A Room of One's Own

What’s in it for me? A powerful look at feminist ideals.

What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art? This is the driving question that moved Virginia Woolf to write A Room of One’s Own – a touchstone work of the feminist canon. These blinks unpack the central arguments within this perceptive and prescient essay on the complex links among gender, society, and individual achievement. You’ll learn how social, economic, and political forces conspire to hold back female artists from attaining their full potential. You’ll also hear how women have been able to overcome these barriers, and how societies can help empower more women in the future. In these blinks, you’ll learn

what it would be like to be Shakespeare’s sister; why fascists make bad art; and how one acquires an androgynous mind.

To achieve artistic greatness, a woman needs money and space.

It was a crisp fall day in the late 1920s, and the novelist Virginia Woolf was strolling along a river that ran through a picturesque college campus. As she lolled in the grass, she became lost in thought. Deep in this intellectual reverie, she felt on the verge of a sharp insight – until, suddenly, a man interrupted her peaceful introspection. The interloper informed Woolf that the riverbank lawn was reserved for scholars at the university and that she must move along. Slightly miffed, she returned to the walking path. Unfortunately, the disruption ruined her train of thought – her insight, whatever it was, was lost for good. Yet the scene brought her to another thought – this one on the relationship between gender and creativity. The key message here is: To achieve artistic greatness, a woman needs money and space. After the mildly unpleasant encounter on the riverbank, Woolf continued to muse on the barriers keeping women from artistic pursuits. She was struck by the way in which, both historically and in her own day, women were excluded from many academic and cultural institutions. For instance, the nearby library held original copies of works by Milton and Thackeray. Woolf would have loved to see them, but she was barred from entry without a male scholar to accompany her. Continuing her walk around the college grounds, Woolf marveled at the impressive architecture of the university buildings. She ruminated on how these massive structures represented centuries of accumulated time, money, and effort. The institution had been founded by kings, funded by merchants and magnates, and built by countless laborers. Now, all of those concentrated resources were available almost exclusively to men. Later in the day, Woolf attended a lavish luncheon with a few fellow intellectuals. While most busied themselves gabbing about gossip and poetry, Woolf continued thinking about social exclusion. She talked to her friend Mary Seton about the local women’s college. While the men’s university was well-funded, the women’s college was just scraping by. It had barely managed to be founded in the first place – and now had to hold fundraisers to continue offering classes. All this reflection wore on Woolf. She saw that men were often afforded luxurious accommodations for their intellectual pursuits, while women had to struggle with economic insecurity and social precarity. She wondered how these disparate conditions affected the creative output of the respective

genders. What could women achieve if they were given the same privileges as their male colleagues?

Men use their power to elevate their own gender over women.

Take a stroll down to the British Library. This venerable institution holds vast archives of books, pamphlets, indexes, and encyclopedias. Surely this massive collection includes all important facts and truths. So, to uncover why women and men are treated so differently in society, this is where Woolf began her research. As the novelist perused the library's shelves, she found an odd imbalance. The library's stacks held thousands and thousands of books about women. There were books on their biology, their temperament, their psychology, and their history – and, of course, they were all written by men. Yet, curiously, there were no corresponding publications about men written by women. It seems that in the Western imagination, women are always the object of scrutiny – but are never allowed to be the objective scrutinizers. Here's the key message: Men use their power to elevate their own gender over women. While Woolf was disappointed at the glaring gender gap in the library's collection, she nonetheless spent the morning flipping through various books on women. She found that men held all manner of ideas and opinions about women. Some disparaged women as dim, childlike, and incapable of learning, while others elevated women as mystical, unearthly goddess figures. None of these extreme notions seemed particularly nuanced or correct. Woolf was especially struck by a thick volume by an esteemed professor, titled The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex. The premise was so ridiculous and laughable that Woolf was driven to imagine the man behind the words. She surmised that he was likely a homely and brutish man with sagging jowls and a deep inferiority complex. She guessed that he had been scorned by women in the past, and this work was his petty revenge. Still, even a pathetic figure like that professor had a more enviable place in the world than most women. Woolf flipped through the newspaper and noted how every headline concerned the actions of men. Men ran governments, brokered the business deals, and had their sports covered in rhapsodic detail. To any visitor from another planet, their structural power over women would have been completely obvious. Given this disparity, it struck Woolf as odd that men were so invested in denigrating women and their work. She hypothesized that this impulse was rooted in men's insecurity and their desire to affirm their status in the world. She imagined that a man must feel assured that he could walk into any room convinced that he was better than half its occupants. Woolf wondered how many women's accomplishments had been diminished by this mindset.

