

## “ARE YOU AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?” PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES OF THIRD YEAR EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF GENDER ROLES IN THREE SHORT STORIES BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

ERIKA DE LA BARRA VAN TREEK\*  
Universidad Chileno Británica de Cultura

**ABSTRACT:** The linguistic impact of the use of literature in an EFL context has been widely studied by different researchers (Quirk and Widdowson 1985; Chapman 1982; Maley 1989). However, a new line of research has emerged recently on the grounds of the theory of reception applied to EFL situations (Carlisle, 2000; Liaw, 2001; Larson, 2009; Khatib, 2011; Shin & Riazantzeva, 2015; Bjelland, 2016). Although this theory was not originally intended for EFL students but for native speakers and competent readers able to take an active role in the reading process, the applications have yielded interesting evidence about the reader who is also a student of English. This paper explores the perceptions of gender roles in three of Virginia Woolf’s stories as well as the students’ expectations in the reading process. The findings also suggest pedagogical implications for EFL learning at advanced levels given the complexity and sophistication of the language generated by students.

**KEYWORDS:** theory of reception, gender roles, patriarchal society, feminism.

*“¿LE TEMES A VIRGINIA WOOLF?” PERCEPCIÓN Y RECEPCIÓN DE ESTUDIANTES  
UNIVERSITARIOS DE EFL DE TERCER AÑO SOBRE ROLES DE GÉNERO EN TRES HISTORIAS CORTAS  
DE VIRGINIA WOOLF.*

*RESUMEN:* El impacto lingüístico del uso de la literatura en el aprendizaje del inglés en contexto EFL ha sido ampliamente estudiado por diferentes investigadores (Quirk and Widdowson, 1985; Chapman, 1982; Maley, 1989). Sin embargo, en el último tiempo ha surgido una nueva línea de investigación desde la teoría de la recepción (Carlisle, 2000; Liaw, 2001; Larson, 2009; Khatib, 2011; Shin & Riazantzeva, 2015; Bjelland, 2016). Aunque esta teoría no fue pensada originalmente para EFL sino para hablantes nativos y lectores competentes capaces de tomar un rol activo en el proceso de lectura; las aplicaciones en el área EFL han arrojado interesante evidencia sobre el sujeto lector estudiante de inglés. Este trabajo explora las

\* Para correspondencia dirigirse a Erika de la Barra ( edelabarra@ubritanica.cl / erikadelabarra@gmail.com)

*percepciones de los roles de género en tres cuentos de Virginia Woolf, así como las expectativas de los estudiantes en el proceso de lectura. Los hallazgos además sugieren implicancias pedagógicas para el aprendizaje EFL en niveles avanzados por la generación de lenguaje sobre temas complejos.*

*PALABRAS CLAVE: teoría de la recepción, expectativas, roles de género, sociedad patriarcal, feminismo.*

## INTRODUCTION

Reading non-abridged literature in a foreign language has always been a challenge for EFL learners. As Parkinson & Reid Thomas (2000) state, the unique way in which language is used in literature makes it too difficult for students to understand and it contributes little to everyday language that students need to learn (p. 12). In the same line of thought, Brumfit & Carter (1986), suggest that the study of literature will “seldom be suited to the academic and professional needs of the students” (p. 150). Although, the linguistic aspect such as unknown lexis –words and idioms seem to be challenging for EFL students, it is also true that the cultural aspect is also crucial because it may lead foreign readers to misinterpret the literary text when constructing meaning. This is because literary texts reflect cultural perspectives that are difficult for EFL students to understand because some concepts may be unfamiliar culturally speaking or some of the moral or religious values that appear in the literary text may be unacceptable (Spirovska, 2016, p. 164).

This study was conducted to explore the perceptions and responses of a group of 3rd year university students of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Santiago, Chile when exposed to three short stories written by Virginia Woolf. The study used the reader-response theory as background to analyze the way Chilean students construct meaning and deal with the gender roles that emerge in Virginia Woolf’s narrative. This construction is at interplay with the students’ own stereotypes that implies a bias in the construction of meaning and is also present in their acceptance and/or rejection of the endings of the stories. Paying attention to the endings and the ways the reader reacts to them is a crucial element in reader-response theory. The endings show whether the characters, themes and conflict diverge or converge and so if the reader’s expectations are fulfilled or crushed. Virginia Woolf, being a modernist writer, usually produced endings that were unconventional for the early XX century readers.

When Virginia Woolf (1880-1941) wrote her stories, there were still traces of the Victorian society and culture that had defined gender roles throughout the XIX century in Britain and the rest of Europe. Ellis (2007) state that “before one can become a Post-Victorian one has to establish what the ‘Victorian’ itself represents, and it is not until 1916 that Woolf’s writing start to do this to any degree” (p. 12). Ellis continues to explain that in 1916 the Victorian era had receded enough to acquire a definition in its own and become different from Virginia Woolf’s present. Benthin (2008) suggest that being Virginia Woolf a female writer in a patriarchal society she would try some challenges:

She challenged the role of the Victorian woman, both in her novels and her other essays. The ideas of women, their roles and identity become especially obvious in her novel *To the Lighthouse*, as here Woolf clearly juxtaposes the two images of women, namely the Victorian ideal and the New Woman. (p. 2)

