

A Room of One's Own

Virginia Woolf

«

Because of this book, I realised that my only worldly ambition was to make enough from writing to earn my living and claim a room of my own. "So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters." Woolf alerted me to the prosaic truth that literary works "are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in."

»

HELEN SIMPSON
WRITER

[<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/book-of-a-lifetime-a-room-of-ones-own-by-virginia-woolf-1978243.html>]]

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A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write

Penguin Books Great Ideas

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Virginia Woolf: a brief biography



English author Virginia Woolf wrote modernist classics including ***Mrs. Dalloway*** and ***To the Lighthouse***, as well as pioneering feminist texts, ***A Room of One's Own*** and ***Three Guineas***.

Who Was Virginia Woolf?

Born into a privileged English household in 1882, author Virginia Woolf was raised by free-thinking parents. She began writing as a young girl and published her first novel, ***The Voyage Out***, in 1915. She wrote modernist classics including ***Mrs. Dalloway***, ***To the Lighthouse*** and ***Orlando***, as well as pioneering feminist works, ***A Room of One's Own*** and ***Three Guineas***. In her personal life, she suffered bouts of deep depression.

She committed suicide in 1941, at the age of 59.

Early Life

Born on January 25, 1882, Adeline Virginia Stephen was raised in a remarkable household. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a historian and author, as well as one of the most prominent figures in the golden age of mountaineering. Woolf's mother, Julia Prinsep Stephen (née Jackson), had been born in India and later served as a model for several Pre-Raphaelite painters. She was also a nurse and wrote a book on the profession. Both of her parents had been married and widowed before marrying each other. Woolf had three full siblings — Thoby, Vanessa and Adrian — and four half-siblings — Laura Makepeace Stephen and George, Gerald and Stella Duckworth. The eight children lived under one roof at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington.

Two of Woolf's brothers had been educated at Cambridge, but all the girls were taught at home and utilized the splendid confines of the family's lush Victorian library. Moreover, Woolf's parents were extremely well connected, both socially and artistically. Her father was a friend to William Thackeray, the father of his first wife who died unexpectedly, and George Henry Lewes, as well as many other noted thinkers. Her mother's aunt was the famous 19th century photographer Julia

Margaret Cameron.

From the time of her birth until 1895, Woolf spent her summers in St. Ives, a beach town at the very southwestern tip of England. The Stephens' summer home, Talland House, which is still standing today, looks out at the dramatic Porthminster Bay and has a view of the Godrevy Lighthouse, which inspired her writing. In her later memoirs, Woolf recalled St. Ives with a great fondness. In fact, she incorporated scenes from those early summers into her modernist novel, ***To the Lighthouse*** (1927).

As a young girl, Virginia was curious, light-hearted and playful. She started a family newspaper, the ***Hyde Park Gate News***, to document her family's humorous anecdotes. However, early traumas darkened her childhood, including being sexually abused by her half-brothers George and Gerald Duckworth, which she wrote about in her essays ***A Sketch of the Past*** and ***22 Hyde Park Gate***. In 1895, at the age of 13, she also had to cope with the sudden death of her mother from rheumatic fever, which led to her first mental breakdown, and the loss of her half-sister Stella, who had become the head of the household, two years later.

While dealing with her personal losses, Woolf continued her studies in German, Greek and Latin at the Ladies' Department of King's College London. Her four years of study introduced

her to a handful of radical feminists at the helm of educational reforms. In 1904, her father died from stomach cancer, which contributed to another emotional setback that led to Woolf being institutionalized for a brief period. Virginia Woolf's dance between literary expression and personal desolation would continue for the rest of her life. In 1905, she began writing professionally as a contributor for **The Times Literary Supplement**. A year later, Woolf's 26-year-old brother Thoby died from typhoid fever after a family trip to Greece.

After their father's death, Woolf's sister Vanessa and brother Adrian sold the family home in Hyde Park Gate, and purchased a house in the Bloomsbury area of London. During this period, Virginia met several members of the Bloomsbury Group, a circle of intellectuals and artists including the art critic Clive Bell, who married Virginia's sister Vanessa, the novelist E.M. Forster, the painter Duncan Grant, the biographer Lytton Strachey, economist John Maynard Keynes and essayist Leonard Woolf, among others. The group became famous in 1910 for the Dreadnought Hoax, a practical joke in which members of the group dressed up as a delegation of Ethiopian royals, including Virginia disguised as a bearded man, and successfully persuaded the English Royal Navy to show them their warship, the HMS Dreadnought. After the outrageous act, Leonard Woolf

and Virginia became closer, and eventually they were married on August 10, 1912. The two shared a passionate love for one another for the rest of their lives.

