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Abstract

“To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction” (13) writes Marshall Berman in an attempt to grasp the vast history of modernity. This thesis will be an investigation of what this life of paradox and contradiction involves in terms of women’s corporeal experience in the early 20th century, and how this is represented in two works of modernist fiction. The novels which will be investigated are *Orlando* (1928) by Virginia Woolf and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) by Jean Rhys. The novels are connected in the sense that they are both written by female authors and provide a female perspective on the physical experience of being a woman in modernity.

Modernity involved radical transformations for women in many ways, because, historically, women were confined to the domestic sphere. In the late 19th century, however, the “New Woman” emerged as a feminist ideal, and soon women were given the opportunity to move, and even work, in the public sphere. In the large and expanding cities, women could enjoy a newfound freedom and a financial independence that they had previously been denied. Even so, it seems that the city was still a hostile place for the public woman, much because of the threat she posed to the order of patriarchal society. Both of the works in question represent the gendered manifestations of the human being in a social and cultural setting, and probe some of the challenges that the public woman emblemises.

This thesis will particularly investigate to what degree clothing defined the “New Woman”. As will be argued, clothing can be seen as an important tool for liberation because the new fashion relieved women of the heavy and restrictive garments that previously almost did not enable them to move. However, both novels engage with sartorial play in order to demonstrate how the performative features of clothes still function to restrict women. It seems that women are to a large extent imprisoned by the very tools that were meant to liberate them.

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There is no manual for becoming a woman, even though the stakes are so high.

- C. Moran, *How To Be A Woman*

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Woman in Modernity

“To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction” (13) writes Marshall Berman in his book *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (1982). Berman attempts to grasp the vast history of modernity and compares the experience of it to being poured into a maelstrom that both unites and disunites mankind. People inside the maelstrom will tend to believe that they are the only ones experiencing the struggle and confusion, when in fact, most people have been through its threatening disintegration. The sources of this maelstrom are many; advances in the physical sciences that changed the perception of humanity in the universe, technological change, an expansion in production and consumption that altered human behaviour for centuries to come, the increased tempo of life, rapid urbanisation, and mass communications binding together people and states nationwide. The result is the paradox and contradiction of «an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are” (Berman 15).

This thesis will employ Berman’s idea of modernity as a “life of paradox and contradiction” as a basis for understanding a woman’s position in this period. Historically, a woman’s body and sexuality were under the control of her father or her husband. A woman’s place was in the domestic sphere, which made this control possible. With the changes that happened in the late 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, women were able to move into the cities and enter the public sphere. They were offered room in the labour market, although what was available was mostly assistant jobs and other low-paid positions. As a result of making their own income, women enjoyed a newfound freedom and an independence that they had previously been denied.

In spite of the fact that women were granted more freedom, the public unaccompanied woman was still a fairly new sight. Walking the city streets, she was constantly put under a watchful gaze by men because they had to separate between prostitutes and simply a woman in public. A woman’s body and sexuality, uncontrolled and parading out in the open, became a symbol of the threat of immorality and vice. Thus, a society that promised women “adventure, power, joy, growth” and perhaps most importantly, “transformation”, was a

paradox because women were still seen as domestic beings whose bodies did not necessarily belong in the public sphere. It seems that the promise of transformation came with a threat of destruction, and this thesis is motivated by the curiosity to investigate how this contradiction was experienced by women and what it meant in terms of how women came to experience themselves.

1.2 The Woman in Modernism

The art that attempted to capture and describe the experience of modern life in the beginning of the 20th century is referred to as the style of modernism. Modernism is typically characterised by a shift of perspective, that is, it attempted to describe human subjectivity and the individual's relation to society (Childs 3). The modernist canon is largely characterised by works written by white men, both because writing as a profession was mostly reserved for men, and because recounting the individual's experience of society required a possession of the time and the means to be able to observe it (Childs 142). Unlike women, men were able to freely wander around the cities and to observe and describe from the outside what was going on. This phenomenon became known as the *flaneur*, and the flaneur could melt into his surroundings and avoid being seen. This perspective has, moreover, also been the focus of critics, who have tended to give more emphasis to male perceptions of early modern life.

Although the modernist canon generally lacks female voices, some women had the right set of circumstances to be able to write. Thus, in a similar manner to how women became more visible in modernity, modernism as a literary genre brought women a textual visibility (Joannou 464). Because of my interest in finding the women's perspective on the physical experience of modern society, I have chosen two different modernist novels written by two different female authors as the main materials for my research. The novels I have chosen are *Orlando* (1928) by Virginia Woolf and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) by Jean Rhys. The novels are connected in the sense that they deal with the corporeal experience of the female in the city. What is more, they provide insight into how the female protagonist struggles to define herself in the maelstrom that is modern society. The expectations that patriarchal society puts forth seems to stand in stark contrast with how she experiences herself as a woman. Thus, my aim is to investigate how Berman's contradiction and paradox is "lived and felt in the flesh" (Young 7) by these women in early modernity.

1.3 The Sartorial in Feminism

Both as a reason for and a consequence of women's changing position in society, modernity saw the first wave of feminism. The first wave was a movement that fought for women's legal and democratic rights, and the "New Woman" as a feminist ideal became a symbol of the changes that were happening for women. In 1947, Simone de Beauvoir is said to have sparked the second wave of feminism which really came to challenge the cultural perception of women. De Beauvoir opposed the cultural and social tradition of defining woman by man and thereby argued that women *become* women because they are taught from an early age how to be one. Thus, it became an important part of the feminist project to highlight society's influence on what being a woman involved.

An important part of this project was a revolution in women's fashion and clothing. Because the New Woman behaved, and thus dressed, differently from the Victorian woman, women's clothing had to undergo a transformation as well. As a result, in the early 20th century the dresses became looser so that women could move more freely and engage in activities they had previously not been able to. In addition, the streamlining of clothing production made new clothes more affordable and available, especially to the expanding middle class. Clothes used to be acquired from a tailor and were accustomed to fit a particular body, however, now clothes were being mass produced in a certain amount of sizes and it was the body that had to fit the clothes. What is more, clothing advertisements pushed through media presented an image of the ideal feminine woman dressed in the newest fashion. This created a need not only for the clothes in question, but also the need to become that particular woman. Thus, clothing can be seen as an important tool for liberation, however, at the same time, the "fashion-beauty complex" (Young 66) was created as a result of the modern capitalist market making money off women always wanting to purchase the newest fashion. Fashion comes with a promise of happiness and joy that will never be fulfilled, and the complex makes women feel inadequate for not wearing the right garments. Thus, it seems that women both became liberated and imprisoned by the same tools.

Because of the significance of clothing and fashion to feminism and the image of the modern woman, as well as its potential to unravel women's "secret subjectivity" (Koppen 1), the thesis will also aim to investigate these themes in the chosen novels. As a preliminary conclusion, it seems that both Woolf and Rhys particularly engage with sartorial play, that is, they play with clothing as a way to challenge gender roles, and to show how clothes can

function to both restrict and liberate women. According to Randi Koppen, Woolf engages with the sartorial because

sartorial items appear as objects of the everyday, phenomenal world that are particularly suited not only to investigations of modern relations between subject and object, but to the experience of a 'modern materialism', imbued with the potential of alternative rationalities and the existence of other worlds. (xi)

As a cultural analyst, Woolf's perspective on clothing provides a comprehensive analysis of its significance to the modern body and of the modern body in general in its social and cultural settings.

Ulrich Lehmann has argued that the hallmark of modernity is found in the reflection of sartorial fashion (Joannou 463). Maroula Joannou therefore points out that it is crucial to investigate Rhys's engagement with the sartorial in order to understand the female urban experience. According to Joannou

'good' clothing is the prerequisite of corporeal movement in modern urban space for many of Rhys's stylish, cosmopolitan women, whose unease about their psychic identity and sense of ontological insecurity is often displaced onto the perennial question of what to wear. (463)

In other words, a closer examination of the sartorial elements in *Good Morning, Midnight* can disclose important insight into a woman's experience of and existence in the modern metropolis, both on a physical and a mental level.

In connection to the significance of what a woman wears, the thesis will also engage with the claim that femininity or womanliness is actually something which can be worn. Joan Riviere compares womanliness to a "masquerade" (94) and argues that these two are, in fact, the same thing. Riviere explains that "the mask of femininity" (95) is something women put on in fear of men discovering that they lack the typical feminine traits or actually possess knowledge, thoughts and ideas which are typically considered to be masculine. Ultimately, the feminine becomes a theatrical performance that women adopt because of the ideology that is being promulgated by patriarchal society.

1.4 What is a Woman Today?

Today, we are still in the modern period and these female voices can be said to have paved the way for the modern understanding of woman. Although a lot has changed since the Woman Question was debated and since Simone de Beauvoir claimed that women are seen as the “Other” in relation to man, contemporary feminists argue that the image of the woman as a second rate citizen has remained to this day (Young 3). As a theoretical orientation to further investigate a woman’s lived experience in modernity and the novels relevance for today’s readers, the thesis will mainly consider contemporary feminist theories laid forth by Toril Moi and Iris Marion Young.

In understanding the concept of woman, Moi’s critically acclaimed essay “What Is a Woman?” (2005) argues that the categories of sex and gender are no longer adequate to explain sexual differences in humans. Moi rather suggests that feminists should return to Simone de Beauvoir for a better understanding of the body. Thus, according to Moi and de Beauvoir, the body can better be understood as a situation. Humans are always in the process of defining themselves, and this is a process that only comes to an end with death. As a result, women, or men, can never be defined in fixed categories.

Along the same lines as Moi, Young argues that terms such as “body experience” and “lived body” (7) are better and more flexible ways for understanding and describing female subjectivity as this is experienced by themselves. Young is concerned with the sociocultural context that surrounds the body and how it shapes the body’s freedom to act in accordance with its environment. Both of these theories will be applied in my reading of the modernist novels in question. My hope is that they will offer a deeper perspective on the corporeal experience as described by Woolf and Rhys.

2. Literary Review, or The Modern Woman

2.1 The Revolt of Modernism

Modernity as a time of great change and progress led artists to push for a change in modes of representation in order to express the sensations of the new world. The attempt to capture the modern disintegrating experience resulted in a new literary style called modernism. The label of modernism refers to literature written from around 1890 to 1930 that, among other things, “attempts to render human subjectivity...to represent consciousness, perception, emotion, meaning and individual’s relation to society” (Childs 3). As a cultural reaction to war, technological development, industrialisation, the rise of capitalism and belief in productivity, artists saw the need for a more complex and compressed style of writing, which adequately captured the human psyche. Thus, modernist novels are often introspective, and comprise an attempt to “climb inside the mind” and liberate oneself of bodily desire (Childs 8).

Furthermore, according to Berman, modernist writing tends to overthrow tradition and all existing values and seeks to destroy and revolutionise. Therefore, at one point, it became associated with revolt. Berman argues that the problem with this image of modernism as the troubling contrast to society, is that, in reality, society was not free of trouble at all (30-31). The truth was that the consequences and contradictions of modernity were many and layered, and the art merely reflected the state of the nation.

A part of modernism’s revolt included a rejection of “bourgeois politics, which advocated reform not radical change” (Childs 21). In other words, this period also saw an increase in the critique of established social practices and norms with the goal of transforming institutions and structures that were seen as harmful or obsolete. As a consequence of such a mindset, literature saw an inclusion of voices that had previously been excluded. An important example of this is female writers, who entered the scene and not only problematised the existing gender stereotypes, but also challenged current and historical beliefs about women’s bodies and sexuality. Previously, most women had failed to gain access to writing as a profession because it meant abandoning one’s responsibilities in the domestic sphere (Childs 22). Newfound work and educational opportunities now gave more women the right set of circumstances to be able to write. However, it should also be noted that critics have argued that women have largely been excluded when discussing modernist writing, and the modernist canon has, until recent years, mostly included men (Childs 142).

This thesis, however, will focus on *Orlando* (1928) by Virginia Woolf and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) by Jean Rhys, two modernist novels written by women which provide insight into the female experience of modernity. They both focus on the physical modern body, with all that this entails in terms of questioning sex and gender, sexuality, capitalist fashion-consumer culture as well as both the liberty and dangers of being in the public sphere as a woman. In *Orlando*, Woolf tackles the question of what it means in a psychological manner to be a woman and how we might liberate ourselves from gender ideology in order to be free human beings on a mental and physical level. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys investigates the relative freedom or captivity of the cosmopolitan woman. She focuses on the challenges the woman might face in terms of poverty, middle age, lack of proper attire and just pure femaleness. Even though the two novels tackle some of the same issues, they also discuss different aspects of the female experience and they do this from two very different perspectives and come to different conclusions. This is what the thesis will be an investigation of, and it will start off by explaining the wind of change for women that made its way across Europe in the late 19th century.

2.2 The Woman Question

The nature of women, that is, the debate to establish what women's roles and rights in a changing society should involve, had been thoroughly discussed for several years, and was referred to as the Woman Question. The question became highly visible in the 19th century with the women's suffrage campaign (Osborne 19). The campaign involved women in the Western world fighting for civil rights, justice and equality, seeking the same democratic rights and educational opportunities as men. The fight continued into the 20th century and the overall movement has later been referred to as the first wave of feminism. The women who were involved were often referred to as the "New Woman", which, in a political sense, pointed to those "who were in favour of emancipation and female independence" (Childs 224). As a feminist ideal, the New Woman exercised control over her own life, thereby changing the social roles and women's sexual life.

The New Woman and the first-wave feminism both changed the manner in which women existed in society as well as people's perception of women in general. However, it was the second-wave feminism that really came to challenge the cultural perception of women. Central to this movement was the French writer, philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir argued that women were seen as the "Other" in society and that man was, in fact,

viewed as the default sex. In *The Second Sex* (1949), she explains that because society is organized as a patriarchy, men are the ones who get to define women, and women are thus defined in relation to man. Furthermore, de Beauvoir argues that because girls are brought up differently than boys, their femininity is imposed upon them by society. From they are born, girls are taught how they are expected to behave and think of themselves as women. Thus, feminist theorists saw the need to explain and highlight the influence culture and society have upon what it means to be a woman. The result was a theory that separates sex from gender. Sex was seen as biological, thus belonging to the body, and gender a social construction and a psychological category (Moi 3-4; 22).

The separation between sex and gender was important for feminist theory in order to challenge the biological determinism which held that there are physiological reasons for why women should not hold certain rights (Moi 5; 15). Even though this division is still commonly used in contemporary language, it has been largely criticized by feminists since the 1970s for its implications of biological determinism that actually follows the image that is presented of sex. In *Sex, Gender and the Body* (2005), the feminist writer Toril Moi explains that because the category of sex is seen as a part of the body it becomes an essence that is stable, fixed and natural (4). Poststructuralist feminist theory, such as laid forth by Judith Butler, strongly opposes this. At the same time, however, her critique of the division uses it as her starting point, which is why Moi argues that Butler's theory does not achieve its goal. In short, her premises are wrong. In her writings, Moi instead argues for a push beyond the separation of essentialism and constructionism and offers a different way of looking at gender and subjectivity. According to Moi, "the narrow parameters of sex and gender will never adequately explain the experience and meaning of sexual difference in human beings (36). In other words, the division into these two categories only results in limiting the possibilities that humans have to define themselves. Moi holds that women, and men, are always in the process of making themselves what they are, and, as a result, they can never be strictly defined in one category or another (63).

Moi's theories are concerned around the question "what is a woman?", and she actually argues that feminists should return to the theories of de Beauvoir for an answer. Moi claims that de Beauvoir has been largely misunderstood, partly because of meanings lost in translations from French. For Beauvoir, what makes a woman a woman is the usual biological and anatomical sexual characteristics. However, there are no necessary social and political consequences that follow this. To Beauvoir, our bodies are an outline or a sketch of the kind of projects it is possible for us to have. Therefore, the body can be understood as a situation

and it becomes what the situation makes of it. As a result of this, individual choices or social and ethical norms cannot be deduced from the structure of the human body itself. Thus, according to Moi and de Beauvoir, the answer to the question “what is a woman?” is “it depends”. A woman is not a fixed reality, rather a becoming. To say “I am a woman” means “I exist as a woman” (Moi 117). Existence is a continuing process that only ends with death.

The core of Moi and de Beauvoir’s argument consists of the claim that the freedom women have to define themselves is incarnated, that is, it can be acted only through their bodies. The body is therefore a fundamental kind of situation because it plays an important role in the lived experience of being a woman. A woman’s body and its meaning are thus tied to the way she uses her freedom (Moi 65). Freedom, according to Beauvoir, is as a result not absolute but situated. A woman’s lived experience and the situation(s) her body is placed in will determine what becomes of her body, and further shape her experience of the body. Finally, Beauvoir points out that “greater freedom will produce new ways of being a woman” (Moi 66). In other words, what matters in the question of what a woman is, are the values, norms and demands a woman will face in society, which will contribute in making her a woman.