The readers she had in mind at that time were very different from the readers today. They were women who lived in a very rigid society that expected tradition would pass from mothers to daughters and where women’s estimation of intelligence was seriously low (Fernald, 2006, p. 3). However, the themes she wrote about such as gender roles, patriarchal society, isolation, identity and self-awareness are still relevant today here in Chile. So, the question of how she is read today in a Latin American context in the XXI century is relevant. Our Chilean students who are nonnatives of English and have had trouble learning the language have also become attentive and able readers who update and refresh the works Virginia Woolf wrote and in doing so, they put their own culture at play. Learning a language is not just about the language it is also about culture. That is why, although not the main aim of this study, it is worth mentioning that it has implications for EFL since students who are nonnative and are in the process of learning the language could do a very good job interpreting, inferring and making meaning of Virginia’s challenging literature. I hope this article will provide insights to other teachers who are interested in using non-abridged literature in their classrooms, and helps them explore its use beyond the learning of the language.

## BACKGROUND

### *1. Reader- response theory*

Reception theory emphasizes the reader’s perception or interpretation in obtaining meaning from a literary text. It was originally developed by Robert Jauss in the late 1960s and became very influential, especially in Germany in the 70s and 80s. Jauss (1985) claims that it is the evolution of the audience and not the historical period of the author that establishes meaning in a literary text. When reading, a certain dialogue between the text and the reader can be established and this creates the conditions for the reader’s experience of the text. For this process to take place it is important to create the necessary imbalance between text and reader which would increase the communication between them and would allow the reader to fill in the blanks or gaps that emerge in the text (Iser, 2010).

It is noteworthy that although Reader-Response theory was not intended for EFL research it has recently provided various and interesting insights about the problem of reception in foreign students when exposed to authentic pieces of literature in English. Publications on this field explore the reactions and feelings that students have when reading authentic texts (Carlisle, 2000; Larson, 2009); and the way they construct meaning through complex transaction with the texts (Liaw, 2001). Likewise, they study the problematic aesthetic response to the texts and the relationship with comprehension (Khatib, 2011; Bjelland, 2016).

Similarly, other studies have focused on the multimodal theory of literacy that emphasizes the interaction between readers and texts of different nature requiring transmediation or the translation of meaning from one sign system to another, fostering cognitive, aesthetic, and emotional responses that can become an alternative way in learning a foreign language (Lee, 2013).

One very interesting direction of work grounded in constructivist theories is the analysis of reader identity when exposed to authentic English literature. Evidence confirms that the identities of the readers mediate in this process (Shin & Riazantseva, 2015) because in the reading process there is a previous pre-existing knowledge that facilitates one's comprehension. In fact, as the reader processes the input material, the generated meaning becomes integrated into the global knowledge of the reader (Nassaji, 2002). The previous experiences that the reader has had, his/her perspectives and values become relevant in this process, because the reader will make connections between his/her previous background knowledge and his/her experience of the text.

Apart from all this research done in EFL from the perspective of the reception theory, it is worth considering some other research done in the field of reading comprehension in EFL in terms of the strategies used when reading. According to Block (2004) reading is a complex process where the reader is involved to make meaning using some preexisting skills. Pressley (2006) defined efficient reading strategies as the conscious behavior of the reader before, during and after the process of reading to get meaning and Lai (2013) stated that reading strategies are methods to find meaning from the text. From this perspective the responsibility of the reader is enormous to bring forth the aesthetic object.

From a phenomenological perspective, the aesthetic object comes forth in the process of reading. Ingarden (1973), probably one of the most brilliant aesthetic philosophers and disciple of Husserl makes a difference between the literary work of art and the aesthetic object. The literary work is a schematic formation made of words and expressions; whereas the aesthetic object comes forth when there is a concretization or concretion in the mind of the reader. For Ingarden, the work of art has certain "places of indeterminacy" which are filled in by the attentive reader who fills in the gaps and can bring forth the plot, characters and settings. Unlike the case of real people, the characters are indeterminate and that is why the work of literature needs a reader who fills in the gaps and indeterminacies with his/her own imagination and experience.

This phenomenological preceptive was the one taken into consideration when choosing the author and the stories for this study. Virginia Woolf's literary works are complex and full of indeterminacies and they demand a very active reader to bring forth the aesthetic object. From the EFL perspective, students would have stories that would allow for more than just one interpretation and this would encourage their own interpretations.

## 2. *Virginia Woolf's stories*

Having been the professor in charge of teaching a course on Virginia Woolf in 2015 and 2016 at that university, I had been able to observe on various occasions the reactions of my students when reading Woolf's stories. These students were in third year of a translation degree program and they had been training for the Certificate in Advanced English for 3 months, and this course on Virginia Woolf was part of a literary component they had to pass to comply with the academic requirements. When reading Woolf's stories their response was rather conservative and traditional. The female independence and feminism that Virginia Woolf advocates generated certain "anxiety" in some students who longed for happier and more romantic endings. From that point of view, I was surprised to observe they expected women in the more traditional roles of wives and mothers rather than in the roles of writers and thinkers.

