

The Evolution of Virginia Woolf

Adeline Virginia Stephan, most famously known as Virginia Woolf, was born in Kensington, London. Her parents' connections with many of the "intellectual luminaries," pioneered the beginnings of her interest of becoming a writer. Although her father supported and nurtured her growth intellectually, "[her] mother held that "to serve is the fulfillments of women's highest nature"(Woolf 3). Disgusted with this thought, the majority of Woolf's work focuses and explores the roles of women in society and how women evolved socially, culturally, and intellectually. This is most notable in her works *A Room of One's Own* (1927) and *Three Guineas* (1938). In these works, Woolf embeds her own philosophical ideals that have inspired and contributed greatly to multiple discourses. Some of these discourses include: gender studies, war studies, pacifist studies, socialist studies, and most importantly feminist studies.

This Modernism(s) Xtended room focuses on two of Woolf's texts rather than one - *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Being the only virtual exhibit room that adopts two texts, this provided us with a rare opportunity to establish a timeline between one of Woolf's earlier works to one of her later works. In doing this, this virtual room focuses on the concept of evolution. Located in this room are assets and items that track the evolution of thoughts, philosophy, perceptions and ideas from Woolf's earlier works to her later works, specifically in her works *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*.

With this in mind, the construction of the room followed the same thematic construct we impose on Woolf's text. This is to say that all the assets, items, and even the design of the room follow this theme of evolution. As one maneuvers through the room from the left to the right side, visitors of the room are presented with two versions of Woolf. First, visitors are presented with *A Room of One's Own* Woolf which notes and underscores more concrete and explicit feminist

ideals. For example, there is a timeline establishing the intellectual and literary evolution of women's writing that Woolf so desperately wants to establish and promote for more female writing in the decades to come. On the left side of the room, visitors are presented with *Three Guineas* Woolf which notes and underscores concrete and explicit concerns surrounding war and the promotion of Woolf's own pacifist ideals. For example, there is a video of a World War I soundscape that grounds the visitor into the specific reality to which Woolf was responding at the time, the grim events of war. In either case, visitors of the room can note the two differences in tone, style, and themes that each text represents, allowing them to trace the evolution of Woolf's ideals and the changes occurring in Europe at the time.

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Woolf's Evolution from *A Room of One's Own* to *Three Guineas* - Regarding Dress and Beauty as Tools for Economic Gain

Being able to read a strong majority of Woolf's works of fiction and social commentary, one can trace the evolution of thoughts and opinions Woolf held regarding specific topics. Whether it be war, pacifism, feminism, patriarchal critiques or commenting on issues of education, Woolf's thoughts and opinions evolved over her literary career. Specifically, by looking at *A Room of One's Own* (1927) and *Three Guineas* (1938), one can note Woolf's evolution of thought in regards to issues of women's dress and the cultural power, and lack thereof, this granted women in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Many of Woolf's works, specifically works surrounding her social commentary, underscore themes of feminist empowerment in the realm of education and female profession, most notably in *A Room of One's Own*. When looking at this specific work, Woolf critiques the women of an earlier generation for not being able to establish trusts or inheritances for their daughters. Woolf continues to cast judgement for passing their time focusing on their physical appearances and status. Woolf writes: "What had our mothers been doing then they they had no wealth to leave us? Powdering their noses? Looking in at show windows? Flaunting in the sun at Monte Carlo?" (Woolf 21). In this passage, Woolf underscores her discontent with women, specifically the older generation, and their obsession with vanity and physical appearance. While some may read these statements as feminist sentiments that oppose sociocultural expectations for

women, Woolf appears to be injecting her own psychological distrust and underscore Woolf's own defense mechanisms in regards to physical appearance .

Woolf's psychological distrust stems from her own inability to view herself as sexual.. In "Sketch of the Past," Woolf highlights these anxieties and fears about participating in vainful acts: "I cannot powder my nose in public. Everything to do with dress - to be fitted, to come into a room wearing a dress - still frightens me" (Woolf 68). Woolf expresses her discontent with her own inability to be vainful. According to Sigmund Freud, this is a defense mechanism, projection. Barry describes the process of Freud's projection as a process when an individual does not want to recognize a negative aspect about themselves. In doing so, they take this negative aspect and attribute it to an object or another individual (Barry 93). This is to say that any negative emotion or sentiment we experience ourselves is displaced and projected on others, thus, we hate the individual or object that we have imposed this sentiment on. As Woolf notes her discontent with women in *A Room of One's Own*, this discontent comes from within Woolf and her inability to "powder [her] nose in public," thus leading her into critiquing aspects of women's dress and physical appearance in *A Room of One's Own*.

This discontent within Woolf ameliorates overtime as showcased in her later works regarding the social critique of women, specifically in *Three Guineas*. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf highlights the idea of dress as being a key for a woman's profession: "Besides the prime function of covering the body, it has two other offices - that it creates beauty fo the eye, and that it attracts the admiration of your sex . . . the enormous importance of dress to a woman can hardly be exaggerated" (Woolf 26). As noted in the passage, Woolf highlights the importance of dress for women. The importance of dress stems from a woman's ability to attract a man with economic resources. Having women dress in such a manner only to attract men may appear "antifeminist,"

but it accomplishes the exact opposite. By doing so, women will be able to create a socioeconomic space for themselves which becomes the main goal of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Instead of viewing dress and vanity as wasteful, Woolf over the course of ten years is able to reflect and come to the understanding that vanity and dress, sometimes, allow women to secure five hundred pounds a year and a room of one's own.

