

Rooms of their own: Windows to freedom

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Abstract

To some women writers in the nineteenth century, a room of their own constituted a place to mature and reflect upon their social situation, to recognize their moral strength and value and, above all, to give birth to a new way of perceiving their gender in favour of constituting a female comprehensive space. It definitely meant a place to express 'their selves'. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing epitomized the contemporary model to follow. These awe-inspiring writers shared a relentless attitude to defend their gender; they were really concerned about the vertiginous social transformations of their times and wrote about them.

Key words: room, gender, social conventions, patriarchy, motherhood.

Cuartos propios: ventanas para la libertad

Resumen

Para algunas escritoras del siglo XIX, un cuarto propio representaba el lugar donde madurar y reflexionar sobre su situación social, reconocer su valor y fuerza moral y, sobre todo, generar un modo particular de percibir su género en favor de constituir un espacio femenino real. Sin lugar a dudas, ese sitio simbolizaba su universo de expresión personal. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf y Doris Lessing produjeron el modelo contemporáneo a seguir. Estas mujeres inspiradoras que compartieron una actitud tenaz en defensa de su género, manifestaron su preocupación sobre las vertiginosas transformaciones sociales de su tiempo y escribieron al respecto.

Palabras clave: cuarto, género, pautas sociales, patriarcado, maternidad.

Janelas próprias: janelas para a liberdade

Resumo

Para algumas escritoras do século XIX, um quarto próprio representava o lugar reflexão sobre sua situação social, reconhecer seu valor e força moral e, sobretudo, gerar um modo particular de perceber seu gênero em favor de constituir um espaço feminino real. Sem lugar a dúvidas, esse lugar simbolizava seu universo de expressão pessoal. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf e Doris Lessing produziram o modelo contemporâneo a seguir. Estas mulheres inspiradoras que compartilharam uma atitude tenaz em defesa de seu gênero, manifestaram sua preocupação sobre as vertiginosas transformações sociais de seu tempo e escreveram a seu respeito.

Palavras chave: quarto, gênero, pautas sociais, patriarcado, maternidade.

Being is, above all, a value. Life begins well, protected, warm at home [...] This is the space where the protective beings live in [...] In this remote region, memory and imagination stay close to each other and they work to deepen one another [...].

(Heidegger 2000)

There are places in all people's houses meant to be public and there are places meant to be private. When thinking architecturally, there are actually three levels of interaction in a home, and they need to be identified and appropriately designed when remodelling. The first is public spaces. These are spaces at home where anyone is welcome. These spaces, for example, would be the front porch or the entry hall. They are not restricted, and they are the appropriate place for strangers and acquaintances to approach someone's house. But seldom people invite strangers into the family room. The family room, kitchen or back-yard deck could all be considered semiprivate spaces. They are entertaining areas and gathering areas but only for those considered friends, family or invited guests. Then there are the rooms people hope guests do not see. These are private spaces. Only family or very close friends are invited into these spaces, which include bedrooms, personal baths and back-of-the-house areas such as laundry rooms, mechanical rooms and storage rooms.

In a well-designed home, these areas are arranged in a logical sequence from the most public to the most private. The level assigned to a given room may vary from family to family. In some homes, an office is a private space, used to pay bills, study, read, etc. In this case, the office could be on the second floor attached to the master bedroom. In other homes, the office may be used for business purposes, and people other than family members may need to access it. Here the office should be placed adjacent to the entry of the home and/or have a separate entry of its own to preserve privacy. As a matter of fact, houses function as cultural representations of society and public, private and personal spaces can be interpreted through different perspectives.

As far as politics is concerned, the concepts of public and private spaces attained great significance with the creation of the modern state. According to the liberal tradition, the modern individual, at home in its private spaces, regards the public space as its outside. The outside is the place proper to politics, where the action of the individual is exposed in the presence of others and there seeks recognition. (This is the notion of the political elaborated by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, which she calls the space of public appearance). Public space is civic space. It is the space of civil society, shared by citizens –individuals who have acquired a public voice and understand themselves to be part of a wider community–.

Undoubtedly, the intrinsic relationship that exists between space and personal experience has become a matter of significant importance to different sciences and

critical theories that populated the last decades of the twentieth century. One consequence of the fact that theories about place and space come from diverse supporters and are not controlled by conventional terms is that questions of space and place and of people's relations to them appear vague and complex. Another consequence is, as Michel de Certeau points out about dealing with the daily, that in this area there are many competent and interesting providers but no dominant or authoritative voice, school, or method.

