Moments of liberty. (Self-)censorship Games in the Essays of Virginia Woolf

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Subject(s): Studies of Literature, Theory of Literature
Published by: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego
Keywords: Woolf Virginia; liberty; censorship; self-censorship; personal essay; women's emancipation; non-heteronormativity; pacifism
Summary/Abstract: What is surprising in Virginia Woolf's essays is the scale and the audacity of her intellectual searches – in the time of increased repressive censorship and growing totalitarianisms, she approached the themes of freedom which have remained controversial ever since. The article presents the essayistic nature as a strategy applied by Woolf in her personal essays to avoid censorship, and intentionally expand the limits of freedoms important to her. The author offers an outline of the mechanism of repressive censorship and the chilling effect it worked in the interwar United Kingdom based on the examples of suspensions of outstanding modernist works and show-trials of writers. She presents three areas of study of freedom in Woolf's essays: women's emancipation, tolerance towards non-heteronormative persons, and pacifism, as well as the areas of private and public (self-)censorship which existed therein.
Virginia Woolf begins her “Sketch” by describing her earliest, joyous memories in infancy, those associated with her family’s beach house, St. Ives. Woolf succumbed to mental illness and killed herself before she was able to put in “the horrid labour” she felt was necessary to make of her “Sketch” a work of art. I found an excellent short essay online by Nicole L. Urquhart, “Moments of Being in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction,” which discusses how Woolf tried to portray moments of being—episodes in which characters are conscious of being conscious—in her novels Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse and Between the Acts.