

IMAGE AND/THROUGH TEXT IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *THREE GUINEAS*

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Abstract

Three Guineas gives an altogether different perspective on Virginia Woolf's literary performance. Readers accustomed to Woolf's work see her modernist novels as the writer's effort to discover the uniqueness and recover the unity of the human being. These novels primarily are about the essence of life, or spirit, or experience, as she calls it, beyond any temporal limitations. Too little insight do readers get into Woolf's contemporary society when reading them. Seldom, if ever, are issues of gender, class, or age tackled. The modernist is more inclined to weave differences into a harmonious whole rather than approach them as potential sources of conflict. However, once modernism reaches its dead-end, there is an opening up towards postmodernism. Consequently, those issues that had previously been relegated to the background tend to come to the fore. *Three Guineas*, alongside *The Waves* or *Orlando*, is proof of Woolf's work oscillating between modernism and postmodernism. Yet, what both her modernist and postmodernist writings do share is Woolf's decision to transgress boundaries between genres and experiment with multimodal communication by resorting to methods pertaining to different arts. *Three Guineas* is the perfect example of how text and image work together to enhance the power of the message and to obtain an enduring effect on the reader. Techniques of drawing, painting, or photography are employed alongside the literary ones. In addition, the essay raises awareness of issues of intercultural communication with subtle, and often ironic, focus on the cultural encounter and clash. It expresses the modernist writer's ideas about the society and the education system of her time, providing readers with a clear-sighted analysis of the relations between genders. Through a meandering line of argumentation, Woolf artfully connects the conflicts caused by gender relations to the more damaging ones, such as wars, likely to affect whole societies. Familiar with the art of photography, Virginia Woolf includes in her essay a number of five images that add explanatory force to the images she creates through words. She could have doubtless also used photographs that depicted the atrocities of war, yet she avoids it and decides instead to create these images textually and to use them recurrently in the text of the essay in order to make them as impactful as possible.

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The effect is so powerful that, once you finish reading the essay, it is these images that obsessively linger. These textually created images reinforce the message of the text.

Keywords: Text; Image; Intercultural communication; Gender; Education.

1 Photographing the Public and the Private

Virginia Woolf's novel-length essay *Three Guineas* was written in the aftermath of the First World War, one year before the outburst of the Second. It encapsulates the modernist writer's ideas about the society and the education system of her time, with focus on the relations between genders, taken as starting points for her debate on the less visible, insidious causes of war. Familiar with the art of photography, Virginia Woolf includes in her essay a number of five images whose purpose is to add explanatory force to the images she creates through words. Interesting, however, is that she avoids using photographs showing the atrocities of the war, although she textually creates them with poignant accuracy. These latter images are by far the most striking of all, given the fact that they keep recurring as leitmotifs throughout the essay, and acquire the same materiality as the photos chosen to complement the text.

[T]he absent photographs [...] act in dialectical tension with the five visible photographs. It is the absent photographs, or rather the narrator's memory of these photographs, which in a major way shape the narrative of *Three Guineas* and its dense visual plenitude. (Humm 2002: 197)

To the images of war damages is added, in the concluding part of Woolf's text, the picture of the dictator in a mirror reflection, which completes Woolf's demonstration of the fact that the germs of domination and destructiveness are not to be looked for extraneously, but rather within each of us.

Three Guineas is then a dense, composite image/text which exposes and resists dominant histories with Woolf's active, alternative forms of memory. The photographs, both absent and visible, are the intellectual centre of gravity of *Three Guineas*, spaces of bodily contradictions which match her narrative work of political contestation. She shows how a long history of patriarchal controls over women's bodies leads to military fascism, and the two kinds of photographs highlight this trajectory. (Humm 2002: 199)

By a close reading of Woolf's text, we shall try to show that *Three Guineas* is the perfect example of how text and image work together to enhance the power of the message and to obtain an enduring effect on the reader. To support her ideas, Woolf constantly resorts to arts other than that of literature, which is common Woolfian practice in her novels as well, in order to enhance the impact of the text through the visual. Techniques of drawing, painting, or photography are employed alongside the literary ones.

In addition, we shall try to prove that the essay, whose argumentative force makes its findings applicable to any society, including our contemporary one, is an investigation into issues of intercultural communication with subtle, and often ironic, focus on the cultural encounter and clash.

Three Guineas is an x-ray of the British society at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, with all its social hierarchies and subsequent inequities, focusing on Britain's position in the context of the two world wars. Thus, it can be interpreted as "a polemical censure of militarist patriarchy" (Nadel 2016: 163), "[t]he politics of meaning [having] to do with the nature of political relationships between men and women and their status in society" (Nadel 2016: 97). *Three Guineas* "focuses on the political and social institutions of patriarchy and connects the politics of the rising fascism in Europe with the politics of the personal and domestic sphere at home." (Goldman 2006: 110)

An in-depth reading of the essay will reveal it, however, as a pertinent analysis of human nature and human relationships. It gives readers insight into controversial issues related to the communication between cultures and their relevance for the visible and invisible wars waged at global as much as at personal level. Woolf closing argument is that the public and the private are inextricably interconnected.

