

THINKING BACK THROUGH HER MOTHER: VIRGINIA WOOLF ON JANE AUSTEN

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (2014) claims that a woman thinks back through her mother, emphasizing the importance of women writers in the literary tradition. On male literary tradition, Harold Bloom (2000) wrote about their anxiety in relation to their literary fathers, in that case, Shakespeare. While problematizing this male tradition, Woolf creates her fictional character Judith Shakespeare, a sister who had the same upbringing, but not the same opportunities. Gilbert e Gubar (2020), following Woolf, investigate female anxiety and try to create a female literary tradition. Ellen Moers also on the same track, thinks about the absence of women in literature and Elaine Showalter perceives that women inevitably think about their fathers in literature, because only men can silence their mothers. This paper discusses how Virginia Woolf thinks back through her literary mothers and the female literary tradition; how Woolf and Austen deal with history; the living room and the tea table training, and finally, the female sentence.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Virginia Woolf. Jane Austen. Female literary tradition. Female sentence. Women writers.

Introduction

Masterpieces are not single and solitary births, they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter (Woolf, 1993, p. 59).

I would like to start this text with this quotation in *A Room of One's Own*: “Masterpieces are not single and solitary births, they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common” (Woolf, 1993, p. 59), highlighting that as Woolf

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said women writers should think back through their literary mothers and Woolf was always thinking back through her fathers too, because as Elaine Showalter mentions only men could silence one of their parents. That takes us to the literary anxiety by Harold Bloom, but also to female literary anxiety, so expressed in the *Madwoman in the Attic*, by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert. By thinking about the absence of women in literary tradition, Virginia Woolf undertakes the task of an archeologist, recovering women writers from silence and absence. Virginia Woolf knew that Jane Austen paved the way for many writers after the nineteenth century, but she was also aware that the way had been paved by many writers before her. “Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter” (WOOLF, 1993, P. 59). That is why Jane Austen also should think back through her literary mothers, as Woolf does in relation to her and Austen was thinking back through her mothers, when she wrote *Northanger Abbey*, she was making a satire about the gothic novel of Anne Radcliffe. But a parody is a road of two ways, at the same time she was criticizing the style, she was paying homage to Radcliffe. Austen who is famous for her irony, makes her audience laugh by enhancing the traits of gothic in her novel; in order to make humor, one must use all wit and Austen is really witty in most of her novels.

By talking about this complex relation between mothers and daughters, I also would like to point that about that in Austen’s novels. While fathers are usually absent and powerless, mothers are inexperienced or not ready for maternity. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, Elizabeth’s mother is completely immature, causing shame to the family. Emma is motherless, as well as the protagonist of *Persuasion*. In *Madwoman in the Attic*, the authors understand that materphobia, is the idea of fear of becoming one’s mother.

Woolf was a great admirer of Jane Austen, especially, by the way she deals with the Female sentence. Woolf wrote about Austen in several moments of her career, only in *A Room of One’s Own* she mentions Austen 27 times, her name is related as a representative of a great movement of women writers who revolutionized the literary scene, as in the following quotation:

Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades and the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write. For if *Pride and Prejudice* matters, and *Middlemarch* and *Villette* and *Wuthering Heights* matter, then it matters far more than I can prove in an hour’s discourse that women generally, and not merely the lonely aristocrat shut up in her country house among her folios and her flatterers, took to writing. (WOOLF, 1979, p. 91)

Woolf wrote several essays on Jane Austen¹ as it has been revealed in the article “Notas sobre a frase “Perfeitamente Natural”: A estética de Jane Austen a partir de Virginia Woolf”. During her entire life, Woolf revisits Austen in most of her writings, as Paula Maggio wrote in her blog², such as in her diaries, her letters and her essays including *The Common Reader*, as it will be discussed later on in this text. As this book is completing 100 years, it has also been celebrated as Jane Austen’s 250 anniversary. Besides that, Austen’s name pervades Woolf’s short story “A Society”, the biography on Roger Fry, the essay *Three Guineas* and the novels *The Voyage Out*, *Jacob’s Room*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Moments of Being*. Moreover, Woolf herself had a copy of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* from 1817.

