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Literary Essays for the People: A Study on the Identity of Virginia Woolf's Common Readers

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Introduction

Were one to ask a person, perhaps a student, what written work Virginia Woolf is famous for, they would most likely say *Mrs. Dalloway*, possibly her most famous novel. Yet, as Maggie Humm notes, "Virginia Woolf was intermittently a novelist but continually a critic". Throughout her whole career, Woolf wrote over five hundred essays (Humm 2010, 247), yet, she produced only two non-fiction collections containing a small portion of them: *The Common Reader* (1925) and *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932).

Woolf's essayistic production can be divided into three categories of non-fiction prose texts: there are book reviews, essays dealing in socio-cultural matters, and essays of literary theory and criticism. While her essays about social issues, such as *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, enjoy a certain degree of fame, Woolf's critical texts are not as famous. They are known by scholars of course, less so by students, and rarely by non-specialised readers. It is therefore my intention to focus on said body of writings, rather than on her novels, and to use it to explore a specific figure that arises from Woolf's literary production: the "common reader".

The Common Reader is indeed the title of her two collections of essays which aimed to introduce past and quasi-contemporary authors to the reading public of the 1920s and 1930s. Woolf had a real, intense desire to share her passion for literature with other people. This thesis argues that the intended readership for such essays was not a specialised one, made of intellectuals or university professors, but instead was envisioned to be as broad as possible, encompassing readers from all social classes and walks of life.

This was, in fact, a core idea of the two books, and one which Woolf achieved by minding the accessibility of the essays which she selected, revised, or wrote for *The Common Reader* volumes. Woolf was well aware of the concept of intended readership and throughout her whole literary career always had a deep respect for her readers. Her interest in the practice of reading and in the concept of reader can be found in so many of her essays that it could even be hypothesised that Woolf was a precursor of reader-reception theory (Koutsantoni 2016, 68). By analysing her essays, it is evident how much Woolf wanted to engage in a productive dialogue with her readers. Given this, the only question which remains to be addressed, and which this thesis seeks to answer, is who, then, this "common reader" of hers was.

The first chapter, *Virginia Woolf: Novelist, Reviewer, Editor,* focuses on those aspects of Virginia Woolf's life which influenced her career as an essayist, noting the formative value of Woolf's early career in journalism and the impressions which it left on her, as exemplified by her essays *The Patron and the Crocus* (1924) and *Reviewing* (1939). The chapter then proceeds to discuss the topic of reading, both as the activity which Woolf, an avid reader, carried out, and also as a subject of literary theory which Woolf repeatedly addressed in her essays.

The second chapter*, Conceiving the Common Reader: The Varied Reading Audiences of Virginia Woolf*, delves first into the two Common Reader books themselves, and then into the identity of the "common reader" itself. While the first paragraph summarises the coming into being of the two volumes of essays and the literary philosophy behind them, the other two sections set out to unveil the social composition of Virginia Woolf's readership. Attention is given to the history of the term "common reader" itself, as well as to how different critics chose to interpret it. Richard Altick (1998), Elizabeth Madison (1981), Hermione Lee (2007), and Katie Halsey (2011) all researched the possible reasons which led Woolf to dedicate her two collections of essays to the "common reader" originally described by Samuel Johnson in 1779. While it does seem that most contemporary Woolf scholars lean towards an interpretation of the "common reader" as a reading modality more than a real, physical group of people, the chapter argues that the matter of the identity of the intended audience of *The Common Reader* retains critical importance. In this perspective, Collier (2010, 152) and Brosnan (1997, 41) argue that the profile of Woolf's readership ought to be traced back to her journalistic roots. Furthermore, tangible proof of that reading public can be found among Virginia Woolf's private correspondence, especially in the *"Three Guineas" Letters* recovered by Anna Snaith. This body of texts also offers a chance to reflect on the accessibility to and of literary works, yet another topic which often emerges in Woolf's essayistic production. Ultimately, the chapter argues that Woolf's readership was remarkably vast and varied in its social composition, as Woolf strove to reach the gamut of the reading public. While "common reader" is a term that does indeed include the working and lower classes, it is by no means to be applied only to them; in fact, as Woolf intended it, its genesis does not seem to lie in class discourse at all.

In chapter three, *Readers and Classes: Woolf's Social and Pedagogical Literary Spaces,* the British cultural debate around the purpose of intellectuals in society, better known as the "Battle of Brows", is analysed in relation to Woolf's own opinions about mass readership and "common readers". Firstly, the chapter analyses the terminology that was used in the context of said intellectual debate and how such words suffered, in time, from a distortion of meaning which only exacerbated the dispute. Secondly, the need to disentangle the concepts of quality and popularity of a literary work from each other (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 20) is addressed; in particular, recent criticism has focused on demonstrating that modernist artists and authors were torn between a distrust in practices of mass-communication and the genuine desire to make good use of them. Next, Woolf's renowned letter-essay *Middlebrow* (1932) is analysed, as Woolf's central contribution to the aforementioned debate. In particular, it has been demonstrated that the hostility which permeates the text is chiefly directed to those people who embody the "middlebrow" mentality, and whom Woolf perceived to have manipulative intentions toward the unsuspecting general reading public of the early twentieth century. Woolf's status as a "highbrow", upper-class, privileged writer is also discussed in the chapter, recognising that Woolf received much criticism for all of her attempts to connect with readers outside her social circle, regardless of whether these attempts were successful. The second half of the chapter then delves into Virginia Woolf's experience of teaching at Morley College and how fundamental it is for scholars today when framing the writer's harsh judgement of the British pedagogical scene of the time. Moreover, such teaching experience is thought to be significantly relevant for the development of Woolf's essayistic style, which is characterised by respect for the reader and an earnest desire to establish a productive dialogue with them.

Finally, chapter four investigates Woolf's reading audience of women, with the intention of analysing whether it affected her non-fiction writing strategies. In particular, the subject of such inquiry was whether any significant differences can be found between the essays that Woolf created specifically with a female readership in mind and those that, instead, were written for a general, mixed-gender public. To do so, the chapter discusses Woolf's literary contributions to popular women's magazines such as *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*. Critical elements and historical circumstances that were analysed in previous chapters are here re-examined within the boundaries of this specific context.

Indeed, Woolf's stance on producing commercial works changed when she herself reflected on her status as a woman writer. However, it is necessary to acknowledge her personal reticence in self-identifying as a feminist and her concerns over being written off by critics as "just" a "lady writer" (Fernald 2006, 159). Woolf valued writing for women, but just as much as she valued writing for an all-encompassing public of "common readers".

In conclusion, the readership for Virginia Woolf's essays was large, seeing how successful her two *Common Reader* volumes were (Lee 2010, 91), as well as wide and various. Moreover, Woolf had to learn to tune her writing to the specific audiences she was addressing. It is thus by no means surprising if she can be read as a contradictory personality. Not only did her opinions on various literary and social issues evolve with time, but they also strongly depended on who Woolf was visualising as her intended reader for a given context. For Woolf, as for any author, literary criticism should take into account that readerships are not monolithic entities, but a gathering of different multitudes (Pratt 1986, 61): this being even truer for texts created for mass-media publications like newspapers and magazines, as is the case with the majority of Woolf's essays. Virginia Woolf was not writing for a "common reader", but for "common readers", and their identity equally encompassed intellectuals, as well as working adults, women of various social classes, and anyone who resonated with Woolf's idea of "outsider".

Chapter I - Virginia Woolf: Novelist, Reviewer, and Editor

1.1 Biographical Preface

The interest for reading and writing came very early to Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), née Stephen. Already between 1891 and 1895 the Stephen siblings had redacted a little fictional newspaper for their family, *The Hyde Park Gate News.* In this sense, the first written productions of Virginia Stephen were of the journalistic kind.

Her and her siblings' initial education fell upon their parents, Julia and Leslie Stephen, who taught them Latin, French, History, and Math. Virginia later deepened her knowledge of Latin and History and studied German and Greek as well, through a mix of courses at the Ladies' Department of King's College and private tutoring. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, her avid reading was encouraged by her father who put no restrictions on the access to his extensive library. She read Carlyle, and tackled her grandfather's *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*. She loved Macaulay, Pepys, and Montaigne, the latter of whom was a fundamental influence over the style of her essays. As she herself wrote in her diary that it was the Elizabethan prose she loved the most (Lee 2007, 142). She moved onto eighteenth-century writers when she was in her 20s, and biographical texts were always among her favourites, even when she later started reading nineteenth-century novels.

In 1904, after Leslie's death, the Stephens siblings moved to Gordon Square. There came into being the famous Bloomsbury group. It was an informal gathering of friends, with a common passion for literature and the arts. Its members, apart from Virginia Stephen, were: Leonard Woolf (Virginia's future husband), Vanessa and Adrian (Virginia's siblings), Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant, Morgan Forster, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Roger Fry, Desmond and Molly MacCarthy (Lee 2007, 263). In Bloomsbury Virginia finally had a room of her own to write in. She read and she wrote, and soon she wrote about what she read as she began working as a professional book reviewer.

From 1909 to 1913 Virginia wrote at least five drafts of what she called "her novel" and which ended up becoming *The Voyage Out*. During their courtship, Leonard Woolf supported her writing, and even encouraged her to finish writing the current draft of *The Voyage Out* before saying yes to the marriage proposal. They married in 1912, and both the newlyweds had ambitions to live off their writing; Virginia, in particular, had

always been anxious about family finances, and thought it important for her to contribute with an income. In the end, her fame as a writer eventually made her the main breadwinner in the couple: the revenues from her novels provided not only for everyday life, but also for out-of-the-ordinary expenses such as renovating their bathroom and buying the Woolfs' first car. Even at the beginning of their marriage though, Virginia had the most capital of the two, thanks to the inheritances from Leslie, Stella, Thoby, and aunt Caroline which had been further invested in stocks (Lee 2007, 325). In later years, Virginia Woolf had no issues addressing the fact that this initial economic security allowed her to begin writing novels without the immediate worry for publication and economic gain (Young 2010, 181). *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf's first published novel, came out in 1915, after many years of struggles. Not only did Virginia feel depressed seeing Leonard publishing a novel before her, but she also found the revision process excruciating (Lee 2007, 327) and had to deal with a mental illness re-lapse.

In 1917 Virginia and Leonard Woolf founded the Hogarth Press: what initially started as a book-printing hobby to publish themselves, their friends and close connections, soon turned into professional publishing work. The Woolfs' first publication was called *Two Stories:* comprising of Virginia's *The Mark on the Wall* and Leonard's *Three Jews*. Next, they published Katherine Mansfield's *Prelude*, T.S. Eliot's *Poems,* and Murry's *The Critic in Judgement.* Virginia republished *The Mark on the Wall* as a stand-alone, and published *Kew Gardens.* Virginia Woolf's unique perspective on the literary market was given by the fact that she experienced it first-hand from multiple professional points of view. She was a book reviewer for newspapers and magazines; she would soon become a famous novelist and essayist; and she was also a publisher herself. She was the typesetter of the company, although the Woolfs eventually had to resort to a commercial printer to keep up with the market requests, and she even packaged and sent out the books herself. However, what at first had started as a therapeutical activity for her turned into a burden and Virginia Woolf ultimately sold her shares of the Hogarth Press to John Lehmann in 1938.

All of Virginia Woolf's novels after *Night and Day* were first published by the Hogarth Press: *Jacob's Room* in 1922, *Mrs Dalloway,* which she began planning in October of the same year (Lee 2007, 455) and was published in 1925; *To the Lighthouse* came out in 1927, *Orlando* the next year, *The Waves* in 1931, and *The Years* in 1937. Her

last novel, *Between the Acts*, was published by the Press in 1941, shortly after her death by suicide.

The decision to expand the Hogarth Press' offer beyond fiction, poetry, and translations was significant: in 1924 the Press started publishing non-fiction as well. This happened just one year before the publication of *The Common Reader*: Virginia Woolf's first collection of essays. It was her formal debut as essayist to the larger reading public. Having become an established literary critic, she published the famous *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, followed by *On Being Ill,* and later on *Three Guineas.* Then, in 1932 she gathered another assortment of her pre-existing essays in *The Common Reader: Second Series*. Her other essay collections were only published posthumously, with Leonard curating *The Death of the Moth* (1942) and *The Captain's Death Bed* (1950).

1.2 Reviewer and Essayist

Even before publishing novels, Virginia Woolf entered the world of professional writing through journalism; in particular, by writing book reviews and short essays. Her first paid publication was a review of the novel *The Son of Royal Langbrith* which appeared in *The Guardian* (the weekly Anglican newspaper) in late 1904. During the course of 1905, Virginia wrote an essay for the *National Review*, another one for the *Academy & Literature*, about half a dozen reviews for *The Guardian* and about as many for *The Times Literary Supplement,* as well as writing her first review for the *Speaker* (Rosenbaum 1994, 172). In fact, she would never stop her journalistic and essayistic production, even when she established herself as a successful novelist.

