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Urban Writing and Female Concern: The Image of London in Virginia Woolf's Novels

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Abstract

Throughout Virginia Woolf's novels, London remains a constant narrative presence. As a pioneer of modernism and feminism, Woolf does not depict London as a cold urban symbol characteristic of traditional male narratives, but rather constructs it as a living space deeply intertwined with women's unique experiences. London not only reflects women's predicaments in public spaces and their aspirations for spiritual freedom but also witnesses the identity construction and consciousness awakening of the new woman. Moreover, it serves as a symbol of gender power struggles and the possibilities for women's development. In Woolf's writing, London transcends its geographical significance, serving both as a vehicle for her literary experiments and personal emotions, and as a unique symbol for exploring female identity formation and reflecting on modern dilemmas. This profoundly demonstrates her concern for women's existential struggles and her acute insight into modern humanity.

Keywords

Virginia Woolf; Urban space; Modernity.

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf is acclaimed as a pioneering figure of twentieth-century modernism and feminism. During the interwar period, she stands at the heart of London's literary scene as a central member of the Bloomsbury Group. Given her profound connection between her writings and London, she can be aptly termed a "London writer." She consistently endeavors to capture the enduring qualities of the city: encompassing both its vibrant hustle and bustle as well as its unique character as a commercial, cultural, administrative, and religious hub. In her works, London sometimes serves as the specific setting for characters' activities, as seen in *Mrs. Dalloway*; at other times, it functions as the residence where characters spend a certain period of their lives, as in *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf never spares her pen in expressing her emotions towards London, including love, anticipation, regret, and disappointment. Her creative perspective consistently focuses on the diverse crowds populating London's bustling streets, encompassing foreign visitors, individuals from the countryside, those returning after a long absence, and residents from various ethnic backgrounds worldwide, forming a highly diverse group. With her keen observation as her pen, she precisely captures the fleeting expressions, gestures, and manners of these characters, delving deep into their genuine inner responses at the moment through meticulous descriptions of their external behaviors. This approach of depicting the essence through form fully embodies Richard Lehan's assertion that crowds can also serve as one of the ways to understand a city. According to Lehan, "the man of the crowd is the crowd and, metonymically, the city as well." [1]. Woolf's way of comprehending the city through its crowds does not refer to ordinary behavioral activities. Rather, it is a process in which the observer, guided by intuitive instinct, perceives inner truths and navigates the realm of personal imagination. Here, intuitive instinct aligns with Henri Bergson's notion of an instinct that "has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely" [2]. It is precisely this mode of perception, rooted in intuition

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and imagination, that forms the essential source of Woolf's joyful and unhindered contemplation of London.

It can be said that London not only serves as a crucial dimension in Virginia Woolf's literary creation but also acts as the core driving force behind her continuous exploration of literary forms and narrative experiments. In Woolf's perception, London possesses a distinct and multi-layered urban texture, as vividly captured in her description: "London crowded and ribbed and compact, with its dominant domes, its guardian cathedrals; its chimneys and spires; its cranes and gasometers; and the perpetual smoke which no spring or autumn ever blows away" [3]. As a pioneer and a flagship figure in feminist literature, Woolf always employs female narrative perspectives, thereby imbuing the image of London with a distinctly feminine lens. London ceases to be a grand and impersonal urban symbol in traditional male narratives but rather becomes a living space deeply intertwined with women's survival experiences and emotional fluctuations. Born into an aristocratic family, Woolf's dual background of upper-class privilege and middle-class exposure provides her with a unique vantage point from which to observe London. This identity enables her to glimpse the multifaceted nature of London as a cosmopolitan metropolis while granting her greater access than ordinary women to literary circles and systematic education. These experiences forges her acute perceptiveness, allowing her to see beyond urban glamour to examine underlying social issues and human dilemmas, thus laying a solid foundation for her creative works based around London. On the one way, Woolf uses London as a mirror to accurately capture the spatial struggles of women between home, marriage, and the streets, workplaces. On the another, the hustle and fragmented landscapes of London's streets, the dual impact of commodity culture on women, and the human alienation under the shadow of the two World Wars collectively prompt Woolf to question the core proposition of how human being can maintain self-integrity in modern society.