In her Jane Austen in *The Common Reader*, Woolf (1984) perceives the author as the best and the most perfect writer, whose books became immortal, but she died just at the moment she was beginning to feel more confident about her own success. Woolf imagines how different her life would have been if she had lived in London and a bit more:

And what effect would all this have had upon the six novels that Jane Austen did not write? She would not have written of crime, of passion, or of adventure. She would have not been rushed by the importunity of publishers or the flattery of friends into slovenliness or insincerity. But she would have known more. Her sense of security would have been shaken. Her comedy would have suffered. She would have trusted less (this is already perceptible in *Persuasion*) to dialogue and more to reflection to give us a knowledge of her characters. (Woolf, 1984, p. 145)

Woolf (1979) understands that the main classic of English Fiction - *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Villette* e *Middlemarch* – were written by women who were excluded from all types of experience, except for those in the living room, but none of war, navy, politics or business. Their lives were controlled, regulated by laws and confined to the living room. Austen became a model for Woolf and her comedies of manners permeate most of Woolf’s novels, such as *Night and Day* and *The Voyage Out*, considering the conventional plot of marriage. And Austen’s comedy of manners was unquestionably inspired in Shakespeare’s plays and she was sending a message that other women writers could use and subvert the bard.

Male writers have always been sentencing women with their pens, as we have learned from the authors of *Madwoman in the Attic*. Thus, in *A Room of One’s Own*,

¹ Check our essay on Ipotesi: <https://periodicos.ufjf.br/index.php/ipotesi/article/view/38606>

² MAGGIO, Paula. Happy 250th birthday to Jane Austen from Virginia Woolf. In <https://bloggingwoolf.org/>. Access in 19 Dec. 2025.

Woolf claims that women should write all kinds of books, not hesitating in face of the odds. As Helene Cixous (1976) states that Women must write themselves, write about their bodies while creating stories of their own and stop being sentenced in male's house of fiction. Women must inscribe in history and in literature, stopping being absent from history. "*The Laugh of the Medusa*":

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies for the same reasons, by the same law with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (CIXOUS, 1981, p. 245)

Cixous (1981) reverberates Woolf's call for women to write themselves in history and in literature. Woolf should be reminded when she claimed that when middle-class women started writing that was a historical fact of gigantic proportions, which shook the pillar of western epistemologies. For masterpieces are not solitary products, but they are the results of a collective thought, which is part of a historic process.

As we close this discussion on female literary tradition, revisiting Austen, Woolf and Cixous, the following topic reflects upon women's confinement in writing in the living room in the domestic sphere. Although women writers were confined in the patriarchal houses, they were reading their contemporary authors, which depicts that they were not alone writing about their own histories, but it reveals that they were part of a literary movement and they were collectively thinking back through their mothers and, in particular, their fathers. They could not entirely erase them, but they were part of process why they decided to write.

Writing in the living Room

Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* declares that a woman must have a room and a salary in order to be a writer. In this case, she was calling attention to the material conditions of women's lives. A room means shelter, protection and privacy. Woolf also talks about the way Jane Austen used to write in the living room, with no privacy at all. As it can be seen in the following fragment:

Jane Austen wrote like that to the end of her days. "How she was able to effect all this", her nephew writes in his Memoir, "is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons

beyond her own family party.” Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper. (WOOLF, 1993, p. 61)

And she would hide her own notes when someone arrived in the house, as she could hear the hinges of the doors. Did she need to be embarrassed by her writing? No, absolutely not! But she would! Not only was Austen hiding her notes and her identity as a writer, but she was also hiding in her writing her subversive power. In a parody like *Northanger Abbey*, she was camouflaging her anger and her literary anxiety. Even so, it would be easier to write prose or fiction, instead of poetry or play, that would require less concentration, Woolf would consider. (Woolf, 1993, p. 60)

A room for writing with a door and a lock would be the perfect locus, an intellectual space, where women could think, could reflect and build their intellectual development and growth. But, at that time, women could not think, could not write or paint, as Lily hear in *To the Lighthouse*. Women were not allowed space in the house, not even privacy. However, their education was based on organizing the house, cooking, nursing, drawing, singing and playing the piano, in order to entertain the guests and visitors. That is not to say that women could not even inherit their own houses, as we learn in *Pride and Prejudice*, when the girls are not allowed to own the house, in case their parents died, which would go to their next male relative in the family, and the parents want them to marry their cousin. So, what Jane Austen is doing in her novel is educating young women.

Moreover, Woolf would argue that Austen was trained at the tea table, she was trained to observe other people in the living room. Her gaze was refined to watch other people carefully to transform them into her characters. Her thoughts were trained at the confinement of her house, that is why in Gilbert and Gubar's chapters are: “Shut up in prose” and “Inside the House of Fiction”. Austen knew she couldn't escape the limits of patriarchal society, but in fiction she could subvert all the norms of social conventions. How could Austen escape the social conventions that belittled her both literally and socially?

