

2) “It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men [...] considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one [sex] only?”

Using at least two examples, discuss the impact and value of the voices of women and/or gender non-conforming individuals to the literary world.

When there is talk about writing, especially work by a female or non-binary voice, it so often becomes a thinly veiled metaphor for identity. Experiences are splayed across the page in literary forms, the author often has very little place to hide. Virginia Woolf wrote in a letter to Hugh Walpole in 1932 that ‘(...) only autobiography is literature - novels are what we peel off and come at last to the core, which is only you and me’<sup>1</sup>, echoed years later by the poet and author Kae Tempest: ‘All characters have to begin in a moment of lived truth’<sup>2</sup>. The ‘lived truth’, as Tempest puts it, is something that is undoubtedly individual, but shaped by the realities of societal norms and pressures. Female personal truth and voice is heavily impacted by female experiences - in ‘A Room of One’s Own’, Woolf muses that ‘fiction must stick to facts’<sup>3</sup>- being a woman, or a non-binary person means having your writing impacted by factual circumstances that male authors simply do not experience. Samuel Coleridge, later quoted by Woolf, decrees that ‘a great mind is androgynous’<sup>4</sup>, yet, it’s arguable that literary androgyny is impossible. Whilst writing may not be inherently gendered as a craft, the lives that affect our writing are. The author may be aiming to be neutral, yet the experiences that affect the writing in question, and the weight with which we judge are going to be impacted by the gender of the author. If Woolf was a man, ‘A Room of One’s Own’ would simply not exist.

Kae Tempest, who came out as non-binary in August 2020, and counts Woolf among those ‘who inspire (them)’<sup>5</sup>, experienced ‘ever present discomfort with expectations of femininity’<sup>6</sup>. Being born female, for Tempest, meant power coming from your softness and sensitivity, a stereotype they aimed to counter; in Tempest’s debut novel, the physically androgynous drug-dealer Harry ‘shrinks before femininity’<sup>7</sup>. It’s evident that Tempest’s lived truth of their existence being intertwined with gender dysphoria, (at the time of publishing, Tempest was still presenting as female), wormed their way into their writing. Tempest’s pen, in creating the character of Harry, knew they were not cisgender even before Tempest did. Coming out as non-binary has therefore radically shifted the focus of Tempest’s writing, too. Their work now is focussed on growth and trust, epitomised in their new album ‘The Line is a Curve’ as opposed to the brutality before that was ravaging their mental health. The pain that drew Tempest to writing is now redistributing itself into joy - their literary voice, and the impact it has had has shifted, as a result of the change of truth.

Tempest’s act of discovering who they are alongside a public audience is so impactful for a generation like mine because whilst the rights of transgender people are slung back and forth across the media, the

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *The Sick Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1932-1935*, 142. Edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 1st ed., vol. 5, The Hogarth Press Ltd, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Khan, Sarah Roselle. “the evolution of kate tempest | The Fifth Sense | i-D.” *The Fifth Sense*, 22 November 2016, [https://thefifthsense.i-d.co/en\\_gb/article/the-evolution-of-kate-tempest/](https://thefifthsense.i-d.co/en_gb/article/the-evolution-of-kate-tempest/)

<sup>3</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*, 17. 1977, Grafton Books .

<sup>4</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 94

<sup>5</sup> Hogan, Michael. “Kate Tempest: a winning wielder of words | Kae Tempest.” *The Guardian*, 14 September 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2014/sep/14/kate-tempest-poet-rapper-mercury-prize-profile>

<sup>6</sup> Segalov, Michael, and Anna Funder. “Kae Tempest: ‘I was living with this boiling hot secret in my heart.’” *The Guardian*, 12 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/mar/12/kae-tempest-i-was-living-with-this-boiling-hot-secret-in-my-heart>.

<sup>7</sup> Tempest, Kae. *The Bricks that Built the Houses*. Bloomsbury, 2016, 24, 37.

people themselves are very rarely given a voice. Tempest's value was not undersung before their transition - they were one of a new wave of performance poets, reclaiming Homer-esque techniques, yet as previously stated, it is now of immense importance that there is a publicly transgender person in the world of literature. In 2019, more than 1/3 of the US's transgender youth population reported attempting suicide that year<sup>8</sup>, a statistic increased today with the blocking of gender affirming healthcare for transgender youth in over 20 states<sup>9</sup>. Having such a high-profile writer (Tempest is the youngest person in history to be selected as one of twenty 'next generation poets' by the poetry book society) is instrumental in proving to a new generation that there is space for those who do not conform. By providing visible proof that one is not defined by the boundaries and binaries enforced at birth, Tempest transcends, and their work along with them. Tempest's impact as an author being integrally linked to their gender is a fact that is inescapable. With every line they write, every word they perform, they are proving their power, having *lived* through mental anguish and external oppression, reflecting this continually in their work, and opposing a society that is often determined to speak over transgender people like them.

