The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf

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I will focus on *A Room of One's Own*, 'Modern Fiction' and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'. A selection of key essays will be discussed in brief.

A Room of One's Own (1929)

This book is enormously important, not only for readers of Woolf's work (to which it may act as an excellent introduction in its own right), but also for those interested in wider critical and cultural debates on feminism, gender, sexuality and modernity. This work is undoubtedly Woolf's most important contribution to literary criticism and theory. *A Room of One's Own* is based on lectures that Woolf gave to women students at Cambridge, but it reads in places like a novel, blurring boundaries between criticism and fiction. It is regarded as the first modern primer for feminist literary criticism, not least because it is also a source of many, often conflicting, theoretical positions.

A Room of One's Own is cited as the *locus classicus* for a number of important modern feminist debates concerning gender, sexuality, materialism, education, patriarchy, androgyny, subjectivity, the feminine sentence, the notion of 'Shakespeare's sister', the canon, the body, race, class, and so on. The title alone has had enormous impact as cultural shorthand for a modern feminist agenda. It is a very readable, and accessible, work, partly because of its playful fictional style; it introduces in this reader-friendly manner some complicated critical and theoretical issues. Many works of criticism, interpretation and theory have developed from Woolf's original points in *A Room of One's Own*. Bold type will be used to introduce the main concepts that derive from this work.

Woolf developed *A Room of One's Own* from two lectures given to Cambridge women students, and an essay version, on 'Women and Fiction'; and although much revised and expanded, the final version significantly retains the original's sense of a woman speaking to women. As part of her *experimental* fictional narrative strategy, Woolf uses shifting narrative personae to present her argument.

Writing 'I': feminist narrative strategies and subjectivity: Woolf anticipates recent theoretical concerns with the constitution of gender and subjectivity in language when she begins by declaring that '"I" is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being . . . (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please – it is not a matter of any importance)' (*AROO* 5). And *A Room of One's Own* is written in the voice of at least one of these Mary figures, who are to be found in the Scottish ballad 'The Four Marys'. She ventriloquises much of her argument

through the voice of her own 'Mary Beton'. In the course of the book, this Mary encounters new versions of the other Marys – Mary Seton has become a student at 'Fernham' college, and Mary Carmichael an aspiring novelist – and it has been suggested that Woolf's opening and closing remarks may be in the voice of Mary Hamilton (the narrator of the ballad). *A Room of One's Own* is full of quotations from other texts, too. It is collage-like and multivocal. The allusion to the Scottish ballad feeds a subtext in Woolf's argument concerning the suppression of the role of motherhood – Mary Hamilton sings the ballad from the gallows where she is to be hung for infanticide. (Marie Carmichael, furthermore, is the *nom de plume* of contraceptive activist Marie Stopes who published a novel, *Love's Creation*, in 1928.) All these different voices make it difficult to talk about *A Room of One's Own* or indeed any other work of literature as being produced by a solitary individual. The writing self seems to be constituted in a collective of selves.

Materialism: The main argument of *A Room of One's Own*, which was titled 'Women and Fiction' in earlier drafts, is that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (*AROO* 4). This is a materialist argument that seems to differ from her apparent disdain for the 'materialism' of the Edwardian novelists that she records in 'Modern Fiction' and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (see below). The narrator of *A Room of One's Own* begins by telling of her experience of visiting 'Oxbridge' university where she was refused access to the library because of her gender. She compares in some detail the splendid opulence of her lunch at a men's college with the austerity of her dinner at a more recently established women's college (Fernham). This account is the foundation for the book's main, materialist, argument: 'intellectual freedom depends upon material things' (*AROO* 141). The categorisation of middle-class women like herself with the working classes may seem problematic, but Woolf proposes, in *A Room of One's Own*, that women be understood as a separate class altogether. *A Room of One's Own* was published in the year after the full enfranchisement of women, ten years after the enfranchisement of working-class men along with middle-class, propertied women over thirty years of age.

