

STORIES WITHIN STORIES: THE WRITING AND READING OF DIARIES AND WOMEN'S LEGACY

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■ **ABSTRACT:** The aim of this article is to discuss Virginia Woolf's "The legacy" articulating the relevance of the diaries in the short story and a critique against the violence of patriarchal society, of which women and men can be victims. The presence of the diaries endows the narrative with a metafictional structure, of a story within a story, so as to create suspense and produce irony. Because of the diaries, the characters change positions and occupy different places throughout the narrative. At last, the argument defended here is that the diaries constitute a powerful metonymy for women's writing and for the emotional elaboration of their life experiences.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Diaries. Metafiction. Patriarchal society. Reading and writing. Woolf

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

("The secret sits", Robert Frost,
qtd in Culler, 2000, p. 53).

Introdução

"The legacy" is a creative short story to illustrate some of the main concerns characterizing Virginia Woolf's fictional production. For one thing, it tells the story of a woman – Angela Clandon – who is already dead when the narrative begins. It is as if telling her story were an act of atonement. She had been the wife of a prominent politician, and for a long time, her life had been restricted to looking after him and their home: "She had been the greatest help to him in his career" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 282). The couple had no children and after a period of alleged happiness in their

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marriage, Angela started to feel frustrated, leading a mere domestic life: “[...] she felt so idle, so useless. She wished to have some work of her own” (WOOLF, 1989, p. 284).

The story is narrated in third person but having Gilbert Clandon – Angela’s husband – as a narrative filter or focalizer – the character who, according to Chatman (1993, p.146), possesses diegetic consciousness to guide the story’s perspective. At the beginning of the narrative, Gilbert is waiting for Sissy Miller, Angela’s secretary, to give her the brooch which Angela had left to her as a gift. Gilbert finds it strange that “Angela had left everything in such order” (a piece of information mentioned twice) before dying: “It was as if she had foreseen her death” (WOOLF, 1989, p. 281). Actually, Angela had left a little gift for every one of her friends. For her husband, she had left her diaries – fifteen volumes.

The insertion of the diaries in the narrative endows the story with a metafictional framework which is responsible for creating tensions in different levels: now, Gilbert, whose perspective guides the narrative, clashes with Angela as a narrator of her own life experiences, as registered in the diaries. Besides, through the diaries Gilbert also becomes a reader, and his reading gradually unveils secrets, creating an atmosphere of suspense. Gilbert as a diegetic reader within the short story creates resonances with the role of readers in general, thus highlighting strategies of reading, such as making conjectures, inferences and interpretations.

Furthermore, Angela as a character of Gilbert’s narration can be contrasted with Angela’s subjectivity as apprehended by her own words in the diaries. When the reader considers the story as a whole, Angela’s writing enlarges her own characterization, since her life as represented in the diaries transcends mere domesticity and the role of a housewife. Her relationship with B. M. also discloses a whole new world for her in terms of reading, learning about society, politics and human relations.

Considering, on the one hand, Angela’s initial characterization as an insecure housewife, lacking a life of her own, as emblematic of Woolf’s critique of female oppressive condition – a topic recurrently discussed in her essays on women and fiction; and, on the other, the presence of the diaries – metonymic of (female) *writing* – as representative of women’s potentials in terms of agency, autonomy and authority, the present discussion aims at analyzing the effects of such a metafictional structure in “The legacy” in terms of reading, writing and the characterization of female subjectivity.

Metafiction and the writing/reading of diaries

The term metafiction, coined by William Gass in 1970 (*apud* WAUGH, 1996, p. 2), means fiction about fiction; according to David Lodge, metafiction occurs in “novels and stories that call attention to their own compositional procedures”

(1992, 206). Metafiction as a theoretical notion is a derivative of Jakobson's (1995) concept of metalanguage and the metalinguistic function of language, focusing on codes. In the fictional context, the literary codes are related to narrative conventions and their strategies of construction, such as how to tell stories, the kinds of voices adopted, the function of narrators, the kinds of language and genres used, the presence of characters addicted to literature, who enact both the process of writing and reading. Undoubtedly, fictional texts in general are made of narrative codes and conventions, but only metafictional texts display them in the foreground, thus exhibiting the status of aesthetic composition characterizing fiction. David Lodge states:

In the work of English novelists, metafictional discourse most commonly occurs in the form of "asides" in novels primarily focused on the traditional novelistic task of describing character and action. These passages acknowledge the artificiality of the conventions of realism even as they employ them; they disarm criticism by anticipating it; they flatter the reader by treating him or her as an intellectual equal sophisticated enough not to be thrown by the admission that a work of fiction is a verbal construction rather than a slice of life (1992, p. 207).

