. The subject's identity in particular is being accentuated:

> Identity [...] is a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self; it is relational, in that it requires a bond to the

71 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, p.161.
72 Cf. Irigaray, Luce: *Je, Tu, Nous.* Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1990, p.78.
73 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, p.169.
74 Ibid., p.164.
75 Ibid., p.163.

> "other"; it is retrospective, in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in a genealogical process. Last, but not least, identity is made of successive identifications, that is to say unconscious internalized images that escape rational control.[76]

Identity is complex and to Braidotti it is linked heavily with the unconscious, which cannot be controlled. The theorist promotes the significance of taking inner conflicts with ease and a sense of humor, and allows and justifies contradictory thoughts within each female feminist subject.[77] This is where the term nomadism becomes important as "vertiginous progression toward deconstructing identity; molecularisation of the self."[78] One could argue that this is a mere description of a healthy and relatively balanced individual; Braidotti's ideal is for individuals to become nomads in the philosophic sense.

In conclusion, female subjectivity needs to be reformulated, or rather formulated in the first place, and the generic images of women require reconditioning. This is not a surprising bottom line but Braidotti goes one step further by saying that sexual difference/s should be pushed to an extreme even if that results in repetition regarding the sexualization of women and men: "I have opted for the extreme affirmation of sexed identity as a way of reversing the attribution of differences in a hierarchical mode. This extreme affirmation of sexual difference may lead to repetition, but the crucial factor here is that it empowers women to act."[79] The focus here lies in emphasizing differences, resulting in diversity not only concerning sex but other aspects that are essential to the female identity.

The theorist's solution to the current situation – women are still suppressed in various ways – and the key for change is to study and critically analyze the stereotypical, old image of the gender roles as presented in her sexual difference level one. This is of great importance so as to create a new and empowered image of the female feminist subject, which means an actual autonomous female feminist subject in the first place as there was no self-determined female feminist subject in the past.[80] The importance of the three presented levels is stressed as these levels are said to cover all the different layers of the female feminist subject's identity; "transformation can only be achieved through de-essentialized embodiment or strategically re-essentialized embodiment: by *working through* the multilayered structures of one's embodied self."[81] Level one presents how women were and still are often seen, level two describes how that image comes into play in reality, and level three shows the numerous possibilities and multiplicities of each individual woman.[82]

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76 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, p.166.
77 Cf. ibid..
78 Ibid., p.16.
79 Ibid., p.169.
80 Cf. ibid., pp.169-171.
81 Ibid., p.171.
82 The three levels of sexual difference described by Braidotti in some ways resemble the three phases the philosopher

3.2 Braidotti on Woolf

In "The Subject in Feminism", an essay serving as an inaugural address, Braidotti underlines the importance of education; a connection is made between education and "the buoyant confidence displayed by younger women."[83] She explicitly draws a line between Virginia Woolf's works and contemporary feminism. Woolf's struggles, as described in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* as well as in many of her novels, serve women of today as a memory of the past and of the history of feminism. The British author's experiences serve to raise today's feminists' awareness of what life for women was like in the past and what direction it took until today, by means of feminist practices. Braidotti calls this process feminist genealogy: "Genealogies are politically informed countermemories, which keep us connected to the experiences and the speaking voices of some of the women whose resistance is for us a source of support and inspiration."[84] Considering the quantity and quality of references to Woolf in *Nomadic Subjects* as well as in *Patterns of Dissonance*, the theorist clearly sees Woolf as a source of inspiration. In one of her essays, she even names *Three Guineas* as one of the chief influences on her becoming a feminist.[85] Braidotti manages to present a helpful link between feminist theory and literature; she underlines the importance of a female writer like Woolf at a time when women were not supposed to be writers and especially critical essayists.

3.3 Applying Braidotti to Woolf: To what extent can feminist thoughts of difference be found in Woolf's essays?

In Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own* the criticism of the traditional patriarchal binary system of the sexes is ubiquitous from the very beginning. When the female narrator tries to cross the lawn on a university campus, a male guard tells her off. The scene is commented on as follows: "Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beadle[86]; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place

and feminist theorist Luce Irigaray describes as the stages of her (Irigaray's) work: "Thus, three phases: the first a critique, you might say, of the auto-mono-centrism of the Western subject; the second, how to define a second subject; and the third phase, how to define a relationship, a philosophy, an ethic, a relationship between two different subjects." (Irigaray, Luce: "'Je-Luce Irigaray': A Meeting with Luce Irigaray." By Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson. Trans. Elizabeth Hirsh and Gaëtan Brulotte. *JAC online*. 16.3 (1995), p.344.) Irigaray's first two phases share strong similarities with Braidotti's first two levels of sexual difference, her third phase, however, differs entirely. Braidotti does not fail to criticize Irigaray's choice of focuses. (Cf. Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects,* 1994, p.170.)

83 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects,* 1994, p.233.

84 Ibid., p.207.

85 Cf. Ibid., pp.142 & 232.

86 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "in the English universities [a Beadle] (at present conventionally spel[led] bedel, -ell,) [is] the name of certain officials, formerly of two ranks distinguished as esquire bedels and yeomen bedels, having various functions as executive officers of the University." In this context it is obvious that the officer mentioned by Woolf is of the male sex.

for me."[87] Right at the outset Woolf presents three dualistic oppositions: The beadle as the man contrary to the woman; the turf contrary to the uncomfortably graveled path; the scholars contrary to Woolf, who represents the woman as the uneducated sex. Thus, being a man means being able to move freely and everywhere, to cut one's own path – with short-cuts via the lawn or by walking on the gravel – and to be educated. A woman, however, stays immanent, her options are limited, she moves within a certain defined space – be it in society or the house itself –, and she is most certainly not a scholar but remains little educated or does not receive any education at all. This is the binary system that Woolf recognized and it almost conforms with Rosi Braidotti's observations in her first level of sexual differences: The differences between man as subject and woman as the other. This is what Woolf observes on campus: The woman tries to disturb the order and the man rebukes her in order to keep the established binary system of the sexes alive, along with the characteristics that are associated with this system.

Woolf draws a picture of the sexes' status quo in Great Britain of the 1920s; the whole first chapter is devoted to the fact that men and women are separated in society. This is described in a ridiculing manner when the narrator asks the questions: "Still an hour remained before luncheon, and what was one to do? Stroll on the meadows? [S]it by the river?"[88] These are activities that are expected from women; the "one" Woolf is referring to is the woman as the other, the immanent and simple creature. This woman is not supposed to do anything that requires intellectual involvement.

Additionally, Woolf criticizes the fact that men put women on pedestals where they are only allowed to do certain, preferably womanly things. In a man's imagination, the female creature represents the perfect human being but in reality the man is high above the woman and his superiority is evident. Woolf describes this dichotomy as follows:

> A very queer, composite being thus emerges. 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.[89]

Consequently, the female becomes abstract both in fiction and in reality as she is not *seen* as an individual human being but rather as an image created by men, always in contrast with men, and ostensibly endured and tolerated by most women.[90] To put it with Braidotti's terms, it can be said that male authors portray woman as *the other* rather than *real-life women* as they seem to be either

87 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.9.
88 Ibid., p.13.
89 Ibid., p.66.
90 Cf. ibid., p.124.

unaware of what real-life women are like or they choose to ignore them.[91] Woman as the other, as an idealized figure, is what man expects, whereas real-life women are altogether unseen and unrepresented. There is a gross disparity between the two; men's fiction is not met by women's realities. Furthermore, Woolf criticizes the fact that women in literature are to a great extent presented by men and not by women: "Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?"[92] Here, women are described as animals rather than human beings, their inferiority evident. Besides, men are active, they have a voice with which they discuss women, whereas the female voice does not exist, as women are confined to passivity and remain unrepresented. Woolf's word choice becomes even more comprehensible when man's privileges and fields of power are enumerated: "His was the power and the money and the influence. He was the proprietor of the paper and its editor and sub-editor. He was the Foreign Secretary and the Judge. […] [H]e it is who will acquit or convict the murderer, and hang him, or let him go free."[93] This description is essentially what Braidotti refers to as man as subjectivity, i.e. as the "universal notion of the subject."[94] Maleness is presented as the universal, thus femininity must be the grossly inferior part of the dichotomy man/woman. Men are omnipresent in the public sphere, the social order is dependent on them alone as all decisions are made by them.

According to Woolf, woman's inferiority is the result of man's fear of losing his own superiority:

> With the exception of the fog he seemed to control everything. Yet he was angry. I knew that he was angry by this token. When I read what he wrote about women — I thought, not of what he was saying, but of himself. […] Possibly when the professor insisted a little too emphatically upon the inferiority of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority, but with his own superiority.[95]

Braidotti picks up the notion of woman's inferiority as resulting from man's wish to be superior in her essay "The Subject in Feminism". Her wording is nearly the same as that of Woolf and for the sake of comparison it is not paraphrased but quoted:

> Misogyny is not an irrational act of woman-hating but rather a structural necessity: it is a logical step in the process of constructing male identity in opposition to – that is to say, rejection of – Woman. Consequently

91 There are always exceptions to the rule. Portrayals of strong and complex heroines such as Henrik Ibsen's Nora in *Et Dukkehjem* and Hedda in *Hedda Gabler* did of course exist at the time of the Modern Breakthrough, but they remained to be exceptions for a long time and faced heavy criticism at the time of their publications/stage performances.
92 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own,* 1949, p.40.
93 Ibid., pp.50-51.
94 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, p.159.
95 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own,* 1949, pp.51-52.

