

“ Woolf’s essays continue to engage readers through the analytical treatment of cooperative principles and individual action”

In the light of your critical study, does this statement resonate with your own interpretation of Woolf’s essays?

Virginia Woolf Essay

A compelling argument has the potential to incite both collective and individual action from responders in response to pertinent social issues. Virginia Woolf’s polemic essay Three Guineas (1938) discusses the systemic inequity faced by women and the direct correlation it has in perpetuating tyranny and war. Her passionate authorial voice attributes the rise of fascism and impeding war in 1930s Europe to the patriarchal forces which deprive women of independence in the private sphere. Through the non-linear, epistolary style of her essay, Woolf ventures off on tangents to attack the male educational establishment and the qualities of dominance and privilege which it instills in men. In addition she reiterates the need for collaborative and independent action to abolish the societal constructs that repress women, an argument still applicable in contemporary society.

The denouncement of the patriarchy and thus the notions of superiority which perpetuate war, are central to cooperative social reform. In Three Guineas, Virginia Woolf makes an inextricable link between the tyrannical repression rampant in 1930s Europe, and the ‘infantile fixation’ of men with dominance and power. Numerous political allusions to fascist Italian dictator Mussolini and Hitler disseminating their messages of superiority to the globe, is directly linked to male supremacy and patriarchy in regular society. Woolf does so by satirically suggesting that war is a, ‘source of happiness’ for men and an ‘outlet for their manly qualities’. Furthermore, Woolf’s insinuates that war is inextricably to patriarchy and the male establishment which systematically suppresses women in their pursuits. She juxtaposes the plight of women in the private sphere whom are, ‘fighting the tyranny of the patriarchal state’, with the public sphere of men fighting against the tyranny of the fascist state. Woolf asserts that by removing the ideals of superiority and domination from the patriarchal home front, that war will become preventable. She insists that superficial changes will not alleviate the impetus that propels society to war but rather the upheaval of the patriarchy and mutual understanding through repetition that women are, “fighting the same enemy that you are fighting for and for the same freedoms.” It is through this collaborative action that Woolf insists all individuals regardless of gender become agents of change, rewriting social paradigms and removing the patriarchy together to fight for freedom for all.

Independence can act as a catalyst for female empowerment and eliminate the repression of women in both the private and public sphere. Woolf engages the responder by insinuating that the liberation of women can be sought through vocational work and entry into a profession. Therefore, she asserts they will no longer be indirectly or passively supporting the war, but rather attaining self-sufficiency and independence, “this new weapon, our only weapon, the weapon of independent opinion based upon individuals income”. The motif of weaponry suggests that independence is an avenue for women to be emancipated from the repression they face in a patriarchal society, and in turn they will no longer be indifferent towards the war. Moreover, Woolf extends a call for action to the reader to be agents of change, metaphorically suggesting that, “when in the blaze of our common freedom the words tyrant and dictator shall be burnt to ashes, because the words tyrant and dictator shall be obsolete. Woolf’s use of anadiplosis and the motif of fire, conjures ideas of regeneration and rebirth, associated with her overall notions of the reformation of society in which men and women are equally ‘free’ and tyranny is non-existent. Her collaborative underlying message is therefore apparent, that through the

independence of women and removal of systemic inequity that war and tyranny will become preventable. Yet even in modern society, is this a standard still unrealised, evident in Australia's need for the introduction of an Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy by the Australian Government in 2016.

Educational institutions are responsible for instilling notions of entitlement and superiority, whilst monetary contributions perpetuate the war. Woolf labels grandiose male educational institution as a 'voracious receptacle', personifying the hunger for greed and superiority it instills in male students which does not, "teach men to hate force but use it". She metaphorically likens the cycle of entitlement and privilege males are endowed with to, "a procession, like a caravanserai crossing a desert'. It is this male prerogative and elitist attitude which Woolf argues are the roots of fascism and warmongering. Furthermore, Woolf links the financing of war with the underfunded and deteriorating women's colleges, questioning the \$300 million spent annually. Utilising the motif of the mulberry tree she satirically conveys the cycle of funding for male endeavours, "Here we go around the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree. Give it all to me, give it all to me, all to me. Three hundred millions spent upon the war". The rhyme and repetition highlights the sense of entitlement and frivolous use of money to fund the war in contrast to the struggle to gain donations for female educational institutions. This notion remains still relevant in contemporary society in which the Australian government has designated over 15 billion dollars since 1999 to military operations, whilst simultaneously women are struggling for grants to further their education in the male-dominated industries of science and technology. Woolf calls for individual action, "take this guinea and with it burn the college to the ground. Set fire to the old hypocrisies", metaphorically suggesting that the entire educational institution and social paradigms be rejuvenated so that the patriarchy and the inequity it instills be abolished forever.

In all, Virginia Woolf's essay Three Guineas compellingly engages its reader by encouraging collaborative and individual action to redress social inequity between men and women in the 1930s Europe. Through seamless digressions and a non-linear structure she articulately outlines the need for the social upheaval in order to prevent the excessive need for dominance and power that perpetuate greed and tyranny which inevitably lead to war, an idea that remains applicable even today.