Throughout history, society has kept gifted women from applying their talents.

The plays of William Shakespeare are truly wondrous things. The language of these timeless texts is so fluid and poetic that each scene and monologue seems pulled straight from the ether, as if by magic. Yet Shakespeare wasn't the only one producing artistic masterworks at the time. All across Elizabethan England, men were penning

gripping plays, beautiful sonnets, and sweet songs. In contrast, few words from women were recorded during this era. So what explains this disparity? Did women lack some magic spark of genius that only men possessed? Of course not. They did, however, suffer a scarcity of opportunity. Without the same education, money, or encouragement, their genius could never bloom. The key message is this: Throughout history, society has kept gifted women from applying their talents. Study history and the history of fiction, and a strange disconnect emerges. The literary canon, for all its faults, is stacked with compelling female characters. From the ancient Greek heroines like Antigone to Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth to the nineteenth century's Anna Karenina, there are plenty of leading women. However, in actual history books, women play a minor role. So why are women so important artistically but so sidelined practically? Well, for one, women have rarely been given the same autonomy as men. Even in the relatively recent era of Elizabethan England, women were scarcely educated. Instead, they were married off early – often against their will or wishes – and expected to bide their time having children and keeping to domestic duties. How could one write, given such little control? To explore this idea, Woolf imagined that Shakespeare had a talented sister, Judith. What would her life have been like? She would have had to teach herself to read and write between chores like cooking and cleaning. Even then, her works would have been made in private. Her father would surely have disapproved of her artistic pursuits. To truly follow her dreams, she'd have had to run away from home – a dire prospect for a young woman, especially in the sixteenth century. So it seems the fictitious Judith Shakespeare would likely never have had the chance to flourish. Many talented women who actually existed were also never given the chance to express themselves. Such stifling conditions surely drove many into mental distress or even to suicide. Moreover, because so few women were able to succeed as artists, other gifted girls had few role models to look up to. It's a shame; think of all the potential masterpieces that were never allowed to make it.

Even successful women writers are still constrained by social realities.

Meet Lady Winchilsea. Born in 1661 to a noble family, Winchilsea was one of the relatively few seventeenth-century women with enough education and material resources to spend her days writing poetry. Unfortunately, her passion was not taken seriously. Others in the lady's aristocratic clique considered her hobby peculiar. They deemed her to be strange and melancholic for spending time alone at her desk. The social ostracism she experienced left her bitter, and the hostility soured her work. In one poem, she reflected on her struggle, writing, "My lines decried, and my employment thought, / An useless folly or presumptuous fault." Clearly, even with her status and resources, Lady Winchilsea still felt artistically constrained. Today, women writers are taken more seriously, but social conditions still shape their work. The key message here is: Even successful women writers are still constrained by social realities. Lady Winchilsea wasn't the first woman to write creatively – and she was far from the last. In fact, while she worked through her anger in poetry, another writer was paving the way for women to be successful wordsmiths. Her name was Aphra Behn. Behn, somewhat miraculously, earned a living writing plays and novels. Her rare success showed writing could be profitable for women – and with profit came respectability. With Behn as a model, more and more women could take up their pens in the pursuit of artistic expression. By the nineteenth century, women like Jane Austen, George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters could apply themselves to writing classic novels. Of course, it

helped that all of these literary luminaries shared a few traits. Each was lucky enough to have had a reasonably financially stable upbringing. Perhaps more importantly, none had children to take care of. And the Brontës and Eliot published under male pseudonyms – Eliot's real name was Mary Ann Evans. But did external realities still affect their work? Of course. All these women wrote novels. Woolf remarked that this format was the easiest to write between bouts of housework and other distractions. While Emily Brontë clearly leaned more toward poetry and Eliot toward history, both settled primarily on literary fiction, which better suited their circumstances. Their social conditions also shaped the content of their work. During this time, men were allowed to venture out and explore the world. Writers like Tolstoy could mine their adventurous lives for inspiration. Meanwhile, women lived a more circumscribed existence. Their novels thus necessarily dealt with more mundane and domestic concerns. Of course, they made these familiar topics enthralling – but consider what else they could have written with more freedom.