Place is a center of meaning produced by sensorial and passive modes of experience. At a high theoretical level, places may be perceived as points in a spatial system, or as strong intuitive feelings, at the opposite extreme. The former is too remote for sensory experience to be real; the latter presupposes rootedness in a locality and emotional commitment to it that are increasingly rare. To most people in the modern world, places lie somewhere in the middle range of experience (Harvey 1975: 152).

But, what happens when such a relation to place does not exist and people feel out of place? Placelessness can be both imposed and chosen. It is imposed by exclusion and confinement. Imposed placelessness is to some degree unavoidable; people are understandably excluded from some places, and they are required to be in places where they would prefer not to be. However, imposed placelessness can be a major aspect of some people's lives, and that is when its negative character becomes recognizable. In such conditions, the inhabited private place becomes a prison.

A particular societal choice of what is space and time is fundamental to how the whole of that society works and it therefore operates in relationship to individuals with the full force of objective fact from which no one individual can escape without severe penalty. (Harvey 1994: 127)

For feminists, the private is often seen as an ideological prison, isolating women from masculine public life. Feminism becomes a kind of spatial politics: "[...] the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about [...]" (Pateman 1988). Domestic space is culturally constructed, measured, and labelled. In this sense, both public and private spaces are fully domesticated.

The feminist criticism that emerged in the United States and Europe in the XIX century, even defending the equality of rights, considered the differences between men and women from the biological point of view, respecting the existent dichotomy between the public and private space which also meant to accept the feminine domesticity and subordination to the masculine pattern, besides imprinting on those natural differences an idea of women's inferiority on account of a greater physical and intellectual fragility, in spite of an undeniable superiority from the moral point of view.

Therefore, a biological truth turned to be a cultural device to assign spaces and define women's roles in a patriarchal society. Men perpetrated an ideological prison that subjected

and silenced women's voices. During the times stated before, it was very difficult for women to escape from those spatial confines to the degree that they had to pay a penalty of isolation and relative exclusion because of the way spaces had been planned for them. At the heart of the domestic world, according to societal parameters, there was the duty to bear and raise children. Home constituted an area of privacy and tranquillity; it was concerned with moral undertakings while the outside world was related to economic activities.

All domestic activity served a dual purpose. On the one hand, it reproduced the human population and made it ready for work by feeding, clothing, and sheltering. On the other hand, it had a symbolic side, indicating the presence of woman, reflecting her character, and converting her functions into cultural life. (Smith 1988: 185)

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the domestic world had become a system full of rules and consequences for women and “[...] this ideology, called the Cult of True Womanhood, legitimized their victimization. These were the means that men used to insure the passivity and docility of women [...]” (Welter 1978: 373-377). However, despite social prejudices, some women decided to step out of the domestic sphere and became novelists, and this made them daring and unabashed in their contemporaries' views. As a consequence, they were thoroughly criticised by their contemporaries and, quite often, they had to adopt men's names to be published because maleness gave legitimacy to their writing, especially if they were writing on serious subjects such as politics. Eventually, no matter the texts women wrote, their ideas started entering the public sphere of the twentieth century.

Women writers were clearly in an ambivalent position. As women, they often admired many traditional values ascribed to womanhood, but by having a profession, they stepped beyond these values and moved into the world of men. (Welter 1978: 228)

For this reason, to have a personal place to think and put their words in ink became a must for female authors and the word 'room' turned to be a symbol of such a location. The term room, charged with divergent connotations according to personal experience, has formed part of an ample range of literary works written by women, especially, in the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, to make public the private experiences of women's domestic sphere.

Several stories written in the XIX and XX centuries contained singular, fictional rooms in their *corpora*; particularly narratives produced by women in times when patriarchy was powerfully institutionalised. For such women writers, a room of their own constituted a place to mature and reflect upon their social situation, to recognize their moral strength and value and, above all, to give birth to a new way of perceiving their gender in favour of constituting a female comprehensive space. It definitely meant a place to express

‘their selves’. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing epitomized the contemporary model to follow. All these awe-inspiring writers shared a relentless attitude to defend their gender; they were really concerned about the vertiginous social transformations of their times and wrote about them.

