

A room of one's own summary

Literature, William Shakespeare



A Room of One's Own Summary Virginia Woolf, giving a lecture on women and fiction, tells her audience she is not sure if the topic should be what women are like; the fiction women write; the fiction written about women; or a combination of the three. Instead, she has come up with "one minor point--a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." She says she will use a fictional narrator whom she calls Mary Beton as her alter ego to relate how her thoughts on the lecture mingled with her daily life. A week ago, the narrator crosses a lawn at the fictional Oxbridge university, tries to enter the library, and passes by the chapel. She is intercepted at each station and reminded that women are not allowed to do such things without accompanying men. She goes to lunch, where the excellent food and relaxing atmosphere make for good conversation. Back at Fernham, the women's college where she is staying as a guest, she has a mediocre dinner. She later talks with a friend of hers, Mary Seton, about how men's colleges were funded by kings and independently wealthy men, and how funds were raised with difficulty for the women's college. She and Seton denounce their mothers, and their sex, for being so impoverished and leaving their daughters so little. Had they been independently wealthy, perhaps they could have founded fellowships and secured similar luxuries for women. However, the narrator realizes the obstacles they faced: entrepreneurship is at odds with child-rearing, and only for the last 48 years have women even been allowed to keep money they earned. The narrator thinks about the effects of wealth and poverty on the mind, about the prosperity of males and the poverty of females, and about the effects of tradition or lack of tradition on the writer. Searching for answers, the

narrator explores the British Museum in London. She finds there are countless books written about women by men, while there are hardly any books by women on men. She selects a dozen books to try and come up with an answer for why women are poor. Instead, she locates a multitude of other topics and a contradictory array of men's opinions on women. One male professor who writes about the inferiority of women angers her, and it occurs to her that she has become angry because the professor has written angrily. Had he written "dispassionately," she would have paid more attention to his argument, and not to him. After her anger dissipates, she wonders why men are so angry if England is a patriarchal society in which they have all the power and money. Perhaps holding power produces anger out of fear that others will take one's power. She posits that when men pronounce the inferiority of women, they are really claiming their own superiority. The narrator believes self-confidence, a requirement to get through life, is often attained by considering other people inferior in relation to oneself.

Throughout history, women have served as models of inferiority who enlarge the superiority of men. The narrator is grateful for the inheritance left her by her aunt. Prior to that she had gotten by on loathsome, slavish odd jobs available to women before 1918. Now, she reasons that since nothing can take away her money and security, she need not hate or enslave herself to any man. She now feels free to "think of things in themselves" <she can judge art, for instance, with greater objectivity. The narrator investigates women in Elizabethan England, puzzled why there were no women writers in that fertile literary period. She believes there is a deep connection between living conditions and creative works. She reads a history book, learns that

women had few rights in the era, and finds no material about middle-class women. She imagines what would have happened had Shakespeare had an equally gifted sister named Judith. She outlines the possible course of Shakespeare's life: grammar school, marriage, and work at a theater in London. His sister, however, was not able to attend school and her family discouraged her from independent study. She was married against her will as a teenager and ran away to London. The men at a theater denied her the chance to work and learn the craft. Impregnated by a theatrical man, she committed suicide. The narrator believes that no women of the time would have had such genius, " For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people." Nevertheless, some kind of genius must have existed among women then, as it exists among the working class, although it never translated to paper. The narrator argues that the difficulties of writing--especially the indifference of the world to one's art--are compounded for women, who are actively disdained by the male establishment. She says the mind of the artist must be " incandescent" like Shakespeare's, without any obstacles. She argues that the reason we know so little about Shakespeare's mind is because his work filters out his personal " grudges and spites and antipathies." His absence of personal protest makes his work " free and unimpeded." The narrator reviews the poetry of several Elizabethan aristocratic ladies, and finds that anger toward men and insecurity mar their writing and prevent genius from shining through. The writer Aphra Behn marks a turning point: a middle-class woman whose husband's death forced her to earn her own living, Behn's triumph over circumstances surpasses even her excellent writing. Behn is the first female

writer to have "freedom of the mind." Countless 18th-century middle-class female writers and beyond owe a great debt to Behn's breakthrough. The narrator wonders why the four famous and divergent 19th-century female novelists—George Eliot, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and Jane Austen—all wrote novels; as middle-class women, they would have had less privacy and a greater inclination toward writing poetry or plays, which require less concentration. However, the 19th-century middle-class woman was trained in the art of social observation, and the novel was a natural fit for her talents. The narrator argues that traditionally masculine values and topics in novels—such as war—are valued more than feminine ones, such as drawing-room character studies. Female writers, then, were often forced to adjust their writing to meet the inevitable criticism that their work was insubstantial. Even if they did so without anger, they deviated from their original visions and their books suffered. The early 19th-century female novelist also had no real tradition from which to work; they lacked even a prose style fit for a woman. The narrator argues that the novel was the chosen form for these women since it was a relatively new and pliable medium. The narrator takes down a recent debut novel called *Life's Adventure* by Mary Carmichael. Viewing Carmichael as a descendant of the female writers she has commented on, the narrator dissects her book. She finds the prose style uneven, perhaps as a rebellion against the "flowery" reputation of women's writing. She reads on and finds the simple sentence "Chloe liked Olivia." She believes the idea of friendship between two women is groundbreaking in literature, as women have historically been viewed in literature only in relation to men. By the 19th century, women grew more

complex in novels, but the narrator still believes that each gender is limited in its knowledge of the opposite sex. The narrator recognizes that for whatever mental greatness women have, they have not yet made much of a mark in the world compared to men. Still, she believes that the great men in history often depended on women for providing them with "some stimulus, some renewal of creative power" that other men could not. She argues that the creativity of men and women is different, and that their writing should reflect their differences. The narrator believes Carmichael has much work to do in recording the lives of women, and Carmichael will have to write without anger against men. Moreover, since every one has a blind spot about themselves, only women can fill out the portrait of men in literature. However, the narrator feels Carmichael is "no more than a clever girl," even though she bears no traces of anger or fear. In a hundred years, the narrator believes, and with money and a room of her own, Carmichael will be a better writer. The pleasing sight of a man and woman getting into a taxi provokes an idea for the narrator: the mind contains both a male and female part, and for "complete satisfaction and happiness," the two must live in harmony. This fusion, she believes, is what poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge described when he said a great mind is "androgynous": "the androgynous mind transmits emotion without impediment it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided." Shakespeare is a fine model of this androgynous mind, though it is harder to find current examples in this "stridently sex-conscious" age. The narrator blames both sexes for bringing about this self-consciousness of gender. Woolf takes over the speaking voice and responds to two anticipated criticisms against the narrator. First, she

says she purposely did not express an opinion on the relative merits of the two genders--especially as writers--since she does not believe such a judgment is possible or desirable. Second, her audience may believe the narrator laid too much emphasis on material things, and that the mind should be able to overcome poverty and lack of privacy. She cites a professor's argument that of the top poets of the last century, almost all were well-educated and rich. Without material things, she repeats, one cannot have intellectual freedom, and without intellectual freedom, one cannot write great poetry. Women, who have been poor since the beginning of time, have understandably not yet written great poetry. She also responds to the question of why she insists women's writing is important. As an avid reader, the overly masculine writing in all genres has disappointed her lately. She encourages her audience to be themselves and " Think of things in themselves." She says that Judith Shakespeare still lives within all women, and that if women are given money and privacy in the next century, she will be reborn.