Even if she had no previous experience in the field, she found work in literary journals through family connections (her father had been editor for the *Cornhill Magazine*) and friends' recommendations; for example, it was her friend Violet Dickinson who recommended her to Mary Kathleen Lyttelton, editor of the women's section of *The Guardian*. Her reviews were mostly anonymous, as that was the practice for many newspapers (e.g., the *Times Literary Supplement)* at that time (Woolf, Smith, and Wade 2019, 15), so fundamental for retracing the existence of these articles are Virginia's own diaries, notebooks, and letters, in which one can find annotations on her readings and mentions of the articles she was working on at the time.

Virginia Woolf matured invaluable experience from journalistic writing, though it was not without struggles. In *Reading, Taking Notes, and Writing: Virginia Stephen's*

Reviewing Practice, Beth Rigel Daugherty reports Virginia's initial struggles when interfacing with newspaper editors such as Mrs. Lyttelton: "I don't in the least want Mrs. L's candid criticism; I want her cheque!", she remarked in a letter to Violet Dickinson (Woolf 1975, 1:154). Magazine editors requested above all conciseness, given how the reviews had to fit within the pages' layout; this at first frustrated young Virginia, who could not see how it was possible to reduce a book's worth to only a couple hundred words. In another one of her letters to Violet, she wrote: "It was quite good before the official eye fell upon it; now it is worthless, and doesn't in the least represent all the toil I put into it" (Woolf 1975, 1:178), referring to her review of Henry James' *The Golden Bowl,* which she had to shorten upon request by her editor (Daugherty 2010, 31). However, she also conceded that, for example, Mrs. Lyttelton's criticism, while severe, was worth following, saying that "[Lyttelton] sticks her broad thumb into the middle of my sentences and improves the moral tone"(Lee 2007, 218). For Virginia Woolf writing for periodicals was a learning experience which shaped her technique as a writer, both of fiction and non-fiction. In particular, Daugherty remarks that:

> From [editors], she learned specific skills, the "knack of writing for newspapers" (L 1:155), and the ability to adapt to various audiences. Having to imagine, respond to, and write for the "Governess, and maiden lady, and high church Parson mixed" who was reading the Anglo-Catholic and "pretty dull" Guardian, the right wing and anti-German imperialists interested in politics in the National Review, the reform liberals reading the lively Academy & Literature, the anti-imperialistic liberals keeping up with literature and politics in the Speaker, the more literary types reading the oldfashioned Cornhill, the even more left-wing readers of the Nation, and the large numbers reading the fairly new Times Literary Supplement gave Virginia Stephen practice in thinking about wider audiences, the varied nature of any audience, and common readers (Daugherty 2010, 30)

The essays *The Patron and the Crocus*, published on *The Nation & The Athenaeum* on 12 April 1924 and then collected in the first *Common Reader* the next year, is proof that journalistic writing taught Virginia Woolf the importance of taking into consideration the reading public of a text when redacting it. "For a book is always written for somebody to read" (Woolf 1966b, 2:149). And this patron, to Woolf, was not only the physical person of the "paymaster", as she called it, but the collectivity of individuals that made up the audience of the text as well. It was, in fact, the press, that showed Woolf the "unexampled and bewildering variety" of reading audiences in the modern twentieth-century literary marketplace. As she stated:

> There is the daily Press, the weekly Press, the monthly Press; the English public and the American public; the bestseller public and the worst-seller public; the highbrow public

> and the red-blood public; all now organised self-conscious entities capable through their various mouthpieces of making their needs known and their approval or displeasure felt.(Woolf 1966b, 2:149)

Thus, the activity of reviewer allowed Woolf to develop her sensitivity to the concept of reader and reading public, and to tune her writing voice for a multiplicity of readerships. And it was a profession she carried on even when she established herself as a successful novelist. Ultimately such a long career in article and essay writing made of Woolf an expert of the field, as is evident in her 1939 essay "Reviewing", in which she reflects on said profession. The essay first appeared as number four in the *Hogarth Sixpenny Pamphlets* series and was published "with a Note by Leonard Woolf". It is an interesting piece of criticism on the practice of book reviewing, even more so coming from a successful reviewer such as Woolf was. The text proposes to investigate the value of the professional figure of the reviewer; going from how it serves a book author, to what use it has for potential readers, to what matters for the reviewer themselves, and to what weight it has in the larger scope of literature. It seems that Woolf's own experiences with literary journalism brought her to the conclusion that such a profession is wholly guided by the economics of the literary marketplace. Her text highlights how an author cares about reviews only as an indicator of future sales, and among the functions of the reviewer she clearly lists the advertising of an author or a book. Even the reading public uses reviews only as a mean to know whether their money and time are worth spending on a text. Thus, the figure of the reviewer is here defined in terms of economic costs or profits. While Woolf did believe that a reviewer had the important task of "sorting current literature", that is to sort through contemporary textual productions to find the works that could be worthy of being read again in the distant future, her description of the job always took into account its economics.

> He [the reviewer] has to review; for he has to live; and he has to live, since most reviewers come of the educated class, according to the standards of that class. Thus he has to write often, and he has to write much. There is, it seems, only one alleviation of the horror, that he enjoys telling authors why he likes or dislikes their books.(Woolf 1966b, 2:211)

It is hard to read passages from this essay without imagining Woolf's own life as a reviewer, without wondering how much of the opinions expressed here have been shaped by her own real-life experiences as a skilled critic trying to bring literature to the greater public. It is one of the many instances in which Woolf reminded her readership

that writing was, in fact, a demanding profession like any other; one which she had chosen deliberately, and upon which she depended economically.

1.2 Professional reading for the Hogarth Press

Retracing Virginia Woolf's career in reviewing would have been difficult had we not had her reading notebooks. She did not annotate her considerations directly on her books like her father used to do, but only on separate notebooks kept for that specific purpose. She used them for her personal readings, for those that newspapers assigned to her, and for the readings she used as sources in her essays. Some of these reading notes were the very first kernels of ideas from which her essays would stem; there, notes can be found for essays such as *Robinson Crusoe, Three Guineas, Donne After Three Centuries, A Room of One's Own, On Not Knowing Greek, The Elizabethan Lumber Room,* and *How It Strikes a Contemporary* (Silver 1983, 345).

Furthermore, reading is also a topic about which she often wrote, as in the case of her essays *On not Knowing Greek* (1925)*, On Re-Reading Novels* (1922)*, Reading* (1919)*, and How Should One Read a Book?* (1926). The latter, in particular, is an interesting source to try and imagine Woolf's own reading habits and processes. She herself states at the very beginning of the paper that even if she found an answer to the question posed in the title, that answer would apply only to herself. The essay thus comes from her own personal reflections on the subject, and ultimately advises its readers to come to their own conclusions and stay independent, "for nothing can be more fatal than to be guided by the preferences of others in a matter so personal"(Woolf [1926] 2003, 150). Woolf is wary of authorities, though ultimately becoming one in her essays. After all she grew up with unrestricted access to her father's library: it seems logical she would come to think readers should train themselves in the art of browsing through libraries. Moreover, submitting to the "critics, the gowned and furred authorities of the library" (Woolf [1926] 2003, 154) might even threaten one's own identity, and to Woolf that core of someone's personality is developed through the right to state what they like and what they dislike. If people deferred their judgement on books to what others think of them, they would lose their personal relationship with the work and its author. It might seem a paradoxical reasoning for someone who was, in fact, a critic and a reviewer, but Woolf also believed that a good critical opinion still has chances of persuading the reader, if they are willing to engage with it. For Woolf another key element of reading was the "boldness of imagination"

(Woolf [1926] 2003, 149); not only books transport us in different worlds, in different times, but Woolf felt they also refreshed her own creative powers (Woolf [1926] 2003, 150). In this regard, the virtual boundary between writer, taken as that individual which reads to create, and the "common" reader is made thin. It can be argued that there hardly ever was a moment in which Virginia Woolf did not read as a writer, or one in which she did not write as a reader. Woolf believed that "to receive impressions […] is only half the process of reading" (Woolf [1926] 2003, 153). The next logical step, for Woolf, was judgement, though she recommended letting the book sit at the back of one's mind before casting one's opinion on it. She vividly described how fundamental for her was to "continue reading without the book before you" (Woolf [1926] 2003, 154): a sign of her impressionistic approach to both reading and writing. Despite the fact that she read, reviewed, and criticised for a living, Woolf still put her identity as a simple reader first. Not that she considered reading an easy task, but she treasured reading for the love of it, and the unfiltered, unprofessional first impressions it gave her.

It is because of this propension for impressionism that her critical writings have often been dismissed as commentaries, rather than analysis, and that Woolf has been, and still continues to be, considered more of an "occasional essayist" rather than a "serious critic"(Goldman 1965, 1). But her essayistic style differs so much from many of her contemporaries because much of her essays are spent trying to transmit the passion, the emotions, the flights of fancy she experienced first-hand while reading a certain literary work, rather than coldly analysing it only for its academic worth. Woolf herself famously criticised Walter Raleigh for the impersonal professionality he used to put in literature: "There is nothing to suggest that literature was a matter of profound interest to him when he was not lecturing about it. When we read the letters of Keats, the diary of the Goncourts, the letters of Lamb, the causal remarks of that unfashionable poet Tennyson, we feel that, waking or sleeping, these men never stopped thinking about literature"(Woolf 1966a, 1:315). Thus, her literary essays are in themselves proof of her love for reading, and how much for her it was not a mere mean of knowledge acquisition, but rather an experience which she encouraged everyone to partake in.

Another dimension of professional reading that Woolf found herself involved with was the one she did for the Hogarth Press. All publishing houses require manuscript readers and copy editors: the first to judge whether a text is worth publishing, the second

to revise the text and prepare it for publication. The Hogarth Press, however, was a small business, and the Woolfs could not afford hiring specialised people for the job. It was up to them to deal with both processes (Battershill 2018, 39), and to this day the most famous manuscript-related episode was their decision to reject Joyce's *Ulysses*. Besides Virginia's genuine dislike for the book, in 1918 the Hogarth Press could not have handled the hand-printing of such a long book. Virginia Woolf eventually had to give up her job as a professional reader for the Hogarth Press, since the continuous mental work was negatively affecting her psychological well-being. This was, perhaps, the only instance where for Woolf reading turned from a passion to a burden, and, as Flint argues, a "form of labour" (Flint 1996, 190).

In conclusion, Virginia's beginnings in periodicals greatly contributed to the development of her skills in the literary industry. She rose to fame as a well-known public figure, she was the "famous" face of the Hogarth Press in the eyes of the larger reading public and, of course, years of reading and writing ultimately culminated in her renowned literary production.

Chapter II – Conceiving the Common Reader: The Varied Reading Audience of Virginia Woolf

2.1 Past Authors for Modern Readers

Woolf's conception of *The Common Reader* possibly began as early as 1921 (Woolf 1978, 2:120). In diary entries from that and the next year Woolf mentions she wants to write a "Reading" book, this being her work-in-progress title for a book of literary criticism. She planned on publishing a collection of some of her already published articles and essays, not without revising and expanding them, to which she also eventually added new essays such as *On Not Knowing Greek*. In 1925, the book was finally published by the Hogarth Press under the title *The Common Reader*. This first volume was then followed by a second in 1932: *The Common Reader: Second Series,* once again written following the same strategy of compiling previously published essays. Woolf's diaries also reveal that between 1938 and 1940 she meant again "to collect, even bind together, my innumerable T.L.S notes: to consider them as material for some kind of critical book: quotations? Comments? Ranging all through English lit: as I've read it & noted it during the past 20 years" (Woolf 1985, 5:180). Such concept could have perhaps turned out to be a third *Common Reader*, but the project never materialised into a published book. This partly because of the decline of her mental health, partly because she had changed creative direction, as Brenda Silver (Silver 1979, 357) theorises from her study of Woolf's last two unfinished essays, *Anon* and *The Reader*.