The purpose of the present paper is to analyze how social, private spaces assigned to female characters in the three literary works hindered their possibility of developing a full identity that would have helped them evolve as complete beings. Moreover, it seems proper to pay attention to the way physical spaces inhabited by women on their own affect their spirits because those intimate spaces face them with their inner unsolved conflicts. Certainly, the perception women have towards such locations function as a determining factor of their inhabitants’ fate. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” in the United States in 1899, and Doris Lessing shaped “To Room Nineteen” in England in 1963. Although these texts belonged to different historical periods, they shared a point in common: they were written by and about women forbidden to express their inner selves in societies governed by men. In 1929, Virginia Woolf gave form to *A Room of One’s Own* giving her female readers the possibility of discovering a comprehensive space to finally feel at home.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Perkins Gilman (1899) introduces the reader to a fictional, almost magical, world at the end of the nineteenth century. The magnificence of the house the young couple sets its residence in minimizes the mournful aspect that the spoiled greenhouses propose to the imagination; in fact, the author’s phantasmagoric description anticipates the future events that John’s wife unconsciously foreshadows: “[...] I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity [...]” (p. 1148). John has convinced her that place will help her recover from hysteria (1).

If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency – what is one to do? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing. (Perkins Gilman 1899: 1147)

Even though he apparently worships her, he uses paternal expressions when addressing her: ‘little girl’, ‘darling’, ‘dear’; but he never calls her by name; as a matter of fact, she is a woman with neither name nor identity. Although she expresses her desire to work, “[...] I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good [...]” (Perkins Gilman 1899: 1149). John does not even listen to her; on the contrary, he forbids her to write, encourages her to sleep, warns her against thinking and reprimands her for being restless. Actually, he adopts the social conventions that rule the society he has been brought up in; a society that subjects women to the double agony of being born and encouraged to be useless.

The rational structure of the modern society has submitted John's wife to an impersonal space in which she feels alienated from any possibilities of becoming and perceiving herself as an independent being. John's paternal attitude towards his wife manifests a strong prejudice against her as a woman; he definitely sees her as inferior from an intellectual point of view; she is just a beautiful and decorative object of his own. John's behaviour towards his wife clearly exposes the cultural stereotype of femininity –women as subjective, emotional and irrational beings– and the gender ideology of the times. In Evelyn Fox Keller's (1991) words: "[...] it is the importance of recognizing the social construction of gender, and the deeply oppressive consequences of assuming that men and women are, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, "born rather than made" [...] (p. 20).

The medical profession's godlike attitude in "The Yellow Wallpaper" reveals this judgment. The 'Rest cure' that Dr. Weir Mitchell prescribed, which is mentioned in Gilman's work, reflects men's disparaging attitudes. His 'Rest cure' calls for complete rest, coerced feeding and isolation. Mitchell, a neurosurgeon specializing in women's nervous ailments, expounded upon his belief for women's nervous conditions when he said,

American woman is, to speak plainly, too often physically unfit for her duties as woman, and is perhaps of all civilized females the least qualified to undertake those weightier tasks which tax so heavily the nervous system of man. She is not fairly up to what nature asks from her as wife and mother. How will she sustain herself under the pressure of those yet more exacting duties, which nowadays she is eager to share with the man? (Mitchell 1998: 141)

The woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" has apparently been under the pressure of such duties –her life dedicated to the welfare of home and family in the preservation of social stability– and, consequently, it is her doctor-husband who chooses a well-lighted, airy and stimulating room for her on the top floor of the house, which may help improve her health. This is a particular room whose yellowish wallpaper produces a particular effect on John's wife: "[...] I never saw a worse paper in my life [...] The color is repellent, almost revolting, [...]" (Perkins Gilman 1889: 1150).

Despite her disgust and rejection, the room seems to inspire her fancy for writing: "[...] We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day [...]" (Gilman 1889: 1150). Gradually, she becomes accustomed to that space though the paper continues upsetting her. Through her room window she can see the beautiful garden that surrounds the house and her poetic creativity emerges when her mind starts imagining the yard full of cheerful people. Receptively, she feels at ease in that space that she starts recognizing as her own place. But John has warned her,

[...] that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try [...]. (Perkins Gilman 1889: 1151)

Subsequently, her creative imagination gives shape to “[...] a broken neck and two bulbous eyes [...]” (Perkins Gilman 1889: 1152) on a tiny damp spot that emerges from the yellowish wall. At the beginning, she is aware of the origin of the spot but later, her mind perceives a state of latent life that moves and smells ‘yellow’ (my emphasis) in it. Her room turns into a prolongation of her person and the image she sees drawn on the wall obsessed her so much that she convinces herself it is her inner self. Repressed from exercising her passion for writing, the creepy physical space she lives in develops into a mental space and inhibits any chance of body or physical labour in her.