The pretext of the essay are three imagined letters, stemming from equally magnanimous and humanistic reasons, through which money donations are required to help prevent war, to support women in their professions and to rebuild a women's college.

Adopting a triadic epistolary narrative, she gives two guineas to fictional proponents of women's educational and economic freedoms, gifts which in turn require her to give a third guinea to pacifism. These separate freedoms, Woolf understands, are completely interdependent. (Humm 2002: 199-200)

The first letter gives Woolf the opportunity to "draw [...] a sketch of the person to whom the letter is addressed" (Woolf 2015: 125).

You, then, who ask the question, are a little grey on the temples; the hair is no longer thick on the top of your head. You have reached the middle years of life not without effort, at the Bar; but on the whole your journey has been prosperous. There is nothing parched, mean or dissatisfied in your expression. And without wishing to flatter you, your prosperity—wife, children, house—has been deserved. [...] For the rest, you began your education at one of the great public schools and finished it at the university. (Woolf 2015: 125)

The sketch of the distinguished middle-class, middle-aged, educated, typically Victorian man is the beginning of Woolf's argument about gender differences at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Despite the apparently common background, there are huge differences between man and woman that, from Woolf's point of view, come from the society's lingering Victorian mentality and its approach to gender.

It is now that the first difficulty of communication between us appears. [...] We both come of what, in this hybrid age when, though birth is mixed, classes still remain fixed, it is convenient to call the educated class. When we meet in the flesh we speak with the same accent [...]. [W]e both earn our livings. But ... those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across it. (Woolf 2015: 125-6)

The differences in education of man and women account for the difference of worldviews and attitudes. “And the result is that though we look at the same things, we see them differently.” (Woolf 2015: 126)

Woolf resorts to biographies and histories to push forward her argument about whether it is worthwhile contributing money in order to prevent war. She identifies war as a *sine qua non* for man’s honourability. It is precisely man’s propensity for conflict and war, be it called competition in professional circles, that makes her emphasise the huge differences between genders. “For though many instincts are held more or less in common by both sexes, to fight has always been the man’s habit, not the woman’s. Law and practice have developed that difference, whether innate or accidental.” (Woolf 2015: 127)

Woolf employs histories and biographies to create “pictures of other people’s lives and minds.” To these she adds some other pictures, disturbing images, textually created, by appealing to the art of photography. They have an undeniable impact on the reader despite the scarcity of words she decided to use in her intention to capture facts.

But besides these pictures of other people’s lives and minds—these biographies and histories—there are also other pictures—pictures of actual facts; photographs. Photographs, of course, are not arguments addressed to the reason; they are simply statements of fact addressed to the eye. But in that very simplicity there may be some help. (Woolf 2015: 130)

The photographs she lays in front of her interlocutor’s eyes are photographs of a war that seemed remote, with too little connection with Britain. Consequently, it would be very unlikely to stir her interlocutor’s concerns and emotions about the imminence of the war he was trying to prevent. They were photographs from the Spanish Civil War.

The Spanish Government sends them with patient pertinacity about twice a week. They are not pleasant photographs to look upon. They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning’s collection contains the photograph of what might be a man’s body, or a woman’s; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a birdcage hanging in what was presumably the sitting-room, but the rest of the house looks like nothing so much as a bunch of spillikins suspended in mid-air. (Woolf 2015: 130-1)

Known to have been interested in photography herself, Woolf decides, however, to use words this time in order to take a picture of the society of her time. She lays the photograph under the eyes of her male interlocutor inviting him to consider the connection between the private and the public life. “*Three Guineas* connects the public world of war with the private world of women” (Humm 2002: 202) as “the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other” (Woolf 2015: 238). Woolf does it by reference to the New Testament and the still existing mentality according to which the woman should not have a voice and a mind of her own. She subtly points to the fact, though changed once she got the right to earn her living, woman’s condition still is that relegated to the confines of the household.

Let us then by way of a very elementary beginning lay before you a photograph - a crudely coloured photograph - of your world as it appears to us who see it from the threshold of the private house; through the shadow of the veil that St Paul still lays upon our eyes;¹ from the bridge which connects the private house with the world of public life. (Woolf 2015: 136)

Unlike the woman’s private world, men’s world is connected to public life and to those institutions where men have always excelled in professions that women were denied access to. They are the institutions of power, where competition, thus war in Woolf’s view, is the driving force.