Literary Work

Several years before marrying Leonard, Virginia had begun working on her first novel. The original title was **Melymbrosia**. After nine years and innumerable drafts, it was released in 1915 as **The Voyage Out**. Woolf used the book to experiment with several literary tools, including compelling and unusual narrative perspectives, dream-states and free association prose. Two years later, the Woolfs bought a used printing press and established Hogarth Press, their own publishing house operated out of their home, Hogarth House. Virginia and Leonard published some of their writing, as well as the work of Sigmund Freud, Katharine Mansfield and T.S. Eliot.

A year after the end of World War I, the Woolfs purchased Monk's House, a cottage in the village of Rodmell in 1919, and that same year Virginia published **Night and Day**, a novel set in Edwardian England. Her third novel **Jacob's Room** was published by Hogarth in 1922. Based on her brother Thoby, it was considered a significant departure from her earlier novels with its modernist elements. That year, she met author, poet

and landscape gardener Vita Sackville-West, the wife of English diplomat Harold Nicolson. Virginia and Vita began a friendship that developed into a romantic affair. Although their affair eventually ended, they remained friends until Virginia Woolf's death.

In 1925, Woolf received rave reviews for **Mrs. Dalloway**, her fourth novel. The mesmerizing story interweaved interior monologues and raised issues of feminism, mental illness and homosexuality in post-World War I England. **Mrs.**

Dalloway was adapted into a 1997 film, starring Vanessa Redgrave, and inspired **The Hours**, a 1998 novel by Michael Cunningham and a 2002 film adaptation. Her 1928 novel, **To the Lighthouse**, was another critical success and considered revolutionary for its stream of consciousness storytelling. The modernist classic examines the subtext of human relationships through the lives of the Ramsay family as they vacation on the Isle of Skye in Scotland.

Woolf found a literary muse in Sackville-West, the inspiration for Woolf's 1928 novel **Orlando**, which follows an English nobleman who mysteriously becomes a woman at the age of 30 and lives on for over three centuries of English history. The novel was a breakthrough for Woolf who received critical praise for the groundbreaking work, as well as a newfound level of popularity.

In 1929, Woolf published ***A Room of One's Own***, a feminist essay based on lectures she had given at women's colleges, in which she examines women's role in literature. In the work, she sets forth the idea that "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Woolf pushed narrative boundaries in her next work, ***The Waves*** (1931), which she described as "a play-poem" written in the voices of six different characters. Woolf published ***The Years***, the final novel published in her lifetime in 1937, about a family's history over the course of a generation. The following year she published ***Three Guineas***, an essay which continued the feminist themes of ***A Room of One's Own*** and addressed fascism and war.

Throughout her career, Woolf spoke regularly at colleges and universities, penned dramatic letters, wrote moving essays and self-published a long list of short stories. By her mid-forties, she had established herself as an intellectual, an innovative and influential writer and pioneering feminist. Her ability to balance dream-like scenes with deeply tense plot lines earned her incredible respect from peers and the public alike. Despite her outward success, she continued to regularly suffer from debilitating bouts of depression and dramatic mood swings.

Suicide and Legacy

Woolf's husband, Leonard, always by her side, was quite aware of

any signs that pointed to his wife's descent into depression. He saw, as she was working on what would be her final manuscript, ***Between the Acts*** (published posthumously in 1941), that she was sinking into deepening despair. At the time, World War II was raging on and the couple decided if England was invaded by Germany, they would commit suicide together, fearing that Leonard, who was Jewish, would be in particular danger. In 1940, the couple's London home was destroyed during the Blitz, the Germans bombing of the city.

Unable to cope with her despair, Woolf pulled on her overcoat, filled its pockets with stones and

walked into the River Ouse on March 28, 1941. As she waded into the water, the stream took her with it. The authorities found her body three weeks later. Leonard Woolf had her cremated and her remains were scattered at their home, Monk's House.

Although her popularity decreased after World War II, Woolf's work resonated again with a new generation of readers during the feminist movement of the 1970s. Woolf remains one of the most influential authors of the 21st century.