In a similar manner, Iris Marion Young in *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (2005) explains that when writing about the female body, she does not see the body as a thing to observe or study. She rather refers to “body experience”, which aims to “describe subjectivity and women’s experience as lived and felt in the flesh” (Young 7). With this perspective, Young follows Moi and de Beauvoir in attempting to describe a woman’s lived experience from her own point of view. Young devotes an essay in her collection to the question of subjectivity and gender, which is entitled “Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity”. Here, the lived body is understood as “a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is a body-in-situation” (Young 16). What Young emphasises here is that a person can never escape his or her body, nor the given environment one finds oneself in. The body will have certain qualities and attributes, and the environment will be shaped by current sociocultural processes and be shared with other people. The person, however, will have a certain freedom to act, define oneself and construct one’s reality according to one’s surroundings. In other words, according to Young and Moi, the category of the lived body can replace gender as a better alternative of understanding bodies and subjectivity. The idea of the lived body acknowledges that a person will be affected by the sociocultural context as well as how other people behave towards her. These factors are out of her control, but how she

chooses to take up and act in relation to these factors is up to her (Young 18). Young agrees with Moi that the lived body is a more flexible concept than gender for understanding and theorizing a woman's body and subjectivity. Young however, concludes that the concept of gender is important for understanding the uneven distribution of power and opportunities for men and women in patriarchal society.

Modernity changed what it meant to be a woman in the world, and the new ways of living, especially in the cities, expanded the freedom a woman had to make of her situation. Thus, Moi's and Young's understanding of the body are highly relevant for recognising the modern female experience and the reason why I have chosen them as the theoretical background for the reading of the novels.

2.3 The Modern Dress Reform

The many newfound freedoms and rights experienced by women in modernity which originated in the first and second-wave feminism and the concept of the New Woman, included a radical change in the way women dressed. The Victorian way of dressing for women was based on enhancing the features men typically found attractive, and therefore included wearing corsets to slim the waist, combined with skirts or dresses, which often were heavy and restricted movement as a result. This way of dressing also contributed to a clearer gender division, because women were not supposed to wear, and could not work wearing, these garments, apart from doing light domestic work. In an attempt to liberate the female body, late 19th century dress reform included looser garments and shorter skirts which eased movement and actually gave women more agency (Koppen 15). Now, women were for instance able to ride bicycles and could get around more easily. Oscar Wilde predicted that the dress reform would be a symbol of modernity because "women, as a rule, are always trying to show their sympathy with the movement and tendencies of the age, by the symbolism of dress, since they are prohibited from taking any part in the actual work of life" (qtd. in Koppen 15). In sum then, women in loose dresses, and eventually even pants, became not only a symbol of the New Woman, but a symbol of the changes that were occurring for women in general in this period.

The symbolism of clothing and fashion in literature can face the risk of being dismissed as trivial matters, however, the image of a woman dressed in traditional men's clothing actually symbolizes an important deeper meaning of change to social structures. In *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity* (2009) Randi Koppen explains why the

presence and significance of clothes in modern fiction is worth exploring. Clothes, according to Koppen, can tell us something about everyday life in a particular historical period and “the relations of clothes to culture can be thought of as constitutive to the extent that clothes as embodied cultural practice contribute to bringing forth and *performing* culture...” (1). As symbols, clothes can “signify the place of individual bodies in social, economic, or sexual orders” (ibid). As objects, they can be tied to historical moments and tell us something about the structure of society as well as everyday life. On a phenomenological level, they are bound up with memory and sensations. In other words, clothes as material, symbolic and psychological carry meaning, history and tradition.

If we view clothes as a cultural expression, we can also largely analyse modernity as a cultural and historical period by looking at clothing conventions. Before anything else, clothes were exchanged in large amounts in the department stores in the busy cities through what became known as consumer culture. Furthermore, the expanding textile industry became a symbol of the new production methods and technological advancements brought forth in this period. Clothing thus became a commodity that was very important for the modern prosperous economy and market (Koppen 2). What is more, as Koppen reminds us, it is important to note that we usually encounter clothes on a body and not as separate entities. Therefore, Koppen argues that garments can be seen as an “imagined extensions of the self” (2) because of the part they play in presenting the body to others.

Because the fashion system functions in a way that enables it to determine what individuals should wear and look like, it can, in fact, limit the individual’s freedom to express the self. In spite of this, critics have argued that it is precisely fashion that modern civilized nations have in common and what separates them from primitive societies. Koppen cites Adolf Loos who argues that

Our century has done away with dress code regulations. Everyone now enjoys the right to dress as he pleases, even like the king if he wants. The level of a nation’s culture can be measured by how many of its citizens take advantage of this newly acquired freedom. (qtd. in Koppen 6)

Arguably, the fashion industry of modernity changed dress code regulations, perhaps most visibly for women. However, there is still a form of social regulation at play, a voluntary consensus that is called fashion and that restricts freedom of expression. Clothes’ position at

the interface between subject and object can function as a medium for social adaptation, at the same time as it provides different corporealities such as for class or gender.

Because of the significance of the symbolism of clothing in modernist literature, as well the potential of fashion to be both liberating and imprisoning, the thesis will investigate how elements of the sartorial are present in the novels and what it implies in terms of female freedom and restriction. The following part will explain Woolf's engagement with the sartorial, and how it is linked to feminine ideology.

2.4 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* and Sartorial Play

When discussing fashion in modernity, Koppen is especially concerned with the writings of Virginia Woolf, because she adopts a stand almost like a contemporary historian and “thinks through clothes in her representations of the present, her explorations of the archives of the past, and her projections for the future” (xi). As a cultural analyst and criticist, Woolf wrote about the tension that occurred during her visits to department stores and her reluctant relationship to clothes and fashion. She incorporated her analysis of the performative and imaginary aspects of clothing into her writing, and Koppen argues that it characterizes much of her work. What is more, Koppen refers to her “famous clothes-consciousness” that proposes “readings of her work in the context of shopping, masquerade, and cross-dressing, as well as exploring the complexities and contradictions of her engagement with a fashionable modernism, commodity culture and the cultural marketplace” (ibid.).

Virginia Woolf is actually considered one of the leading modernist writers, in spite of the fact that few female writers have been canonised. As a modernist author, Woolf found herself inside Berman's maelstrom and – as a result – rejected the linear narrative and developed her own style by using interior monologue and stream of consciousness narrative in order to convey the truth of human experience (Greenblatt 2143). Woolf was born in London in 1882 into an academic family and was able to educate herself in her father's library. After experiencing several tragic deaths in her family, as well as a mental breakdown, she settled in the bohemian district of Bloomsbury. Together with two of her brothers, her painter sister and a group of writers and artists she formed “The Bloomsbury Group”, a circle of intellectuals that came to influence the 1920s cultural London. They also became known for their eccentric clothing, open discussion around sexuality, cross dressing and having same-sex lovers. Woolf married Leonard Woolf and together they founded the Hogarth Press which published most of her writing, as well as the works of other famous authors such as

Sigmund Freud and T.S. Elliot. While still married to Leonard, Woolf fell in love with the bisexual poet Vita Sackville-West, and their relationship, as well as the frankness of The Bloomsbury Group, inspired Woolf to explore gender and identity in her writing.

Woolf's experimental, playful and parodic novel *Orlando*, written in 1928, is introduced as a biography that is dedicated to Sackville-West. Sackville-West was a well-known personality in the 1920s for her bisexuality and her theatrical cross-dressing. She would, for instance, frequently be seen dressed in men's clothing and calling herself "Julian" (Koppen 46). Orlando, the protagonist poet and aristocrat of Woolf's novel, possesses striking similarities to Sackville-West and her unconventional life, through habits such as frequent cross-dressing, and changing of gender identity as well as sexual partners.

In this novel, Woolf particularly employs sartorial play, that is, playing with clothes in the novel as a literary technique, to highlight their social function as both restrictive and liberating. There was actually an overall tendency of sartorial play in modernity to challenge the set gender roles, and dressing up in costumes, but also cross dressing and playing with sexual stereotypes, became a symbol of the 1920s sexuality (Koppen 27). Koppen argues that clothing allows for nearly endless ways of doing this, in the same way as the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality also involves endless possibilities. Referring to a portrait of Orlando, Koppen states that the sexual ambiguity shown in the clothes he is wearing is a polymorphic performance because "clothes are cast in a variety of roles sometimes representative of anatomy, sometimes of gender; sometimes repressive, sometimes liberating" in order to explore and assert unstable and mutable relationships (47). In other words, Woolf challenges the traditional stereotypes of sex and gender, and playing with clothes becomes a method for showing how fluid these concepts really are. My reading of *Orlando* will use this statement as a starting point for looking at how Woolf actually does this in her novel.

2.4.1 Gender as Ideology

Historically, cross dressing is a very old concept and in the Elizabethan era when women were not allowed on a theatrical stage, all the female parts in Shakespeare's plays had to be acted by men dressed up as women (Orgel 1). Shakespeare also played with this in the plot of his plays, such as in *Twelfth Night*, where a woman (played by a man) hides her identity and causes a lot of confusion by dressing up as a man. The audience seemed to have no trouble whatsoever determining who was a boy and who was a girl, mostly because of the clothes the actors were wearing. In this sense, gender becomes something performative, something that

can be convincingly acted out. The learned repetition of this performance reinforces the gender roles and stereotypes, and actually ends up producing the individual. A performance requires an audience, however, and Henry Sayre writes in his essay “Performance” that “each member of the audience... possesses some idea of what the “master” work ought to sound or look like, and each performance is measured against this theoretical standard” (91). Thus, gender performativity always aims towards this “hypothetical ‘perfect’” (ibid.), which is socially constructed and reinforced, and thus creates an artificial binary of the sexes.

Such questions of gender, that is, its fluidity and its relationship to the body, are one of the main concerns in *Orlando*. The actual term “gender” is not present in Woolf’s language, but it is clear that she is referring to and exploring a different type of concept than just biological sex. About halfway through the novel, Orlando undergoes a mysterious biological sex change from man to woman, but does not seem to take any notice of it. Simultaneously, Orlando lives for hundreds of years and gets to experience the different historical and cultural period’s effects upon what it means to be a woman. In other words, Orlando’s identity presumably does not change as a result of the sex change per se, but it is rather forced to change and adapt in order to conform to society’s current expectations of her gender.

A society’s expectations of its subjects are referred to as ideology. According to Louis Althusser, ideology is “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1300). Althusser was concerned with how human subjects are shaped by dominant social systems through ideology, and how these social systems are reproduced in order to reinforce and secure their existence. In a capitalist society, Althusser names these social systems “ideological state apparatuses” (ISAs) because they include state institutions such as churches, schools, art, political parties, the media and sports (1284), and they do not get their power from force, but from *consent*. Ideology as imaginary works similarly to Sigmund Freud’s theories of the unconscious; it is something we are born into and it unconsciously influences everything we do. Furthermore, Althusser sees the schools and the education system as contemporary society’s most important ISAs, because children learn “submission to the rules of the established order” (1287) from an early age. If gender is a result of ideology then, powerful organized systems play a part in reinforcing – and perhaps even creating – its existence.

Woolf’s innovative treatment of sexuality and gender combined with the long-spanned time frame of *Orlando* can be seen in relation to Myra Jehlen’s claim that “gender is a matter of ideology” (272). In her essay on gender, Jehlen explores how *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is seen as a “great book” and a classic because of its proclaimed theme of

“the autonomy of the individual” (265), but as Jehlen points out, this category of the “individual” does not include women, nor blacks or Asians. “The individual” or Huck, is because of his circumstances separated from society and becomes an “emblem of individualism” (Jehlen 266). In an attempt to conceal his identity as a runaway, Huck dresses up as a girl in a bonnet and a gown, but his disguise is revealed by a middle-aged woman called Judith who puts his new gender identity to the test. Huck tries to play the role of a girl, but fails, and Jehlen argues that the nature of gender is reversed when Judith calls his bluff and lectures him on his flawed performance. Femininity, as well as masculinity, becomes a social structure when Judith separates herself from it and analyses it from the outside. With proper knowledge of these structures, anyone can act as a boy or a girl, and this is what Judith has done to call out Huck’s disguise as in fact, an act.

If femininity is a social structure, Jehlen also argues that femininity “is a performance, and not a natural mode of being” and that “femininity... is something women *do*” (269). Judith tells Huck that his performance might have been able to fool a man, but never a woman. The problem was not the disguise itself nor the attempt at concealing his masculinity, instead, what gave him off was his lack of construction of the feminine. Huck could not perform the feminine tasks, because he is used to performing them in a masculine way. Jehlen concludes that Judith’s remarks reflect her gender ideology, that is, she believes that women do things in a certain way and that this separates them from men.

In “Womanliness as a masquerade” (1929), Joan Riviere first presented the idea of femininity as performative, stating that women “put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and retribution feared from men” (91). Riviere deals with the modern intellectual woman who holds academic positions that were previously reserved to men only, or that, more recently, exclusively consisted of the masculine type of women. Now, female professors also take on the roles as wives, mothers and housewives and have “feminine interests” such as “their personal appearance” (ibid.) Riviere turns to psychoanalytic theory in order to explain this type of woman, however, what is interesting about her argument is the fact that she claims that these women put on a performance of femininity. The mask of womanliness is worn to hide what is considered to be masculine features and to avoid anxiety, and women tend to act out a part as uneducated and foolish in meetings with men. Furthermore, Riviere argues that there is no such thing as genuine womanliness, only the masquerade. In the same way that Huck’s performance could not fool a woman, Riviere states that “it is significant that this woman’s mask, though transparent to other women, was successful with men and served

its purpose very well” (99). The performance is thus reinforced, because it attracts men and the men show women favour.

The idea of femininity as ideology and womanliness as a masquerade will be important for my reading of *Orlando*, as well as the exploration of Orlando’s sometimes contradictory understanding of who she is. The question of identity will be further explained in the following part.

2.4.2 Gender and Identity in *Orlando*

Orlando is introduced as a biography, which is a literary attempt at capturing and portraying someone’s true self. The question of what the self actually consists of has puzzled philosophers and writers for centuries. Various attempts at capturing or describing it has led to different definitions of identity, and, as Bennet & Royle point out in their chapter called “Me”, “literature is the space in which questions about the nature of personal identity are most provocatively articulated” (151). Furthermore, Bennet & Royle refer to the recent change of language in referring to the self as “subject”, as opposed to the “individual”. This refers back to Althusser’s definition of ideology, in which the self is not detached from its “conditions of existence”, as well as the fact that the self is self-conscious, self-reflective and aware of its existence. Finally, Freud’s psychoanalytic theory added the somewhat disturbing element that makes us subject to our own self, that is, the unconscious. Forces we (for the most part) are unaware of affect the way we think, act and speak (Bennet & Royle 153). Therefore, there seems to be a shift from viewing the self as autonomous and unchanging, to one that is reliant on its circumstances, which in turn will affect the unconscious.

In *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (2014), Hans Renders and Binne De Haan try to provide the reader with an overview over the history of the modern biography. They explain that a biography was supposed to provide a description of the history of someone’s life, and that the person in question had to have a “special talent” or “exceptional destiny”, which meant that the subjects were often politicians, kings or bishops (Renders and De Haan 12). A biography is thus linked to national culture and history, because the subject in question would have been important and well-known enough to deserve a biography, and for that reason also play an important part in a nation’s identity (Renders and De Haan 20). Renders and De Haan further argue that although there is a difference between hystographies and biographies, biographies are a non-fiction genre. They refer to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, who held as a principle that

a biography should be commemorative, that is, to give respect to and remember the individual in question. The biographer was supposed to be the sidecar passenger, simply observing the subject's life and doings (Renders and De Haan 34-35). However, sometimes the biographer was commissioned to write the biography in order to restore the subject's reputation or enhance his good sides or deeds (Renders and De Haan 24). The biographer then becomes omniscient, instead of the absent, objective storyteller that the genre demands. In their chapter on the roots of biography, Renders and De Haan moreover ask "is it so important to be able to classify a book under a specific genre?" (31). They conclude that the answer is yes, because "it is an unwritten code that we wish to know whether something is true or false" (31). People would expect that everything the biography said about the subjects' life was true because the genre itself is non-fiction.

Although *Orlando* is dedicated to and inspired by Sackville-West's life, there seems to be at least one additional reason for Woolf choosing the format of the biography. Woolf's father Sir Leslie Stephen was actually the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and wrote biographies of great men that aimed for a better understanding of a historical period because "the singular individual mirrored the age" (Burns 345). The term "individual" here, again, refers to men, as the genre of biography was a thoroughly male genre. What is more, it was especially important for the biographer to convey the whole truth about the identity of the great individual in question. In *Orlando*, Woolf casts the narrator in the role of the biographer, and he has to admit on several occasions the limitations of knowledge about its subject the biographer actually can possess. Thus, in many ways, *Orlando* can be referred to as an anti-biography based on the fact that it exposes the limitations of the genre as well as its subject being a woman.