As I had to teach the same course again in fall 2017, I thought this would give me the chance to analyze Chilean EFL students' reading process when exposed to Virginia Woolf's stories and see how they constructed meaning. This author is particularly interesting because of the unconventional endings; because of the indeterminacies in her writing which demands an active reader, and because she portrays gender roles in a way that makes students reflect critically upon the subject. It would also give me the opportunity to help students incorporate more sophisticated lexis and reinforce students' reading, writing and oral skills as this is one of the aims of the Certificate in Advanced English. I knew some of these students because I had taught them English when they were in first year. They had studied a course on English classic literature from Beowulf to the Romantic period before, but they had never read or studied anything by Virginia Woolf. To analyze and systematize their perceptions, I devised a procedure to collect their individual opinions through a reading journal where they would be able to record their reading experience. This journal included the three stories organized in a booklet that contained also room for writing. Each lesson they would devote 60 minutes to reading and then writing short essays through some guiding questions so as to collect their response to the literary pieces. This work was done individually and in silence. At the end of the course, I organized a focus group and students were able to speak freely about their perceptions and impressions on gender roles and the stories endings.

To contextualize the impact of Virginia Woolf on these students it is important to bear in mind what was explained before in the introduction and background, as this modernist writer not only wrote fiction but challenged the gender roles of the Victorian ideals. Ideas of female identity are clearly questioned in the three stories chosen for this study as Virginia Woolf questions Victorian ideals (Benthin, 2008, p. 2).

The three stories chosen for this study focus on gender issues from different perspectives but all of them question the Victorian ideal that somehow reduced female identity to the spheres of home, motherhood and marriage while men stayed in privileged positions of power. Marriage, for example was probably the most important goal for women because staying single implied losing their social position and gaining disapproval of society. (Benthin, 2008; Sanchez, 2016) One very interesting idea

that Virginia Woolf defies is the one of the “angel in the house”. This expression was coined by Virginia Woolf (1942) to refer to the traditional characteristics of women who were somehow manipulated by the patriarchal society. The angel in the house was this type of woman who was supposed to be selfless and sacrificial with the purpose of being accepted by males. Woolf stated that a woman to become a writer had to kill the “angel in the house” first:

And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her the heroine of a famous poem, the Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between my paper and me 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. (“Professions for Women”, para. 3)

From the Victorian perspective, women were perfect ladies whose most important task was to enlighten the rest of the family in moral and religious virtues. As Reverend E.J. Hardy noted in 1887:

Sweetness is to woman what sugar is to the fruit. It is her first business to be a happy sunbeam in the house, making others happy, True, she will often have a ‘tear in her eye’, but (...) it must be accompanied with a smile on her lips. (as cited in Benthin, 2008, p. 4)

In “The Widow and the Parrot” (1989), Mrs. Gage, the protagonist, is an old and poor widow who unexpectedly receives a letter from her brother’s solicitors stating that she has inherited some money. This is a change of fortune for the widow who starts a journey to take possession of the inheritance. The parrot in the story is the one who helps her get what she wants and move on in life from being poor to becoming rich. She remains a widow at the end of the story, though. In “The Legacy” (1989), the protagonist, Angela is trapped in a marriage where her husband makes her “the angel in the house”. She is a beautiful young lady who revolves around her husband. Everything changes when she meets BM who belongs to another social class. In the end, Angela, decides to escape her loveless marriage killing herself. “The Mark on the Wall” (1989) shows us a female character who is sitting in her home’s lounge wondering at a mark on the wall. Her mind roams over different topics while she is looking at the mark. She tries to decipher the enigma and at the end of the story we learn that the mark on the wall is a snail. The story written with a stream of consciousness technique shows the character is isolated and torn from the other character in the story, her husband, who is sitting next to her.

### 3. *Literature in the EFL class*

Regarding the topic of the use of literature in the EFL classroom, a lot has been written. Just to mention a few important authors who have made major contributions to this field, Quirk and Widdowson (1985) who noted that to really learn a language we must learn its literature as well, or Chapman (1982) that has stated that the language that people use is the language of literature, and Maley (1989) who believed language is not known until you know its literature.

For this study, I would like to refer to a piece of research carried out by Al-Darwish and Shuqair (2015) in Kuwait with a sample of 300 EFL students, they were asked about the impact of literature in the development of other skills. 78% of the students stated that literature had an impact on the development of their reading skills, while 64% agreed that it had an impact on their lexis, 52% stated that it had positive impacts on their writing skills and 30% valued it as important in the development of their oral skills.

Taking this into account and in the context that my students had to train for the Cambridge CAE exam it made sense to expose them to non-abridged, demanding literature to reinforce their skills in English. It is important to bear in mind that C1 level corresponds to a proficient use of the language and it requires that the user performs complex tasks related to study and/or work, so in terms of writing and speaking "can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion". ("Common European Framework", p. 4)

The way students learned to think in a more literary way –in terms of characters, themes, conflicts, expectations- throughout the experience gave them the possibility to discuss in a more critical and sophisticated way about abstract topics which favors the learning of the language at an advanced level. Sophistication is one of the key elements that allows learners of English to move from one level to another. Students at an elementary level are only able to speak about personal topics. The more students progress in their learning of the language the more sophisticated and abstract their language becomes. This is what defines their moving from B2 level to C1 for example.

## METHODS AND RESEARCH

Participants included 15 university students of a translation program (8 males and 7 females all aged between 20 and 24 years old) taking the Advanced English course at a university in Santiago, Chile, which was assigned to me for a 16-week- semester with ten hours of weekly contact. These students speak Spanish as their L1 and have reached a ~C1 level of English on CEFR. The course develops both oral and written abilities.

