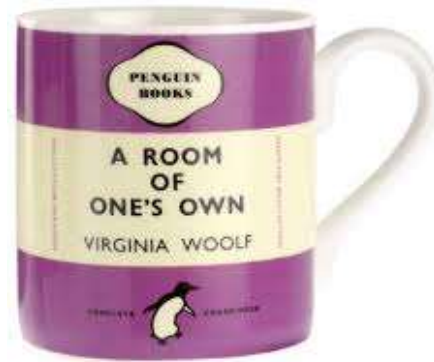


Vanguard Feminism: Virginia Woolf & *A Room of One's Own*

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Why Woolf?

- gender, literature, theory → anticipates central concerns of this course: identity, similarity, difference, authorship, patriarchy, aesthetics
- canonical text < feminist literary criticism
- chronology: “the first modern text of feminist criticism” (Jane Marcus)?
- complex, multi-layered text

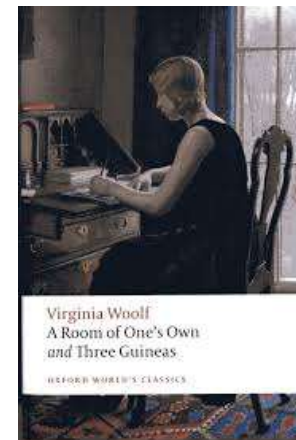
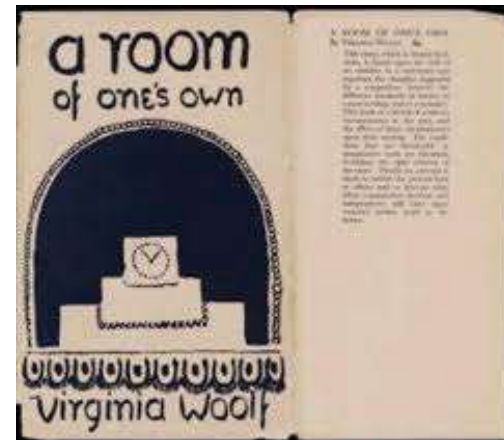
Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

- *The Voyage Out* (1915)
- *Kew Gardens* (1919)
- *Modern Fiction* (1919)
- *Night and Day* (1919)
- *Jacob's Room* (1922)
- *Monday or Tuesday* (1921)
- *The Common Reader* (1925)
- *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)
- *To the Lighthouse* (1927)
- *Orlando* (1928)
- [*A Room of One's Own*](#) (1929)
- *The Waves* (1931)
- *The Years* (1937)
- *Three Guineas* (1938)
- *Between the Acts* (1941)



A Room of One's Own

- Based on lectures delivered at Newham college and Girton college in 1928;
- Incorporates essay entitled “Women and Fiction”, published in *Forum* March, 1929.
- first published on 24 Oct 1929 by the Hogarth Press in England, and by Harcourt Brace & Co. in the United States.
- now often published together with *Three Guineas*



Woolf on *A Room of One's Own*

"I forecast, then, that I shall get no criticism, except of the evasive jocular kind ... that the press will be kind & talk of its charm, & sprightliness; also I shall be attacked for a feminist & hinted at for a sapphist ... I shall get a good many letters from young women. I am afraid it will not be taken seriously. ... It is a trifle, I shall say; so it is, but I wrote it with ardour and conviction. ... You feel the creature arching its back & galloping on, though as usual much is watery & flimsy & pitched in too high a voice." (diaries, 1929)

"I wanted to encourage the young women - they seem to get fearfully depressed." (letter to Lowes Dickinson)

Contemporary reception

“I learned for the first time, and with surprise, that the problems of ‘a woman writer’ were supposed to be different from the problems of a man who writes; that the problem is not one of writing but of living in such a way as to be able to write. *A Room of One’s Own* made claims on life far beyond mine: a room and a small unearned income were, to me, luxuries unimaginable.” (Kathleen Raine, undergraduate at Girton)

Contemporary reception

“What Mrs Woolf has traced, of course, are the reasons for the very limited achievements among women novelists through the centuries. Why did they fail? They failed because they were not financially independent; they failed because they were not intellectually free; they failed because they were denied the fullest worldly experience.” (*The New York Times*, 10 November 1929)

A Room of One's Own: Chapter 1

- “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”
- “what effect poverty has on the mind, what effect wealth has on the mind”
- “how unpleasant it is to be locked out ... how worse perhaps to be locked in”

“

*Lock up your libraries if you like;
but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt
that you can set upon
the freedom of my mind.*

Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

A Room of One's Own: Chapter 2

(Angry) books about women

→ Women as objects of male theories (difference)

→ Women as 2nd class citizens under patriarchy (otherness, inferiority)

“Women have served all these centuries acted as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size”

→ Women's complicity in patriarchy, in the construction of the male, patriarchal subject

→ Because dependent?