To fulfil the biography's purpose of disclosing the truth was possible because Stephen and his generation held a firm belief in the image of identity as unchangeable and fixed. As we have seen, modernists typically abandoned this image in favour of an image of identity as fragmented. In "Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*", Kirsty Burns points to Woolf's use of biography as a conscious choice to deconstruct the traditional image of identity, and she argues that, rather than looking for "the single thread" of personal identity as *Orlando*'s biographer seemingly does, the novel is about deconstructing these essentialist ideas in a parodic way. Burns positions herself between the conflicting views of the self as either constant and unchanged by external factors, or ever changing, impacted by social and historical circumstances. Furthermore, Burns examines the tensions between essentialism and what she calls

“contextually re-defined subjectivity” (344). In other words, Burns argues that in writing her novel, Woolf was mockingly combining the attempts of a biography to capture the essential self, with the modern project of capturing the changing subjectivity. In *Orlando*, Woolf is distancing herself from the essentialist thinking of her father’s generation, as well as mocking the male genre by writing a biography about a woman. Thus, according to Burns, Woolf parodically destructs the narrator’s attempt to defend the essential self and moves toward the modern understanding of subjectivity.

In addition to the attempt at re-defining self-construction, Woolf also embarks on a journey to discover how much of the self is essentially our own and how much resistance it has against social pressure. After Orlando’s sex change, the narrator comments that Orlando remained exactly the same, and it is not until she changes her clothes that an actual gender transformation occurs, and she has to deal with her new sex. Burns therefore argues that “clothing – that external social trapping – pressures her to conform with social expectations of gendered behaviour” (351). As a woman, Orlando has to dress in a certain way in order to be accepted as a feminine woman. Because this restricts her freedom, Orlando starts engaging in cross-dressing to both expand her possibilities but also to access the possibilities reserved to men. Burns also argues that “the category of ‘woman’ ...is produced and restrained by the very structures of power which emancipation is sought” (356). In other words, what it means to be a woman is defined within the system of patriarchy which is precisely the system women want to escape. Burns concludes that the act of cross dressing can allow one to challenge the system from within, to “perform subjectivity” in line with social expectations (356).

My reading will focus on *Orlando* as an anti-biography with the aim of understanding why Woolf chose this particular format as a frame for her project. Orlando, or Vita Sackville-West, were not “great men” that deserved a biography, but for Woolf they were important because they symbolised a model for the modern woman.

2.4.3 Androgyny

In *Orlando*, Woolf was not only challenging the male dominated genre of biography, she was also challenging the male dominated social system she and her literary figures found themselves in. In “A Study of Gender Performativity in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Mocking Biography*”, Mahboubeh Moslehi and Nozar Niazi argue that by having Orlando exhibit male *and* female characteristics, Woolf is deconstructing the view of gender as two binary

categories in opposition, and rather seems to view gender as socially determined. Moslehi and Niazi also point out that clothes are significant in the novel to further substantiate the social construction of gender. Similar to Burns, Moslehi and Niazi argue that gender norms are constructed through repetition. They state that “Orlando experiences the advantages and disadvantages of both sexes in each age and discovers that the differences between men and women are socially constructed and defined” (6). Moreover, by cross-dressing, Orlando demonstrates how gender norms can be challenged and reversed. Thus, Moslehi and Niazi find that, ultimately, there is a contrast “between Orlando’s appearance and her essence” (2) which Woolf postulates by having Orlando be an androgynous character.

The Cambridge dictionary defines *androgynous* as “having both male and female features” (“Androgynous”). Woolf’s engagement with androgyny in *Orlando* led her to develop a theory of the androgynous mind. In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), the essay that followed *Orlando*, she discusses the position of women in further detail and presents her theory. The essay was based on lectures Woolf held to female students at Cambridge University and deals with the effects of gender differences and oppression of women. Among other things, she explores the “...perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet” (Woolf, “A Room” 2264). What is more, she criticizes the Victorian Woman, or Angel in the House, as she calls her. The Angel tries to influence her writing and make it more “feminine”, and Woolf ends up killing her. She arrives at the conclusion that all female writers have to kill the Angel in the House to avoid aiming for a female perspective in literature. What is more, after seeing a couple getting into a taxi, she describes a feeling of her mind previously being divided, now coming together as a whole again. This leads her to argue for a literature that is “androgynous in mind” (Greenblatt 2144) so that it includes and speaks to both sexes. An androgynous mind is a marriage of minds; it contains a balance of masculinity and femininity and is not only the best in terms of creativity, but it does not think separately of sex.

Woolf’s reinvention of the androgynous, sexed being has received a lot of attention from critical scholars. In “‘What Phantasmagoria the Mind Is’: Reading Virginia Woolf’s Parody of Gender”, Esther Sánchez-Pardo González, much like Moslehi and Niazi, argues that in *Orlando*, Woolf deconstructs the gender binary and resolves the contradictory gender appearances of Orlando by having him be an androgynous character. However, along the same lines as Koppen, González postulates that Woolf’s idea of an androgynous, genderless being is not an attempt at escaping the feminine and masculine but is in fact the invention of a being where both sexes are united in the mind, as later suggested in *A Room of One’s Own*,

and that this union actually can be considered fertile. According to Woolf: "...the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; it transmits emotion without impediment; it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (77). This somewhat ambiguous definition of androgyny does not state, according to González, whether the two sexes neutralize each other or if one of them acts as the governor, at least physically. Woolf does not address what González calls the "sexual ontology" of the androgynous being and González claims that the portraits of Orlando as a man with feminine traits and as a woman with masculine traits must mean that androgyny is a man-womanly or a woman-manly (78). Therefore, González seems to conclude that although the sexes are united in the mind, one of them must act as leader.

The ambiguity in Woolf's writing is further emphasized by González in her reading of the sex-change scene in *Orlando*. González argues that it is unclear whether Orlando actually undergoes a sex change or not, suggesting that either he was already, biologically, a woman, or, in his mind, he was man-womanly. Because of "Orlando's inability to distinguish gender in the Other [it] mirrors his subjective vision of himself" (González 77). In other words, Orlando has always been unsure of his own sex and for this reason has trouble determining other people's sex as well. Furthermore, critics have also raised the question whether Orlando perhaps always has been masquerading, either as a man or as a woman. To provide an answer to this question, González refers to Riviere, who suggested that femininity and masquerade are the same thing; namely theatrical. The feminine essence does not exist, and feminine stereotypes and clichés have been created in literature and reappropriated by culture and convention (González 80). The feminine is like a "prosthetic appendage" that "deforms, conceals and creates the idea of a woman" (González 81). Therefore, Woolf, in *Orlando*, rejects the idea of femininity and creates an androgynous being that has neutralized his sex.

In spite of the discussions of the nature of sex and gender, Koppen reminds us out that Woolf makes it clear that what *Orlando* is concerned with is aesthetic theory, not sexology (61). Anything human is subject to change, and for Woolf an androgynous mind is a human mind that "does not let 'I' get in the way of expression" (Koppen 63). In other words, a mind not run by the ego is Woolf's model for modern and ethical gender relations, and in *Orlando*, this theory is represented by the characters cross-dressing and the flexible properties of clothing. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf formulates the social and material conditions that is necessary to allow for the theory of the androgynous mind to exist and its writing to come into existence. Clothes play an important part in Woolf's project as signifiers and they perform at the interface between subject and object.

2.5 Jean Rhys and Modern Life in The City

The city, with its impressive structures and cosmopolitan lifestyle, became perhaps the most prominent symbolic expression of modernity. People emigrated in masses into the great western cities which resulted in rapid growth and expansion. When trying to capture and explain the new and dizzying life in the cities, Berman turns to the troubled voice of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In Rousseau's novel *The New Eloise*, the protagonist Saint-Preux writes a letter to his love and tries to put into words his experiences of "wonder and dread" after having moved to the city stating that "everything is absurd, but nothing is shocking, because everyone is accustomed to everything" (Berman 17-18). Saint-Preux tries to find something solid to hold onto but realizes that in order to enjoy all the new experiences offered, one has to constantly change one's principles and live in contradiction with oneself.

A similar description of modern life in the city can be found in the novels of the Dominican born Jean Rhys. As an author, Rhys has to no extent experienced the same recognition as Woolf has, and her novels have, until recent years, largely been excluded from the modernist canon. Rhys was a Creole woman living in Europe and her novels express the self-lived experience of alienation in the 20th century. The novel *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) was written some ten years after Woolf's *Orlando* and is also partly biographical. The novel deals with the "wonder and dread" of modern city life, as Rousseau named it, as well as past and present trauma's effect on subjectivity and female sexuality. Large parts of *Good Morning, Midnight* is written as an interior monologue spoken by the narrator-protagonist Sasha Jansen. Sasha is a middle-aged woman who is recovering from prior traumatic experiences, and through her inner thoughts and discussions with herself, as well as in her meetings with others, we get insight into how she deals with depression, alienation and confusion as she tries to navigate the 1930's Paris alone. The novel was poorly received and deemed too depressing by critics when first published, as people wanted to read something uplifting after the terrible war they had just seen.

Although women in the cities enjoyed a newfound sense of freedom, Laura De La Parra Fernández argues that the city was still "hostile to women who fail to perform conventional standards of femininity" (215). In "Subversive Wanderings in the City of Love: Constructing the Female Body in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*" Fernández explores how women could live on their own in the cities due to the high demand of work force, as well as the fashion and beauty industry's need for female consumers. Women were now able to provide for themselves and did not have to rely on their fathers or husbands for financial

support. The feminine ideals from the Victorian period got rejected in favour of a woman in control of her own body and sexuality. This created a chaos in the order of the patriarchal system and even threatened the position of men who could be lured into vice. The presence of women unaccompanied in public became a question of moral, because men could not know whether they were public women or prostitutes.

In spite of the financial freedom that was made available to women, Paris as the city of love did not really have a place for the single and thus vulnerable woman. Sasha has gotten too old to qualify for the jobs she was previously viewed as qualified for and she has to rely on men for financial support. Fernández also refers to Riviere and argues that in order to get the right attention from men “Sasha faces the plight of having to perform the ‘masquerade of womanliness’” (219). Ultimately, femininity comes with the promise of romantic love and Sasha relentlessly tries to act out the role and wear the mask of femininity in order to somehow achieve this. According to Fernández her failing performance reveals how femininity itself fails at its promise, because it exposes its exploitations of women and the consequences that follow a participation in the act. The streets are not in fact safe for Sasha, and suspicious looks and threats of violence follow her everywhere when she wanders the city alone.

Fernández also point to the part clothes play in the masquerade. Sasha uses clothing as a means to make her performance convincing, and cosmetics and fashion thus becomes a protective shield against the threatening looks people give her. In trying to present herself like “une femme convenable”, Sasha both performs the role to others, as well as attempting to ease her own anxiety with the masquerade, and Fernández concludes that “identity can thus be bought, worn, performed” (221). While Sasha seems to be very aware of her performance and aware of its failures, this does not stop her from continuing her quest for love that is the prize of femininity.

2.5.1 Sartorial Play in *Good Morning, Midnight*

In trying to understand the woman in modernity and her experience of life in the city, Maroula Joannou argues that Jean Rhys and the sartorial play present in her novels has been largely overlooked. Joannou states that the Rhys woman’s “unease about (her) psychic identity and sense of ontological insecurity is often displaced onto the perennial question of what to wear” (463). The presence of the sartorial can be read, according to Joannou, in

similar lines as Woolf's fiction as a metaphor for modernism's rejection of the self as stable and fixed, and as a symbol of women's life. This is due to the role of clothing both as presenter of the body and subjectivity, and the new performative possibilities that modern clothing brought. Furthermore, Joannou states that a dress will always signify something, saying that "if fashion is broadly analogous to language in that it transforms a woman's body into a readable text, its vocabulary in Rhys's fiction is expansive" (470). For Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*, dressing in a certain way is an attempt at concealing her depressive state of mind and her aging looks, and presenting herself as a woman who has her act together.

New clothes and the meaning attached to them therefore becomes the object of longing for Sasha. Similar to Berman's modernity as a maelstrom, fashion promises joy and transformation, but the promise will never be fulfilled. Fashion becomes a dream, brought forth by the system of capitalism, but it is always just beyond our reach. Sasha fantasizes about the black dress and tells herself that everything will change if she just could have that black dress (Joannou 468). She actually believes that by wearing the dress, a physical transformation will happen. Joannou notes that:

Good clothes in Rhys's fiction are a litmus test of emotional well-being and self-esteem. Their absence is equated with feelings of self-reproach, inadequacy and humiliation, and, worse still, with the prolongation of childhood with its concomitant discomfort and embarrassment. (470)

In other words, Sasha clings on to the idea that she can purchase a solution to her problems and a new beginning. However, another problem with the fantasy is that she does not have the finances necessary to purchase the clothes she dreams of, and this further adds to the feeling of discomfort. Joannou calls this the "feminization of poverty" (479); the Rhys' woman as "insecure and underpaid, albeit superficially glamorous" (480). The fantasy of glamour and sophistication is what drives Sasha to continue her quest.

2.5.2 Female Trauma

Perhaps one of the reasons the novel was deemed depressing was because it deals with the effects of trauma, that is, painful memories of stressful events that have a lasting impact on a person's mind if not properly worked through. In *Virginia Woolf, Jeans Rhys and The*

Aesthetics of Trauma (2007) Patricia Moran explains that Freud's work and writing on hysteria precedes the modern day understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder as an illness, as well as the means of recovery. Freud identified the hysteria patient's fragmented recollection of the event(s) as well as the "conscious and unconscious omissions" (P. Moran 4) that led to a confusion about the story. The aim of psychoanalysis was for the patient to talk about the experience in order to be able to properly organize it in time and place, and finally integrate it as an actual event and thus be able to work through it. Moran argues that this model of recovery is the basis for the "narrative focus of therapeutic treatment for trauma" (4). The "talking cure" then becomes the "writing cure", and Moran insists that Rhys, in her fiction, confronts some of her own lived experiences of trauma.

Trauma comes from the Greek word for "wound" (130) and Bennet & Royle explain that trauma is a psychological wound because the traumatic event leaves a mark upon the psyche for possibly years to come. In addition, "the traumatic event does not happen when it happens: its force and significance is only experienced later on" (Bennet & Royle 133). In other words, trauma can function like a ghost that comes back to haunt someone with its ability to transcend time and space. Furthermore, representing trauma in literature can "critically illuminate and even transform our thinking about traumatic experiences and events" (134), although the text can be disturbing to the reader. Thus, literature play an important role in drawing attention to trauma experienced by women and the wound inflicted upon memory and self.

The woman we meet in *Good Morning, Midnight* is what Moran names the "Rhys woman" (7). The Rhys woman is passive, dependent and self-destructive; a character which is recurring in Rhys's novels and one that lives "in constant fear of the return of the repressed" (P. Moran 14). As readers we do not get told straight out what actual trauma Sasha has experienced, instead, the trauma and its effects is represented in a much more complex way. As Moran puts it:

...modernist narrative form, with its emphasis on interiority, memory, psychological verisimilitude, and personal isolation, and its development of fragmented, nonlinear plot, provides an ideal medium for traumatic experiences. (3)

In other words, what Rhys presents to us, is a narrative of the effects of trauma upon someone's psyche, memories and life. The novel performs trauma and the form helps represent how the trauma intrudes into Sasha's daily life, as "highly visual, intrusive

fragments of past time” (P. Moran 6). Sasha struggles to refrain from drinking and tries to plan out the day, in order to avoid the return of distressing memories. A part of her plan is to dye her hair, purchase a new dress and “get on with the transformation act” (Rhys 49) in order to remake herself and once and for all get rid of the past. Sasha ends up living in “an almost non-existent space between the horrors of the past and fears of the future” (P. Moran 14). Thus, Moran concludes that Rhys constructs a narrative that gives memory agency to “intervene in imposed systems of meaning” (3) and therefore becomes a part of the Rhys woman’s identity.

Despite Sasha’s attempts at recovering, towards the end of the novel she finds herself experiencing a new trauma. Rene is trying to force himself on her, and instead of fighting him off, Sasha with tears in her eyes submits to the pain and compares it to a resurrection. Prior to the experience, she has been dead and now comes to live again. She has been using clothes as a shield to hide and protect herself, in order to escape the past and numb her feelings, but the pain she is forced to feel from the attack breaks this protective shield. According to Moran, the masochistic element in Rhys’ writing has received little attention by critics. Referring to the rape scene, Moran writes:

Given the devastating history Sasha details – her apparent exile from her land of birth, her family’s rejection of her, the death of her newborn son, her abandonment by her husband, and numerous humiliations endured at the hands of employers, family members, and lovers – her ability, finally, to feel pain is indeed a moment when she returns from death to life, from unfeeling to feeling. (116)

Sasha’s experience turns into a type of healing, but it is a masochistic type of healing, as according to Moran is often seen in survivors of sexual trauma. At first determined not to feel anything, only existing as a living dead and reminding herself “...no crying in public...” (Rhys 15), she is resurrected as a human being, only to invite another man into her bed.