In this course, the teacher guides students through the reading of the non-abridged short stories by Virginia Woolf (1989). These stories were chosen because they have interesting plots with unexpected endings; the heroines are non-conventional and strive for their own identity in a patriarchal society and the narrative strategies include interior monologues and multiple narration. From the perspective of the reader response theory these texts would create the necessary imbalance between text and reader which would increase the communication between the reader and the text. Besides, from the perspective of an advanced English course these stories would generate the divergence in interpretation that would engage students in speaking and writing of more sophisticated ideas.



Each of the stories was divided into two or three parts for research purposes. Students were encouraged to read one part each class on their own and look up vocabulary that prevented understanding. After they finished reading, students spent 25-30 minutes writing their impressions of the literary pieces they had read answering the guiding questions provided by the teacher-researcher. At the end of each class, they would submit a short essay on the basis of guiding questions of 140-190 words on the questions provided. For a full account of the questions please see appendix 1.

Data collection included mainly the essays students handed in at the end of the class and one focus group that was recorded to obtain the group's responses to the texts. Special attention was paid to the students' aesthetic response and their construction of meaning of the image of woman presented by Virginia Woolf. For a full account of the questions that served as a basis for the focus group, please see appendix 2.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The methodology employed to analyze the open questions is the traditional codification method. The answers were organized and categorized according to the content of the answer and their frequency (Pope 2012). In the case of the focus group, the answers were more general, but also were categorized to have a more thorough account of students' perceptions.

### *1. Perception of female gender roles*

In relation to female characters, this paper focuses on Mrs. Gage ("The Widow and the Parrot"); Angela ("The Legacy"); and the unnamed female narrator ("The Mark on the Wall"). The three characters fail to fulfill the traditional female roles of mothers and wives, and this is something that all the students in this research perceived. Mrs. Gage is a widow who lives alone with her dog Shag in very poor conditions, and suddenly receives a letter from two solicitors stating that she has received an inheritance due to her brother's death. She travels to meet the solicitors and take possession of the inheritance when something unexpected happens: The money has disappeared! When describing Mrs. Gage, the two characteristics that appear with more frequency in students' answers is that she is old and poor to be the hero of the story, lacking the traditional Victorian attributes of youth, beauty, and wealth which would make her "the angel in the house" (Benthin, 2008, p. 4). On the other hand, something that some students perceived as a rather negative trait is Mrs. Gage's ambition. In fact, they rejected her happiness upon receiving the solicitors' letter with information of the inheritance. Certainly, they expected the more traditional Victorian self-denying reaction that would place her own needs in second place, rather than an eager woman who would like to change her social condition. Virginia Woolf was very concerned about the economic issue and advocated for women to have the chance to become economically independent (Fernand, 2006, p. 8). Likewise, Mrs. Gage is perceived



to be adventurous and able to make decisions that lead her on a path of self-discovery that makes her happy and rich at the end of the story.

Categories	Frequency in the answers
Mrs. Gage is old	15
Mrs. Gage is poor	13
Mrs. Gage does not fit the traditional role of the heroine	10
Mrs. Gage is an animal lover	8
Mr. gage is lame and shortsighted	5
Mrs. Gage is interested in Money and is rather opportunistic	5
Mrs. Gage is lonely	3

In relation to Angela, in “The Legacy”, she shares some of the characteristics observed in Mrs. Gage. She also appears to be extremely weak at the beginning of the story although she is beautiful, young and rich. The plotline shows Angela belonging to the upper class and being married to a politician who values his job more than anything else. As the story develops, the reader learns that Angela was having an affair with another man, a socialist, who juxtaposes to her husband, a rich MP. The fact that Angela has an affair with someone from a lower triggers the tragic ending. Nothing could have been more scandalous for the Victorian society that an upper-class woman having an affair with someone from a lower class, as the Victorian stratification was hierarchical and rigid (Frost, 1995, p.81). Most of the students (6 of them) perceived Angela as a friendly person who cares about her friends, and a good wife, devoted to her husband and in love with him. Angela is perceived in the first part of the story as a great example of “an angel in the house”. The character of Angela is angelic at the beginning of the story, but that changes in the moment of self-realization and at the end she prefers to commit suicide rather than live a fake existence. Similarly, to Mrs. Gage, Angela starts a journey of self-discovery through the relationship with BM and she learns to be more independent, starts working, grows up, and changes. This change that Angela experiences is also rejected by some students (4 of them) who state that Angela is a mysterious character who had a double life and cheated on her husband. This was more relevant for some students than the fact that she had finally found herself and freed from a manipulative husband and a society that expected her to be an angelic figure.

Categories	Frequency in the answers
Angela is a good wife	4
Angela is a friendly person who cares about her friends.	6
Angela is not very clever or cultured.	3
Angela is submissive and silent	2
Angela is a quiet and organized woman	2

In the case of the unnamed character in “The Mark on the Wall”, 10 students stated that she is very observant and thoughtful and a little unfocused, that she seems worried about her life and the mystery of it. The plot line in this story is complex. The story

starts when a woman is sitting in her sitting room in January and as she drinks tea, she notices a mark on the wall and the entire story is a hypothesis to find out what the mark on the wall is. Most of the students had difficulties to understand this story, and they rejected the stream of consciousness technique employed by Virginia Woolf because it was disruptive in comparison to what they had read before. In fact, the story is built on the protagonist's thoughts that go from very abstract topics such as the meaning of life; history, literature and philosophy to the anxieties of the Second World War. There is a certain passive behavior that the character states, that being inside the house, thinking is the proper realm of women in contrast to the more active roles of men in society. However, students valued the unconventional narration and the way the normal categories are altered and changed. The fact that the female character in the story has become pure thought in a contemplative, meditative attitude made them value this trait as part of the gender roles that Virginia Woolf also attributes to female characters. As Virginia was herself an intellectual, students focused on the probable biographical traits of this story. She herself would probably just sit down and be thoroughly absorbed in contemplation defying a role that was usually attributed to the male world. Men are the ones who write, think and contemplate. Men are the ones who have spiritual needs. Although, some students were uncomfortable with the challenges of the character's thoughts they celebrated the fact that the female prototypical gender roles had been defied.

