

# THE CONCEPT OF 'NEW WOMAN' IN LITERARY MODERNISM: FINDING THE PLACE IN CULTURE (VIRGINIA WOOLF, LESYA UKRAINKA)

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**Key words:** modernism, literary tradition, autobiography, authority, self-image  
**Słowa kluczowe:** modernizm, tradycja literacka, autobiografia, władza, obraz siebie

**Abstract:** Iryna Nikolaichuk, THE CONCEPT OF 'THE NEW WOMAN' IN LITERARY MODERNISM: FINDING THE PLACE IN CULTURE (VIRGINIA WOOLF, LESYA UKRAINKA). "PORÓWNANIA" 20, 2017. Vol. XX, P. 135-144. ISSN 1733-165X. The article deals with the problem of forming the concept of 'the new woman' in the field of literary modernism and shows the complex change of the woman's role and place through the comparison of two national modernistic images of 'the new woman.' Self-representation of women authors through their writing, the process of revision of literary tradition by women authors and the changing the traditional social roles of women (mother, daughter, women friend) are the key points of the analysis. This study demonstrates the main features of 'the new woman' concept through similarities and differences of its implementation in two national models of literary modernism.

**Abstrakt:** Iryna Nikolaichuk, POJĘCIE „NOWEJ KOBIETY” W MODERNIZMIE LITERACKIM: POSZUKIWANIE MIEJSCA W KULTURZE (VIRGINIA WOOLF, LESIA UKRAINKA). „PORÓWNANIA” 20, 2017. T. XX, S. 135-144. ISSN 1733-165X. Artykuł dotyczy problemu konstruowania pojęcia „nowej kobiety” w dziedzinie modernizmu literackiego i pokazuje kompleksową zmianę roli oraz miejsca kobiety poprzez porównanie dwóch modernistycznych obrazów „nowej kobiety”, przedstawiających dwie różne narodowości. Kluczowymi punktami tej analizy są: pozycja autorki wyrażana poprzez jej styl pisania, proces rewizji tradycji literackiej i zmiana tradycyjnych ról społecznych kobiety (matka, córka, przyjaciółka). Artykuł pokazuje główne cechy pojęcia „nowej kobiety”, a także podobieństwa i różnice wdrażania jej w dwóch modelach narodowych modernizmu literackiego.

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## Introduction

The concept of 'the new woman', which appeared in Western Europe in the second half of the XIX century, was the result of a complex change which touched all the spheres of life – political, social, and moral. Since women obtained the right to vote, to receive higher education (in the USA in 1837 and Western Europe in 1848) and to obtain professional positions which were earlier accessible only for men, there had been a need for new social standards, new moral values, new models of behavior for women who wanted to take responsibility for their own life – and, apparently, the new aesthetic.

As for culture in general and literature in particular, the first significant reaction to the phenomenon of 'the new woman' appeared in literary works in the period of 'fin-de-siècle' – between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century. Each European national culture demonstrated its unique features of implementation the model of 'the new woman' in its system of values. Nevertheless, it is undoubted that for literary modernism which formed at the same time in most of the European national kinds of literature, the concept of 'the new woman' became one of the key points because it appeared as such in the process of the development of women writing. Not only women literary characters of that type, but the self-representation of a women writer through the values of 'the new woman' became a significant aesthetical phenomenon of literary modernism. So that the comparison of different national 'the new woman' types in literature have become fruitful material for understanding the sense of modernistic aesthetic and also for analyzing women writing as a separate phenomenon. Therefore, this research aims to highlight the key features of developing the concept of 'the new woman' in the works of the British woman writer and literary critic Virginia Woolf and the Ukrainian writer, poet and playwright, Lesya Ukrainka.

### **Women writer and literary tradition: evaluating, reviewing, placing oneself**

First of all, for both analyzed women writers, the process of reviewing the previous literary tradition became an important part of self-representation. According to Hayden White and his *Metahistory* in 1973, before the reconstruction of a particular historical period, there is a need to 'pre-figure' it (White 1973). Both Virginia Woolf and Lesya Ukrainka had an excellent education and large intellectual background – but the second side of the medal was a need to overcome the influence of 'the father's library' and to evaluate each literary phenomenon, period and person by themselves. For Virginia Woolf, this process started only after the death of her father, Lesley Stephen, who was one of the most titled literary critics of the Victorian

period, in 1904. It resulted in more than 35 articles and critical reviews of different books, authors, literature periods and aesthetical phenomena. These works were later re-systematized in the book *Common Reader* (1925).

