

Making room for
women: virginia
woolf's narrative
technique in a room
of one's ow...



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“ Like most uneducated Englishwomen, I like reading.” Can these words really belong to Virginia Woolf, an “ uneducated Englishwoman” who knew half a dozen languages, who authored a shelf’s length of novels and essays, who possessed one of the most rarified literary minds of the twentieth century? Tucked into the back pages of *A Room of One’s Own*, this comment shimmers with Woolf’s typically wry and understated sense of humor. She jests, but she means something very serious at the same time: as a reader, she worries about the state of the writer, and particularly the state of the female writer. She worries so much, in fact, that she fills a hundred some pages musing about how her appetite for “ books in the bulk” might be satiated in the future by women writers. Her concerns may be those of a reader, but the solution she proffers comes straight from the ethos of an experienced writer. “ A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction,” Woolf asserts early in her essay. This “ one minor point,” as she calls it, could have major repercussions for the future of literature. It would certainly, in the least, enrich the life of Virginia Woolf the reader. But before this can happen, Virginia Woolf the writer must demonstrate how a few hundred pounds and some privacy translate into a wealth of new books by women. To do this, she uses a most natural example: *A Room of One’s Own* itself. Before it became a seminal feminist text or the source of countless cultural clichés, this essay was first a piece of writing by a woman of some means and leisure. It is both the result and the purveyor of a set of ideal creative conditions for the female author.

Employing an innovative narrative technique, Woolf manifests how these external conditions come to bear on women’s prose style. *A Room of One’s Own* is Virginia Woolf’s fictionalized response to a very factual request. “ We <https://assignbuster.com/making-room-for-women-virginia-woolfs-narrative-technique-in-a-room-of-ones-own/>

asked you to speak about women and fiction – what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" Woolf asks, anticipating her audience's bewilderment at the title of her work. It has to do, she explains, with women writers' need for money and personal space. But it can only be properly explained through fiction. " I am going to develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can [my] train of thought...making use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist," she explains. One can imagine that this statement only further perplexed Woolf's original audience of female undergraduates in 1928. But Woolf is adamant here. She has no desire to rehash remarks about the usual suspects of women's literature. Jane Austen, George Eliot, the Bronte sisters – these women will eventually be mentioned, but Woolf is no historical surveyor. She writes modernist novels; naturally, she will write about women and fiction in that same modernist, novelistic mode. But the fictional form of *A Room of One's Own* indicates more than Woolf's predilection for the novel as a writer. Rather, prose fiction has been the tendency of successful female authors since their historical emergence. Woolf, who notes later that the finest male writers compose " with the unconscious bearing of long descent," knows that her gender has no Shakespeare, no Milton, no Keats. Nor have women had their hands in biography, philosophy, or history. How is a woman to write, then, without the gracefulness with which tradition imbues the contemporary author's pen? Woolf confronts this problem by writing in the mode of the richest tradition available to a woman writing – the novel. Here the female author has *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch* to bolster her claim to the form. A male author may demand his own stake on the basis of *Tom Jones* or *Bleak House*, but he cannot deny any woman her fair share in the history of the English novel. For Woolf, a " long descent" is a crucial

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condition affecting a writer's talent; she writes in novelistic form because it is the one which she truly can trace back through her "mothers and grandmothers." If female authors have had the best luck as novelists, women personages have likewise fared better in fiction than in history. A trip to the British museum confirms that, while men have had plenty to say about the contemporary inadequacies of the opposite sex, "nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century." There are scraps of knowledge about wife beating and childbearing, but the thoughts and habits of females have been shrouded by years of social insignificance. It is no wonder Woolf prefers to talk about women through fiction, for in history they have a tendency to completely disappear. This is not so in the literature of this very same past. Male historians took no interest in women, but, as she points out, male fiction writers certainly did. From Lady Macbeth to Madame de Guermantes, literature recounts the lives of hundreds of dynamic females. "Imaginatively woman is of the highest importance," Woolf observes, "but practically she is completely insignificant...she is all but absent from history." It makes sense, then, that Woolf would write *A Room of One's Own* in the genre that held women to be of the greatest importance rather than the one that found in them nary the least significance. Just as Woolf found a form fit to the woman writer, so she discovered a sentence to accommodate her as well. Like Jane Austen laughing at the "man's sentence" of the nineteenth century, Woolf smiles at the realist prose in vogue in her day and politely pushes it away. She opts instead for a style which underscores her interest in how exterior conditions act and react with the mind. Her own evaluation of her style is deceptively simple. According to Woolf, her sentences "follow a train of thought." The sentences and the writers