Woolf understood that Austen and other women writers could have written other genre, such as poetry, history or biography, but mainly because of the confinement of their houses and giving the fact that they were isolated from other experiences, writing a novel would be the best genre to write, because it did not need concentration, as a play or poetry would require more attention.

In the house, the office or the library is the space for men, the retreat for the absent fathers, where they can hide in peace, while the living room is the social space where women serve and drink tea, draw, read, sing and play the piano. Where women could show their talents, not to develop them professionally, but to amuse that small group of people.

Woolf was using her tea table tone to create her writing process in *A room of one's own* and she was much criticized for that, by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of their Own*. To which extent, was Jane Austen using her tea table training to create her characters, her scenes in her balls, in the living room? There are so many scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* that reminds us of her tea table training, while they are dancing and at the same time, they are performing important dialogues about their own position in society; while they are in the living room discussing who is entitled to inherit the house and when Elizabeth crosses the moors and arrives covered in mud and is scrutinized by the gaze of the tea table training girls.

After finishing this topic on women writing in the living room in the confinement of the domestic sphere, without privacy or a proper place, next this text discusses how Woolf and Austen feel in relation to history, as daughters of educated men, they feel they cannot share the same notion of nationality and patriotism of their brothers.

History for Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf

As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world. ' (WOOLF, 1993, p. 234)

The quotation above is from Woolf's essay *Three Guineas*, published in 1937, just after Guernica attack in Spain by dictator Franco. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf asked how women could avoid war, once they were absent from the political decisions and they were confined to the domestic sphere and not to the public one. Women are absent from history and from the political decisions, they were outsiders, at the margins of patriarchal society. Both Austen and Woolf were daughters of educated men, they were taught on their libraries, reading many classic books of English Literature, nevertheless, they would not have the same privileges of their brothers, who had access to university education and, consequently, to better positions at the job market. While in *A room of one's own*, Woolf reflects upon history, she reads *The History of England*, written by historian Trevelyan.

Gubar and Gilbert (2020:134) see that history in Austen is:

a matter of indifference to women, who never participate in it and who are almost completely absent from its page. Austen thus anticipates a question Woolf would angrily pose in *Three Guineas* "what does patriotism mean to the [educated man's sister]? Has she the same reasons for being proud of England, for loving England, for defending England? For like Woolf, Austen asserts that women see male-dominated history from the disillusioned and disaffected perspective of the outsider. (GUBAR; GILBERT, 2020, p.134)

As Woolf also noticed in *A Room of One's Own*, women were absent from history and from literature. However, there was a great contradiction: while women were powerfully represented by men in fiction, in real life they were really miserable. Austen writes in one of her letters "Single women have a dreadful propensity of being poor". About that, Gubar and Gilbert (2020) declare that:

Thus, in all her novels, Austen examines female powerlessness that underlies pressure to marry, the injustices of inheritance laws, the ignorance of women who were denied from formal education, the psychological vulnerability of the heiress or widow, the exploited dependency of the spinster and the boredom of a lady provided with no vocation. (GUBAR; GILBERT, 2020, p. 136)

Woolf was aware of that when she wrote about women's poverty in *A Room of One's Own*, about their powerlessness and about their lack of independence. She was aware of the lack of education women have both in *Three Guineas* and "Professions for women". "*For, the outsider will say, 'in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.'*" (WOOLF, 1993, p. 234).

This sentence can be understood in two ways: first, Woolf is denying a nationalism she perceived as a growing movement in England, as she had already noticed it in *A Room of One's Own*, which would result in fascism, as she describes in *Three Guineas*. Secondly, by rejecting England and as she does so, she is launching an international position, when she noticed that the fight was a global one and would affect men and women equally.

In 1929, Woolf noticed the beginning of fascism in England, and she was extremely critical of it. In 1937, the movement was evident and her essay is a call to union to fight a battle she knew was not easy to win, as she had lost her nephew, who had decided to fight in the war. Of course, Woolf occupies a privileged position, but during her life she fought against Imperialism, from her first book *The Voyage Out* to the last one, *Between the Acts*, her political position can be perceived. Woolf was not only criticizing fascism and Imperialism, but she was also attacking capitalist patriarchal society, by defending women's position in it.