Woolf puts forward, in *A Room of One's Own*, a sophisticated and much-quoted simile for the material basis of literary production when she begins to consider the apparent dearth of literature by women in the Elizabethan period:

> fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible; Shakespeare's plays, for instance, seem to hang there

> complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in. (*AROO* 62–3)

The passage offers a number of different ways of understanding literary materialism. Firstly, it suggests that writing itself is physically made, and not divinely given or unearthly and transcendent. Woolf seems to be attempting to demystify the solitary, romantic figure of the (male) poet or author as mystically singled out, or divinely elected. But the idea that a piece of writing is a material object is also connected to a strand of modernist aesthetics concerned with texts as self-reflexive objects, and to a more general sense of the materiality of the text, the concreteness of words, spoken or printed. Secondly, the passage suggests writing as bodily process. Thirdly, writing as 'the work of suffering human beings' suggests that literature is produced as compensation for, or in protest against, existential pain and material lack. Finally, moving from this general sense of connection with human lived experience to a more specific one, in proposing writing as 'attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in', Woolf is delineating a model of literature as grounded in the 'real world', that is, in the realms of historical, political and social experience.

Woman as reader: subjectivity and gender: After looking at the difference between men's and women's experiences of university, the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* visits the British Museum (also a significant location in *Jacob's Room*), where she researches 'Women and Poverty' under an edifice of patriarchal texts, concluding that women 'have served all these centuries as looking glasses . . . reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size' (*AROO* 45). Here Woolf touches upon the forced, subordinate, complicity of women in the construction of the patriarchal subject. Later in the book Woolf offers a more explicit model of this when she describes the difficulties for a woman reader encountering the first-person pronoun in the novels of 'Mr A': 'a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter "I". . . . Back one was always hailed to the letter "I". One began to tire of "I". . . . In the shadow of the letter "I" all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No it is a woman' (*AROO* 130). For a man to write 'I' seems to involve the displacement of a woman in its shadow, as if women are not included as writers or users of the first-person singular in language. This displacement of the feminine in the representation and construction of subjectivity not only emphasises the alienation experienced by women readers of

male-authored texts but also suggests the linguistic difficulties for women writers in trying to express feminine subjectivity when the language they have to work with seems to have already excluded them. When the word 'I' appears, the argument goes, it is always and already signifying a masculine self.

Women in history and woman as sign: The narrator of *A Room of One's Own* discovers that language, and specifically literary language, is not only capable of excluding women as its signified meaning, but also uses concepts of the feminine itself as signs. Woolf's narrator points out that there is a significant discrepancy between women in the real world and 'woman' in the symbolic order:

> Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (*AROO* 56)

Woolf here emphasises not only the relatively sparse representation of women's experience in historical records, but also the more complicated business of how the feminine is already caught up in the conventions of representation itself; how women may be represented at all when 'woman', in poetry and fiction, is already a sign, that is, a signifier in patriarchal discourse, functioning as part of the symbolic order: 'It was certainly an odd monster that one made up by reading the historians first and the poets afterwards – a worm winged like an eagle; the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping suet. But these monsters, however amusing to the imagination, have no existence in fact' (*AROO* 56).

Woolf converts this dual image to a positive emblem for a feminist writing:

> What one must do to bring her to life was to think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment, thus keeping in touch with fact – that she is Mrs Martin, aged thirty-six, dressed in blue, wearing a black hat and brown shoes; but not losing sight of fiction either – that she is a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually. (*AROO* 56–7)

This dualistic model, contrasting prose and poetry, is of central importance to Woolf's modernist aesthetic, encapsulated in the term 'granite and rainbow'.

Androgyny: *A Room of One's Own* can be confusing because it puts forward contradictory sets of arguments. An important example is in her much-cited passage on androgyny. Woolf's narrator declares that 'it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex' (*AROO* 136), and a model of writerly androgyny is put forward, derived from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's work:

> It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilized. . . . Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be accomplished. (*AROO* 136)

William Shakespeare, the poet-playwright, is Woolf's ideal androgynous writer. She lists others – all men – who have also achieved androgyny: John Keats, Lawrence Sterne, William Cowper, Charles Lamb, and Marcel Proust (the only contemporary). But if the ideal is for both women and men writers to achieve androgyny, elsewhere *A Room of One's Own* puts the case for finding a language that is gendered – one appropriate for women to use when writing about women.

Gendered sentences: *A Room of One's Own* culminates in the prophesy of a woman poet to equal or rival Shakespeare – 'Shakespeare's sister'. But in collectively preparing for her appearance, women writers need to develop in several respects. In predicting that the aspiring novelist, Mary Carmichael, 'will be a poet . . . in another hundred years' time' (*AROO* 123), Mary Beton seems to be suggesting that prose must be explored and exploited in certain ways by women writers before they can be poets. She also finds fault with contemporary male writers – such as Mr A, who is 'protesting against the equality of the other sex by asserting his own superiority' (*AROO* 132). She sees this as the direct result of women's political agitation for equality: 'The Suffrage campaign was no doubt to blame' (*AROO* 129). She raises further concerns about politics and aesthetics when she comments on the aspirations of the Italian fascists for a poet worthy of fascism: 'We may well join in that pious hope, but it is doubtful whether poetry can come out of an incubator. Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father. The Fascist poem, one may fear, will be a horrid little abortion such as one sees in a glass jar in the museum of some county town' (*AROO* 134). Yet if the extreme patriarchy of fascism cannot produce poetry because it denies a maternal line, Woolf argues that women cannot write poetry either until