The two volumes of *The Common Reader* consist of twenty-one and twenty-two essays respectively. The essays are arranged in chronological order of subject: from medieval literature to Conrad for the first volume, and from the Elizabethans to Thomas Hardy for the second one. Woolf was inspired by the 18th century writer "Dr." Samuel Johnson for the title of her essay collection. She considered Johnson to be one of England's greatest literary critics and in the first essay of *The Common Reader*, by the very same title, explains the intent of her book. In *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* Johnson had said "I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours" (Johnson 1779); this made Woolf consider the importance of said figure of the common reader within the landscape of literary criticism and scholarly studies. Despite such

reader's many flaws (the common reader is "worse educated", "hasty, inaccurate, and superficial"), Johnson believed that it could contribute to the process of literary canon formation thanks to its lack of literary prejudices and richness of common sense. Woolf agreed with his critical opinion and claimed that "perhaps, it may be worth while to write down a few of the ideas and opinions which, insignificant in themselves, yet contribute to so mighty a result" (Woolf [1925] 2002, 4).

2.2 The Profile of Woolf's Common Reader

Much has been debated around the identity of the common reader both Johnson and Woolf wrote about. Undoubtedly, Johnson's reader must have been quite different from Woolf's. In the century that sets them apart literacy increased drastically: "In twentieth-century England not only every one can read, but it is safe to add that every one does read" (Leavis 1939, 3). The decades in which Woolf wrote truly saw the explosion of mass readership. At the beginning of the twentieth century the percentage of British men that could read was 97.2%, and women's literacy rate stood at 96.8%, even though one must take in consideration that, in the 1920s, less than 10% of schoolkids went on to secondary education (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 60). Already in 1932, Q.D. Leavis highlighted that the primary proof that the British people read was the numbers of "Sunday newspapers sold" (Leavis 1939, 3), which greatly increased after the first World War. Having established without trace of doubt that all British people at the turn of the century could read, it is now necessary to investigate who, among them, were the common readers that Woolf sought to reach.

As Katie Halsey said, the term itself poses many issues. Part of the problem originated when, in *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900,* Richard Altick used it in correlation to a social class difference among the reading public. Since then, critics have thus been led to think of the "common reader" as of a working-class person. However, as Halsey stated "the term 'common reader' did not necessarily have class implications, being used instead to discuss levels of readerly expertise" (Halsey 2011, 69). Lee agrees in not tying too much Virginia Woolf's common reader to specific social classes. She thinks that this kind of critical reading is a side effect of the discussion over Woolf's own standing in the "battle of brows", stating that "because there have been so many attacks on her life and work (especially in Britain) for snobbery,

high-brow-ism and a refusal to write for a mass public, the other meaning of common has crept into the discussion"(Lee 2007, 414–15).

According to Lee, the term "common" is to be interpreted as "general", or "ordinary", but without necessarily tying it to a lower-middle class sociological interpretation. Rather, by titling her collection of essays *The Common Reader* Woolf sought not so much to identify who the book had been written for, but to present her own reading modality to the literary community (Lee 2007, 414). Madison also theorised that Woolf placed herself "in the category of common reader" (Madison 1981, 62), further expanding on the intent behind the collection of texts, and in particular the importance of its first short essay by the same title. According to her, Woolf felt she needed to legitimise her creation of a book of literary essays, since she was not a scholar or a critic. Samuel Johnson's words on the common reader gave her the basis to do so: they justified her desire to publish her own opinions on the books she read, on literature.

Yet, reducing the term "common reader" to a reading modality would mean ignoring the question of a text's readership, a theme which deeply interested Woolf. As Jeanne Dubino says in her *Introduction* to *Virginia Woolf and The Literary Marketplace*, "her other major passion was the reader"(Dubino 2010, 9); Woolf constantly returned to the concept of the reading public (Snaith 2003, 118) since, as she said, "A writer is never alone. There is always the public with him" (Woolf 1966, 1:332). Snaith reminds us that for Woolf there can't be no complete act of writing without a readership, and that being aware of who is one's own target audience is fundamental to establish a productive critical dialogue with it (Snaith 2003, 42).

"To know whom to write for is to know how to write"(Woolf [1925] 2002, 118), wrote Woolf in *The Patron and the Crocus*, highlighting how writing is inherently a form of communication. It seems then logical to deduce that Woolf must have had a reading public in mind for the two volumes of *The Common Reader,* and that it is worthwhile to investigate the identity of this readership. As Collier pointed out, Woolf was also aware of the difficulty, at times, of reaching her intended readership (Collier 2010, 152). In *Woolf Studies and Periodical Studies*, he analysed Virginia Woolf in the context of periodical literary production; which is relevant when one remembers that the *Common Reader* essays, before they were book chapters, had been journalistic articles, published first in *the Times Literary Supplement*, *The Nation,* and *Vogue,* among many others. As

Brosnan has argued, it would be a mistake to read Woolf's essays divorced from their material circumstances of production (Brosnan 1997, 41). As a matter of fact, Woolf put in place a re-framing strategy in *The Common Reader* (Collier 2010, 155) by choosing to open her collection of essays with the following brief *Preface*: "Some of these papers appeared originally in the Times Literary Supplement, the Athenaeum, the Nation and Athenaeum, the New Statesman, the London Mercury, the Dial (New York); the New Republic (New York)" (Woolf [1925] 2002, 3). In what is then an operation of textual relocation, Woolf deliberately called "papers" what initially were articles. She presented these essays as "fresh utterances, written to the moment by a common reader for other common readers" (Collier 2010, 155–56), when their birthplace had been the pages of a literary magazine. While the *Nation & Athenaeum,* the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the other periodicals these texts had had been published on were not "two-penny" publications (the *Nation & Athenaeum* proudly advertised itself at 6d weekly) (Collier 2010, 156), they still belonged to the commercial world of newspaper and journalism. Q.D. Leavis in particular stated that English people, across all social classes, in the first half of the twentieth century had a significantly stronger habit of purchasing magazines and newspapers compared to book-buying (Leavis 1939, 10–12). Periodicals truly were the mass-media of the period. Leavis, following the critical trend of the time, affirmed that "The purely literary periodicals alone can be divided on internal evidence into three classes […]. It will be convenient to call these levels 'highbrow,' 'middlebrow ' and 'lowbrow'" (Leavis 1939, 20). But more interestingly, she gave sales estimates for each of these categories and, of all the periodicals quoted, it was the *Times Literary Supplement* which presented a statistical discrepancy: despite being included in the "middle" level, it sold three times as much as its companion the *London Mercury*, breaching the 30 000 copies for each number. This would have put it much closer to the "lowbrow" category defined by Leavis. The author quotes the fact that it was "a trade organ for booksellers, schoolmasters, etc." as a possible source of the inconsistency. In this sense, while Woolf's essays were born not as "papers" but as articles in a periodical, it can still be argued that they were written by a common reader for other common readers.

Central to the debate around the common reader, is the figure to which Q.D. Leavis herself dedicated the whole second chapter of her book: the middleman. According to Leavis, the sheer size of the British twentieth century reading public (which she

claimed to be of forty-three million people (Leavis 1939, 4)) demanded for the existence of an intermediary between book authors and the people, this intermediary being the press. Literary journalism was made of book-reviews, advertisements, and literary articles. Its literary mission was to guide the public in its reading choices; its practical intent was to sell books. “It is this public which has made nearly all the big newspapers think it worth their while to pay for the services of very well-known literary figures, who provide a weekly article or batch of reviews once a week” (Leavis 1939, 21), wrote Leavis. As a reviewer, Woolf herself was part of this system, but she hardly had any praise for it. She thought two types of readers had developed: the common and the critic (Koutsantoni 2016, 53–54), and she stood correct. The first half of the twentieth century did, as a matter of fact, see an increasing professionalisation of reading, which Woolf identified as the cause of a widening of the gap between the author and the reader. The academic institutionalisation of literature in particular was for her “the most abhorrent of all” (Dubino 2010, 10). Professionals (from reviewers, to critics, to academic professors) were intruding voices in the dialogic relationship between a text and its readership. Woolf did not want to see literature walled up within the rooms of academia. She feared that these middlemen would undermine the reader’s confidence in their judgement and that academically-prescribed methods of textual analysis readers would discourage them from thinking on their own. Against such a cold methodology, Woolf proposed, as an alternative, a reading modality where the reader would retain the “emotions, which [they] have in common with others” (Woolf [1922] 1988, 473–99). When she titled her two collections of essays *The Common Reader*, she assumed her own readership would interpret the phrase in opposition to professional reading (Palmer and Buckland 2011, 69–70). It is then in this perspective of communal and common reading, and in response to the emergence of academic criticism, that Woolf sought to remove the figure of the commercial literary middleman, urging her public to become a more independent common reader (Macnamara 2010, 92).

2.3 Common Responders: The Accessibility of Virginia Woolf’s Essays

Despite the “common” nature of Woolf’s two volumes of essays, much critical space has been devoted to the question of whether she wanted to resonate with the reading public

at large, and whether she did succeed at that. Since the time of contemporary reviewers and critics, there were those who categorised Woolf as an élite writer, "too much of a lady" (Bogan 1938, 164–65). Q.D. Leavis and Graham Greene, both accused her of being too removed from the "real world", sheltered by her class and "highbrow" social circles. For a long time, critics have struggled to "see beyond Woolf's social background" (Snaith 2003, 117) and still today Woolf's position as a modernist writer falsely paints her as inaccessible for the modern average reader. However, Woolf critics have eventually migrated toward an interpretation of her and her works much more involved in the social debate of her age. Woolf was moved by the democratic principle of inclusion (Dubino 2010, 9) when she wrote *The Common Reader,* and she aspired to reach the broadest reading public possible. Her preference for the common reader instead than the "literary bully" (Low 1997, 262) was part of what critics defined as her "democratic highbrow" stances. Woolf had no desire to be read by a restricted group of people (Snaith 2003, 120): her sales for *The Common Reader* books reflect a marketing strategy that was deliberately addressed to the general public. While the first edition of *The Common Reader* was sold at 12s. 6d., both the volumes had a paperback re-print by Penguin (Pelican) marketed at a significantly cheaper price: the first volume was sold at a sixpence in 1938, followed by the second one in 1944, priced a ninepence. Both the Penguin editions ran 50000 copies (Lee 2010, 91). These re-prints of the books are proof of the success of the essays among the broader reading public. Further evidence of Virginia Woolf's widespread and common readership can be deduced from the bundle of eighty-two letters that Anna Snaith made accessible in *"Three Guineas" Letters* (Snaith 2000). These letters come from the *Monk's House Papers* at the University of Sussex and were written in response to the publication of *Three Guineas*. Fifty-eight of these missives, therefore the majority of them, are from forty-nine different readers who were complete strangers to Woolf, thirty-four of whom were women. In a clear example of the importance Woolf attributed to the concept of author-reader dialogue, Woolf replied to many of their letters. This body of correspondence (one must remember Woolf certainly received more letters than the ones she kept) represents in its concreteness the existence of Virginia Woolf's common reader, and of many kinds of common readers at that. There is a wide variety in the forty-nine respondents, in particular in terms of social class and education.

> Three of the respondents identify themselves as working-class, one man and two women (70, 64, 72) and another three situate themselves as different from Woolf in terms of class and/or education (7, 68, 80). There are many letters from which it is impossible to determine class background. […] Many of the female respondents were politically active (Snaith 2003, 123)

This readership of common readers was not made solely of well-educated bourgeois or clever intellectuals, it was made of working-class people too. The authors of these letters were "an office worker, teachers, vicars, housewives, an accountant, a librarian, a bookseller, a bus conductor and a postgraduate student"; the bus conductor, Ernest Huxley, wrote not one, but two lengthy letters to Woolf, and a woman acknowledged she had never written to an author or a celebrity before (Snaith 2003, 123–26). Snaith's work on these letters demonstrates both that working-class readers sought Woolf and both that Woolf's own "highbrow" status did not impede her communication with them. She made conscious efforts to think outside of her own life experiences and recognised the importance of knowing when to stop and let the people directly involved with an issue be the ones to write about it (Childers 1992, 70).

Fundamental in the discourse on Woolf's audience of common readers is the question of literary accessibility. To implement the ideal of a truly democratic literature, texts need to be easily accessible: both in terms of obtaining access to the text, and in terms of understanding its contents. To achieve the latter, Woolf wrote her essays in a witty, conversational, but informative tone (Dubino 2010, 9). The topic of a reader's physical access to the text was also a matter Woolf was aware of. Even her own readers openly brought up the issue with her; it is, in fact, the main element of similarity among the forty-nine readers who wrote to her following the publication of *Three Guineas* (Snaith 2003, 125). Woolf's own readers desired for her texts to become even more widespread and were conscious the price of her essays was a financial barrier for many. This call to make literature more accessible resonates with Woolf's longstanding passion for public libraries. She brought it forward herself in *The Leaning Tower*, an essay based on a speech she gave to the *Workers' Educational Association* in 1940. As Woolf says in her diary, the subject of the essay "leads to Public Libraries: & the supersession of aristocratic culture by common readers: also to the end of class literature" (Woolf 1985, 5:267).