In actual fact, the yellow wallpaper, with its two different designs –the front one of bars and entangled obstacles and the back one of a woman struggling to free herself– becomes the most powerful symbolic image in this short story. The drawings of eyes and bars stand for a vigilantly sterilizing society, which does not allow the woman to develop her personal interests and to become a complete, self-sustaining human being. This society prescribes the obligations a woman ought to fulfil towards husband and children as well as the emotions and thoughts she must have to be considered ‘normal’ (my emphasis).

The cries for help of John’s wife do not worry him, who reproduces the scientific and rational discourse society has inflicted in him.

My darling, I beg for you, for my sake and for our own child’s sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as physician when I tell you so? (Perkins Gilman 1889: 1156)

His patriarchal attitude not only impedes him giving effective assistance to his wife but also reacting when faced with the worsening of her mental health. She cannot sleep any more and acts aggressively towards those who dare enter her room with the purpose of appropriating her image, as her disturbed mind has imagined. As a reflex action, she encloses herself, throws the key away and destroys the paper on the wall. Consequently, the symbiosis concludes; the subject subsumes the object in her mind and assumes her self-defense. “[...] I’ve got out at last, in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back [...]” (Perkins Gilman 1889: 1161).

As a matter of fact, Charlotte Perkins Gilman portrays an unusual kind of room. Undoubtedly, the powerful social and physical space the author proposes for the central character in “The Yellow Wallpaper” emerges as the most suitable for a woman who has been deprived of her name and identity. In the character of John, Perkins Gilman has symbolized the public power of masculine society and its conventions, which women have suffered for centuries. In such a society, John’s wife has only a way out: let her diagnosed hysteria turn into madness to achieve a complete depersonalization of her self so as to preserve the social patterns.

Taking into consideration “To Room Nineteen”, Doris Lessing introduces the reader to a seemingly perfect marital relationship between Susan and Matthew in the middle of the twentieth century. The community they live in recognizes them as a happy and successful couple: they apparently love each other; they both have profitable jobs and enjoyable lives. Everything happens as they have planned before getting married. Later, Susan gets pregnant four times and they become parents of four beautiful children. As they are a large family, Susan and Matthew decide to move house and they set their home in the outskirts of the city. Susan’s daily duties, as a mother and wife, and the long distance she has to travel to get to work every day, force her to quit her job though she feels happy with the change.

However, it is at that moment precisely when Susan commits her biggest mistake because, by accepting such a proposal, she loses all possibilities of entering the public sphere and becoming independent again. Such a decision does not emerge from much thinking on her situation but from the submissive and obedient position she has adopted. Susan blindly assumes her role of woman and mother as sources of life, power and energy. Undoubtedly, the patriarchal society she is a member of has imposed sexual and behavioral patterns on her that she has accepted as social rules and cultural inheritance. Susan accepts this thought without taking into account that womanhood is a cultural constraint that impedes her to fulfill her personal expectations.

The chauvinistic oppression consists of imposing certain social models of femininity on women so as to make us believe that such models are natural. (Moi 1989: 75) (2)

Such social norms have established both characters’ tasks: Matthew will work outside the house and Susan will look after their home and children.

With the passing of time Susan and Matthew’s marriage starts suffering the pressures of the external world; their fluent, rational and intelligent communication turns to be trivial and hesitant. When Matthew admits a secret love affair Susan tries to rationalize it but her selfhood feels betrayed. Soon she realizes that her life has dramatically fallen into a void. Almost immediately, the couple’s inability to communicate with each other inspires contradictory feelings on Susan. On one hand, her inner self pushes her to react against the passive role society imposes her to accomplish; on the other hand, she feels guilty. “[...] Susan did not tell Matthew of these thoughts. They were not sensible [...]” (Lessing 1888).

There is a particular instance in the story in which Susan decides to free herself from the oppressive space her house has turned to be and organizes a room of her own despite she rapidly discovers that it is not ‘hers’ but just another room in the house. In a while, this desperate woman starts suffering from hallucinations that manifest in the presence of a young man who persecutes her. These visions are just steps in the process of displacement she begins to go through. Deeply inside, she feels the need of isolating

herself from the rest of the world, but not in her house because she does not feel protected by it any more.