When students were asked about their perception of gender roles in Chile during the focus group session and if they found any similarities with the female characters in the stories, there was a consensus in the fact that traditional stereotypes were still present in Chilean culture and although a lot of women have departed from them, there is still discrimination. The problem with stereotyping is that categorizes roles bases on the frequency males and females are perceived to carry these roles out in society. However, it is basically about roles and about genders. For example:

Women are perceived as more nurturant and concerned with the care of babies and infants. Women probably do perform more nurturing behaviors than do men, but this is because women are more often placed in positions (teacher, nurse) and roles (motherhood) where these behaviors are expected. Conversely, men are generally more aggressive and domineering than women, and again this is because men are more likely to have jobs where such behavior is encouraged. (Schneider, 2005, p.447)

This is reinforced by some recent publications that point out the differences in terms of wages, managerial positions, job segregation (Godoy and Mladinic, 2009; Flores, 2017; Novella, Rucci & Vasquez, 2015) in Chile. It is interesting that both men and women in the focus group agreed on the fact that when women try to show their skills, part of the society frowns on them. However, some other students, especially girls stated that society is divided because there are some women who want to be independent, and study and have their own professions but others still find it very normal just to stay home and raise children.

As a conclusion, students perceived the female characters in the stories as nontraditional and somehow defying the stereotypical role models of the patriarchal

society. The three female characters kill the “angel in the house” promoting roles that have to do with independence, self-discovery, and deep thought. Nevertheless, the students’ negative perceptions of the ambition in Mrs. Gage; the unfaithfulness in Angela and the excessive thought and reverie in the protagonist narrator of the “Mark on the Wall” (1989) reveal their prejudices as Chilean readers. This does not mean that being Chilean make them prejudiced but it reveals they have inherited some patriarchal traits from their parents and grandparents which is put into play in the process of reading and will be part of their response to the text.

2. *Perceptions of male gender roles*

Another issue this paper focuses on is the perception that students have on men; especially on Mrs. Gage’s brother, Joseph (“The Widow and the Parrot”); Gilbert, Angela’s husband (“The Legacy”) in their relationship with the female protagonists. It is interesting to observe that in relation to Joseph 13 out of 15 students referred to him as being mean, evil and unfeeling; one student remarked Joseph’s cleverness and craftiness while another highlighted his lack of empathy. Altogether, the reactions and perceptions of students were rather negative. Most of them referred to the bad habit of hurting animals or insects when he was a child and then to the fact that he never answered Mrs. Gage’s Christmas cards. Other male characters in the story, such as the solicitors who wrote to Mrs. Gage informing her about the inheritance and later about the loss of the money, were considered rather cold and indifferent, uncomprehending and apathetic.

Categories	Frequency in the answers
Joseph is mean, evil and unfeeling.	13
Joseph is clever and crafty	1
Joseph lacks empathy	1
Gilbert is a good husband	7
Gilbert is too worried about his job as a politician.	3
Gilbert is arrogant	4
Gilbert is a patient	1

In relation to Gilbert, students’ answers were more divided. At least 7 students pointed out that Gilbert was a good husband and a good man who cared about his wife. One student stated that Gilbert was patient. Nevertheless, 4 students highlighted the fact that he was arrogant and conceited; 3 students stated that he was just obsessed with his work and left his wife alone. These findings indicate that most of the students focused on the rather traditional values of the good wife devoted to the husband, the loving and caring husband who provides for the house, who feels superior to his wife but loves her anyway. Just a few people were able to go beyond the surface and understand that the husband who appeared loving and caring was just absorbed in his own political career and the wife who was agreeable was growing more and more isolated as the story develops.

In conclusion, Joseph was easily perceived in a negative way by most students because objectively he is portrayed with a series of negative traits such as greed, indifference, selfishness who has never cared about his sister and has failed to relate with her in a positive way. Students also observed that he is quite the opposite of good Mrs. Gage, if she is loving and caring about animals, he is cruel and indifferent to them; if she is generous and good-hearted he is selfish and hard. Mrs. Gage becomes a hero in the eyes of students because when compared to her brother she has positive qualities while he has only negative ones. Nevertheless, in the case of Gilbert, students were quite divided, and most of them saw very good qualities in him. It was really a few who realized he was also very selfish and neglected his wife. In Gilbert, it is easily perceived how students were biased by stereotypical role models because they accepted the stronger man who protects a weaker wife to the point of transforming her into a little child. In fact, many students disliked the fact that Angela had cheated on her husband in search for her own independence and made it difficult for some of them to accept her as a heroine. At least many of them stated she was a complex character because it was contradictory for them that she could be so devoted to her husband in the first part of the story and had turned into such a treacherous person at the end.