To give an example, Woolf's *Orlando*, constructed as a parody of biographical writing, is full of examples of such a metafictional discourse. For instance, chapter II begins with the narrator, embodied as a biographer, exposing the difficulties of telling Orlando's life due to an episode characterized as "dark, mysterious and undocumented" (WOOLF, 2016, p. 47). The narrator ironically details the consequences of such an episode: "Volumes must be written in interpretation of it; whole religions systems founded upon the signification of it. Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may" (WOOLF, 2016, p. 47). Interestingly, the narrator's difficulties highlight the lack of documented sources available for the biographer, who can only state the facts *as far as they are known*, in other words, as precarious, contingent and full of blanks. As such, the narrator-biographer invites the reader's complicity, illustrating another strategy of metafictionists: "Self-conscious novelists often enlist the reader's active collaboration. They see their texts as indeterminate, full of gaps, as schemes that need to be filled out by the realizing acts of the reader's imagination" (STAM, 1992, p. 154). No wonder the narrator in *Orlando* has also predicted, in a hyperbolic and ironical way, the appearance of volumes of interpretation of the mysterious episode, calling the attention, as such, to how signification can also be constructed out of fissures, silences and gaps.

To offer another definition, according to Patricia Waugh, "metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between

fiction and reality” (1996, p. 2). In Woolf’s “The legacy”, Angela’s diaries are responsible for telling another version of her life experiences (her truth), and, as a consequence, the diaries show Gilbert as an untrustworthy and unreliable narrative filter. As Robert Stam declares, “stories themselves change as they are filtered through different ways of telling” (1992, p. 164). As such, the diaries displace the focus from Gilbert to Angela to make justice to her life story/history, giving her a place and a voice. The diaries also draw the reader’s attention to strategies and functions of reading and writing and to the relevance of diaries in fostering women’s self-knowledge and subjectivity. The diaries reveal the existence of another Angela, different from the one initially grasped through Gilbert’s perspective, thus shattering his supposedly solid knowledge of his wife.

As a literary genre, throughout time diaries have been associated with women and writing about their innermost and personal reality. At a time when psychoanalysis did not yet exist, writing in diaries was a significant space for women to give vent to their anguish, oppression and doubts about existence. Cynthia Ruff (1989, p. 6), by referring to Adrienne Rich’s characterization of diaries as a “profoundly female, and feminist, genre”, remarks that diaries play with inner and outer lives, connecting both writers and readers to past selves and projected identities. As in Woolf’s “The legacy”, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in “The yellow wallpaper”, also constructs a female character (experiencing postpartum depression) who writes about her everyday experiences in a diary. In this case, the fragmented nature of diary-writing even affects the configuration of the short story in terms of narrative. Alba de Céspedes’ *Forbidden notebook* is also about a woman who gets subjectively transformed through writing in a diary.

The association of diaries to female subjectivity, secrets and intimacy can provide an interesting way to understand how secrets are related, in a general way, to the very process of reading and interpretation. Bennett and Royle (1999, p. 226) argue that “a logic of secrecy, concealment and revelation” is crucial to literary texts. The presence of diaries endows “The legacy” with a structure of detective or whodunit story, offering the diegetic reader, Gilbert, a mystery to be solved. Therefore, in terms of formal composition, Woolf’s short story dramatizes the act of reading and its strategies of making conjectures, inferences, asking questions and interpreting.

In her investigation on biography and contemporary subjectivity, Leonor Arfuch (2010, p. 143) characterizes diaries as deeply rooted in the subjectivity of the I, the first person, the self. She argues that the writing of diaries is open to improvisations and can encompass multiple registers of language, such as notes, bills, photographs, clippings. Arfuch (2010, p. 143) declares that “the diary can cover any theme, ranging from the everyday insignificant routine of the diary’s author to philosophical insights, from sentimental reflection to unleashed passion”.

