A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN
THE FEMINIST CLASSIC

VIRGINIA WOOLF

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DR JESSICA GILDERSLEEVE

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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.

In this way, women's voices were routinely silenced, dismissed as boring or shallow, or framed as of concern only to their own gender. Over and over, a woman was reminded, she was suited only to be the *object* of the literary text – the adored, voiceless beauty to whom the sonnet is dedicated – or she reflected back the glow of man himself: 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size,' Woolf writes. 'Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?'

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf seeks to return that authority to the woman writer as well as to the female student and imagined female reader whom she addresses.

WOMEN AND LITERATURE

Casting across the history of literature, Woolf identifies a range of both important and forgotten women writers, including Austen, Eliot, the Brontës, and Aphra Behn. She establishes a new model of literary heritage, which acknowledges not only those women who succeeded, but those who were made invisible or anonymous, prevented from working in the first place due to their sex, or their works cast aside by prevailing value systems. Woolf explores how women's letter-writing, for example, can demonstrate both a woman's aptitude for writing and the way in which it is cramped and suppressed by other expectations of her time.

Woolf's key idea is that the lack of an identifiable matrilineal literary heritage works to impede women's ability to write and crushes their expectations. To underscore this point, she presents the story of 'Judith', an imagined sister of Shakespeare. Judith is a woman equal to her brother in talent, intellect and creativity, but without his encouragement or resources. While he attends school, she must 'mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers.' Resistant to her family's expectation that she marry a local boy, Judith escapes to London and begs at the stage door for a role on the stage. But the pity of a stage manager compromises her dreams once more: 'she found herself with child by that gentleman and so – who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body? – killed herself one winter's night.' Judith's thwarted spark thus comes to stand for the fate of so many women prevented from following their natural talent for fear of transgressing cultural expectations.

For Woolf, the establishment of major women writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the moment 'the middle-class woman began to write', is in her mind a moment in history 'of greater importance than the Crusades or the War of the Roses.' T.S. Eliot in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) and Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) both identify the (male) writer's relation to his precursors as necessary for his own literary production. But how is a woman to write if she has no models, Woolf asks? This is, she says, the 'difficulty which faced [women writers] … when they came to set their thoughts to paper – that is that they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help'. Famously, she asserts, 'we think back through our mothers if we are women.' Woolf continues:

> 'Without those forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and

> tamed the natural savagery of the tongue. For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice … It is [Aphra Behn] … who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight: Earn five hundred a year by your wits.'

This argument for a matrilineal heritage became central to the feminist revisionist work of literary critics like Toril Moi, Elaine Showalter, Carolyn Heilbrun, Jane Marcus, Gillian Beer, Sandra K. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Woolf was positioned as 'the "mother" of feminist critics of the late twentieth century … the alpha and omega of feminist criticism, its origin and its "goal,"' as Laura Marcus (2010) puts it. Just as the women writers Woolf identifies could not have come into being without their literary foremothers, so too it is hard to imagine contemporary feminism without Woolf.

One of the most important moments in *A Room of One's Own* is in Woolf's evocation of another imagined character, a writer named Mary Carmichael. As Woolf's contemporary, Carmichael emerges from the strictures that prevented Judith Shakespeare from succeeding as a writer. Her writing suffers from a self-imposed restriction, what Woolf identifies as a fear 'of being called "sentimental,"' but her work is unusual in that it is seeking to inculcate change in both form and content.

Despite her unwieldy sentences, Mary Carmichael's characters ultimately lead to a profound moment in literature: 'Chloe liked Olivia,' the reader learns. Having included and noted this nod to women's sexuality, Woolf is then at pains to reassure her readers that 'these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.' Moreover, as Ellen Rosenman (1989) has pointed out, the line is significantly diluted from Woolf's original manuscript. Following hot on the heels of Radclyffe Hall's trial for obscenity in her depiction of a lesbian relationship in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Woolf was loath to attract the ire of the censors. Indeed, it is remarkable that her novel published in that same year,

Orlando: A Biography, which depicts a character fluid in both gender and sexuality, did not suffer the same fate (see Parkes 1994). But in recognising that 'Chloe liked Olivia,' Mary Carmichael/Woolf not only permits the revelation of women as sexual beings, but also the potential for women's lives to have significance beyond their service or interest to men.

The Mary Carmichael episode of *A Room of One's Own* is also critical for our understanding of Woolf's perception of the socio-economic status of women writing in her time, especially for the possible futures she describes throughout the essay. Mary Carmichael comes to stand as the 'link between the middle-class women writers of the eighteenth century and Woolf's predicted future woman writer of genius,' argues Melissa Sullivan (2013). Through the figure of Mary Carmichael, Woolf observes the failures of modern women writers to achieve full intellectual and creative freedom, even as she celebrates the strides this figure has made since the death of her ancestor, Judith Shakespeare.

WOOLF AS PROFESSIONAL WRITER

The late 1920s and early 1930s were particularly prolific and significant years in Woolf's writing career. The period saw the publication of the novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and *The Waves* (1931), in addition to the experimental biography *Flush* (1933), and three major essay collections: *The London Scene* (1931) and *The Common Reader* (1925 and 1932). It was also during this period that Woolf drafted another notable lecture-cum-essay, 'Professions for Women' (1931), delivered to The Women's Service League.

