

A Room of One's Own and "Modern Fiction"

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One of the first things to notice about *A Room of One's Own* is that it is not a typical lecture. It rambles and flows back and forth, in and out. It is more narrative than logic. It breaks many of the conventions of a formal address. Why does Virginia Woolf choose to do this? Why choose this style, this method? One reason is to turn predominantly masculine, or traditional, thinking on its head in order to undermine its authority. There is another reason for her approach, however—one that rises from her most basic ideas about what literature and writing should be and do. Her ideas about what makes for good writing are contained in this text, if indirectly. Grasping these ideas allows the reader to see how she is able to write so convincingly, particularly since there seems to be such a significant lack of argument involved. Where she does not tell the reader what she thinks, she shows them. But why does she add an undergraduate in a boat, and why a river? She is doing more than simply trying to keep the reader interested with a few colorful descriptions. She is showing us what she values most about writing while at the same time artfully expressing her views on women and fiction.

Woolf is a modernist, concerned with illuminating life through the subjective consciousness and its impressions. Her seemingly random details and descriptions, in fact, work together to paint a picture, to leave a skillfully crafted impression upon the reader. She believes the best door to the human mind and heart is through the subjective. She places us inside the minds of others, where we, more often than not, find a little of ourselves. Eudora Welty writes, in her foreword to *To the Lighthouse*, "The interior of its [the novel's] character's lives is where we experience everything. And in the

subjective—contrary to what so many authors find there—lies its clarity” (viii). Part of the power of *A Room of One’s Own* is its ability to engage the depths of human psychology where logical analysis and rhetoric might fail to do so.

Though the problems with which Woolf is presented in *A Room of One’s Own* are significantly attached to historical problems, her main role in the work is as a literary critic rather than historian, though on the surface she does not seem to say much about style, method and criticism in it. She mentions Jane Austen’s sentences, how material concerns influence writers, a few words about the structure of the novel and that “fiction is like a spider’s web” (Woolf, *AROO* 35). These themes seem to be contained in greater detail throughout the work, but hidden, just beneath the surface. There are other places, however, where Woolf speaks more directly about the aims and methods of writing. In her 1925 essay, “Modern Fiction,” she claims that it is Life that good writing must search for and somehow capture. She writes: “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (287-88). Life is like the sea, with its ebb and flow; it is like a river, constantly changing, yet always the same. Navigating these waters is the ultimate goal of writing for her, but this alone does not account for her use of the subjective, of impressions, in her own work.

She warns that life must be attended to and navigated without poisoning it with something foreign, something that is not real. This is why she does not structure *A Room of One’s Own* like a formal argument, intended “to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievance” (43). Her method is non-argumentative. To a certain degree, she is arguing, or making a case; however, this is only through presenting the facts and demonstrating how she came to her

conclusions, which, a surface reading may suggest, are merely that a woman needs five hundred pounds a year and a room of her own to write. What other conclusions may be found in the work exist below the surface. She accuses Charlotte Bronte, whom she regards as a genius, of falling into this trap of wanting to preach or proclaim an injury. She reads in Bronte an “awkward break,” a “jerk,” and an “indignation” that insures that “she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted” (50). These breaks disrupt the natural rhythm and integrity of her work. She further states that Bronte “will write of herself where she should write of her characters” (50). This kind of unwelcome preaching, this sudden appearance of indignation, disturbs the sense of the “real” that Bronte is trying to create in her work. Jane Austen contrasts Bronte in this aspect. Things that Austen might have felt have crept their way into her novels, but not at the expense of the reality or life of the novel. Rather than sermonizing on the treatment of women or the condition of the novel, Austen allows her characters to express their opinions, as Henry Tilney does in *Northanger Abbey*, with appropriateness to the rest of the text.

Woolf is acutely aware of the difficulties surrounding the term “real,” but does not shy away from examining it and demanding it. She claims that the real would be “something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun.... But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates” (70). The association here between what is real and what is ordinary, or seemingly incidental, is found throughout Woolf’s own work. If the real is found in these ordinary objects and

occurrences, then life must be articulated in these terms as well. The dusty road and the scrap of newspaper should somehow relate to life, but how does this work itself out?

In order to represent life, the real must be upheld. She claims it is “the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit [life], whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible” (Woolf, “MF” 288). The “alien” and “external” here are the sermonizing and arguing she refers to elsewhere. Therefore the real should be represented as it exists—seemingly random and arbitrary. On this basis, she praises James Joyce because “he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious, whether it be probability, or coherence or any other of these signposts which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader when called upon to imagine what he can neither touch nor see” (288). He refuses to be guided by convention, but upholds the real, and in this case, the purely subjective, in search of capturing life.