If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space, which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity, will be a non-place. (Augé 2004: 83) (3)

In her house, Susan has lost trace of her singular identity and she is not able to establish a personal and loving relationship with its inhabitants because they do not recognize her as a woman but only as a mother and wife. Eventually, she undertakes her household duties as she has been taught to do; however, she does not feel involved in them. Her life in that house has lost sense for her.

The space of non-place liberates anyone who penetrates it into its habitual determination. That person is only what he does or lives as a passenger, client or driver [...] The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relationship, but loneliness or similitude. (Augé 2004: 106-107) (4)

After much consideration, she makes the decision of renting a little room in a hotel to be alone, far away from familiar claims. However, initiating her journey to freedom is not as easy as she has thought. The first time she tries, the hotel manager refuses to hire a room to a woman and she feels disappointed. Luckily, her fortune changes when she finds Fred, who thinks more about his need for money and forgets his moral ethics. He offers her an isolated room with only one window, a fire and some old furniture. To Susan, room 19 means liberation. She does not do much in it; she just stretches her arms, smiles and enjoys her anonymity. She is not Susan Rowlings, Matthew's wife, mother of four children, Mrs. Parker and Sophie Traoub's employer any more. She is Mrs. Jones without past or present life. "[...] This room has become more her own than the house she lived in [...]" (Lessing 1901). Undoubtedly, that room is the place to let her essence manifest.

Nevertheless, her wonderful and secret world vanishes into the air when she finds out that her husband, afraid of her having a love affair, has sent a detective to follow her. And she does not deny such a possibility when facing her husband's hostility towards her; as a result, she builds up two different discourses: one for the outside world and another for her lonely heart. Her 'great' marriage comes to an end when Matthew suggests her to have a meeting with each other's lovers. To disguise her uneasiness, her mind makes up a name for her non-existent love affair: Michael Plant. At that moment, she feels like falling apart and she concludes that she has to disappear because she is unable to start a life of her own and face the moral critiques of society.

She is completely desperate when she returns to room 19; she stands in front of the window "[...] looking down, watching people pass and pass and pass... The demons

were not here. They had gone for ever, because she was buying her freedom from them [...]” (Perkins Gilman 1889: 1907). She thinks about her family but realizes that life has lost sense for her. Slowly, she switches the gas on, pulls up a blanket over her body and waits for the end of her suffering. “[...] She was quite content lying there, listening to the faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river [...]” (Perkins Gilman 1889: 1908).

Either to John’s wife in “The Yellow Wallpaper” or to Susan Rowlings in “To Room Nineteen” rooms function as spaces of representation. On the one hand, the context the woman in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is obliged to inhabit flings her into a process of deterioration of the self, which, in the end, takes her to madness. She is an intelligent woman who does not choose to live away from society but who is driven away from it by the gender role that her patriarchy has imposed on her. That room represents the social constraints to her personal autonomy and, as she lacks both the experience and the social context to practice it, she blames herself for her discontent and roughness and does not understand her desire for freedom. The paper on the wall answers her questions when the woman on it leaves her prison at night and wanders around in freedom. But these answers are the ultimate evidence of her insanity. Signs and symptoms create a textual fabric of the woman’s mental decline.

On the other hand, Susan Rowlings’s room in “To Room Nineteen” is quite different. In it, the female protagonist finds a place to understand and exercise her needs, to materialize her individual practices and to criticize her womanhood. Room 19 represents a universe she can appropriate and use to establish a close communication with her self. The fictional room created by Doris Lessing in “To Room Nineteen” is a neutral and unknown space where Susan shapes her identity. Far away from the society that surrounds her and the unsatisfied needs it represents for her, she recognizes herself as a woman. Since she feels overwhelmed by the arbitrary reality she lives submerged in, she chooses that protective room to put an end to her passive life, which has become unbearable. Considering the production and dominion of space, Henri Lefebvre (1974) pointed out

[...] the dominion over time constitutes a fundamental and omnipresent source of social power over daily life. Then it is necessary to investigate more deeply how that form of social power articulates with the control over time, money and other forms of social power. (1974: 235) (5)

Neither of the female central characters in the stories being analyzed so far can dominate public space because this issue is masculine in their corresponding societies. Due to the restraints they are obliged to live with, they have no access to money or any other way social power may be exercised by. That is the fundamental reason for what they truly need to build a universe of their own, not only to express their selfhood but also, and more imperative, to identify themselves as human beings no matter the name

they are called by. The women's rooms, which in the end become their only worlds, acquire surreal features: the outside world is menacing, distorted and unknown. Being excluded from the possibility of leading a 'normal' (my own emphasis) life in which the expression of the self is possible, the female characters see the otherwise normal settings of home and garden from phobic perspectives.

