

Dissertação de Mestrado **OF ANGELS AND DEMONS: VIRGINIA WOOLF'S
HOMICIDAL LEGACY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR***

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Unlike many postcolonial critics have tried to convince us, I believe that Virginia Woolf, the essayist, destabilises the foundation of colonisation: she questions the discourse that validates the power of one body over another. Woolf, the essayist, is thus what I intended to unveil when I wrote my dissertation. It is now high time that she be removed from the first-wave feminism scenario and be studied as the timeless feminist critic I firmly believe that she is. It is her search for a tradition of woman writers that most enticed this study. It is the essayist who said that the cheapness of paper made writing so feasible for women in her essay “Professions for Women” (1942), the same one who also alleged that only in a room furnished with five hundred pounds a year could women soar above dependence in *A Room of One's own* (1929), that this study intended to bring to light, not the one believed to pay no heed to difference.

Virginia Woolf, the essayist, identifies the Victorian Era as the root of something that hindered the new twentieth-century writer's subject position, something that cast a shadow upon her ability to claim a room for herself in literature. Thus, three essays

have been chosen in order to exemplify her research on the space designated for women in history and literature: (1) *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the masterpiece of Woolf's journey as a researcher, (2) "Women and Fiction" (1929), and (3) "Professions for Women" (1942).

"Professions for Women" represents, as a whole, the end of Woolf's expedition as an essayist. There Virginia Woolf announces the death of the Angel in the House, that Victorian ghost that had haunted all woman writers, perpetuated by Coventry Patmore's poem. Woolf as a researcher focused mainly on the nineteenth century and its Angel, a cage for her contemporaries.

Thus, the first chapter of this study replicated Woolf's impulse and attempted to frame the life of those Victorian Angels. It is here that we understand the regulating agencies working to castrate women's transcendence in the nineteenth-century public world, creating an angelical image that would empower and weaken this woman at the same time.

Chapter one observed the discourses working to relegate women to the house, caging them in their own bodies. At the same time, it also discussed how this repression made room for some of the most ingenious woman writers to find a way of writing novels that somehow started exposing the cracks in this nineteenth-century foundation. Here we discussed the importance of the Victorian writer as a queer figure, one that questions the role of gender performativity.

Chapter two went a century forwards and observed Virginia Woolf, the essayist, and her struggle against this silent legacy. Here we saw the Victorian Era through Woolf's eyes and understood what it meant to be a woman writer in the early twentieth century. All three essays selected have worked together in order to exemplify (1)

Woolf's research on the Victorian writer, her limitations and accomplishments, and (2) the mission she establishes for the new woman writers who are now part of a tradition: that of killing the Angel in the House.

Once this Angel is killed, Virginia Woolf and her cohort of modern woman writers become Demons in the House, a term I have borrowed, with a few appropriations, from Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon* (1982). While Auerbach's demon exists in the broadest sense – as a “disruptive spiritual energy that also engorges the divine” (1982, p.1), i.e. a facet of the Angel when confronted by spinsterhood or prostitution – the Demon in my title represents the double of this Angel.

The Demon personifies, in my study, the duplication of the woman writer's body, detaching herself from the Angel that demands that she be silent. It is the creation of a new material unity that fosters her creative liberty. Otto Rank classifies the duplication of oneself as a projection of the bad deeds of an individual to a separate illusory body (*The Double*, 1979). Thus one can carry out the suicide of one's bad self in this other fictional body. What I proposed was an inversion of this projection: Woolf urges the death of the good, of the behaving self. What lives is the bad, the deviant, the Demon in the House.

Though wordlessly, chapter two also aimed at merging all the waves of feminism by bringing out the parity between Woolf's mission statement as a writer and the advocating of an *écriture féminine* by the purported third-wave feminists. By proposing that Virginia Woolf mothered the movement that would become *écriture féminine* one sees the continuity of the movement, and not its disintegration.

Chapter two was also the bridge connecting the Victorian Angel to *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath's only novel published in London in 1963, the same year that saw Plath's

suicide. Plath's novel has been read by many, especially by scholar Caroline King Barnard, as a confessional novel, for it depicts the journey of a young student who descends into madness and attempts suicide.

It is undeniable that Sylvia Plath indeed used her own life as inspiration for her novel, but this did not classify our reading of *The Bell Jar*. Whether the novel is a *bildungsroman* based on Plath's own life, as widely alleged by scholars, did not fit the purpose of my study. Quite the opposite, we have overlooked any counterparts found in her life in order to focus on her adherence to Virginia Woolf's mission of writing in order to kill an oppressive past within her character's own body, the Angel.

Chapter three has resolutely fostered the dialogues between Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath in the light of Foucault's dynamics of power between the body and the soul, and Kristeva's abjection. This chapter investigated the ways in which Woolf's homicidal legacy of killing the Angel in the House, fundamental for women to take on a subject position according to the writer, permeates Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*. It aims at underscoring the path towards subjection established by Woolf – and depicted by Plath – through women's freedom of speech, and death as a metaphor for the birth of a new identity for women, i.e. doubling of one's own self into the Demon of the House.

In short, my dissertation was a study of Angels and Demons, of sameness and difference. Its main goal was to call femininity into question, without relegating the feminine. We have seen Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath writing collectively to purge their bodies of femininity, but finding a space that entwines the feminine as a metaphor for creativity. The Demon becomes One, and the Other is killed by this deviant sameness – a slaveless world, and in their case, it is not an oxymoron.

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