A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN
THE FEMINIST CLASSIC

VIRGINIA WOOLF

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DR JESSICA GILDERSLEEVE

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This Capstone edition first published 2021

The first edition of *A Room of One's Own* was published by Hogarth Press in 1929.

Registered office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

9780857088826(hardback)

9780857088802(epdf)

9780857088819(epub)

Cover Design: Wiley

AN INTRODUCTION

BY JESSICA GILDERSLEEVE

> ‘But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction – what has that got to do with a room of one's own? I will try to explain.’

With this rhetorical flourish Virginia Woolf begins *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The first word of the essay, ‘But,’ anticipates immediate argument from her imagined reader, the student audience watching her deliver it, and the university administrator who has commissioned the work. ‘A room of one's own?’ these audiences think. ‘Why? How is it relevant?’ Woolf's essay proceeds to explain: the ‘room’ is not a minor detail, but foundational for women's financial and social independence, and essential for the female writer.

I say ‘essay,’ though the work has also been called a manifesto, a work of fiction, a lecture, a fable, and a performance. It seems as difficult to define *A Room of One's Own* as it is for Woolf to define what that room has to do with the relationship between women and fiction. Even at its conclusion Woolf can only gesture towards the future, rather than provide clear instruction. But it is precisely in the uncertainty of Woolf's approach that we find the significance and relevance of the work. The many possibilities opened up by Woolf's opening question continue to fascinate readers and critics, and we will look at some of their points of view.

Virginia Woolf, 1927. Photographer unknown.

WHY IT MATTERS

The question of a woman having a room of her own in which to work and write is as pertinent today as it was almost a century ago.

Indeed, I sit at my kitchen table to write this essay, as hundreds of thousands of women have done before me. It is not my own room, but such things remain a luxury for most women. The table will do. I am fortunate that I can make a living ‘by my wits,’ as Woolf has it. That living enabled me to buy not only the room, but the house – although the presence of my young family means that a room of my own is currently an unattainable luxury. My living as an (academic) writer does, however, enable me to purchase safe and reliable childcare, in which the physical and emotional labour of other women permits me to sit here and write. It is as true today, therefore, as it was almost a century ago when Woolf said, ‘a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction’ – indeed, to write anything at all.

Woolf's book-length essay began as a series of lectures she delivered to female students at the University of Cambridge year prior to publication. Its central premise and title has entered the popular lexicon: former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's podcast, *A Podcast of One's Own*, takes its lead from the essay, as does Anonymous Was A Woman, a prominent arts funding body based in New York. A 1980s pop rock group, Shakespears Sister (sic), took its name from The Smiths song *Shakespeare's Sister*, Morrissey's reflection on Woolf's idea that if the Bard had had a sister of equal genius, she would not have been given the opportunity to express it. Even the Bechdel–Wallace test, which measures the success of a narrative according

to whether it features at least two named women, conversing about something other than a man, can be seen to descend from the ‘Chloe liked Olivia’ section of *A Room of One's Own*. In the imagined novel Woolf references, Chloe and Olivia not only like one another, but their conversation and lives exist outside of any male or patriarchal identification. Finally, Woolf's observation of women as a kind of underclass, in which their work is not recompensed at the same rate as work by men, still holds relevance in relation to today's gender pay gaps – as does the hierarchy of value placed on men's over women's writing, which has led to the necessary establishment of awards like the Women's Prize for Fiction in the United Kingdom and the Stella Prize in Australia.

Yet it is also necessary for contemporary feminists to recognise that, as important as *A Room of One's Own* has been for feminism in general and for women's writing in particular, there are assumptions and limitations inherent in Woolf's argument, which we will address.

WHO IS VIRGINIA WOOLF?

Virginia Woolf was born Adeline Virginia Stephen in London in 1882. It was the second marriage for both her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, and her mother, Julia Stephen (née Duckworth). Virginia was one of eight siblings and half-siblings, including Vanessa (later Vanessa Bell, the artist).

Leslie Stephen was a prominent essayist and critic, and editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. So although Virginia was educated at home rather than at school and university (as were her brothers), she was exposed to a wealth of knowledge and intellectual ideas throughout her childhood and teen years. There was a parade of learned or artistic visitors to their London Hyde Park home, among

them the writer Henry James, poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, and the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (Julia Stephen's aunt).

When Virginia was just 13, her mother died. She was devastated, as was her father, who turned his grief onto his children. This extra psychological pressure plunged Virginia into the first of a series of breakdowns she suffered throughout her life. They occurred on the death of her elder sister, Stella, that of her father, and after the completion of her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915).

Virginia married Leonard Woolf in 1912 and together they established the Hogarth Press, partly in order to give Virginia repetitive manual work in order to rest her fevered brain and aid in her recovery. The Hogarth Press published a range of important works, including T.S. Eliot's modernist epic poem, ‘The Waste Land’ (1924), a number of Woolf's own novels and essays and, later, English translations (by James Strachey) of the complete works of Sigmund Freud (1952–74).

Although Virginia worked and wrote prolifically, publishing nine novels and hundreds of short stories and essays, her mental health was never stable. In 1941, terrified of the threat of a German victory in the Second World War and what that would mean for herself and her Jewish husband, she committed suicide by drowning near her home in Sussex.

THE FEMINIST *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

From the moment of its publication, *A Room of One's Own* was taken up as a critical work of the feminist movement. The day prior to its release, Woolf recorded in her diary her fears for its reception, simultaneously concerned that it

would be cast aside for its ‘charm, & sprightliness,’ even while she was ‘attacked for a feminist & hinted at for a sapphist’ (see Favre 2020). She need not have worried. Although some critics, such as Woolf's regular adversary Arnold Bennett, disagreed with her arguments, most recognised the essay's contribution to feminism. Indeed, author Rebecca West (1931) described it approvingly as ‘an uncompromising piece of feminist propaganda’. Later, prominent feminist critic Susan Gubar would recognise it as ‘a classic in the history of Western feminism’ (see Ziarek 2010).

Woolf's emphasis on the necessity of a room has a wider sociological significance. Her essay signals a move away from the doctrine of separate spheres, which characterised gender relations in Britain in the nineteenth century. Under this social structure, men occupied the public sphere while women were confined to the private. They were expected to serve the interests of their home and family rather than their individual needs or desires. A room of one's own, then, signifies the feminist reimagination of the domestic space. As well as being ‘the site of a dynamic female potential,’ as Christina Stevenson (2014) puts it, and the physical and mental privacy necessary for intellectual work (Wendy Gan 2009), a separate room assigns meaning to ‘woman's social and political existence’ (Julie Robin Solomon 1989).

It is precisely because of this domestic confinement that women had not been afforded the time, space, or cultural respect necessary to write. Those who did published their work under pseudonyms (such as George Eliot), hid their work from those closest to them (Jane Austen had to draft her novels surreptitiously in a corner of the sitting room), or channelled their creative energy into ‘appropriate’ narrative forms, such as diary-writing.