In summary, madness, confinement and placelessness in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "To Room Nineteen" are symbolic both of women's lack of power to change their lives and of their failed efforts to overcome their fates. Insanity or suicide are the punishments for the woman who dares defy a patriarchal society where being female is an inborn weakness, and where being an intelligent woman is a crime. Perhaps Virginia Woolf has provided the best representation of a place for a woman in her first feminine essay, *A Room of One's Own* "[...] A room of one's own is a statement against a world that, for centuries, has confined women to a function entirely oriented to the glorification of men [...]" (Mannoni 1998: 15) (6).

The particular room Woolf refers to in her work symbolizes all the places women have been secluded in during nearly five centuries but, at the same time, it proposes a comprehensive space which allows for some sense of commonality with other women. In this particular setting it is possible to imagine the story of John's wife, Susan and all women who have suffered outrageous humiliations just because they wanted to proclaim their female condition in a patriarchal society that did not recognize them as subjects with rights and needs. Even though wives and mothers were worshipped inside and outside home, women did not have decision upon their *persona*.

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. (Woolf 1929: 5)

Virginia's Woolf imagined room is the ideal arena for the central character –that stands for all women– to emerge as the representative of the female gender, no matter her name" [...] Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please - it is not a matter of any importance) [...]" (Woolf 1929: 1). In fact, no name could be more meaningful than her female identity. There, the woman writer joins the heroic deed of her predecessors of all times.

When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Bronte who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift

had put her to. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman (Woolf 1929: 8).

Two or three centuries ago, a room of one's own stood for the universe where to act because women, as well as men, needed to exercise their intellectual faculties. That was what some rebellious female novelists did at the same time most women were looking after their home and children and accepted as hysteria any manifestation of freedom that their female being urged them to express. [...] They had no money evidently; according to Professor Trevelyan they were married whether they liked it or not before they were out of the nursery, at fifteen or sixteen very likely [...] (Woolf 1929: 6). John's wife and Susan Rowlings are denied of personal opportunities or individual achievements by the historically subordinate position of women in society, and as their spirits are not rebel enough to face social constraints, they finally surrender.

The room that Woolf proposes for the reader to consider summarizes every room inhabited by women that have ever dared defy the constraints of the patriarchal society, not to do better than men but to occupy the place that belongs to them: The fictional space of *A Room of One's Own* gives refuge to John's 'sacred' wife and biologic mother of his baby, who loses her mind when not permitted to express her feelings in written words, when forbidden to 'deliver' (my emphasis) a piece of literary work. It also provides shelter to Matthew's abnegated wife and mother of four children, who recognizes herself as a frustrated woman, regarded by her husband just as an object of reproduction and social conservation, so she commits suicide. Considering Mannoni's (1998) words,

Virginia Woolf denounced the fascist ideology that made woman be a completely men dependant being. Virginia Woolf dreamt of strategies such as separate taxes and claimed the economic autonomy for women. (Mannoni 1998: 56) (7)

At the same time a room of one's own represents the site of freedom to express feelings, emotions and frustrations for those writers while leading the future generations, it stands for the intellectual independence of women, the motherhood of writing that surpasses stories of alienation, intellectual sterility and masculine supremacy. All women, who feel to be like Shakespeare's sister in Virginia Woolf's masterpiece, must face the responsibility of struggling to reach their place in this world and be respected as human beings.

A Room of One's Own opens two windows in the same space: one to the past, so as to give shelter to the submitted women in patriarchy, as John's wife is; the other to the present, in order to incorporate women who have become aware of their condition and attempt to find strategies to change it, even if failing in the try, as Susan Rowling does. Both windows open to a comprehensive space that integrates the past and the present to pave a common future of kinship that can assure women freedom to create a place of their own.

Notes

- (1) It was a popular diagnosis in the Victorian era for a wide array of symptoms including faintness, nervousness, insomnia, fluid retention, heaviness in abdomen, muscle spasm, shortness of breath, irritability, loss of appetite for food or sex, and a "tendency to cause trouble".
- (2) The translation to English belongs to me.
- (3) Idem.
- (4) Idem.
- (5) Idem.
- (6) Idem.
- (7) Idem.

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