There could not be better proof that public libraries were indeed used by the common public than the copy of *The Common Reader* "spotted with readers" which is

preserved at the Lewes library. Cuddy-Keane indeed reports finding in the library's archives a 1929 edition of the book full of "smudges that appeared to be thumb marks but also orange spots, brown spots, pink spots – looking like tea, marmalade, jam, and lipstick" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 113); this must be the very same copy Virginia Woolf saw toward the end of her life when, distraught by the thought of war, she sought to make contact with her readers through the shelves of a public library. Ease of access to literature was a fundamental element of Woolf's dream of a democratic highbrowism; and one that was not only pursued through the promotion of public libraries, but chiefly through her essays as well. In fact, the reason for which Woolf wrote literary essays was precisely to introduce a wide, vast readership to literature. Still today, her critical essays excel at making a varied range of literary works accessible because they are written in a "soft rhetoric of empathy and changing viewpoint" (Good 2014, 151) and, most notably, because they strive to hand out to the reader the critical methods to engage with even more literature on their own (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 1).

Chapter III – Readers and Classes: Woolf's Social and Pedagogical Literary Spaces

3.1 Highs, Middles, and Lows of the Early Twentieth Century Intellectual Debate

In October 1932, the same month that saw the publication of *The Common Reader. Second Series,* Virginia Woolf's attention was taken by a debate that troubled "the evening air" (Woolf [1932] 1966, 196): as part of the *To an Unnamed Listener* radio talk series, on October 10, J.B. Priestley had given a talk titled *To a High-Brow* on the BBC (*Radio Times* 1932a) and on October 24, Harold Nicolson had promptly replied with his own speech, *To a Low-Brow* (*Radio Times* 1932b). These two radio talks were the product of dividing opinions concerning the position of the intellectual in society. The birth of mass culture had shaken the cultural landscape of the 1920s and 1930s; if on one side it was easier than ever to reach large audiences, on the other there was a persistent anxiety that the larger body of the people could be too easily influenced. More than ever before, people from all classes of society not only had access to intellectual culture, but could partake in its production. Yet, there was certainly an assumption that intellectual culture belonged to the upper classes, and that popular culture corresponded to the lower classes; consequently, intellectual culture could only be performed by a small, élite group, while popular culture was a mass phenomenon (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 18). At the same time, British society was increasingly more preoccupied with the concept of democracy and the forces that threatened it: intellectuals did not feel at ease in championing élite culture as superior, but also struggled to understand how it could be fully democratic. Furthermore, they suspected that mass culture, with its tendency for standardisation, was also antithetical to a democracy that protected and encouraged individual thought and expression. However, much of the debate surrounding "high" and "low" culture originated from the incorrect usage of terms such as "mass" and "popular". In particular, it is to be noted that these two words are not synonyms. Michael Kammen marks the distinction between cultural works produced to be mass-consumed, and the works "produced by and for specific cultural communities" which are "popular" in the sense that they come from the people themselves (Kammen 1999, 5). It is this slippage between the concepts of popular and mass that further muddied the debate around mass-consumed

culture and intellectual production. From there resulted the common misconception that pitted modernists against mass culture.

Among the proponents of such theories Andreas Huyssen set modernism and the masses as antithetical cultural poles, and John Carey, in his work *The Intellectuals and the Masses,* equated the large number of ordinary readers with the concept of undifferentiated mass (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 3). On the contrary, the production of cultural goods for the mass market does not necessarily lead to the creation of a homogenous audience, and mass communication as an approach is not synonymous with empty, mass-produced cultural content. Both Carey and Huyssen were mistaken in depicting modernism as an inherently hostile reaction to the birth of mass readership; or at least, claims such as "the purpose of modernist writing was to exclude these newly educated (or 'semi-educated') readers" (Carey 1992; quoted in Cuddy-Keane 2003, 3) fall prey to the generalising tendency that assumes all modernists shared the same views on the matter. Many modernists expressed criticism toward mass culture, mostly out of concern that this new phenomenon was discouraging individual, critical thought in common readers. That cheap mass-literature was written to present the reader with ideas they already believed in and that this form of confirmation bias would lead to a strengthening of prejudice is, for example, one of the points over which both Q.D. Leavis and Virginia Woolf agreed. However, it must be noted that "an opposition to mass culture does not then automatically imply an opposition to mass communication or to popular forms" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 14); Virginia Woolf did not disdain popular forms of culture, nor did she refuse making good use of mass-media, as is evident from her multiple appearances on BBC radio. Interestingly, in the pamphlet *Hunting the Highbrow*, Leonard Woolf also stopped to analyse the nature of classic and best-seller works, challenging the supposed opposition between what is intellectual and what is popular. As Cuddy-Keane noted, the quality and popularity of a cultural work "need to be disentangled" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 20), in particular, that a popular work cannot be of value because the larger mass of the people appreciate it is a biased posit which does not hold true. Still, this reasoning was not apparent at the beginning of the twentieth century or, more likely, it was lost in the midst of the heated and polarising debate around intellectual culture that would soon be known as the "Battle of Brows".

The words “highbrow” and “lowbrow” came into frequent use in British culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. Literally, the terms refer to the height of the forehead; by metonymy, they then came to signify the degree of intellectual nature of a person or of a cultural work (Hendrickson 1998, 326, 442). The first recorded use of “highbrow” is in 1884 (‘Highbrow, Adj. and n.’ 2022), distinguishing between the “high” and more complex entertainment for the mind from that for the body. However, “by the time we reach the pre-war fiction of H. G. Wells and Sinclair Lewis, “highbrow” and “highbrowed” had acquired the negative associations of asceticism, repression of the physical, and a pretentious, high moral stance […] By the mid-1920s, the oppositional relation of the brows was established enough for the hostilities to become a target of fun in *Punch*” (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 18). The Bloomsbury group was often criticised for its élite nature, and Virginia Woolf was labelled a “highbrow” many times before she herself claimed that title. For example, Frank Swinnerton, under the pen-name of “Simon Pure”, cast Woolf as part of a neo-Georgian “caste” of aesthetic “highbrows”; Orlando was deemed “high-brow lark” by Arnold Bennet, who also called Woolf the “queen of the high-brows,” in his review of *A Room of One’s Own* (Majumdar and McLaurin 2003, 130, 232, 258). In August 1932, Woolf herself wrote in a letter to Ethel Smyth: “I get so much heckled by journalists for Bloomsbury Highbrowism” (Woolf 1979, 5:89). Clearly, “highbrow” was not simply a synonym for the adjective “intellectual”: semantically, it carried over an attitude, a judgement, toward any noun it modified. “If highbrows are intellectually superior, the reasoning goes, they must assume they are superior people; if they think they are superior people, then others resent such assumed superiority”, remarks Cuddy-Keane (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 16).

Both “highbrow” and “lowbrow” were charged terms reflecting an attitude of the speaker. The defenders of “high culture” believed that the mass-market threatened the production of good quality works; in particular it threatened those writers whose complex works could only be afforded to print in small runs. Their worry was that intellectual culture was no longer financially sustainable and that mass-marketed works were destined to take over the means of communication.

> The particular conjunction of cultural and economic pressures during this period caused long-standing concerns about audience to emerge as a source of anxiety for the highbrow press. The explosive rise of mass media and mass communication, coupled with the rapidly growing diversity in the reading and listening audiences, intensified concerns

> about capturing the reader's attention and raised questions about which kinds of publication were going to survive (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 20).

Without communicative resources at its disposal, the intellectual would be left with no sway over public opinion and the general public. On the other hand, the exponents of "low culture" feared exclusion from cultural circles at the hand of the highbrows. The erroneous syllogism that "if highbrow was quality, and highbrow was not popular, then popular could not be quality" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 22) threatened the inherent cultural value that lowbrow works had. Were it not enough, the highbrows' preferred rebuttal strategy when criticised was to disparage the quality of non-highbrow work. But in the end, both sides were arguing for the right to have a reading public.

Eventually, this cultural climate gave origin to a third class of intellectuals, the "middlebrow", also called "broadbrow". One of the first mentions of the term appears in a satire against the BBC and its cultural programmes: "The B.B.C. claim[s] to have discovered a new type, the 'middlebrow'. It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like" (*Punch* 1925; quoted in Brown and Grover 2012, 4). This "middle" class of intellectuals is the subject of the essay-letter that Virginia Woolf wrote, but never sent, to the editor of the *New Statesman and Nation* between 29th and 31st October 1932, published only posthumously under the title *Middlebrow*. As Cuddy-Keane theorised, this essay was most likely the product of Woolf's fervour on the particularly intense month of October 1932. At the time, Woolf was already preoccupied with questions of readership, with the critical reception of her second *Common Reader*, and with all sorts of socio-cultural matters regarding women, the role of intellectuals in modern society, and the prevailing control public institutions had on education and communication. Priestley and Nicolson's respective *To a High-Brow* and *To a Low-Brow* talks on the BBC acted as the lightning rod that catalysed all of Woolf's cultural concerns and prompted her to "dash off" an essay within a matter of days, interrupting the writing of *The Pargiters,* despite the fact that the debate had seemingly already ended, with the *New Statesman* itself celebrating Nicolson's victory.

Nicolson's final script for the talk has unfortunately been lost, although it seems that his main concern was arguing that the lowbrows "will end by producing a race which, like the wasps, have no ideas at all" (*Yorkshire Post* 1932; quoted in Cuddy-Keane 2003, 25). Nicolson, like Q.D. Leavis, saw lowbrow culture as a form of "herd thought", where ideas simmered in isolated bubbles, fostering intolerance. While the fear of growing

sectarian prejudices was a concern Woolf also shared, she did not cast the blame on lowbrow culture at all: for her, the people encouraging such mass thought were the middlebrows. Priestley himself embodied this "ordinary sort of chap" (Woolf [1932] 1972; quoted in Pollentier 2010, 144); in his talk he urges his listener not to "be either a highbrow or a low-brow. Be a man. Be a broad-brow" (Priestley 1932; quoted in Cuddy-Keane 2003, 24), a stance he had previously taken in his 1926 essay *High, Low, Broad* (Pollentier 2010, 143) as well. It was "Priestley and his priestliness" in particular that irritated Woolf.

> Priestley's script survives in the BBC archives. The style of his talk can be described as informal, matey, and pugilistic; the unnamed listener, addressed as "my dear fellow," is constructed as male; and the gist of the message is to fight off the dangerous temptation to be a highbrow and join the speaker in going out for a drink. All the familiar clichés about highbrowism are rehearsed: that it sneers at popularity and can only admire what is liked by a small group; that it is divorced from ordinary life and characterized by affectation; that it is a product, just as much as lowbrowism, of fashion and the desire to move in herds (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 24).

For as much as Priestley harshly criticised highbrows and lowbrows for their herd mentality, he himself falls prey to generalisation. Indeed, by the time of Priestley and Nicolson's debate, the meaning of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" had strayed far away from their point of origin and the intellectual discussion had degenerated into a polarised disagreement. For Priestley, it was no more only a debate about thinking modalities, but about socio-economic categories too. To critics such as Woolf, the figure of the broadbrow was not as much a case of "in medio stat virtus" as much as it was a third category of people who, by avoiding to express a definitive opinion on the matter, could feel superior to both.

This was an ideology that Woolf had denounced even before the proper beginning of the "Battle of Brows". Already in 1918, she was strongly critical of the "middleness" of certain writers, as can be read in her review of Lynd's *A Book of Essays*. There, she critiqued the "middles", a subgenre of the familiar essay which owes its nickname to their position in periodicals (Pollentier 2010, 137). This typology of essay discussed everyday topics in an easy, conversational tone and became very popular among the reading public between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, so much so that Caroline Pollentier defines them as "a mass-cultural phenomenon". As a matter of fact, these "middles" did not stay constrained to newspapers, but soon entered the book marketplace as popular essayists began to collect their pieces and re-print them in book

form. The commercial proliferation of the "middles" sparked negative critical reactions in those writers who instead upheld the ideal of the "pure essay" and who were, therefore, strongly critical of the "popularization of the essay" (Gosse 1910, 778). Virginia Woolf was indeed one of the main critics of the familiar essay and of the "middles", both because of their form and because of what they stood for at a societal level. Already in 1905 in *The Decay of Essay-writing* she denounced the "mechanical" nature of contemporary personal essays, a consequence of both journalistic and school practices which encouraged mindless production of literary content. Undoubtedly, this opinion was influenced by her job as a teacher at Morley College, where not only she saw the decay of essay-writing into a mere composition exercise, but also heard students such as Miss Williams lament about the newspaper industry forcing its writers to produce articles mechanically and in a hurry. (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 82). For Woolf, the modern "middles" lacked the very "personal opinion" (Woolf 1986, 5:25) that stood at the origin of the genre as Montaigne had conceived it. Despite, or perhaps because, her later work as a journalistic book reviewer and essay-writer, she "accused essayists of complying with the conditions of the publishing market by adapting their prose to a restricted space and thus turning essay-writing into a lucrative exercise in style" (Pollentier 2010, 139). But even stronger was her social critique of the "middles", which she saw as the embodiment of the "middlebrow ideology of the everyman" (Pollentier 2010, 144). She mistrusted the common-man persona that popular essayists adopted, perceiving it as manipulating and predatory toward the larger public of common readers. This was the real core of Virginia Woolf's critique of mass culture: not a dislike for lightweight forms of entertainment, but a cultural anxiety toward the manipulating power of mass-circulating ideas coming from intellectuals who might not have the best interest of the people at heart.