[<https://www.biography.com/writer/virginia-woolf>]



Themes, Motifs and Symbols in *A Room of One's Own*

THEMES

The Importance of Money

For the narrator of *A Room of One's Own*, money is the primary element that prevents women from having a room of their own, and thus, having money is of the utmost importance. Because women do not have power, their creativity has been systematically stifled throughout the ages. The narrator writes, "Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time . . ." She uses this quotation to explain why so few women have written successful poetry. She believes that the writing of novels lends itself more easily to frequent starts and stops, so women are more likely to write novels than poetry: women must contend with frequent interruptions because they are so often deprived of a room of their own in which to write. Without money, the narrator implies, women will remain in second place to their creative male counterparts. The financial discrepancy between men and women at the time of Woolf's writing perpetuated the myth that women were less successful writers.

The Subjectivity of Truth

In *A Room of One's Own*, the narrator argues that even history

is subjective. What she seeks is nothing less than "the essential oil of truth," but this eludes her, and she eventually concludes that no such thing exists. The narrator later writes, "When a subject is highly controversial, one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold." To demonstrate the idea that opinion is the only thing that a person can actually "prove," she fictionalizes her lecture, claiming, "Fiction is likely to contain more truth than fact." Reality is not objective: rather, it is contingent upon the circumstances of one's world. This argument complicates her narrative: Woolf forces her reader to question the veracity of everything she has presented as truth so far, and yet she also tells them that the fictional parts of any story contain more essential truth than the factual parts. With this observation she recasts the accepted truths and opinions of countless literary works.

MOTIFS

Interruptions

When the narrator is interrupted in *A Room of One's Own*, she generally fails to regain her original concentration, suggesting that women without private spaces of their own, free of interruptions, are doomed to difficulty and even failure in their

work. While the narrator is describing Oxbridge University in chapter one, her attention is drawn to a cat without a tail. The narrator finds this cat to be out of place, and she uses the sight of this cat to take her text in a different direction. The oddly jarring and incongruous sight of a cat without a tail—which causes the narrator to completely lose her train of thought—is an exercise in allowing the reader to experience what it might feel like to be a woman writer. Although the narrator goes on to make an interesting and valuable point about the atmosphere at her luncheon, she has lost her original point. This shift underscores her claim that women, who so often lack a room of their own and the time to write, cannot compete against the men who are not forced to struggle for such basic necessities.

Gender Inequality

Throughout *A Room of One's Own*, the narrator emphasizes the fact that women are treated unequally in her society and that this is why they have produced less impressive works of writing than men. To illustrate her point, the narrator creates a woman named Judith Shakespeare, the imaginary twin sister of William Shakespeare. The narrator uses Judith to show how society systematically discriminates against women. Judith is just as talented as her brother William, but while his talents are recognized and encouraged by

their family and the rest of their society, Judith's are underestimated and explicitly deemphasized. Judith writes, but she is secretive and ashamed of it. She is engaged at a fairly young age; when she begs not to have to marry, her beloved father beats her. She eventually commits suicide. The narrator invents the tragic figure of Judith to prove that a woman as talented as Shakespeare could never have achieved such success. Talent is an essential component of Shakespeare's success, but because women are treated so differently, a female Shakespeare would have fared quite differently even if she'd had as much talent as Shakespeare did.

SYMBOLS

A Room of One's Own

The central point of **A Room of One's Own** is that every woman needs a room of her own—something men are able to enjoy without question. A room of her own would provide a woman with the time and the space to engage in uninterrupted writing time. During Woolf's time, women rarely enjoyed these luxuries. They remained elusive to women, and, as a result, their art suffered. But Woolf is concerned with more than just the room itself. She uses the room as a symbol for many larger issues, such as privacy,

leisure time, and financial independence, each of which is an essential component of the countless inequalities between men and women. Woolf predicts that until these inequalities are rectified, women will remain second-class citizens and their literary achievements will also be branded as such.

