

How Woolf used symbolism to write good fiction



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Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) explores the complex nature of the numerous elements that are needed to write good fiction. *A Room of One's Own* is a partially fictionalized narrative that is written from the perspective of an unknown woman who shares interchangeable views with Woolf as she critiques the ability of women to write good fiction. The essay is an extended version of numerous lectures Woolf presented at Newnham and Girton College for women, in which she brings to attention the emotions women were feeling as they were struggling for rights and freedom and most certainly, to write. Woolf argues that any good fiction must be written with the use of an androgynous mind and comments that this is what made Shakespeare's works so fantastic. She suggests that anger in one's writing causes anger for the reader so it must be avoided at all costs. She also brings up the issue of education and the struggles for women to get any, resulting in fewer foundations to create fiction. Freedom, both physically and financially are of the highest importance when it comes to someone wishing to write fiction. Finally, Woolf considers the circumstances of one's birthplace and how that will impact their chances of having the opportunity to write.

In Woolf's opinion, an important element to good fiction is to write with the use of a 'completely' androgynous mind. The use of androgyny when writing ensures that the writer uses "both [sexes] of the mind" in equilibrium, which ensures the mind "transmits emotion without impediment". This theory gives men and women the ability to write without consciousness of their own sex. The resulting mind is 'undivided' and 'naturally creative'. Woolf creates a symbolic representation of the importance of an androgynous mind in the

works of Shakespeare as she remarks that the success of his plays as being attributed to this mindset. The narrator juxtaposes Shakespeare's plays to the works of other male writers such as Milton and Ben Jonson as his were of the very few in history that did not present women 'burning like beacons'. The peacefulness of this state of mind is brought to the reader's awareness when the narrator's mind is 'eased of some strain' as she is brought to the attention of a man and a woman climbing into a taxi together. This simple act in the 'strictly sex-conscious age' of Woolf's novel develops a calming symbol amongst the 'roar' of London's traffic and suggests to the reader that the coming together of sexes is to be in "harmony together, spiritually co-operating"; just as it is in the mind. The narrator asserts that "it is fatal" for a writer if they go about creating their works with a "pure[ly]" man or woman mind if the reader is to get feeling that the writer is "communicating his experience with perfect fullness". Thus, good fiction will not be achieved without the individual possessing an androgynous mind.

Woolf criticises that the emotive anger is an emotion that works against one's writing and that it causes anger in the reader, decreasing the quality of the fiction. Woolf represents this as her narrator reads from 'Professor Von X's' novel 'The Inferiority of Women'. She discovers that the strength of anger has the ability to make her "angry because he, [the author], was angry". Woolf enhances the need for the proper emotions when writing good fiction as she symbolizes 'Professor Von X's' novel to be "written in the red light of emotion" when it must be written in "the white light of truth". The symbolization of light and dark in the novel explores the way anger operates in one's writing, blinding them from writing the truth, and the negative affect

this has on the standard of the work. Anger in fiction may only result in the author arguing 'dispassionately' which in turn forces the audience to only 'think of the argument' the author holds and not of the true meaning or potential of the fiction. Therefore, to write good fiction anger must be absent from the authors' present emotion.

If one wishes to write good fiction, then Woolf advises that an education must be obtained, as it is the only way to flower one's genius. As the narrator comments, it is ironic and somewhat perplexing as she visits a male and then a female college, discovering that "men drink wine while women drink water". Men are spoon-fed the opportunity to go to great colleges and receive fantastic educations whilst the women are stuck, sitting around a coffee table struggling to "scrape" together "£30, 000" for their charity-like university. "Uneducated" women found that it would "be impossible... completely and entirely" to be offered the chance to write fiction and Woolf likens this to the "strong yellow flame". This flame is established by the lack of women's education to further symbolically explore the intelligence that she states women struggle to acquire. Intelligence is the underlying construct that allows for one to write good fiction and one is "apt to play it false" with the absence of education. As a result, women will never write good fiction as to do so one must also have a good education, which women cease to be able to acquire.

A female writer's access to privacy and a room is deemed to be one of the most important 'materials' by Woolf when it comes to the woman wishing to write good fiction. The symbolical representation of a room is presented in the title of the novel as it allows the barest necessity for the 'freedom' of <https://assignbuster.com/how-woolf-used-symbolism-to-write-good-fiction/>

uninterrupted creativity. 'These conditions are necessary' in the creation of good fiction and Woolf reflects on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* where she comes across an 'awkward break' in her writing. Woolf blames the setting in which the novel was written, the family basement, for the nature of this break. The narrator emphasizes that Austen will never have had 'her genius expressed whole and entire' as she only had access to the family basement to write her works for in this common area she neither had 'freedom' nor 'peace'. Further exploring this symbol, Woolf symbolizes the Brontë family to develop the argument that one must 'be cut off from what is called the world' in order to wholly flower their potential as a writer. 'If she has a room to herself' then she may be gifted with the opportunity to express her inner genius 'unlit by the capricious and colourless light of the other sex'. Woolf, by the symbolizing of light, means to say that the anger of men is restrictive to the creativity of women. Woolf therefore deems it important that a 'genius [may] bloweth' only where one writes under the terms of their own room.

The final argument Woolf explores in her account for what makes good fiction is that it is an indispensable need for one to have '500 pounds' if they 'wish to write'. Through the symbol of money, Woolf develops the argument that money is the most needed for a woman in particular if they wish to have the freedom to write. Woolf expresses her belief that money allows one to 'make money by the pen' as they do not have the 'burden' of 'unpaid' bills and other commodities. The narrator assesses the financial situation for women of her era and concludes without money to support herself, a 'poor' woman has 'a dog's chance' in having the opportunity to write fiction.

Through Woolf's personal experience, the inheritance of ' 500 pounds a year' is a righteous gift and ' of more importance' than the vote. This proves that the vote was merely an insignificant symbol to women of Woolf's time, and that money was of far more importance to earn a living and certainly to write. Woolf deems ' the prosaic conclusion' to be that in order to write good fiction one must have financial freedom of preferably ' 500 pounds a year'.

When taking all aspects of Woolf's thesis into account, the reader will see that she used numerous symbols in order to convey her beliefs as to what is needed in order to write good fiction. She emphasized the need for an ambiguous mind that is also without anger for both these elements encourage peace for the reader. Woolf further created a symbol of education in order to portray the inarguable need for one to have a proper education should they wish to write and she expressed the difficulty for women to do so. Finally, Woolf underpinned the importance of a room of one's own and money if an individual wishes to have the freedom, time and space to write good fiction. A combination of these elements are what creates a masterpiece of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, where she expresses through the use of symbolism, the materials needed to write good fiction.