



A Room of One's Own

Virginia Woolf
(1929)

Virginia Woolf's extended essay *A Room of One's Own* is based on the lectures the writer gave at the first two colleges for women at Cambridge University in 1928 and demonstrated her ability to write persuasive expository prose. In this work Woolf defines **the question of women and fiction** as being three connected questions: **women and what they are like; women and the fiction they write; women and what is written about them.** Woolf points out the obstacles and prejudices that women writers have had to face and explores the differences between women as *objects* of representation and women as *authors* of representation. **The main obstacles** she saw included

economic dependence on men, entrapment in marriage, and the age-old prejudices embodied in academic institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge, which in Woolf's day rarely admitted women.

Woolf's point was that it was necessary to change the forms of literature because most literature had been 'made by men out of their own needs for their own uses'. In the last chapter it speaks about the possibility of **an androgynous mind** in which both masculine and feminine faculties are used.

This volume has become a **feminist classic**, addressing the challenges faced by female intellectuals and writers.



Shakespeare's sister

This passage includes the last pages of Woolf's essay where Woolf imagines what happened to talented women of the past and what would have happened if Shakespeare had had a brilliantly talented sister.

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Part VI

How can I further encourage you to go about the business of life? Young women, I would say, and please attend, for the peroration¹ is beginning, you are, in my opinion, **disgracefully** ignorant. You have never made a discovery of any sort of importance. You have never shaken an empire or led an army into battle. The plays of Shakespeare are not by you, and you have never introduced a barbarous race to the blessings² of civilization. What is your excuse? It is all very well for you to say, pointing to the streets and squares and forests of the globe **swarming** with black and white and coffee-coloured inhabitants, all busily engaged in traffic and enterprise and love-making, we have had other work on our hands. Without our doing, those seas would be unsailed and those fertile lands a desert. We have borne and bred³ and washed and taught, perhaps to the age of six or seven years, the one thousand six hundred and twenty-three million human beings who are, according to statistics, at present in existence, and that, allowing that some had help⁴, takes time.

There is truth in what you say – I will not deny it⁵. But at the same time may I remind you that there have been at least two colleges for women in existence in England since the year 1866; that after the year 1880 a married woman was allowed by law to possess her own property; and that in 1919 – which is a whole nine years ago she was given a vote? May I also remind you that most of the professions have been open to you for close on ten years now? When you reflect upon these immense privileges and the length of time during which they have been enjoyed, and the fact that there must be at this moment some two thousand women capable of earning over five hundred a year in one way or another, you will agree that the excuse of lack of opportunity, training, encouragement, leisure and money no longer holds good⁶. Moreover, the economists are telling us that Mrs Seton has had too many children. You must, of course, go on bearing children, but, so they say, in twos and threes, not in tens and twelves.

Thus, with some time on your hands and with some book learning in your brains – you have had enough of the other kind, and are sent to college partly, I suspect, to be uneducated – surely you should embark upon another stage of your very long, very laborious and highly obscure career. A thousand pens are ready to suggest what you should do and what effect you will have. My own suggestion is a little fantastic, I admit; I prefer, therefore, to put it in the form of fiction.

- 1 attend, for the peroration. Ascoltatemi, poiché la mia perorazione.
- 2 blessings. Benedizioni.
- 3 We have borne and bred. Abbiamo partorito e allevato.
- 4 allowing that some had help. Ammettendo che alcune siano state aiutate.
- 5 I will not deny it. Non lo nego.
- 6 no longer holds good. Non regge più.



I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister; but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee's life of the poet. She died young – alas⁷, she never wrote a word. She lies buried where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle. Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here to-night, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us **in the flesh**. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her. For my belief is that if we live another century or so – I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals – and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves; if we look past Milton's bogey⁸, for no human being should shut out the view; if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to **cling** to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing⁹ her life from the lives of the unknown who were her **forerunners**, as her brother did before her, she will be born. As for¹⁰ her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part¹¹, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I **maintain** that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while¹².

- 7 alas. Ahimè.
 8 Milton's bogey. Lo spauracchio di Milton (grande poeta inglese vissuto nel XVII secolo).
 9 Drawing. Attingendo.
 10 As for. Per quanto riguarda.
 11 effort on our part. Sforzo da parte nostra.
 12 is worth while. Vale la pena.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 precursors
- 2 shamefully
- 3 body and soul
- 4 crowded
- 5 insist
- 6 so
- 7 remain attached
- 8 opinion, conviction

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ lines 1-13 again and complete the table with the arguments for and against women's equality.

Arguments against	Arguments for

3 READ lines 14-25 again and list the women's achievements mentioned by Woolf.



4 READ the text to the end again and answer the following questions.

- 1 What female activity is Woolf hinting at through the metaphor of Shakespeare's sister?
- 2 What conditions should women meet in order to take it up?
- 3 Where else will 'Shakespeare's sister' draw life from?

➤ **COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

5 EXPLAIN how Woolf develops her argument. How would you define her tone? What is her aim?

6 SUM up what she really means by 'rooms of our own'. What movement of the contemporary age do her words anticipate?

➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

7 DISCUSS with the rest of the class supporting your answers with examples. Do you agree that women are considered equal to men nowadays or do you think they are still regarded as second-class citizens? Is it the same all over the world?