

A room of one's own and the erasure of the gender binary in literature



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A Room of One's Own explores the relationship between women and literature, and offers advice to aspiring female authors. According to Virginia Woolf " a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). Woolf's opinion stems from the presence of the educational, financial, and social disadvantages that hinder the success of women aspiring for careers during her lifetime and throughout the course of history. Woolf advocates for women to obtain the rooms of their own and financial stability necessary for the realization of the feminine literary potential and the transformation of literature into an art form free of the constraints of the gender binary. Woolf feels that the presence of this binary hurts the quality of literature as a whole, stating that " it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex" (104). In A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf notes how the gender binary system serves as the main cause of the lack of feminine success in literature and believes that the erasure of this oppressive construct would improve the overall value of the art of literature by allowing for works to be judged by quality rather than through the lens of gender.

Virginia Woolf views the presence of the gender construct rather than lack of skill as the main source of the lack of quality literature by female authors. Men and women have equal potential for creating great works of literature but unequal circumstances and opportunities. Woolf begins this argument by noting the inequalities of the educational system. According to Woolf, if women had been able to earn money to invest in education, then there would be more " fellowships and lectureships and prizes and scholarships appropriated to the use of their own sex" (21). This gender based discrepancy in educational opportunity causes women to fall short in all

areas, including literature. To further illustrate gender based opportunities as the source of feminine literary disadvantage, Woolf raises the question of “ what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith” (46). Woolf proposes this possibility in order to illustrate the equal potential of feminine and masculine authors. She describes the hypothetical sibling as “ gifted” and “ just as adventurous, as imaginative, [and] as agog to see the world as he was” (47). The only difference Woolf presents between the pair lies in gender. Woolf uses this example to focus the root of the problem of the lack of female authors as being based in gender discrimination rather than a simple lack of skill. She later describes the careers of Currer Bell, George Eliot, and George Sand, female authors who published literature under male pseudonyms, describing them as “ the victims of inner strife” who “ sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man” (50). These authors produced highly revered works of literature, proving that women indeed have the skill necessary for writing fiction. Woolf’s examples of women who wrote under masculine pseudonyms prove the lack of innate difference in the quality of male and female writing. Had these women published the same works under their given names, they would have likely gone unread. This fact highlights Woolf’s realization of the gender binary system being the source of the lack of literature by women both during her own time period and throughout the course of history.

Woolf most effectively supports her case for genderless literature by pointing out the fact that the best writers do not focus on their sex and/or gender in their work. She cites Samuel Coleridge’s belief that “ a great mind is androgynous” (98). Woolf forms the opinion that “ a mind that is purely

masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine” (98). In other words, a mind that is focused on fulfilling the expectations of gender fails to utilize its full potential. This reality hinders literature due to the fact that it lessens the quality of the work produced by both men and women. If writers learn to write in a way that ignores the gender construct, better works will be produced. Virginia Woolf then points to William Shakespeare, arguably the most well-known and successful writer in history, as an example of the adoption of this idea by describing his mind as “androgynous” and “man-womanly” (99). She credits his success to his ability to use the entirety of his mind in writing rather than picking and choosing amongst the characteristics assigned to males. According to Woolf, the blending of all traits regardless of where they are aligned along the gender spectrum allows for better writing overall. She stresses that a writer should “use both sides of his mind equally” in order to produce the highest quality work (103). Woolf further preaches the advantages of genderless literature by praising William Shakespeare’s and Jane Austen’s ability to separate their personal identities from their writing (68). She proclaims that Austen’s ability to produce “writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, [and] without preaching” led to her production of higher quality work (68). Woolf feels that an author “should write of her characters” rather than personal circumstances such as their own sex and/or gender (70). The ability to write without thinking of one’s gender produces more well-rounded and high quality literature.

Woolf further pushes for the removal of the gender binary system from the art of literature by discouraging the divisive gender influenced writing style

that reinforces the division. She points to the descriptions of women by male scholars and authors noting that “ they had been written in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth” (32-33). Woolf believes that the divisiveness of the gender binary system harbors hostility between the opposing groups it creates and feels that the placement of anger and blame onto the opposing group hinders literature by causes it to reflect emotion over reflecting reality. She declares that “ it is absurd to blame any class or any sex, as a whole” (38). Woolf feels that both genders are responsible for the hostility that is present throughout literature, but also believes that it hurts both sides. Woolf views writing in a way that places anger and blame on either gender as irrational due to the fact that the viewpoints that inform this style of writing “ are driven by instincts which are not within their control”, or in other words, social constructs (38). Woolf reinforces this idea by pondering the reason why the female author, Mary Carmichael, was able to produce literature despite the fact that “ she was no ‘ genius’”. She concludes that Carmichael’s success results from the fact that “ men are no longer to her ‘ the opposing faction’” (92). Carmichael’s freedom from the war between genders allowed her to spend less time “ railing against them” and more time to focus her work on literary elements such as plot and character (92). Woolf uses this example as an advertisement of the possibilities of removing the gendered approach to literature. She presents Carmichael’s abandonment of opposition to men as freeing and as allowing for broader subject matter and more engaging work.

In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf highlights the disadvantages endured by aspiring female authors and focuses the blame for these disadvantages

on the gender binary system. Woolf urges for the erasure of the gender construct, especially within the realm of literature. The removal of the expectations of this system would allow for the production of overall better literary creations by allowing authors to be judged upon the quality of their writing rather than by their gender. *A Room of One's Own* points out the success of authors who embody the idea of genderless literature and encourages authors of all sexual and gendered identifications to focus on the art rather than the social construct that fosters disadvantage and division amongst writers.