It is from here that Woolf's essay *Middlebrow* draws its origins; "characteristically, Woolf enters the fray at the foundational level, interrogating the discourse of the argument itself. Instead of defending the highbrow, she challenges her reader to scrutinize conventional thinking, beginning with the assumption that high, middle, and lowbrow correspond to high, middle, and low class" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 25). In opposition to Priestley and Nicolson's speeches, Woolf's essay is everything but polarising: despite Woolf's proud initial and conclusive statements that she is indeed a "highbrow", the letter is not a defence of highbrowism. Even more so, seeing how, in it,

Woolf actively challenged the prejudices society had assigned to the lowbrow and highbrow categories.

> I love lowbrows; I study them; I always sit next the conductor in an omnibus and try to get him to tell me what it is like - being a conductor. In whatever company I am I always try to know what it is like – being a conductor, being a woman with ten children and thirty-five shillings a week, being a stockbroker, being an admiral, being a bank clerk, being a dressmaker, being a duchess, being a miner, being a cook, being a prostitute (Woolf [1932] 1966, 197).

Woolf placed the duchess, the prostitute, the admiral, and the miner in the lowbrow category without distinctions, because she firmly believed it was not social class that determined a person's intellectual preferences or capabilities. However, where Woolf depicted highbrows and lowbrows as categories with both flaws and qualities, in *Middlebrow* the one true recipient of severe disapproval is the intellectual "species" of the "middlebrow". They are depicted as people who seek to earn money "to buy", antiques in particular, not to live nor to engage with "living art" (Woolf [1932] 1966, 201); people who purposely instigated animosity between the highbrows and the lowbrows, and fed off it. An attitude exemplified, according to Woolf, by the "Betwixt and Between Company", thus she labelled the B.B.C., which she strongly criticised for promoting opposition for the sake of entertainment, all with the purpose of making more profits out of it. From a literary standpoint, it is precisely this profit-driven marketplace strategy which Woolf condemned the most in middlebrow works. Middlebrow authors engaged in the dangerous business of producing texts that asked readers not to think but merely to agree. Not only that, but their works presented views and ideas that their audience already agreed with, thus fostering confirmation bias and the creation of social bubbles hostile to each other. Noticeably, Woolf marked the distinction between literature that does not require its reader to think, because it is meant for entertainment purposes, and written works that fail to "deliver its *promise* of thinking" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 26): the former being lowbrow works, and the latter being the middlebrows' pretentious attempts at literature.

However, Cuddy-Keane argues that Woolf's ultimate antagonist in *Middlebrow* is not "a person, or a group of people, but a whole discursive system […] a masculinized institutional discourse that dogmatically interpellates the reader/listener into its own ideology. In contrast, the letter-essay "Middlebrow" shares with *The Common Reader* a respect for the reader's intelligence and the reader's intellectual needs" (Cuddy-Keane

2003, 31). "Highbrow", "lowbrow", and "common reader" are three distinct terms which overlap at times, but are neither synonyms nor antonyms of each other. They are not socio-cultural categories of people, but rather different approaches to written works; both highbrow and lowbrow literature can be approached "commonly", as much as highbrow works can also be read through the pretentious and stale lenses of academia.

Woolf's critique of middlebrow ideals was thus also a critique of the capitalist middle class, especially in the field of culture, art, and literature. The middle-class and middlebrow author embodied, for Woolf, the traits of an "obnoxious middleman, complicating and muddying the exchange" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 162): the exchange in question being the dialogue between an author and their readers, taking place thanks to the written word. Furthermore, as previously stated in this chapter, Woolf did not think that middlebrow works took any particular efforts in establishing said dialogue, offering instead a monodirectional discourse to a passive reader. In the case of novels in particular, Woolf was critical of how the British class system favoured middle-class writers and hindered the rise of a truly inclusive and democratic cultural landscape. On one extreme of the literary landscape sat the aristocrats who, according to her, rarely wrote novels at all; on the other extreme, stood aspiring working-class writers who, however, ended up facing a class-consciousness crisis: "They are no longer, as they used to be when Chaucer wrote, simply themselves. For it is impossible, it would seem, for working men to write in their own language about their own lives. Such education as the act of writing implies at once makes them self-conscious, or class-conscious, or removes them from their own class" (Woolf [1932] 2003, 124). Therefore, all that remained for the British literary landscape of the early twentieth century, according to Woolf, was the middle-class novelist of success who, however, could not possibly portray life in the rich variety of all its hues.

> The rising novelist is never pestered to come to gin and winkles with the plumber and his wife. His books never bring him into touch with the cat's-meat man, or start a correspondence with the old lady who sells matches and bootlaces by the gate of the British Museum. He becomes rich; he becomes respectable; he buys an evening suit and dines with peers. Therefore, the later works of successful novelists show, if anything, a slight rise in the social scale. We tend to get more and more portraits of the successful and the distinguished (Woolf [1932] 2003, 124).

On this topic, the main criticism that was, and still continues to be, directed toward Virginia Woolf pertains to her very own belonging to a class of privileged, upper-class,

educated people. Woolf denounced the lack of correct representation of the aristocracy as much as the representation of lower classes. Some critics simply never saw past Woolf's own social class and her belonging to the small "élite" cultural circle of Bloomsbury. For example Rose, in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes,* depicted her as disdainful of the ordinary reader and misread *A Room of One's Own* when he claimed that Woolf felt serenely confident "that literary genius could not arise from the working classes" (Rose 2001, 425). Other intellectuals instead criticised Woolf's mere involvement in the debate around working-class intellectualism, as MacCarthy did when reviewing *The Leaning Tower*. His suggestion was that Woolf should have avoided using of the second person plural pronoun "we" in speeches such as the one given at the Workers' Educational Association since, clearly, she did not belong to that crowd of people and thus was not the most suitable spokesperson for them (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 111). Evidently, Virginia Woolf never claimed she was "on the ground" (Woolf 1982, 6:468) with the lower working classes: on the contrary, *Middlebrow* is the prime example that she did claim for herself the appellative of "highbrow". However, this self-identification with the term must not be read as Woolf stating she was an elitist who sought to keep the majority of people outside the gates of culture. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the word "highbrow" gained pejorative meanings with time, which led many to view Woolf as "an isolated, elitist, class snob" (Mills 2016, 219) and, consequently, casting modernist literature as inaccessible for the reading masses. This limiting depiction of reality buried Woolf's own active battle for the democratisation of society and culture. As a matter of fact, Woolf was able to envision cultural possibilities that moved beyond the categorisation of art and literature in "high", "middle", and "lowbrow" genres. While certainly still tied to her own social biases, Virginia Woolf promoted what Cuddy-Keane named "democratic highbrowism". It is a concept based on the idea that "intellectual culture might well be popular in the sense of being open to and generated by subgroups of the whole – a focused interest shared by a mixed group of professional and non-professional people, rather like baseball, or fiddle music, or Tai Chi" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 15). For Virginia Woolf it meant that literary works of a certain degree of intellectual depth could reach outward to the greater reading public; even more, that they should be written to achieve such widespread status in the first place. Her democratic highbrowism was grounded on the concept that it should be the very "common

ground" of which Woolf spoke in *The Leaning Tower*, the cultural zone where the "common" and the "professional" met; it was a vision that surpassed class divisions, based on the core idea that readers of any social standing had the right to access written works no matter how difficult to approach or specialistic they might be. Woolf's democratic highbrowism stood for the freedom any reader has to choose their readings on their own, regardless of all the unsolicited reading advice of those who seek to control their thoughts.

In the end, Woolf's democratic highbrowism remained an ideal; she never claimed that, through her own works, she had managed to achieve it (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 111). It was, however, one of the values which directed her writing career. Democratic highbrowism was a goal; one truly attainable not through the work of a single author, nor at the hands of a restricted society of well-intentioned writers and intellectuals, but only via the involvement of the broader society of common people and common readers.

3.2 Experiences in Pedagogy: The Influence of Morley College on Woolf's Essayistic Style

While perhaps she did not promote a classless society, Woolf did champion "the ideal of a classless, democratic, but intellectual readership" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 2). Woolf's democratic highbrowism was not merely a condescending desire to educate the ignorant, but a real pedagogical project which she viewed as a fundamental step toward the creation of a truly democratic society. Yet, the writing voice that Woolf adopted stood apart from the usual and conventional didactic text that students were provided with at that time. Her essays and articles were, and still are, intellectually challenging while still proving to be accessible and not to exclude the wide reading public of common, unprofessional, readers. Woolf was an intellectual who did not underestimate the intelligence of her readers; the challenging nature of her works is a manifestation of the respect that she bore for them. Thus, as Cuddy-Keane noted, in order to be pedagogical Woolf's democratic highbrowism project "must pose intellectual challenges" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 118).

Now, in order to understand why this project mattered to Woolf to such a great extent, one must examine the world of education as it was during the author's own times, in early twentieth century Britain. In particular, Woolf left plenty of written evidence of her dislike for academic institutions, but she also examined at length the subject of the

so-called "professional education" for the working classes. With regards to the former, Woolf's unfavourable opinion toward academia was certainly influenced by her exclusion from higher education, but it was also part of a broader stance toward the newly established study of English as an academic subject.

> At the beginning of the twentieth century, English was a relative newcomer to the university as an independent discipline. Although the first Chair of English Language and Literature in Britain was established in 1828 at the dissenting University College, London, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, English remained a minor component in the curriculum, entering into university study largely through the newer colleges that were established in Manchester (1850), Leeds (1874), Sheffield (1879), Birmingham (1880), Liverpool (1881), and Nottingham (1881). Since the primary emphasis in these colleges was either technical and scientific or classical and theological, English came into the academy largely in the form of evening extension classes, with attendant assumptions of its peripheral rather than central character. The Merton Chair of English Language and Literature was not established in Oxford until 1885; at Cambridge, the first professorship in English literature finally materialized, after heated debate, in 1911 (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 69).

Therefore, Woolf was not alone in her objections to the entrance of English literature in schools' curricula. However, her reservations were not against the worth of teaching literature, obviously, she criticised the didactics of English, that is the methods of teaching it, and the pedagogical approaches employed to bring literature to learners. "But why teach English? As you say, all one can do is to herd books into groups, and then these submissive young, who are far too frightened and callow to have a bone in their backs, swallow it down; and tie it up; and thus we get English literature into ABC; one, two, three; and lose all sense of what it's about." (Woolf 1979, 5:450) she wrote in 1935 to Julian Bell, who at the time was teaching English in China, at Wuhan University. Not only were these university systems systematically oppressive, limiting people's access to it, but even the academic reading practices they promoted were, according to Woolf, intellectually dulling, if not outright oppressive. In particular, it was the lecture, chief method of teaching in the twentieth century, that was the main target of Virginia Woolf's disapproval. Remarkably ahead of her times, Woolf identified the authoritative gap that characterises a lecture's unequal relational dynamics. She exposed the way society itself used the power difference which subsists between "speaking" and "being spoken to" in order to enforce cultural control through pedagogy and education itself (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 92). Woolf was fighting a cultural battle in defence of democratic freedoms; in this sense, even the liberty to read for pure passion was being threatened by institutionalised literary education, as she remarked in *Hours in a Library*. Furthermore, Woolf questioned

the lecture's "results" on both the production and the consumption of contemporary literature. In *Craftsmanship,* originally a BBC broadcast aired on April 29th 1937, she expressed the belief that studying and reviewing English literature did not add to the capacity of people to write it and read it compared to "four hundred years ago when we were unlectured, uncriticized, untaught" (Woolf 1966a, 249). Yet again her words must be read carefully: Woolf here was not stating that studying English cannot help people improve their writing and reading comprehension skills, but was instead emphasising the importance of natural, instinctual critical skills. Finally, Woolf's criticism of the British university system also focused on the individuals responsible for having made it what it was: the professors, the teachers, and the lecturers. In a remarkable diary entry from Saturday 26 October 1940, she sketched a portrait of how she saw them:

> "The complete Insider" – I have just coined this title to express my feeling towards George Trevelyan; who has been made Master of Trinity: whose history of England I began after tea (throwing aside Michelet vol. 15 with a glorious sense of my own free & easiness in reading now). Herbert Fisher is another. So (with a "perhaps") is Maynard. They are Romans not Greeks. I like outsiders better. Insiders write a colourless English. They are turned out by the University machine. I respect them. Father was one variety. I don't love them. I don't savour them. Insiders are the glory of the 19th century. They do a great service like Roman roads. But they avoid the forests & the will 'o the wisps (Woolf 1985, 5:333).