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A Room of One's Own and Women's Education

I argue that in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, she is portraying that women need the same opportunities as men do in Education. In *A Room of One's Own*, she tries to break the stereotypes of women portrayed in literature and break those false stereotypes concerning women. These would be that their sole duty is to marry and bear children. Most importantly, sons. Woolf wants to say that there is more to women to just be wives and mothers. They can be writers. If they are not allowed to explore their hearts, desire the way men can, they become tragic figures like that of Judith Shakespeare. Woolf herself was not allowed to have the same Education that her brothers had because she is a woman. They went on to private universities. Although she is educated, she couldn't grow the way educationally that she would have liked.

Woolf argues that "If a woman is to write fiction, she must have a roof of her own" (Woolf 6). I believe that Woolf is referring to herself in this statement. She is a writer, especially a fiction writer. Without the necessary tools, which would be 500 pounds and her own creative space, it would have been impossible for women to write. She also mentions that "It would have been impossible... for any women to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare" (Woolf 46).

Furthermore, if a woman with the same brilliant and creative ideas as Shakespeare would not have been allowed to write, then all of that creative genius would be lost to us. Those plays, phrases, and words invented by Shakespeare would never exist, and we would miss out on them

as a culture. I think of Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*. If she were not allowed to have the freedom to write, where would we be as a society? Her works bloomed the inspirations for other women's work. If Mary Shelly wouldn't have dared to cross the boundaries of writing just because men view that a woman shouldn't write such morbid things, then we wouldn't have *Frankenstein*. That is the point Woolf is trying to explain to us as her audience.

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The Lack of Progress in Women's Education

While looking at works of Virginia Woolf they often depict the struggles and major issues that are occurring during the time the text takes place or of the real life history that is occurring while she is writing. In *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* by Virginia Woolf they are both texts that highlight the deep integrated flaws in English society, one of them being the lack of women's education. These texts are especially important however because they illustrate the lack of evolution that is happening within English society and its desire to educate and help more women as both texts tackle this same issue even though they were apart. These texts, while taking place in dramatically different parts of history, still are mentioning and trying to fix the same problem indicating that Woolf is showing just how unimportant the lack of women's education really is to those who have the power to help them.

When looking at *A Room of One's Own* its start and main points that are discussed are very telling of what Woolf viewed as being important issues of that time. In the article ““With anger and emphasis”: the proof copy of *A Room of One's Own*” by Isaac Gewirtz they discuss how the book came to be from lectures that Woolf gave at Cambridge in 1928 (Gewirtz) and goes on to say, “In *A Room of One's Own*, she would lampoon and lament the meal's mediocrity, which she saw as a telling, though apparently mundane, case in point that typified the shameful neglect shown by women of means toward the two impoverished bastions of women's higher education. (6)”. (Gewirtz). Woolf's draw light on the fact and makes sure that others see that women's education is lacking but this issue will continue to prevail for years to come even

though time is passing by. In Christine Kenyon Jones and Anna Snaiths article ““Tilting at universities”: Woolf at King's College London” this lack of progress is evident as they say, “A Room of One's Own, *The Years*, and *Three Guineas* make much of the economic disparity between funding for men's and women's colleges, and the discrepant amounts spent by fathers on educating their sons and daughters.” (Jones and Snaith). Even though these texts are spread apart they still continue to tackle the same education issue over and over again and how this lack of funding is stifling women from multiple different people.

Not only does Woolf demonstrate the lack of evolution and progress in *Three Guineas* but also explores how hard it still was for women to receive an education. In the article “Narrow gates and restricted paths: the critical pedagogy of Virginia Woolf” by Rod C. Taylor they discuss this harsh relationship between women and education as they say, “ In *Three Guineas*, Woolf demonstrates that upward mobility, which higher education promises, is not so easily attained, nor are the intellectual independence and social equality that supposedly come with it.” (Taylor). The lack of educational progress is seen but so is the difficulty in attaining this education benefits that should have been easier for women to receive. This lack of progress is again echoed in Alice Staveleys article “Marketing Virginia Woolf: Women, War, and Public Relations in “*Three Guineas*””as they go on to say that both texts deal with issues surrounding women even though *A Room of One's Own* was written about ten years prior (Staveley 295). For Woolf she sees that even a decade later little to no progress has been made surrounding women's education. This is a testament to just how opposed and careless many were towards something as important as women's education and how resilient many were to barring women from receiving fulfilling and beneficial educations. *Three Guineas* not only once again addressed this issue but also angered many as revealed in Brenda R. Silvers “The Authority of Anger: “*Three Guineas*”

as Case Study” as they go on to say, “Published in 1938, Woolf’s controversial critique of her culture set off a series of rhetorical attacks and counterattacks that reverberated both in the media and in Woolf’s correspondence.” (Silver 340). This shows that even the mention of women's education and criticism of the lack of it angered many even though it was an issue that needed fixing. Women deserved to receive a beneficial education and yet even over the course of years many of them did not receive it.

In all, Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* are clear indicators of the lack of progress towards women's education. Even though there is a large gap between the two texts, women's access to education did not progress at the speed one would think it would. In both texts Woolf argues for the education of women and yet nobody who can help women have access to higher education do anything to help the issue. Woolf shows that just because time passes that does not mean societies evolve to the extent that they should.

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