> Woman is connected to the patriarchy by negation. […] The paradox of being defined *by* others is that women end up being defined *as* others; they are represented as different-from Man and this difference is given a negative value. Difference is a mark of inferiority.[96]

The Italian's philosophic remarks can easily be used as an explanation of the observations Woolf has made in literary studies about women composed by men. What Braidotti calls misogyny in her essay is what is simply called anger in *A Room of One's Own.* Resentment is the starting point, stressing the differences between man and woman is the execution of the male sex to establish superiority. This similarity between the two writers is striking as the two quotes can be put next to each other even though they are sixty years apart. In "The Subject in Feminism", Braidotti refers to the above quote by Woolf, calling her thoughts on man's superiority "memorable"[97] and thus indicating that the contemporary theorist was highly inspired by the novelist's feminist observations. The surprising aspect here is that these ideas on the superiority of the male are still as current as to make their way into contemporary feminist theory.

One of the aspects of the sexual difference theory is that women should avoid borrowing certain characteristics typically associated with men in order to achieve female empowerment. Examples of such masculine characteristics are not explicitly given but emphasis is put on formulating a female identity without copying the omnipresent male identity.[98] Instead of adjusting themselves to the patterns of a male-dominated world, women should establish their own patterns. Formulating a female identity here means that women should recognize and respect their strengths. Adopting male characteristics and thus encouraging these stereotypically masculine modes of thought as being of a universal nature is not helpful in the process of female empowerment. This central idea of the theory of sexual difference can also be found in *Three Guineas.* The essay consists of seven written letters, one of which is an answer to a letter from a male-dominated anti-war society.[99] The society would like the letter's recipient to join the society and make a donation in order to prevent war together. This request, however, is rejected, precisely because of the fact that said society is male-dominated: "[T]he Society of Outsiders has the same ends as your society – freedom, equality, peace; but [...] it seeks to achieve them by the means that a different sex, a different tradition, a different education, and the different values which result from those differences have placed within our reach."[100] What is here referred to as the society of outsiders are women, of course; the anti-war society can be referred to as society in general. Women are outsiders as they are

96 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, p.235.
97 Ibid..
98 Cf. ibid., p.160.
99 Even though the essay's title suggests that there are only three letters, Naomi Black points out that Three Guineas contains twelve letters, five of them received and seven of them written. Cf. Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, pp.86&90.
100 Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, p.206.

not part of society as such; they have no influence. Thus, they form their own society with their own means based on their femininity and their strengths. Even though their goals are the same it is impossible to reach the goals with the same means. Joining the men's anti-war society would be equivalent to accepting and, eventually, adopting the male modes of thought. The woman, with presumably different strengths, would be forced to assimilate to man's way of working, thus neglecting her own strengths. The man dictates the means and the woman copies them without any further, possibly new, intellectual input. Here, Woolf clearly demands what Braidotti describes as female empowerment by reformulating female identity. A female subjectivity needs to be constituted before women can participate as equally respected figures in society. Not only is the goal the same, but the means are, too: Strengthening female characteristics and empowering women by refusing to adopt masculine modes of thought.

> But as a result the answer to your question must be that we can best help you to prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods. We can best help you to prevent war not by joining your society but by remaining outside your society but in co-operation with its aim.[101]

At this point, Woolf's thinking evidently resembles that of contemporary sexual difference theorists. Differences should be accentuated rather than denied and suppressed, since suppression would only encourage male domination. With regard to Braidotti's three levels of differences, it could be said that Woolf wants to move away from the first level where masculinity is the universal, whereas femininity is the other, a move which was difficult at the time. “The analysis of the first level of sexual difference came to be challenged not only because of changing political and intellectual contexts but also because of revolutions internal in the feminist movement itself.”[102] This is Braidotti, explaining that level two and three of her model of sexual difference were basically impossible to establish and distribute – and basically unknown in the first place – before certain changes had taken place. That is what becomes evident when reading Woolf's essays: The British author was searching for in-depth analyses of the complex female being, that is to say of an image of women that goes far beyond the *woman as the other*. The required changes Braidotti talks about occurred mainly after Woolf's death, which is why Woolf had such difficulties finding what she was looking for, namely women writing fiction *on* women *as* women, as opposed to men writing fiction on women, or women writing fiction on women but trying to write as men. *Woman as the other* as in Braidotti's model can hardly be expected to formulate a detailed study of the female human being.

101 Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, p.260.
102 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, p.161.

> [I]f women stop being confined to the eternal "other" and […] finally gain the right to speak, to theorize, to vote, to go to university – then it is only a question of time before the old image of Woman, which was created without consulting the experience of real-life women, will have to be replaced by a more adequate one.[103]

These are Braidotti's words. However, they describe Virginia Woolf's struggles more than those of most of the women today.[104] Unlike Braidotti and other contemporary feminist theorists, Woolf and the women of her time had just gained the right to vote – in Great Britain at least – and there were still restrictions regarding women's admissions to university, which is a central point of criticism in *A Room of One's Own* as well as in *Three Guineas*. Woolf and her contemporaries were stuck with the "old image of Woman"; the writer was actively searching for a "real-life" woman. What she was looking for in a woman is what can be found in Woolf herself. The author analyzed womanhood and criticized what she found, or rather, what she did not find because it did not exist, yet.

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf stresses the importance of difference by saying that "[it] would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only? Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences rather than the similarities?"[105] Here, not only the concept of difference is underlined but also the importance of education for *every* human being. Why copy men if there is so much more than the stereotypically masculine way of thinking and acting? Woolf sees great potential in female modes of thought, once they are outlined and respected as equal; equal not in the sense of *the same* but of *same value*. The quote from 1929 could as well have been from an essay by Braidotti; the two essayists have very similar thoughts concerning female empowerment and how to achieve it. When applying Braidotti's model to Woolf's quote, again, it becomes very clear that Woolf is seeking an image of the woman beyond the theorist's first level of sexual difference. Her notion of "similarities" is a critique of women having to adjust to the characteristics of men, of becoming similar to men, which is the crucial point: Women are expected to adjust to men and by no means vice versa. On the one hand, Woolf recognizes the differences between the sexes but on the other hand she is not willing to stop there but demands that changes take place.

Even though *A Room of One's Own* is predominantly concerned with the topic of women and fiction, it is impossible to discuss women's role in literature in isolation, that is, without noting the overall situation of woman in society. Woolf recognizes the role of women as mentioned above; equality is not given, woman is the other. Thus, her essay does not remain a work on women and

103 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects,* 1994, p.241.
104 However, even nowadays some countries have not yet introduced the right to vote for women. In some parts of the world, women today have fewer rights than women in the Western world had at the time of Woolf.
105 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.132.

fiction merely but turns into a critical note on society and patriarchy. Having inherited five hundred pounds a year from an aunt, the narrator states: “I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me.”[106] This sentence is true in many ways, obviously not only concerning writing. A woman with an income of her own is independent, she does not have to follow the traditional role models of the sexes and get married to a man, become a mother and housekeeper, and consequently remain nothing but *the other*. She *can* do all of the above but she is not *forced* to do so. With money, her opportunities become greater and much more diverse. Hence, money also changes the dichotomy of man/woman, it allows women to think for themselves: “In short, she need not acquiesce; she can criticize. At last she is in possession of an influence that is disinterested.”[107] Opinions are no longer based on what men think.

Formulating opinions and investigating politics to acquire a certain point of view is certainly one important step towards becoming a female feminist subject, to put it with Braidotti's words. Does this mean that the process mentioned above is the way out of patriarchy? Does money alone change everything? Is it really that easy? Not all women inherited money as Woolf did, in fact the number of women who were financially independent was very limited. Money cannot be the starting point. In order to break out of this order, women need to be educated and earn their own money, they have to be able to live independently of men. Thus, not money, but the means to earn money – hence education – is the starting point for women to become not only writers of fiction but subjects as opposed to objects in the first place.

In “The Subject in Feminism”, Rosi Braidotti does not fail to emphasize the importance of education for women in a time when education is not a question of sex anymore. She explicitly puts Woolf's opportunities in contrast to the possibilities women have today and thus underlines the changes that have taken place. However, what good is the right to earn a living if women are not employed and if so, receive poor financial compensations for their work? In 1929, Woolf's essay had a clear and serious tone. In 1938, her tone became polemical. Women were allowed to attend universities and they had the right to make a living on their own. They were allowed to work and to own property – in theory. The reality was different, which is strongly criticized by Woolf in *Three Guineas*: “It is true that women civil servants deserve to be paid as much as men; but it is also true that they are not paid as much as men. The discrepancy is due to atmosphere.”[108] Women worked outside of the domestic sphere but could not live off of their work as they did not receive equal payment. The quote from 1938 could as well have been from today, as it describes a phenomenon that is now referred to as the gender pay gap. The “atmosphere” mentioned here links the sexes'

106 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.57.
107 Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, p.32.
108 Ibid., p.95.

inequality to fascism. In the fascist states of Germany and Italy, the roles of women were clearly defined as being responsible for the children and the household. The patriarchal structures of fascism are inherent in a smaller sphere everywhere and Woolf argues that fascism should not only be fought in other countries but in the smaller and everyday spheres at home, too.[109] This is Woolf's explanation of why women earn less money than men. It is a polemical explanation but in its core it certainly bears a reasonable amount of truth: As long as women are shut away as mothers and wives by society and tradition it is useless to expect equal pay. Braidotti explains the role of women on the labor market today as follows:

> I think that the misogynist fabric of our culture is such that the feminine is drained away in step with its promotion in terms of the socio-economic and discursive structures. Advanced capitalist society would even be ready – except, of course, in the context of severe economic recession – to open the doors of factories, offices, universities, some laboratories, the army, and, recently in France, the Académie Française to women, as long as they conform to established norms.[110]

This shows that even though women today have to face fewer obstacles on the labor market than in the 1930s, the problems still concern the same mechanisms. Women seem to be welcome into the force, which appears to be a great progress compared with the situation in the first half of the 20th century. On the surface, women have the same opportunities as men and these opportunities are not only of theoretical nature but many women have reached positions formerly restricted to men. Today, women often work side by side with and equal to men. However, and this is what the theorist underlines and criticizes, the price women often have to pay is that of their very own female identities. Women are accepted on the labor market as equal if they adapt to the rules men have established before women were common as graduates and trainees. According to Braidotti, the world of economics is still very much male-dominated; women are left out if they do not conform. The problems pointed out by the theorist and the novelist are thus very much alike; both recognize that the male – or the male mode of thought – is the universal. Both critiques underline the lack of recognition of women's capabilities. Woolf's polemic picks up on the obvious inequalities whereas Braidotti points to the more subtle inequalities that are nowadays often celebrated as equality of the sexes.

