

An audience
member's
perspective on a
room of one's own



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Audience Member's Perspective on A Room of One's Own A young, female reader of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own would experience an array of emotional responses to the author, ranging from empathy to hostility.

Though Woolf is writing to just such an audience in an effort to encourage young women to write fiction, her argument is often self-contradictory and otherwise full of holes. As a young woman in very much the same social situation as many of Woolf's listeners would have been, I find many flaws within the writing that may have alienated the very women whom she was trying to inspire. Woolf begins A Room of One's Own wonderfully, considering the nature of her audience. It is immediately clear that she is writing for a woman, not for a man. Her apologetic, somewhat defensive tone, which might appear to a man stereotypically weak and "feminine", would appeal to a young, female audience. "[W]hen a subject is highly controversial - and any question about sex is that - one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker" (4). A young, female audience would see a woman able to admit the possibility that she is wrong as courageous. Woolf's willingness to accept other points of view would be a welcome break from the overly confident, bullheaded voices of men whom they would have been used to reading. However, Woolf soon launches into a discussion of the viability of anger in a piece of writing. She discusses how she saw the necessity of complete objectivity and was thus able to overcome the anger she felt towards certain men. She writes that writers writing out of anger are weakened and states, "<https://assignbuster.com/an-audience-members-perspective-on-a-room-of-ones-own/>

"I need not hate any man" (38), and yet she does. As Woolf writes so vehemently about the necessity of complete objectivity in order to maintain a credible argument, she is in fact letting the reader know that she is, indeed, angry, even if she doesn't always appear to be. By repeatedly stating that one must appear objective regardless of true feelings, Woolf is indirectly (and perhaps subconsciously) letting the audience know that she is suppressing her own anger in order to appear rational and credible. Woolf is not always able to keep her anger in check. Instead, she tends sometimes to rechannel it, focusing it on others and letting their own anger speak for her. Woolf's bitterness towards men shines through her objective façade in countless places throughout the book. Most striking is when Woolf writes of Lady Winchilsea, who's writing, Woolf believes, is "harassed and distracted with hates and grievances" (62). Yet the emotion prevalent in Winchilsea's writing is hopelessness, not anger. Woolf, in her criticism of Winchilsea, reveals her own bitterness at being unable to express anger because of her fear of losing credibility. Perhaps Woolf is jealous of the other woman's ability to reveal her true emotions without fearing backlash. Woolf also appears bitter towards Charlotte Bronte, whom she wrongly criticizes, writing that "anger was tampering with her integrity. . . She left her story. . . to attend to some personal grievance" (76). A psychologist might say that when Woolf sees hatred of men in other women's writing, she is actually giving voice to the hatred in herself. It is apparent that Woolf's true feelings are not always expressed, leaving her audience feeling possibly distrustful of her statements and uncertain about her true message. Woolf's rejection of the "traditional" female lifestyle is another point on which the author may inadvertently alienate herself from her audience. She rejects the notions of

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passion and romantic love as being predicated on an imbalance of power. Woolf believes that love only gets in the way of making money - most likely an unpopular viewpoint in an audience of college-age women. Additionally, Woolf criticizes the idea of motherhood as being unworthwhile. " I thought. . . of the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space. Certainly our mothers had not provided us with anything comparable to all this - our mothers who found it difficult to scrape together thirty thousand pounds, our mothers who bore thirteen children to ministers of religion at St. Andrews" (24). This unsympathetic, unromantic point of view would certainly have alienated a number young women. While motherhood and love are not occupations that will bring in any money, they are certainly not to be disregarded as a waste of time. Woolf's main point, that wealth is necessary in order to attain intellectual freedom, is the primary point on which many (especially after the speeches were published as a book) may feel hostility towards the author. Although she was, at the time, speaking to an audience to whom wealth was hardly an impossible aim, is Woolf not creating a sense of hopelessness to anyone who cannot hope to come into money in the future? Although she offers other, more symbolic, interpretations of her belief that money is absolutely necessary (page 110), Woolf does not appear to truly believe in these alternative interpretations of her argument. Indeed, the symbolic option appears to be inserted as an afterthought, a halfhearted attempt to win over the less financially secure members of her audience. Only a page later, Woolf states it directly: " Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom." By making such an strong statement (and supporting it with quotations from various male writers) without offering

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alternative ways for women to achieve intellectual freedom, Woolf comes off, in the end, as sounding remarkably similar to those men who see themselves as the keepers of "THE ABSOLUTE TRUTH". Although Woolf does say that women, regardless of their socio-economic position, should write whether or not they have a room of their own, she spends far too much time preaching about what women should be doing and far too little time telling them how they can do it. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, has a number of interesting, revolutionary ideas which doubtless could have inspired and benefitted her intended audience. However, her inability to voice to her own anger, her self-contradictory rejection of other lifestyles and points of view and her omission of suggestions as to how women may be able to achieve the wealth which she presents as necessary all serve to undermine what may have otherwise been an incredibly strong argument. Whether or not the women in the audience to which she read these speeches did, indeed, feel alienated from Woolf is impossible to know, but modern-day readers will certainly find fault with many of her assertions.