Voice and Truth in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

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Abstract: This essay analyzes a small section of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) where a metaphorical hum that emerges from the narrator's synthetic aural image characterizes the difference between pre-war (WWI) and post-war luncheons. The hum represents the illusion of order and balance that the educated class of English society preserves. With Woolf's ironic voice and perhaps unreliable narrator, this essay explores the importance of the hum through gendered performance. An intertextual analysis of the poems with the Bible and Hamlet will help demonstrate how the illusion hides the chaos of society.

Virginia Woolf's voice in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) guides her argument with irony. In the beginning of the book, Woolf separates herself from the "I" of her essay and creates an unnamed narrator who functions as a rhetorical instrument (7). Author-narrator separation allows the narrator freedom from stereotypes, and it rhetorically forces the reader to reconsider the truth or intentions of her words. So, when the narrator explores the difference of appearance between a post-war Oxbridge luncheon in 1928 and its pre-war equivalent, her observations imply a paradox in the metaphor that emerges from the narrator's synthetic aural image, the hum. She notices that this hum, which was present at pre-war luncheons, no longer fills the post-war air. To metaphorically contextualize the hum, the narrator evokes two Victorian poems, Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Maud" (1854) and Christina Rossetti's "A Birthday" (1861). On the surface, the hum is a metaphor for the musicality of pre-war educated-class culture and values. Upon close reading, the poems allegorically point towards texts such as Hamlet and the Bible. The themes of these texts

and their prominence in the poems illustrate the aforementioned values which include heteronormative dynamics of romance and gender. These values—which extend to how women are received in male-dominated environments (e.g. political, educational, and career)—are veiled by "the illusion which inspired Tennyson and Christina Rossetti to sing so passionately" (Woolf 19). The illusion of cohesion within society is sustained by gendered performance. Gendered performance is a "stylized repetition of acts" that have been systemically enforced on a specific representation of gender (Butler 519). The hum is a metaphor for the illusion that hides the chaos of society, but in turn creates more chaos. Tennyson and Rossetti's poems, through the lens of Butler's theory, reveal this paradox of chaos and cohesion. The hum metaphor explores the authority of Woolf's voice through the rhetorical use of her narrator and the authenticity of her narrator's assertions.

At the Oxbridge luncheon, the narrator finds an oddly specific stanza from Tennyson's "Maud" that the narrator pairs with a stanza from Christina Rossetti's "A Birthday." The narrator asks if the stanza from Tennyson's "Maud" is "what men at luncheon parties hummed before the war" and if the stanza from Christina Rossetti's "A Birthday" is "what the women hummed" (Woolf 16–17). Since the selected stanzas follow similar rhyme schemes, structure, and subject matter, they are in concert with each other. This concert alludes to the dynamic of heteronormative romance. The lines where Tennyson's narrator waits for his love at the garden gate, "She is coming, my dove, my dear; / She is coming, my life, my fate" (Woolf 16) assert a confident yet wishful anticipation of his love's arrival. Rossetti uses similar words to Tennyson (she writes "singing bird," "apple tree," and "my love" which are comparable to his endearments and flowers), but Rossetti's speaker expresses no anticipation "because [her] love is come to [her]" (Woolf 16). She has already received the arrival of her love while Tennyson's narrator still waits. Even in patriarchy, the woman seems to have the power in romance. At a superficial level, these stanzas contextualize the hum (and the difference

between the post- and pre-war luncheon) as a romanticized past with a balanced dynamic between the sexes.

In Tennyson's stanza, the masculinity of the narrator's gendered performance reveals the nuance behind the woman's perceived power in romance. The flowers' speech extends the anticipation of Tennyson's narrator: there is hopelessness in the flowers' "cries" and "weeps" of "She is near," "She is late," and "I wait" (Woolf 16). The flowers experience the narrator's desperate feelings, which might be a romantic symbol of how intensely he is feeling. However, since the flowers express these desperate feelings in first person and in no direct extension towards the narrator other than verbal mimicry, he instead seems to disconnect himself from these emotions and ascribe them to the flowers. A confident and wishful anticipation is more favourably dedicated to the narrator. This distinction between who experiences the "good" or the "bad" aspects of anticipation, whether the man or the more effeminate flowers, signals the gendered performance of masculinity through the suppression of sadness. This performance demonstrates how men are expected to conform, but the repeated act of suppressing "bad" emotions produces a lack of emotional intelligence and a vulnerability to uncontrolled outbursts. Is an aversion to emotion so attractive? Is this indeed what men so romantically hummed at "luncheon parties . . . before the war" (Woolf 16)? In an environment that reinforces heteronormativity, this shortcoming of the man places the responsibility on the woman to navigate emotional strife. The 19th-century woman accepts this responsibility, not for the sake of romance but for social survival, which "depends on gaining male approval and protection" (Gilbert and Gubar 273). Woolf's hum intentionally disguises this dynamic of power and emotional labour between the sexes as an intricate and romantic dance.