In her 1991 book *Patterns of Dissonance* Braidotti dedicates one chapter to some more radical feminist movements within the theory of sexual difference. One of those movements is that of *l'écriture féminine.* The term, which translates as *feminine writing*, is described as follows: “The style known as feminine, characterized by disruptions of syntax leading to the disturbance of

109 Cf. Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, pp.97-98.
110 Braidotti, Rosi: *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy.* Trans. Elizabeth Guild. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p.160.

meaning, tends to express the body understood as a cultural counter-text, in order to decode the blanks in language and to express sexual difference."[111] Hélène Cixous is considered the founder of the movement and Braidotti does not hesitate to refer to her ideas as being somewhat contradictory. However, and despite the criticism expressed in her earlier book, Braidotti partly represents the idea of *l'écriture féminine* in her introduction to *Nomadic Subjects*, where she demands that feminist writers do not blindly follow male writers and their masculine style of theoretical writing that has long become the standard in the academic field.[112] Academic discourse is perceived as a universal standard for the high theoretical style even though it has been established by male writers only, with female writers adjusting to this style: "[M]ost university women have been trained to speak to and in the language of man: the fetishized, false universal mode of Western humanism."[113] Braidotti advocates a shift away from this adoption of the masculine style, meaning both the actual style of writing and the contents of men's writing. She refers to academic texts as well as to literature in general. Without defending the idea of *écriture féminine* in its entirety, Braidotti's statements nonetheless express a certain support for this rather radical movement.

Virginia Woolf could not possibly have written about a feminine mode of writing in academic circles, merely because back then women were barely ever represented in the academic world. Instead, Woolf concentrates on the study of women's writing by reading early works by female writers such as Anne Finch, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Brontë. It becomes clear that women often write about their resentment concerning the lack of equal rights and the belittlement they have to endure from the male sex. According to Woolf, Jane Austen was the first to write without anger dominating her style and contents; this was not true for Charlotte Brontë, who herself was present in every one of her characters. The reason for this is said to be woman's lack of life experience gained by traveling or acquainting oneself with strangers, aspects of life that can be used in fiction and are highly beneficial when describing places and people. However, these privileges were granted to men only; very few women came to experience such adventures. About Charlotte Brontë Woolf writes that "[s]he had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others."[114] The oldest of the Brontë sisters tried to write like a man, a project that was bound to fail as the writer lacked the experience of a man. She realized this, which then resulted in anger to be read between the lines of her novels.[115] While Woolf discusses some popular female authors of the past, she also introduces and elaborates on a fictitious writer named Mary Carmichael. Woolf creates this imaginative author as someone who manages to write unconscious of her sex. Carmichael's style of writing is described

111 Braidotti, Rosi: *Patterns of Dissonance*, 1991, p.239.
112 Cf. Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, pp.29-30.
113 Ibid., p.37.
114 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.112.
115 Cf. ibid., p.111.

as disturbing sequences and breaking sentences, as well as containing a certain lack of smoothness. Her fictitious contents have not been present as such in literature before, as she writes on the friendship between two women.[116] Woolf invents this persona, a female writer like her does not seem to exist in reality. The imaginary author Carmichael has a different style as well as different, non-male topics. Woolf's statements on women's writing here resemble Braidotti's definition of *l'écriture féminine* above: breaking a sentence here is similar to the "disruptions of syntax"[117] there. Virginia Woolf bases her ideas on the close-reading of several female writers' works – and on a fictitious novel – whereas Braidotti has recourse to the philosophies developed by thinkers and theoreticians, both male and female. Despite the different approaches represented by Woolf and Braidotti, the similarities are given. Woolf's study of the imaginary Mary Carmichael's novel, however, results in the words "she had […] mastered the first great lesson; she wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself."[118] This quote deserves to be discussed on two levels.

First of all, the author mentioned here is a product of imagination and so is the author's novel. Thus, the style that Woolf praises here is likewise a product of her imagination. On the one hand this means that it did not exist, yet – otherwise Woolf would probably have mentioned a real author's style at this point. On the other hand, the female writer who is unconscious of her sex is considered the ideal female writer. This does not support a female style of writing; the writing is not feminine. The writer is a woman but the reader cannot tell. Does this, then, mean that the style is neutral or of universal and thus masculine nature? What Woolf means here is merely that her imaginary female writer Carmichael writes without the relatively short female tradition in mind. She does not obey any standards set by other women before her; she is not restricted by unwritten laws of style. In this respect, Woolf's remarks by no means conform with the *écriture féminine* movement, where female writers do not forget that they are women, but quite the opposite: According to the *écriture féminine* movement, a female writer's identity is formed by texts of other female authors.[119] Thus, it is obvious that this movement would have been a utopian project in Woolf's time. How could the women presented in *A Room of One's Own* possibly have formed their identities as writers through other female writers before them? Such writers barely existed, or they did not get published, and the basis they were offered was too small to identify with solely. Women then had either men to identify with or they had to walk down their own paths by themselves.

116 Cf. Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.123.
117 Braidotti, Rosi: *Patterns of Dissonance*, 1991, p.239.
118 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.140.
119 Cf. Braidotti, Rosi: *Patterns of Dissonance*, 1991, p.239.

Hence, Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine* as presented by Braidotti was not possible at the time of Woolf. However, the idea of some kind of feminine style of writing was present in Woolf's mind, and even more so: Woolf was looking for a strong and unexpected style of writing by a female.

Furthermore, Woolf speaks of the "sex [that] is unconscious of itself,"[120] whereas Cixous is "positing a sexually-differentiated unconscious and an alternative female symbolic."[121] These two phrases are quite the opposite to one another. Cixous recognizes an unconscious that is marked by sexual difference; Woolf requests that sex be unconscious of itself, which, to put it differently, means that the unconscious should be unmarked by sex. This is an interesting remark by Woolf as it does not entirely conform with what she has said earlier in the text, speaking from a contemporary feminist theory point of view, that is. On the one hand, Woolf demands female empowerment through strengthening female characteristics, but on the other hand, her ideal female writer is unconscious of her own sex. To Woolf, however, this is not a contradiction. Considering that the writers she mentions in *A Room of One's Own* supposedly have a distinctively feminine style although they lack life experience outside of the domestic sphere, she clearly foresees the opportunities women should be given; opportunities that could possibly and probably lead to a different style of writing with different and more universal topics – universal in the non-domestic and more diverse sense of the word, not in the sense it is used by feminists nowadays, namely as the *male as universal*.

Hence, concerning the *écriture féminine* idea, the similarities between Braidotti and Woolf remain rather blurry. Braidotti does not position herself very vehemently, she does not entirely agree with Cixous' thoughts but she does not dismiss them altogether, either. The theorist demands and encourages changes in women's writing, especially in academic circles, which have been dominated by men for a long time. Woolf likewise requests changes in the style of women's writing, or rather, an actual established and new style in the first place, a process that requires time and women who are willing and eager to write.

4 Feminist theory beyond the sexes

4.1 Judith Butler, "performing gender"

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* Judith Butler, the American gender theorist and "co-founder" of queer theory, presents her post-modern ideas on feminism and distances herself from the common categories of man and woman, hence the feminist theories that

120 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.140.
121 Braidotti, Rosi: *Patterns of Dissonance*, 1991, p.241.

are based on sexual difference as described above.

To begin with, she criticizes the term *woman* and the difficulties that come with it as women are the subjects of feminism but are often depicted as a whole and thus too one-sided. She points out that "[i]f one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; […] gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities;"[122] women are not all the same or similar only because they all have experienced oppression of some sort. If a subject of feminism is expected to be formulated as a stable figure, as suggested by some feminist theorists before, this formulation resembles some kind of definition, which could easily serve as a manual. Whoever does not conform with this manual is thus not considered a subject of feminism. Butler finds this very problematic and asks: "What sense does it make to extend representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject?"[123] Accordingly, narrowing down a subject's identity in order to receive one stable subject is a restrictive measure that is bound to fail as it will not represent all women. If a hypothetical stable subject represents the majority of women, this would still mean that these women would only be able to move within a certain sphere or a certain spectrum, which conforms with said identity. Apart from this, a majority implicates a minority, which would be excluded by being different. Thus, constituting one subject of feminism is a restriction to feminist politics, which, in turn, goes against its very own motivations. This resembles Braidotti's notion of nomadism to the extent that both theorists claim that the term *woman* is often too fixed and one-sided. The difference between Butler and Braidotti is that to Butler the word *woman* is not necessarily confined to people with female genitalia. Braidotti still moves within the binary of mank and woman; both notions depend on the individual's sex. Thus, even if *woman* is defined in the broadest sense it still manages to exclude certain people.

