

A History of the Struggles of Women in Literature and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

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Abstract

Feminists would argue that women in literature must be considered peripheral voices, as they have been repressed in the arts for centuries.

Liberal Feminists argue that there has been a gradual progress regarding the representation of women writers, female characters and the portrayal of women in literature of the last century. Novelist Maria Edgworth wrote in *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1975); 'women of literature are much more numerous of late than they were a few years ago. They make a class in society, they fill the public eye, and have acquired a degree of consequence and appropriate character'.¹ Whilst the development of publishing and technology has led to literature becoming more accessible to a wider audience, it also arguable that society's attitudes to women have changed, allowing women to become more successful in educational achievement and careers. Over the last century, there have been texts very influential and inspiring to women in literature, for instance, feminist writer Ethel Smyth published '*March of the Women*' (1911) which was dedicated to Emmeline Pankhurst. Not only was *March of the Women* very ahead of it's time, but it was also a strong statement to women to stand against repression and communicate powerful messages which would reject the expectations of women to be subordinate in a patriarchal society.

On the other hand, women are still underrepresented in publishing. According to *The Guardian*, women fill most of the jobs in the publishing industry – apart from the senior executives who are mostly men, which is not only unjust but

¹ Edgworth, Maria, *Letters for Literary Ladies*, (Nabu Press, 2014) p. 97

explains why there is still lack of female representation in canonical literature today. Furthermore, there is a continuous gender pay gap in publishing, which in the last survey (by Bookcareers.com) was revealed to be 16% in the UK. One writer who addresses this underrepresentation is Virginia Woolf. Critic Jane Goldman states that Feminist writer Woolf is 'rightly the founder of feminist literary criticism'.² Woolf was a brilliantly perceptive and articulate thinker, incredibly well educated, and as a result, member of The 'Bloomsbury Group'; which was made up of privileged and extremely intelligent creative thinkers who attended regular meetings in London at the home of Woolf's sister artist Vanessa Bell, supporting each other and sharing ideas, where it became apparent within this inner circle that Woolf was immensely influential and inspiring to women. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) explores the prejudice and discrimination women face when writing literature. Woolf writes that 'Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman'³, highlighting the inequality between genders. Perhaps Woolf is referring to the Bronte sisters Emily, Charlotte and Anne, who published their poetry collection 'Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell', and whose decisions to use pseudonyms stemmed from a fear of discrimination solely for being female writers. There are many journal articles which support the point Woolf is making, for example in the article 'From the Stacks: "Virginia Woolf on Women"' critic Louise Bogan writes 'As the shelves are empty of women's epics, tragedies and the critical examinations of men, so are they full of men's volumes dedicated to investigations of, and opinions on, women'.⁴

Not only in *A Room of One's Own*, but in Virginia Woolf's popular fiction there are strong female characters who are a reflection of her own feminist values and who are central to the stories, for instance Mrs Dalloway – the title '*Mrs Dalloway*' itself suggests that Clarissa Dalloway is an extension of her

² Goldman, J. (2007); *The feminist criticism of Virginia Woolf*. In G. Plain & S. Sellers (Eds.), *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007) pp.66 -84

³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (London : Penguin 2004)

⁴ <https://newrepublic.com/article/117235/louise-bogan-reviews-virginia-woolfs-room-ones-own>

husband as opposed to a woman in her own right. However, as the novel progresses, she is referred to more frequently as her first name, which suggests Clarissa is claiming her identity back. Woolf's presentation of Clarissa as a strong protagonist communicates feminist values and ideals. The very first sentence of the novel is 'Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself'.⁵ Clarissa is self-assured and independent, which would have been read by an audience as both radical and revolutionary in a century with less dominant female characters in popular fiction. The general portrayal of women in the arts was simply a reflection of women's powerlessness in society. Sir William Blackstone, an English jurist, judge and politician, well known for writing for the *Commentaries of the Laws of England*, wrote that 'by marriage, the husband and wife are / person in law: that is, the very being of legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband'. Woolf addresses the discrimination of women at a time where women were indeed subordinate to men, by highlighting the underrepresentation of female writers in canonical literature; 'For most of history, Anonymous was a woman', and 'Why are women... so much more interesting to men than men are to women?'

One of the most poignant quotations in *A Room of One's Own* is 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'⁶. Woolf points out that the women who *do* have more status are indeed the women of the upper classes, as the room represents their own independence, which upper class women are more likely to possess. She is still arguing that the inequalities between men and women exist, yet women with money and consequently status, possess more power and freedom than women of the working class. One of Woolf's most famous characters is Miss Kilman, a working class teacher who is illustrated as weak and subordinate. Her lack of money prevents her from gaining happiness; 'why should she have to suffer when other women, like Clarissa Dalloway, escaped'.⁷ Woolf regularly

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Wordsworth Editions, 2003) p. 3

⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* p. 93

⁷ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 91

highlights Miss Kilman's jealousy of upper class women's economic power and privilege. Marxist-Feminists would argue that working class women face a dual-oppression, and I feel Woolf wrote this in *A Room of One's Own* to highlight the oppression of working-class women who struggle even more to gain acceptance and equality.

In the essay *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf describes what it would be like if Shakespeare had a sister;

'she was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers'.⁸

She makes an imperative point about the lack of choices and freedom women have in comparison with men, hinting that one of the institutions which has promoted this inequality throughout history is the education system. Although feminists would argue there has been a gradual move towards equality in the last one hundred years, with the first women offered places at the University of Oxford in 1920 and the University of Cambridge in 1921, it is evident that the primary socialisation of children heavily influences subject choices. This could prevent young girls from pursuing more traditionally "academic" subjects as they are taught roles with an emphasis on nurturing and caring rather than academia. However, in 1956, legal reforms stated that women teachers and civil servants should receive equal pay, which gave women an incentive to pursue careers and excel in education. There has also been an increase in the number of female students attending university and entering higher education with successful results, which suggests a gradual move towards a more equal work environment. In 1975, The Sex Discrimination Act made it illegal to discriminate against women in work, education and training, an act made possible by the Women's Movement. Furthermore, the family as an institution

⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 19

further encourages these traditional patriarchal gender roles through primary socialisation, instilling gender roles into children from an early age. For example, if the texts the children are reading, for example young children's fiction, are encouraging gender roles, the gender ideals and expectations will continue to be reinforced. It is essential that there is wider representation of women writers, publishers and characters in order for this inequality to be addressed.

To conclude, although there has been a gradual progression towards equal opportunities for women, due to society's changing attitudes to women, influential feminists such as Woolf pushing literary boundaries, and laws to enable to women to achieve success academically, women, especially working-class women, remain peripheral voices as they still face discrimination and oppression in literature; particularly in writing and publishing. As Woolf famously wrote, 'it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare'.⁹

⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 50

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