

## TO THE QUESTION OF THE UNDERVALUATION OF WOMEN'S WRITING IN THE 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES

**Summary.** The article focuses on the problematic issues of the undervaluation of women's writing in the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The research aspects in this sphere have been illustrated; the insight on the struggles of women writers against male editors and authors and their selfishness and total disregard for them has been highlighted; the challenge faced by women writers of being unaccepted in the literary world, often having to prove the worthiness and importance of their works, being categorized in ways different to men has been emphasized on. The research has been done on the basis of the analysis of gender studies' approach to women's writing. By taking a closer look at the public reception of the female authors in the nineteenth-twentieth centuries we assume that the narrow-mindedness of the patriarchal society and the lack of basic human rights to freedom of women's writing in this period hindered the development of female literature. In order to step on the male-dominated literary path and stand alongside the men, female authors had to use male pseudonyms or write anonymously to avoid the condescending judgements of men-critics. Women writers faced the challenge of being unaccepted in the literary world, often having to prove the worthiness and importance of their works, being categorized in ways different to men.

**Keywords:** women's writing, Virginia Woolf, undervaluation, gender studies.

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### ДО ПИТАННЯ НЕДООЦІНКИ ЖІНОЧОГО ПИСЬМА В ХІХ–ХХ СТОЛІТТЯХ

**Анотація.** Дану розвідку присвячено проблемі недооцінки жіночої літератури 19–20 століть. Проілюстровано аспекти дослідження у цій сфері; висвітлено розуміння боротьби жінок-письменниць проти редакторів та авторів-чоловіків та їхнього егоїзму і цілковитої зневаги до жіночої літератури; було проведено аналіз гендерних досліджень жіночого письма. Наголошено на тому, що авторки стикаються зі своїм неприйняттям до літературного світу чоловіків, і, як результат, їм часто доводилося захищати цінність та важливість своїх творів для суспільства таким чином, щоби вони посіли гідне місце в світовому спадку. Недалекоглядність патріархального суспільства та брак прав не давали розвинутися жіночій літературі того часу вповні. Щоби вийти на літературний шлях, де домінували чоловіки і стати поруч з ними, жінки-письменниці також часто використовували чоловічі імена або псевдоніми, щоби публікувати свої твори і уникнути поблажливих суджень чоловіків-критиків. Але, не дивлячись на жодні перепони, жіночий роман і далі розвивався. З'являлося все більше й більше авторок, які у своїх творах торкалися тем шлюбу, материнства, освіти, власної ролі в суспільстві тощо. І саме в художній літературі жінки добилися найбільшого успіху і завоювали собі добру репутацію. Розвиток культури неможливий без подолання стереотипів і упереджень, без урахування інтересів обох статей і паритетної співпраці. Суспільство, в якому відсутня рівність чоловіків і жінок, інакше, як хворим чи недорозвинутим, не назвеш. Патріархат нищівно впливає на ментальність, культуру, спотворює її, робить однобокою, нарешті дидактично-фальшивою. Навіть під маскою оспівування така культура несе в собі глибинні структури зневаги до жінки, апологію її експлуатації. Таким чином, стать письменника – це лише один з багатьох фактів, який варто знати про літературний твір. «Власна кімната» (A Room of One's Own, 1929) Вірджинії Вулф по праву вважається яскравим зразком феміністичної полеміки з цього питання. В даному творі авторка ставить ряд важливих питань не лише щодо проблем жіночої долі, пошуків жінкою власного місця в суспільстві, сім'ї, з новою силою розглядаються її прагнення до самовираження, особливо в літературі. А тому, чого ми повинні уникати – це ситуації, коли наше усвідомлення статі автора обумовлює нашу реакцію на сам твір, написаний жінкою.

**Ключові слова:** жіноче письмо, Вірджинія Вулф, недооцінка, гендерні студії.

**The problem setting.** Male criticism and the lack of gender equality in the literary world is not the only thing that women writers faced in the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Men were in control of literary art and it was believed that male critics “scratched each other's backs,” instead of allowing women writers to receive the proper respect and acknowledgement for the work they produced. Even to this day, male writers in the literary world have forced women writers to stand in their shadows.