The main focuses of Virginia Woolf's revision were, on the one hand, evaluating the whole process of building British literary tradition, from William Shakespeare to Woolf's contemporaries, the so-called Edwardians (named after Edward VII, king of the United Kingdom in 1901–1910) and attempting to find a place for works of women authors. On the other hand, it was defining leading authorities for British literature and trying to find an alternative. Her re-evaluation of the literature of Enlightenment and Romanticism touched mostly those characteristics of aesthetic and style which were potentially 'modernistic,' and because of them, literary modernism became a complete phenomenon. For example, in the essay "Defoe" through criticizing the writing manner of one of the most famous authors of the British Enlightenment Woolf claims: «Having at the outset limited his (Defoe's) scope and confined his ambitions he achieves a truth of insight which is far rarer and more enduring than the truth of fact which he professed to make his aim» (Woolf 1925).

But what is much more special here is her complicated revision of William Shakespeare's works and influence which is done both in critical works (including one of the most famous, *A Room of One's Own*, 1919) and personal diary. As Harold Bloom admitted in his work *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), «The largest truth of literary influence is that it is an irresistible anxiety: Shakespeare will not allow you to bury him, or escape him, or replace him. No strong writer since Shakespeare can avoid his influence» (Bloom 18–19). Taking the position of 'strong poet,' in Bloom's terms, Virginia Woolf feels the 'pressure' of Shakespeare and tries to overcome it. In her novels *Jacob's Room* (1919), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Shakespeare becomes a synonym of non-modernistic aesthetic and values. Jacob knocks one of Shakespeare's plays overboard. Septimus Smith commits suicide having no possibility to find 'proper' words in 'Shakespeare's' language. Mr. Ramsay feels lost and odd with all his knowledge of Shakespeare among the younger people. And, finally, Woolf builds a metaphor of 'Shakespeare's sister' in *A Room of One's Own* which shows the situation of likely women authors of the Elizabethan age (Woolf 1919). Therefore, Woolf declares a need to 'leave Shakespeare behind' to establish a new aesthetic – and, at the same time, to 'save' women authors from the pressure of Shakespeare's language, to make it possible for them to speak in a different manner in which they have to establish themselves.

Lesya Ukrainka processed the same work from the last decade of the XIX century. Her critical works were published mostly in *Zhizn* – the magazine which began its existence in 1897 in Saint-Petersburg, Russia. Besides evaluating real literature phenomena, Lesya Ukrainka tried to highlight the influence which different

aesthetical features had on Ukrainian literature. In the articles "Dva napravleniya v noveyshey italyanskoy literature" (1899), "Zametki o noveyshey polskoy literature" (1900), "Mikael Kramer. Poslednyaya pyesa Gerharda Gaupmana" (1906) she attempts to define and analyze different phenomena of contemporary European literature. Moreover, through this analysis, Lesya Ukrainka aims to explain various aspects of these phenomena to the community of Ukrainian writers. So that she experiences a need of being a 'mentor' for colleagues – and, what is even more significant, mostly for women writers.

From this point of view, Lesya Ukrainka's research on the concept of 'the new woman,' how it appears in the article "Novyye perspektivy i starye teny" (1900), is the most representative. She reconstructs the process of forming 'the new woman' values and aesthetical orientees in the cultural space of Western Europe – from Stendhal and Duma to contemporary authors. One of the conclusions made by Lesya Ukrainka in this article she formulates in the following way:

If we compare the literature of the 'new woman' in England, Norway, Germany, and France, it immediately catches the eye, how different the results of the 'struggle for freedom' are, when they are reflected in fiction. In England and Norway, the new woman is in most cases triumphant; in Germany – either defeated or paid too high price for her victory; in France, she took, in the end, a position of half-free, [...] where an intelligent woman has the right to choose only among three professions: teaching, artistic and – at worst – literary, in case she has no connections with feminism (Ukrainka 1900).

Therefore, Lesya Ukrainka's attempt to sum the status of 'new woman' up in both social and aesthetical aspects is made in order both to build the 'whole picture' of Western Europe experiencing and reflecting the concept of 'the new woman' and to make correlations between European and Ukrainian cultural contexts.