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contained within *A Room of One's Own* have much in common – they are all meditative and meandering beings sometimes harassed by material conditions. Consider, for example, Woolf's narration of her visit to the British Museum: "London was like a machine. We were all being shot backwards and forwards on this plain foundation to make some pattern. The British Museum was another department of the factory. The swing-doors swung open; and there one stood as if one were a thought in the huge bald forehead which is so splendidly encircled by a band of famous names. One went to the counter; one took a slip of paper; one opened a volume of the catalogue, and..... the five dots here indicate five separate minutes of stupefaction, wonder, and bewilderment." The beginning of this passage is lyrical, poetic, very "writerly." Rich in simile, musical and brisk in style, the first four sentences flow from a mind in comfortable and free circumstances. If London is a machine, the person speaking these words is a carefree cog, at ease functioning as an individual unit and as a tiny part of the larger mechanism. When a wrench is thrown into the works, though, the cog malfunctions as much as the machine. Woolf's prose, sensitive to its subject matter, reacts the way a real person might. Here shock is not expressed "I was astonished" or "I could not believe." It gets recorded, rather, as "five dots" signifying the ineluctable blankness of a mind confronted with the truly unnerving. Like the mind of a young female writer, Woolf's sentences are impressionable; they are words with a lively inner reality in the act of interpreting an unpredictable outer one. Sometimes, though, this outer reality proves to be a tedious interruption, as Woolf's writing strives to demonstrate. Her stroll across the Oxbridge campus is a vivid instance of this. Glancing about the college, Woolf thinks of an essay by Charles Lamb about a certain

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manuscript of Milton's kept in the Oxbridge library. This leads her to muse first upon how Milton revised his poem, next upon the fact that the manuscript of Thackeray's *Esmond* resides in the very same building. Her mind is busily engaged in these profound thoughts when both her person and her intellect are abruptly stymied on their path:" But then one would have to decide what is style and what is meaning, a question which - but here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of wings, a deprecating silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction." Here is a woman, intellectually curious, well-read, receptive to the great thinkers and writers of the past, turned away by a persnickety Beadle and a tradition of patriarchic oppression. The dash in the first sentence frustrates not only the clause, but the intellectual potential of the young lady herself; the sentence is not allowed to develop fully, nor is she. The first chapter of *A Room of One's Own* is strewn with such interrupted efforts. Later we find her pensively considering the wealth of Oxbridge: " It was impossible not to reflect - the reflection whatever it may have been was cut short. The clock struck." And heading up to Fernham after the lapsing of a few more hours: " Why, if it was an illusion, not praise the catastrophe, whatever it was, that destroyed illusion and put truth in its place? For truth...those dots mark the spot where, in search of truth, I missed the turning up to Fernham." Barely does the crescendo of thought come than reality - unyielding, misogynistic - crushes it yet again. Woolf's prose mimics these frustrations, describing and <https://assignbuster.com/making-room-for-women-virginia-woolfs-narrative-technique-in-a-room-of-ones-own/>

demonstrating the intellectual opportunities (or lack thereof) of women writers. Woolf further augments her reflective style with a deft use of symbolism. In the early pages of *A Room of One's Own*, symbols of truncation and arrested development abound, often opposed by symbols of affluence and maturity. Dining sumptuously at Oxbridge, for instance, Woolf is startled from her post-prandial leisure by the sight of a tail-less cat lumbering past the window. "The sight of the abrupt and truncated animal padding softly across the quadrangle," she reflects, "changed by some fluke of the subconscious intelligence the emotional light for me. It was as if some one had let fall a shade." It is hard to ignore, suddenly, that the banquet upon which she has just feasted was prepared for men, members of an academic institution from which she is barred admittance. The meager dinner at Fernham a few pages later provides another counterpoint for the Oxbridge luncheon. She reports: "Dinner was ready. Here was the soup. It was a plain gravy soup. There was nothing to stir the fancy in that." Woolf really could have chosen any material condition common to both colleges – plumbing, size of the library, quality of the teaching – in order to juxtapose symbols of wealth and poverty. Food, though, works the best with her prose style because it exerts the most immediate and consistent effect on human beings. It leaves an impression on the quotidian experience of men and women alike. According to Woolf, "one cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well." It seems reasonable to add to this list "write well," for women's lack of both stuffed pheasants and literary tradition are not entirely unrelated. Also not entirely unrelated are the shape of the female literary tradition and the structure of *A Room of One's Own*. The essay's tone develops like a timeline of famous woman authors. First, like <https://assignbuster.com/making-room-for-women-virginia-woolfs-narrative-technique-in-a-room-of-ones-own/>