After finishing how both Woolf and Austen reacted to history, knowing they were completely excluded from it, by not sharing the same privileges of their brothers or their fathers, the next part discusses the female sentence. As this text proceeds, the following topic is the female sentence for Austen and how Woolf discusses it, trying to relate it to the androgynous mind, relating Shakespeare to Jane Austen.

The Female Sentence

"They wrote as women write, not as men write." (WOOLF, 1993, p. 68)

The last part of this text discusses the female sentence, Woolf observed that all those writers from the nineteenth century were writing as women, not like men. But the sentence was not adequate to them. “Charlotte Bronte with all her splendid gift for prose, stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in her hands, George Eliot committed atrocities with it that beggar description. Jane Austen looked at it, laughed and devised a perfectly natural sentence.” (Woolf, 1993, p. 69). Jane Austen broke the boundaries of the male sentence, Woolf revolutionized the modernist language and the feminist criticism studied all the ways women made use of language. Austen was not only imitating the male discourse, she was subverting it, laughing at it to talk about serious subjects such as marriage, education for women, women’s material conditions and confinement in the house. Her double talk, that could even start with *Northanger Abbey*. What is not said, in between the lines, half spoken, the ambiguity and humor, as Marouvo et al (2022) explores in the text “Uma Leitura Woolfiana de *Pride and Prejudice* e *Persuasion*, de Jane Austen”.

Woolf learned so much from Austen with her humor, her sarcasm and her wit, Austen was gifted with a sharp and acid social criticism, not heavy in tone, but always keeping the elegance of the female sentence. I also want to highlight that Woolf’s humor is not as easy to be identified, as we could read in *Flush*, in *Orlando* and even in her play *Freshwater*. That is to say that some translators could not translate Austen’s irony and censors could not understand the subversive power of her writing.

What was the perfectly natural sentence for a woman? Why was that different from a man’s sentence? Was the novel created by male hands a flexible genre for women’s use? Could a woman write a tragedy in V acts? Would she choose to write in verse or prose? Woolf knew there were no answers for those questions at that moment, they were questions for the future, a “forest with no paths”, and yet, the future of fiction would depend a lot on women’s role. Woolf knew that although women could adapt their style, there was no sentence in common to be used by her. Women writers had no freedom or expression, besides that a lack of women’s literary tradition had certainly affected their writing. Moreover, Woolf realizes that women’s novel, as flexible as it should be, must be adapted to the body, it might be shorter, because as we learned from Austen, it has to be ready for the interruptions, so it wouldn’t require long hours of uninterrupted. Women, says Woolf, will start to use literature as art and not as a method of personal expression.

After a century, Austen’s sentence is not so natural and perfect for Mary Carmichael’s use, several social transformations have occurred and that also changed the rhythm and melody of the novel. Mary Carmichael breaks up Austen’s sentence and the sequency, her novel innovates tremendously, she uses no excess of sentimentality, it presents a short breath, but perhaps too many facts. For the first time in literature, the reader faces the sentence: “Chloe liked Olivia” and she changed the sequence of events, breaking once more the chains that limited the

woman writer. Woolf wants to perceive how Mary Carmichael can capture those moments when words are not uttered, they are half said, or unsaid. Woolf advice to Mary Carmichael is that she should laugh more on the peculiarities and vanities of the other sex, but without bitterness, but playfulness should be in her writing, humour and wit, as in Jane Austen.

The female sentence, in a way, has to do with the androgynous mind, when it is fertilized by the female part of the brain and it also in balance with the male part. Woolf gives us the example of a male sentence that falls hard on the floor, but a Coleridge's sentence explodes and gives light to all kinds of ideas. Coleridge who created the idea presented an androgynous mind, as well as Shakespeare and Jane Austen. Whereas Milton and Ben Jonson were too masculine, as Kipling and William Wordsworth. While Proust was too feminine, Shelley was sexless.

The permanent and dominant "I" in male writing was like a shadow on a female figure, while in women writing the "I" is never dominant, but it gives place to the unknown, to the ambiguity, to the unsaid and the small gestures that communicate volumes. Besides that, humour, laughs and wit are constant in women writers writing. Humour and irony are not evident in women writers, as it has been said before, since translators and censors could not notice it, not even the subversion power in their writings, as they sub-estimate their political power, as we must remember *Orlando* passed on the eyes of censors, as they understood as fantasy, not as a novel which was transgressing the boundaries of the novel. I would love to expand on that, but my time is over and I must cease.