As Thomas Sterns Eliot admitted in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, the literary tradition cannot be inherited or even followed – it has to be obtained by a high labor. So we can see that both Virginia Woolf and Lesya Ukrainka went this way successfully. However, Woolf focuses mostly on 'pre-figuring' her national literary tradition to find the place for herself in it. Lesya Ukrainka's attempt, at the same time, is to have a look at tendencies that appear in the cultural space of Western Europe to make these new ideas, aesthetical and stylistic features closer to the Ukrainian national context. Such types of self-positioning of the woman author in her culture space bring us to the conclusion that in literary modernism women authors became a part of the literary process 'of full value.' Modernistic women authors thereby demonstrate at the same time the need for both a 'fictional' and 'critical' voice, position and strategy to be formed and publically reflected.

## 'New woman' against patriarchy: British Victorianism and Ukrainian positivism

The second important thing is deconstructing the traditional model of family and patriarchal values on which all the previous literary periods (for Lesya Ukrainka – positivism, for Virginia Woolf – Victorian realism) stood. For Woolf, the aim of it was, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar mentioned in their *Madwoman in the Attic*, a symbolic kill of an 'angel in the house', the idealized image of a Victorian woman created by the British poet Coventry Patmore in the poem with the same title (Gilbert, Gubar 1979). This statement is a reformulation of Virginia Woolf's conclusion which she made in her essay "Professions for Women":

And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better, I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last, I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her – you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House [...] She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily [...]. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace. In those days – the last of Queen Victoria – every house had its Angel (Woolf 1933).

As Virginia Woolf claims, the most dangerous thing was that this 'angel in the house' was not only the idealized literary character but a model of behavior for real women. Therefore, in the novel *To The Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf through a demonstration of the family house fallen in ruins after the death of the main character, Mrs. Ramsay, the post-Victorian 'angel' of this house, shows that Victorian family model is no more possible and relevant in current conditions. It is even more significant that the prototype of this character was Woolf's mother, actress Julia Duckworth. In the novel the one who has to bring the rest of the family together is actually 'the new woman' type, the painter Lily Briscoe who could not start her creative work while Mrs. Ramsay was there; Briscoe always felt incomplete and even defective in front of her. And when the Victorian 'angel in the house' is dead and the house itself – ruined, there is a place for a new type of family, new aesthetic and new moral values which in the world of *To The Lighthouse* are established by 'the new woman' character.

As for Lesya Ukrainka, this critique became in her works rather more radical, but also rather more visible. In the play *Lisova pisnya* the main character Lukash who, having to choose between Mavka and her creative potential and Kylyna with the traditional family values, prefers the second variant – and ruins his life and the life of Mavka. The same thing we see in many other plays by Lesya Ukrainka – in

*Advokat Martian, U pushchi, Cassandra* the conflict between younger and older generations becomes one of the key points.

It should also be admitted that through this revision traditional patriarchal values are associated with Christianity for both Virginia Woolf and Lesya Ukrainka. For Ukrainka, Christianity is the metaphor of alien civilization, violence, and slavery. In the plays *Lisova pisnya, Ruffin i Priscilla, Orgya* Ukrainian writer demonstrates the inner conflict which most often leads to a strong opposition between the 'natural,' archetypical or mythological values and Christian demand of ascesis and absolute dependence. Moreover, Christianity is the factor which opposes the creative potential of leading characters of these plays (men as well as women). As for Virginia Woolf, a bright approval of this thesis is found in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*: the main character, Clarissa Dalloway, tries to overcome an influence on her daughter Elisabeth which is made by Doris Kilman, a Christian fanatic. Christianity here is strongly associated with anility and exhaustion. This metaphorical 'fight' is important for Clarissa (and for the author of the novel as well) in order not to lose the chance to build a new bridge 'between past and future.'

### **Women friendship: an intellectual cooperation and personal interconnections**

This observation leads to one more important thesis – re-building interconnections 'woman-to-woman' is also one of the priorities of 'new woman' writers. "This is my Elisabeth," Clarissa Dalloway says, introducing her daughter to the guests in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. It is the sign of understanding of the need of cultural and aesthetical inheritance in women community, and, what is even more important – this correlation must be not only personal but also intellectual.