In these lines, Woolf summarised much of her critical thoughts on literature, its pedagogy, and its reading practices in general: her metaphor opposes dry writing efficacy against artistic self-discovery practices. The "roads" are a representation of the 19th century academic style: developed by experts eager to teach pupils their vision of literature, it approaches a text with the purpose of finding its ultimate meaning. It is an encyclopaedic style whose usefulness is undiscussed. Yet Woolf preferred the whimsy of the fairy fires and the lyricism of Greek poetry. This is a method of writing and reading which defends the right of the reader/traveller to get lost in the text, to choose the meandering path, to take wrong turns and, in doing so, making the discovery of literature their own.

Woolf, like many other intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century, perceived that a mechanical, passionless pedagogy of literature would turn legitimately curious "common readers" into students focused only on fact memorisation with the sole purpose of obtaining academic prestige. Woolf had strong concerns that the academicization of literature would sever the intimate relationship that a text establishes between an author and their readers, even more so in the case of works by renowned

authors from the past. Furthermore, the birth of the figure of the "student reader" was evidence of the twentieth century trend of the professionalisation of reading. The student is no common reader, which is intrinsically "non-academic" (Halsey 2011, 70). At the time, the linking of literature with higher education risked conveying the message that it was an activity practicable only within the walls of academia; that it was exclusive only to the kind of privileged people who could afford to attend a university, and that the forms of reading performed there were inherently superior to those practised by the majority of the British population in its free time. According to Woolf, all of this could lead to the loss, within the literary marketplace, of the ordinary reader, who would be discouraged by a misleading depiction of reading and of literature as a pursuit beyond their intellectual reach. Woolf's accusations become even more focused on social issues when they regard the forms of education meant for working class individuals. As Daugherty has noted in *Teaching Woolf/Woolf Teaching*, in Virginia Woolf's time British society was still struggling with the concept that the lower classes too deserved an education, in particular one that went beyond the basis of maths and English that were taught in primary schools. The upper classes struggled to conceive how educated workers could bring improvements to both society and the economy. One must not forget that, at the time, Britain was still a global empire, and imperialistic, colonising tendencies were precisely what Woolf criticised the most when it came to public education. All forms of formal education are a system by definition, but the intentional presence of socially manipulative features was what Woolf condemned the most in the education meant for workers. It had been created with the intention of controlling the people of a vast empire and it discouraged social mobility and the questioning of the system itself (Daugherty 2004, 284). The ultimate critique of such manipulative pedagogy is embodied in the character of Septimus Smith from Woolf's most famous novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf described Septimus as perhaps even too much in love with literature and, by metonymy, with his teacher Miss Pole. However, it was precisely the ideal of an "England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square" (Woolf [1925] 1963, 95) which pushed Septimus to enlist as a volunteer during the First Word War (Godfrey 2006, 179); education in *Mrs. Dalloway* is thus represented as "both manipulative and destructive" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 85).

Surprising as it might be for a writer to criticise education, Woolf had developed such an opinion after her own experience of teaching at Morley Memorial College for Working Men and Women. Morley College, still existing today, was established by Emma Cons in 1889 thanks to the endowment of Samuel Morley, an entrepreneur, politician, and philanthropist; located in Waterloo Road, its first classes were held in the backstage of the Old Vic Theatre. Woolf taught there from 1905 to 1907: she was young, she did not have any professional teaching title and her schooling had been informal. Still, she held courses in history, literature, and composition, but refused to teach grammar (Daugherty 2004, 276). Virginia Woolf's classes had between four to eight students (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 82), all working adults, both men and women. Despite teaching there for a relatively short period of time, the experience left an impression on Woolf: for the first time, she had stepped out her class boundaries to interact with people outside her social circles, and was struck by her students' hunger for knowledge despite the material limitations that came with their social class. In all probability, it was at Morley that Woolf realised for the first time that the propension for intellectuality could be found equally in people from all walks of life. Talking with one student in particular, Miss Williams, Woolf was confronted with the less-than-ideal reality of the world of professional writing. Miss Williams worked for a newspaper that put her under so much pressure to quickly write articles and book reviews that she could barely read the book she was reviewing; she complained about feeling "mechanised" by her job, devoid of the ability to express her own truthful opinions (Daugherty 2004, 278). Woolf thus came to the conclusion that, for the lower social classes, both access to literature and the opportunity to produce it were strongly limited by their material circumstances: they were certainly eager to engage with it, but the mere fact of needing to work for most of their day left them without the time to do so. This, without even taking into account that most of these people felt deep discomfort when approaching literature because they had internalised society's message that their lack of expertise in it was an insurmountable obstacle (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 83).

Given this, one wonders whether Woolf herself ever felt a sense of unease in teaching her classes at Morley College. There is no negating Woolf belonged to the upper class and, even if being a woman did subject her to forms of discrimination, she still benefited from various forms of privilege. Woolf might have never fully realised that she was promoting a pedagogical strategy that hinged on reading in large amounts to students

whose life hardly gave them the time for it. Beth Rigel Daugherty in *Teaching Woolf/Woolf Teaching* observed that, before her experience at Morley College, Woolf had hardly had any meaningful interaction with the working classes and their lives, nor did she know anything of what educational bases the public system had provided them with (Daugherty 2004, 288). Yet, Woolf made efforts to connect with her students and to understand them. She began from what they had in common: a passion for learning but adverse opportunities to do so, and the resulting patchwork of pieced-together intellectual notions both she and the Morley students had. Woolf's own lack of formal schooling was what she had the most in common with her students. According to Daugherty,

> Virginia Stephen is not pretending when she identifies with her students or sees how different material circumstances might have made them more like her (or vice versa?). Real similarities did exist between her education and theirs: education begun at home, irregular, and narrow in some way; education dependent on one's own initiative, motivation, and discipline; education fragmented and often interrupted (Daugherty 2004, 290).

As a matter of fact, in a 1940 letter to Benedict Nicolson, Woolf recalls how she had "tried to share the fruits of that very imperfect education" (Woolf 1982, 6:419) which she had received with her students at Morley College. Consequently, Woolf's teaching strategy hinged on sharing her passion for books and literature. It was atypical for the time: she borrowed books from the library, prepared handouts, took her students on field trips, and encouraged discussion within the classrooms (Daugherty 2004, 289), an approach that anticipates her essayistic style. As seen from the letter to Benedict Nicolson, the topic of education is one Woolf revisited even later in her life, decades after her brief teaching experience at Morley College. It stayed with her, influencing the writing of essays such as *The Leaning Tower* and *Why?*

The Leaning Tower, as already discussed, is the written form of a speech that Woolf gave to the Brighton Workers' Educational Association in 1940; *Why?* instead is an article that Woolf wrote in 1934 for a magazine called *Lysistrata*, published by the students at Somerville, the Oxford women's college. Both these texts were specifically meant for an audience of students belonging outside the traditional higher education system. Cuddy-Keane's analysis of the communicative strategies of the two texts is illuminating:

> In both works, Woolf tried to offer interactive exchange as opposed to authoritarian instruction. But while neither essay adopts the conventional lecturer's tone, Woolf

> employs her subversive alternative discourse differently for each group. Titles are often good indicators of approach. *Why?* conveys a predominantly interrogative mode; *The Leaning Tower* reflects the development of an extended metaphor. […] Woolf "performs" more radically for her university audience than she does for the WEA. *Why?* subjects the reader to a barrage of questions whereas *The Leaning Tower* guides its audience smoothly through a well-articulated argument (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 96–97).

Why?, in particular, encourages its readers to question the pedagogical method of the lecture. Ideally Woolf sought a university system which empowered students to discuss with their professors without fearing their authority. The 1934 article laments the status-quo of higher education practices that might as well have been "the death and burial of English literature" (Woolf 1966b, 282) because they were unable to establish a productive and creative conversation around it.

The Leaning Tower instead struggled more, as a text, with a tone that was perceived as being too similar to that of a lecture. Perhaps it was the significant difference in social background between Woolf and her audience that led to this. As mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter, Woolf's attempt to reduce this gap by calling for social unity and employing the pronoun "we" throughout the text was criticised by the intellectual circles of the time. Woolf herself recorded that the speech had not achieved the effects she had hoped for: she wrote as much to Vita Sackville-West the very day after the event, on April 28. However, Woolf attributed the mild reception of the speech to the fact that there were too many "middlebrows" in the audience, or perhaps that the working-class people had been manipulated so much by the middlebrows that they had lost their drive to argue (Woolf 1982, 6:394).

Although *The Leaning Tower* might not be the most evidently successful product of an essayistic pedagogical text meant for the greater public of "common readers", Woolf owed many of her communication skills to the years spent teaching at Morley College. While technically Woolf's first literary public, the readers of her book reviews, predates her students at Morley, those working-class adults offered what newspaper readers could not give: immediate feedback. Undoubtedly, as Beth Rigel Daugherty has noted, the pedagogical experience at the Old Vic Theatre directly influenced Woolf's formative years as a critic and essay writer and "reverberate[d] throughout her career" (Daugherty 2004, 291), influencing her critical style, as can be clearly seen in the two volumes of *The Common Reader*. *Teaching Woolf/Woolf Teaching* argues that these collections of essays are structured around a pedagogical model, and it is known that Woolf wrote them with

the intention of introducing the greater reading public to English Literature: "The tables of contents look suspiciously like course syllabi. Woolf uses chronology, historical essays written specifically the volumes, […] she provides lists, summaries, and definitions; in addition, she encourages access by frequently using biography, autobiography, diaries, and/or letters; and she uses literary allusions in ways that include rather than exclude the reader" (Daugherty 2004, 292). Thus, Morley College was essential in the shaping of Woolf's ability to write for a general, "common" readership, so much so that Daugherty claims that the figure of the "common reader" sketched in the brief essay by the same title owes much to the intellectual characteristics Woolf saw in her own students. Some of Virginia Woolf's essays are evidently pedagogical in nature: *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* and *How Should One Read a Book?,* for example, but also *A Room of One's Own* and *Professions for Women.* And *The Voyage Out* is, among Woolf's novels, perhaps the one that presents more clearly a pedagogical subtext. Still, even the rest of her essayistic production aims to create a shared intellectual space much like that of a classroom; one where the lecturer sits on the "common ground" with their students. Above all, in her non-fiction texts, Woolf acknowledged the presence of the reader and respected the value of their opinions; Woolf wrote each of her essays to be a conversation rather than a lecture, hoping they would ignite reflections and debate within their reading public. In her critical pieces, she used captivating facts and arguments to interest her "common readers" in the history of literature and to motivate them to pursue literary knowledge even after they had finished reading the *Common Reader* volumes. Ultimately, Woolf's "conversational" essayistic style, even in her critical works, is not only as worthy of respect as any other academic text, but is also deliberately designed to be so: Woolf believed conversation to be an optimal pedagogical strategy, in contrast with the university teaching methods of her times. Thus, the roots of Virginia Woolf's essays are inherently pedagogical in nature and can be considered the source of Woolf's characteristically dialogical style.

Chapter IV – Virginia Woolf's Woman Reader in the Literary Marketplace

4.1 "Ladies' clothes and aristocrats playing golf don't affect my style": Woolf Among Women Readers and Editors

To Virginia Woolf writing essays always entailed knowing whom she was writing for (Woolf [1925] 2002, 118). With her non-fiction Woolf had a clearer sense of her target audience than she had with her novels, this because most of her essayistic production were articles, reviews, and speeches which she was commissioned to write by magazines such as the *Times Literary Supplement*. In fact, as analysed in chapter one of this thesis, Woolf learnt from her early experiences in journalism the skill of tailoring her writing style to the intended readership of each of her texts. Seen how Woolf has been championed by the field of Women Studies since the 1970s as one of the greatest feminist writers (Silver 1999, 13), one may pose the question of whether writing for a specifically female readership had an influence on her.