Differently from letters, which presuppose the existence of an addressee, diaries are apparently written for no one, being vehicles for confession and the pouring out of feelings, written in secret and kept in locked drawers. However, as Arfuch (2010, p. 143) informs, there are cases of diaries produced with a previous idea for publication – an aspect that affects “the spontaneous expression of subjectivity through adjustment, erasure, total or partial rewriting, thus illustrating the influence of the larger public context in the private and intimate space of interiority” (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 143). This difference is related both to the issue of authorship and diary-writing as possessing literary and cultural relevance. It informs of a change when diaries were written by common people – mainly common women – to a time when diaries began to be written by famous people, mainly writers. As we all know, Woolf herself wrote several volumes of diaries, and they constitute sources of information about her ordinary life as a woman and as a writer concerned with language, literary composition and narrative innovations. As an example, here is a passage from one of her diaries (WOOLF, 1979, p. 30):

Friday 29 January

Shall I say ‘nothing happened today’ as we used to do in our diaries, when they were beginning to die? It wouldn’t be true. The day is rather like a leafless tree: there are all sorts of colours in it, if you look closely. But the outline is bare enough.

This is a revealing passage, metalinguistic in itself, making a reference to the very writing of diaries; and to how, for a writer, nothingness may not exist, since it can evince a detailed and introspective look at reality, and reveal it in symbolic ways, as, for example, her figurative comparison of the day to a leafless tree.

In “Women and fiction” (originally published in 1929; 1988), Woolf constructs an articulation between ordinary life and literary production. By considering the double meaning of the title – “women and the fiction that they write, or women and the fiction that is written about them” (WOOLF, 1988, p. 43), she emphasizes the relevance of knowing about the lives of obscure women in order to know about women writers. She claims that in order to know about extraordinary women, one must also know about ordinary women, those whose lives were neglected, not documented by historians at large: “It is only when we can measure the way of life and experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as writer” (WOOLF, 1988, p. 44). Among the sources one could search, Woolf herself suggests: “The answer lies at present locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, half-obliterated in the memories of the aged” (1988, p. 43-44). Her short story “The legacy”, featuring a common housewife as a character who has written fifteen volumes of diaries,

constitutes a significant piece for one to discuss the role of diaries in women's lives and how the writing/reading of diaries can contribute to construct and reveal a different subjectivity.

The politician, the housewife and the secretary: what places do they occupy?

The first part of the short story – narrated in third person, without the mediation of the diaries – introduces the reader to Gilbert and Sissy Miller, the secretary, and to the fact that Angela has recently died in a car accident. Gilbert, Angela's husband, a prominent politician, is characterized as vain, narcissistic and pretentious. He looks at other people from a rather superior and snobbish position. He considers the brooch Angela has left for Sissy Miller as an inadequate gift. In his view, "it might have been better to have left her a sum of money, or even the typewriter" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 282). Whereas Angela and Sissy had been friends, being more than employer and employee, for Gilbert, "[Sissy] was scarcely distinguishable from any other woman of her kind. There were thousands of Sissy Millers – drab little women in black, carrying attaché cases" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 282). In other words, he views Sissy with complete indifference, in an objectified way, as a person without singularity.

In "The legacy", Woolf makes a creative use of foreshadowing, a literary strategy or device

[...] that writers utilize as a means to indicate or hint to readers something that is to follow or appear later in a story. Foreshadowing, when done properly, is an excellent device in terms of creating suspense and dramatic tension for readers. It can set up emotional expectations of a character's behaviors and/or plot outcomes. This can heighten a reader's enjoyment of a literary work, enhance the work's meaning, and help the reader make connections with other literature and literary themes.

The initial part of the story has several foreshadowings whose references are gradually revealed after the reading of the diaries: 1. Gilbert finds it strange that Angela has left everything in order before dying, as if she knew she would die; 2. Sissy is wearing black – as Gilbert, she was in mourning, since a brother of hers has also recently died; 3. Gilbert attributes the close relationship between Angela and Sissy Miller to the fact that Angela had a genius for sympathy (a piece of information mentioned twice); 4. Gilbert misreads Sissy's offer of help, and interprets it as a sign of passion for him. Besides creating suspense and enhancing the reader's interest in the reading, the presence of foreshadowings is also responsible for the production of irony. Since Gilbert's knowledge is limited and partial, it clashes, in a retrospective reading, with Sissy's knowledge, which ends up generating a whole new interpretation of the events reported so far.