A close reading of Rossetti's "A Birthday" reveals how the woman's gendered performance compensates for the lack of emotional intelligence of the man due to his own gendered performance. In 19th-century literature, "becoming a man means proving or testing oneself or earning a vo-

cation, [whereas] becoming a woman means relinquishing achievement and accommodating oneself to men and the spaces they provide" (Gilbert and Gubar 274). In the first stanza of Rossetti's poem, her narrator seems to perpetuate this stereotype through cliché heart metaphors, but simultaneously demonstrates her ability to experience "bad" emotions through her nature similes. Her "heart is like a singing bird [. . .] an apple tree [. . . and] a rainbow shell" (Rossetti 71). Her heart is an extension of herself, unlike the flowers in "Maud," so her metaphor does not grant sentience to another object for the sake of emotional aversion; she does the opposite and grounds the emotions within herself. Then, rather than transform an object, the speaker uses similes to associate her heart with objects that can better portray her experienced emotions. For example, the apple tree's fertility signifies the speaker's perceived happiness and positivity, but the tree seems uncomfortably encumbered as its "boughs are bent with thick-set fruit" (71). Perhaps the speaker is overwhelmed by her happiness and fertility, or her femininity. More specifically, she might be struggling with society's perverse expectations of femininity that she is expected to perform. Her heart balances the struggles of performance with its rewards. The speaker's personality and true feelings might go unnoticed just like those of the women who hummed "at luncheon parties . . . before the war" (Woolf 17). She dances in sync with her male partner lest she trip him, and hums to his tune lest he lose his good humour.

Placing "Maud" and "A Birthday" into conversation with each other suggests that Tennyson's narrator's lack of emotional intelligence compels him to dehumanize the character of Maud. The monologue of Tennyson's narrator imitates Shakespeare's character Hamlet through his unreliable narration and neurotic meditations on ambiguous oscillations between revulsion at and obsession over Maud's beauty. In the conversation where Hamlet protests Ophelia's perceived sexual deviances, he shifts from distinguished iambic pentameter to boorish prose which demonstrates

his declining opinion of her (3.1.1.104). With his prose he loses the veil of polite society and allows his abusive nature to be exposed. Throughout the play, Hamlet's meter continues to expose his erratic character as the tortured hero archetype. Similarly, Tennyson's narrator varies in too many forms of meter to name, and the variation exposes an erratic and unreliable archetype. Although Maud's perspective is never explicitly shared, her mental state—even through the self-centered eyes of the protagonist—becomes melancholic and withdrawn like Ophelia's. When the narrator becomes obsessed with Maud, it is only because, in his own mind, she becomes the "looking-glass" (Woolf 43) that doubles his natural size. Maud is not a person to Tennyson's narrator. The narrator falls in love with "not her, not her, but a voice" which is described as a symbol of honour and glory (Tennyson 29). In the context of Woolf's luncheon hum, the poem demonstrates how men place no value on women—and even become angry at their beauty or success—unless they serve a purpose.

Rossetti's "A Birthday," like Tennyson's "Maud," conceals the woman's thoughts, but Rossetti does this to demonstrate that there are indeed thoughts to conceal. The concision of her two-stanza poem mimics the social restraints that women in the 19th century experienced. Since women's literary voices were less valued than men's, condensing more significance into less text is authorially strategic. Ironically, Woolf's narrator still manages to degrade Rossetti's poem by only featuring the first stanza. This stanza is iambic tetrameter. The latter part of the poem, though, has a shift in meter that should be considered similarly to how the shift in meter within Hamlet and "Maud" was considered. "Iamb is by far the commonest English foot" (Abrams 169) so its use in Rossetti's first stanza embodies a sense of submission to societal norms and politeness. The second stanza is catalectic trochaic tetrameter. A trochee inverts the iamb and thus perhaps inverts her docility. Catalectic meter removes the last unstressed syllable of the line and creates a consistency of masculine endings which shrouds the shift in