First of all, it is undoubtable that Woolf had a female reading public for her essays. Simple proof of that is the existence of *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf's most famous essay and one of the most celebrated feminist texts of the twentieth century; but of course, *Three Guineas* and the bundle of response letters from readers (Snaith 2000) are also testament to it, as well as the fact that several of Woolf's essays and articles were written primarily, if not exclusively, for audiences of women. In this respect one can identify a series of essays, articles, and reviews which were composed for periodicals catering specifically to female audiences or as lectures to a public of women. Chronologically, one of the first of such text bears not Woolf's signature but Marjorie Strachey's: it is *Lysistrata,* a review of a modern adaptation of Aristophanes' play written for *The Englishwoman* in November 1910, which scholars have later re-attributed to Woolf (Romero Mariscal 2012, 8 n. 5). *The Plumage Bill* (1920), *Vision & Design* (1921), and *A Letter to a Lady in Paraguay* (1922) were all written for the *Woman's Leader*, a vigorously feminist periodical of those years; *Memories of a Working Women's Guild* was initially written, in 1930, for the *Yale Review*, but it was then revised to become the introduction to Margaret Llewelyn Davies' *Life as We Have Known It* (1931); as previously mentioned in chapter three of this dissertation, *Why?* was written for *Lysistrata*, the magazine published by the girls of Somerville college. In the case of texts

which originated from speeches, of course *A Room of One's Own* stands out: its initial genesis was as two lectures on "women and fiction" delivered on 20 and 26 October 1928 at Newnham and Girton, two women's colleges in Cambridge. The first intended audience *How Should One Read a Book?* was also the public of girls at Hayes Court Common school (Daugherty 1998, 123), and *Professions for Women* was a speech delivered to the *Women's Service League* in 1931. Virginia Woolf also published articles on some of the most famous magazines for women both of hers and our age. Within her lifetime, Woolf contributed five articles to the British edition of Vogue: *Indiscretions* (November 1924), *George Moore* (June 1925), *The Tale of Genji* (July 1925), *The Life of John Mytton* (March 1926), and *A Professor of Life* (May 1926, later republished in *The Captain's Death Bed* under the title *Walter Raleigh*). One essay was written with *Eve*'s public in mind, *The Waxworks at the Abbey* (May 1928), although it was also published the *New Republic* (Wood 2020, 155–56). While the six essays posthumously collected in *The London Scene* were commissioned to her by the British version of *Good Housekeeping* magazine, between 1931 and 1932.

Their literary content of the essays published on *Vogue* might seem surprising. The most famous fashion magazine in the world, *Vogue* asked renowned novelist Virginia Woolf to write about Murasaki Shikibu, in the same issue in which it most likely advertised lipsticks, hats, and gossiped about the habits of the celebrities of the "roaring 20's". In *Vogue*, Woolf published her respectful critique of Walter Raleigh. This highly literary and artistic cultural content was, however not unusual for the British periodical, especially not between 1922 and 1926, when its local editor was Dorothy Todd; notably, all of the aforementioned Woolf's articles were published under her editorship (Wood 2020, 4). Todd intentionally sought to expand the cultural section of the magazine: she gave more space to book reviews, she introduced signed articles by famous writers and personalities, and she celebrated contemporary visual artists. Furthermore, as Alice Wood remarks, there were real, even personal, social and economic ties between *Vogue*, Bloomsbury, and modernist circles at the time (Wood 2020, 29, 86-87): in those years, *Vogue* became a formidable "promotional vehicle for Bloomsbury artists and writers" (Wood 2020, 149).

Woolf never held back the practical and monetary concerns of being a professional writer: "of the two – the [women's] vote and the money – the money, I own, seemed

infinitely the more important" (Woolf [1929] 1977, 37), she stated in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf knew that freedom derived from independence and that, alas, in a modern capitalist world independence is the daughter of money. It should not surprise then to find that Woolf agreed to write six essays for *Good Housekeeping*, considering that the fee they paid for each, £50, was conspicuously higher than what *New Statesman and Nation* and the *Times Literary Supplement* usually offered her for an article (Wood 2020, 111). After all, as famously elaborated in *A Room of One's Own*, intellectual genius and the production of literary works that could stand the test of time depend "upon material things" (Woolf [1929] 1977, 103). Of course, Woolf considered herself "the only woman in England free to write" what she liked (Woolf 1981, 3:42–43), because she recognised that some of the circumstances of her life gave her a serious advantage over her contemporaries as far as freedom of expression was involved. In *A Room of One's Own,* but of course in her private writings too, Woolf admits the £2500 inheritance from her aunt had great positive impact over the launch of her career as a novelist: "Caroline Emilia's legacy meant that she would not have to keep penny-pinching through reviewing, and in 1909, with that added financial security, she began her first novel, *The Voyage Out*", states Juliet Dusinberre (1997, 27). This sum and the novels it allowed Woolf to write further resulted in Virginia and Leonard Woolf seizing "the means of production" (Dusinberre 1997, 38) and establishing the Hogarth Press, with the main goal of having almost absolute control over her literary production.

But, in the context of commissioned articles, Woolf's foresight did not stop at money: one of the reasons she was most glad to write for Vogue was that the magazine could offer her fame and social recognition: "Vogue, (via Dadie) is going to take up Mrs Woolf, to boom her: &—&—&— So very likely this time next year I shall be one of those people who […] know everyone worth knowing. I can just see what he [father] meant; just imagine being in that position—if women can be" (Woolf 1978, 2:319). Considering Woolf's hostility toward mass consumption of art and middlebrow values, such emotions, expressed in private, could be interpreted as contradictory. But, as has been pointed out (Wood 2020, 178–79), the idea of a stark opposition between modernism and mass culture, epitomised by Huyssen's *After the Great Divide* (1988), was in fact "gendering the binary in a way that is problematic for a feminist intellectual like Virginia Woolf" (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 3). Woolf certainly cared little about such personal

inconsistencies. Instead, her literary production is rich with opposing stances: she wrote her essays to be elusive and meandering, often refusing to pass definitive judgments both on literary and social matters, preferring instead the juxtaposition of opposing points of view. Furthermore, context and circumstances mattered enormously. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a female artist's economic worries were deeply different from her male counterparts, and it can be argued that preoccupations with the purity of art were a remarkably male concern. In fact, in 1925, Virginia Woolf became engaged in debate with Logan Pearsall Smith, an American essayist and critic: "He says one must write only for the Lit. Supplement and the Nation and Robert Bridges and prestige and posterity and to set a high example […] What he wants is prestige: what I want, money" (Woolf 1977, 3:154). Smith could conceive writing under commission as a worthy practice only when it was collocated in a "high", renowned literary context, and he was hardly alone in his prejudices. Historically, even figures such as Sidney and Donne, whom Woolf admired, "would both have scorned the notion of writing for money as the debasing activity of the hack" (Dusinberre 1997, 7). The previously mentioned aunt Caroline Emilia Stephen also scolded her "for 'journalism'" recounted a young Woolf, "She thinks I am going to sell my soul for gold, which I should willingly do for gold enough, and wants me to write a solid historical work!! People do take themselves so seriously" (Woolf 1975, 1:165). Woolf, instead, valued all her journalistic works, the doors they opened to her, and the lessons they taught her. I do not mean to imply that Woolf never wished writing could be free from monetary concerns and from the controlling power of editors: she truly loved literature, but did not think being a starving artist would have done her any good. Among male critics and literary peers, she both allowed herself to disdain commercial "middlebrow" literature and necessarily had to conform to her colleagues' literary discriminations. However, in the context of publications edited by women, and addressed to other women, the rules of the game changed: perhaps Woolf felt that to women she could express opinions that would have provoked negative reactions in a general, mix-gender public; or perhaps she considered fundamental to speak frankly and pragmatically to other women who shared with her dreams of independence (Dusinberre 1997, 2, 9).

Ultimately, Virginia Woolf did not think that writing for commercial women's magazines diminished her cultural capital: on the contrary, Alice Wood's analysis in *Modernism and Modernity in British Women's Magazines* concluded that the implicit

pact between commercial magazines and modernist writers was highly profitable (monetarily and socially) for both parties involved. Furthermore, as Woolf reported Duncan Grant saying, “if Bloomsbury has real pearls, they can be scattered anywhere without harm” (Woolf 1977, 3:158), meaning that true artistic value does not shatter at the contact with everyday reality and its consumable goods.

4.2 A Literary Public of her Own – Woolf Between Feminism and Androgyny

All considered, the texts Woolf wrote specifically for a female readership represent a minority among the totality of her essayistic production. There is something to be said about Virginia Woolf's androgynous tendencies in her writings. In the complex landscape of a young feminism, Woolf fought all her life to be regarded as one of English literature's most famous authors, not authoresses (Fernald 2005, 159). She was well-aware of the scope of her skills and feared that publicizing herself as a great female writer would have meant settling for a smaller prize than the one she rightfully deserved. Her understandable reluctance to present herself as feminine (whatever this word might mean to today's society) transpires in her works, even those that are regarded as most feminist. For example, in *Three Guineas* Woolf dismissed the term “feminism” as a word full of conflictual connotations and whose usefulness had expired

> What more fitting than to destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete? The word “feminist” is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means “one who champions the rights of women.” Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. And a word without a meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word. Let us therefore celebrate this occasion by cremating the corpse […] The word “feminist” is destroyed; the air is cleared; and in that clearer air what do we see? Men and women working together for the same cause (Woolf [1938] 2014, 145).

But such positioning also manifests itself in more subtle and indirect ways: as Nadia Fusini remarked in *Woolf A-Z,* “Si noti, Virginia non dice ‘a room of *her* own’, una stanza tutta *per lei*, ma ‘of one's own’” (Fusini 2021, 256). Even in the text that later became the most celebrated for its feminism, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf did not limit herself to speak to a solely female audience; she did not “gender” the language of the title. There are several instances in her essays where Woolf seemed reticent to use feminine pronouns. For example, in *The Common Reader* she always referred to her ideal reader with the

masculine pronoun “he”. However, Juliet Dusinberre argues that “the male pronoun, 'he', masks the true identity of the new common reader. She is a woman. The gender transformation is clear in the original draft for the Preface, entitled *Byron and Mr Briggs*” (Dusinberre 1997, 12). Still, while Woolf’s common reader does in fact possess “feminine” qualities, the fact remains that Woolf chose to use masculine pronouns to denote her common reader. Most likely, her choice to do so in this essay, as in others, was not shaped by some deep-rooted, subconscious sexism, rather she probably employed masculine pronouns as the then-common and established neutral way to refer to any possible reader, in the very same way even twenty-first century texts today still often employ “a man” to mean “a person” despite it not being acceptable anymore (Merritt and Kok 1995, 145–46). The practice of adjusting the pronoun usage depending on the intended audience is in fact somewhat recent (Pauwels 2003) as is, in general, the wide-spread awareness that a writer should not assume its primary reader to be a man. Woolf certainly did not assume that her “common reader” was necessarily a man, but she was nonetheless conscious that a larger part of her readership, especially when it came to literary essays, was male.

But the “woman common reader” did exist; in particular, when it comes to the two *Common Reader* books, Woolf’s project of making literature accessible clearly aligns itself with her awareness of how much women suffered from the exclusion from academic and “high” literary spaces. Virginia Woolf’s “common reader” identity is thus multi-faceted and made of contributions from different parts of the twentieth century British society. It is not a perfect amalgamation, but rather a landscape dotted with a rich and diverse flora. In such a landscape, women brought specific skills and sensibilities, which often went against the reading practices celebrated by traditional literary criticism. “A woman reader does not start with high authorities, but converses with the writer, creating dialogues in the place of an authoritarian discourse” (Dusinberre 1997, 14). Dusinberre also notes how “In her search for common readers not educated in a male classical tradition she recover[ed] and create[d] women readers” (Dusinberre 1997, 16). In turn, this tradition of literary forebearers influenced her essayistic form: Virginia Woolf appropriated stylistic choices at which the male literary tradition had always scorned in what *de facto* was a form of literary sexism. The critiques she received for her impressionistic style originated from a masculine bias against emotions and feelings

within the field of academic analysis: rigorous reasonings and detailed arguments – a much longed-for ‘objectivity’ – were instead preferred. When in 1929 Arnold Bennett stated, reviewing *A Room of One's Own*, that Woolf was “the victim of her extraordinary gift of fancy” (quoted in Majumdar and McLaurin 2003, 259), it was not a compliment: fancy was the opposite of reason, Woolf was criticised for not “thinking”, but rather “daydreaming”.