The identity of the Rhys woman is closely bound up with the experience of trauma, with, according to Moran, masochism as a response. Thus, Sasha’s self-destructiveness is a result of the fragmented memories that haunt her daily life. The dissociation leads to a living nightmare for her and to the attempt of living like an automaton in order to protect herself from her memory. There must be no gaps, no opportunity for painful memories to seep in. However, clothing sometimes also works as material reminders, because, as Koppen argued, they are bound up with memory and sensations. Memory sometimes distorts her conception of

reality: “I feel for the pockets of the check coat and I am surprised when I touch the fur of the one I am wearing” (Rhys 91). Furthermore, Moran argues that a part of Sasha’s masochism is a submission and obedience to fashion:

Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying hard to be like you. I know I don’t succeed, but look how hard I try. Three hours to choose a hat; every morning and hour and a half trying to make myself look like everybody else.
(Rhys 106)

In other words, to be feminine involves submitting to social control, and for Sasha is bound up with her plan of finally ridding herself of past trauma and remaking herself or being reborn.

3. Orlando, or the Modern Androgynous Being

This chapter will focus on the reading of *Orlando* in light of the feminist theories presented in the previous chapter. First, I will investigate what *Orlando* as an anti-biography says about female identity. I will demonstrate how Woolf takes the elements from the traditional biography and uses these to challenge not only the genre, but the very picture it presents of identity as stable and fixed. The reading will then move on to the body of the subject and discuss how corporeal experience is linked to identity. The theories of Toril Moi and Iris Marion Young will be important for recognising how Woolf uses *Orlando*'s body to problematize the gender stereotypes that are enforced upon a woman. In relation to how the body is presented to others, the reading will also take a closer look at Woolf's strategy of using clothes to play with gender expressions, thus highlighting the potential that clothes have in both restraining and liberating a woman. Finally, I will be discussing to what extent we can say that *Orlando* has what Woolf referred to as an androgynous mind.

3.1 *Orlando* as an Anti-Biography

From the very first page, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is introduced as a biography and, after publication, it was, in fact, placed with other biographies in the bookstore. However, *Orlando* was not and was never supposed to be a traditional biography like the ones Renders and De Haan were referring to. Rather, Woolf both experiments and critiques the genre of biography with this work. The choice of both employing and criticizing the genre of biography, was perhaps partly a result of the influence from her father Sir Leslie Stephen, the first editor of *Dictionary of National Biography* (Renders and De Haan 24). Stephen also wrote biographies about "great men" and Woolf, who was educated at home, became acquainted at an early age with biographical classics that were solely about men and their lives. What we see with *Orlando*, then, is partly a rebellion against, or attempt to come to terms with, her father and his generation's considerations of what was valuable and admirable in a person, as well as a fictional meditation on biography. This reading will show that her choice of writing a biography, other than it actually being inspired by her friend and lover Vita Sackville-West, seems to be a way of mocking the very male-dominated genre of biography and a

biographer's absurd claim of possessing knowledge of the complete truth about the individual in question.

According to Renders and De Haan, a biography is supposed to tell the truth about a person's life and for that reason it is a non-fictional genre. Not only is the work entitled *Orlando: A Biography*, but already at the second page the narrator establishes himself as the biographer: "happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one!" (Woolf 12)¹ The biographer-narrator keeps referring to himself this way throughout the novel and at the opening of chapter II, right before Orlando falls into his first episode of seven-day sleep, he states a biographer's responsibility in telling a story:

The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth... (Woolf, *Orlando* 47)

Here, the importance of telling the truth is emphasized for the first time, and it is mockingly referred to at several instances throughout the rest of the novel. The biographer faces more and more difficulties in staying on the "firm, if rather narrow, ground of ascertained truth", however (Woolf, *Orlando* 93). Truth is presented as a single story, a story that is out there and that is within reach if one only has the right information. In 1927, Woolf wrote an essay entitled "The New Biography". Here, she argues against Sidney Lee, who succeeded Stephen as the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and who claimed that the biographer's aim was to truthfully convey the personality of the subject. Woolf, in her essay, argues that truth and personality are opposed. When depicting the inner life of a person, moreover, truth should not be the main concern. Life, Woolf says, does not consist in actions only or in works – "it consists in personality" (Woolf, "New Biography" 120). Woolf also openly attacks the Victorian biography and refers to it as "a parti-coloured, hybrid, monstrous birth" which only functioned to hamper and destroy personality (ibid.). Hence, Woolf calls for a new biography where the biographer ceases to be a "chronicler" of life, but becomes an artist who "chooses" and "synthesises" ("New Biography" 121). Such an approach is very much in line with the literary style of modernism that Woolf belongs to, which was not only seen as a revolt that

¹ For the sake of conventions, I will refer to the biographer as "he".

broke with tradition, but also an attempt at describing the staggering and disintegrating experience of modernity. This individual experience will not be *one*, true story, but many versions of the truth, which are all equally true.

As opposed to the side-car passenger in traditional biographies, the biographer-narrator's voice is very present in *Orlando*, and he sometimes takes the wheel and stops to pause and reflect, comment, or even yawns at parts of the story (Woolf, *Orlando* 70; 75; 84: 89-90). He also complains and says that his "patience is wearing thin" (Woolf, *Orlando* 187) when nothing spectacular happens in Orlando's life, and threatens to leave the narrative (Woolf, *Orlando* 188-189). When Orlando falls into his second seven-day sleep, the biographer wants to end the novel and not tell the truth anymore. However, he is kept under strict rule by "Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer..." (Woolf, *Orlando* 95) and has to disclose what happened to Orlando during his sleep. The ironic tone, not only in this example, but throughout the novel, highlights Woolf's strategy of mocking the genre and its traditional elements. Eventually, the biographer seems to approach truth in a more modest way:

To give a truthful account of London society at that or indeed at any other time, is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it – the poets and the novelists – can be trusted to do it, for this is one of the cases where truth does not exist. (Woolf, *Orlando* 135)

In other words, novelists can give a better account of life at a particular point because they are not so concerned with telling the truth. In fact, according to the biographer, truth does not exist, but that does not mean that it is impossible to paint a picture of London society. Woolf explains that biographies changed with the 20th century because now, the biographer became an artist. From being "slavishly" (Woolf, "New Biography" 121) concerned with following in the footsteps of the subject, the biographer now had his own voice and his own judgements.

Although *Orlando* was mistakenly placed among the biographies in the book shop, it seemed of great importance to Woolf that people actually would understand that it was, in fact, a novel. In a diary entry from 1927 she wrote:

I am writing Orlando half in a mock style very clear & plain, so that people will understand every word. But the balance between truth & fantasy must be careful. It is based on Vita, Violet Trefusis, Lord Lascelles, Knole & c. (Woolf, *Orlando* xlvi)

There are many ways in which *Orlando* the biography differs from traditional biographies. First of all, it is a biography written by a woman about a woman. Secondly, the woman in question did not have any particular “special talents” or “exceptional destiny” (Renders and De Haan 12) nor were she well-known or important for any nation. So why did Woolf choose to write a biography about Vita Sackville-West? When discussing a biographer’s choice of research subject, Renders and De Haan argue that

his choice of subject is often meant to emphasize the uniqueness of his hero, but to achieve this aim, the high biography must include considerable context. This will demonstrate the extent to which the subject is truly unique and to what extent he was the product of his time, his occupation, his social class, or literary trend. (38)

Other than the choice of personal pronoun being worth noting, Renders and De Haan make an important claim about the context that surrounds the individual and contribute to their uniqueness. In the introduction to *Orlando*, Sandra M. Gilbert argues that since the name Vita means life and the biography is based on a woman who lived a very non-traditional life, the novel is really about “the New Life that is the Life of the New Woman” (xxviii). Woolf was undoubtedly inspired and fascinated by Vita as a person, but the reason for providing her with a commemorative, as we will see, is that Vita and her way of life seem to be Woolf’s model for a solution to the woman question.

In “The New Biography”, Woolf presents Harold Nicolson as the prime example of the new biographer. She states that Nicolson has mastered the new art because he does not concern himself with facts about his subjects, he rather describes them how he sees them and how the essence of character “shows itself to the observant eye in the tone of a voice, the turn of a head, some little phrase or anecdote picked up in passing (Woolf, “New Biography” 122). Furthermore, Woolf argues that his subjects does not feel uneasy about his observations because he also applies his irony to himself. He includes self-observations that does not put him in a flattering light, and thus becomes himself a subject. Woolf concludes:

Indeed, by the end of the book we realize that the figure which has been most completely and most subtly displayed is that of the author. Each of the supposed subjects holds up in his or her small bright diminishing mirror a different reflection of Harold Nicolson. And though the figure thus revealed is not noble or impressive or

shown in a very heroic attitude, it is for these very reasons extremely like a real human being. It is thus, he would seem to say, in the mirrors of our friends, that we chiefly live. (ibid.)

Here, Woolf argues that the biographer's descriptions and observations actually reflect the biographer himself. The point is that, even though the genre is said to be non-fictional, it is still presented as seen through the lens of a human being. Thus, one's subjectivity will influence how and what one sees and says about another person. This implies that Vita's biography actually reflects Woolf herself as she is subtly displayed within the pages of the book. Furthermore, when discussing *Orlando* and Virginia Woolf, Jonathan Bate states that

novels have often followed the protagonist's growth to maturity in the manner of a biography. Many a novel has been called 'the life of' or 'the history of' such and such a character, who has sometimes been a projection of the author him-or herself.

Orlando's immortality and gender-bending parody the cradle-to-grave structure that can deaden both novel and biography [and] Woolf is shaking up received novelistic practice. (141)

According to Bate, then, the character of Orlando might project Woolf, however, Woolf is also mockingly challenging the genre of the novel in order to shake up the traditional narrative.

In sum, then, Woolf used the genre of biography to show how identity is much more complex and fluctuating than what a traditional biographer can capture between the pages of a book. Identity is closely linked to the body both because of how we experience ourselves in the world, as well as the body as a presenter of ourselves to others. In the following two parts I will explain how Woolf in *Orlando* problematizes the relationship between subjectivity and the body.

3.2 Orlando and the Lived Body

"Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it" (Woolf, *Orlando* 98) exclaims the biographer-narrator about halfway through the novel. A change of sex has taken place and Woolf's reason for including it in the novel has been thoroughly discussed by critics and scholars. As we have seen in Chapter Two, theories of gender as performative seem to be

favoured in readings of *Orlando*; however, this thesis proposes that the theories of Moi, de Beauvoir and Young can provide a better understanding of Woolf's exploration of gender in the novel. Orlando's bodily changes can be seen in relation to Moi and de Beauvoir's claim that the body is a situation; the body becomes what the situation makes of it. In her essay "What is a Woman?", Moi argues that the distinction between sex and gender did its job at challenging what she calls the "pervasive picture of sex"(6), but that these parameters have become too narrow to adequately "explain the experience and meaning of sexual difference in human beings" (36). These categories will actually limit the human being's ability to define themselves freely. In short, the categorizing of either sex or gender fails to take into account the continuing lived experience of a human being. A woman will continue to define and redefine who she is throughout her life. In other words, women are always in the process of defining and making themselves who they are. As Moi puts it: "the aim...is to liberate the word 'woman' from the binary straitjacket in which contemporary sex and gender theory imprisons it..." (ix). As this reading will show, it seems that Woolf is making a similar suggestion with *Orlando*.

What Moi in her critically acclaimed essay has named the pervasive picture of sex was the prominent view under the "two-sex model" that was laid forth by medical doctors in the early 20th century. This model pictures sex as "something that seeps out from the ovaries and the testicles and into every cell in the body until it has saturated the whole person" (Moi 11). It was under this biological paradigm that Woolf was writing her fiction, and modern feminism was born as a result of the need to oppose this idea. Moi and de Beauvoir do not claim that the body is not an object at all, as it can be scientifically studied and measured as an object. Their argument is rather that a justifiable philosophy of human existence cannot be derived from it.

In a similar manner, *Orlando* tells the story of a man becoming a woman, thus reflecting on the very different lived experiences of man and woman. The meaning of sexual difference is precisely the main subject in *Orlando*, and this seems to be Woolf's attempt at drawing attention to the strict and limiting restrictions women were under, as well as redefining what it means to be a woman. After the sex change, which we will come back to in further detail later on, the biographer-narrator reflects on what has happened within the person of Orlando:

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. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory – but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his’, and ‘she’ for ‘he’ – her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. Some slight haziness there may have been, as if a few dark drops had fallen into the clear pool of memory; certain things had become a little dimmed; but that was all. The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. (Woolf, *Orlando* 98)

The biographer referring to “the change” means that some kind of transformation must have happened, but exactly what kind is not revealed. If the change from man to woman means that only the genitalia have been transformed, then this paragraph tells us several things. First of all, for Woolf, sex is not connected to identity. Orlando is the same person with the same memories and experiences, and in “every other respect” (ibid.). Secondly, “their” future is altered. This could hint that Orlando will have different experiences as a woman than as a man, so that while the sex change itself did not alter his identity, something else will. Thirdly, Orlando’s lack of surprise at the change could suggest that her genitalia do little to define who she is. Orlando has been attracted to sexually ambiguous figures, and it seems that it is the sex of the other who determines if they are *allowed* to get involved, not if Orlando wants it or not. The biographer’s use of plural “they” when referring to their future, their identity and their faces, could suggest that Orlando has always been, or will be from now on, inhabiting both sexes. His face and his identity are both the face and identity of a man and a woman. Here, the biographer who previously has been concerned with only telling the truth, decides not to speculate any further on the sex change and states “let other pens treat of sex and sexuality, we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can” (Woolf, *Orlando* 98). In spite of announcing his decision to leave this subject altogether, it inevitably comes up throughout the whole novel, suggesting that it is something that is hard for Orlando to escape.

After waking up from the sex change that happened during a seven-day sleep, Orlando stands naked in front of the mirror and the biographer is able to observe her. The biographer observes that “his form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (Woolf, *Orlando* 98) which makes it even more unclear how much of his body has actually changed and how much has remained the same. If the strength refers to his physique and grace to an elegance usually associated with character, then it seems that his body physically, except for the genitalia, has not changed much at all. Grace could also refer to moving or presenting

one's body in a certain way. If so, the body could still be a man's body that moves and flows in a way that is usually associated with women. Again, the biographer seems to suggest that Orlando is inhabiting characteristics from both sexes.

If Orlando's body consists of both sexes, and her living experience is what eventually will determine how she sees herself, then theorizing about which sex she *really* belongs to seems useless, because her body will become what the situation makes of it. This is Moi's core argument, and her understanding and theorizing of the body has inspired several critics to consider this route to exploring gender. In Chapter Two, we saw that Iris Marion Young in *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (2005) uses the terms "body experience" and "lived body" to "describe subjectivity and women's experience as lived and felt in the flesh" (Young 7). Young emphasizes that a woman always finds herself in her body and in a certain sociocultural environment. A woman will thus have a certain freedom to define herself and construct her reality in accordance with her surroundings. What Young is saying, is that the category of the lived body can replace gender as way of recognising female bodies and subjectivity. The idea of the lived body acknowledges that a woman's sociocultural context is out of her control, but how she chooses to take up and act in relation to it is up to her (Young 18).

Nowhere does the concept of the lived body seem more relevant than in chapter V of *Orlando*. The chapter starts with the transition from the 18th to the 19th century, and the 19th century is described as gloomy, filled with doubt and confusion and as "antipathetic" (Woolf, *Orlando* 168) to Orlando. A change in climate has happened, not only in nature but also socially and morally, and we learn that the air was so filled with damp that it eventually began seeping into everything, even into men's hearts (Woolf, *Orlando* 158). Women would marry at nineteen and bear up to eighteen children, but they would have to wear a crinoline to cover the pregnancy for as long as possible (Woolf, *Orlando* 158-162). Orlando feels the chill as well and wraps herself in a blanket after realizing she has been wearing breeches in public, and everyone else in the household is wearing "three or four red-flannel petticoats, though the month was August" (Woolf, *Orlando* 161). The chapter describes how a cold and wet tension seem to lay like a damp cloud over everyone and everything in England, making it very uncomfortable for everyone to exist.

Orlando attempts to continue writing her poem that she has been working on since 1586 but finds it impossible. She feels a strange tingling in her body, a sensation that finally manifests itself in the second finger on the left hand, the finger where a wedding ring should or would have been. Orlando realizes that the whole world wears a wedding ring, except for

her, and people seem to exist in couples (Woolf, *Orlando* 166). The tingling gets worse, and Orlando realizes that we need not only the fingers to write, but the whole person (Woolf, *Orlando* 167). In order to be able to write again, she considers yielding to the sociocultural pressure and take a husband, thus conforming to society's expected behaviour of a woman. This intrusive pressure from the environment upon an individual's freedom is described by the biographer as "... the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age [which] batters down anyone who tries to make stand against it far more effectually than those who bend its own way" (Woolf, *Orlando* 167). The social pressure of the 19th century has broken Orlando, and she is described standing "mournfully at the drawing-room window...dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted" (Woolf, *Orlando* 168). The situation, or the spirit of the age, now has Orlando thinking about herself and her opportunities in a new and different way. Even though Orlando's body is the same, her body experience has drastically changed as a result of the body-in-situation in the Victorian period, and she is no longer able to write poetry.