2. London as a Mirror: Female Confinement and the Quest for Liberation

Rezia, a lively young Italian woman who marries a British soldier in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is filled with anticipation for London: "She respected these Englishmen, and wanted to see London, and the English heroes, and the tailor-made suits, and could remember hearing how wonderful the shops were, from an aunt who had married and lived in Soho." [4] This monologue not only directly reveals Rezia's yearning but also implicitly aligns with Virginia Woolf's own beautiful fantasies about London. As Woolf's stream of consciousness unfolds, Rezia arrives in Britain by train from Newhaven, visiting the Tower of London, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and witnessing the State Opening of Parliament presided over by the King. While strolling through the streets, she is invariably drawn to and lingers in front of elegant clothing stores, hat shops, and handbag boutiques. During afternoon tea, she shares daily anecdotes with her husband, such as the news that Mrs. Filmer's daughter is about to give birth. In Woolf's portrayal, the most profound impression of London on the outlander Rezia centers on the various commodities in the city. Consumerism, an important hallmark of modernity, is quietly infiltrating and influencing the perception of this young woman, causing her to unconsciously focus her gaze on various commodities during her life in London. The bustling world of commodities provides women with an opportunity to break free from the private sphere, allowing them to step out of their homes, stroll through the streets of London, and shop in various stores, thereby engaging with public space. However, behind the act of shopping, Woolf actually employs London's commodity culture scene to conduct a dialectical examination of modernity. She presents both the freedom brought about by consumption and implicitly contemplates its potential limitations.

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This reflection is also evident in other female flâneuses depicted in Woolf's works. The protagonist of *Mrs. Dalloway,* Clarissa, shares Rezia's fondness for London's bustling streets. When she steps out of her home one morning to buy flowers for her evening party, she immerses herself in the vivid urban tapestry: "in people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June." [5] Strolling through the streets of London holds a special significance: it is both a means of escaping the tomb-like family home and a source of vitality. The commercial civilization symbolized by Bond Street fascinates Clarissa, while the speed and power embodied by modern material symbols such as airplanes and automobiles also evoke her admiration. However, whether it is Clarissa's or Rezia's urban wanderings, they remain constrained by the gendered division between public and private spheres. In the 18th century, men could freely interact with strangers in public spaces such as streets, coffee houses, and theaters, while women are barred from such places. Even in the 19th century, women are largely confined to the private sphere, unable to enter restaurants alone, whereas men could freely navigate crowds, clubs, and taverns. It is not until the 1850s and 1860s, with the rise of department stores and the advent of consumerism, that the boundaries between public and private began to blur. Yet, no matter how much women cherish and enjoy their walks through London, they are still compelled to conform to their roles as bourgeois women in public, fulfilling the social duties assigned to them and adhering to the patriarchal tradition that confines women to the private sphere [6].

This female experience of entering public space through consumption also finds resonance in Woolf's essay *Street Haunting: A London Adventure*. In the essay, the female narrator similarly uses the pretext of "buying a pencil" as an excuse to freely roam the streets of London on a winter evening. Leaving her normal identity at home, she merges into the crowd of passersby as an anonymous figure, finding a sense of ease and belonging. Through her eyes, the streets of London brim with vivid scenes of daily life: clerks reading letters, women making tea, gold beaters in attic workshops, a chance encounter with a Jewish passerby, and cats darting across moonlit patches. She even traverses freely into the inner worlds of strangers, inventing stories for a dwarf buying shoes, weaving scenarios for a blind man, speculating about the quarrels of an elderly couple running a stationery shop. The street, here, becomes a window into the theater of everyday existence. As Woolf writes at the end of the essay, "To escape is the greatest of pleasures; street haunting in winter is the greatest of adventures," [7] which precisely encapsulates the spiritual freedom women experience when they cast off the shackles of identity in public space. The very act of gaining access to public space through consumption exposes the passivity of women's entry into the public realm. The similar experiences of both the narrator in the essay and the characters in Woolf's novels jointly confirm that women's public participation in the nineteenth century is always constrained by the yoke of identity. Even the freedom to stroll the streets has to be obtained through justifiable excuses, profoundly reflecting the strict discipline imposed by the patriarchal society on women's living space.

Faced with the myriad sights on the streets of London, Clarissa always navigates the tension between her inner self and the external world, struggling to establish a stable self-image. She expresses her understanding of self-identity and belonging in such a manner: "She was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself." [8] At times, she is rooted in the private estate that signifies her class identity, connected to a fixed social circle; at other times, she dissolves into the anonymous crowds of London's streets, blurring her individual boundaries within public space. Similarly, Rezia's lack of children denies her the identity of motherhood, weakening her sense of feminine belonging and rendering her existence in London profoundly

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unstable. She is intensely affected by her husband's emotional state, and her own sense of self remains as difficult to anchor as mist. Furthermore, the female narrator in *Street Haunting* wanders the streets anonymously, capturing the wonders of modern life while detaching her consciousness from her physical form, merging into the crowd like mist. As Walter Benjamin emphasizes, "The crowd in the street is a new and singular thing in modernity, merely the ashes of the bourgeois dream world." [9] This "mist-like" self essentially epitomizes the state of consciousness under the dual shadows of modern life's chaotic whirl and the trauma of war: fragmented, contradictory, and perpetually shifting. The creation of these images also subtly reveals traces of Woolf infusing her own consciousness into the construction of London's image. Through the existential dilemmas of her female characters, she projects her observations and reflections on the spiritual condition of the modern individual. On one hand, Woolf sharply criticizes the materialism in society that revels in commodity culture and sinks into commodity fetishism, condemning its erosion of the individual spirit. On the other hand, she meticulously depicts the autonomy and confidence displayed by female shoppers during consumption, fully exploring the romantic potential inherent in acts of shopping.