Butler then proceeds by taking on a controversial position, questioning the distinction of sex and gender. Regarding sex, she wonders what it is that defines sex in the first place, and argues that sex itself might – throughout scientific discourses – just as well be constructed as gender.[124] "Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction?"[125] Questioning the category of sex means to question the

122 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, p.4.
123 Ibid., p.8.
124 Cf. ibid., p.11.
At first sight, Butler's suggestion that there are more than two sexes might seem strange to the reader. However, later in the text, she gives an example of when the supposed given biological sex must be questioned: "Transsexuals often claim a radical discontinuity between sexual pleasures and bodily parts. Very often what is wanted in terms of pleasure requires an imaginary participation in body parts […] that one might not actually possess, or, similarly, pleasure may require imagining an exaggerated or diminished set of parts." Ibid., p.96.
125 Ibid., p.9.

difference between sex and gender as well. If sex is no longer a biological definite essential to marking a man as male and a woman as feminine then the difference between Butler's argumentation and that of the sexual difference theorists becomes clear. The theory of sexual difference is based on the assumption that sex is a given, that it is a biologically concrete sign defining whether one is a man or a woman, assuming that there exists a binary system of the sexes, namely that of the female and that of the male. Butler explains that this system of the two sexes necessitates and assumes heterosexuality, thus the kind of reproductive sexuality that requires "a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from the feminine term, and the differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire."[126] Concerning the definition of gender, Butler criticizes the notion that there are only two genders. If gender is a social construct that is independent of sex then why are there only two genders, the female and the male? Why does a binary gender system exist if gender does not conform with sex? Should there not be numerous genders instead of only two?[127] Distinguishing between sex and gender is thus unnecessary as both are constructed according to the same binary system and hence there is no difference, unless the term gender is being reformulated.

Gender identity and performativity is discussed in detail in the third and last chapter of *Gender Trouble* when the 19th century intersex person Herculine Barbin's sex, gender, and identity become the focus of attention. Herculine was determined as a female by birth even though biologically, s/he had female as well as male attributes.[128] S/he kept a journal in which s/he chronicled h/er life, especially h/er emotions and reactions from and towards other people. As an adult, s/he fell in love with a female fellow teacher, resulting in a relationship between the two lovers. Around the same time, knowing that s/he was different, Herculine entrusted h/erself to doctors and a bishop, who then made h/er change h/er sex before the law, regarding h/er feelings for a woman as an indicator for h/er maleness. Officially, s/he was now a man, however, s/he was forced to leave h/er lover and quit h/er job. At the age of thirty, Herculine committed suicide, leaving h/er journals behind.[129] Butler incorporates this case as an example of gender confusion caused by social norms:

> S/he herself presumes at various points that h/er body is the cause of h/er gender confusion and h/er transgressive pleasures, as if they were both result and manifestation of an essence which somehow falls outside the natural/metaphysical order of things. But rather than understand h/er anomalous body as the cause

126 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, p.31.
127 Cf. ibid., p.9.
128 In the following, Herculine will be referred to as „s/he", which is also Butler's practice when discussing the hermaphrodite's case, and which corresponds with the unequivocal sexual attributes of the subject. The possessive form will be "h/er".
129 Cf. Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, pp.127-138.

> of h/er desire, h/er trouble, h/er affairs and confession, we might read this body, here fully textualized, as a sign of an irresolvable ambivalence produced by the juridical discourse on univocal sex. In the place of univocity, we fail to discover multiplicity […].[130]

The insistence on only two possible genders that are based on only two sexes excludes a great number of people from being considered and treated by the norms. In Herculine's case, heterosexuality was the only possibility and homosexuality not even considered, thus Herculine's sex was changed officially to male only because s/he loved a woman. This case does not only show how difficult it can be to determine the category of sex but, furthermore, it illustrates that there must be more genders than only the masculine and the feminine. Herculine's mind was disturbed because s/he was unable to refer to either gender; s/he was not entirely masculine, nor was s/he clearly feminine. With this study of the intersex person Herculine, Butler points at one main difference between her theories and those of the sexual difference theorists: Sexual difference theorists assume that people are aware of their sexes and their genders, of which there are two, respectively.

Butler understands the theories based on difference as a retrograde step:

> Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms.[131]

Butler criticizes feminism for assuming oppression by men in every culture with the aim to apply feminist ideas to all cultures without considering regional differences. Again, the claim of unity is a difficult and unrealistic one that only hinders feminist politics to a degree of immobility. Why should all women unite only because they supposedly have the same sex? These means are referred to as “colonizing,” which, in turn, is an oppressive behavior. Should feminist politics employ oppressive methods although oppression was the means used to mark women off as inferior in the past? These politics seem contradicting, as women's identities cannot be united based on sexual difference only. Furthermore, Butler questions the importance of unity within feminist politics, indicating that unity demands a common identity without even being able to move away from the question of identity, which is a complex and never-ending one as identities can be reformulated endlessly.

Restrictions on genders and identities by means of a compulsory heterosexuality only support exclusion and deny multiplicity, a practice which goes against the politics of feminism and thus needs to be reconsidered. Butler's solution to this problematic is based on her theory of

130 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, p.135.
131 Ibid., p.18.

performativity, the idea of gender being performative, that is. Words are acts that are performed, they have a consequence, and as such these speech acts formulate and construct gender if performed repeatedly. This had happened in the past which is how the gender roles have been established in the first place:

> The rules that govern intelligible identity, i.e., that enable and restrict the intelligible assertion of an "I," rules that are partially structured along matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, operate through *repetition*. Indeed, when a subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity.[132]

Thus, gender has always been performatively produced, of course, but it has been so within the frame of compulsory heterosexuality. Now, if this is how identity was formulated in the past, then it can as well be reformulated in favor of multiplicity by functioning beyond the restrictions of the binary system. Gender as a social construct is produced by repeated performative acts and in order to renew and reformulate gender it is possible and, according to Butler, therefore necessary to change the existing attributes that are now strongly associated with the sexes.[133] "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results."[134] One cannot *be* a gender but one can *perform* gender, which ultimately constitutes an identity, however, an identity that is not fixed as gender is performed over and over, resulting in allowing identity to be subject to constant change.[135]

4.2 Can Butlerian thoughts be found in Virginia Woolf's writing?

Reading Virginia Woolf's essays with Butler's theories in mind is, needless to say, very different from reading Woolf with Braidotti at the back of one's head. Braidotti aims at empowering the female feminist subject – an aim that is obviously shared by Woolf – whereas Butler is questioning the very fundamental philosophical notions of sex, gender, and woman. Even though it seems less obvious, it is nonetheless interesting to make a connection between Butler's theory-loaded ideas and the writings of Virginia Woolf.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf comes to the conclusion that a woman's mind cannot exist creatively without some portion of maleness, and that in turn, a man's mind cannot be productive to its fullest without a certain amount of femaleness inherent. Both sexes require both genders:

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132 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, p.198.
133 Cf. ibid., pp.33-34.
134 Ibid., p.34.
135 Cf. ibid., p.191.

> [I]t 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 woman-manly or man-womanly. [...] And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilized. […] Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished.[136]

At first, she claims that one should be unconscious of one's sex, which is then redeemed by saying that a combined consciousness of the two sexes is necessary for full creativity. The first statement would conform with Butler's criticism towards sex as being considered one of the main determinants of one's identity. Not to think of one's sex is thus a Butlerian ideal, allowing identities to become less fixed and more diverse. The correction stated following the thought of sex-independence, however, is not similar with what Butler stands for. When Woolf speaks of man-womanly and woman-manly minds it can be said that she uses the idea of sex and gender as it is the norm today: *Man* and *woman* referring to the biological sexes, *womanly* and *manly* referring to the socially constructed genders of the subjects. The biological sex is the point of departure, it is the determinant but not the only identity-giving factor. Accordingly, a man not only *can* but is *required* to partly *be* the opposite gender. He has to be womanly to a certain extent in order to be fully productive in the field of fiction-writing. On the one hand, this indicates that a man can be womanly and thus not only manly, which, at first sight, is similar with what Butler says, as she criticizes the notion that men are always associated with masculinity and women with femininity, thus resulting in sex and gender being the same.[137] Woolf seemingly breaks with this notion saying that both sexes can and must have both genders. However, Woolf is still moving within the heterosexual matrix by simply reversing the order: There must still be a point of departure by saying that a biological woman must have male modes of thinking. This male mode of thinking requires an origin that is clearly linked with an established and fixed masculinity in society. Interestingly enough, Woolf also makes use of the word *fertilized* – a term clearly connected to the heterosexual matrix and its reproductive aim – indicating that a good piece of writing demands some kind of mother and father. This terminology of reproduction, as well as the idea of two genders resulting in completion, is used earlier in the essay when Woolf wonders

> whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they [...] require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. […] It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully [fertilized] and uses all its faculties.[138]

136 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, pp.156-157.
137 Cf. Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, p.152.
138 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own,* 1949, pp.147-148.