### *3. Perceptions of the narrative itself*

Apart from students' perceptions of gender roles in the stories it was relevant to obtain their perspectives on the narrative itself, especially in terms of their expectations as readers as well as on the endings because this also provides interesting data as to the way they are reading and how they are reacting to the new gender roles explored by Virginia Woolf and their own stereotypes.

Regarding the ending of "The widow and the Parrot" (1989), most of the students (9 of them) thought it was a good ending because it was unexpected and because it fulfilled students' expectations in terms of justice; after all Mrs. Gage had suffered she was now happier. Only 3 people said that the ending was predictable and boring. Regarding Mrs. Gage and the twists in the narration of the story 7 people perceived that the most important twist is that she is happier now while 6 people although mentioning the "happiness" factor believed that she became more capable and stronger. Some students also mentioned that it was the connection between Mrs. Gage and the bird that caused this happiness. They even refer to "their living happily ever after" which is the typical romantic ending for children's stories between a prince and a princess, only that here it was between a widow and a parrot.

In the focus group students stated that Mrs. Gage appeared more powerful at the end of the story. She had learned to face adversity. Some students did not like the fact that the parrot died in the end. However, they were happy with the ending. Nobody expected, for example, a romantic ending. For instance, that Mrs. Gage remarried to avoid solitude; they seem to accept quite naturally that this woman could live on her own bonding to a parrot rather to another human being. In fact, some students came up with the idea that contrary to what happened in the Victorian endings where there is a

male character who saves the lady in distress, the savior of Mrs. Gage was the parrot which distorts the conventional happy ending. The new role model of an independent and wealthy widow at the end of the story was appealing. Students also observed in the focus group that the choice of the heroine as lame, short sighted, poor and old was the antithesis of the Victorian angel in the house, and that an ending where this antithesis is happy and well provided was interesting for them.

In the case of "The Legacy" (1989) most of the students were very surprised with the ending and for some of them it was too tragic. However, for most of the students the ending was good and well-constructed. It is interesting to observe that nobody would have expected Angela to marry BM at the end. That would have been too happy according to the observations of my students and it would have reinforced the traditional gender role where females need to be saved by males. Besides, in the focus group some students pointed out that both Gilbert and B.M are different just in terms of social class, they both need to get control of Angela and impose on her, so an ending where she stays with either of them at the end, would have implied a self-defeating ending for her. Some students thought that the name of main character, Angela, was meaningful because it refers to the angel in the house that was later killed.

Regarding "The Mark on the wall" (1989), students were struck by the narrative, which had so many traits of stream of consciousness. Their sense of extreme thought and the main character's mind that roams from topic to topic figuring out the meaning of life and the futility of it made students wonder about this character and the gender role that Virginia Woolf was trying to explore here, and although the stream of consciousness technique was difficult to understand, they were able to relate to the character and understand that she has a trait that refers to the intellectual woman. In the focus group, some students talked about the difficulty of the text and the lack of narrative unity in contrast to the two previous stories, and although it did not fill their expectations as readers, the use of this story provided the opportunity for a lot of discussion about gender roles and stereotypes that are present in the story.

## CONCLUSION / DISCUSSION

The present study sought to explore the perceptions and reactions of third year EFL students of Virginia Woolf's female and male gender roles and the way students perceive these in three short stories. The analysis revealed the cultural perspectives of Chilean students who mostly value women's independence from patriarchal society.

From this perspective the main character in "The Widow and the Parrot" (1989), Mrs. Gage is viewed as an old woman who goes through an ordeal to become happier at the end of the story. The themes of the story that resonated with students were the fact that she is short sighted and limps. Her poverty was also of utmost importance in the sense that students felt sorry for her deprivation, both material and affective. The co-constructed narratives appeared as to be filled with experiences from their own grandmothers who have had to learn the ways of a society that most of the times does not include them. They valued the fact that Virginia Woolf had chosen an older

woman to be the heroine of the story, as this is not particularly heroic nowadays. Despite the fact that students seem to have admired these traits in Mrs. Gage, there was some rejection in the fact that she was also interested in money. This identity of Mrs. Gage as materialistic and a little ambitious reveals the patriarchal trait in our society that denies women that right. Students' expectations were not met in this item because they would have preferred her to stay home in a rather passive way rather than taking action, becoming a protagonist and fetching the money her brother had left her. However, it was not just the fact that she threw herself into the adventure of fetching the money but the lack of sorrow for her brother's death. Some students punished Mrs. Gage for this lack of feeling and expected a sadder sister even if the brother had been a miser all his life. This is confirmed by the fact that students perceived the selfishness of Joseph only but were unable to perceive the indifference of other men in the story, such as the solicitors. This appreciation reveals the cultural trait of propriety for women which was another stereotypical Victorian gender role which seems to be present in the minds of some of the readers in my class.

Another important finding is connected to the second story "The Legacy" (1989) which was the one that students liked the most. During the meaning construction process, two stages happened. First, Angela was perceived as the ideal wife and Gilbert as the perfect husband. This experience stemmed from patriarchal cultural codes as well, where a husband and wife live happily ever after as long as she remains silent and submissive. However, in the second stage the meaning constructions were focused on the independence gained by Angela, which at first seemed a good trait in the character. It seems fair for students that Angela detached from her husband, as he was always worried about his job as a politician. However again, this was mostly accepted from a patriarchal perspective, women need their husbands and if they don't have one they grow detached. Nevertheless, very few accepted the fact that Angela had started a parallel relationship. The character's actions and events in the story appeared chaotic and hopeless. Angela's unfaithfulness practically destroyed her in the eyes of the students. She had deceived, and she had cheated on her husband! Cultural positions manifested by the participants reflected the importance of Chilean conservative values in terms of family honour and decency.