**Aim setting.** The goal of the article is to describe the problem of the undervaluation of women's writing in the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The goal of the research calls for the fulfillment of the certain tasks:

a) to illustrate the research aspects in this sphere;

b) to highlight the insight on the struggles of women writers against male editors and authors and their selfishness and total disregard for them;

c) to emphasize on the challenge faced by women writers of being unaccepted in the literary world, often having to prove the worthiness and importance of their works, being categorized in ways different to men.

**The presentation of the main material.** Often the first question that is asked, if one talks about studying women's literature, is “Why women's literature? Isn't all literature fundamentally the same?”

There is no absolute answer to a question like this. Certainly there are many literary texts which a reader could look at without being able to tell whether they were written by a woman or a man. In all cultures that we know of, however, the lives and experiences of men and women are different in many ways. It would be surprising if such differences were not reflected in some degree in what men and what women write.

We are not usually made uncomfortable by the idea that it is useful, for purposes of studying, to divide literature into categories which emphasize one significant aspect of the texts we are considering. In recent years, many researchers have felt that it is similarly useful to look at works written by women separately from works written by men. Some approaches which have traditionally been used in studying all literature may really not be very relevant to works written by women.

If we consider, for example, a novel by Jane Austen in the light of the fact that the author was a woman, we are not prohibited from also, at another time, thinking of it as an English (not American) novel, or as an early nineteenth-century (not mid eighteenth-century) work.

In the past, works which focus on women were often thought of as aimed mainly at women readers, while works which focus on men were considered to be aimed at a “general” audience, suitable for reading and study by both men and women.

The judgement that works about men are “general” while works about women are “narrow” or “specialized” tells us something about the way in which our culture has evaluated the relative importance of the experience of men and the experience of women. As this evaluation changes, we notice that women writers frequently have given us a more detailed depiction of women’s lives, ideas, emotions and preoccupations, than men have.

In “A Room of One’s Own” Virginia Woolf observes that at the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a prevailing literary style based on what she calls “a man’s sentence...unsuited to a woman’s use”. She adds, “Jane Austen looked at it and laughed and devised a perfectly natural shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it [7, p. 70]. Woolf does not explain what she considers to be the distinguishing characteristics of the “man’s sentence”, nor why it is unsuited for women writers, nor exactly how Jane Austen’s sentence differs from it, and no later commentators on Woolf’s work have produced a convincing elucidation of her ideas on this point. Furthermore, later in the same work Woolf, apparently contradicting herself, says, “It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice for any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman” [7, p. 94].

The issues raised here by Virginia Woolf have recurred. Is there anything distinctive in the way in which women write? Should there be?

Linguists have generally held that in languages which have been studied, there are some identifiable differences between the ways in which men and women talk. Therefore, it seems reasonable

enough to ask whether there might be similar differences in the writing – especially the literary writing – of men and women.

Approaching the matter from a different perspective, some feminists hold that, as the public world is dominated by men, the language of public communication, including much literary communication, has been formed to suit men’s needs – including the need to remain dominant over women [5].

In “A Room of One’s Own” Virginia Woolf also gives an imaginative account of why a woman in the sixteenth century (“Shakespeare’s sister”) would find it virtually impossible to produce literature of lasting worth like her brother’s. She lacked education and economic resources (to buy books and paper, for example) and she had little or no privacy or unsupervised free time. Among the few women writers of the nineteenth century who have long been held in high esteem – Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson – none had a child. Woolf’s work emphasizes the obstacles which prevented women from writing.

Since the advent of the women’s movement in the late 1960s in Western countries, women themselves have increasingly wanted to read study and discuss literary works by other women, and have shared their own favourites and discoveries with others. One of the major results of the movement has been to call attention to the fact that women have written a great deal more than even a widely-read person like Virginia Woolf would have realized in the 1920s. But much of this writing, including some which was widely esteemed in its own time, was quickly forgotten.