If Tempest is a Homer-like figure, telling the Greek epics in a South London setting, then Mary Shelley, in her 1818 groundbreaking gothic novel 'Frankenstein' is arguably retelling the infamous biblical allegory of Adam, Eve and original sin. The allegory itself is inherently female-centric, hence being used as a chain on women's freedom for the next 2000 years. *Eve* betrayed God, *Eve* ate the apple and *Eve*, therefore, is forced to carry two children, undergo immense pain in giving birth to them, only for one of them to kill the other. Adam is solely a bystander. The reason why the world is as it is, argues this allegory, is as a result of the female weakness, the 'criminal female curiosity'<sup>10</sup>. Shelley, in her own way, also falls victim to this fatal flaw: she meets and runs away with Percy Shelley, a man five years her senior, at sixteen, leaving her comfortable life and is accused of corrupting her stepsister, Claire, when she joins them, similar to Eve's 'corruption' of Adam.

Shelley's life was marred by tremendous loss, from almost the moment she came into this world - her mother died eleven days after giving birth to her, Shelley herself had lost three children and her husband by the time she was twenty five. This maternal grief is staggeringly impactful throughout 'Frankenstein' - both literally: Elizabeth and Caroline are orphans, but more metaphorically through Victor Frankenstein's doomed attempts to create life and hence betraying God once more in an Eve-like fashion. His method of creating the monster is influenced heavily by the actions taken by women who were pregnant at the time, Frankenstein shuts himself up in a 'solitary chamber'<sup>11</sup>, similar to the kind Shelley would have used for her five pregnancies, and falls ill, again referencing Shelley's own experiences through the voice of Victor Frankenstein - women were denied medication during childbirth in the nineteenth century<sup>12</sup> as it was believed that with every birth, the female population should atone for Eve's crime, even if that resulted in death. Shelley's own experience with this internalised ideology at the time of writing is clear through Frankenstein's own moral dilemma: Shelley muses through Frankenstein's voice that 'to examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse with death'<sup>13</sup>. Almost the very act of giving birth is corrupting the human body, as birth was believed to be a punishment, and through his submission to this stereotypically female flaw of curiosity, Frankenstein takes on the cross that has befallen women since the dawn of time - that we are responsible for creating evil. More than the novel's subtitle of 'a modern

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<sup>8</sup> "Data on Transgender Youth." *The Trevor Project*, 22 February 2019, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/data-on-transgender-youth/>.

<sup>9</sup> Londoño, Ernesto. "Fight or Flight: Transgender Care Bans Leave Families and Doctors Scrambling." *The New York Times*, 6 July 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/06/us/transgender-health-care-bans.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 234. Yale University Press, 1980

<sup>11</sup> Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. 55. Edited by Maurice Hindle, Penguin Publishing Group, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> "The Reality of Childbirth in the 1800s." *Curious Historian*, 13 December 2018, <https://curioushistorian.com/the-reality-of-childbirth-in-the-1800s>.

<sup>13</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 52

Prometheus', I believe Dr Frankenstein to be a Pandora figure, Prometheus' ill-fated sister-in-law, who single-handedly unleashed cruelty on the world as a result of her weakness. What is 'Frankenstein' if not a love letter to the women who have been blamed for man's undoing? 'Frankenstein' is a product of all of the rules enforced by a society fundamentally patriarchal to the core, 'Frankenstein' is Shelley's voice on every page detailing the fundamental exhaustion of simply being a woman at that time. Although the protagonists are male, and it is a male narrative perspective, (one could argue Walton portrays the Adam-like figure who is corrupted by Dr Frankenstein's unbelievable tales), it is impossible to categorise the novel as 'masculine' or even 'androgynous' as the centre theme of the novel - creation, is forever intertwined with the feminine. The impact of Shelley's voice as a writer goes far beyond her status as a sole female author; in writing a book so unabashedly linked to women heavily relied on as scapegoats by our society, she gave those women a voice. The impact of Mary Shelley's voice through Frankenstein did for Eve and Pandora what Woolf's did for the fictional Judith Shakespeare in 'A Room of One's Own', their own impact came from the voice they gave to others.