This interconnection is also an essential aspect of the personal life of each of the authors. Virginia Woolf for a long time had a close relationship with her colleague from the Bloomsbury group, writer and journalist, Vita Sackville-West (this relationship became a prototype of the friendship of Clarisse Dalloway and Sally Seton in *Mrs. Dalloway*). This interconnection became in *Mrs. Dalloway* a metaphor of female friendship which still has an emotional basis, but differs in meaning from the 'usual' one. Traditional models of behavior for women and patriarchal values are no more exclusive things that women can retranslate between each other:

Sally it was who made her (Clarissa) feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was. She knew nothing about sex, nothing about social problems. [...] There they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world. They meant to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written, though not sent out. The ideas were Sally's,



of course – but very soon she was just as excited – read Plato in bed before breakfast; read Morris; read Shelley by the hour (Woolf 1925: 27).

In letters, which Lesya Ukrainka and Olha Kobylyanska wrote to each other for approximately ten years, we can also find arguments pro this thesis. These letters became for both women writers an exceptional kind of a private space with its unique style, ways of appealing to each other (they name one another in letters ‘someone’ and ‘someone else’, or ‘someone little white’ and ‘someone little black’), and extreme trust and openness. The number of researchers in independent Ukraine were attempted to qualify and explain such a type of interaction. Solomiya Pavlychko in *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskij literaturi* (1997) claims that it was ‘lesbian fantasy’ (Pavlychko 87). Tamara Gundorova in 2002 in her work *Femina Melancholica: Stat’ i kultura v genderniy utopii Olgy Kobylyan’skoyi* insists on the thesis that it was ‘women’s platonic romance’ with its characteristics of creative co-working, intellectual cooperation and deep personal interrelations (Gundorova 62). Later Oksana Zabuzhko in *Notre Dame D’Ukraine: ukrainka v konflikti mifologij* (2007) concluded that such a type of discourse that developed between Lesya Ukrainka and Olha Kobylyanska was mainly of the ‘sister’ or ‘family’ type. Two women writers felt extremely close to each other ‘by blood and spirit’ and together they built the space of trust and intimacy which at the same time appeared as a visible result of their creative working together (Zabuzhko 165). Thus, these letters become more important not as biographical documents, but as a separate literary phenomenon which is even more significant because of its modernistic nature.

As we can see now, both Virginia Woolf and Lesya Ukrainka understand that these interconnections can be the basis of a new tradition – a tradition of women writing with its features of style and aesthetic. Moreover, this is probably the most significant result of implementing in the literature the ‘new woman’ values. For women writers, there is no more need to hide behind the men pseudonyms, the men language, the men rationality and the men tradition. Literary modernism gave the women writers a chance to speak their own truth aloud – even when, like in the play *Kassandra* by Lesya Ukrainka, it is inconvenient. The central opposition between two ancient prophets, *Kassandra* and the much more ‘attractive’ *Helen* who does not tell people the truth, but what they want to hear, highlights this thesis. In the period of modernism, women literature finally managed to overcome the inner fear which Virginia Woolf expresses in *To The Lighthouse* like ‘women can’t paint, women can’t write’ which repeatedly sounds in Lily Briscoe’s head – but she found the courage to make the first mark on the canvas. Woolf by herself builds on the base of ‘the new woman’ values the unique type of writing strategy that she defines in *A Room of One’s Own* as “a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and [...] the normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating” (Woolf 1919),

this model of androgynous creative mind. For Lesya Ukrainka, it is a way deep in the spirit and soul of women in order to find out once again the archaic voice of self and, at the same time – the proper words to express the senses of the new aesthetic, new values, and new type of self-positioning which women authors demonstrate in the field of modernistic literature. These two writing strategies (and ways of self-positioning) seem to be perfect representatives of 'the new woman' appearing in British and Ukrainian national models of literary modernism.

## Conclusion

To sum up, we can see that Ukrainian and British models of 'the new woman' represented by Lesya Ukrainka and Virginia Woolf are a little bit different in meaning (with the 'natural,' mythological appeal of the Ukrainian writer), but quite similar in substantiation. 'The new woman' included not only the features of the literary character which was 'up-to-date' with modernism but the way of self-representation for both women authors. Creating an alternative 'women' literary tradition, developing style and composition and, at the same time – new types of women characters in their works, Virginia Woolf, Lesya Ukrainka and many other women writers were actually developing an auto-image of themselves – and of women writer as well. Despite the fact that there was still no place for a woman in literary tradition – a 'new woman' managed to place herself in it.

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