The novel as a genre was initially not valued highly, and it took many years before novel-reading was regarded as a serious (or, in some cases, even as a respectable) activity. Furthermore, many of the women who wrote novels did so (like many of the men) with the deliberate intention of making money rather than creating “works of art”. Yet although women constituted by far the greatest proportion of readers of novels, and a high proportion of writers of them, publishing and reviewing were, and are, overwhelmingly controlled by men.

As the novel established itself as a serious art form, increasing numbers of men wrote novels, and the genre attracted increasingly serious appreciation. Although certainly many men wrote about love and marriage – often as part of a larger plot – the tendency, noted previously, to consider “men’s subjects” serious and major, and “women’s subjects” trivial or minor, came into play. A notable number of nineteenth-century women novelists, including the Brontë sisters and George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) published first under masculine or equivocal pseudonyms, rightly believing that the ostensible sex of the author influenced critical reception of a work. It has, for example, been shown that the evaluations of Emily Brontë’s “Wuthering Heights” (1847) changed subtly but significantly when it became known that the author was a woman [3, pp. 71–74].

We also know that women were explicitly discouraged from taking themselves seriously as writers. In Victorian times particularly there was much pressure on women to see to it that their literary careers did not interfere with their domestic responsibilities. Likewise it was considered

unsuitable for women to treat certain subjects in their writing. Women's writing could thus be labelled improper as well as insignificant. And even if a particular writer or her work were granted esteem, she would be regarded as unusual, not as one of a large company of serious and notable writers, many of whom were women. Not only Joanna Russ, herself a writer of science fiction has summarized the obstacles faced by women in achieving lasting literary reputations in her witty but hard-hitting "How To Suppress Women's Writing" (1983) [4] but also Meese, Elizabeth. "Women and Writing: A Re/turn." (1990) [2], Silverman, Rosa. "Women Writers Suffer in Maledominated Literary World, Says Novelist" (2014) [6], and Roxane Gay "Beyond the Measure of Men" (2014) [1].

These comments apply particularly to fiction, where women nevertheless have had the greatest success at establishing lasting reputations. The situation is even more difficult with regard to poetry and worst of all in respect of drama. Virginia Woolf believed that writing fiction, although scarcely easy, requires less concentration (i.e., less free time and privacy) than writing poetry or drama, and that this fact explained the relative paucity of women poets and dramatist. Most women in the nineteenth century were either aristocratic or childless.

Of the women poets who did publish and achieve popularity in their own lifetimes, many did so precisely because they confined themselves to topics and sentiments considered "lady-like"; as a result, much of this verse appeared to be conventional or sentimental and regard for it did not persist beyond its own generation. Some of the more serious and adventuresome poets, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, suffered a particularly ironic fate. Only those poems which were

considered appropriately "feminine" were frequently anthologized and therefore handed on to a future generation. Thus, schoolchildren all over the English-speaking world have known Elizabeth Barrett Browning's love sonnets for generations, but her poems about political subjects or about artistic creation were ignored and virtually forgotten for over a century.

Feminist critics argue that many ignored or forgotten texts by women are at least as valuable as many of the texts written by men now regarded as standard. Scholarly studies of publishing history have shown that, in general, works by women are more likely to go out of print than works by men; they are, therefore, less likely to be read and handed on by future generations of readers. This state of affairs is certainly related to the fact that publishing and criticism are still principally male domains, although this situation has changed somewhat in recent years.

**Conclusions.** In general, one may conclude that much writing by women is implicitly regarded as being of limited value precisely because it is about women and may appeal mainly or especially to women readers, who are regarded as a "special" rather than a general or typical audience. This approach reinforces the tendency to assume that work by women, whatever its content, and however much it is praised, somewhat does not belong to the "mainstream". The sex of the writer is only one of many facts worth knowing about a literary work. What we must strive to avoid is a situation in which our awareness of the sex of the writer conditions all of our other responses to the work. Not least, we must try to avoid returning to a situation in which knowing that a text is by a woman is a justification for ignoring it.

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