Again, the "sexes in the mind" can be referred to as gender, whereas the "sexes in the body" are meant to denote sex. Here, it becomes especially clear that a biological woman cannot be predominantly masculine, since her biological female sex is dominant and governs her mind. A portion of masculinity is appreciated and even necessary but a biological woman can only be of the masculine gender to a certain, limited extent; the majority of the mind is still feminine. Both genders are required to have some kind of "intercourse" in order to (re)produce ideas. This employment of reproductive terminology and the idealization of heterosexuality is, in itself and considering the time of its application in the 1920s, not very surprising. However, Woolf introduces these theories by saying that the belief in heterosexuality as being the most satisfactory of all options is "irrational," thus implying that this belief needs to be reconsidered.[139] Hence, Woolf's initial concerns and observations can be interpreted as Butlerian. The solutions and elaborations to said concerns, however, are by no means Butlerian because they still work strictly within the heterosexual frame of mind, with a terminology that is entrenched in this frame. Woolf's thoughts enhance the idea of multiplicity, but not to the extent that Butler demands it.[140]

Even though the quotes above suggest that Woolf only employs thoughts based on heterosexuality in *A Room of One's Own*, she does, in fact, move beyond that matrix by inventing the fictitious novel *Life's Adventures* by the equally fictitious writer Mary Carmichael. The novel describes the homosexual relationship between Olivia and Chloe, thus suggesting an alternative to the normative man-woman relationship. Woolf does not explicitly state that the women have a sexual relationship but her introductory words clearly hint at this assumption.[141] At this point, homosexuality, as well as bisexuality – one of the women is married to a man – serves as a counter-proposition to the established binary of man and woman. Usually, women were portrayed as wives and lovers of men:

> It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that; and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose.[142]

The critique does by no means only concern the fact that women in literature were merely depicted as counterparts to men. Woolf further points out that relationships among women were presented as rivaling and/or too simple in general; usually, women were seen in relation to men. Heterosexuality

139 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.147.
140 Woolf does, however, elaborate on the idea of switching between genders in her novel *Orlando*. For further reading see Woolf, Virginia: *Orlando: A Biography.* London: Hogarth Press, 1954.
141 Cf. Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.123.
142 Ibid., p.124.

thus predominates, which is why Woolf introduces a different concept, resulting in different characterizations, thus leading to more complex identities, and proposing equally more complex genders, indeed, different genders. In a society of "compulsory heterosexuality"[143], as Butler would put it, the relationship between Chloe and Olivia is presented as something that just "happen[s]"[144] sometimes. This notion indicates a nonchalance that evokes a certain naturalness towards non-heterosexual relationships.[145] Following her introduction of the female couple, Woolf reveals what Butler confirms many decades later, namely that outside the heterosexual matrix, people behave differently from within that normative matrix. This, of course, is Butler's terminology applied to Woolf's essay, but it works nonetheless. Gender roles change and the monotony of women's portraits in literature that Woolf complains about suddenly has to disappear, as this monotony was the result of established stereotypes of women in relation to men. When no man is present and the two women do not talk about men or their relations to men, the writer is forced to draw a more complex picture of women. Other factors and interests become prevalent and formative.

Later in the text, Woolf admits that she "often like[s] women,"[146] followed by naming the female characteristics she appreciates, which are generally not depicted in literature. Now, this can be interpreted simply as complimenting the female sex. However, considering that Woolf herself had a love relationship with Vita Sackville-West,[147] this statement could just as well be a supportive argument for identities formed outside the heterosexual matrix: Woolf as a woman sees another woman not as a counterpart for a man but as a person who is more complex than the stereotypes presented in general.

Not only does Woolf propose relationships other than heterosexual ones with different identities in her essay. At one point she makes a remark concerning the sexes, saying that "we have too much likeness as it is, and if an explorer should come back and bring word of other sexes looking through the branches of other trees at other skies, nothing would be of greater service to humanity […]."[148] The possibility of having more than two sexes, thus breaking out of the binary system of the sexes and therewith the heterosexual matrix, is merely hypothetical and not a serious consideration. What is embraced and welcomed here is first and foremost the complexity of (wo)mankind. Too much "likeness" is a negative, diversity is an ideal that is necessary and complimentary for everyone. Woolf's reference to "other sexes" here is not a critique of the

143 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble,* 2006, p.24.
144 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, 1949, p.123.
145 Besides, explicit representations of lesbian relationships in novels often led to scandals at the time as was the case with Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, one year before the publication of *A Room of One's Own.*
146 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own,* 1949, p.167.
147 Cf. Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. II, 1973, p.119.
148 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own,* 1949, p.132.

dichotomy of sex being prediscursive, as it is in Butler,[149] but an affirmation of otherness in general. Even though her idea does not entirely conform with Butler's questioning of the exclusionary binary system of the sexes, it is still remarkable that at such an early stage in history this progressive thought is used as a rhetorical instrument when praising sexual diversity, among other things.

In the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own*, the sight of a Manx cat appearing on the lawn is described as a curiosity taking the narrator's mind off the luncheon party. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the Manx Cat is "a breed of domestic cat having no tail or an extremely short one, originating on the Isle of Man."[150] In the essay, the encounter with the cat is depicted as follows:

> [T]he Manx cat, who did look a little absurd, poor beast, without a tail, in the middle of the lawn. Was he really born so, or had he lost his tail in an accident? The tailless cat, though some are said to exist in the Isle of Man, is rarer than one thinks. It is a queer animal, quaint rather than beautiful. It is strange what a difference a tail makes […].[151]

The physical peculiarity of the missing tail is what puzzles the spectator. The cat is said to be a *he* who is walking on the lawn, presumably the sphere where only males are allowed, as quoted above in the analysis of Woolf and Braidotti. However, the male cat is missing its tail, a symbol of the phallus, and without this marking phallus it is walking on a ground that serves as an exclusive environment for males. This overall confusion of physical anomalousness (the cat does not appear to be male in the first place) and the somewhat behavioral abnormality (as presented to the spectator's eye) can be interpreted as a confusion of the body and the mind. Is the cat really male or female? It is only missing its tail and thus its phallic symbol, even though this phallic symbol is not the phallus, the male genitalia, itself. Only the symbol is missing but still this animal is considered to be "quaint" and as such bizarre and interesting, but abnormal nonetheless. The cat portrayed here simply looks different. By strolling in the area meant for males, it is certainly behaving correctly, so to speak. The animal causes confusion because it is tailless, which is not equal to lacking the sex-defining genitalia; theoretically, it could as well be female since female Manx cats are born tailless, too. The phallic symbol, however, seems to be equally important as the genitalia as it is the more obvious physical characteristic. Besides, the cat is pitied and described as a rare minority. The description of the Manx cat is interesting on many levels. It appears for no apparent reason. The cat is referred to as male. The strangeness results from lacking the phallic symbol and not from a lack of the genitalia. Despite the physical abnormality it behaves in the right way. The question that

149 Cf. Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, pp.8-10.
150 "Manx, adj. and n.". *OED Online*. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 15 April 2012.
151 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own,* 1949, p.20.

emerges is: What does the cat stand for? The features and characteristics, so to speak, applied to a human being would result in a man who is missing the outside appearance of a male but behaves in a stereotypically masculine way nonetheless. The biological sex is unknown and only indicated by the use of the pronoun *he.* Now, who is this metaphorical person? Is it a man desiring to be a woman? Is it a woman in a castrated man's body? Is the loss of the tail incidental or genetic? Is the sex or the gender identity-giving? Is his existence both physically and culturally univocal? In an essay on allusions in *A Room of One's Own*, Alice Fox suggests that Woolf herself identified with the cat, the lack of the tail being an indication of castration.[152] She points at Quentin Bell's remark that the members of the Stephen family "were born with little tails seven inches long" and that they all had a strong affinity to writing: "But they wrote like men who are used to presenting an argument, who want to make that argument plain but forcible."[153] Did the former Stephen, now Woolf, become subject to castration resulting in a person who lacks male physical features but who has male characteristics? Or did the castration lead to a way of writing that eventually differed from the male Stephen tradition of writing? Was the castration genetic or caused by certain circumstances? Reformulated, this comes down to the question: Is the castration of biological or cultural nature, and in either case, does it matter at all? Thus, the observation of the Manx cat presented here is a great example of gender and sex confusion as described by Butler in her chapter on the intersex person Herculine. The Manx cat as well as Herculine fail to meet the norm. They are said to be quaint, rare, peculiar, and queer. Are these peculiarities caused by nature or by culture?

The Manx cat is not the only rather strange creature in Woolf's essay. At one point, Woolf speaks of the peculiarities inherent equally in both sexes, male and female: "Life for both sexes [...] is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. […] More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself."[154] The phrase of interest here is the short embedded "creatures of illusion as we are," the pronoun indicating a conflation of both sexes. The key word is "illusion." Strictly speaking, an illusion is the "fact or condition of being deceived or deluded by appearances, or an instance of this; a mental state involving the attribution of reality to what is unreal; a false conception or idea."[155] When Woolf claims that men and women are creatures of illusion then it can be said that, to her, everything that surrounds the system of the two sexes is to some extent made up and not real. An illusion makes one believe in something by means of something else. Men and women as creatures – another interesting word choice – present a deceptive version of reality. Perhaps this illusion has become reality but it remains deceptive

152 Cf. Fox, Alice: "Literary Allusion as Feminist Criticism in 'A Room of One's Own'." *Philological Quarterly*, 63 (1984), p.148.
153 Bell, Quentin: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography,* Vol. I, 1973, pp.18-19.
154 Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own,* 1949, p.52.
155 "illusion, n.". *OED Online*. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 16 April 2012.

nonetheless. What, then, are the means of this illusionary perception? How was this illusion constructed and how is it maintained? From a Butlerian point of view, the answer would be: Through repetition.

> [W]hen the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects.[156]

The process described by Butler is not only concealing and hence an illusion to some extent, but it is also subject to change. If the illusion mentioned by Woolf is the result of the kind of repetition Butler observes, then the illusion is not stable and the "creatures" in Woolf are not, either. However, the question remains if the illusion is still an illusion after a possible change. Woolf does not use this term as a critique but simply as an observing assertion.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf demands that women should start behaving differently in order to prevent war and to introduce a peaceful alternative to patriarchy. This feminist goal can be reached "by finding new words and creating new methods,"[157] a call for action that Butler would probably agree with, at first glance, that is. Woolf's statement resembles Butler's insistence on gender reformulation through repeated acts, even though Butler underlines that gender performativity does not require "a "doer behind the deed," but that the "doer" is variably constructed in and through the deed."[158] At first sight, the two feminists seem to be on common ground. However, it is not by chance that Woolf's call for action has been quoted above, when compared to Braidotti. Woolf's means are strongly based on that of sexual difference: Women should start behaving in a way that demonstrates to men (and women) the dangers that result from patriarchy; men and women do not cooperate. And that is precisely what Butler is opposed to. To her, gender reformulation must happen independent from sex and strict categories.

