

# The phallocentrism in 'if on a winter's night a traveller' and the feminism in 'm...

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



The Phallogocentrism in 'If on a Winter's Night a Traveller' and the Feminism in 'Mrs. Dalloway' All literary texts, according to Bennett and Royle (153-154), can be thought about in terms of how they represent gender difference and how far they may be said to reinforce or question gender stereotypes and sometimes provoke us to think about the very idea of gender opposition. On top of the essential anatomical or biological difference between the male and female, various kinds of gender-stereotypes are then articulated, e. g. the male is strong, active rational whereas the female is weak, passive and irrational. The history of Western culture has long been dominated by the logic of the gender-stereotypical description. Patriarchy upholds the notion of phallogocentrism, which involves the supposed priority of the male, in which the phallus means power, authority, presence and the right to possession. As Culler suggests, ' Numerous aspects of criticism, including the preference for metaphor over metonymy, the conception of the author, and the concern to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate meanings, can be seen as part of the promotion of the paternal. Phallogocentrism unites an interest in patriarchal authority, unity of meaning, and certainty of origin,' (63). Italo Calvino presents his phallogocentrism in his 'If on a Winter's Night a Traveller', first by defaulting the Reader, the protagonist, as a male character. ' Calvino's phallogocentric orientation in the male Reader's blatant domination of the female Other Reader is a logocentrism of patriarchy,' (Brink 310). As de Lauretis (70) reminds us, Calvino offers us ' the intimate connection of narrative with love, articulated in the necessary link of distance and desire... in this book reading is a function of desire, literally. The pursuit of the book's reading corresponds to the pursuit of the unattainable love object, narrative

closure is impeded by the dispersal of meaning; and the pleasure of the text is infiltrated or undercut with the jouissance of the text. The archetype of this fiction is the male sexual act.' Calvino thus craftily parallels Reader's attempt of satisfying dual desires, a relationship with Ludmilla and getting the correct and complete copy of 'If on a Winter's Night a Traveller'. The notion of 'castration' in literature can also be seen as a phallocentric representation in Calvino's book. Castration, the removal of the phallus (the important male biological feature), is unpleasant and undesirable that has a special resonance with the oppression of women, who have often been considered as both castrated and castrating, especially in psychoanalysis. She argues that castration is the numbered chapters of Italo Calvino's book, suggesting that the various fragmented named chapters that appear in the book are themselves castration images. Ludmilla, the female Other Reader, is portrayed as a stereotypical perfect passive reader, who reads for purely escapist purposes, in a phallocentric paradigm. The way she acts fits perfectly the gender stereotypical description of a female. Ludmilla 'never finishes a book; she eschews the company of authors, publishers, all the purveyors and agents of dominant discourses,' (Brink 328) It proves that Ludmilla is reluctant to take over the authoritative role of the author. Moreover, Lotaria, Ludmilla's sister, is a feminist who thinks literature should be used to further her polemic agenda. Lotaria, as suggested by Booker (132), is presented as a 'threatening, castrating female, the implication of which is that Calvino is reacting to a perceived threat from the feminist sector'. She made a complaint about Ludmilla's 'peculiar' reading habit, 'Ludmilla reads one novel after another, but she never clarifies the problems.

It seems a big waste of time to me. Don't you have this impression?'(Calvino 44) That Lotaria tries to challenge Ludmilla's habit is actually an attempt to challenge the conventional passive role of readers. The portrayal of Lotaria is also ' an anxious reaction against the threat posed by feminism to traditional male power' (Booker 132). Calvino himself is also completely aware of such interpretations and explicitly mocks them in his book. He depicts a meeting of Lotaria's feminist reading group, At this point they throw an open discussion. Events, characters, settings, impressions are thrust aside, to make room for the general concepts. " The polymorphic perverse sexuality" " The laws of market economy. . . " " The homologues of the signifying structures" " Deviations and institutions . . . " " Castration ... " (Calvino 91) Overall speaking, Calvino's attempt to engage us, the readers, turns out to be a hoax that led us to falsely believe that we could challenge the author's authority. Genette argues that ' If on a Winter's Night a Traveller' is ultimately only an optical instrument the author offers the reader to help him read within himself, what Calvino truly intends to do is to provoke the reader into revolt against phallogocentric textual authority or finality in order to assume one's full responsibility as a human being. Nonetheless, the effort in fulfilling the male desire is proved futile as ' the final bedroom scene offers no closure whatsoever. It is instead a decisive and derisive laugh at the expense of the single-minded logocentric Reader,' (Brink 328). It is interesting that Calvino puts this dangling end to both Reader's desire of the book's closure and that of his partner. Although he has long desired a stable relationship with Ludmilla, he prefers reading to sleeping with her in the end. This shows the nature of desire, which, according to Freud, is unobtainable

as we can never get what we want: we may think we have got it, but actually desire will always have moved on again. This endlessly deterred complete satisfaction is seen simply as unavoidable. (Bennett and Royle 181)

Phallocentrism was so common in literature that gave rise to feminism at the time when women were given right to be educated and be socially active.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is often read as a powerful satire on patriarchal society and values. Its emphasis is particularly on its revealing of the all-pervading soft face of oppression against women. The story not only explores the ways in which the problem of patriarchy has to do with the behaviour of men, but also with that of women. Shihada (121) summarises that women were stereotypically considered intellectually and physically weak before the mid-19 centuries.