meter along with the additional shift in the speaker's tone. The subtle masculine endings signal the elusive and pervasive male-imposed gendered expectations on women. With more irony, Woolf continues to ambiguate her narrator by allowing her to choose the former stanza instead of the latter (or even the whole poem). Without the pivotal aspect of the poem, Woolf shows that the 19th-century woman's hum—her already repressive, performed participation in society—might still be repressed by not only men, but by other women as well. A woman's survival depends on gaining male approval and protection for herself, and other women (especially if they demonstrate merit) are a threat.

The second stanza's tense evokes the preaching and oratory nature of Biblical texts to further resist societal norms. The speaker demands that a throne is raised, adorned with common Biblical symbols such as the dove and the pomegranate, as well as peacocks which refer to an exotic form of wealth that the wise King Solomon receives every three years (*New Oxford Annotated Version* 1 Kings 10.21–23). Only, Rossetti's are "peacocks with a hundred eyes" (Isaiah 6, Ezekial 1), which strengthen the symbolism of Solomon's wisdom and wealth but may also allude to the seraphim who guard God's throne. The speaker is ordering a godly throne to be raised in honour of "the birthday of [her] life" (Rossetti 71). This is hardly a submission to societal norms. Instead, Rossetti's poem displays the power and skill of her narrator's covert expressions of passion and advocacy. In the context of "what women hummed at [pre-war] luncheons" (Woolf 17), the second stanza of the poem demonstrates the hidden intricacy of the performance of femininity in accommodation of the more vulgar performance of masculinity. In contrast to Tennyson's narrator, Rossetti's narrator hides her true emotions for the sake of feeling and expressing them, not to relocate and dismiss them.

Rossetti's narrator inverts Christian frameworks of worship to evoke the interwar increase in frequency of women entering the workforce and forging a sort of gender solidarity. In contrast to the Biblical references in "Maud,"

Rossetti's narrator inverts the one-way human-worshipping-God power dynamic to evoke a woman worshipping her own femininity. The narrator of Rossetti's second stanza does not command to raise *Him* a throne, but instead she says, "raise me [a throne]" (71). She embodies the power of the masculine texts that she references to neutralize and humanize the projected idea of a woman, and she advocates for the worship of the authentic woman. Woolf is perhaps using this aspect of the poem as a parallel to post-Great-war feminism. During the war, wives of soldiers and sailors were granted "on the strength" (Pederson 985) work and responsibilities, and "separation allowances" (989) which allowed them monetary autonomy while the men were at war. The progress of women participating in the job industry would continue. Women participated in volunteer social work with other women, and "a sympathy born of kindred anxiety and sorrow . . . touching all hearts and homes in like manner" would create a link between classes leading the women to advocate for themselves (Pederson 992). As some women begin to rely on each other, the progress to dismantle traditional gendered performance starts to incite authority over one's voice, truth and authenticity. This disturbance of societal norms may be one of many things that causes Woolf's hum to cease after the war.

Woolf's narrator encourages the reader to believe that there was a musicality that the post-war luncheons do not have. This is one of many illusions in Woolf's essay. The levels of illusions are created by irony, symbols, and gendered performances. Once again, Woolf's narrator suggests with more questions that the war "destroyed the illusion and put truth in its place" (19). But then she struggles to define and decipher truth from illusion. That inability to distinguish is the heart of the argument. Woolf is pointing out that the foundations and woes of patriarchy and heteronormativity are one and the same. It is a cyclical relationship of concealment and disorder. But humans are not by nature categorized, and what might have once been a blissful illusion will soon be deconstructed as a systemic attempt

to organize and assimilate. Woolf's essay is a masterfully crafted literary void that puts the burden of authority and authenticity on the reader, not entirely to prove the rhetoric that performance does not equate to authenticity, but to prove that authenticity matters more to the performer. It is up to the reader to perceive and apply what they wish to their own performance, but it is not up to the reader to apply that perception to the performers (including Woolf and her narrator). The hum of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is the paradoxical illusion that is both real and invented. The performance is only an act to satisfy societal expectations, and if the reader can suspend their own expectation, they will more fully appreciate Woolf's work.

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