A Room of One's Own: Chapter 3

“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.”

Materialist argument

- Materiality of writing >< transcendent romantic poet
- Writing is a bodily process
- Literature grounded in real world (society, history, politics)



woman in literature >< woman in reality

A Room of One's Own: Chapter 3

“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”

- Discrepancy between women in the real world and “woman” in the symbolic order.
- Representation of feminine in literature and language
- “Woman” as signifier in patriarchal discourse

A Room of One's Own: Chapter 4

Lack of “**greatness**” among women writers?

1. material obstacles
2. Ideological restrictions
3. problem of tradition:

no writing?
distorted writing?

“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.”

“we think back through our mothers if we are women”

ANGER?!

A Room of One's Own: Chapter 4

4. Yet another explanation for “lack of greatness” among women writers:

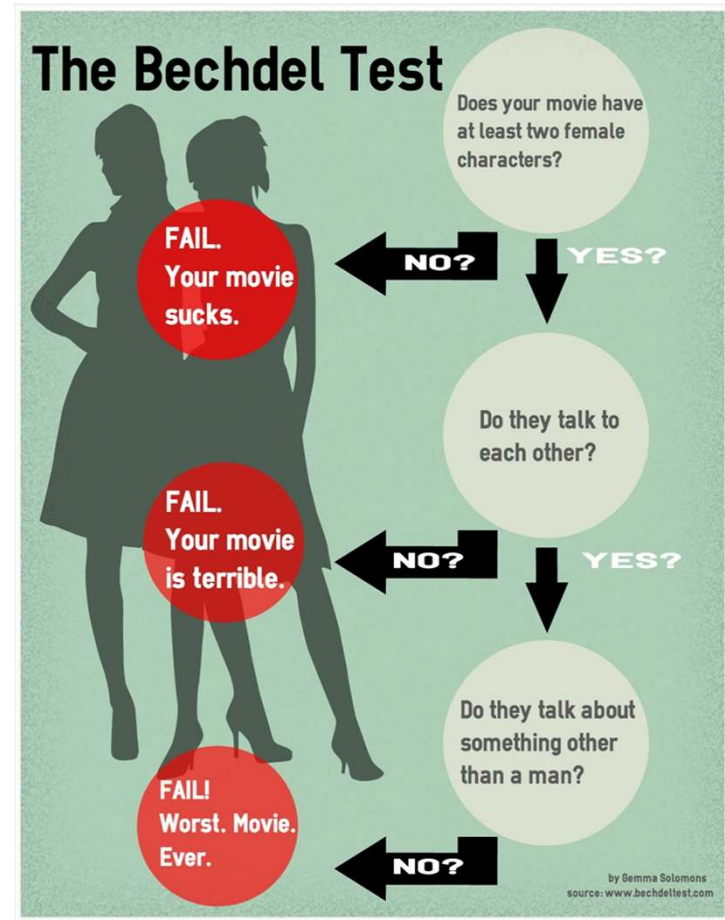
“It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are important; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes trivial... This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of the drawing room.”

“the whole structure of the early-nineteenth century novel was raised, if one was a woman, by a mind which was slightly pulled from the straight, and made to alter its clear vision in difference to external authority”; “altered her values in deference to others”

A Room of One's Own: Chapter 5

Contemporary women's writing

"It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex [...] Suppose that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women..."



A Room of One's Own: Chapter 5

“one has only to go into any **room** in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one’s face. [...] It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only? Ought not education to bring out and fortify the **differences** rather than the similarities? For we have too much likeness as it is, and if an explorer should come back and bring word of other sexes looking through the branches of other trees at other skies, nothing would be of greater service to humanity; and we should have the immense pleasure into the bargain of watching Professor X rush for his measuring-rods to prove himself ‘superior’”

A Room of One's Own: Chapter 6

Androgyny?

“it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex [...] 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 . . . 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.”



Materialist argument? Difference argument?

female writing? “book has to somehow to be adapted to the body”

feminine writing? “man’s sentence [...]unsuited for women’s use”

writing about women: “above all, you must illumine your own soul”