According to this concept, the society was divided into private worlds and as public counterpart. The private world implied that women should stay at home without being allowed to work or learn. They could only be taught to the skills such as sewing and nursing required by their only vocation, marriage. The liberal feminists and the social feminists advocated the probe of the depth of women's psyche, evaluating their position as women and change in gender identity. They came up with two approaches, one of which was the dual approach that aimed at changing patriarchy's economic aspects through materials means and its social and ideological aspects through psycho-analytic means. In a bid to have an ideological change, a lot of female writers like Virginia Woolf thus shoulder the responsibility of calling women to reflect their role in the modern society. Subjected to a depressive and patriarchal rule in her family, Virginia Woolf witnessed her father's

domination of his wife and daughters. Woolf's attempts of fighting against patriarchy and inspiring women to re-examine their value and identity are shown in her famous 'Mrs. Dalloway'. Woolf portrays how the patriarchal norms impact on women's lives. Women, like Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, the protagonist, face different sorts of frustration. In her early fifties, Clarissa shows her ignorance about social problems, caring only about her parties as she sees it as the only way to get the sense of achievement as well as the warmth from people around her. She regards herself the angel of the house and highly cherishes this responsibility. Lack of vision, she is a good example of a typical woman in the patriarchal paradigm. Woolf also highlights that marriage does not guarantee a blissful relationship between a man and his wife in a patriarchal society by revealing Clarissa's failure in gaining mutual understanding with her husband, Richard Dalloway. Woolf appreciated the need for women's friendship with the aim of fighting against patriarchy. Clarissa's very close friendship with Sally Seton, an anti-patriarchal woman, can be seen as a reaction against heterosexuality and patriarchal machinery. She sees her 'league' with Sally Seton as a precious gift. 'She felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it- a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling, ' (Woolf 40). Woolf projects her ideal woman's image on the young Clarissa, who once tried to struggle for her independence. Before her marriage with Richard, Clarissa had a brief romantic relationship with Peter Welsh, whom she regarded as a male dictator (Shihada 128). Despite the fact that she was deeply attracted and

he offered to marry her, Clarissa rejected his proposal as she thought that her freedom would be undermined and her life intervened by him, ' for in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him (where was he this morning, for instance? Some committee, she never asked what.) But with Peter everything had to be shared, everything gone into' (Woolf 10). It shows Clarissa's initial courage to challenge the meaning of marriage. She does not believe that marriage is the sublimation of love. In the end, what Woolf would like to emphasize is an effort of reflection. Although both Sally and Clarissa accept the assigned female identity and succumb to patriarchal forces by marrying wealthy or powerful men, Clarissa finally realises how ignorant she was in the past, by the time she learns about Septimus' suicide at the party and gradually comes to admire his way of pursuing freedom, ' somehow it was her disaster — her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress,' (Woolf 203) Conclusion Bennett and Royle give us an inspiring reminder that ' what is important about literary representations of gender is not merely that a particular text can be shown to be sexist or phallogentric, or even feminist. Rather it is the literary texts call into question many of our essentialist ideas about gender,' (156). It leads to an interesting question in deconstruction (which involves ' the desedimentation of those conceptual oppositions through which essentialism operates) (157): when we always believe that rationalising the opposite of superstitious, male is often stereotyped as rational, ' who supposes that it is an impossible

contradiction to be superstitious and rationalising at the same time?' George Eliot asks in ' Daniel Deronda'. Therefore, the phallogentrism in ' If on a Winter's Night a Traveller' and the feminism in ' Mrs. Dalloway' draw our attention to understand not only the sexual difference between but difference within, which is indeed a deeper, more intriguing question to study. Reference: Bennet A. and Royle N., *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (3rd Ed.). Pearson/Longman. 2004. Print. Booker, M. Keith., *Techniques of subversion in modern literature : transgression, abjection, and the carnivalesque*. University of Florida Press. Gainesville. 1991. Print. Brink A., *The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*. New York University Press, Washington Square, NY. 1998. Print. Calvino, I. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (trans: William Weaver). Vintage Books. London. 1983. Print. Culler J., *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. London: Routledge, 1983. Print. de Lauretis, T., *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. Print. Genette, G., (trans. Jane E. Lewin) *Narrative Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell. 1980. Print. Shihada, Isam M., *A Feminist Perspective of Virginia Woolf's Selected Novels: Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse*. Al-Aqsa University. Woolf, V. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Penguin Books. London. 2000. Print.