

Exploring freedom
and influence in
woolf's a room of
one's own and three
guineas



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Both Virginia Woolf's critical essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and her polemic *Three Guineas* (1938) explore feminist issues of freedom and influence. Despite being written almost a decade later, *Three Guineas* further explores the ideas and values of *A Room of One's Own*, thus highlighting how, despite their different contexts, there has been little change. Whilst *A Room of One's Own* focuses on the financial and intellectual freedom of women, *Three Guineas* explores notions of educational freedom for women. Comparing the contexts of the two texts also provides us with insights into the influence of societal views and the power that educational opportunities can provide women.

Both *A Room of One's Own* (*A Room*) and *Three Guineas* explore the theme of freedom through a call for progress of women's intellectual and financial rights. In *A Room*, the financial restrictions on a woman's literary potential are expressed in Woolf's overarching argument that, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". The room acts as a symbol of financial and intellectual independence, whilst the frequent repetition of the words "a room" throughout the essay emphasizes how women lack the necessary freedom to write. A woman's intellectual restrictions are illustrated when Woolf's narrative persona is refused entry into the Oxbridge library by a man who looked, "like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings". The man acts as a metaphor for the blocked opportunities and societal barriers that have been imposed on women by men, the imagery emphasizing the role of men in restricting woman's intellectual freedom. Woolf conjures the imaginary character of "Judith Shakespeare", to further demonstrate the

inequality of women. This literary allusion and the allegory of Judith demonstrate how the talents of women are being lost because they are not allowed to be creative. Despite Judith sharing the same genetic makeup, and thus the same potential, she achieved nothing due to lack of education and freedom. The three centuries between Shakespeare's and Woolf's contexts highlights the almost nonexistent change in woman's intellectual freedom. Thus *A Room* explores restrictions the gender plays on a woman's intellectual, creative and financial freedom. In the context of a troubled 1938 Europe, the later essay *Three Guineas* similarly explores the theme of freedom, focusing on educational freedom and the role that educated women can play in preventing war.

Similarly to *A Room*; *Three Guineas* also explores the role of men in preventing the educational freedom of women. The freedom from male financial reliance that education can provide woman's with is highlighted through the metaphor of woman's being slaves to their fathers: "to depend upon a profession is a less odious form of slavery than to depend upon a father." Having a career and earning income, she argues, is more rewarding than being financial and intellectually reliant on the men in one's life. This idea is further emphasized metaphorically by the truncated sentence, "You [men] are fighting with us, not against us". The 'war' represents the 'war' between women and men in literature and the professions. *Three Guineas* thus highlights the limitations of a woman's educational rights. Both essays also discuss more broadly the effects of society's attitude towards women. *A Room* explores the influence of strict early 20th century societal views on women and their role in society. The long history of disrespect towards

women in the literary profession is illustrated by alluding to Dr Johnson, the renowned 18th century English writer: “ a woman’s composing is like a dog’s walking on his hind legs. It is not done well”. The simile reflects the general male disrespect towards women, whilst further emphasizing the negative influence societal disregard of women writers. Woolf’s argument that societal influences have restricted women from literature composition is further portrayed when Woolf comments that “ even a woman...has brought herself to believe that to write a book was to be ridiculous”. The narrator’s disappointed tone emphasizes the impact of societal constraints, further illustrating how a lack of a literary legacy allows women no goals to aim for. Woolf also explores the disheartening impact that a negative and often cruel reception of women writers has on women: “ She was afraid of something; afraid of being called ‘ sentimental’ perhaps”, the repetition of the adjective ‘ afraid’ reflecting potential women writers’ entrenched fears and discouragement. The play on the adjective ‘ sentimental’ reflects the pre-Depression view, that women, due to their perceived softer nature are incapable of producing good literature. *A Room* consequently provides us with a unique insight into the overarching influence of early 20th century, pre-Depression English society on women writers.

In contrast, *Three Guineas*, reflecting its pre-WW2 context, explores the theme of empowerment of women through education and the professions. A woman’s limited role in society due to lack of educational opportunities is reflected in the rhetorical question, “ What does ‘ our country’ mean to me an outsider?” emphasizing that because women lack influence and don’t have a voice, they consider themselves outsiders. Woolf quotes Sir Ernest

Wild, a British Royal Naval seaman, to validate her argument that, without education, women have to rely on manipulation to influence a man: "A man liked to think he was doing his job...[a] wise woman always let him think he was running the show when he was not." The alliterative "wise woman" suggests the general view in male dominated society that the usefulness of women is based on their natural feminine talent rather than real skills acquired through education. It also argues that in a changing society, an "educated man's daughter has now at her disposal an influence which is different from any influence that she has possessed before". The repetition of 'influence' stresses that, through education, women have a newfound strength. They no longer have to resort to using "whatever charm or beauty...[they] possess to flatter and cajole the busy men". *Three Guineas* thus demonstrates the role that education and participation in the professions can play in a woman's influence over both the men in her personal life and the events of society in the broadest sense.

A Room of One's Own and *Three Guineas* have explored different aspects relating to women's financial, creative and intellectual freedom and resultant influence. Woolf's call for intellectual and financial freedom in *A Room of One's Own* is complemented by a stronger and more urgent call given the context and the passage of time in her later discussion of the importance of educational freedom in *Three Guineas*.