'Professions for Women' covers many of the same points as its much longer sister-essay, *A Room of One's Own*: the obstacles to women's success as writers ('The cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in other professions'); the importance of a matrilineal literary heritage ('the road was cut many years ago … [by] many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten … making the path

smooth, and regulating my steps'); and the satisfaction of an income earned from one's writing. Regarding the latter point, we must always keep in mind Woolf's upper-middle-class circumstances. For instance, she admits at one point that 'instead of spending that sum upon bread and butter, rent, shoes and stockings, or butcher's bills, I went out and bought a cat – a beautiful cat, a Persian cat.' The essay also returns to the concern she had raised in her diary about the potentially dismissive reception of *A Room of One's Own*, in her observation that truth 'cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must – to put it bluntly – tell lies if they are to succeed.'

But 'Professions for Women' is most important for its recognition of an obstacle not recognised in *A Room of One's Own*: 'if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman … It was she who used to come between me and my paper 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.'

KILLING THE IDEALISED WOMAN

Named after Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem of the same title, Woolf's so-called 'Angel in the House' conveys the way the idealised image of woman becomes a spectre that stops women from writing. This 'angel in the house' is both a symbol of cultural discourses about women's roles and a persistent internal monologue that discourages women from writing.

Both *A Room of One's Own* and 'Professions for Women' steer clear of the more militant outrage that characterises *Three Guineas* (1938), an essay frequently published alongside *A Room of One's Own*. But the essay (cast as a lecture, as in the two earlier works, or as a letter, as in *Three Guineas*) was a form that Woolf found appropriate for expressing her social and political views. As Anne E. Fernald (1994) notes, the essay was 'well-suited to making arguments for social change, in spite of many dismissals of it as too polite, too conciliatory,

too willing to play the feminine role of "hostess" to contradictory or even offensive ideas.'

It is more useful to see *A Room of One's Own* as an essay rather than as, for instance, a feminist manifesto, since it 'refuses to stake out a set position' or an 'assumption of authority', as Randi Saloman (2013) suggests. She notes that its style may be meandering and even indeterminate, but it is through the very open-endedness of the essay that young women reading it can be inspired to imagine unique futures.

WOOLF AS MODERNIST WRITER

A Room of One's Own is not only critical as a document in feminist history: it also demonstrates several aspects of Woolf's approach to the new possibilities of narrative within the modernist movement. Alongside James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, and T.S. Eliot, Woolf is recognised as one of the great writers of literary modernism, the period roughly spanning the last years of the nineteenth century up until the end of the Second World War. But how specifically is Woolf's modernism expressed in *A Room of One's Own*?

Modernism is associated with experimentation in form, particularly narrative fragmentation. The stream of consciousness technique, influenced by psychoanalysis and its revelations about the mind, seeks to represent the endless movements of thought. Indeed, whereas literature of the nineteenth century is primarily associated with realism, and an assumption that the world can be represented just as it is, modernism shifted from an interest in external to internal representation.

Writers such as Woolf, as well as visual artists including Vincent Van Gogh, sought to capture the individual impression of a moment in time. Woolf termed this 'moments of being.' Her short story, 'Kew Gardens' (1919), demonstrates this, describing the individual thoughts and impressions of a range of people – and even a snail – wandering the gardens. In the contrasts and conflicts between the contemplations of these people, as well as the elevation of the snail's own consciousness,

Woolf makes clear the impossibility of a single, unified realism or even, as *A Room of One's Own* reiterates, a unified truth.

Much of the early sections of *A Room of One's Own* demonstrate not only an emphasis on the importance of the ordinary, but also the stream of consciousness technique. Woolf ruminates on women's position in, and in relation to, fiction while wandering through the university campus, driving through country lanes, and dawdling over a leisurely solo lunch. Critically, however, she also uses frequent patriarchal interruptions to that flow of thought – a college beadle waving his arms in exasperation as she walks on a private patch of grass, a less-than-satisfactory dinner served in the women's college, a 'deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman' who turns her away from the the university library. These episodes serve to underscore the way in which such interruptions disrupt the work of a woman without a room.

The same lesson, incidentally, is imparted at the conclusion of *To the Lighthouse*, in which the artist Lily Briscoe must figure out how to shed the overbearing influence of Mr and Mrs Ramsay if she is to 'have her vision.' The Mr Ramsay character, a professor based on Woolf's own father, demands the full attention and respect of his wife and family. The novel opens with an example of the stream of consciousness technique, depicting a confrontation between Mr and Mrs Ramsay as to the expected weather. Oblivious to the desires of his young son, who wishes to travel on a small boat to the lighthouse just off shore from the Ramsays' holiday house, Mr Ramsay insists that he is correct, that both his wife and son must align with his view of the world. Part of the evolution of the novel involves Mr Ramsay coming to tolerate, if not understand, the consciousnesses of those around him. Crucially, it is the artist, Lily Briscoe, who imparts this knowledge to him. Standing in some ways for Woolf herself, Lily must not only kill the 'angel in the house' (Mrs Ramsay, the symbol of Victorian womanhood), but confront Mr Ramsay, the symbol of patriarchal intellectualism as gatekeeper. Only then can she work.

Woolf knew that the flights and flow of modernist technique took time and effort to get right. It would not be possible for women