Your world, then, the world of professional, of public life, seen from this angle undoubtedly looks queer. At first sight it is enormously impressive. Within quite a small space are crowded together St Paul’s, the Bank of England, the Mansion House, the massive if funereal battlements of the Law Courts; and on the other side, Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament. (Woolf 2015: 136)

Using techniques of the photographer, Woolf takes a snapshot of the attires of men in public positions. Clothes are presented as cultural markers. The five photographs she included in the text of *Three Guineas*, close-ups of the cultural symbols of professions, draw the readers’ attention to the display of power through official apparel meant to advertise the position of superiority, to delimit the public space from the private one, to impose rules and set limits. “[E]very button, rosette and stripe seems to have some symbolic meaning. [...] Even stranger, however, than the

¹ “Note: The veil that St Paul still lays upon our eyes: see 1 Corinthians 11:5: ‘But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.’ Woolf typed 1 Corinthians 11:4–15 into her scrapbooks as well as 1 Corinthians 14:34–5: ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.’ (Woolf 2015: 282)

symbolic splendour of your clothes are the ceremonies that take place when you wear them.” (Woolf 2015: 137)

The dress of women served an altogether different purpose. It was supposed to point to the woman’s position of inferiority, to her having been long dependent on father and husband, to her accomplishing perfectly the role of “the Angel in the House.” “For dress, as we use it, is comparatively simple. Besides the prime function of covering the body, it has two other offices - that it creates beauty for the eye, and that it attracts the admiration of your sex.” (Woolf 2015: 138)

The comparison Woolf draws between man’s attire and woman’s dress is followed by a question that is at least surprising at first sight. “What connection is there between the sartorial splendours of the educated man and the photograph of ruined houses and dead bodies?” (Woolf 2015: 140) The answer is even more baffling and supports the writer’s line of argumentation. “Obviously the connection between dress and war is not far to seek; your finest clothes are those that you wear as soldiers.” (Woolf 2015: 140)

In Woolf’s view, the causes of wars, be they the visible or invisible ones, are to be looked for in the education system and the values it had promoted for whole generations, a system almost exclusively designed for the needs and purposes of men, men of a certain class and standing. Education such as that tailored at Oxford and Cambridge prepared for war instead of contributing to preventing it. The writer’s main accusation, after investigating facts from history and biography, is that “education, the finest education in the world, does not teach people to hate force, but to use it.” (Woolf 2015: 149) Her “argument is that war can only be prevented with gendered changes in education, employment and intellectual life” (Humm 2002: 199).

Do [these facts] not prove that education, far from teaching the educated generosity and magnanimity, makes them on the contrary so anxious to keep their possessions, that ‘grandeur and power’ of which the poet speaks, in their own hands, that they will use not force but much subtler methods than force when they are asked to share them? And are not force and possessiveness very closely connected with war? (Woolf 2015: 149)

The photographs showing dead bodies of men, women and children, as well as ruined houses appear as a leitmotif throughout the essay. Woolf invokes them whenever the question of how to prevent war comes under scrutiny.

The visual impact of unavoidable trauma is evident throughout *Three Guineas*, even though its presentation is visually circumscribed. The generalized but repeated presence of the photographs of the maimed and destroyed in Spain allows Woolf to both engage and disengage from its horror, which she understands is a persistent experience of wartime. (Nadel 2016: 176-7)

Given their visual impact, the photographs are also used to support Woolf’s views about the failure of the education system that still existed before World War II. For education to help prevent war the women’s college had to be rebuilt starting from

altogether different premises, from completely different values and only after questions such as “what is the aim of education, what kind of society, what kind of human being it should seek to produce” (Woolf 2015: 151-2) were answered. “*Three Guineas* clarifies Woolf’s belief in a democratic art” (Humm 2010: 10) and education, a “poor college” as she calls the one that could counter the established patriarchal system.

Next, what should be taught in the new college, the poor college? Not the arts of dominating other people; not the arts of ruling, of killing, of acquiring land and capital. [...] It should teach the arts of human intercourse; the art of understanding other people’s lives and minds [...]. The aim of the new college, the cheap college, should be not to segregate and specialize, but to combine. It should explore the ways in which mind and body can be made to cooperate; discover what new combinations make good wholes in human life. (Woolf 2015: 152)

2 A Collage of the Society

Using the technique of the collage, Woolf includes in her essay several fragments from newspaper articles to support her views. Two, especially in their close succession, are relevant if we are to understand Woolf’s subtly meandering argument. One is from *The Daily Telegraph*, the other from *The Sunday Times* published the same year, 1936, three years before the outburst of World War II and two before she wrote her essay. Both testify to the fact that, despite significant social and political changes in the aftermath of World War I, the lingering Victorian mentality was still in favour of divisions and rigidly fixed roles in the society.

The war that Woolf’s male interlocutor was struggling to prevent meant mainly an armed war, as those waged by professionals on the front, and it was thus the image of Hitler that was looming large upon the world. Therefore, Woolf creates through text a picture of Hitler, but she refrains from including one from the archives of the time. Her photograph impresses through its accuracy.