At the same time, Woolf does not shy away from pointing out that these women are ultimately unable to resist the allure of commodity culture and end up as insignificant figures submerged by the tide of commodities, becoming elusive and intangible "mist." In this process, both producers and consumers of commodities undergo profound alienation. People cease to be the masters of their own actions; instead, they are objectified and become a part of product, reduced to aesthetic and artistic objects for observation. [10] This portrayal of human alienation precisely aligns with the rebellious core of modernist literature against modernity. It breaks down the clear boundaries between subject and object, between humans and things in traditional cognition, revealing the dislocation of the relationship between individuals and the world in modern society. Woolf's keen perception and profound presentation of this modern dilemma not only demonstrate the ideological depth of modernist literature but also confirm her forward thinking and insight as a representative modernist writer who transcends her era.

3. London as Witness: Female Awakening and the Forging of a New Identity

If Clarissa remains content with shopping on commercial streets and confining herself to the private sphere as a hostess of evening parties, her daughter Elizabeth demonstrates a stronger urge to break through these limitations. Elizabeth represents the New Woman who actively challenges the constraints of the private domain and engages in public life that reflects her authentic self. In her eyes, London appears even more vibrant: the crowds on the streets are devoted to solemn pursuits like shipping, trade, law, and administration, with an air of cheerful reverence, free from the Bond Street fascination with prestigious figures in cars or the trivial gossip at social gatherings that preoccupy her mother.

A typical manifestation of gendered spatial segregation is the long-standing exclusion of women from universities. It is not until the 19th century, as women's status improved, that this segregation begin to break down, leading to changes in the social hierarchy. Thus, the "home" as a harbor becomes a segregated domain for women. Spatial regimes assigned men and women to distinct gendered spaces: men’s spaces include socially valued fields like theology, law, and medicine, while women’s spaces are limited to undervalued domains such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning. Access to knowledge and adjustments in spatial relations gradually transform women’s subordinate status. For Elizabeth, London is not only a place that brings the joy of public life but also a platform for constructing an autonomous identity.

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Woolf consistently focuses on issues concerning women's education and career. In *Three Guineas,* she points out that in the 19th century, women from the upper-middle class in Western society are confined to the domestic cage. The education received by daughters of British gentlemen focuses on pleasing men, and marriage is even regarded as the sole career for women. With the removal of restrictions on women's careers, women from the middle and upper classes find themselves at the junction of old and new circumstances: "Behind them lay patriarchy, the boudoir, boredom, inhumanity, hypocrisy, and servility. Ahead lay an open world and a career system." [11] Woolf puts forward clear propositions on this matter: she encourages women to receive education to achieve intellectual independence and also advocates for women to take up employment to escape poverty through economic independence. Moreover, she calls on women to become political subjects transcending patriarchal values, to liberate themselves from the tyrannical psychology of patriarchal society, and ultimately to break free from the limitations of the private sphere. Women are urged to actively participate in the writing of urban discourse in the public sphere and become new women with both self-worth and social influence. This ideal image is embodied in Mary Datchet in her another novel *Night and Day*. Mary comes from a rural working-class family. After graduating from university, she lives and works in London. Her growth trajectory breaks the cyclical pattern of "country - city - country" in Henry Fielding's classic urban novels and instead demonstrates a strong identification with London. She yearns to have a working space in the city and hosts biweekly club gatherings where various issues could be freely discussed. Compared to Elizabeth, Mary's personal growth is more profound and diverse. She accomplishes Woolf's feminist view of "becoming oneself," achieving both spiritual and economic independence, and shaping a self-sufficient and open female self.

Another female character in the novel *Night and Day*, Catherine, also serves as an important vehicle through which Woolf draws on her personal life experiences to convey her concern for women. Catherine comes from an illustrious family that produces many remarkable figures, yet not a single female member. She has to long reside at home, managing household affairs with great efficiency. However, the tedium of housework is no less demanding than labor in factories and workshops, yet the value it creates is far inferior to that of factory work and receives no social recognition. In a letter Woolf wrote to her Latin teacher, it is implied that the character, Catherine, is modeled after her sister Vanessa. Vanessa harbors a deep passion for painting but is compelled by her half-brother to participate in social activities. [12] Moreover, the story of *Night and Day* also subtly incorporates Woolf's personal experiences: after their father's death, her sister takes her away from Kensington and moves to Bloomsbury to start a new life. For Woolf, this spatial transition is also a form of rebirth. While she feels marginalized at the entrance of Hyde Park, her life after the move is filled with joy and creativity in London. As Squier mentions in her research, drawing on what she called her “tea-table training”, Woolf first expressed herself in a disguised fashion in her writing, despite the constraints on her voice and values posed by male literary conventions. [13] These reflections on women's predicaments and explorations of self-identity are cleverly woven into her works through the image of London she portrays.