Sylvia Plath, too, portrays her own experiences through her literary voice. Plath's experiences with mental illness dominated much of her life, and as a consequence, her writing, both poetry and prose. Although, at an immediate first glance, the impact Plath's mental illness had on her and her work may not be integrally linked to her gender, but not only are 'internal' mental disorders such as depression and anxiety are significantly more likely to be prevalent in women than men,<sup>14</sup> it is also interesting to note that 'hysteria' (madness being a key motif in many of Plath's poems, as well as in her lone novel 'The Bell Jar'), the most common, and often a 'cop-out' of a diagnosis for women at the time by psychiatrists, was viewed by Freud as a 'consequence of a lack of motherhood'<sup>15</sup>, a theme which is also prominent in Plath's final, posthumously published collection of poetry, 'Ariel'. Thus, Plath's mental illnesses are unarguably linked to her gender and a woman's role in 1950s society - the forced domesticity 'choked' Plath's literary voice<sup>16</sup>. Plath's poem 'Lady Lazarus', a subversion of the biblical story encompasses all of the above. Plath calls herself a 'smiling woman'<sup>17</sup>, whilst describing the 'big strip tease'<sup>18</sup> of attempting suicide and not succeeding, showing the almost voyeuristic attitude America especially had to women's mental health disorders at the time, through the over-sexual language and controversial comparison of a biblical miracle to something classically sinful. The 'smiling woman' references the 50's 'booming American housewife' stereotype, however, the irony here is clear, as in the 50s, doctors wildly over prescribed drugs such as valium, under the tagline of 'tranquillisers'<sup>19</sup>, with these drugs influencing Plath - she was on antidepressants at the time of writing 'Ariel'<sup>20</sup>. Plath here seems to reclaim the act of being a controversial woman who was shunned by society, much like Tempest, she is speaking for a marginalised group, and her impact in this respect continues today.

Plath also references the now-horrific overuse of electroconvulsive therapy in both 'Ariel' and 'The Bell Jar'. This is no coincidence, nor is it just a comment on the psychiatry at the time, it is deliberate. Women

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<sup>14</sup> Rosenfield, Sarah, and Dena Smith. "Gender and Mental Health: Do Men and Women Have Different Amounts or Types of Problems?" 256, *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health: Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems*, edited by Teresa L. Scheid and Tony N. Brown, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Public Health and Clinical and Molecular Medicine, University of Cagliari, Italy. "Women And Hysteria In The History Of Mental Health." *NCBI*, 2012, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3480686/>

<sup>16</sup> Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Word*, 15. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992

<sup>17</sup> Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*, 8. Faber & Faber, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Gershon, Livia. *How Anxiety Got Rebranded As Depression*. Daily JSTOR, 2016  
<https://daily.jstor.org/how-anxiety-got-rebranded-as-depression/>.

<sup>20</sup> Yates, Emma, and Nana Kwame Adjei. "Drugs a 'key factor' in Plath's suicide, claimed Hughes." *The Guardian*, 8 August 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/aug/08/artsandhumanities.highereducation>.

accounted for almost 70% of ECT cases in America during the heyday in the 1950s<sup>21</sup> - treatments of mental illness *are* gendered. Plath herself was one of those women, and Esther's description of later experience with ECT is graphic and brutal - she 'thought her bones would break'<sup>22</sup>. Although male mental health is vital and often silences as a result of the crippling 'toxic masculinity' culture, here, Plath's writing is littered with comments about society's actions surrounding female mental health. Her voice throughout her work, especially 'The Bell Jar' was a crucial element in bringing about the fall of harmful psychiatry in the 60s and 70s. Plath is obviously far more complex a character than a product of her mental health issues but the way they were dealt with as a result of her gender influenced her writing beyond measure.

Woolf had only one sole criticism for Charlotte Brontë: 'she had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others'<sup>23</sup>. Kae Tempest said the same thing about herself: 'I have tried to be what others wanted me to be, so as not to risk rejection'<sup>24</sup>. These two quotes illustrate that literary androgyny is simply impossible: as although there are many other stigmas, no male author has ever had to alter his literary approach because of his gender. As with society, literature is weighted in the male gaze's favour, which is what makes voices like Woolf, Plath, Shelley and Tempest so impactful for a female/non-binary audience; they illustrate real, relatable experiences for an audience who, historically, have been taught to believe that they are somehow 'less' than their male counterparts, often as a result of a biblical woman's mistake over 2000 years ago. This is what has made their work so lasting. Plath is described as "(tapping) a source of power that transforms (...) poetic voice into a raving avenger of womanhood"<sup>25</sup>, yet this is true for all examples in this essay: they are powerful because they voice *womanhood*. In giving attention to ignored, taboo or even forgotten themes and women, these four authors, of very different periods, are fulfilling Woolf's last musings in 'A Room of One's Own': Judith Shakespeare, the fictional sister of the great playwright 'lives in you, and in me'<sup>26</sup>, and so, it seems, in them.

**Word count: 2499**

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<sup>21</sup> Underwood, Alexia. "Electroconvulsive therapy: its dark past and hopeful future as a treatment for depression." *Vox*, 23 May 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/14/18274191/electroconvulsive-therapy-depression-treatment-controversial-history>

<sup>22</sup> Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*, 138. Faber & Faber, 1966.

<sup>23</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 71

<sup>24</sup> Segalov and Funder, 2022

<sup>25</sup> Karen V. Kukil. "Sylvia Plath." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath>

<sup>26</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 103

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