

# Wordplay and the androgynous self: woolf's construction of orlando



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Virginia Woolf's creation of the main character in the novel *Orlando* relies upon a certain amount of "wordplay" in order to maintain her androgynous nature. But what is androgyny according to Woolf; to what degree does this gender mixing occur? When discussing discrete genders in any form of literature, there are certain specific phrases and indeed certain attributes that are usually reserved for one gender or the other. It is precisely by mixing up these words that Woolf is able to create a genuine air of androgyny – here, wordplay is not a mere stylistic attribute, but a tool as necessary as grammar or sentence structure because it is the only thing that is able to define intersexuality the way Woolf desires. According to Woolf, Orlando is born and raised as a boy, '...there could be no doubt about [that].' However, later in that first segment of the novel he is described in quite the peculiar way; Orlando is described as having 'eyes like drenched violets... [and] shapely legs.' This is quite clearly a breach of the code of rigid gender roles! Why, from that sentence, one would think that we were describing a woman, not a man. In western culture, shapely legs and beautiful eyes are specifically within the realm of people who identify themselves as women, and assuming one has spent any amount of time here in the West, it's readily apparent that the number of people who might use these characteristics to identify themselves while at the same time identifying as male are quite few. This then could be simply seen as a morsel of obvious foreshadowing to the morning where Orlando wakes up as a woman; at the same time it is part of Virginia Woolf's expression of her homosexual and emotional feelings towards Vita Sackville-West, as this book has been generally recognized as a loose biography of Sackville-West's life in which Sackville-West is represented by Orlando. ' Through the power of her pen, <https://assignbuster.com/wordplay-and-the-androgynous-self-woolfs-construction-of-orlando/>

Woolf reversed the centuries' old Kentish law which had prevented Vita from inheriting Knole [her ancestral home]. In the pages of [Woolf's] *Orlando*, Vita Sackville-West owned Knole in a way that she never could in reality (DeSalvo, 2005). This sentence goes to show just how specifically Virginia Woolf integrated Vita's life and history into *Orlando* and the character of Orlando. Normal patterns of behavior, such as surprise at waking up as a member of the opposite sex, are eschewed here; there is a stunning lack of emotion that puts Orlando directly at loggerheads with normative patterns of behavior. Again and again she will create these situations where normal behavior is almost combated; for an example, when Nick Greene leaves Orlando and writes a scathing pamphlet about him, which causes Orlando such pain that he 'delivered the document to him at the end of a pair of tongs; bade him drop it in the filthiest heart of the foulest midden on the estate' (Woolf), Orlando continues to pay him a quarterly pension. This goes against all good sense, for who would continue to support one who had written such a thing? Virginia Woolf formed many of her strongest sexual and emotional ties to women during her lifetime, and this is apparent in many of her works, including *Orlando*, which was presented to her long-time lover, Sackville-West. According to Sackville-West's son, Nigel Nicholson, the book was 'the longest and most charming love letter in literature (Smith, 60)'. It has also been referred to as a fairy tale a clef; a book which is a roman a clef is a "novel with a key," or a book which is a representation of real events, but which is hidden behind a layer of metaphor or mislabeling. Fairy tales can often be looked at as magical fiction – a reality which given certain allowances otherwise acts in a realistic way. One can see from these two genres what a fairy tale a clef is – a way to double disguise the truth behind <https://assignbuster.com/wordplay-and-the-androgynous-self-woolfs-construction-of-orlando/>

the story. This story, as previously mentioned, is a rough retelling of the life of Vita Sackville-West, who was very close to Woolf – hence the roman a clef element; it is also set in a fantasy world when men can become women and live for unnatural amounts of time – hence the fairy tale aspect. As well, fairy tales usually tell us stories in order that we learn a lesson – classic tales like Little Red Riding Hood and Cinderella all have multiple moralistic lessons in them, some not intended for children as we have been conditioned to believe in this era. Likewise Orlando has morals embedded within its rich narrative. The main fairy tale message that Orlando has to impart to us regards individuality. Orlando the character certainly is an individual, not conforming to many of the practices of the times. This fairy tale nature to the story also allows for a great deal of creative wordplay, which pushes forward both the story and the theme of alternative sexuality. Some examples of this wordplay are in the next paragraph. As yet, I have referenced numerous times the term “ wordplay”, but I have yet to provide a concrete example. If one were forced to choose a singular example from which to judge all other instances of so-called “ wordplay” in Orlando, it would be this: ‘So Orlando stood gazing while the man turned his pen in his fingers, this way and that way; and gazed and mused; and then, very quickly, wrote half-a-dozen lines and looked up. Whereupon Orlando, overcome with shyness, darted off and reached the banqueting-hall only just in time to sink upon his knees and, hanging his head in confusion, to offer a bowl of rose water to the great Queen herself’ (Woolf). This is an example of Orlando acting as and fulfilling the gender role of a woman. Here are several points worth pointing out: Orlando ‘ gazing’ at a man, ‘ gazing’ not usually a term applied to one man looking at another; Also Orlando is fulfilling a subservient role, female in <https://assignbuster.com/wordplay-and-the-androgynous-self-woolfs-construction-of-orlando/>

nature when he is ‘ overcome with shyness’ and ‘ sinking upon his knees and, hanging his head in confusion.’ Both of the preceding quotes are not ones that we would associate with the traditional, prototypical male – a male does not usually act in a way that puts himself ‘ beneath’ another person. Thus Orlando begins to think of himself as a woman, and Woolf clearly lets us know that through her choice of wording. ‘ Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath. We may take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements. 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). Here is another quote, from the middle of chapter three in Orlando, which shows our protagonist’s strong sense of identity and individuality. Obviously, an overnight, uninvited sex change would bother most people, but Orlando shows us such a sense of self through her calmness and the regularity of her actions that we cannot help but be slightly awed, which is partly the point of this story; if we are awed, then we may take into consideration the fact that we can act as Orlando in our own lives, and be better for it. It is necessarily by mixing up words and phrases that Woolf is able to create an indisputable tone of androgyny – here, wordplay is not a plain stylistic feature, but a means as indispensable as the text itself because wordplay is the only thing that is able to define intersexuality the way Woolf desires. And as demonstrated, Woolf has a history which provides her with the preoccupation with gender roles and interactions. Androgyny, according to Woolf, has to do with breaking out of restricting gender roles and social norms. Works Cited Smith, Victoria L. “ <https://assignbuster.com/wordplay-and-the-androgynous-self-woolfs-construction-of-orlando/>

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