Gilbert's (and the reader's) reading of the diaries' passages introduces Angela's presence as a different *voice* in the narrative. Although Angela is dead, her presence is conspicuous through the diaries, whose writing and voice are metonymic of herself, in fact, her *new self*. Actually, this short story would not have the power it has, were not for the presence of the diaries representing Angela's voice. Woolf, as the author, could have chosen to tell Angela's story by merely referring to it, without the mediation of the diaries. But the presence of the diaries makes all the difference – both in terms of rescuing Angela and making her present and also in terms of materializing and saving her writing, her legacy, from obscurity.

It is important to remark that the early sections of the diaries are full of admiring comments about Gilbert and about the early experiences of their marriage. On the one hand, she mentions her pride of being his wife; besides, her responsibility as the wife of a prominent politician. Angela also mentions their trips, their parties, their dinners with other politicians. In fact, in the early sections of the diaries she presents (represents) herself as occupying the role of a woman in patriarchal society.

Gilbert's reading is usually interrupted by pauses and reflections, derived from remembrances, which contributes to create a larger spectrum of Angela's registers. Significantly, Gilbert's references to Angela characterize her in an infantile and childish way: "she was still a child, she loved ices" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 284); "she had written it all out in her schoolgirl hand" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 284); "she was so eager to learn. She was so terribly ignorant" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 284); "her poor little head" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 286). As such, Angela is the immature woman who needs Gilbert's help, protection and guidance. For Gilbert, her diary pages are "full of the little trifles, the insignificant, happy, daily trifles that had made up her life" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 284)¹. Gilbert is the prominent politician; he is the one having a public and relevant life. Angela is the housewife, leading a mere domestic, private and allegedly insignificant life. When she appears in public, she is only fulfilling an accessory role as the wife of a politician. Such is the order of conventional values perpetrated by patriarchy. Their relationship, therefore, is based on relations of power that dictate Gilbert's control and guidance to which she must submit.

The daily trifles (according to Gilbert's perception) of Angela's life change when Angela starts to do some charity work in the East End, helping the poor. It is there that she knows B. M. and has a relationship with him. Not only does this new activity offer Angela the possibility of developing new abilities and knowing a different world; her relationship with B. M. provides her with new readings and an understanding of political issues that contrasts with her husband's conservative positions.

¹ Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, written as a play (1916) and rewritten (1917) as a short story entitled "A jury of her peers" constitutes an interesting intertext to Woolf's "The legacy".

Both the work and her involvement with B. M. are responsible for the appearance of a different subjectivity in Angela, one that transcends the domestic sphere. Likewise, her new experiences affect the writing of the diary in a significant way: not only does Gilbert's name appear less frequently – after all, he has lost the centrality he used to hold in Angela's life; she also uses certain writing codes – like the abbreviations B. M and the use of scratches and blanks which denote the wish to hide secrets and the possibility of living a life of her own. In the diaries, Gilbert moves from a central to a marginal position; and ends up all obliterated.

In "Identity, identification, and the subject", Jonathan Culler (2000, p. 111) states: "Narrative literature especially has followed the fortunes of characters as they define themselves and are defined by various combinations of their past, the choices they make, and the social forces that act upon them". This statement resonates very strongly when one thinks of Angela's process of disentangling from her position of a mere politician's housewife to become a charity worker and the lover of a socialist. Angela's previous condition as a housewife is attuned with patriarchal and oppressive social forces. One can consider Angela as an illustration of the "Angel of the House", described by Woolf, in "Professions for women" (1988, p. 59), as follows: "She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily". Angela's decision to work and break with a mere domestic routine constitutes a remarkable decision responsible for disrupting apparently stable forces, thus giving rise to a new emotional subjectivity.

In "What is to console us?: the politics of deception in Woolf's short stories" (1981, p. 244), Selma Meyerowitz declares that "'The Legacy' presents [a] picture of the failure of emotional commitment and communication in marriage. Angela Clandon has led a life of deception by maintaining the façade of her conventional upper-class marriage". This interesting statement might lead to further questionings: what are the causes for such a failure? What would have happened if Angela had broken the silence? If, instead of telling her diaries, she had confessed to Gilbert about her clandestine life? And, most importantly: has not Angela permitted herself to lead another life, different from the make-believe of her conventional marriage? Has not she had a different story with B. M. after all? Perhaps one should say that Angela has deceived Gilbert, but not herself – quite on the contrary: her last act reveals how true to her new self she was. And that might also constitute a possible answer to Meyerowitz's question, "What is to console us?" Although one certainly laments Angela's death, at least one may feel solaced by the fact that she chose not to go on with the deception. As Meyerowitz also (1981, p. 246) argues:

In contrast to Clandon, Angela had overcome the emptiness of her marriage by using deception as a means to achieve freedom and pursue fulfilment outside her relationship to her husband. While social prestige and vanity have left Clandon

without emotional fulfilment and have contributed to the self-destruction of others, namely Angela and BM, Angela's diary, a record of her inner life, becomes the source of truth and self-revelation for her husband -- a veritable gift or legacy.