[<https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/roomofonesown/>]

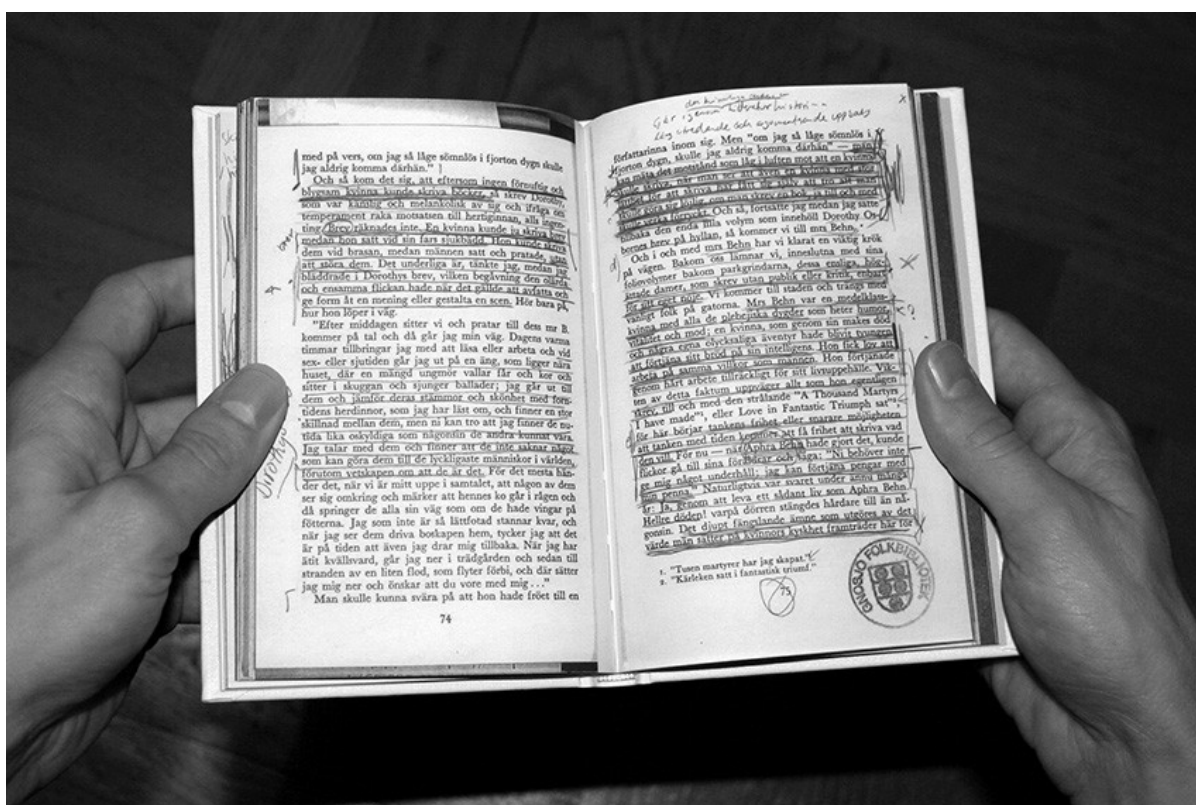


Image from **A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries**, artistic project by Kajsa Dahlberg (2016), a compilation of all the marginal notes made by readers in the Swedish library copies of Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay **A Room of One's Own**.

More info: <http://kajsadahberg.com/work/a-room-of-ones-own--a-thousand-libraries/>

A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf's feminist call to arms

I sit at my kitchen table to write this essay, as hundreds of thousands of women have done before me. It is not my own room, but such things are still a luxury for most women today. The table will do. I am fortunate I can make a living “by my wits,” as Virginia Woolf puts it in her famous feminist treatise, **A Room of One's Own** (1929).

That living enabled me to buy not only the room, but the house in which I sit at this table. It also enables me to pay for safe, reliable childcare so I can have time to write.

It is as true today, therefore, as it was almost a century ago when Woolf wrote it, that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” — indeed, write anything at all.

Still, Woolf's argument, as powerful and influential as it was then — and continues to be — is limited by certain assumptions when considered from a contemporary feminist perspective.

Woolf's book-length essay began as a series of lectures delivered to female students at the University of Cambridge in 1928. Its central feminist premise — that women writer's voices have been silenced through history and they need to fight for economic equality to be fully heard — has become so culturally pervasive as to enter the popular lexicon.

Julia Gillard's *A Podcast of One's*

Own, takes its lead from the essay, as does *Anonymous Was a Woman*, a prominent arts funding body based in New York.

Even the Bechdel-Wallace test, measuring the success of a narrative according to whether it features at least two named women conversing about something other than a man, can be seen to descend from the “Chloe liked Olivia” section of Woolf's book. In this section, the hypothetical characters of Chloe and Olivia share a laboratory, care for their children, and have conversations about their work, rather than about a man.