Regarding "The Mark on the Wall" (1989), students made clear their cultural positions by wondering at the excess of thought in the character and for being unfocused. Some of the students realized this is a gender role that is usually associated with male characters and took interests in the developing of the story, but some others appeared to dislike this female character who contemplates, meditates on abstract topics and has certain knowledge of philosophy. This shows that in terms of gender roles, Chilean stereotypes still attribute these intellectual academic actions to males.

The results also illustrate that literary pieces in non-abridged English provide L2 students with opportunities to negotiate meaning, re construct characters and events from their own cultural experience. It was also interesting to observe that although similar appreciations were written individually by students, the collective opinions that appeared in the focus groups influenced most of the class into a common perspective of the stories. This also makes me think that although the reader response theory was not



intended for EFL research, its use in the EFL classroom enriches it, as bringing forth the aesthetic object is also possible with students who are non-natives of English. Students who have developed appropriate reading skills can become very competent readers and even though they have obstacles with vocabulary they are able to reconstruct the story and fill in the indeterminacies that plots, characters and settings have.

These findings also suggest pedagogical implications for what it implies developing reading, writing and speaking skills in EFL students who are training to take the Cambridge CAE exam. Reading is a complex ability that demands the interplay of certain skills that have to do with making inferences, constructing and negotiating meaning. The fact that students had to face challenging texts in non-abridged English put into play all their lexical baggage both passive and active apart from the skills of deciphering, making hypothesis, and getting involved as an active reader in the text. Apart from the reading process itself, students were asked to write in English and to speak, so there were two other skills that were reinforced.

The production skills considered all the creativity used in the reading process. To write their own pieces, students had to be able to portray their own feelings, emotions, and analysis of Virginia Woolf's stories, and they were able to do this in a creative and analytical way. After that, they were also able to discuss the stories orally and provide their own point of view. From this perspective, students benefited a lot from the experience in a context where they are preparing for the Cambridge CAE certificate.

One limitation of the research methods was the small size of the sample. Only 15 EFL students were part of this study. If more students had participated there would have been a higher variety of responses and answers that would have enriched the analysis. So, a recommendation for further research is precisely that of increasing the sample. This could be done by incorporating two or three classes to the study to see the variations in the perceptions and responses.

To conclude, the use of these three short stories by Virginia Woolf in the EFL class helped students explore their own cultural prejudices regarding gender roles in Chile as well as enrich their perspectives from the proposals of a British writer. Apart from this, the effort of deciphering and inferring as part of the reading process reinforced their competencies as readers, writers and oral users of English. What's more, this learning was meaningful, as it considered their own knowledge and their own preconceptions that were put into play.

## REFERENCES

- BENTHIM, A. 2008. *Redefining gender Roles: The Image of women in Virginia Woolf's to the Lighthouse*. Norderstedt Germany: Druck und Bindung.
- BIJELLAND, A. 2016. "The Road Not Taken": *Poetry and personal insight in the EFL classroom and beyond*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Universitetet i Agder: University of Agder.
- BLOCK, C. 2004. *Teaching Comprehension: The Comprehension Approach*. Boston MA.: Pearson Education.



- BRUMFIT, C.J. AND CARTER, R.A. (eds.) 1986. *Literature and Language Teaching* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CARLISLE, A. 2000. "Reading logs: an application of reader-response theory in ELTELT" *J* (2000) 54 (1): 12-19. doi: 10.1093/elt/54.1.12.
- CHAPMAN, R. 1982. *The Language of Literature*. London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd. Common European Framework of References for Languages: Learning Teaching Assessment. Retrieved from <http://ebcl.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/CEFR-all-scales-and-all-skills.pdf>
- DARWISH, S AND K. SHUQAIR. 2015. "The Use of Literature in an EFL Classroom. *British Journal of Education* Vol.,3 n°7, pp. 71-82, July. Retrieved from <http://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Use-of-Literature-in-an-EFL-Classroom.pdf>
- FISH, S. 2001. "Yet Once More". *Reception Study. From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*. New York and London: Routledge (original edition 1995).
- ELLIS, S. 2007. *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- FERNALD, A. 2006. *Virginia Woolf. Feminism and the Reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- FLORES, P. 2017 "Ser mujer en Chile ¿estamos alcanzando la igualdad? Historia de la reivindicación femenina para lograr sus derechos. Cuaderno Jurídico y político, Vol.3 pp-85-96. Retrieved from <http://portalderevistas.upoli.edu.ni/index.php/cuaderno-juridico-y-politico/issue/view/58>.
- FROST, G. 1995. *Promises broken: Courtship, class, and Gender in Victorian England*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia.
- GODOY, L Y A. MLADINIC. 2009. "Estereotipos y roles de género en la evaluación laboral de hombres y mujeres en cargos de dirección". *Revista Suche* v.18 n.2 Santiago nov. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-22282009000200004>
- HALL, S. 1980. 'Encoding/decoding'. *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Ed.): Culture, Media, Language. London: Hutchinson.
- INGARDEN, R. 1973. *The Literary Work of Art*, translated by George G. Grabowicz, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- ISER, W. 2010. "Interaction between Text and Reader" *The Norton Anthology of Theory and criticism*. Ed. Peter Simon. United States: Norton and Company, Inc., 1526.
- JAUSS, R. 1985. "The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding". *Identity of the Literary Text*. Ed. Mario J. Valdes and Owen Miller. Toronto: U of Toronto. 146-174.
- KHATIB, M; REZAEI, S. AND A. DERAKHASHAN. 2011. "Literature in EFL/ESL classroom". *English Language Teaching* Vol. 4, N° 1. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v4n1p201>.
- KRAMSH, C. 2001. Intercultural communication. In R. Carter and D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LAI, S. 2013. "Strategically Smart or Proficiency – Driven? An Investigation of Reading Strategy use of EFL college Students in Relation to Language Proficiency". *Contemporary Issues in Educational Research*, 6 (1) 85-92. <http://dx.doi.org/10.19030/cier.v6i1.7606>.
- LARSON, L. C. 2009. "Reader Response Meets New Literacies: Empowering Readers in Online Learning Communities". *The Reading Teacher*, 62: 638–648. doi:10.1598/RT.62.8.2.