the historical canon of women's writing has been uncovered and acknowledged. Nineteenth-century women writers experienced great difficulty because they lacked a female tradition: 'For we think back through our mothers if we are women' (*AROO* 99). They therefore lacked literary tools suitable for expressing women's experience. The dominant sentence at the start of the nineteenth century was 'a man's sentence . . . It was a sentence that was unsuited for women's use' (*AROO* 99–100).

Woolf's assertion here, through Mary Beton, that women must write in gendered sentence structure – that is, develop a feminine syntax – and that 'the book has somehow to be adapted to the body' (*AROO* 101) seems to contradict the declaration that 'it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex'. She identifies the novel as 'young enough' to be of use to the woman writer:

> No doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and providing some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her. For it is the poetry that is still the denied outlet. And I went on to ponder how a woman nowadays would write a poetic tragedy in five acts. Would she use verse? – would she not use prose rather? (*AROO* 100–1)

Now the goal of *A Room of One's Own* has shifted from women's writing of fictional prose to poetry.

Chloe likes Olivia: So *A Room of One's Own* is concerned with what form of literary language women writers use and also what they write about. The assertion of woman as both the writing subject and the object of writing is reinforced in several places: 'above all, you must illumine your own soul' (*AROO* 117), Mary Beton advises. The 'obscure lives' (*AROO* 116) of women must be recorded by women. The example supplied is Mary Carmichael's novel, which is described as exploring women's relationships with each other. *A Room of One's Own* was published shortly after the obscenity trial provoked by Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), and Woolf flaunts in the face of this a blatantly lesbian narrative: 'if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been' (*AROO* 109). Her refrain, 'Chloe likes Olivia', has become a critical slogan for lesbian writing. In *A Room of One's Own*, she calls for women's writing to explore lesbianism more openly and for the narrative tools to make this possible.

The 'fine negress': One of the most controversial and contradictory passages in *A Room of One's Own* concerns Woolf's positioning of black women. Commenting on the sexual and colonial appetites of men, the

narrator concludes: 'It is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her' (*AROO* 65). In seeking to distance women from colonial practices, Woolf disturbingly excludes black women here from the very category of women. This has become the crux of much contemporary feminist debate concerning the politics of identity. The category of women both unites and divides feminists: white middle-class feminists, it has been shown, cannot speak for the experience of all women; and reconciliation of universalism and difference remains a key issue. 'Women – but are you not sick to death of the word?' Woolf retorts in the closing pages of *A Room of One's Own*. 'I can assure you I am' (*AROO* 145). The category of women is not chosen by women, it represents the space in patriarchy from which women must speak and which they struggle to redefine.

Shakespeare's sister: Another contradictory concept in *A Room of One's Own* is 'Shakespeare's sister', that is, the possibility that there will be a woman writer to match the status of Shakespeare, who has come to personify literature itself. 'Judith Shakespeare' stands for the silenced woman writer or artist. But to seek to mimic *the* model of the individual masculine writing subject may also be considered part of a conservative feminist agenda. On the other hand, Woolf seems to defer the arrival of Shakespeare's sister in a celebration of women's collective literary achievement 'I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals' (*AROO* 148–9). Shakespeare's sister is a messianic figure who 'lives in you and in me' (*AROO* 148) and who will draw 'her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners' (*AROO* 149), but has yet to appear. She may be the common writer to Woolf's 'common reader' (a term she borrows from Samuel Johnson), but she has yet to 'put on the body which she has so often laid down' (*AROO* 149). *A Room of One's Own* closes with this contradictory model of individual achievement and collective effort. The sense of a collective authorial voice, here, in the preparations for the coming of Shakespeare's sister, is implicit in the very multivocal narrative of *A Room of One's Own*.

Suggested further reading

Michèle Barrett, 'Introduction', in Barrett (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing* (London: Women's Press, 1979)

Jane Marcus, 'A Very Fine Negress', in Marcus, *Hearts of Darkness: White Women Write Race* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004)

Toril Moi, 'Introduction', in Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985)