Young argues that the reason a woman doubts her abilities, agency and power is because she lives her body as an object and that a woman in patriarchal society thus is forced to live a life of contradiction:

The culture and society in which the female person dwells define woman as Other, as the inessential correlate to man, as mere object and immanence. Woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied the subjectivity, autonomy and creativity that are definite of being human and that in patriarchal society are accorded the man. At the same time, however, because she is a human existence, the female person necessarily is a subjectivity and transcendence, and she knows herself to be. The female person who enacts the existence of women in patriarchal society must therefore live a contradiction: as human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence. (32)

As a human, Orlando has subjectivity, but as a woman, she is also an object. This contradiction, according to Young, explains why women seem to physically move and use their body in a different way than men, something that has often been explained by women's physiology and anatomy. Young, however, argues that an imaginary constricted space always surrounds women, a space that she thinks she cannot move beyond. As a result, women also tend to move more "closed", that is, they do not open their bodies when moving in the same

way as men and make use of the space that is actually available to them. Furthermore, women move as if they are always looked at. This causes uncertainty, because the self-consciousness leads to a woman having to focus on performing the task *and* controlling her body. Finally, a woman always lives with the threat of bodily invasion, and Young argues that the imaginary space is also created as protection against such a possible invasion. The source of a woman's limited movement is thus not anatomy, but the lived body or "the particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society" (Young 42). The patriarchal system forces women to live and exist inside their constricted created space, because moving beyond it can be potentially threatening on many levels.

Orlando eventually becomes so dragged down by the spirit of the age, that it has even taken over her voice (Woolf, *Orlando* 169). Aware of her defeat, she contemplates who she can marry, but ends up meeting her future husband by accident after breaking her ankle in the woods. His name is Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine; a man who she discovers is actually a woman. Shelmerdine also realizes that Orlando is a man and apparently they are surprised to find that "a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman" (Woolf, *Orlando* 179), although this seems not to bother them much and they soon return to their normal conversation. After their engagement, Orlando receives a legal document from the Queen stating, among other things, that her sex "is pronounced indisputably, and beyond the shadow of a doubt...female" (Woolf, *Orlando* 176). Thus, she is allowed to legally marry a man.

Their marriage, although it *is* a marriage, at least legally, between man and woman, differs greatly from the heterosexual normative marriage of the Victorian period, as well as the assigned gender roles of man and woman. A Victorian woman was supposed to take on the role as wife, mother and daughter, with Queen Victoria as the role model for the respectable woman. In *The Daughters of England* (1842), Sarah Stickney Ellis states that "as women, then, the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men – inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength" (57). In other words, it was expected of women to become good and happy wives (Ellis 53) and to be content with their situation. Ellis wrote her conduct book about a woman's place in society under the ideology of "separate spheres", that is, the idea that a division of masculine and feminine spheres were natural because of the differences between the sexes (54). A woman's sphere was in the home because she was considered to be the passive and the nurturing sex. A man's sphere, on the other hand, was in public because men were considered to be the active

and conflict solving sex. Thus, the gender structure of men and women existing in separate spheres was self-given because of their characteristics.

Young's argument in "Lived Body vs. Gender" seems to fittingly sum up Orlando and Shelmerdine's marriage. Young argues that gender structures are historically and socially given, and impact and impose upon a person's thoughts and behaviour. Even though gender structures lead to a limited set of choices and resources, a person will use the, if few, possibilities one is given or try to refigure or resist them. Young says that "gender as structured is also lived through individual bodies, always as a personal experimental response and not as a set of attributes that individuals have in common" (25-26). Thus, gender will always mean something different to everyone who lives it, and it is not a category that one either fits into or one does not. The lived experience will be shaped by how a person chooses to act on the given circumstances.

The gender structures of the Victorian period weighs heavily on both Orlando and Shelmerdine, as they are experienced as givens. Even the clothes they wear are predetermined by larger forces. However, Orlando and Shelmerdine act on the limited possibilities or resources they are given by the heterosexual normative society. Young concludes that the concept of gender is not something women and/or men have in common, but it is rather a lived experience, a unique response to society by each individual. Thus, "Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself" (Woolf, *Orlando* 184). Orlando has yielded and married, but it is a marriage to a woman who is cross-dressing as a man. And finally, Orlando is able to write poetry again.

3.2.1 Cross-dressing and Sartorial Play

As stated in the above section, gender structures are experienced as something everyone must relate to, and an important part of these are clothing conventions. The question of what to wear is actually determined by structures of profit seeking establishments, class and income, occupation, heterosexual normativity, occasions and activity and perhaps most important, conformity. At one point in Orlando's life, the biographer has to admit that keeping track of her life is becoming extremely difficult, as she is engaged in cross-dressing and costumes, and changing her name and identity. Despite the difficulties, the biographer seems to describe a happy scenario for Orlando:

The task is made still more difficult by the fact that she found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another...She had it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive, nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (Woolf, *Orlando* 153)

The biographer blames the limited knowledge and observations on the cross-dressing and the identity changes, as well as Orlando's excellent skills at sustaining the parts of man and woman. Furthermore, the frequent changing of sex leads to a much greater pleasure of life for Orlando. That her experiences become multiplied is a result of her escaping the limitations women usually are under, and she is free to move and use her body as she pleases. Woolf, in the true spirit of the Bloomsbury group, also exclaims that Orlando is bisexual, or at least seems to have sexual relations with both sexes.

In Chapter Two, we saw that Koppen argued that the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality are fundamentally unstable and mutable, and that, in *Orlando*, sartorial play are means to represent this instability. Sartorial play is dressing up in costumes, cross-dressing and/or playing with sexual stereotypes. Clothes thus become a symbol both for the fluidity of sex and for the performance of subjectivity. Clothes sometimes represent anatomy, other times gender. Sometimes they repress the body, sometimes they liberate the body. Already when Orlando is 16, the biographer observes that "there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (Woolf, *Orlando* 11). A portrait of Orlando at this age pictures him with long hair and perhaps some feminine facial traits, but it is not further emphasized what is meant with this opening statement. After her sex change, Orlando goes off to live with a group of nomad gypsies in the hills of Turkey. Before leaving, she washed and "dressed herself in those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex; and was forced to consider her position" (Woolf, *Orlando* 98). Here, clothes do not represent sex, and Orlando can freely choose if she wants to remain a man or become a woman. However, notably what comes to define Orlando living among the gypsies is not her sex, but her cultural background. The biographer explains that "Orlando had contracted in England some of the customs or diseases (whatever you choose to consider them) which cannot, it seems, be expelled" (Woolf, *Orlando* 100). The fact that the

biographer suggest that sociocultural background could be a disease that cannot be cured, shows how much of an influence society has over a person, or subject, to use Althusser's designation. This disease – which could also be referred to as ideology - is innate and unconscious and is enforced through a subject's life by powerful organized systems (Althusser 1287). Although Orlando looks and behaves like the gypsies, it is eventually her sociocultural beliefs that lead her to having to leave the group. Thus, due to wearing the gender-neutral clothing, culture, not sex, becomes the decisive factor for Orlando's identity.

Orlando's sex change itself actually resembles more a change of clothes than a change of gender because of the little attention she pays to the transformation. While living with the gypsies, she wore gender-neutral clothes and seemed to be judged, and eventually cast out, by her British beliefs and character, not by her sex. It is thus not until she is on a boat back to England, dressed in the appropriate English attire, that she actually meditates on the change, and we learn that "it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck, that she realised with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position" (Woolf, *Orlando* 108). The privileges include the attention and courtship others show her, but the penalties seem to lie in the clothes she has to wear:

these skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels. Yet the stuff (flowered paduasoy) is the loveliest in the world. Never have I seen my own skin (here she laid her hand on her knee) look to such advantage as now. Could I, however, leap overboard and swim in clothes like these? No! Therefore, I should have to trust to the protection of a blue-jacket. Do I object to that? Now do I? (Woolf, *Orlando* 109)

Because Orlando is wearing the dress of an English lady that restricts her movement, she would have to rely on a man rescuing her from drowning should she fall overboard. This is a first of many realizations she makes about a woman's position in relation to men, and how clothes are used to further differentiate the sexes.

With this recognition, Orlando also becomes aware of how she can use clothes to challenge her position. Now living in London, the biographer describes how Orlando's sex now changes frequently and as easily as changing a set of clothes. A day in Orlando's life is described as follows;

So then one may sketch her spending her morning in a China robe of ambiguous gender among her books; then receiving a client or two (for she had many scores of suppliants) in the same garment; then she would take a turn in the garden and clip the nut trees – for which knee-breeches were convenient; then she would change into a flowered taffeta which best suited a drive to Richmond and a proposal of marriage from some great nobleman; and so back again to town, where she would don a snuff-coloured gown like a lawyer's and visit the courts to hear how her cases were doing – for her fortune was wasting hourly and the suits seemed no nearer consummation than they had been a hundred years ago; and so, finally, when night came, she would more often than not become a nobleman complete from head to toe and walk the streets in search of adventure. (Woolf, *Orlando* 153)

Orlando changes her clothes, and thus her sex, several times in just one day. This results in her having a new-found freedom and the means to enjoy the life and occupations of both sexes. She wears the clothes that best suit her and that are most convenient to the activity in question, from working in the garden to visiting the courts and receiving marriage proposals. Finally, she is able to wander the streets at night, which she would not have been able to as a woman in the 19th century. The only thing allowing her these freedoms, and making her behaviour acceptable, are the clothes she is wearing and that they are suited to the setting. Orlando knows what clothes goes with the different parts, and therefore masters the transitions with excellence. Therefore, Woolf not only shows how fluent gender actually is, but how it depends on clothes as social signifiers and the power clothes thus have over the social perception of what is acceptable behaviour and freedom of movement for the sexes. Woolf even commented in her journal on the quality of women's clothing leading to a need to perform a femininity that resembles an ideal:

You must consciously try to carry out in your conduct what is implied by your clothes; they are silken – of the very best make – only to be worn with the greatest care, on occasions such as these. They are meant to please the eyes of others – to make you something more brilliant than you are by day. (13)

Thus, it seems that Woolf, in *Orlando*, is criticising women's clothing conventions for restricting female movement and freedom, because their sole purpose is to “please the eye of

others” (ibid). This refers back to Young’s theories that a woman is further restricted in her movements because of the uncertainty of being constantly looked at.

After being back in England for a while, the biographer reflects on the changes that have happened in Orlando. Referring to the remark made “about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman” (Woolf, *Orlando* 131), it seems that something has, indeed, happened, and that this has ceased to be true. The biographer continues by saying that “she was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more vain, as women are, of her person” (Woolf, *Orlando* 131). This is a curious remark and may perhaps come surprising to readers who are becoming familiar with Woolf’s thinking about gender. However, the biographer offers an explanation, by blaming everything on the clothes women have to wear:

The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us. For example, when Captain Bartolus saw Orlando’s skirt, he had an awning stretched for her immediately, pressed her to take another slice of beef, and invited her to go ashore with him in the longboat. These compliments would certainly not have been paid her had her skirts, instead of flowing, been cut tight to her legs in the fashion of breeches. And when we are paid compliments, it behoves us to make some return. Orlando curtsied; she complied; she flattered the good man’s humours as she would not have done had his neat breeches been a woman’s skirts, and his braided coat a woman’s satin bodice. Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts our brains, our tongues to their liking. (Woolf, *Orlando* 131-132)

The example offered by the biographer further reflects the view that the body becomes what the situation makes of it, and the body is usually presented cloaked in a set of clothes. How others perceive and treat us will further shape our perception of ourselves, as well as our interaction with others and the way we use and move our body in the world. How the body is dressed will act as a visual representation of our identity. Men, like the captain, will see a woman’s skirt and behave thereafter. The skirt moulds his heart, brain and tongue, in other words, it shapes how he feels, thinks and speaks towards women. The biographer continues this reflection by referring to the portraits of Orlando as a man and as a woman, respectively.

Attention is now drawn to how the clothes limit Orlando the woman's freedom of movement. Orlando the woman has to use her hands to hold the satin around her shoulders, while Orlando the man is free to move and use his hands. Because of the way their clothes allow them to pose for the photography, Orlando the man looks the world straight in the eyes, while Orlando the woman offers a more modest side-glance. The biographer concludes that "had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same" (Woolf, *Orlando* 132). This conclusion offers us a lot of insight into Woolf's thinking. It reveals her reason for playing with clothes in the novel as to show their social and restricting function upon women. The way the body is presented to the world, that is, what type of clothes the body is wearing, will have a lot to say for how the body is free to move in the world, as well as the body's experience of the world, which will further shape the body's experience of the self. It is perhaps a hint towards a need for more gender equality in terms of fashion and clothing conventions, or, perhaps in a more Woolfean sense, clothes should be neutralized, in some way, in order for men and women to have an equal outlook on the world.

In sum, Woolf not only mocks the performative features of clothes, she also makes us aware of how they function to perform femininity and masculinity, and, as such, further differentiate the sexes. Also, because of the sexed meanings attached to them, they are easily subject to being used to challenge this function. Orlando ends up alternating between dressing as a man and a woman and multiplies the experiences of life. She is able to enjoy life to its fullest because she is not locked in the narrow parameters of sex and gender. But it is not only the clothes that makes Orlando, or Vita, worthy of a biography. As the next part will show, it is Orlando's state of mind, which inhabits both sexes, that seem to be Woolf's model for the modern human, and the answer to the woman question.

3.3 Orlando and the Androgynous Mind

Cross-dressing, wearing costumes and the performative function of clothing bring images of masquerade and the theatre to mind. In the first quote presented in the previous section, the biographer actually referred to Orlando's change between men and women's clothes as *parts* (Woolf, *Orlando* 153). A part can be a character, or a role played by an actor, and in this section of the thesis I will focus on González' and Riviere's claim that femininity is theatrical. González and Riviere argue that feminine stereotypes have been created in literature and reappropriated into culture and convention, thus creating a female ideal that women act out to the best of their ability. My reading of *Orlando* in the light of this claim will show how these

clichés are being challenged by Woolf. The first part will focus on a close-reading of the sex-change scene in the novel.

When Orlando is an ambassador in Turkey, he falls into a mysterious seven-day sleep. Whilst asleep, the biographer describes a curious ceremony taking place in Orlando's room. The Turks had risen against the Sultan and started persecuting all the foreigners in the country. Orlando was spared, because as the soldiers entered his room, they mistakenly think he is dead. After they leave, an obscure scene takes place. The biographer describing the scene is kept on watch by the austere Gods Truth, Candour and Honesty. They blow in silver trumpets and demand that the biographer tells the truth, although he seems reluctant to do so.

Three ladies enter the room and they are described as almost saint-like with "hair as an avalanche of the driven snow" and "eyes are pure stars" (Woolf, *Orlando* 95). The ladies, who are sisters, are called Lady Purity, Chastity and Modesty, respectively, and the names refer to characteristics that were typically associated with femininity and the ideal woman. Lady Purity says "on all things frail or dark or doubtful, my veil descends" (Woolf, *Orlando* 96). A woman should ideally be pure and innocent, and weakness and darkness should be covered. Lady Modesty makes it even more clear who this ideal is created for and by when she says that "I am she that men call Modesty. Virgin I am and ever shall be." (ibid.). It is men that have named her, and she is so modest that she shall remain a virgin for ever. These three figures try to impose upon the sleeping woman Orlando, but Truth's trumpets chase them away. In a final attempt they join hands and sing:

Truth come not out from your horrid den. Hide deeper, fearful Truth. For you flaunt in the brutal gaze of the sun things that were better unknown and undone; you unveil the shameful; the dark you make clear, Hide! Hide! Hide! (ibid.)

This truth that must be hidden could be the truth about women and femininity; that these ideals are imposed upon women by men and that they have no anchor in the actual truth. The ideals are in fact what González in the first chapter called "prosthetic appendages" (81) that is, they are not naturally a part of a woman, they are rather like artificial limbs that have to be worn. They are not worn as a result of lacking a limb, so they rather conceal and deform the idea of women.

The three sisters desperately try to cover the truth and stop the trumpeters, but finally they have to give in and admit that "... the women detest us" (Woolf, *Orlando* 97). Their final

speech, however, says something about society's attitude at large towards women and femininity:

For there, not here... dwell still in nest and boudoir, office and lawcourt those who love us; those who honour us, virgins and city men; lawyers and doctors; those who prohibit; those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why, those who praise without understanding; the still very numerous (Heaven be praised) tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness; those still worship us, and with reason; for we have given them Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, Ease. To them we go, you we leave. Come Sisters, come! This is no place for us here. (ibid.)

