* This document is an essay that I wrote for an English class at UCLA, discussing a scene out of Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own.*

An Analysis of the Taxi Scene in *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf

In her essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that in order for women to produce quality writing, they need a room of their own and money to support themselves. To support this, she examines why a room of one's own and sufficient funds enable one to produce quality writing, and makes the point that these two requirements enable one to think with unity of the mind. She further defines a unified mind to be one that does not see the sexes as separate entities, a mind that acknowledges both sexes inhabit everyone to varying degrees; to her, the unified mind, the mind capable of producing great work, is androgynous. In prefacing her claim, Woolf shares a view of the London streets, a view characterized by two distinct scenes. At first, she observes the chaos of private people in a closed-off London—then, she shifts to a peculiar scene of a man and woman, unidentified and seemingly suspended in time, getting into a taxi-cab and floating down the streets. While at first these scenes may seem inconsequential to supporting her argument promoting the androgynous mind, if one considers the disparities in tone and sentence structure between the two scenes, it's evident that her two separate portrayals of London are reflections of Woolf's attitudes toward the respective private and androgynous minds. The initial scene of London is described with chaos, and Woolf's writing in this section embodies this, fraught with unpleasant words and jarring structure, a byproduct of how Woolf feels about the confidential, divided, industrial way of life in London. In contrast, Woolf renders the succeeding taxi-cab scene as an ethereal sight, characterizing it with pleasant words and

cascading sentences, as if simply talking about the androgynous mind puts Woolf in an agreeable state. This idyllic way in which Woolf describes the taxi-cab scene, paired with its unified sentences, opposes the disdainful, syntactically difficult translation of the private London scene, implicitly making the case for her upcoming explicit claim regarding the necessity of an androgynous mind. This structural foreshadowing in the essay is thus an important rhetorical strategy for Woolf, as it demonstrates the effectiveness of form to preface an argument and emotionally invest a reader.

As Woolf describes London and its people from her window, her observation of the private way these people live is markedly negative, cluing readers as to why she is against a private way of thinking. She notes that of these people, “each seems bound on some private affair of his own,” and their movement is characterized by, “the nonchalance of hurrying feet,” with pauses to, “avoid collision” (Woolf 95). Eschewing a romanticized view of London’s energy, Woolf is focused on the people's inattentiveness. Rather than feeling excitement stemming from the people working below her, all she can comment on is the way each person avoids interaction in pursuit of their own private life, the segregation between the different sexes this creates, and the resultant bleakness. For instance, her characterization of the interaction between the "distinguished gentleman” and “bustling lady” as an "avoided collision" rather than, perhaps, a “chance meeting," exposes the negativity she associates with a private society and the disunity of the sexes. Or, that she chooses to describe the hurrying feet as “nonchalant” rather than “eager” reveals disdain for this rushed way of life that she sees. In full, Woolf creates an atmosphere in which everyone, man and woman, is for themselves and thus missing out on each other: an atmosphere of loneliness.

The atmosphere is then furthered in the descriptions of the people themselves, for instead of honing in on the physical characteristics, emotional expressions, or abstract qualities unique to the people, Woolf merely classifies them by their occupations. She writes of, "the business-like… the drifters… [and] hailing men in carts giving information without being asked for it" (Woolf 95-96). Through referring to in this way, rather than acknowledging their distinct qualities, each person becomes rather inhuman, a mere completer of tasks. That the first and most identifiable thing to her about the people below is their job demonstrates the extent to which their work consumes and defines them. It also reveals the mindset that Woolf herself is in, one accustomed to such superficial categorization. Not only is the private chaos of London isolating and drab, but it causes its people, Woolf included, to become judgemental. From here, this scene and its accompanying written style, to be discussed later, reflect what Woolf intends to eventually reject in the essay.

This assertion is made possible by the fact that the chaotic portrayal of London is set adjacent to the previously mentioned taxi-cab sequence. The positioning is important, as the drastic change in tone and syntax going into the new scene becomes more apparent—Woolf prompts the reader to see something new in this scene, namely, the androgynous harmony of the sexes. To introduce this scene, she writes, "At this moment, as so often happens in London, there was a complete lull and suspension of traffic. Nothing came down the street; nobody passed," and she proceeds to envision a river that, "was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather booth, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxi-cab; and it brought all three together" (Woolf 96). Compared to the previous scene, this moment is peaceful and almost dreamlike, with people, importantly a man and a

woman, coming together in the same space. Rather than “avoiding collision” as the man and woman do in the previous scene, the man and woman here occupy the same space, despite not necessarily knowing each other. In addition to this, Woolf uses nothing more to describe the man and woman than their respective genders and their relatively androgynous clothing, vague descriptions, especially if one takes into account the comparatively specific occupational descriptions in the previous scene. This general way of describing the two people adds to the dreamlike state of the scene, and forms the association with the androgynous mindset Woolf later advocates for. Woolf sees the cooperation of humanity as people sharing a collective being instead of living as private individuals, a space that is welcoming rather than aloof.