[A]nother picture has imposed itself upon the foreground. It is the figure of a man; some say, others deny, that he is Man himself, the quintessence of virility, the perfect type of which all the others are imperfect adumbrations. He is a man certainly. His eyes are glazed; his eyes glare. His body, which is braced in an unnatural position, is tightly cased in a uniform. Upon the breast of that uniform are sewn several medals and other mystic symbols. His hand is upon a sword. He is called in German and Italian Führer or Duce; in our own language Tyrant or Dictator. And behind him lie ruined houses and dead bodies—men, women and children. (Woolf 2015: 238)

The articles she analyses prove that domination and dictatorship are not to be associated only with the pedestalled dictators. They also exist in embryo in societies that tolerate segregation, encourage class divisions, and consider that some groups

are superior to others, that some are dominant and others subservient. The article in *The Daily Telegraph* indubitably gives a male view on the status quo of the society.

I am certain I voice the opinion of thousands of young men when I say that if men were doing the work that thousands of young women are now doing the men would be able to keep those same women in decent homes. Homes are the real places of the women who are now compelling men to be idle. It is time the Government insisted upon employers giving work to more men, thus enabling them to marry the women they cannot now approach. (Woolf 2015: 167)

The second article, the one in *The Sunday Times*, is very similar in outlook. It comes as an in-text quotation. It is not indented as the previous one. As if to pass unnoticed, one might suspect. The surprise is even greater when, only after reading the endnote, we realise that this second is none other's but Hitler's. Striking are the similarities between the two. Just that "[o]ne is written in English, the other in German. But where is the difference? Are they not both the voices of Dictators [...]" (Woolf 2015: 168)

'There are two worlds in the life of the nation, the world of men and the world of women. Nature has done well to entrust the man with the care of his family and the nation. The woman's world is her family, her husband, her children, and her home.' (Woolf 2015: 168)

Asked to help prevent war "by protecting culture and intellectual liberty", Woolf resorts again to "the photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses" (Woolf 2015: 195). The position she adopts is that of the outsider simply because she cannot identify with the male representatives of a patriarchal society. She feels a woman and "as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world." (Woolf 2015: 213) As an outsider she has the liberty to reject "personal distinctions—medals, ribbons, badges, hoods, gowns—not from any dislike of personal adornment, but because of the obvious effect of such distinctions to constrict, to stereotype and to destroy." (Woolf 2015: 217)

Sensitive to the hybridity of her contemporary world and, I daresay, having a premonition of things to happen in our contemporary world, Woolf rejects stereotypes as she feels they are hindering the communication between cultures "and in our age of innumerable labels, of multi-coloured labels, we have become suspicious of labels; they kill and constrict." (Woolf 2015: 235)

What Woolf reveals is that there are indeed two worlds, the public and the private one, rather than that of men and that of women. The picture of Hitler stirred strong emotions, the photograph of the dead bodies and ruined houses an even stronger one, of "horror and disgust" (Woolf 2015: 238). But, in essence, there was no difference whatsoever between Hitler's figure and the male figure in a patriarchal society. From her point of view, there is "a very important connection. It suggests that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other." (Woolf 2015: 238)

With her perfect knowledge of human nature, Woolf is fully aware that “we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure” (Woolf 2015: 238). She insightfully detects the germs of domination and intolerance in every one of us. She seems to suspect that ethnocentrism (see Hall 1997: 258) has nothing to do with race, class, or gender, but it is innate (see Samovar & Porter 2003: 8-11). Thus, to work for the same cause, to help prevent war, one should have the courage to look at the photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses and accept that the cause is in that figure, Hitler’s and its mirror reflection.

It suggests that we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life. How essential it is that we should realize that unity the dead bodies, the ruined houses prove. (Woolf 2015: 238-9)

3 Conclusions

Woolf’s *Three Guineas* is standing out and undoubtedly succeeds in refreshing the readers’ perception. The essay shows Woolf’s artistry in experimenting across arts boundaries as techniques of drawing, painting, or photography are used alongside the literary ones to make the message impactful and memorable. Text and image are made to work together.

The essay also reveals the modernist writer’s sensitivity to problems of her contemporary society, from gender relations through education to war. It shows her keen eye for human relationships and the connections between the private and the public.

Constructed from the pretext of three imagined letters through which money donations are required to help prevent war, to support women in their professions and to rebuild a women’s college, *Three Guineas* represents a clear-sighted analysis of the British society in the context of the two world wars. It equally delves into human nature and explores the complicated relationships between cultures and the sources of conflict both at home and abroad. Besides, the essay gives insight into issues of intercultural communication, raises awareness of difference and investigates the cultural encounter and clash.

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