

Virginia woolf and a
room of one's own:
writing from the
female perspective



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Virginia Woolf's ambitious work *A Room of One's Own* tackles many significant issues concerning the history and culture of women's writing, and attempts to document the conditions which women have had to endure in order to write, juxtaposing these with her vision of ideal conditions for the creation of literature. Woolf's extended essay has endured and proved itself to be a viable, pioneering feminist piece of work, but the broad range of ideas and arguments Woolf explores leaves her piece open to criticism over certain concepts which seem to contradict themselves. This observation can be explained most satisfactorily by critic Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, who posits, "the essay does not strive for the strict coherence of a jigsaw puzzle, composed of perfectly interlocking pieces in which no gaps exist and there is nothing left over...Woolf's essay has proved so durable because it often contradicts itself"(13). Woolf puts forth the notion in the end of her essay that the "androgynous mind" is to be the apotheosis of all the perspectives of writing; yet this belief she conveys contradicts not only previous evidence she has expressed but also diminishes the value of the female as a significant contributor to the world of literature, and discredits woman's ability to write as she is attempting to praise and inspire us. Virginia Woolf uses *A Room of One's Own* as a platform to discuss past and current social inequities that exist within the realm of women and literature, attempting to document the negative effects that patriarchal society of the early twentieth century England has wrought upon the female psyche. From her analysis of these issues and her own life experiences, Woolf comes to the conclusion which becomes the basis for this essay, stating, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction"(2154). Taken at face value, this statement seems rather uncontroversial and quite obvious.

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However, this supposition of Woolf's is based less on the physical environment, and more on the psychological changes she hopes to induce in allowing women the freedom of these two possessions. Woolf's essay hinges on the fact that women at this point in time are oppressed, abused, disallowed to work in certain areas and in general have not gained the respect of their male counterparts as intellectuals and authors; these injustices produce in a woman a certain bitterness and skeptical quality which distorts her view of the world and its possibilities. This argument is illustrated when Woolf discusses the obstacles which women authors such as Jane Austen have battled, relating, "What genius, what integrity must it have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking"(2193). She reserves the highest praise for Austen for her ability to compartmentalize her anger and bitterness over the circumstances that both her sex and the opposite have imposed upon her. Of course Woolf does not believe she is admiring Austen for this quality, but rather for her complete lack of rage in the first place. She muses over this idea, noting "perhaps it was the nature of Jane Austen not to want what she had not. Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely. But I doubt whether that was true of Charlotte Bronte..."(2189). It is a wonderful quality of Jane Austen that she is able to rise above the prejudice that has been inflicted upon her and all women for that matter, but is that ability the only path to meaningful writing? Does Woolf really mean to say that the writing of Jane Austen is better than Charlotte Bronte merely because this female perspective is somehow obscured, subtler than in Bronte's works? Rosenman illuminates this quandary when she relates, "How do we judge the works of the women <https://assignbuster.com/virginia-woolf-and-a-room-of-ones-own-writing-from-the-female-perspective/>

writers Woolf discusses, almost all of whom express anger at their plight? Are they all “doomed to death,” unable to “grow in the minds of others” as Woolf claims? Has only Jane Austen survived?”(105) As Woolf praises Austen, she discredits women who strive to write from their perspective, to document faithfully their ‘plight’, to reflect life as they know it. This criticism of Woolf’s becomes all the more ambiguous when viewed in light of her beautiful and inspirational words, “No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself”(2189). Is Woolf suggesting that all our experiences, torments, struggles somehow do not combine to create our truest selves? If indeed gender is a social construction, as Woolf believes it is, that does not change the fact that this construct does exist and does color our perceptions of the world. It is a lofty idea to hope that women will be able to disregard their earthly circumstances, but this is a very narrow view of what inspires great literature, and one of the many casualties of this belief is the faction of female writers who believe their true selves are a combination of all the anger, bitterness, and other emotions that women feel throughout their lives. Woolf clings to the idea that Charlotte Brontë’s resentment towards the chains that have bound her, both in her life and in her literature, disallows her to write with her full consciousness, and thus cheapens the value and message of her work. A manifestation of this attitude appears when Woolf is discussing Brontë’s work and states, “if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly” (2190). The validity of this view has not often been challenged, and without further consideration it does begin to seem that this chip on Brontë’s