Another aspect that differs significantly between Woolf and Butler is the question of identity. Butler's point of view suggests numerous identities, depending on the definition of sex and gender, and on the interrelation of the two. The idea behind her theory is to break the heterosexual matrix, which serves as normative, and which is restrictive towards gender identities.

> The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist" − that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the

156 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, p.198.
157 Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, p.260.
158 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, p.195.

> practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender.[159]

Her criticism points at the exclusionary practice of compulsory heterosexuality. People who fail to meet the norm supposedly lack identities. Emphasis is put on "identities," in the plural. In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf establishes two identities, that of man and woman. When she refuses to join an exclusively male society, she argues that "[f]or by so doing we should merge our identity in yours," a process which needs to be avoided.[160] Clearly, "our identity" is the singular identity inherent in women, whereas "yours" is presumably the singular identity inherent in men. Those two identities should not be mixed but kept apart. Woolf does discuss the androgynous ideal with a man-womanly and a woman-manly mind but the man is still predominantly male and the woman mostly female. By explaining the ideal of androgyny Woolf still employs terms inherent in the binary system. To Woolf, identity is limited while for Butler it is multiple. The one is based on the binary opposition of the sexes, the other is the result of a rejection of this opposition. The two positions presented here remain rather conflicting.

5 A debate on Woolf's feminism

Not only Woolf herself was skeptical concerning her feminism. Due to her omission of several, highly relevant feminist topics, some feminist critics are reluctant to put Woolf's work in the category of feminist writers. Naomi Black defends Woolf's feminism by saying that "she cared most about [...] the larger social structures that cause the battles"[161] only to admit later that Woolf was indeed very reluctant to focus on sexuality, race and class issues.[162] The first omission can be explained by the sexual abuse Woolf had to endure in her childhood and teenage years. The lack of focus on race issues is described as the result of the limited number of immigrants in England during Woolf's lifetime.[163] Woolf was not exposed to people of different races and, thus, did not take the aspect of race into consideration. This may be true to some extent but at the same time, Black's reasoning can be interpreted as naivete and sheer ignorance on Woolf's part. Considering the aspect of class as related to feminism, Woolf, herself a member of the upper-middle class, often had a rather distorted image. Naomi Black allows and justifies criticism from feminists "because [Woolf] does not analyze the specific gender disabilities of working-class women – their disadvantages

159 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*, 2006, p.24.
160 Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, p.192.
161 Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, p.172.
162 Cf. ibid., p.182.
163 Cf. ibid., p.190.

relative to their own men."[164] While the working class members of the Women's Co-operative Guild were opting for women's literacy in the first place, Woolf was a published writer of fiction and non-fiction.[165] She did not go into detail with regards to the needs of working-class women.

Braidotti approaches the discrepancy between Woolf's aspirations and those of the women of the lower classes differently. Woolf indeed had many privileges denied to women of other classes but the vast differences concerning the women's opportunities and those of Woolf did not affect her arguments.

> [...] Woolf stated that for *any* woman to be able to turn her interest in the arts and especially in literature into a source of income, some general and very concrete sociopolitical preconditions would have to be fulfilled. This is true for any woman – that is to say, for all women – not only the few privileged ones. In other words, the category *Woman*, despite all the differences that actually exist among individual women, is very clearly identifiable as suffering from common, culturally enforced assumptions.[166]

Braidotti clearly focuses on the category of women as the common ground and dismisses the importance of class. The working class women would surely benefit from sociopolitical changes enabling them to live off of their own literary aspirations but was this – women's education with the aim to have an income based on one's writing – their most urgent goal at the time? As Black has pointed out, the first and foremost goal was to be able to read and write at all. Thus, education was of great importance to them as it was to Woolf but their problems were more severe and fundamental.[167] Nonetheless, Braidotti has a point when she claims that, regardless of the differences between the critical feminist writer Woolf and women with other backgrounds, Woolf seeks sociopolitical changes for all women alike. By stating that all women are to some extent affected by "common, culturally enforced assumptions," Braidotti manifests and justifies Woolf's feminism and defines it as pertaining to all women because *woman* as the common ground is the most important and fundamental category in feminism. To Braidotti and Black alike, there is no doubt that Virginia Woolf was a feminist writer, both of them stating that *A Room of One's Own* as well as *Three Guineas* are works that clearly prove the writer's involvement with feminism.[168] Black, however, is aware of the potential difficulties Woolf's feminism faces. In the context of discussing the controversial *Three Guineas*, in which Woolf blames patriarchy for the wars and links womanhood with peace, Black recognizes that "Virginia Woolf's feminism is of a sort still not

164 Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, p.189.
165 Cf. ibid., p.188.
166 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, p.234.
167 In Woolf's short story "A Society," published in 1921, the female protagonists focus on the importance of literacy for women. Thus, women's ability to read was of great importance to Woolf many years before her two essays were published. For further reading see Woolf, Virginia. "A Society." *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf.* Ed. Susan Dick. London: Hogarth Press, 1985.
168 Cf. Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, pp.232-233.
Cf. Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, pp.7&112.

easily accepted today."[169]

The American feminist critic Elaine Showalter is one of the most hostile literary critics of Virginia Woolf's feminism and finds it problematic and false that Woolf is nowadays classified as a feminist. Her critique is partly based on Woolf's statements on the ideal of the androgynous mind in *A Room of One's Own*. A mind containing both female and male powers is a utopia leading to confusion. Showalter equals maleness with aggression and femaleness with nurturance and proceeds to claim that Woolf could not possibly have succeeded in acquiring androgyny as the status of womanhood would not have allowed this.[170] As a supportive argument for her dismissal of androgyny, Showalter uses the figures of the Bloomsbury group:

> When we think about the joy, the generosity, and the absence of jealousy and domination attributed to Bloomsbury, we should also remember the victims of this emotional utopia: Mark Gertler, Dora Carrington, Virginia Woolf. They are the failures of androgyny; their suicides are one of Bloomsbury's representative art forms.[171]

Here, Showalter does not hesitate to link androgyny with suicide. This is a controversial connection to be made. Besides, the painter Mark Gertler is generally not mentioned as a member of the Bloomsbury group as he was only loosely connected with them.[172] Dora Carrington committed suicide after a phase of depression.[173] Virginia Woolf's suicide is likewise associated with manic-depressive periods. If these depressions were connected to an androgynous mind or lifestyle remains questionable and the suggestion merely appears like an attempt to stigmatize the concept of androgyny. Showalter's argumentation is certainly not flawless at this point as she employs assumptions that are not proven and in the end simply false.

About Woolf's androgyny Showalter states that it "was the myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition."[174] The critic refers to the concept of the combination of masculinity and femininity as a means of escape from having to establish a clear sexual identity. The androgynous ideal as the very opposite of feminism is one of the reasons why Showalter dismisses Woolf and especially *A Room of One's Own* as anti-feminist:

> Even in the moment of expressing feminist conflict, Woolf wanted to transcend it. Her wish for experience was really a wish to forget experience. In the 1920s, as her fiction moved away from realism, her criticism

169 Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, p.6.
170 Cf. Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, pp.263-264.
171 Ibid., pp.264-265.
172 Cf. Richardson, Elizabeth P.: *A Bloomsbury Iconography*. Winchester: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1989, p.2.
Cf. Rosenbaum, S.P.: *The Bloomsbury Group.* London: Croom Helm, 1975, pp.ii-iii.
173 Cf. Caws, Mary Ann: *Women of Bloomsbury. Virginia, Vanessa, and Carrington,* pp.117-119.
174 Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, p.264.

and her theoretical prose moved away from a troubled feminism toward a concept of androgyny.[175]

Feminism and androgyny contradict each other and cannot possibly be combined according to Showalter. Thus, Woolf is either a feminist or in favor of the androgynous idea but she cannot possibly advocate both thoughts. However, in her earlier essay, Woolf certainly does not merely focus on the union of masculinity and femininity in the mind. Her well-known demand that women should have a room of their own as well as money for self-support and independence is presented as the essay's conclusion and it is without a doubt a feminist thought.

In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi disagrees with Showalter's depiction of Woolf's androgyny as representing her "flight from fixed gender identities."[176] To Moi, it is not an escape but rather a recognition of the illusion of the binary system of the sexes. Woolf was not afraid of a female identity but simply rejected the supposedly fixed identities of the masculine and the feminine as the two only possibilities. Instead of adopting the stereotypical female identity, Woolf realized that the only way to overcome the established system is to question it and, consequently, to refuse to participate in it by repetition.[177] Is Moi's explanation more reasonable than that of Showalter? In *Three Guineas,* the narrator explicitly calls for a society of outsiders, meaning that women should form a group in order to follow their interests outside the patriarchal system. Men and women are clearly separated, which is repeatedly stated in the essay as a means of formulating a female identity independent from that of the male.[178] Whatever purpose Woolf's androgyny represents, the question remains if it automatically dismisses feminism. As already mentioned, for Showalter, Woolf's ideas on the androgynous mind are concomitant with anti-feminism. In contrast to that, Moi is of the opinion "that a theory that demands the deconstruction of sexual identity is indeed authentically feminist;"[179] her detailed definition of Woolf's feminism will be discussed later in the text. Concerning androgyny, the concept is ultimately seen as the epitome of anti-feminism by one and authentic feminism by the other.