Lady Winchilsea, ur-woman writer of the seventeenth century, the speaker flares up with anger at the thought of her restrained opportunities. Here she is on being barred from the library: " Never will I wake those echoes, never will I ask for that hospitality again, I vowed as I descended the steps in anger." And here we find her with Mary Seton in one of the anemically furnished rooms of Fernham: " we burst out in scorn at the reprehensible poverty of our sex. What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us?" The speaker of these early pages is incensed at the condition of women and her words redound with Winchilsea's indignation. " How are we fallen! Fallen by mistaken rules,/ And Education's more than Nature's fools;/ Debarred from all improvements of the mind,/ And to be dull, expected and designed," the poet wrote of women in the late 1600s. Two hundred years later her frustration rears its head again through Woolf's eloquent pen. With a shift in scene, though, comes a shift in tone. Under the vaulted ceiling of the British Museum appears a speaker whose rage smolders less spectacularly than Winchilsea's, a Charlotte Bronte-like lady whose anger emerges indirectly. There are no declarations of ire or disgust in this setting, only actions that manifest these repressed feelings. Woolf's doodling is one such example. She says:" While I pondered I had unconsciously, in my listlessness, in my desperation, been drawing a picture of Professor von X engaged in writing his monumental work The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex...The professor was made to look very ugly in my sketch...Drawing pictures was an idle way of finishing an unprofitable morning's work. Yet it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top. A very elementary exercise in psychology showed me, on looking at my notebook, that the

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sketch of the angry professor had been made in anger. Anger had snatched my pencil while I dreamt. The “submerged truth” here, as Woolf finds it to be later in her evaluation of *Jane Eyre*, is that women resent men for suppressing their active and intelligent natures. Woolf’s sketching and Brontë’s transitioning both have “that jerk in them, that indignation – one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire.” Some progress has been made since Winchelsea; the woman writer has at least let her genius peek through. But it remains “deformed and twisted” by social constraint and its attendant anger. Woolf sequesters the reader into the present state of women’s literature with the imaginary novel *Life’s Adventure* by the neophyte writer Mary Carmichael. This novel, Woolf says, “must be read as if it were the last volume in a fairly long series, continuing all those other books – Winchelsea’s poems and the novels of the four great novelists.” *Life’s Adventure* is a kind of culmination of women’s writing thus far. And as such, its achievement is modest but noteworthy. Carmichael writes unfettered by the anger and resentment of her predecessors, “as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages are full of that curious sexual quality that comes only when sex is unconscious of itself.” Likewise, gone is the anger and self-consciousness of the narrative voice of *A Room of One’s Own*. In the privacy of her home library where she leafs through the novel, Woolf’s own voice becomes that of the modern female writer – eager, free, perceptive, and yet still lacking something. “Give her another hundred years” Woolf says of the woman writer; then she will have more tradition, money, and privacy abetting her art. But who is this woman writer of the future? Woolf claims that she, like Shakespeare, like Keats, like Coleridge, will possess an androgynous mind. Her intellect will be

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a fusion of male and female sensibilities and she will write with the unconscious bearing of complete genius. No personal vendetta to voice, no inequalities to rage against, this woman would be in “ some state of mind in which one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back.” As Woolf describes this unborn talent, though, it suddenly becomes clear that her descriptions belongs not to some book to be written, but the very one that she has already written. The reader has just experienced androgynous prose, for how else could we explain how full and natural the narrative of *A Room of One's Own* seems? Woolf is no Mary Carmichael, languishing without adequate material comfort and conditions. She is a woman with five hundred pounds a year, a room of her own, and a deep investment in the literary tradition to which she is adding her own volumes. If more women lived as I do, she seems to say, there would be more *To the Lighthouses*, more *Mrs. Dalloways*, more *Orlandos*, more women and fiction of the highest intellectual and aesthetic caliber. *A Room of One's Own* is a utopian text written in a utopian style. It began with the topic “ women and fiction,” but Virginia Woolf delicately steers her prose toward envisioning a paradise of readers and writers where, regardless of sex, good living and good literature abound.