The sisters are referring to the system of patriarchy, where powerful individuals as well as complying subjects help the system prevail. The majority wants to keep the system because it provides wealth as well as comfort and ease. The truth about women, that they are not the ideals they are supposed to be, can never come out because it would rock the foundations of the system. The system needs Purity, Chastity and Modesty to help veil the truth and keep women subject to these ideals.

The result of the somewhat curious scene is that Orlando now is a woman, but the characteristics assigned to women from birth are being chased away. The truth must then be that purity, chastity and modesty are not actually a part of a woman's anatomy; they are not inherent or part of a female essence, and they rather try to intrude upon a woman's body. As a part of femininity, they are theatrical, performed in order to live up to the ideal that is created in order to keep the patriarchal system running. The biographer, deeply concerned with telling the truth, has to make a choice and chooses to stick to his principles and reveal the truth in a confession that "he was a woman" (Woolf, *Orlando* 97). The use of "was" and the ending of the paragraph leaves the reader in some ambiguity as to whether Orlando has always been a woman, or that during his sleep he has become a woman. He has either way managed to become a woman without appropriating all of the typical feminine characteristics assigned to a woman. It seems that is perfectly possible to be a woman without them.

At first, Orlando seems not to reflect upon this herself, however, after seeing the reactions men have to her new way of dressing on the boat back to England, she meditates on how women really are and how it takes discipline to keep up the image of how they are supposed to be:

She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled. ‘Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires’, she reflected; ‘for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature. They can only attain, these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline. (Woolf, *Orlando* 110)

It takes a sex change for Orlando the man to realize that femininity is theatrical, a show that requires discipline and in return denies a woman “the delights of life”. She has previously been an active part in the system that preserves these ideals. Orlando now knows the perspective of both sexes and the truth about women. As a woman, she has to pay the prize for her previous insistence on maintaining these ideals. At the same time, she laughs at how foolish men are, thinking they are “the Lords of creation” (Woolf, *Orlando* 113), when really, they seem to lose their mind at the sight of a woman’s leg. Orlando seems to want to belong to neither sex after realizing how foolish both sexes are behaving.

In chapter IV, when Orlando has been back in England for some time, it seems that she has decided to refuse to adopt the feminine stereotype. The biographer stops to reflect on the change that has occurred and a more nuanced picture of a woman is presented, one that deviates from the stereotypical image of femininity, or, as the biographer puts it, “gave her conduct an unexpected turn” (Woolf, *Orlando* 133). Apparently, Orlando dresses faster than most women and does not seem to pay much attention to how to choose and wear women’s clothing. At the same time, she does not possess the typical attributes of a man. She does not like to see animals harmed but detests household work. She is a skilled farmer, likes to drink and play games, and rides a horse like a man. She is tender-hearted and cries easily. The biographer, concerned with telling the truth, cannot say whether she is most man or woman. It seems that Woolf is showing and telling the reader that a woman can be much more than the feminine ideal that is assigned to her. She is compound and complex, and the unexpectedness of the conduct only comes to those who firmly believes in the feminine ideal.

Orlando has become a woman who challenges the traditional and conventional picture of femininity. However, after being a man for thirty years, she seems to, in some sense, inhabit both sexes. Her first reaction to being aware of this fact leads her to wanting to belong to neither:

Heavens! She thought, “what fools they make of us – what fools we are!” And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirligig state of mind to be in. The comforts of ignorance seemed utterly denied to her. (Woolf, *Orlando* 113)

The clothes force Orlando to choose a sex and enable her to see from the perspective of both men and women. The comforts of ignorance that one sex can enjoy refers back to the system of patriarchy which continue to thrive because of the comfort it offers. And uncomfortable and bewildering it is indeed, to possess the secrets of both sexes and thus being able to challenge and even change the system. Orlando is a man and a woman, with the strengths and weaknesses of each. She is thus in an enlightened state of mind that as we will see, is Woolf’s idea of androgyny.

González presented us with the idea that Woolf’s theorizing about the androgynous, genderless being is not an attempt at escaping the feminine and masculine but an invention of a being where both sexes are united in the mind. This union of the sexes, or marriage of the minds, is a fertile one, especially in terms of creativity, but it seems that Woolf has a larger vision for her being. She even describes it as naturally incandescent, perhaps because when the theatrical performance of gender has been cast aside, a person’s identity can be allowed to shine through unrestrained. In a similar manner, the first time Orlando lays eyes on Sasha, the biographer-narrator frequently repeats that although Orlando cannot determine Sasha’s sex, it is her *person* he is drawn to:

...when he beheld, coming from the pavilion of the Muscovite Embassy, a figure, which, whether boy’s or woman’s, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity. The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person. (Woolf, *Orlando* 26)

The loose clothing disguises the body and thus removes attention from the sex. Orlando does not see a boy or a woman, he sees a person. The clothes serve to neutralize the sex, allowing

the person to be seen first. In addition, the clothes allow Sasha to move as she pleases and Orlando, having never before observed women moving in that manner, concludes that the skater must be a boy. Of course, Orlando hopes that the skater is a girl, because if they are of the same sex, “all embraces were out of the question” (Woolf, *Orlando* 26), as we are in the Elizabethan era after all. The “extraordinary seductiveness” that issues from Sasha is the incandescent of her androgynous being.

A similar scenario is described, when Orlando returns to England as a woman and the archduchess who previously wanted to marry Orlando the man, reveals to her that she is actually a man. After observing the undressed archduke standing in front of her, Orlando is made aware of her own sex, which, according to the biographer, she had “completely forgotten” (Woolf, *Orlando* 126). After the revelation, Orlando sips some wine and the biographer makes an interesting conclusion: “In short, they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse” (ibid.). After attention is brought to both their sexes, there seems to be a need to act the parts assigned to men and women. However, this need only lasts for ten minutes before Orlando and the archduke return to their normal behaviour. This acting “the parts of man and woman” does not come natural to either sex. The natural form for the sexes to communicate is not by playing or acting out their roles, the “natural discourse” seems to come when they abandon these roles.

Abandoning the idea that the two sexes are binary and opposites, and Orlando inhabiting both sexes and eventually marrying someone who does the same, the novel presents a new vision for the concept of gender. Woolf’s androgynous ideal as presented in *Orlando* is what Young explains as a type of gender ideal that actually envisions an end to gender:

‘Androgyny’ named the ideal that many feminists theorized, a social condition in which biological sex would have no implications for a person’s life prospects, or the way people treated one another (including, importantly, in the most consistent of these theories, one’s choice of sex partners). These androgynous persons in the transformed liberated society would have no categorically distinct forms of dress, comportment, occupations, propensities toward aggression or passivity, associated with their embodiment. We would all be just people with various bodies. (13)

The androgynous ideal, as opposed to the feminine ideal, would not have to dress a certain way nor encounter any predetermined conceptions about how one should act according to

one's body. This condition seems to be the very essence in *Orlando* and the conclusion Woolf lands at after exploring gender in the novel. With telling the story of Orlando (and Vita's) life, Woolf has successfully shown how femininity is performative rather than an innate essence of the female body. She has shown how clothes play an important part in this performance, as well as for gender stereotypes in general. She has also managed to show that what defines a woman is not her body, but her lived experience. The lived experience is shaped by how a woman is allowed to and supposed to be in society, as well as persistent perceptions of women that further contributes to limiting their experience. Woolf's resolution seems to be abandoning gender altogether, in favour of an androgynous ideal that allows for new ways for women (and men) to define themselves and to shape their lived experience.

3.4 Conclusion

Orlando sets out to redefine not only what it means to be a woman, but what it means to be human in the 20th century. As a frame for her work, Woolf creates an anti-biography to show how the self is fragmented and subject to change, as opposed to the picture of the self as stable and fixed as presented in her father's biographies. Orlando's body that inhabits the self is also inconstant and Woolf demonstrates how gender is not a set category of attributes. However, she also demonstrates how the body's relationship with identity is defined by the ruling gender ideology, that is, how it is expected that a woman should be and behave. Therefore, a woman will during her lived experience in her body continually define and redefine herself depending on her situation and circumstances. Woolf is not saying that the situation has no effect on a woman; on the contrary Woolf opposes the leading pervasive picture of sex by showing that femininity is not some mysterious essence that all women are born with. Femininity is rather a theatrical performance that is imposed upon women by her circumstances and remains an ideal under the system of patriarchy. Fashion and clothing contribute to the creating of this ideal, as they restrict movement and even, according to Woolf, a woman's outlook on the world. Orlando engages in cross-dressing in order to enable herself to freely define who she is, thus embodying the androgynous ideal that Woolf envisioned. Historically, only important people with special talents deserved a biography, and for Woolf, the most important people are the ones who have an androgynous mind.

4. Sasha, or the Impossibility of Being a Woman in the Metropolis

This chapter will focus on *Good Morning, Midnight* and its narrator-protagonist Sasha Jansen. The reading looks specifically at Sasha's attempt at transforming herself, both physically and mentally. The first part will deal with the physical transformation which involves changing her appearance such as dying her hair and purchasing a new set of clothes. I will demonstrate how Sasha places her longing for new clothes alongside the promise of happiness and renewal that comes with fashionable garments. The reading will again engage with the theories of Young to show how and why this promise will never be fulfilled. The second part will look more closely into Sasha's attempt to transform in terms of her public behaviour. She tries to perform the role of the liberated woman in the city but at the same time, she has to conform to the conventional standards of femininity and expectations of how a woman should behave in public. Finally, the last part focuses on how, mentally, Sasha's transformation is about getting over trauma and keeping old memories from interfering into her daily life. It seems that no matter how much she changes her appearance or tries to keep up the performance, the past trauma she is living with seeps into her consciousness and shapes or disturbs her every experience. Ultimately, Sasha has nowhere to hide from her own mind, and as a single woman alone in the metropolis, she is not safe and ends up experiencing a new trauma.

4.1 Sasha's Transformation Act

In "Women Recovering Our Clothes", Iris Marion Young cites Ann Hollander who argues that in modernity, clothes became associated with personages and situations because of the images presented by advertisement. In contrast to the image of the Victorian woman, who was statuesque and immobile, the modern images typically showed "women on the move – striding down the street, leaping with excitement, running on the sand, leaning over a desk" (Young 64). These images became readily available to everyone through catalogues, films and department stores, and came to characterize women's experience of clothing. Women pictured themselves doing these things, and fantasized about being like, feeling like and looking like the woman in the advertisement. Hollander, according to Young, further argues that modern city life provided innumerable opportunities for the fantasy to be fulfilled.

Restaurants, hotels, bars and crowded city streets made it easier to place oneself inside the picture. All one had to do was to buy the right clothes.

When we first meet Sasha, she is in a cheap hotel room that feels “quite like old times” (Rhys 3) and we learn that she has been here for five days. She has made out a plan for her everyday routine; where to eat and where to drink. She lies awake in her bed contemplating what has brought her here, and we learn that she is, in fact, in Paris, where she used to live up until five years ago. Sasha’s trip back to Paris was encouraged by a friend which she had run into, and who, after just looking at her, decides that she needs a change. The friend lends her money, and Sasha, commenting that she has become very passive, follows her advice and goes. Thus, her trip to Paris is an attempt to start anew and what sparks her so-called “transformation act” (Rhys 49).

Although the friend suggests she should get new clothes, Sasha can tell from her look that what she is really saying is: “She’s getting too old. She drinks” (Rhys 5). In other words, the friend implies that the required change involves more than just a change of appearance. As Ingrid Galtung puts it in “‘This Way – This Way to the Exhibition’: Jean Rhys and the Narrative Logic of Fashion”, when the old friend remarks that she needs new clothes, it is implied that what she really needs “...are not new garments in and of themselves, but the meanings attached to them – which include... those of youth, vigour and radiance” (2). Put differently, new and fashionable clothing have *meaning* in that they send a message; a message that you are a certain type of woman, a fashionable woman, who has her act together. Sasha does not have her act together because she is getting older and she drinks too much. While the clothes cannot change this, they can act as a shield to hide or cover up what is really going on, both on the inside and the outside, and present a façade to others, so that at least she looks like *that woman*.

The comment made by the old friend has made Sasha even more self-conscious about what she is wearing and how she looks. When the patron of the hotel she is staying at gives her a disapproving look for not putting in her passport number, she blames it on her appearance:

It shouts “Anglaise”, my hat. And my dress extinguishes me. And then this damned old fur coat slung on top of everything else – the last idiocy, the last incongruity. Never mind, I have some money now. I may be able to do something about it. (Rhys 8)

The hat she is wearing seems to be of the English fashion and not of the French. Her dress is not right either and her fur coat is old. She is not dressed appropriately according to what a woman in Paris should look like, and the patron is also likely to notice this. Sasha thus blames herself and her stupid dressing behaviour for the patron's objection. A few years ago, Sasha also changed her name because she was hoping it would bring her luck (Rhys 5). In other words, Sasha seems to firmly believe that all of these external changes will somehow lead to internal changes. Thus, her transformation act is as much a mental change as a change of appearance.

According to Koppen, some of the reason why fashion became an important part of life in the city in modernity was that "the metropolitan condition with its bodily closeness and lack of space" (6-7) made it necessary to separate oneself from other bodies and protect one's independence. There was also the potential of being noticed, to receive attention and to stand out from the masses. It seems that for Sasha, however, fashionable clothing is about protecting herself and her boundaries and avoiding attention. By achieving the fashionable look, she will blend in, feel happier and ultimately be left in peace. However, she knows she is failing and pleads for some pity and understanding:

Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed, but look how hard I try. Three hours to choose a hat; every morning an hour and a half trying to make myself look like everybody else.
(Rhys 86-87)

Her constant failure makes her unhappy and anxious, and she keeps receiving unwanted attention. It thus becomes even more important that her transformation act succeeds, and she starts off by visiting the hairdresser to dye her hair blonde cendré. She admits that she thought the happiness achieved by acquiring nice, new hair would last for days, but she has already forgotten about it in the taxi back and she does not even feel like eating (Rhys 49). She continues the transformative act by planning to purchase a hat. She spends hours in the hat shop but cannot seem to find a hat that neither fits nor she likes. Even so, she ends up purchasing one. The hats in fashion are, according to the saleswoman, difficult to wear, but it seems that they are selling no matter how much the customers are complaining about them. Galtung states that "what the customer buys, after all, is not the hat in and of itself, but its signified meaning of *chic*..." (18). In other words, it is the meaning attached to the hat that is crucial and what it signifies. The saleswoman assures Sasha that the hat is the right hat, and

that everyone else is experiencing the same difficulties as her. And the hat seems to achieve its desired effect:

I feel saner and happier after this. I go to a restaurant near by and eat a large meal, at the same time carefully watching the effect of the hat on the other people in the room, *comme ça*. Nobody stares at me, which I think is a good sign. (Rhys 55-56)

The act of purchasing and wearing a chic hat makes Sasha feel better and she gets her appetite back. Wearing the right clothes thus seem to be about blending in and looking like everyone else, because Sasha feels more relaxed when she no longer feels like an outsider. As we will come back to, Sasha does not have any family or a home, and she even says that she has "...no pride, no name no face, no country. I don't belong anywhere" (Rhys 33). Thus, looking and dressing like the Parisian woman seems to give her a sense of belonging.

The type of woman that Sasha wants to present herself as is one that was created by advertisement in order to sell a product. As argued by Young, however, clothes never will fulfil this fantasy, because one will always have to buy more in order to keep up with the changing fashion. In her essay, Young also points to Sandra Bartky, who argues that the "fashion-beauty complex" (66) is internalized by women because of the evaluating gaze they are constantly put under, both by themselves and by others. The fashion and beauty criteria that women are trying to meet are created by capitalist society in order for corporates to make money. To make sure that consumers are always wanting to buy something new, the criteria only focuses on deficiencies. No matter how much one acquires, the complex remains because there will always be something that is lacking and something which one is not. The promise of fulfilment lies in this lack and the idea that "good clothes, new clothes, this year's clothes will cover up my flaws, straighten me out, measure me up to the approving eye" (Young 66). Put differently, in fashion we desire approval and transformation. The desire is within reach and seems fully possible to fulfil; it is possible for a second to be the sexy woman in the picture parading down the street in a new and expensive dress. However, it will not be long before the dress is out of fashion and another image is presented, and all one is left with is the feeling of lack. Thus, the fashion-beauty complex continues.