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shoulder ruins her otherwise brilliant work. However, Rosenman comes up with another, perhaps more accurate interpretation of Brontë's tirade against patriarchal society through the eyes of Jane Eyre, when she relates, "Rather than being only technical flaws, perhaps they are also gateways to a distinctively female point of view"(108). If this statement be indeed true, if Charlotte Brontë was merely attempting to expose the female side in her writing, how can this be in conflict with Woolf's admiration of Austen and Emily Brontë, who are the only women in her view who "wrote as women write"(2193). Who is Virginia Woolf to be the judge of what writing is purely female but not jaded at the same time? Woolf seems to be disagreeing with her own vision of quality writing, and her conflicting views on the female perspective that imbues women's literature leave the reader in a state of flux, wondering whether Woolf is calling upon females to write as if the construct of gender never existed, or to bask in their womanhood and display it in all its glory. Inarguably, the most radical concept which Woolf wrestles with in *A Room of One's Own*, the idea of androgyny as the highest form of consciousness, muddles her exaltation of women and brings into question the status of this work as a piece of progressive feminism. Woolf defines the androgynous mind as being, "resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (2206). These words are indeed poetic, and they paint an idyllic picture of a mind unhindered by any emotional or psychological conflict, but not only does this perspective appear nearly impossible to attain for women of this age, it also brings into question many of the statements Woolf has previously made about the value of female contribution to the realm of literature. Rosenman clarifies this statement <https://assignbuster.com/virginia-woolf-and-a-room-of-ones-own-writing-from-the-female-perspective/>

when she relates that, " Woolf's notion of a single-sex artistic creation as ' a horrid little abortion,' like her comment that gender consciousness is fatal, flies in the face of her valorization of women's writing"(111). What does Woolf mean to say here, that neither women nor men have a consciousness which allows them to write to their fullest extent? She befuddles the reader even more with this statement, confessing, " Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind"(2204). This seems to me to be the most controversial supposition of the entire work; for a woman to think like herself is to acknowledge a certain female perspective that colors her views. To disregard these views and attempt to transcend her sex, to begin to think of women and men as the same beings is the concept which requires the most effort. How does one gain the consciousness of a man, or lose the consciousness of a woman without the deliberate disregard for the feelings and emotions that have been ingrained within us from years and years of experience through the eyes of one sex? Another point of contention that has brought this view of androgyny under greater scrutiny in more recent years is the subtle, at times purposeful suggestion that it is man and woman together that makes for the highest form of awareness, " for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness"(2205). Woolf unconsciously brings sexuality into the mix at this point, advocating heterosexuality as the truest form of fulfillment. This idea opens her up to the fire of feminist critics who rail against this notion of heterosexuality being necessary for true happiness, and who also believe that women do not need men in any way, shape or form in order to succeed and achieve in this world. Virginia Woolf deserves to be praised if only for the vast amount of debate and controversy

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she has been able to stir up with these views, but nonetheless this utopian vision of the androgynous mind is not only implausible, but creates too narrow a standard for the ideal perspective of writing. Woolf makes many statements that encourage women to write, to make themselves heard, to paste themselves into the pages of history, yet in doing so she also sets clear and restrictive guidelines which one must follow in order to create what she views as worthwhile fiction. In her eyes, Charlotte Brontë has squandered her gift, while Jane Austen has cultivated hers. Rosenman's observation that, "The celebration of the feminine style coexists with the valorization of androgyny; the insistence on gender as crucial to women's perspective and experience coexists with a stern admonition to women not to think consciously of their sex"(13), exposes brilliantly the ambiguity present throughout Woolf's essay. And Woolf herself provides the most eloquent contradiction of the piece when she urges, "it is much more important to be oneself than anything else. Do not dream of influencing other people, I would say, if I knew how to make it sound exalted. Think of things in themselves"(2211). To 'think of things in themselves' in the most literal sense would be to allow every perception, every attitude, every emotion equal stature in one's mind and in the writing process. Perhaps it is not disregarding one's own sex that will make for the highest form of literature, but instead allowing the combination of experience and emotion, spirituality and materialism, belief and conjecture, to coalesce into a beautiful mass of ideas that will truly be a reflection of the author in her most complete consciousness. WORKS CITED

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