Contemporary women can use fiction to break new artistic ground.

Let's now turn from the past to the modern era of the late 1920s. Browse a contemporary bookshelf, and you'd be pleasantly surprised. Shelved among the male authors are just as many, or nearly as many, books by women. Better still, their content is wildly diverse. You can find a book on Greek archeology by Jane Harrison; Vernon Lee's writing on art and aesthetics; and Gertrude Bell recounting the history of Persia. There's a plethora of fiction as well – romances, fantasy stories, and novels grounded in gritty realism. So what can we say about women's writing of that era? Well, there's only one way to find out. Let's crack open a random title and have a look. Here, this one seems interesting – it's called Life's Adventure, by Mary Carmichael. Here's the key message: Contemporary women can use fiction to break new artistic ground. Woolf felt that the only way to read fiction was to treat each work as the latest installment in a longer literary history. So, when reading Mary Carmichael's debut novel, she compared the work to texts of the past. In this light, Life's Adventure presented a few interesting departures. For one, Carmichael's prose is snappier and more terse than those of predecessors like Austen or Brontë. But this stylistic choice is only the beginning. Woolf was immediately struck by a simple sentence: "Chloe liked Olivia." This short phrase opened a whole new world of possibility. Previously, nuanced and amicable relationships between women had rarely been depicted. Women were always written as mutually antagonistic, or rendered purely through their relationships with men. By focusing on a working relationship between two women, Carmichael was already pushing literature in new directions. It's also notable that Chloe and Olivia are not merely friends, but colleagues. They work together as scientists in a laboratory. Here again, Carmichael was exploring new territory. Modern women's fiction was no longer confined to the perfumed parlors of upper-class protagonists. Women were now writing about a broader range of experiences, from workers to courtesans, and giving them more detail and distinction than male writers ever had. And there was more to explore. For one thing, women could train their pens directly at men. For, just as it's impossible to see the back of one's head, it's difficult for men to write about themselves with complete accuracy. Woolf felt that if women could set aside lingering animosity to trace male characters with care, they would produce works that offered stunning new insights into the opposite sex as well.

The best artists are able to think beyond categories like gender.

Imagine you're gazing out your window on a cool London morning. Below you, the streets are full of activity. People bustle up and down the sidewalk, attending to shopping, social events, and business meetings. No one, it seems, is thinking too much about art, creativity, or the future of fiction. And now here come two pedestrians, a man and a woman. They meet at the street corner, hail a cab, and depart together to destinations unknown. Their interaction is fluid and beautiful in its simplicity. The pair work together. They cooperate as one in a completely unselfconscious manner. This scene awakens something in you. Maybe our social categories of "man" and "woman" do more harm than good. Maybe artists are at their best when they operate beyond such strict binary thinking. The key message is this: The best artists are able to think beyond categories like gender. The human mind is wonderfully inventive and flexible. It produces our own rich and detailed internal monologues, but it's capable of so much more. It can empathize with others; see the world from new points of view; and imagine thoughts, feelings, and experiences beyond its own. Tapping into this power makes space for truly creative thinking. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge forged the concept of the "androgynous mind." This is a mind that works beyond the simple binary of male and female. It sees the world from both male and female perspectives, and it finds artistic avenues that don't strictly adhere to either sex at all. Woolf surmises that the best writers throughout history have had androgynous minds. Of course, the world of the late 1920s was very conscious of gender. In particular, men felt threatened by women exerting themselves politically – popular animosity against the women's suffrage movement is a prime example. Many men sought to protect masculinity by retreating into a self-consciously masculine ideal. This not only produced bad art, but also fed dangerous, hypermasculine political movements such as Facism in Italy. Woolf imagined a better world – one in which women and men alike can pursue their goals, artistic or otherwise, without their identities being refracted through the prism of gender. She asserted that artists should not worry themselves with ranking the relative merits of the sexes, but should instead focus on relating to reality as a whole. She felt that this mindset, along with material resources, was the best path to producing great art.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: For millennia, women were prevented from pursuing independent artistic and creative lives. This was largely because most societies have traditionally been structured to give material support – such as money, education, and free time – almost exclusively to men. For women to succeed as artists, they need steady incomes and rooms of their own in which to work. Hopefully, in the future, both sexes will have such luxury, and everyone will be able to work creatively without their endeavors being shaped through the lens of gender and gender disparities.