Final Considerations

The importance of Jane Austen to the female literary tradition is undeniable. She had and has still a great impact on other female writers around the globe. Her legacy of 250 years celebrated all over the world depicts how important her writing still is. The way Virginia Woolf reads Jane Austen portrays how she thinks back through her mothers, reflecting and learning from her. Austen paved the way for women writers after her, but Woolf also knew it had been paved before her and here is Woolf's crucial importance in her archeological work of recovering those obscure lives absent from history. Woolf also wrote about her literary fathers, however her vital role is thinking back through her literary mothers, which was indispensable for the second wave of feminism to recover women writers. This work has been so successful that today many black, indigenous and lesbian writers are emerging and occupying a place they have been historically denied. As Woolf said when women started writing, that was more important than the Crusades or the War of The Roses.

By doing that, it can be observed through Woolf's reading of Jane Austen how women writers overcame the limits of the confined spaces of the living room, trained by the tea table training education, which was basically serving, helping

and entertaining others. Even if they were in this limited space, with restricted education, they could subvert the norms of the social and literary conventions, by inscribing themselves in history.

Talking about history, it has been discussed in this text how both women felt excluded from it. They were both aware that they were marginalized, powerless and dreadfully poor and as daughters and sisters of educated men, they could not participate in the same political decisions, as they were confined in the domestic spheres and excluded from the public ones. Women writers needed more than financial freedom and a room of their own, they needed proper education, more professions, adequate material conditions and intellectual freedom. As Woolf asserts in *A Room of One's Own*: "Lock up your libraries, if you want, but there is no bolt you can limit the freedom of my mind" (WOOLF, 1985, p. 94).

On the female sentence, Woolf declares that Jane Austen broke the male sentence, she laughed at it and created her perfect and natural style. Then Mary Carmichael, in her fictitious *Life's Adventure*, broke Austen's sentence and the sequency, by creating an unexpected plot. Austen's perfect sentence was not adequate anymore, for the times have changed, many social transformations had taken place and the melody became dissonant and more and more dissonant voices have emerged on the literary scene, enabling other women do to the same. That was Woolf's prediction about the future on Mary Carmichael, "give her more one hundred years" and a century later, her predictions were absolutely right, as today the authoritarian "I" of male writers is in crisis, giving space to ambiguity, doubt and uncertainty.

Woolf teaches us remarkably from the way she reads Austen and she reads her in relation to history, to other women writers and the small confined spaces in the living room. Woolf also depicts Austen in relation to her own style and how revolutionary she was in breaking the boundaries that tried to limit her.

I would like to finish with Borges's text "Kafka and his precursors", by making an analogy we could think that Jane Austen prophesizes Woolf and we must take away all rivalry that might have on their way. When Borges says that each author creates his precursors, Woolf created hers and Jane Austen's work changes the way we look into the past and the way we see the future. "For masterpieces are not single births" (WOOLF, 1993, p. 59)

OLIVEIRA, Maria A. Thinking back through her mother: Virginia Woolf on Jane Austen. **Itinerários**: Revista de Literatura, Araraquara, n. 62, p. 143-155, jan./jun. 2026.

■ **RESUMO:** Virginia Woolf em seu ensaio *A Room of One's Own* (2014) afirma que uma mulher deve refletir criticamente sobre sua mãe, ao enfatizar a importância

das escritoras na tradição literária. Sobre a tradição literária masculina, Bloom (2000) escreveu sobre a angústia literária em relação aos pais literários, nesse caso, Shakespeare. Ao problematizar sobre a tradição masculina Woolf cria sua personagem ficcional Judith Shakespeare, uma irmã que teve a mesma educação, mas não as mesmas oportunidades. Gilbert e Gubar (2020), seguindo Woolf, investigam a angústia literária feminina e buscam estabelecer uma tradição literária feminina. Ellen Moers, também na mesma direção, reflete sobre a ausência de mulheres na literatura e Showalter percebe que, inevitavelmente, a mulher pensa sobre seus pais literários, pois apenas os homens podem silenciar suas mães. Esse artigo discute como Virginia Woolf reflete criticamente sobre suas mães literárias e sobre a tradição literária feminina; como Woolf e Austen lidam com a história; a sala de estar e o treinamento da mesa de chá e, finalmente, sobre a frase feminina.

■ **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Virginia Woolf. Jane Austen. Tradição literária feminina. Frase feminina.

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