In fact, the argument defended here is that the diaries possess a function that goes beyond the source of truth for Gilbert – as a legacy, the diaries also represent, in a metaphorical and metonymic way, women's writing and power of subversion – a weapon in the fight for growing and understanding oneself emotionally. Far from registering the little trifles of Angela's life, as Gilbert puts, the fifteen volumes of diaries demonstrate an intrinsic relationship between writing and looking at one's life and human relations.

In the essay "The leaning tower", it is Woolf herself who invites readers to think about the writers' work and the challenge it poses:

Even the simplest story deals with more than one person, with more than one time. Characters begin young; they grow old; they move from scene to scene, from place to place. A writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, that changes, upon an object that is not one object but innumerable objects. Two words alone cover all that a writer looks at – they are, human life (WOOLF, 1992, p. 159).

Considering that this is true for literary works in general, it is even truer for a short story like "The legacy", in which Angela is constituted as a multiple self, moving, changing, and getting matured as a subject in process. In terms of setting, the story moves from the house, from privacy, to a public space of work; from a model of patriarchal marriage to a clandestine love affair. In terms of characterization, the story forces Gilbert, the arrogant and conceited politician, *to read* Angela, to *finally look at her*. Significantly, the act of writing – metonymically represented in the diaries – is crucial not only for the construction of Angela's new subjectivity and human life, but for problematizing the strategy of stories within stories, and the deciphering of literature's innumerable objects.

"What was the meaning of that?": final remarks

The reading of Angela's diaries – by Gilbert and the extra-diegetic reader – disrupts the positions initially held by the characters. In other words, the diaries enact a gradually constructed and different subjectivity of Angela's, thus subverting the characters' places in the narrative. To give an example, Gilbert refers to the diaries as "the only thing they had not shared when she was alive" (WOOLF, 1989, 281). This constitutes a key irony in the short story, since, as the reader knows, the

diaries are not merely objects, but are metonymic of another life lived by Angela; the diaries are her secret and intimate territory – *a room of her own* – where she could exercise imaginative freedom to reveal how excluded from her life Gilbert had been. Therefore, the diaries displace Angela from the periphery to the foreground of the narrative. And Gilbert, holding the centrality of being the narrative filter, falls to erasure and exclusion in Angela's writing and life.

The diaries also affect Sissy's initial role as a mere secretary. In fact, both her tears and her mourning clothes possess a double tragic cause, two suicides intimately connected, of which Gilbert is ignorant. As B.M.'s sister, Sissy is more than a secretary to Angela; she is an accomplice of the lovers' clandestine relationship. The brooch Angela has left for her is not a sign of "her genius for sympathy" (p. 282) or of how "she had been the soul of candour" (p. 285), but a token of their sisterhood and friendship.

The metafictional structure Woolf has adopted in "The legacy" creates the framework of stories within stories. As such, Woolf aligns a powerful critique of the violence of patriarchal society with an innovative narrative composition that recognizes the value of women's writing. Diaries, after all, though mostly associated with daily trifles and ordinary lives, are also relevant in the history of literature and humanity, mainly as they concern women's writings and struggles in the process of acquiring self-knowledge and discovering new subjectivities.

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■ **RESUMO:** *Propomos a discussão do conto "The legacy", de Virginia Woolf, procurando fazer uma articulação entre a relevância dos diários e a crítica e denúncia feitas em relação à violência da sociedade patriarcal, de que são vítimas mulheres e homens. A presença dos diários dota a narrativa de uma estrutura metafictional, de uma história dentro de outra história, de modo a criar suspense e ironia. Por causa dos diários, os personagens mudam de posições e ocupam lugares diferentes ao longo da narrativa. Por fim, defendemos que os diários constituem uma metonímia potente para a escrita de mulheres e para a elaboração emocional de suas experiências de vida.*

■ **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Diários. Metaficção. Sociedade patriarcal. Leitura e escrita. Woolf*

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