Showalter furthermore criticizes Woolf for refusing to write explicitly on the feminist topic of female sexuality. While Naomi Black justifies this omission as being most likely the result of Woolf's sexual abuse, Showalter goes as far as to question the abuse in the first place. She does so in a very brief paragraph and in a rather subtle manner by quoting the reviewer Gordon Haight, who attributed Woolf's diary entries on the abuse to her vivid imagination.[180] Showalter does not disagree

175 Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, p.282.
176 Moi, Toril: *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 1991, p.13.
177 Cf. ibid., p.13.
178 Cf. Woolf, Virginia: *Three Guineas*, 1943, p.206.
179 Moi, Toril: *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 1991, p.14.
180 Cf. Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, p.269.

and suggests that

> it is impossible to know exactly what George [Duckworth, Virginia's half-brother,] did, but it is altogether reasonable to believe that his attentions were a terrifying sign to Virginia that people *knew* about her, that her changed state was a signal to men.[181]

Woolf is presented as the active person by Showalter; it is *her* body that changed and it is *she* who is sending signals. Presumably, Showalter says Duckworth only reacted to her bodily change. The abuse of Virginia as a six-year-old is not mentioned here. Sexual abuse at such an early age can hardly be pinned down to some "changed state" of the body. What follows is an attempt to explain Woolf's reserved attitude towards sexuality as an act of willful repression. Sexual abuse is not considered as a possible reason for her reservations. Woolf is presented as a woman who refuses to accept her womanhood and who tries to fight it by repressing everything that could possibly be identified as feminine. Showalter links Woolf's breakdowns with her supposed difficulties to attain a female identity. She creates a time-line and states that the first major breakdown coincides with the onset of menstruation as well as with the death of Woolf's mother. The latter is not an uncommon reason for a mental breakdown. The former, however, is what Showalter puts emphasis on. To her, the crisis caused by Woolf's first menstruation is a sign of the writer's flight from female identity. The confusion that results from the fight of a female identity is what supposedly caused the breakdown when Woolf was thirteen years old. Additionally, Showalter states that "[a]nother symptom now understood as an aspect of female adolescent trauma is *anorexia nervosa*, or willful self-starvation."[182] This is followed by scientific quotes proving that the onset of menstruation and the change of the body can cause anorexia and other eating disorders.

Stephen Trombley explains Woolf's temporary aversions to food quite differently and in direct contrast to Showalter. According to Trombley, Woolf's anorexia "does not involve a rejection of her own femininity […]. What is more probable is that she is rejecting *male* sexuality, or its effect on her."[183] Apparently, her anorexic phases were in one way or the other connected to sexuality and it is nearly impossible to tell who is ultimately right, Showalter or Trombley. Trombley, however, points out that "the explanation for Virginia's condition is not to be found in a broad social perspective, but in a unique personal one."[184] This statement refuses to accept the general assumption that women starve themselves due to the fashion dictates of society as the reason of Woolf's anorexia. According to Trombley, Woolf's eating disorder was more complex and not due to a repression of her

181 Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, p.269.
182 Ibid., p.268.
183 Trombley, Stephen: *'All that Summer She was Mad' – Virginia Woolf and Her Doctors.* London: Junction Books, 1981, p.61.
184 Ibid., p.62.

femininity, which becomes obvious in her relationship with Vita Sackville-West. Her first phase of starvation followed Leonard's first efforts to sexually approach her; his desire was alien to her. Thus, she did not reject femininity or women's bodies but men and male sexuality.[185]

For Showalter, the second breakdown is attributed to the fact that Leonard decided not to have children with Virginia; this time, it was Leonard who repressed his wife's female identity. Finally, "[her] suicide in 1940 [sic!] followed menopause."[186] The breakdowns and the suicide are thus linked with female bodily functions that made Woolf aware of her female sexuality, which she repeatedly tried to repress. That Woolf suffered from severe manic-depressive illness throughout her whole life is not considered as the cause for her breakdowns. The "madness" is seen as a direct result of Woolf's rejection of female identity because she did not succeed in withdrawing from her body, which reminded her of her sex.[187] It becomes clear that Showalter dismisses the explanation of sexual abuse in favor of her theory that Woolf rejected womanhood and the bodily functions that make a woman aware of her sexual identity. Woolf's episodes of depression are loosely associated with her sexuality. This overall rejection of female identity is seen as a means to succeed in acquiring an androgynous mind; it is a necessary step towards androgyny: "At some level, Woolf is aware that androgyny is another form of repression or, at best, self-discipline. It is not so much that she recommends androgyny as that she warns against feminist engagement."[188] Thus, the repression of her sexuality is, indirectly, connected with Woolf's rejection of feminism. The message is: If you do not accept your female identity, you cannot possibly be or become a feminist. And again, if you seek for androgyny, you are fighting feminism and risking suicide.

It is obvious that Showalter emphasizes Woolf's biography; she focuses on the novelist's personal experience more than on her writings to determine her feminism, or rather, her anti-feminism. If it is true that Woolf denied her own sexuality and her female identity then Showalter makes sure that she portrays Woolf as a woman who is highly influenced by the functions of her body. The critic projects the female body onto a writer who refused to accept it. Menstruation, the absence of experienced motherhood, and menopause supposedly governed Woolf's life.

While Showalter's argumentation for Woolf's anti-feminism is to a great extent based on biographical aspects, or rather, the critic's interpretations of them, she does not fail to discuss some of Woolf's works. About a passage in *Three Guineas* she says that it poses an "exaggeration [that] undoubtedly proceeds from [Woolf's] need to combat the lingering shadow of her own father's demands."[189] Showalter recognizes personal issues of Woolf incorporated in her works. Later, she

185 Cf. Trombley, Stephen: *'All that Summer She was Mad'*, 1981, pp.61-64.
186 Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, p.267.
187 Ibid., p.276.
188 Ibid., p.288.
189 Ibid., p.63.

devotes nearly two pages to describing how the writer's experience found its way into the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*.[190] This is important to note as she then proceeds to discuss *A Room of One's Own*. Her main point, apart from the critique of androgyny mentioned above, is precisely the lack of genuine personal experience in Woolf's earlier essay. She points out that Woolf used experience to a minimum and even managed to distort the few personal notions that are in the text. Furthermore, she attests Woolf a lack of seriousness with regards to the essay's style.[191] At this point, it seems necessary to discuss the genre of *A Room of One's Own*. Is it merely an essay? Does Woolf's introduction of several narrators not indicate that this essay functions on various levels? To Showalter, essays have to be a documentation of personal opinion without fictitious elements. Naomi Black, however, points out that *A Room of One's Own* is clearly an amalgamation of "fiction and disguised autobiography," which becomes obvious by the many imaginary aspects incorporated by Woolf.[192] What is less obvious is where to draw the line between fact and fiction. Showalter explains that she read the essay merely as a document of the writer's experience, she studied it "detached from its narrative strategies,"[193] an approach that Toril Moi strongly criticizes. According to her, omitting the narrative aspect of the essay means an imbalanced reading naturally leading to false interpretations of the text.[194] Disregarding the narrative strategies by only considering the contents could not have been Woolf's intention. At one point, Showalter mentions – and disapproves of – the choice of narration Woolf made.

> [D]espite its illusions of spontaneity and intimacy, *A Room of One's Own* is an extremely impersonal and defensive book. Impersonality may seem like the wrong word for a book in which a narrative "I" appears in every third sentence. But a closer look reveals that the "I" is a persona, whom the author calls "Mary Beton," and that her views are carefully distanced and depersonalized, just as the pronoun "one" in the title depersonalizes, and even de-sexes, the subject.[195]

Thus, Mary Beton – one of the four narrators in the essay – is a superfluous middle-woman who functions as a barrier between the female reader and Woolf's personal feminist opinion. The narrator ostensibly must be Woolf herself. Only then is a truly personalized text guaranteed. But does this really mean that *A Room of One's Own* fails to meet a feminist agenda? Could the narrative strategies not have a purpose? Not only Moi would answer this question in the affirmative. Anne Fernald discusses the function of Woolf's narrative in her article "'A Room of One's Own', Personal Criticism, and the Essay" and concludes that the introduction of the four narrators is, in fact, a

190 Cf. Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, pp.276-278.
191 Cf. ibid., p.283.
192 Black, Naomi: *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 2004, pp.74-75 & 79.
193 Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, p.285.
194 Cf. Moi, Toril: *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 1991, p.3.
195 Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, p.282.

helpful tool rather than a barrier. The female readers can easily identify with a persona like Mary Beton because she resembles an *ordinary* woman more than Woolf did or could.[196] Unlike Woolf, her readers are not necessarily part of the upper-middle or upper classes, and, even more so, they are not published authors with influence. By introducing a narrator such as Beton, Woolf indeed takes away the immediate personal experience that Showalter demands but she manages to maintain an intimacy that addresses the reader. Ultimately, this is the crucial point: Would the ordinary readers, especially those of the 1920s, have appreciated the unmediated opinion of a real but highly privileged woman and her problems in a patriarchal world rather than a fictional figure who was more like themselves? Did the readers not know that it was the popular literary figure Woolf who wrote the text? And even more importantly: Did they *expect* to read the writer's personal experience? Fernald points out that many readers of *A Room of One's Own* at the time of its publication as well as today assume that they have read Woolf's personal opinions in the essay, regardless of the obvious fact that Woolf chose to introduce narrators that are not herself.[197] They resemble Woolf in some ways but they do not represent the writer entirely. Most readers seem to be able to read Woolf's opinion even though it is not her own voice speaking. Thus, to Fernald the impersonal narrator is a tremendous help, whereas to Showalter, this choice of narration is part of what she refers to as the "flight into androgyny,"[198] Woolf's way of remaining distant from her writings.

