

Discussing the  
relationship between  
gender and genre in  
"Orlando: a  
biography"



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Virginia Woolf, born in 1882, is regarded as one of the first and most important modern feminist writers. In *Orlando: A Biography*, she tackles and bends the concepts of gender roles and gender identity and, on the other hand, deals with the subject of biography and novels. Woolf's work was innovative at the time, as it defied the Victorian values held by a big part of society. Surrounding herself with family and friends who had a similar mindset that provided an environment in which controversial and experimental texts were encouraged, she was able to openly discuss these troublesome subjects. This essay intends to explain and discuss the similarities between gender and genre showed by Woolf.

First of all, it is compulsory to define what is considered a biography and what is considered a novel, so that it is possible to analyze the elements of one or the other throughout the book. The Cambridge dictionary defines a biography as “ the life story of a person written by somebody else”, with this concept, it is perfectly rational to consider *Orlando: A Biography* a biography. However, biographies often tell a true life story, stating facts through an intensive study of documents about the person the biography is about. Although there are facts and real geographical references in this book, it could also fit into the category of fiction, defined by the Cambridge dictionary as “ the type of book or story that is written about imaginary characters and events (...)” (Cambridge dictionary, 2015).

Before carrying out any discussion about the subjects above mentioned, there must be an agreement on the genre the book actually belongs to. Calling it a biography feels like stretching the truth quite a bit, although the fact that it calls itself one justifies this classification. In addition, it actually

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seems to be a biography until some pretty incredible things happen: magical sex changes, characters that live for centuries, weeklong sleeps that are inexplicable, etc., which belong to a fictional novel. Hermione Lee, president of Wolfson College and writer of one of the many Woolf's biographies, says that "Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries are poised on the edge of the revolution which has turned biography into the iconoclastic, gossipy art-form it is now, when the only taboo is censorship." (Lee, 1996) With saying this, Lee seems to imply that all of Woolf's works, including Orlando, were a fundamental part of the evolution of the term 'biography'. However, I believe that the most appropriate thing to do is to divide it into the two genres; when Orlando transitions from being a man to being a woman and all the strange events occur, the book transitions as well, from a biography to a novel.

As mentioned before, Woolf and her contemporaries challenged the traditional concept of biography, which ended up changing. In this book, Virginia does the same thing with gender, giving new perspectives to its concept. Orlando, the main character, completely breaks down and transcends the categories of male and female, showing gender norms and conventions to be socially constructed, and disrupting them (Rognstad, 2012). Needless to say, although Orlando's story might have been based on true facts (mostly geographical), the story is clearly fantastical. As Woolf said, it should be "truthful but fantastical".

Among these fictional elements, time and gender both stand out. This approach to chronology, on one hand, allowed Virginia to show how time affected the main characters. On top of that, the writer - in a controversial <https://assignbuster.com/discussing-the-relationship-between-gender-and-genre-in-orlando-a-biography/>

move for that time - plays with the concept of gender, by making Orlando go from male to female almost effortlessly and without giving too much explanation as to why or how this happens. In this process, Purity, Chastity, and Modesty appear personified in order to show qualities women were supposed to present in those times, and even though they utilize their magic around Orlando's room, she never becomes particularly pure, chaste, or modest once she is a woman. As mentioned before, Orlando's gender switch might be that effortless for plot purposes; yet, it could be interpreted as the expression of Woolf's beliefs on gender. This being that it is not set in stone; it is flimsy and unreliable. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf explains: "one must be woman - manly or man - womanly" (*A Room of One's Own*, 1929), since nobody can show all characteristics assigned to their gender at the same time.

The same ease is showed in the transition of the book from bibliography to novel; Woolf does not try to explain it and we, as readers, should just accept it as it is. The gender change simply happens when Orlando visits Turkey to get away from his lover. There, he falls asleep for a long period of time and eventually wakes up being a woman. The character does not question what happens; instead, he/she embraces it and lives with a gypsy community before returning to England, where she gets completely accustomed to living as a woman. It might seem, if you have not read the book, like Orlando is some kind of weird creature capable of doing extraordinary things such as sex-swapping, but that is not the case. In many ways, he/she is just like everybody else: struggling with life, the demands of society, love and a career.

When living with the gypsies, Orlando does not fully realize the situation she is in; it is when she returns to England that she understands her new position in society as a woman and starts to struggle with what society demands. She starts being treated differently by people, and starts to think, just by looking at her clothes, that she cannot longer do all the things she did before changing gender, or, if she did, it would not be socially accepted. Here, we can see that the position a certain gender takes in society is nothing more than a social construction. This, of course, was much more radical in the age Orlando lived in. Furthermore, it is easy to see that Orlando only realizes she has to act differently when people start to treat her differently because of her sex. The captain, her servants and basically everybody else treats her like a woman, so she must act like one was supposed to act. Rongstad says that Orlando, as well as *A Room of One's Own*, could be considered studies of androgyny, not in the sense of physical androgyny, but androgyny of mind. Orlando, obviously, is the perfect example of this type of mind, given the fact that she shows aspects of both genders equally throughout the whole novel.

Gender change and identity issues can be tackled both in a biography and in a novel. However, the aspect Woolf shows about these subjects is incredibly personal and detailed, which makes the book a novel after the gender transformation. In chapter 3, when the transformation happens, Orlando goes from he to their to she: "Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity." (Woolf, 1928) What this signalizes is that there is

nothing specifically important about Orlando's sex; she is biologically a woman, indeed, but yet she shows aspects of her past life as a man. The only thing that happens is that Orlando now expresses the feminine side showed by the character in the first half of the book, in the biography. This way, gender roles, the "correct" way in which a certain gender is supposed to think and behave) are unimportant to Orlando, and she continues to be the exact same person she was before.

With this, in my opinion, Woolf tries to show that just as gender does not determine a person's identity, the title of a book does necessarily determine what the book actually is. Calling the book a biography is somewhat correct, and calling Orlando a man is also correct to a certain extent. What they truly show, however, is that in a way, the book can be both a novel and a biography, and Orlando can be both a man and a woman without this causing any trouble.

Judith Butler, a feminist philosopher, says that "the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (Butler, 1998). What Butler tries to explain is that the "natural" features we have about what a male or a female is supposed to be like, have been created over time, via social and political norms, and are being reinforced through their everyday application. Furthermore, Woolf allows Orlando to experience characteristics from both genders, trying to tackle the question of why is that certain actions are typically male or female and that it is possible to choose how one wants to act. In accordance to Butler, Woolf confirms that it is indeed acts that define a person's gender.

To conclude, we must reflect on how Woolf's post-modernist ideas are reflected in the book. The writer plays with gender and genre, and shows that what can seem certain and truthful cannot be fully believed; this is seen in a phrase found at the beginning of the book: " He – for there could be no doubt of his sex". Orlando showed a lot of the features that define a man, but still turned into a woman. The title of the novel, as well, showed us that it would be a biography and, until a certain point (around chapter three), any person could believe it was. Notwithstanding, it turned out to be a work of fiction. Lastly, Woolf shows that there are a lot of things – just as gender and genre – that can be questioned and analyzed more than they are. She does this in a playful way and shows their intricate connection while demonstrating how wrong our assumptions about genre and gender can be.

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