

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf establishes, in a blend of essay and fiction, what has become equally a fine literary work and a seminal work of feminist criticism. The occasion that serves as a framing device for her discourse has the speaker honoring a request to address the graduating class of a women's college in 1928. For the occasion, the author in her personae as "Mary Seton" has been asked to speak on the topic of "women and fiction". Finding the topic deceptively simple, she muses on its meaning.

"When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant. They might mean simply a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austin; a tribute to the Brontes and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow . . . a respectful allusion to George Elliot. But at second sight the words seemed not so simple. The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion." In the voice of Mary Seton, Woolf goes on to lament that she can offer no refined nugget of wisdom for the students to "wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever" (Leaska 169-170).

On the first of these accounts, a great difficulty, for Woolf, arises in even knowing about women and what they are like. In her narrator's trip to the British Museum Library to find out, a pivotal discovery is that nearly everything written about women has been

written by *men*. Besides the dry anthropological accounts that might give someone a sense of the puberty rituals of south sea islanders, everything in the library is highly slanted and derogatory. All non-fiction works that take up the woman question seem angled at exposing her purported moral, mental, and physical inferiority. All fictional works seem to deal in extremes, painting woman as either goddess or seductress, virgin or whore, the center of creation or something less than human. And all of the fiction written by men, show women in relation to men, and reveal little or nothing about the relationship of women with other women.

When she turns her attention to fiction written by women, she finds of course that the history of female authorship and the English novel is very short, hardly granting one the moorings of a strong tradition. What's more, most of the early female novelists seem to be hampered in their genius by streaks of resentment, even outrage, at the treatment of women and the lack of equality, so that their full attention is never turned toward the development of their characters; instead, the narrative seems thinly autobiographical and broken by the woman author's inevitable urge to be either conciliatory or defiant--or both at turns--toward perceived male critics. For Woolf, this self-consciousness--quite valid in the earlier centuries of the English novel, when men held all positions of authority and authorship was not considered a woman's province--creates an undue burden and constraint that prevents most any woman writer from achieving her full artistic potential. She sees only Jane Austin and George Eliot as even beginning to realize their full creative potential, as they hide manuscripts from polite company, in Austin's case, or hide behind a masculine pseudonym, in Eliot's.

Woolf paints a vivid portrait of how an author even as skilled as Jane Austin, still had to work against the extra burden of the all-confining assumptions of patriarchy--not

only the nasty attitudes of male critics with a ready-made assumption that women should not be involved in the finest work of the mind, but also the simple, daily, societal constraints--the assumptions that women have not much need of leisure time, education, privacy, or money.

The central thesis of this eloquent work expresses Woolf's core conviction that to produce literary art a woman must have "500 pounds a year and a room of her own." She points out that the early Victorian parlor, where women like Jane Austen spent much of their time, was never conducive to real privacy or the work of the mind. Likewise, she delineates the effects of crushing poverty and subsistence living. Despite the rare exception, most male authors in the English literary cannon have lived lives of relative privilege, setting them free to pursue the literary life rather than scraping near the bottom, chained to the worst sorts of labour, merely to survive.

It is reasonable to assume that poverty and hard labour are significant barriers for anyone wishing to create. What isn't as readily clear, save for Woolf's brilliant analysis, is just the extent to which these very calamities represent the historical condition of women. Even the women of wealthy husbands usually possessed no control of the money, and lived somewhat as domestic slaves within their own homes. Add to this a society not merely indifferent, but sometimes positively hostile to the artistic and intellectual efforts of a woman, and the incredible difficulty for any woman prior to Woolf's time to receive an adequate education, and the picture is rounded out. In full view we have the reason the world has never yet produced a female Shakespeare. Woolf offers a challenge against this very injustice in a spirit of keen wit and irony, of sad and funny lament. For her, to be deeply embroiled in the bitterness of it, or indeed any other negative emotion, is to be the prisoner within yourself, and barred at the most

essential level from that capacity to create at the finest level.

For Woolf's narrator, Mary Seton, the realization of inequity is galvanized during a trip to "Oxbridge", where she realizes that women are not permitted to enter the hallowed halls of one of the world's greatest libraries without the escort of a male fellow of the college, or a written introduction. As Ruth Evans states, "Touring the fictional worlds of Oxbridge and the British Museum Library, the work vividly realizes the relationship between male privilege and the cramping of female potential but resists delivering a transparent truth about women's situation" (Sage 542). The need for *permission* from masculine authority figures plays predominately, without the bitterness and resentment for one moment eclipsing a sense of the absurdity and irony in the situation, and without slipping into ridiculous stereotypes or a felt need to demonise either sex.

Woolf recognizes that the masculine principle resides within woman and the feminine principle within man, and that creative genius can only flourish where these forces are harmonized into a sort of androgynous power and a person who is not overly conscious of being of a particular sex.

The apex of her realization is to see past the great disembodied masculine authority figure that Milton "taught her to adore", to the the plain, clear, thrilling sky beyond. But lest one think that her liberation ideology ties up merely to anti-authoritarianism and mysticism, Woolf also makes quite plain the hard cold economic realities entailed. It is only by the endowment of her deceased aunt that she is able to live as a woman of independent means and slowly disentangle herself from any concern with the opinions of others, setting her mind free. In the hassles of the marketplace, the burdens of menial labour, and the hardships of rearing children, people of

either sex may find their capacity for intellectual and artistic endeavor truncated, as the horrible Manx cat with no tail, that scurries into the narrator's vision, changing the colour and tone of her experience at the venerable men's college at "Oxbridge". As Woolf reveals, social and economic injustices must be righted for the finer things of the spirit to prevail.

Works Cited

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