Woolf's identification of women as a poorly paid underclass still holds relevance today, given the gender pay gap. As does her emphasis on the hierarchy of value placed on men's writing compared to women's (which has led to the establishment of awards such as the Stella Prize).

Invisible women

In her book, Woolf surveys the history of literature, identifying a range of important and forgotten women writers, including novelists Jane Austen, George Eliot and the Brontes, and playwright Aphra Behn.

In doing so, she establishes a new model of literary heritage that acknowledges not only those women who succeeded, but those who were made

invisible: either prevented from working due to their sex, or simply cast aside by the value systems of patriarchal culture.

To illustrate her point, she creates Judith, an imaginary sister of the playwright Shakespeare.

What if such a woman had shared her brother's talents and was as adventurous, “as agog to see the world” as he was? Would she have had the freedom, support and confidence to write plays? Tragically, she argues, such a woman would likely have been silenced — ultimately choosing suicide over an unfulfilled life of domestic servitude and abuse.

In her short, passionate book, Woolf examines women's letter writing, showing how it can illustrate women's aptitude for writing, yet also the way in which women were cramped and suppressed by social expectations.

She also makes clear that the lack of an identifiable matrilineal literary heritage works to impede women's ability to write.

Indeed, the establishment of those major women writers in the 18th and 19th centuries (George Eliot, the Brontes et al), when “the middle-class woman began to write” is, Woolf argues, a moment in history “of greater importance than the Crusades or the War of the Roses”.

Male critics such as T.S. Eliot and Harold Bloom have identified a (male) writer's

relation to his precursors as necessary for his own literary production. But how, Woolf asks, is a woman to write if she has no model to look back on or respond to? If we are women, she wrote, “we think back through our mothers”.

Her argument inspired later feminist revisionist work of literary critics like Elaine Showalter, Sandra K. Gilbert and Susan Gubar who sought to restore the reputation of forgotten women writers and turn critical attention to women’s writing as a field worthy of dedicated study.

All too often in history, Woolf asserts, “Woman” is simply the object of the literary text — either the adored, voiceless beauty to whom the sonnet is dedicated or reflecting back the glow of man himself.

« Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.»

A Room of One’s Own returns that authority to both the woman writer and the imagined female reader whom she addresses.

Stream of consciousness

A Room of One’s Own also demonstrates several aspects of Woolf’s modernism. The early sections demonstrate her virtuoso stream of consciousness technique. She ruminates on women’s position in, and relation to, fiction while wandering through the university campus,

driving through country lanes, and dawdling over a leisurely, solo lunch.

Critically, she employs telling patriarchal interruptions to that flow of thought.

A beadle waves his arms in exasperation as she walks on a private patch of grass. A less-than-satisfactory dinner is served to the women’s college. A “deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman” turns her away from the library. These interruptions show the frequent disruption to the work of a woman without a room.

This is the lesson also imparted in Woolf’s 1927 novel **To the Lighthouse** where artist Lily Briscoe must shed the overbearing influence of Mr and Mrs Ramsay, a couple who symbolise Victorian culture, if she is to “have her vision”. The flights and flow of modernist technique are not possible without the time and space to write and think for herself.

A Room of One’s Own has been crucial to the feminist movement and women’s literary studies. But it is not without problems. Woolf admits her good fortune in inheriting £500 a year from an aunt.

Indeed her purse now “breed(s) ten-shilling notes automatically”.

Part of the purpose of the essay is to encourage women to make their living through writing.

But Woolf seems to lack an awareness of her own privilege and how much harder it is for

most women to fund their own artistic freedom. It is easy for her to advise against “doing work that one did not wish to do, and to do it like a slave, flattering and fawning”.

In her book, Woolf also criticises the “awkward break” in Charlotte Brontë’s **Jane Eyre** (1847), in which Brontë’s own voice interrupts the narrator’s in a passionate protest against the treatment of women.

Here, Woolf shows little tolerance for emotion, which has historically often been dismissed as hysteria when it comes to women discussing politics.

A Room of One’s Own ends with an injunction to work for the coming of Shakespeare’s sister, that woman forgotten by history. “So to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worthwhile”.

Such a woman author must have her vision, even if her work will be “stored in attics” rather than publicly exhibited.

The room and the money are the ideal, we come to see, but even without them the woman writer must write, must think, in anticipation of a future for her daughter-artists to come.

[<https://theconversation.com/guide-to-the-classics-a-room-of-ones-own-virginia-woolfs-feminist-call-to-arms-145398>]

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