

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Virginia Woolf

In 1940 Virginia Woolf remarked to her friend Ethel Smyth, "There has never been a woman's autobiography." The remark has puzzled and provoked many readers, since in the simplest sense it is historically wrong but also because it is strictly true of Woolf herself. She never wrote an autobiography. And yet she was often very close to it, in her novels, her approximately 4,000 letters (six volumes of them published in 1975-80), and her powerful personal essays. Moreover, her father was Leslie Stephen, author of biographies of major English authors and editor of twenty-six volumes of the highly respected *Dictionary of National Biography*. Life-writing was keenly interesting to her, as was all writing and women's writing in particular.

All this comes together in her brilliant personal essay, *A Room of One's Own*, which is based upon two lectures Woolf gave at Newnham and Girton colleges in Cambridge University in October, 1928. She had been asked, she says, "to speak about women and fiction"), and the title comes from her basic argument that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." (Ch. 1) So in the six chapters she expands on these two needs: the humiliations women have been subjected to historically, partially as a result of lacking them; how women have been portrayed in literature by men; how women have written about themselves; and how women can now use the greater opportunities they have today.

The first chapter focuses on women's lack of access to money, when their property, if any, was managed by their husbands, who therefore used it mainly for themselves and their sons. Universities such as Cambridge and Oxford, which she lumps together as "Oxbridge," were endowed with rivers of gold and silver and were only for sons. Without directly mentioning her own family, she could be referring to how her brothers were sent to fine schools and colleges, while she and her sisters were not. Her father thought education was for men. In one heart-breaking incident she tells of how she wished to see Milton's manuscript of "Lycidas" in an "Oxbridge" library, but could not. Women could enter only with men.

In the second chapter she, as a representative woman, goes to the British Museum in London and looks up subjects like "Women and Poverty," only to find a long list of sub-topics leading to books written by men. For an explanation, she turns to men's anger at women and the men's egos. The paradox, developed in chapter three, is that for centuries male writers, from dramatists like Sophocles, Shakespeare and Racine, to great novelists like Tolstoy have nevertheless created very great female characters. But what women characters might women have created if they had ever had the opportunity? What, she asks, would Shakespeare's sister have written?

Chapter four is more like a critical essay on the great women writers of the past and surveys of women writers today. But the critical comments are still very personal because of the profoundly immediate importance of these writers to Woolf. In chapter five she opens saying that women's writing has become much more various, on archaeology, aesthetics, travel and diplomacy, and is becoming more artful and subtle. "The impulse towards autobiography may be spent," she writes, thus admitting the opposite of her remark in 1940, but also implying that autobiography as such is primitive and artless. So she metaphorically pulls a new novel off the shelf, "*Life's Adventure*," by a "Mary Carmichael" to see how it advances the cause. (There was indeed a Marie Carmichael Stopes (1880-1958), an advocate of birth control, who published a novel called *Love's Creation* in 1928, using only her first and middle names.) In it Woolf finds (or imagines) the sentence "Chloe liked Olivia," which leads her to the heretofore forbidden, but to Woolf very immediate, topic of lesbianism. "Sometimes women do like women," she says frankly and rather disingenuously, going on to argue that women should now write about this and other once suppressed topics.

In these ways Woolf clearly writes about herself and intimate, important issues in her life without writing long, full-size autobiography. At other times, she is also more outspoken than in the quasi-invention of "*Life's Adventure*." At the end she returns to her basic argument that to write a woman needs money (500 Pounds a year, which she says she has been willed by an aunt, as the minimum) and a room of her own. She then quotes from the famous anthologist Arthur Quiller Couch, editor of *The Oxford Book*

of *English Verse*, writing that most of the great English poets of the Nineteenth Century had had enough money to go to universities and obtain the leisure to write. For this Woolf has sometimes been attacked as an elitist. Alice Waters, for instance, has pointed out that Harriet Jacobs ("Linda Brent"), author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, had no such middleclass security and privacy. But Quiller Couch acknowledged a few exceptions to his generalization, e.g. John Keats, and so implicitly does Woolf. Woolf was writing an artful personal essay, about the primary conditions of her own life, and for women essentially like herself. Simultaneously, she was arguing for all women's rights and their equality with men – economic, political, and literary.

#### Questions for Further Study:

1. Quentin Bell says in *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* that "in *A Room of One's Own* one hears Virginia speaking," that in it "she gets very close to her conversational style...the conversational voice is there." Select several passages that seem to you to illustrate this and explain why you think so.
2. In the beginning of Chapter 6 Woolf muses that on an ordinary day in London, "Nobody cared a straw" for "the development by the average woman of a prose style completely expressive of her mind," and that she didn't blame them. But she herself obviously does care. Why is this so important?
3. Woolf and her husband Leonard were the founders of the Hogarth Press, which they ran out of their own house and which published books by themselves and many of their very talented friends. It took a lot of work and distracted them from many other projects. But she once wrote in her diary, after turning down a book she did not think was very good, that she could write a better book on the same subject herself, "off my own bat, for the Press if I wish!" "Yes," she concluded, "I'm the only woman in England free to write what I like." How does *A Room...* possibly fulfill that freedom?