Sasha is a prime example of the fashion-beauty complex. She feels shame for not wearing the right clothes and frequently pictures herself wearing perfect outfits and feeling different. After being humiliated by the manager in a clothing store she used to work, she seeks comfort in a dress that she wants to buy:

In this fitting-room there is a dress in one of the cupboards which has been worn a lot by the mannequins and is going to be sold off for four hundred francs. The saleswoman has promised to keep it for me. I have tried it on; I have seen myself in it. It is a black dress with wide sleeves embroidered in vivid colours – red, green, blue, purple. It is my dress. If I had been wearing it I should never have stammered or been stupid. (Rhys 19-20)

Sasha has pictured herself in the dress that has been worn by the perfect mannequins. She has thus pictured herself as perfect and complete and as the woman the department stores wants its customers to buy. She believes that if she had been wearing the dress, the situation would have turned out differently. Ultimately, the fashion-beauty complex is so internalized by Sasha that she confuses her own and other people's deficiencies with those put forth by fashion and beauty. As a consequence, Sasha accepts the blame for the humiliating incident, and ascribes it all to her look, or, to be more exact, her lack of the fashionable look.

Because of the promise of happiness that the advertisement presents, Sasha also uses clothes and beauty as consolation. While the biographer states that Orlando, as a woman, deviates from the feminine stereotype because she does not care much about her clothes or her appearance, Sasha has a different relationship to it. When Sasha feels like crying, she immediately shifts her attention to her hair: "I try to decide what colour I shall have my hair dyed, and hang on to that thought as you hang on to something when you are drowning" (Rhys 40). In other words, Sasha deals with her anxiety by shifting her thoughts to something that she actually can control, namely her appearance. Another time, when an old and distressful memory comes up from another job that she used to have and lost, she seems to pull herself together by shifting her thoughts to clothes and that same black dress, imagining how it will make everything better:

Then I start thinking about the black dress, longing for it, madly, furiously. If I could get it everything would be different. Supposing I ask So-and-so to ask So-and-so to ask Madame Perron to keep it for me? ...I'll get the money. I'll get it... (Rhys 23)

Sasha tries to suppress the uncomfortable feelings the memory evokes and replace them with a visualization of the pleasure the dress will provide. However, the price for the black dress is four hundred francs, the same amount that Sasha makes a month from her work. This adds

another element to the inadequacy; she does not have the money to acquire the right clothes. This is what Maroula Joannou in “‘All right, I’ll do anything for good clothes’”: Jean Rhys and Fashion” calls the “feminization of poverty” (479). Joannou argues that Sasha sees her life in Paris as a life in a stylish type of poverty, and she distances herself from the worn and poor women dressed in shabby clothing while wheeling prams. Even so, Sasha is in a precarious position because she only qualifies for ill-paid jobs that also require that she looks presentable. So superficially, she has to look fashionable and glamorous, but she does not really have the means to qualify for this kind of life. Hence, the strife not only becomes a quest for looking successful but acquiring the feeling of success on the inside as well.

Joannou also notes how the black dress symbolizes the new woman in modernity. The “little black dress” used to be associated with mourning but was reinvented by the French fashion designer Coco Chanel in 1926 and made both sophisticated and accessible. The dress was now made in a soft fabric that made it suitable for any occasion, and the loose style made the dress perfect for active women on the move in the city (Joannou 466). The colour, moreover, separated the girls from women. Chanel created the image of a mobile and liberated (and wealthy) woman that created a yearning among consumers to have that dress and that life. As a result, Sasha puts all of her longings into wearing the black dress. However, as Joannou also notes, Sasha’s longings for the dress are

doomed to fail since it situates the desired garment in relation to an imaginary ideal. Once the coveted item materializes, it loses that relationship to the ideal and registers on the consciousness differently, coming to seem “dated” and thus setting in motion anew the interminable quest for innovation and renewal inherent in the incessant striving for perfection. (474)

Put differently, the desire comes from the associations a woman gets when regarding the women in the advertisement and dreaming about the dress, that is, the woman Chanel wants them to imagine. Once they purchase the dress, the connection to the ideal is lost and the dress is just another garment. A new desire will immediately arise.

It was noted by Koppen that clothes are usually encountered on a body (2). In the fashion industry, however, these bodies are referred to as mannequins, belonging to either real women or plastic figures. The mannequins in the department stores would exhibit “corporeal templates” (Galtung 10) that would be copied and purchased by the female customers. When Mr. Blank, the head of the shop where Sasha once worked, comes over to Paris to observe

how business is going, he questions Sasha about her job qualifications. Sasha says that she used to work as a mannequin prior to getting the receptionist job at Mr. Blank's store. Mr. Blank replies: "'You worked as a mannequin?' Down and up his eyes go, up and down. 'How long ago was this?'" (Rhys 13). Mr. Blank's measuring look discloses a certain scepticism towards this information and we realise that this has to do with the state of Sasha's body. The gap between the real and the artificial body was growing at this time, and Galtung explains that the real mannequins eventually had to be replaced by the dolls because they lacked their "smooth, ageless surface" and "streamlined figure" (11) that was required. Furthermore, the new and improved Art-Deco mannequin of the 1920s was

moulded in solid material and fitted with arms, legs and heads, duplicating the dimension of "real" women. Yet Art Deco simplified and de-familiarized the natural female body, reconfiguring it as artful sculpture. (Galtung 10)

Sasha contemplates the mannequins from her receptionist desk "...watching those damned dolls, thinking what a success they would have made of their lives if they had been women. Satin skin, silk hair, velvet eyes, sawdust heart – all complete" (Rhys 11) In other words, the template women attempted to copy was a fabrication and an ideal that could only be created artificially. The same goes for fashion's promise of fulfilment and happiness. The promise is like the mannequins; a perfect image on the outside, but completely empty on the inside.

4.2 Sasha's Exhibition of Femininity

The image of femininity that the clothing advertisement contributes to presenting is one that Sasha attempts to live up to. However, as this is an ideal that can never be achieved, the attempt rather becomes a theatrical performance that Sasha does her best to carry out convincingly. Clothes become a means to this end because "fashion is purchasable femininity" (Joannou 472). Put differently, the promise of physical and emotional transformation that Sasha believes in if only she could purchase the black dress, also becomes a quest to become the woman that the dress entails. However, it will take more than a dress to cure Sasha's anxiety. Thus, wearing the dress is more like wearing a mask that shields and covers up her inner feelings, and presents a show of acceptable female behaviour and looks to the outside world. The idea of the feminine ideal as theatrical was first presented by González and Riviere in Chapter Two and then applied in Chapter Three to demonstrate how Woolf in

Orlando challenges this ideal. Orlando is not a typical feminine woman and realizes after her sex change that it takes tedious discipline to be one. Sasha, on the other hand, is willing to put in the discipline it takes in order to present herself as a feminine woman. The transformation act is therefore her main project, because it will hopefully make her become one. However, it also seems that Sasha actually wants to escape this theatrical show, or the Exhibition, as it manifests itself in Sasha's dreams.

Early in the novel, Sasha discloses her disturbing dream about the Exhibition. In her dream, everything is pointing her and pushing her towards the Exhibition, but she does not want to go. She rather wants to escape and find the way out (Rhys 6). No matter how hard she tries or who she asks for directions, there seems to be no way out and nowhere to go, except to the Exhibition. *The Cambridge Dictionary* defines "exhibition" as "a situation in which someone shows a particular skill or quality to the public" ("Exhibition"). The Exhibition that seems to haunt her dreams could therefore be seen as a symbol of her having to show these particular skills or qualities. The skills are those associated with femininity, and since Sasha does not conform to the conventional standards, she has to perform a role in order to display the right qualities. The feminine thus becomes something theatrical or like a masquerade that Sasha dresses up for and performs in. Her dream suggests that she actually wants to escape this show, however there is no exit sign and no escaping the all-encompassing ideology of femininity.

Because Sasha is a middle-aged unmarried woman living alone in Paris, she does not have anyone to rely on or to protect her, and she is dependent on performing in line with the expectations of femininity in order to avoid unwanted attention. However, Sasha goes out to bars at night without being accompanied by a man and she drinks more than a woman should. Sometimes she even lets her guard down completely, and cries in public. She is aware that she is not behaving as she should, and this seems to add to her feeling of discomfiture. Keeping up appearances is a tiresome task, however, and Sasha also seems to be aware of the fact that nothing is real and it is all actually a show. After having confessed to a man that she had drinks with that she has barely had anything to eat for weeks, he ends up abruptly leaving her standing on the pavement. He has accused her of being "mad for pleasure" and she responds:

And did I mind? Not at all, not at all. If you think I minded, then you've never lived like that, plunged in a dream, when all the faces are masks and only the trees are alive and you can almost see the strings that are pulling the puppets. Close-up of human nature – isn't it worth something? (Rhys 73)

By performing a role herself, she has become aware of how others are performing, as well. She can almost see the puppet-strings, meaning that everyone are just dolls that are performing in the way they are told. Thus, nothing is real; everyone is wearing a mask and performing in the play that is life. This is also the reason why Sasha is not offended by the comment. How can she be offended when it is all just a play? Sasha even refers to her own face as a mask, saying that “besides, it isn’t my face, this tortured and tormented mask. I can take it off whenever I like and hang it up on a nail” (Rhys 33). She is to some degree a willing participant in the play, but according to her, she can take her mask off whenever she likes.

Although Sasha thinks that she can take off her mask at any time and see the strings in the puppet-play, she still goes out of her way to achieve the feminine ideal. One of the reasons Sasha tries so hard to pull herself together is because she is well aware that not displaying the expected behaviour will be seen as a deviation from the exhibition of femininity. Sasha keeps a record of certain bars and restaurants she cannot visit, and a record of the rest where she is allowed because “I have never made scenes there, collapsed, cried –”(Rhys 29). The places she cannot go to are places where she has deviated from her role and thus made a scene. The scenes seem to often involve crying in public. Referring to an episode that taught her to be more careful, she exclaims “last night, for instance, last night was a catastrophe...” (Rhys 3). She then describes how she had entered into a conversation with the woman sitting on the table next to hers in a restaurant when she started crying for no apparent reason other than having a drink too many. The other woman sits up straight and tells her: “I understand,’ she said, ‘I understand. All the same... Sometimes I’m just as unhappy as you are. But that’s not to say that I let everybody see it’” (Rhys 4). The woman does not ask her what is wrong or attempt to comfort her. She rather tells her straight out that her behaviour is unacceptable and that she has to pull herself together. In “Subversive Wanderings in the City of Love: Constructing the Female Body in Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight*” Laura De La Parra Fernández labels this deviation “the spectacle” because “it disrupts public codes of sexual behaviour for women and challenges patriarchal authority” (223). A woman has to be careful with deviation and it can in fact just be minor mistakes such as laughing too loud in public or wearing too much makeup. In other words, the spectacle could be any sign of behaviour that exceeds the performance of femininity and thus challenges the whole notion of gender. The behaviour will most likely not be taken seriously, and rather “dismissed as hysterical” (Fernández 223) or blamed on the woman for bringing it upon herself. Thus, Sasha has to

avoid the places where she has failed at her theatrical performance of femininity because she has made a spectacle of herself.

It is not only in public places that Sasha has to keep up the exhibition. Although Sasha meets people that she might come close to calling friends, she is constantly reminded that she has to keep up her performance and avoid the spectacle. Sasha agrees to go with a Russian man who calls himself Nicholas Delmar to see a painter-friend of his. When they are there, they listen to music, dance and talk when suddenly Sasha starts to cry for no apparent reason. Delmar tells Sasha a story from when he lived in London to make her stop crying. He says that one time a woman was crying loudly outside his door, and he took her in and offered her a drink. The woman was originally from Martinique and explained how she had been subjected to racism in England and had not left the apartment before dark for two years. She had been staying with a white man because she had nowhere else to go, but now she was drunk and “at the end of everything” (Rhys 78). Delmar attempted to comfort her by saying; “don’t let yourself get hysterical, because if you do that it’s the end” (Rhys 79). In other words, his way of comforting or speaking reasonably to her, as he names it, is to remind her that departing from her role will do her no good. If the man sees her, he might kick her out, and then she would really have nothing. Delmar feels sorry for the woman, but the only resolution he sees to her problems is to stop acting hysterical. Sasha believes that he is telling this story because he is comparing the Martiniquaise to her and thus reminding her to avoid the female spectacle.

Fernández also refers to the spectacle as “the female complaint” (223). The female complaint “departs from a female subjectivity that has been wronged (that is, denied the “good life” promised in exchange of fulfilling one’s own role as a woman)” (223-224). The complaint will never be taken seriously because what the woman complains about is actually what she desires and what traps her in the first place. Thus, Fernández concludes:

The female complaint – that is, “making a spectacle out of oneself” – can exist *precisely* because it is not taken seriously, because it is actually asking for what it complains about: not being loved, in the fantasy mode of romantic love. Therefore, while the complaint voices female oppression, it is also “contained” within the very discourse that it is criticizing – that of sentimentality -, functioning, thus, more as a “safety valve” than as a useful tool for political action. (224)

Sasha is very much aware of having to be careful and avoiding the spectacle, and it traps her into wearing a mask and complying with the rules of female behaviour, which like the exhibition has no way out because the female complaint is trapped inside her own argument and will never be taken seriously. In trying to comfort herself, she tells herself: “It’s all right. Tomorrow I’ll be pretty again, tomorrow I’ll be happy again, tomorrow, tomorrow...” (Rhys 44). The promise of the good life still seems to reside within Sasha.

While the female complaint gets blamed for her own misfortune, men seems to be allowed to, and to get away with, having a different philosophy. When Sasha is speaking to Delmar about life, he explains his philosophy to her:

For me, you see, I look at life like this: If someone had come to me and asked me if I wished to be born I think I should have answered No. I’m sure I should have answered No. But no one asked me. I am here not through my will. Most things that happen to me – they are not my will either. And so that’s what I say to myself all the time: “You didn’t ask to be born, you didn’t make the world as it is, you didn’t make yourself as you are. Why torment yourself? Why not take life just as it comes? You have the right to; you are not one of the guilty ones”. When you aren’t rich or strong or powerful, you are not a guilty one. And you have the right to take life just as it comes and to be as happy as you can. (Rhys 50-51)

Delmar’s attitude towards life stands in stark contrast to Sasha’s experience of being a woman in the world. While he thinks he cannot be blamed for most of the things that happens to him, Sasha torments herself for everything that happens and blames it on her own failing performance as a woman. Delmar tells himself to take life as it comes but taking life as it comes for a woman would probably be a dangerous affair. For example, not having a job or steady income means for Sasha to have no home and no security. According to the female complaint, when a woman is neither rich nor strong nor powerful, she is certainly to be blamed for her misfortune. To be as happy as she can is not a right for a woman, it is rather a fantasy promise if she delivers her part of the deal, that is, playing her part as a woman right.

To avoid making a scene and to cause a spectacle is also a self-preserving project for Sasha because her performance seems to be all she has left. When Sasha overhears the patronne of the hotel offering a room to a new guest, she realizes that she is paying three times as much for her room than what the new guest is told to pay. Sasha concludes:

It shows that I have ended as a successful woman, anyway, however I may have started. One look at me and the prices go up. And when the Exhibition is pulled down and the tourists have departed, where shall I be? In the other room, of course... as usual trying to drink myself to death... (Rhys 24-25)

So far, Sasha is able to perform convincingly, and her transformation act has worked. However, she is getting older and keeping up with appearances becomes more and more difficult. If the “Exhibition is pulled down”, that is, that Sasha’s show is uncovered and she is exposed as a pretender, or, that she gets too old to play the game, she would have nothing left but to kill herself. Thus, Sasha’s life, for now, depends on the successfulness of her performance.

Through her terrifying dream about the Exhibition and her realization that everyone around her is also pretending, it seems that Sasha really wants to find a way out of the theatrical performance she is living. However, that would involve serious consequences for her. The last part of this chapter will demonstrate how and why the city ultimately is a dangerous place for Sasha and that causes her to finally accept her fate as a woman.

4.3 Woman in the Metropolis

In her essay, Fernández also aims to explore why the city was a hostile place for women in the beginning of the 20th century when they had access to jobs that were supposed to give them more freedom. A woman walking around alone in the city could easily be mistaken for a prostitute and thus became a symbol of feral sexuality and vice. Her counterpart on the other hand, the *flâneur*, who is a white male, could freely wander around the city and observe the crowds, while critically commenting on what he saw. The flâneur became a frequent figure in modernist literature and symbol of the individual in the cities of modernity. According to Fernández, scholars disagree if it was even possible for women to become a *flâneuse*. Some seem to argue that it was impossible simply because the public was a masculine space, and others suggest that only prostitutes could manage the task because they literally “inhabit the streets” (Fernández 218). Sasha is a *flâneuse* to the extent that she lives on her own and her life mostly consists of walking the streets of Paris while commenting on her surroundings with a mix of nostalgia and contempt. Even so, there is something keeping her from becoming

equal to the flaneur. Apart from the fact that the streets are not safe for a woman, Sasha also struggles with overcoming emotions and fears that arise from living with past trauma.

