Week Nine:
Critical Engagement with Feminist Literature

Monday, October 22. Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own,” Chapters One and Two. Dr. Dewey will be presenting with the Department of Corrections at the International Corrections and Prison Association in Montreal, Canada on Wednesday-Friday this week. Please use the 100 minutes you would normally spend in class on Monday and Wednesday to do the following:

1. Watch Professor Paul Fry’s 52 minute lecture at Yale University on feminist literary criticism: 
   https://oyc.yale.edu/english/engl-300/lecture-20
2. Use what you learn to work on your book review and related presentations for weeks 13-15

Readings for this Week

Available on WyoCourse as:

Virginia Woolf. 1929. *A Room of One’s Own*, Chapters One and Two

You may consult related sources online in open access format by consulting the “Additional Resources” section of this document.

Context and Relevance

You would be justified at this point in the semester in saying, “Hey, wait a minute! Virginia Woolf published *A Room of One’s Own* in 1929. Why are we reading a text written during the first wave of feminism when in Weeks Ten and Eleven we will focus on the fourth and most contemporary wave?” Yet reading the assigned chapters is useful because Woolf so clearly articulates some of the basic problems that continue to face women artists, activists, and aspiring scholars. First among these is on page four: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved.” Later, on page 23, she reiterates this central economic problem in the form of rhetorical questions: “Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect had poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?”

Throughout the text we read for this week, Woolf stays close to the topic of “Women and Fiction”, which she was asked to speak about to a group at a women’s college, as her fictional protagonist, Mary, meanders from a university campus — where she is asked to leave by a staff member because women are not allowed — the library, where she is again excluded for the same reason, and then gains admission to eat at the all-male university, which serves a lavish lunch. She then eats a spare meal at the women’s college, which causes her to reflect on women’s poverty relative to men. When she returns to London, she visits the library and is dismayed to see the number of works written by men that disparage women’s intelligence, abilities, and otherwise justify their oppression. She dismisses these sexist texts, on page 28, as having “been
written in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth" and overcomes her initial
shock and anger when she realizes their true purpose (pages 29-30):

“Possibly when the professor insisted a little too emphatically upon the inferiority
of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority of women, but with his
own superiority. That was what he was protecting rather hot-headedly and with
too much emphasis, because it was a jewel to him of the rarest price. Life for both
sexes...calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps,
creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-
confidence we are as babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this
imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that
other people are inferior to one self...for there is no end to the pathetic devices
of the human imagination.”

As you practice your critical reading strategies with Virginia Woolf’s text, remember that
feminist literature and feminist literary criticism take as many approaches as there are individual
feminists and there is no one “right” way to engage in it. The goal of reading chapters assigned
for this week, and completing the related assignment due at the end of the semester, is to practice
utilizing the feminist theories and concepts we have learned about in our twelve weeks of class
together as a means to interpret a work of fiction. As you do so, you will want to consider the
style, tone, and, of course, the content of the assigned text as a means to build your skills to
further engage with this topic on Week Twelve.

Reading Questions

1. Consider the power of perspective as you choose two or more of the assigned texts,
ideally ones that take different perspectives on issues related to our class. Ask yourself
how the author or authors might read the two chapters from Virginia Woolf’s A Room of
One’s Own based on what you know of their work. For instance, what would the
Combahee River Collective have to say about the privilege that Woolf enjoys as a result
of an inheritance from an aunt that allows her to visit universities while reflecting on
questions related to women’s place in the art and literature of the time? How might Mary
Wollstonecraft, who advocated so passionately for women’s right to be educated, regard
Woolf’s criticism of the poor conditions of Fernham, the women’s college in comparison
with much richer and male-only Oxbridge?

2. Woolf takes her readers on a journey through a number of physical spaces where art
and literature are regularly created or shared, including universities, libraries, and the
cities that surround them. Visiting these physical spaces through her descriptions of
them—particularly her descriptions of her exclusions from them—makes the reader
keenly feel the challenges facing women writers and artists of the time. Why do you
think she chose this strategy, rather than simply listing the problems facing women who
wanted to engage in creative work?

3. It can be tempting to dismiss work written in another historical era as irrelevant to
contemporary life. Writing, art, and other creative areas remain unfortunately difficult
to break into and pose socioeconomic barriers for individuals irrespective of
background. Yet are there aspects of Woolf’s argument and the examples she uses to support it that remain true today for those who want to pursue art?

**Additional Resources**

1. A brief review of *A Room of One’s Own* as one of the 100 best books of all time: [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/05/100-best-nonfiction-books-no-45-a-room-of-ones-own-by-virginia-woolf-shakespeares-sister-seton-beton](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/05/100-best-nonfiction-books-no-45-a-room-of-ones-own-by-virginia-woolf-shakespeares-sister-seton-beton)

2. A comprehensive review of reputable online resources available about Virginia Woolf by the British Library: [https://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpsubject/literature/authors/woolfvirginia/woolf.html](https://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpsubject/literature/authors/woolfvirginia/woolf.html)
Critical engagement with feminist literature

Week Nine

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

- Preparation for Weeks 12 on applying feminist analysis to literature
- Published in 1929 (first wave era)
- Woolf clearly articulates basic problems that continue to face women artists, activists, & aspiring scholars
- “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved” (p. 4)
Central economic problem facing women

- “Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect had poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?” (p. 23)
- Stays close to the topic of “Women and Fiction”
- Asked to speak at a women’s college

Strategic choices in style/plot

- Mary meanders through a university campus, library, lunch at the men’s university, dinner at the women’s college, then back to London and the library
- Reflects on sexism in each site
  - Excluded from campus and library
  - Lavish meal at all-male university
  - Spare meal at under-funded women’s college
  - Reflects on women’s poverty relative to men
These texts were “written in the red light of emotion rather than the white light of truth…Possibly when the professor insisted a little too emphatically upon the inferiority of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority of women, but with his own superiority. That was what he was protecting rather hot-headedly and with too much emphasis, because it was a jewel to him of the rarest price. Life for both sexes calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself…for there is no end to the pathetic devices of the human imagination” (p. 29-30).

- Remember that feminist literature and feminist literary criticism take many approaches
- There is no “right” way to engage in it
- Practice utilizing the feminist theories and concepts we learned in the past nine weeks
- Consider style, tone, and content to build your critical reading and analytical skills
Consider the power of perspective as you choose two or more of the assigned texts, ideally ones that take different perspectives on issues related to our class. Ask yourself how the author or authors might read the two chapters from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* based on what you know of their work. For instance, what would the Combahee River Collective have to say about the privilege that Woolf enjoys as a result of an inheritance from an aunt that allows her to visit universities while reflecting on questions related to women’s place in the art and literature of the time? How might Mary Wollstonecraft, who advocated so passionately for women’s right to be educated, regard Woolf’s criticism of the poor conditions of Fernham, the women’s college in comparison with much richer and male-only Oxbridge?

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Additional resources

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- A comprehensive review of reputable online resources available about Virginia Woolf by the British Library:
  https://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpsubject/literature/authors/woolfvirginia/woolf.html