One other frequent concern, of Virginia Woolf as of many of her female contemporaries, was avoiding the accusations of being too “personal” with their writings (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 32) rather than being objective, especially in the field of social critique. As Woolf was compiling *The Common Reader,* she asked herself “Do I write essays about myself?” (Woolf 1978, 2:248): this was considered a feminine thing to do. Woolf's very personal way of approaching literary essays is a valuable distinguishing feature of her style, but in the early twentieth century (despite the great number of female novelists that populated Britain at the time) women were still chiefly seen and celebrated as authors of private letters and diaries. This view was still so prevalent, that even Woolf's most intimate friends assured her that one day she would go down in history as a great letter-writer (Dusinberre 1997, 94); furthermore, even Woolf recommended to her fellow women writers to avoid being too personal in their works, as attested by her 1933 letter to Ethel Smyth (Woolf 1979, 5:194–95). Even if Montaigne's art, the “essai”, was conceived rich in personal anecdotes and reflections, when Woolf did the same in her works she felt the stern judgement of a patriarchal society weighing on her.

In the end, it can be said that Virginia Woolf always predilected writing her essays with a broad, general intended readership in mind, preferring to adopt the stance of an androgynous intellectual first and foremost, instead of being accused of belonging to “that damn mob of scribbling women” (Hawthorne 1855, quoted in Frederick 1975, 231). This was Woolf's personal struggle with femininity, and while it is not necessary at all to be a woman to be a feminist, she was perhaps less of a feminist writer than how Women Studies researchers made her look in the 1970s and 1980s (Boileau 2020). In the end, Woolf's preferred intended audience for her essays was wide-ranging, non-specific, and varied in kind. This, not because she did not care to write for women, but because she valued writing for everyone, without exceptions: she wrote for men and women, as she wrote for the upper and lower classes of British twentieth century society; she wrote for

her fellow English-people, as well as anyone who would read her from abroad, and she wrote for contemporaneity as much as for posterity. Her vision of her own literary public was a unifying one, rooted in her belief in democracy. Woolf's common reader was the anonymous anyone in the crowd, that only needs to pick up one of her books and read it to join the community of her readers.

Summary in Italian

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) non fu solo una scrittrice di romanzi, ma anche una saggista prolifica, con più di cinquecento saggi scritti nel corso della sua carriera. Fu proprio così che, nel 1904, la sua carriera ebbe inizio: pubblicando recensioni letterarie e brevi articoli su giornali come il *The Guardian, The National Review, The Time Literary Supplement, The Speaker, Vogue,* e il *Nation and Athenaeum.* Pur quando si affermò nella scena letteraria come una delle più prominenti autrici di romanzi della sua epoca, Woolf non smise mai di produrre opere di saggistica, tra cui molte di critica e teoria letteraria.

Gli inizi non furono privi di frustrazioni (Woolf 1975, 1:154), ma furono altrettanto decisivi nella sua formazione professionale e nello svilupparsi della sua capacità di adattare il proprio stile di scrittura a seconda del pubblico letterario di una data pubblicazione (Daugherty, 2010, 30). Inoltre, quest'esperienza fu per Woolf occasione di riflessioni sul mercato letterario, come quelle espresse ne "*Il Committente e il Croco"* (1924) e in *Recensire* (1939). Entrambi i saggi sono frutto dalle esperienze che Woolf ebbe nel corso della sua carriera giornalistica. Il primo riflette su l'importanza del pubblico di lettori per lo scrittore, mentre il secondo discute, tra i vari argomenti, l'aspetto economico del mercato dei libri e come ciò ne influenzi la sua struttura e i meccanismi intrinsechi. Di fatto, nel corso della sua carriera critica Woolf non si limitò a scrivere saggi su scrittori del passato, ma ragionò molto anche su argomenti di teoria letteraria pura. Ad esempio, Woolf rifletté sulla pratica della lettura, scrivendone in saggi come *La lettura* (1919), *Rileggere* (1922), *Del non Sapere il Greco* (1925), e *Come Dobbiamo Leggere un Libro*? (1926).

Non stupisce dunque, che il titolo delle due sole collezioni di saggi critici che ebbe modo di pubblicare in vita sia *Il Lettore Comune* (1925) e *Il Lettore Comune: Seconda Serie* (1932). Il titolo trae ispirazione da un passo di *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* di Samuel Johnson (1779) che Woolf stessa riporta nel saggio di apertura a il *Lettore Comune,* dipingendolo come una tipologia di lettore intrinsecamente non-professionale, al contrario: un lettore poco accurato, superficiale, ma che sia Johnson che Woolf credevano potesse offrire un contributo essenziale allo sviluppo del canone letterario.

Critici diversi hanno dato interpretazioni differenti al termine "lettore comune". Richard Altick lo contestualizzò in un discorso di classe, vedendolo come un lettore di

classe sociale bassa; ma quest'interpretazione è stata poi messa in discussione da critici come Halsey, la quale reputa che il termine si riferisca principalmente a livelli di competenza nella lettura (2011, 69). Riferendoci nello specifico alla produzione letteraria di Woolf, Lee (2007, 414-415) è d'accordo nel non darne un'interpretazione troppo legata al discorso di classe, mentre Madison (1981, 62) sostiene che il "lettore comune" del titolo fosse, principalmente, Woolf stessa e che, con i suoi due volumi, essa volesse promulgare e giustificare le sue proprie modalità di lettura e il suo modo di condurre critica letteraria.

Rimane comunque importante discutere dell'identità "reale", sociale, del "lettore comune"; Woolf doveva aver avuto in mente un pubblico specifico mentre scriveva *Il Lettore Comune*. Inoltre, come ricordano Brosnan (1997, 41) e Collier (2010, 152), bisogna tenere a mente le origini giornalistiche dei saggi presenti nelle due raccolte: è possibile che l'identità del pubblico letterario di Woolf sia da cercare proprio in questo contesto di mezzi di comunicazione di massa. Testimonianza tangibile di questi lettori può essere trovata nella corrispondenza privata di Virginia Woolf, in particolare nelle *"Three Guineas" Letters* rivenute da Anna Snaith. Tra i mittenti di queste lettere, ben quarantanove erano "fan" di Woolf, persone a lei completamente estranee che nonostante ciò intrapresero la decisione di scriverle e alle quali possiamo supporre, vista la cura con cui sono state conservate le lettere, che Woolf abbia risposto. Questa raccolta di scritti offre inoltre un'occasione per riflettere sull'accessibilità ai testi letterari e dei testi letterari, un argomento di teoria letteraria e sociale su cui Woolf rifletté spesso nei suoi saggi.

Fondamentale, per inquadrare la saggistica di Woolf, è contestualizzarla all'interno del dibatto culturale che ebbe luogo nella società britannica di inizio novecento, meglio conosciuto come "The Battle of Brows", che ebbe il suo apice nell'ottobre 1932. L'avvento dei nuovi mass media, tra cui la radio e il cinema, risvegliò nei circoli intellettuali una certa inquietudine in merito a come essi, insieme ai più tradizionali mezzi del giornalismo e dei libri, potessero essere strumenti per influenzare le masse. Si dibatteva di quale ruolo l'intellettuale dovesse avere nella società moderna, e lo si faceva ricorrendo ai termini "highbrow", "lowbrow" e, successivamente, "middlebrow". Questi termini, letteralmente designanti l'altezza della fronte di una persona, indicavano tre tipologie diverse di cultura più o meno d'élite o popolare.

L'intervento più rilevante che Woolf fece in questo dibattito fu una lettera mai inviata al capo redattore dello *New Stateman and Nation*, pubblicata dopo la morte di Woolf come *Middlebrow*. Nel saggio, l'autrice si scaglia contro l'omonima categoria di persone denunciandone le attitudini manipolative nei confronti della grande massa di lettori. Gli intellettuali "middlebrow" scoraggiano i propri lettori dall'usare il pensiero indipendente e non sono intenzionati a instaurarci un dialogo. L'intellettuale "middlebrow", secondo Woolf, era rimosso dal contatto con il popolo dei "lettori comuni", persino più di quanto non lo fossero le élite letterarie.

Woolf stessa ricevette ampie critiche per il suo stato di "highbrow" e di donna appartenente alla classe medio-alta della società britannica. Molti la ritenevano una "snob" rimossa dalla vita reale delle classi operaie, nonostante i suoi numerosi tentativi di oltrepassare le barriere di classe e di stabilire contatti con persone al di fuori del suo circolo sociale. Uno di questi tentativi fu il breve periodo d'insegnamento al Morley Memorial College for Working Men and Women svoltosi tra il 1905 e il 1907. Questa esperienza, unitamente all'esclusione dall'educazione formale all'università, è alla base delle opinioni che Woolf elaborò in merito al sistema scolastico britannico, in particolare riguardo l'istruzione per adulti e il mondo accademico. Woolf ebbe modo di vedere come il sistema scolastico era discriminatorio nei confronti delle donne e delle classi operaie, di come trasformava la letteratura in un passivo "ABC" (Woolf 1979, 5:450) da imparare a memoria, e di come esso fosse sistemicamente imperialista e colonizzatore. Woolf, già a inizio Novecento, aveva identificato la differenza di potere che sussiste tra i ruoli di "lecturer" e di studente. Woolf invece aspirava al raggiungimento di un "terreno comune", dove chi parla (o scrive) sia allo stesso livello della propria audience perché essi la rispetta. Di fatto questo è lo stile saggistico di Woolf: pedagogico ma anche accattivante, personale, caratterizzato dal rispetto per l'intelligenza del lettore e dalla volontà di stabilire un dialogo creativo con esso.

Infine, in merito all'identità del "lettore comune" di Virginia Woolf, è necessario considerarne un aspetto in particolare: quello femminile. Dagli anni '70 del Novecento in poi, Woolf è stata resa un'icona femminista, anche se forse questo non sarebbe un titolo che Woolf avrebbe adottato per sé stessa (Woolf [1938] 2014, 145). In questo ambito, ci si può chiedere se scrivere saggistica per pubblici specificatamente femminili influenzasse Woolf e se si possano riscontrare particolari differenze tra le opinioni

espresse in questo tipo di saggi e quelle che compaiono in scritti rivolti a un pubblico più generale e di genere misto. Questi testi scritti per un pubblico esclusivamente di lettrici si possono ritrovare tra gli articoli che Woolf scrisse per magazines femminili, come *Vogue* e *Good Housekeeping*, e tra le "lectures" che Woolf dette davanti a pubblici di donne.

Nel contesto di una scrittura intesa per un pubblico di donne, si nota come Woolf esprimesse, esplicitamente o implicitamente, opinioni diverse rispetto a quelle dichiarate a pubblici che comprendevano anche lettori uomini. L'aspetto della sussistenza economica di uno scrittore fu, in particolare, un tema di cui Woolf ne parlò spesso alle sue audience femminili. Al tempo stesso, va riconosciuto come Woolf, durante la sua carriera, abbia messo in atto diverse strategie per evitare di essere considerata semplicemente una "donna scrittrice" (Fernald 2006, 159) da parte della critica letteraria, prevalentemente maschile, della sua epoca. Di certo Virginia Woolf aveva a cuore il pubblico femminile, ma con la stessa attitudine con cui si dedicava al suo pubblico di "common readers" omnicomprensivo e inclusivo di persone di vario genere e classe sociale.

In conclusione, il pubblico di lettori dei saggi di Virginia Woolf era molto vasto, visto il successo editoriale dei due *The Common Reader* (Lee 2010, 91), e eterogeneo nella sua composizione socio-culturale. In oltre, nel corso della sua carriera, Woolf dovette imparare a calibrare la propria scrittura in funzione di ciascuna specifica *audience* a cui si stava rivolgendo. Non deve quindi sorprendere se Woolf possa sembrare una figura contradditoria. Non solo cambiò opinione su vari argomenti letterari e sociali con il passare del tempo, ma anche i pensieri che esprimeva nei suoi scritti dipendevano da chi stesse visualizzando come target di lettori in un dato contesto. Per Woolf, come per ogni autore, la critica letteraria dovrebbe considerare che il "lettore" non è un'entità monolitica, ma raccoglie in sé un insieme di moltitudini (Pratt 1986, 61). Questo è particolarmente vero, poi, per testi ideati per pubblicazioni di massa come giornali e magazine, come nel caso della maggior parte dei saggi di Virginia Woolf. Woolf non scriveva per un "common reader", ma per dei "common readers": una categoria che comprendeva in parte uguale sia intellettuali che lavoratori, che donne di vari ceti sociali, e chiunque si identificasse con l'idea di "outsider" di Woolf.

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