4. London as an Arena: Gender Politics and Female Potential

London provides Woolf with the stimulus of social interaction, setting her mind teeming with ideas that proves vital to her creative work. As she observes, "The charm of modern London is that it is not built to last; it is built to pass. Its glassiness, its transparency, its surging waves of coloured plaster give a different pleasure and achieve a different end from that which was desired and attempted by the old builders and their patrons, the nobility of England." [14] Yet Woolf focuses precisely on trivial domestic tasks in modern life. In her novel *The Years*,

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discussions of feminist dreams among women take place alongside needlework, which is a deliberate parallel that reflects Woolf's confirmation in the groundbreaking power inherent in women's manual labor. She firmly believes that patriarchal civilization would eventually be replaced by an egalitarian society, and within domestic labor lay the seeds of feminist rebellion and confidence.

The Years subverts the traditional paradigm of family chronicles, abandoning the portrayal of the illustrious lives of great men and instead focusing on the inconspicuous and fragmented lives of the women in the Pargiter family. It not only depicts their survival circumstances within patriarchal households but also traces their journeys of establishing themselves in the external world after escaping from the confines of home. In this writing, London is endowed with special significance: it serves as both a "battlefield" where men and women vie for control over the city and a "stage" where new women launch their struggles for gender equality and occupational equality. *The Years* crafts two highly symbolic urban images of London: the mailbox and the bridge. In a speech Woolf delivers to the National Union of Women's Services, she mentions that the mailbox symbolizes the boundary between the private and public worlds. Its upright form and the emblematic imagery representing royal authority evoke associations with the phallus and imperialism. In the novel, in 1880, when Rose sneaks out to the store, she witnesses an exhibitionist standing beside a red mailbox, a scene that causes her immense psychological distress. Behind the freedom of strolling the streets lurks a constant threat that restricts women's activities, and Rose's subsequent emotional withdrawal further implies the confinement women face at the level of discourse.

The depiction of the other urban image, the "bridge," reveals the greater possibilities for development that the city offers to women. In the novel, women's talents and work function as "bridges" that forge connections: Eleanor builds bridges outside the family, regarding friends across ages and nationalities as family members, and ultimately learns to live independently and happily; Maggie marries a Frenchman, constructing cultural and emotional bridges between different ethnicity; Rose not only builds a bridge of romance among women but also plays a pivotal role in the women's suffrage movement, becoming a crucial link connecting the female community, and the turning point when she decides to devote herself wholeheartedly to the women's suffrage movement occurs on a bridge in London. At this moment, the image of London has transformed. As North observes when he returns from Africa, "He was somewhere in Oxford Street; the pavement was people, jostling each other; swarming round the plate-glass windows which were still lit up. The gaiety, the colour, the variety, were amazing after Africa. All these years, he thought to himself, looking at a floating banner of transparent silk, he had been used to raw goods; hides and fleeces; here was the finished article. A dressing-case, of yellow leather fitted with silver bottles, caught his eye." [15] As women's presence on the streets becomes increasingly frequent, they move from the domestic sphere into public spaces, collectively shaping a unique new image of London. From a symbolic perspective, the "bridge" connects the past and the future, serving as a central image of women's experiences: it represents the transitional intermediate position women occupy before leaving the private household and entering the public world. The detail of Rose seeing her own reflection in the window of a tailor's shop while on the bridge precisely embodies Woolf's profound aspirations and fervent hopes for the future realization of true independence for women.

5. Conclusion

The image of London in Woolf's works carries multiple layers of meaning: it is both the central space embodying the author's emotions and literary experiments, and a vital medium reflecting women's existential struggles and witnessing their awakening consciousness. From Clarissa's passive entry into the public sphere through consumption, to Elizabeth and Mary's active

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attempts to break through gendered spatial constraints, and further to the gender oppression symbolized by the pillar box and the hope represented by the bridge, Woolf consistently employs a female perspective to transform London into a literary arena for narrating women's conditions and reflecting on modernity.

The construction of these London images integrates both Woolf's profound concern for women's education, profession, and independent identity, and her acute insight as a modernist writer into the relationships between individuals and the city, and between the self and the inner world. Ultimately, the London of Woolf's pen transcends its geographical significance. It becomes her interrogation, as a member of the feminine "Other," of the dilemmas of modern societal development—far surpassing its role as a mere physical space to become a unique symbol for exploring female identity and questioning the spiritual crises of modern society.

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