Sasha's quest for transformation, both mentally and physically, seems to really originate from the attempt to escape the psychological trauma she has experienced and that seems to haunt her. Bennet and Royle explain how the force and significance of a trauma is experienced much later than the actual event that caused the trauma. Sasha currently suffers from past trauma because she is forced to live with these flashbacks or her "film-mind" (Rhys 146) as she names it. At the very first page of the novel, we learn that alcohol, as well as an old familiar song can trigger these memories. "It was something I remembered" (Rhys 3) she tells the people around her in order to excuse her behaviour. She describes the night as a catastrophe and reminds herself in the future to be careful with alcohol in order to avoid scenes like this one.

Sasha's plan for avoiding the triggers is to have a clear plan for each day and sticking to it and never letting her guard down, in other words, to become an "automaton" (Rhys 4). According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, an automaton is "a person who acts like a machine, without thinking or feeling" ("Automaton"), which is evocative of the mannequins Sasha used to admire. It seems that it was Sasha's intention that her life in Paris would revolve around the automaton plan, and, perhaps, acquire the kind of "sawdust heart" (Rhys 11) that she imagines the mannequins to have. However, it is hard for her to live such a rigid life, especially because she likes to have her drink after dinner, and that drink too often becomes a few. Alcohol acts both as a trigger and a consolation for her. When she is having a good day and for a second thinks there is nothing to worry about, she makes sure to remind herself:

Be careful, careful! Don't get excited. You know what happens when you get excited and exalted, don't you? ... Yes And then, you know how you collapse like a pricked balloon, don't you? Having no staying power... Yes, exactly... So, no excitement. This is going to be a quiet, sane fortnight. Not too much drinking, avoidance of certain cafes, of certain streets, of certain spots, and everything will go off beautifully. (Rhys 8)

It is important for the successfulness of the plan that she does not for a second deviate from it, and this involves not getting too excited or too relaxed. This way of talking to herself, almost parent-like, is prevalent throughout the whole novel. It seems that Sasha has had no chance to properly work through what she has experienced, and for this reason the memories have

completely taken over her mind. In order to keep herself afloat, she reminds herself not to get too worked up and to avoid the triggers that she knows for sure will lead to a breakdown. In other words, the plan is to find a way to live with the trauma without it interfering too much into her activities.

The trauma Sasha has experienced is diverse in terms of severity and content, and spans from humiliations experienced in the workplace to losing her baby and being left by her husband. What the experiences have in common is that they are experiences she has had solely because she is a woman. Although women had the opportunity to work in the 1920's Paris, the work opportunities were limited to assistant positions and similar poorly paid and low-standing jobs. When Sasha is unable to carry out a task requested by the manager, he scolds her by humiliating her: "God knows I'm used to fools, but this complete imbecility... This woman is the biggest fool I've ever met in my life. She seems to be half-witted. She's hopeless..." (Rhys 19). He is even referring to her in third person, further adding to the humiliation by speaking like she is not present. Sasha has endured several humiliations similar to this one, and it seems that this has made Sasha aware of her "market value" (Rhys 20) and made her view herself as an inefficient member of society. She has come to accept that men like the manager have a "mystical right" (ibid.) to treat her and speak to her like this.

Sasha has also become estranged from her family, which also adds to her lack of protection. When she got back from Paris the last time, someone she names "the old devil" (Rhys 31) (presumably her dad) asks her "why didn't you drown yourself in the Seine, Sophia?" (Rhys 32). Her dad refuses to call her by her new name and tells her that she is dead to them. Sasha has in fact attempted to drown herself, but she was "saved, rescued, fished-up, half-drowned, out of the deep, dark river..." (Rhys 4). Some nights she considers herself lucky to be alive, other nights she contemplates drinking herself to death because she has "had enough of thinking, enough of remembering" (Rhys 32).

Quite suddenly, towards the end of part 2 of the novel, Sasha opens up about her marriage. It seems that the memories that frequently arise in Paris are from this period of her life. Sasha used to be married to a man she met in London named Enno and he was the one who took her to Paris in the first place. When describing her wedding day, it is not presented as a pleasant memory. The day was cold and rainy, she wore a grey suit that she did not like much, and she does not care too much for the two guests present either. When Sasha and Enno go for a drink after the ceremony, she says "it's the first time that day that I have felt warm or happy" (Rhys 95). Her marriage to Enno consists mostly of her worrying about

money and Enno promising he will fix it while leaving her locked up in a hotel room somewhere in Europe. When he is finally able to get them a room in Paris, it is filled with bugs. They live off of borrowed money they get from old acquaintances. When they are having dinner with some people they intend to borrow money from, Sasha gets a glimpse of herself in the mirror and is startled of what she looks like. She sums up her marriage;

I hadn't bargained for this. I didn't think it would be like this – shabby clothes, worn-out shoes, circles under your eyes, your hair getting straight and lanky, the way people look at you... I didn't think it would be like this. (Rhys 100)

Sasha's life with Enno is a life in what Joannou calls "bohemian poverty" (479), meaning that it is almost a stylish and artistic life in the cities lived by people who have not always been poor. However, it seems that it was not living in poverty that affected Sasha the most, but rather Enno's condescending behaviour towards her. In order for them to get some money, Sasha wants to give English lessons, but Enno does not want her to work for another man but him. At one point he leaves her in the hotel room for three whole days without a word. Sasha is at this point pregnant but has not told him yet. The last thing he said to her before leaving was: "You don't know how to make love... You're too passive, you're lazy, you bore me, I've had enough of this. Goodbye." (Rhys 105). When he suddenly walks through the door the third day, he demands Sasha peel him an orange. However bad Enno behaves towards Sasha, she loves him and even blames herself for the treatment she is getting: "I fastened myself on him, and now I am dragging him down" (Rhys 107). In the end, Sasha loses her baby and Enno leaves her, and she describes how she started falling to pieces after this and the memories become a blur.

The fragmented after-effects of the trauma come to define Sasha and is the reason why she is the prime example of Patricia Moran's "Rhys' woman" (7). Sasha is self-destructive, she drinks too much and she has tried to drown herself in the river. She has trouble sleeping and takes luminal. She is also dependent because she seeks out the company of men, although she seems determined that "human beings are cruel – horribly cruel" (Rhys 36) and even declares that "now I no longer wish to be loved, beautiful, happy or successful. I want one thing and one thing only – to be left alone" (Rhys 32). This is probably also the reason Sasha agrees to have a drink with the man who calls himself Rene, although it seems that she does not enjoy his company. The whole last part of the novel deals with the meeting with Rene and

thus seems to be of great importance because it shows that no matter how hard Sasha tries to transform herself as a woman, there is nothing she can do to change the behaviour of men.

When Sasha first meets Rene, his story does not quite add up and she suspects that he is a gigolo because he seems to want money from her. She realizes that he has thus done exactly what she intended him to: he has judged her by what he can see; her clothes and her coat. This realization seems to make Sasha change her mind. Previously, she wanted to blend in and actually be judged by her coat. Now, she states:

I want to shout at him 'I haven't got any money, I tell you. I know what you're judging by. You're judging by my coat. You oughtn't to judge by my coat. You ought to judge by what I have on under my coat, by my handbag, by my expression, by anything you like'. (Rhys 59-60)

Sasha gets annoyed with him for judging her by what she has presented him with. She has previously admitted to wanting to be like and look like everybody else, but in conversation with Rene she instructs him to not "tell me that I'm like other women – I'm not" (Rhys 133). Sasha suddenly becomes very protective of her individualism, and it becomes important for her not to give the idea that she is chasing the feminine ideal. When Rene realizes that she is not worth any money, he wants to get into her hotel room instead. He is also under the impression that women are only pretending, resisting temptation because they want to present themselves as proper and chaste. Sasha insists on not letting him into her hotel room and he replies: "You're such a stupid woman" he says, "such a stupid woman. Why do you go on pretending?" (Rhys 141-142). According to Rene, it is easy to see what Sasha *really* wants, but Sasha gets offended by his self-righteousness and throws him out of the room. He refuses to go and what follows is a struggle where he threatens to rape her. Again, the blame is put on her and she is accused of lying and pretending.

The ending of *Good Morning, Midnight* seems to signal Sasha finally surrendering to her fate as a woman. In lack of a proper home, her hotel room has always been her safe space in the city, her place to creep in and to "hide from the wolves outside" (Rhys 28). However, her room is also "saturated with the past" (Rhys 89), which could refer to past memories but also the fact that people tend to repeat their mistakes. After Rene leaves her room, she regrets kicking him out, gets really drunk and leaves the door open so that he can come back in. However, it is the *commis* next door that ends up entering. Sasha has previously expressed dislike for the man, describing him as a ghost and a skeleton with a "bird-like face" (Rhys 7).

He seems to always be there, blocking her way and attempting to enter her room, but she has always rejected him. According to Fernández, the fact that Sasha gives up despising men and pulls him down into his bed signals that if you do not voluntarily comply to feminine ideology it will be enforced through violence (229). The final “Yes – yes – yes...” (Rhys 158) expressed by Sasha, is a surrender, or a consent as Althusser would name it, to the ruling ideology.

4.4 Conclusion

In many ways, *Good Morning, Midnight* can be said to be an anti-narrative of what it means to be a woman in the modern metropolis. The stereotypical narratives that women engage themselves with are the ones where they find love, get married and have children. Rhys, on the other hand, as the female complaint, presents us with the narrative of reality. Sasha has bought into the fantasy of romantic love, and even though she is middle aged and poor without a lot of means, she is still seeking fulfilment through such a narrative. As the final scene reveals, however, love in the sense that it is presented to women does not exist, and when opening herself to men Sasha experiences new trauma. Therefore, the real trauma is the lie women are told about the promise of love, as well as how they must act in a specific manner to achieve this promise. This promise is not attainable and Sasha’s situation is actually an impossible one. Rhys is unveiling this lie in her novel, and this is perhaps one of the reasons why the novel was deemed too depressing by critics.

Because Rhys presents us with the narrative of reality, she also demonstrates how Sasha sometimes grow tired of pretending and wants to find a way out of the exhibition. Her performance thus repeatedly fails and unveils how, like in *Orlando*, the feminine is theatrical. Ultimately, life in the metropolis is not safe for a woman like Sasha and the trauma she has already endured keeps interfering into her everyday experience and keeps her from reaching the feminine ideal. In the end she has no other choice than to surrender to her fate as a woman, because it is violently enforced upon her. In sum, it seems that both Woolf and Rhys critique the feminine stereotype, but they do this in different ways. Woolf uses clothes to play with gender conventions and demonstrate how they can be easily challenged through cross-dressing and sartorial play. Rhys, on the other hand, demonstrates how feminine ideology is something that is impossible for women in the 20th century to escape, and that for Sasha, the safest alternative is to conform rather than resist.

5. Conclusion: Comfort - or Curiosity and Courage?

This thesis has investigated female corporeal experience as presented in *Orlando* and *Good Morning, Midnight* in the light of Berman's perception of modernity as a life of paradox and contradiction. We have seen how modern life for women came with a promise of adventure, power, joy, growth and, perhaps most importantly, transformation of themselves and the world. At the same time, it threatened to destroy everything they had, everything they knew and everything they were (Berman 15). My reading aimed at describing how this paradox is "lived and felt in the flesh" (Young 7) by the protagonists Sasha and Orlando.

In her "Feminist Manifesto" from 1914, Mina Loy states that in order to achieve freedom it is vital that "women must destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved –" (2080), and that they have to let go of "the desire for comfortable protection" in favour of curiosity and courage. In these early years of the 20th century, Loy abandoned the suffragette movement and women's fight for equality, and ended up declaring that the key to liberation is to be found if women look within themselves for standards of value. In other words, Loy argues that instead of comparing themselves to men and longing to be men's equals, women have to find a way to define themselves for themselves and as themselves. And, as a central part of this process, the romantic illusion that takes up so much space in women's lives, needs to be replaced by the courage to be curious and seek an answer inside for what it means to be a woman.

In *Good Morning, Midnight* Sasha lacks the courage she needs to let go of her desire for comfortable protection. While she expresses a desire to be left alone, and, according to herself, has attempted to transform herself into an automaton that has a sawdust heart, she still seeks out the company of men, thus signalling a desire to be loved. While her dreams and sarcastic comments suggest that she actually knows that the romantic narrative is a lie, she still lacks the strength and also has little to no means to change her situation in any other way. Hence, when a man is finally able to enter her hotel room, her only safe space in the hostile city, she ends up surrendering to the enforced feminine ideology because she sees no way for her to escape it. Thus, it seems that Rhys mediates to the reader that the quest for love that is established as the only narrative for women, is actually a story of abuse and rape, but that there are few other options available for the "public woman".

Orlando, on the other hand, can be said to possess both courage and curiosity. As a woman, Orlando challenges a lot of the feminine stereotypes that have been created, and the

novel presents a more nuanced picture of not only the modern woman, but of women in general. Because Orlando inhabits the androgynous mind, “the comforts of ignorance seemed utterly denied to her” (Woolf, *Orlando* 113). However, it is also important to note here that there are vital differences in the material conditions of Sasha and Orlando, so we should take into account that the question is not one of courage and curiosity only. This is particularly clear if we look at the historical figures of Woolf and Rhys in the early 20th century. Born into privilege, Woolf considered dressing-up a fun, theatrical activity and actually had an ambivalent relationship to fashion, which she considered a “trivial” thing (Joannou 465). Thus, the element of sartorial play in her writing seems more similar to a theatrical masquerade and a play with the performance of subjectivity. Orlando is a person of means, so her material conditions are not given much attention because it is uncomplicated for her to acquire the clothes that she needs.

In contrast, Rhys, as a poor immigrant woman, had to make a living by taking jobs that required wearing presentable clothing. Rhys derived pleasure from clothes and was happy as long as she was wearing a pretty dress (Joannou 470), and therefore, clothes also became a source of comfort. *Good Morning, Midnight* is perhaps set in Paris for a reason, as this was the capital of fashion in modernity, and a place where clothes enjoyed equal status with high art (Joannou 485). However, there is also an underlying critique of the fashion system as both liberating and imprisoning present in Rhys’s fiction, not least on a material level. The emotional state of Sasha is closely linked to her choice of and quest for clothing and this is juxtaposed with feminine trauma and alienation because clothes are both the key to liberation and a means of continued imprisonment at the same time – at least for the “public woman” who cannot afford them.

In many ways, these novels can be viewed as our origin stories because they describe the very birth of the modern woman and the germination of how women define themselves today. Although a lot has happened since the early 20th century in terms of women’s rights and self-image, we are still in modernity and clothes continue to be a source of both freedom and frustration for women. We can see this in *How to be a Woman* (2011), a recent feminist manifesto written by Caitlin Moran. Here, she responds to Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born a woman – one becomes one” by saying that de Beauvoir “did not know the half of it” (8). Moran devotes a chapter entitled “I Get Into Fashion” to the clothing restrictions women are still under. Here, she describes her experience of guilt and insecurity after her husband has commented that “all other women buy a lot more clothes than you” (C. Moran 197). She takes a look in her closet and concludes that she is not being a proper

woman for not caring about such things as outfits and her looks. Women's magazines tell her that high heels "are a non-negotiable part of being a woman" (198) and she decides to acquire a pair. What follows is a detailed account of how she has bought several heels as a "down payment on a new life I had seen in a magazine, and subsequently thought I would attain, now I had the "right" shoes" (199). In other words, she only bought the heels because she thought (and was told) it was something she needed as a woman and that was supposed to fulfil a promise of a better life. Now, they all lie in a box under her bed because they failed to fulfil this promise.

After tackling women's shoes, Moran turns to clothing, because "when a woman walks into a room, her outfit is the first thing she says, before she even opens her mouth" (209). Moran, in a manner similar to Sasha, describes the uncomfortable moment when someone judges your outfit, and then starts talking to you in some way or another, based on their assessment. The outfit decides the outcome of the conversation, and sometimes even of your life (C. Moran 209-210). Thus, to always be dressed correctly according to occasion is "one of the presumed Skills Of A Woman" (ibid.) and because of the potential consequences of failing, it becomes a compulsory game that women have to partake in. Furthermore, Moran argues that when women say "I have *nothing* to wear!" what she really means is "There's nothing here for who I'm supposed to be today" (211). In other words, an important part of the feminine performance, is still based on wearing the right clothes. If a woman fails, the fatal consequences include being labelled as the spectacle for neglecting this crucial part of a woman's role.

I do not claim that this thesis has managed to answer the woman question. I do hope, however, that it has successfully demonstrated how the promise of growth, joy and power that women were offered in early modernity was an essential part of the paradox and contradiction that was physically felt by the female characters in the novels I have investigated. It seems that early modern women's lives were filled with potential, but at the same time it was very dangerous, especially if they did not conform to the feminine ideology. Therefore, we can conclude that both novels include a critique against the strict restrictions women are under in what (still) is a patriarchal society. Perhaps the answer to the woman question actually lies in Mina Loy's claim, that what is keeping women held back is actually themselves, because they need to take control over their own narratives. In short, women have to stop seeking comfort, and rather continue being courageous and curious.

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