Moreover, Showalter is of the opinion that not only essays but feminist works in general require depictions of the writer's experience. Moi explains this as follows:

> The philosophical ground for the turn to the personal and the rejection of objectivity is the idea that knowledge is 'situated'. A famous feminist version of the claim is that knowledge – all knowledge – is gendered, that 'women's ways of knowing' are different from men's […].[199]

The "situated" is what Woolf presumably omits. Naturally, Showalter is not the only one seeking for the "situated" in feminist writings. Rosi Braidotti likewise advocates that feminists pay "[a]ttention to the *situated,*"[200] which, in her opinion, does not mean that a writer who merely focuses on the category of woman is an anti-feminist. Braidotti's theoretical background is that of sexual difference but what is Showalter's theoretical background? What is her point of departure? Moi criticizes Showalter's book as lacking a theoretical background the reader can relate to and that could explain

196 Cf. Fernald, Anne: "'A Room of One's Own', Personal Criticism, and the Essay." *Twentieth Century Literature*, 40.n2 (Summer 1994), pp.176-177.
197 Cf. ibid., p.165.
198 Showalter's chapter on Woolf is called "Virginia Woolf and the Flight Into Androgyny."
199 Moi, Toril: *What is a Woman?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.155.
200 Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994, p.163.

Showalter's point of view. The only theoretician mentioned in her chapter on Woolf is Georg Lukács. Moi points out that even though Showalter cannot be said to be a "proletarian humanist" like Lukács, "there is detectable within her literary criticism a strong, unquestioned belief in the values […] of traditional bourgeois humanism of a liberal-individualist kind."[201] This humanism, she argues, is the result of a patriarchal society. Taking traditional humanism with the male as its central focus as a point of departure for a discussion of Woolf's feminist ambitions is thus bound to fail.[202] Moi's critique concerning Showalter's humanist views may be justified. However, this does not mean that Showalter is missing a theoretical point of view in the first place. Her point of view might be considered questionable but its existence is not. Furthermore, the American critic may have failed to make her own feminist stand explicit but it is certainly possible to find it between the lines. It is self-evident by her strong objection of Woolf's androgyny that Showalter advocates a theory of sexual difference rather than one that aims at abolishing the binary system of the sexes. She calls for women's embodiment and for a strong focus on the feminine and female experience. All of these aspects can be found in Braidotti's model of the three levels of sexual differences. Showalter's theoretical feminist background will not be forcefully defined through speculation at this point but it should become clear that it is not too difficult to detect its traces in the text.

Contrary to Showalter, Toril Moi explains her theoretical methods with which she attempts to define Woolf's feminism. She employs Julia Kristeva's model of three different kinds of feminism. The first branch is referred to as "liberal feminism," with women seeking for equality and "access to the symbolic order." The second branch is called "radical feminism," where the symbolic order of the first branch is explicitly dismissed as it is male-dominated. Radical feminists explicitly praise femininity. Both branches are based on the binary opposition between men and women. The third branch, which Kristeva herself advocates, refuses to accept "the dichotomy between masculine and feminine" and rejects this opposition as metaphysical.[203] Moi seems to position her own feminism somewhere between branch two and three, saying that a combination is necessary for branch two not to fall into the trap of sexism but be aware of the constructed nature of gender. Branch three is thus not fully realistic as women need to be recognized as such in the first place for branch three to become effective. This, however, is merely Moi's personal feminist critique. Her definition of Woolf's feminism is positioned more explicitly into one of the branches, namely that of branch three, as Woolf "has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity."[204] To Moi, Woolf

201 Moi, Toril: *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 1991, p.6.
202 Cf. ibid., p.8.
203 All quotes from ibid., p.12.
204 Ibid., p.13.

was neither a liberal nor a radical feminist but clearly went beyond the masculine/feminine dichotomy. Her assumption is mainly based on the reading of *Three Guineas*, where, according to Moi, Kristeva's stage three prevails, whereas stage one and two are rejected as dangerous but then taken up again at the end.[205] This description of Woolf's feminism is quite blurry as no textual examples are given. When the essay's narrator demands colleges with special curricula for women then this is certainly a form of radical feminism and does not aim at destroying the binary system of man and woman. And when the narrator calls for equal pay and the same professional opportunities for both men and women, with the women aspiring the same positions as men, then this is certainly a liberal feminist thought, according to the Kristevan model Moi discusses. These aspects are by no means minor issues in *Three Guineas* but are of great significance to its build-up. Woolf's most controversial observation that patriarchy is linked to war and femininity to pacifism is yet again by no means a statement that abandons the dichotomy of the masculine and the feminine. It is much rather radical feminism, according to the definition that Moi borrows from Kristeva.

In the end, it becomes obvious that even though Moi's definition has a stronger sense of theory, it is only slightly less one-sided than the argumentation presented by Showalter. Moi does grant Woolf's feminism some nuances of the so-called liberal and radical feminism but her bottom line is that Woolf is thinking beyond gender, and that she is aware of the constructed nature of man and woman and consequently wishes to deconstruct it for the sake of her ideal, namely androgyny. To Moi, Woolf was "this great feminist writer," and a "declared feminist."[206] To Showalter, "it is important to demystify the legend of Virginia Woolf" in the context of feminism.[207] The question that remains to be answered is: Who is right? Moi, Showalter, either of them, or maybe neither of them?

205 Cf. Moi, Toril: *Sexual/Textual Politics,* 1991, p.14.
206 Ibid., p.1 & 8.
207 Showalter, Elaine: *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, p.265.

6 Conclusion

Reading Virginia Woolf from different feminist standpoints today as well as the debate by Moi and Showalter underlines the difficulty of categorizing Woolf's feminism and labeling it as following one coherent contemporary direction. In her two famous essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, many and very different ideas on the woman question come together. It is possible to interpret her thoughts as ideas that are nowadays referred to as relating to the theory of sexual difference. The focus is often on how men and women are different and how this difference can accentuate both sexes' strengths. Likewise it is possible to read the essays as something entirely different, yet still feminist. Thus, even aspects of complex feminist theories like those elaborated on by Judith Butler were not entirely alien to Woolf. She questions the sexes as being purely feminine or purely masculine while at the same time she appears to be advocating sexual difference. Her extensive elaborations on women's issues and the nature of her trains of thought prove that Virginia Woolf was a progressive thinker who was ahead of her time concerning her feminist stand and her personal position as a woman in a patriarchal society.

As this thesis has shown, it is extremely difficult to ascribe one single feminist theory exclusively to Virginia Woolf's thinking. Her feminism cannot simply be described as following the concept of androgyny only, nor is it merely positioned in the tradition of sexual difference. It is a concoction of different feminist directions, which is why her feminism is so complex and appears at times controversial to readers today. The ambiguity of her feminism is also the reason why critics such as Showalter are opposed to it; they refuse to accept that the theory they themselves are in favor of are mingled with the ones they are opposed to as theorists. But this ambiguity does not mean that Woolf contradicted herself concerning her feminist ideas. As presented in this thesis, Woolf's approach to feminism was not a one-way street. She considered herself a feminist at an early stage but refused to be called a feminist later on due to her own definition of the word.

If Woolf is considered a feminist thus depends on how feminism is defined in the first place. To Braidotti, Black, and Moi, Woolf was most definitely a feminist; to Showalter and even to Woolf herself, she was not; Butler's stand on Woolf is unknown. They all have different ideas about feminism and its definition. At the same time, their theoretical backgrounds and feminist convictions differ tremendously. This does not mean that one assumption is correct while the other must be false. However, every feminist's attempt to instrumentalize Woolf for one specific feminist theory is bound to fail. There is no category or branch of feminism that fulfills all the aspects of Woolf's feminism, including her self-proclaimed position as an anti-feminist who despises the f-word. Woolf's feminism is complex and the only label that would rightly define it would simply have to be called *Woolf's feminism*. When Toril Moi states that “[f]or Showalter, Woolf's writing

continually escapes the critic's perspective, always refusing to be pinned down to one unifying angle of vision"[208] then this critique addresses numerous feminists trying to uniquely define Woolf's feminist ambitions. When the critic's perspective does not allow multiplicity then the critic's aspirations will lead to false conclusions. "[O]ne unifying angle of vision" cannot be articulated in Woolf's case, or rather, it cannot be articulated convincingly. Hence, claiming that Woolf was an anti-feminist precedes a one-sided reading process and/or a rather narrow explanation of the word feminism, a term that has become very diverse and omnipresent since the late 20th century.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that Woolf's essays discussed in this thesis had all been published several decades before the theoretical texts presented here were formulated. Employing Woolf as an example of one contemporary feminist theory is impossible. Instrumentalizing her thoughts in parts *cannot* work as the nature of her feminism is more diverse than the very specific theories today. If a representative of the Continental group claimed that Woolf was a feminist advocating sexual difference/s and should thus be referred to as a sexual difference feminist then this hypothetical representative would (have to) block out all the aspects and ideas that are not conform with said theory. The same applies to representatives of other specific feminist theories. Some aspects would always be missing. Woolf's thinking was free of feminist theoretical discourse, which is the reason why her ideas seem to be contradictory to today's readers who may have studied feminist and/or literary theory. The nature of her feminism does not entirely fit into the categories established many years after her publications. Its diversity results from the lack of established discourse and at the same time it was Woolf herself who contributed to the feminist discourse now recognized. Other than today's feminists, she did not have numerous female predecessors to quote from, instead, it is Woolf herself who is often quoted as a feminist today. Her work does not cease to influence contemporary writers and (feminist) theorists as pointed out in this thesis. In the end, Woolf's feminism cannot be put into one single category. From a contemporary point of view it is a concoction of different ideas and directions, and as such it is *Woolf's feminism.*

208 Moi, Toril: *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 1991, p.3.

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