- LEE, H. 2013. "An Examination of ESL Taiwanese University students' Multimodal Reading Response". *Literacy Research and Instruction*. 52: 192-203. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2013.774449>.
- LIAW, M.L. 2001. "Exploring Literary Responses in an EFL Classroom". *Foreign Language Annals*, 34: 35-44. doi:10.1111/j.1944-9720.2001.tb02800.x.
- MALEY, A. 1989. "Down from the pedestal: Literature as resource". In R. Carter, R. Walker, and C. Brumfit (Eds.), *Literature and the learner: Methodological approaches* (pp. 1-9). Modern English Publications and the British Counsel.
- NASSAJI, H. 2002. "Schema Theory and Knowledge-based processes in second language reading comprehension: A Need for alterative perspectives. *Language Learning*. Volume 52, Issue 2, June 2002, 439-481. 10.1111/0023-8333.00189.
- NOVELLA, R. RUCCI, G Y C. VASQUEZ. "Porque no quiero o no puedo. Cuanto no sabemos del trabajo femenino en Chile". Nota Técnica IDB-TN 842. Banco Internacional del Desarrollo, Agosto, 2015 <https://publications.iadb.org/handle/11319/7124>.
- QAMAR, F. 2016. "Effectiveness of Critical Thinking Skills for English Literature Study with Reader Response Theory": *Review of Literature Journal of Arts and Humanities*; Annapolis5.6 (Jun 2016): 37-50.
- QUIRK, R. AND G. WIDDOWSON. 1985. *Standard, codification and social linguistic realism. English in the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PARKINSON, B. AND REID-THOMAS. 2000. *Teaching literature in a second language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- POPE, J. 2012. *Investigación de mercados. Guía maestra para el profesional*. Norma, Bogotá.
- PRESSLEY, M. 2006. *Reading Instructions that Works: the Cs for Balanced Teaching*. New York: Guilford Press.
- SANCHEZ, M. 2016. "The Appeal to audience through figures of thought in Virginia Woolf's feminist essays". *Renascence*, 68 (2) 127-143.
- SCHNEIDER, D. 2005. *The psychology of stereotyping*. New York and London: The Guilford Press.
- SHIN, C. AND RIAZANTSEVA, A. 2015. "Reader identity: a case study of Korean graduate students' meaning construction of an L2 literary text". *Language and Intercultural Communication*. 15:4, 600-615, DOI: 10.1080/14708477.2015.1061535.
- SPIROVSKA, E. "Literature in ELT Setting: Students' Attitudes and Preferences towards Literary Texts". *Procedia. Social and Behavioral Sciences* 232 (2016) 161-169. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.041.
- WOOLF, V. (1942) "Professions for women". *The Death of the Moth, and other Essays*. Date first posted: October 2012. Retrieved from <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks12/1203811h.html>
- WOOLF, V. (1989). *The Complete shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. Second Edition. Ed. By Susan Dick. New York: A harvest Book, 1989.

## APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INDIVIDUAL WRITING

1. What do you think of the character of Mrs. Gage? How is she described by the narrator? Does she fit into the traditional image of woman who is young and beautiful?
2. Why do you think that Mrs. Gage goes through the adventure of the river? How are men, especially Mrs. Gage's brother portrayed in the story?
3. What do you think of the ending of the story? Did you expect such an ending? How was Mrs. Gage changed throughout the story? Does she appear more powerful than at the beginning?
4. There are three characters mentioned in this part: Angela, Sissy and Gilbert. What kind of women are Angela and Sissy? What can you say about Gilbert? What kind of man is he?
5. Angela has defined herself as a writer. What kind of relationship did Angela and Gilbert have? Do you notice any changes in Angela that let her grow up as a character?
6. The main character and narrator is remembering when she had just finished her tea in the middle of January when she saw the mark on the wall. What kind of person is this character? What does she reflect on? What are her concerns?

## APPENDIX 2: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE FOCUS GROUP

1. What kind of woman is Woolf trying to portray?
2. What are the women's relationship with the men like?
3. Do you think your expectations were fulfilled?
4. Do you see women in Chile as they appear in the story?
5. Why do you think Woolf chose an old woman as a hero?