

A Room of One's Own: summary

A Room of One's Own by Woolf is divided into six parts. "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," is what she refers to as her "minor point," and it explains the essay's title. She continues by stating that a woman's financial independence may be achieved by an inheritance of five hundred pounds annually, which she believes is more significant than women gaining the right to vote (women had not yet achieved full equality with men in 1928, when Woolf gave her lectures).

Woolf takes on the fictitious character of "Mary Beton," and she uses this persona to communicate with her readers and audience. The origin of this name can be traced back to an ancient Scottish folktale called "The Four Marys" or "Mary Hamilton," which tells the story of Mary Hamilton, a lady-in-waiting to the Scottish queen. Mary becomes pregnant through the King's means, but she kills the child and is subsequently found guilty of a capital crime. One of the other three Marys in the ballad is "Mary Beton."

In her analysis of the historical exclusion of women from social and political institutions, Virginia Woolf uses the observation that, as a woman, she would not be able to access a manuscript kept within an all-male college at "Oxbridge"—a rhetorical mash-up of Oxford and Cambridge—to illustrate her point. Woolf originally delivered A Room of One's Own to students at one of the recently established women's colleges at Cambridge, but these female students were still prohibited from entering certain areas within the university's all-male colleges.

Woolf then focuses on what men have written about women and comes to the clear conclusion that men, who have a stake in maintaining their dominance in literature and academia, represent

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women in particular ways to effectively maintain their status as second-class citizens. Woolf's next step is to think about the writing of other women. At this point in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf invents a (fictional) Shakespearean sister, Judith Shakespeare, maybe in reference to Shakespeare's own daughter's name. (Incidentally, Woolf coined the term "Shakespeare's sister," which also happened to be the name of a female pop duo and a song by The Smiths.)

Woolf asks us to see this hypothetical sister of William Shakespeare as having the same brilliance and capacity for greatness from birth as her brother. However, she is denied access to the options her brother has, including a grammar school education, the potential to work as an actress in London, and the ability to support herself in the Elizabethan theatre.

Rather, "Judith Shakespeare" would discover that these establishments would close their doors to her simply due to her gender at birth. Woolf responds to the argument that there has never been a woman writer as brilliant as Shakespeare by pointing out that few women in Shakespeare's day had the same chances as males did, and that great authors are created, not born.

In Woolf's play "Judith," an actress-manager in the London playhouses seduces her, she becomes pregnant, and then, in extreme poverty and suffering, she commits suicide.

Woolf then goes back to surveying what women have written, taking into consideration writers she admires, like Jane Austen and Emily Brontë, as well as Aphra Behn, the first English woman to become a professional writer, whom Woolf says deserves recognition for demonstrating that the career woman writer could actually come to pass.

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Writing in the seventeenth century, Behn represented a significant advancement for women in general, "because it was, she who earned them the right to speak their minds." Because they were women writing in a field dominated by men, earlier female writers were overly limited by their insecurities, which caused a "flaw" in their work. But nineteenth-century novelists like Austen and George Eliot were 'trained' in social observation, and this enabled them to write novels about the world she knew:

Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper. Then, again, all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. People's feelings were impressed on her; personal relations were always before her eyes. Therefore, when the middle-class woman took to writing, she naturally wrote novels.

But even this led to limitations: Emily Brontë's genius was better-suited to poetic plays than to novels, while George Eliot would have made full use of her talents as a biographer and historian rather than as a novelist. So even here, women had to bend their talents into a socially acceptable form, and at the time this meant writing novels.

*Woolf contrasts these nineteenth-century women novelists with women novelists of today (i.e., the 1920s). She discusses a recent novel, *Life's Adventure* by Mary Carmichael. (Both the novel and the writer are fictional, invented by Woolf for the purpose of her argument.) In this novel, she finds some quietly revolutionary details, including the depiction of friendship between women, where novels had*

previously viewed women only in relation to men (e.g., as wives, daughters, friends, or mothers).

Woolf concludes by arguing that in fact, the ideal writer should be neither narrowly 'male' or 'female' but instead should strive to be emotionally and psychologically androgynous in their approach to gender. In other words, writers should write with an understanding of both masculinity and femininity, rather than writing 'merely' as a woman or as a man. This will allow writers to encompass the full range of human emotion and experience.

A Room of One's Own: analysis

Woolf's essay, although a work of non-fiction, shows the same creative flair we find in her fiction: her adoption of the Mary Beton persona, her beginning her essay mid-flow with the word 'But', and her imaginative weaving of anecdote and narrative into her 'argument' all, in one sense, enact the two-sided or 'androgynous' approach to writing which, she concludes, all authors should strive for.

A Room of One's Own is both rational, linear argument and meandering storytelling; both deadly serious and whimsically funny; both radically provocative and, in some respects, quietly conservative. Throughout, Woolf pays particular attention to not just the social constraints on women's lives but the material ones. This is why the line which provides her essay with its title - 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' - is central to her thesis. 'Judith Shakespeare', William Shakespeare's imagined sister, would never have become a great writer because the financial arrangements for women were not focused on educating them so that they could become breadwinners for their families, but on preparing them for marriage and motherhood. Their lives were structured around

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marriage as the most important economic and material event in their lives, for it was by becoming a man's wife that a woman would attain financial security.

Such a woman, at least until the late nineteenth century when the Married Women's Property Act came into English law, would usually have neither 'a room of her own' (because the rooms in which she would spend her time, such as the kitchen, bedroom, and nursery, were designed for domestic activities) nor money (because the wife's wealth and property would, technically, belong to her husband).

Because of this strong focus on the material limitations on women, which in turn prevent them from gaining the experience, the education, or the means required to become great writers, A Room of One's Own is often described as a 'feminist' work. This label is largely accurate, although it should be noted that Woolf's opinion about women's writing diverges somewhat from that of many other feminist writers and critics.

Specifically, Woolf's recommendation that authors aim to be "androgynous" has drawn criticism from feminist critics who came after her because it refutes the notion that "women's experience" and "women's writing" are unique and different from men's. If a patriarchal society genuinely treats women as lesser subjects, then their experience of it must differ significantly from men's, and they must have both a space and what Elaine Showalter termed "a literature of their own"?

Theorists of the French school Hélène Cixous and other later feminists have suggested that there is écriture féminine, or feminine writing, that exists as an alternative to more "masculine" writing. While male writing focuses on creating a reality from concrete, materialist details, feminine writing—and much modernist writing, including Woolf's

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fiction—focuses on the "spiritual" or psychological aspects of daily life, the gaps and daydreams, and the seemingly "unimportant" moments we encounter in our day-to-day activities. Compared to traditional masculine writing, it is also less teleological, less focused on an end point (marriage, death, resolution), and more meandering.

*One wonders to what extent Woolf's claim in *A Room of One's Own* is supported by her own fiction, considering how much of her work is written in this style and may thus be classified as *écriture féminine*. The solution might be found in Woolf's 1928 book *Orlando*, which she released just before starting to write *A Room of One's Own*. In *Orlando*, the protagonist transitions between genders as she travels through three centuries of history. *Orlando* could be the best option, in fact, if one were to compare one of Woolf's fictions with *A Room of One's Own*.*