It is also of note how this scene takes place in the same London square, and is looked onto by the narrator through the same window as the chaotic scene, as opposed to it taking place in a different location, or looked onto from a different vantage point. If it were different, the harmony achieved in this latter taxi-cab scene could potentially be attributed to a change in location, but by maintaining the same vantage point, Woolf reimagines what London, and that particular area of London, could be purely by consequence of an androgynous mindset. This idea that the chaos outside her window could be turned into the pleasant image of a man and woman hopping into a taxi and floating down a river offers a rather positive outlook: Woolf chooses to believe that this space, and the humanity in it, can change, instead of losing hope. It's a testament to the power Woolf believes that the androgynous mindset holds; her pleasant reimagining of the city is a direct consequence of her thinking in the androgynous mindset, and writing with this mindset puts her in a headspace that leads her to better characterize her later points.

Along with the subject matter making a distinction between the two scenes, the formal structure of the sentences also aids the formulation of Woolf's argument. The sentences in the first scene are marked with uncomfortable repetition and jarred beginnings, each helping to produce the chaos Woolf associates with private life. In the descriptions of people here, she lists that, “There were the business-like, with their little bags; there were the drifters rattling sticks upon area railings; there were affable characters…” (Woolf 95). Here, she keeps repeating the word “there,” not listing the different people with commas, but rather giving each person their own independent clause; it creates an effect of isolation, and separates everyone in the scene instead of uniting them. If she were to have used commas, there might be a semblance of unification between subjects, but the rigid semi-colons mirror the barriers each subject of her view have built around themselves, evidenced by the absence of communication. It gives off the sensation of a blur, as if she, from the window, is unable to capture everyone in the same plane of vision, instead resorting to multiple turns of the head to capture the scene. That everyone can occupy the same space yet need their own plane of her vision, their own clause in the essay, disorients one who wishes to view them or even read about them, and supports Woolf’s claim against the private, non-androgynous mindset. Additionally, from a grammatical perspective, one reading the passage is disenchanted as well, for there is no pattern or seeming resolution. Woolf resorts to making distracted chains of sentences, one being, “Also there were funerals to which men, thus suddenly reminded of the passing of their own bodies, lifted their hats. And then a very distinguished gentleman came slowly down a doorstep and paused to avoid collision with a bustling lady…" (Woolf 96). It is as though she is unable to contain everything into one coherent

point—not only is the scene chaotic, but the reading of it is too, and discomfort, whether visual or syntactical, becomes associated with the private, uncooperative mindset.

However, as Woolf transitions to the taxi-cab scene, a major factor in this scene being the mysterious presence of a river, the sentences begin to flow, a welcome change from the disjointedness of the previous scene: the pleasant reading becomes associated with the subject matter of unified people and the androgynous mind. While describing the taxi's path, Woolf writes, “It seemed to point to a river, which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along, as the stream at Oxbridge had taken the undergraduate in his boat and the dead leaves” (Woolf 96). In divergence from the closed-off, semicolon riddled depictions of the private city-scape, this sentence ferries each point being made in a cohesive unit, much like the river contained within the very sentence does with the man, woman, and other people. Commas, rather than semicolons, dictate the flow of the sentences; rather than entirely separate clauses and views, the scene meanders and flows, a logical progression rather than a torrent of sights. This congruence reads agreeably, is easily understood, and therefore makes sense, just like how Woolf later on sees an androgynous mindset as making the most sense. The structure once again mirrors the content, and helps Woolf in advocating for her point.

Woolf supports an androgynous mind in a writer, or more specifically, a mind that embodies all genders in its sphere. She pays special attention to the syntax in the sentences used to describe two environments that she feels reflect the two mindsets, the aforementioned androgynous mind and conversely, the non-androgynous, private mind. The private chaos of London is marked with disconcerting sentences, while her androgynous, unified vision of the

same London is characterized with flowing sentences. Furthermore, her tone shifts when describing these two scenes, demonstrative of the different effects on the mind reading about and seeing different environments can have. Through these factors, Woolf is able to properly preface and make compelling her following argument for the cooperation of the sexes, engaging multiple layers, ranging from style to structure to emotion.