What is the difficulty, then, in representing the real as it exists? What about it is so difficult that even a genius like Charlotte Bronte was unable to do so consistently? If fiction is like a spider’s web, then we must also keep in mind that fiction is one created by clumsy humans. Therefore, she reminds us, “these webs 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” (Woolf, *AROO* 35). The life of the author, the “grossly material things,” have an effect on what the author writes and how. Because fiction is attached to these things, it can, and typically does, fall short somewhere: “The imagination falters under the enormous strain. The insight is confused; it can no longer distinguish between the true and the false; it has no longer the strength to go on with the vast labor that calls at every moment for the use of

so many different faculties” (51). The “real” in life and the “real” in fiction should be one and the same, but life and fiction are distinct. The real here seems to be the spiritual aspect of the thing, while life and fiction are physical states of being. The frequent inability to distinguish between the two, between “the true and the false,” characterized either by a lack of care on the author’s part or an inability to hold all of the elements of their created structure in place, is the source of the disruptions found in Bronte and elsewhere. All of the elements of a work must be held precisely and carefully in place or the whole thing suffers: “The whole structure . . . is one of infinite complexity, because it is thus made up of so many different judgments, of so many different kinds of emotion” (51). An unusual ability to hold nuances of thought and emotion in place is needed to create these structures.

The need to hold all these elements carefully in place is further complicated by the fact that writing must be attached so closely to life. Woolf writes, “This shape . . . starts in one the kind of emotion that is appropriate to it. But that emotion at once blends itself with others, for the ‘shape’ is not made by the relation of stone to stone but by the relation of human being to human being” (50-51). A writer may confuse what is trivial with what is real, or be unable to hold the real in life and the real in fiction in a proper relationship for long.

It is the mark of good fiction that it makes us believe that what we are reading is in some sense real. What gives a novel lasting importance for Woolf is what she calls “integrity,” which is the feeling we get when we begin to believe that what we are reading “is the truth” (51). This is more than simply being convinced of the accuracy of an account or of a reasonable course of events. She sees the truth here as being something that is revealed through the text. Therefore, it is something that may have

been previously unknown or disputed. The traditional method of convincing one of the truth of something is to make an argument; however, we already see that Woolf is opposed to this approach. She is in favor of a more subtle method that involves taking the readers through the thought processes that led to a particular conviction so that they may experience for themselves the choices and emotions involved at every turn. The majority of *A Room of One's Own* is written to this end; it follows the narrator through her experience of writing the text at hand.

Terms such as “life,” “reality,” and “truth” are likely to be embraced and held up by any critic, but how do they manifest themselves for Woolf? This question leads to one of the most significant passages concerning the novel in *A Room of One's Own*, where Woolf likens the novel to “a creation owning a certain looking-glass likeness to life” (50). But what does Woolf see in the looking glass? Is it the objects that surround us in life? Is it ourselves? Is it the characters that make up our stories? In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf criticizes Mr. Galsworthy, Mr. Wells, and Mr. Bennett, her predecessors at the time, for being materialists. She claims that when they look in the mirror, they see the body and not the spirit. She accuses Mr. Wells of “scarcely having the leisure to realize, or forgetting to think important, the crudity and coarseness of his human beings” (286). Significantly, she attaches this critique to the accusation that he attempts to take up “the work that ought to have been discharged by Government Officials,” again making the connection between sermonizing and failing to be “real” or “true” (286).

Woolf herself may be seen as a materialist at times on account of her generous use of symbols and her interest in “things,” often observed first in the physical sense. She frequently uses things and urges her listeners in *A Room of One's Own* to “Think of things in themselves” (70). This sounds like a detachment from the human, but, on the

contrary, it is precisely the human that sees these things, that is able to think of things in themselves. It is this closeness to the things, in fact to the spirit of things rather than the physical attributes of them, that allows the writer to be most effective. When she says, “He [the writer] must not look or question what is being done. Rather, he must pluck the petals from a rose or watch the swans float calmly down the river,” she is asserting that he must have this closeness to be a good writer (67). He must attach himself to the things of life and to life itself. She connects this intimacy to the things of life with upholding the real.

Where, then, is this life, this “luminous halo,” to be found in literature? What does it look like? Though she describes writing as a spider’s web, “attached to life at all four corners,” she asserts, “Shakespeare’s plays, for example, seem to hang there complete by themselves” (35). He is so close to life and so able to see the real that “his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded” (43). She claims that Shakespeare was unhindered by an urge to preach and able to hold the delicate structure of his plays in place so that they have a life of their own, which is also one reason why we know so little about Shakespeare. She also suggests that Jane Austen had some of this ability and that Charlotte Bronte would have had it, had she written with fewer impediments.

Somewhere near the center of *A Room of One’s Own*, the reader comes across a rather strange description of the novel: “It is a structure leaving a shape on the mind’s eye, built now in squares, now pagoda shaped, now throwing out wings and arcades, now solidly compact and domed like the Cathedral of Saint Sophia at Constantinople” (50). This description may inspire one to look for patterns and shapes in Woolf’s own text. There, they will find a taxi cab, flashing leaves, sauces and plain brown gravy, faceless beadles, furred scholars and women in fur coats walking their dogs, and a river running

through and around everything. These seemingly random objects and descriptions paint a picture that may contain the real power of *A Room of One's Own*. She visits Oxbridge in October, in the autumn of its existence, and yet when she visits Fernham, she is tempted to say it is now springtime, since for Fernham, perhaps, symbolically it is. While the young Oxbridge undergraduate is steadily navigating the waters of the river, the fictional narrator is scarcely able, scarcely bold enough, to drop a line of thought into these waters. Descriptions of dinners and the construction of buildings give the reader a feel of Woolf's picture of the world that no sermon, no argument, no plea, could. And it is through a taxi cab, holding a young man and a girl, and the massive force of the river that the entire work seems to float down, that she captures life and convinces us that she is telling the truth.

Works Cited

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