

Virginia Woolf

A Room of One's Own

Objectives

1. Describe the educational context of Woolf's essay.
2. Compare Woolf's essay to students' experiences studying and learning in higher education today.
3. Relate Woolf's Fabian politics to today's political environment.
4. Distinguish material conditions of learning from cultural ideals and beliefs.

Reading Assignment

"British suffrage movement celebrates 100 years." *The National*, CBC Television, 2018.

Woolf, Virginia. "A Room of One's Own."

Commentary

[Virginia Woolf](#) has become one of the most widely read of modernist novelists, both for her success with experimental forms as well as for her social commentary. Her long essay (or short book) *A Room of One's Own* is a standard part of many undergraduate curricula –we are reading only the first and final sections, which stand on their own as a complete essay. Woolf's novels inspired the recent novel by Michael Cunningham and film *The Hours*, and her works were translated and adapted by other authors, such as [Jorge Luis Borges](#) of Argentina (himself a major modernist writer of the [Modernismo](#) tradition in South America). Woolf's influence on the later responses to Modernism, [feminism](#), and equal rights is profound, as is her contribution to social and political thought. Woolf's literary network was also profound and influential: "[Bloomsbury](#)." The Bloomsbury group is named for the London neighborhood in which many of its members lived, including Woolf (immediately South of the modern British Library or the King's Cross and St. Pancras train stations that modern audiences would recognize from the Harry Potter films). As a group, the Bloomsbury authors were largely Oxford or Cambridge educated, socially progressive, and of an elite leisured class. This background informs Woolf's works and also gives her readers a context in which to understand the arguments she advances in *A Room of One's Own*.

Woolf's immediate social circle in the Bloomsbury Group included many famous figures: the novelist and Cambridge professor [E.M. Forster](#), the playwright [George Bernard Shaw](#) (whose play *Pygmalion* became the musical and film *My Fair Lady*), the economist and Director of the Bank of England [John Maynard Keynes](#), the art critic [Roger Fry](#), the science fiction writer H.G. Wells (who wrote *War of the Worlds*), the children's writer Edith Nesbit, and the major biographer [Lytton Strachey](#). Strachey's younger brother, James Strachey, was also one of the first English translators of [Sigmund Freud](#) and was general editor of the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, which was published by Virginia Woolf's (and her husband [Leonard Woolf](#)'s) publishing house [Hogarth Press](#). The Bloomsbury Group was also at the heart of the Fabian Society, which is best known as Fabian Socialism. All those mentioned above self-identified as **socialists**. Contrary to many modern expectations, Fabian Socialism has made a profound impact on government policy and economic research. The Fabians, with Woolf's friend George Bernard Shaw, founded the London School of Economics, the Labour Party of Britain (most recently led by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown), and counted among their members several international political figures: Muhammad Ali Jinnah who founded Pakistan and was its first Governor-General; Obafemi Awolowo, a founding father of Nigeria (who studied at the London School of Economics); Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of Singapore; and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India.

In short, Virginia Woolf was intimately connected with the leading academic, political, economic, and artistic figures of her generation, in England and around the world. When she writes of economic conditions and political independence in *A Room of One's Own*, it is with John Maynard Keynes and Lytton Strachey as her confidants and advisors. This is to say, the political and economic ideas about which Woolf writes have shaped much of the political terrain of the twentieth century, so when she writes about higher education undergraduate students today would do well to take notice. As a result, and also based on her major innovations in twentieth century literature, Woolf's fame and respect have been widespread.

However, this was not always the case. Woolf was not as widely regarded during his career as were her peers [James Joyce](#) and [T.S. Eliot](#), and her major works appeared after the *anna mirabilis* of Modernism: 1922. Her husband, Leonard Woolf, was the more famous of the two based on his literary and social criticism and his prominence as a public intellectual with influence over British political life. This has, nonetheless, changed significantly over time, and Woolf is now seen as a major influence on social and literary thought across the twentieth century.

The "Oxbridge" Context

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf fictionalizes many of her subjects in a thinly veiled series of references to her contemporaries, friends, and public institutions. The most obvious of these is her reference to “Oxbridge” (Woolf 42–44, 56–57, & 60), for which she is explicit in saying “Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham [College]” (84). The term derives from a longstanding portmanteau of Oxford and Cambridge. *A Room of One's Own* is based on Woolf’s lectures at Newnham College and Girton College (together “Fernham”), both women’s colleges at Cambridge University (the very first colleges in the United Kingdom to admit female students). Significantly, Woolf’s father did not believe that it was worthwhile to invest in the education of his daughters, so Woolf did not have any formal schooling and did not attend one of the few schools that would have admitted her. She studied at home and was extensively self-taught. The context of the work is, therefore, access to education and voting rights for women (won in Britain contemporaneously with the publication of the book) – this is also set in contrast to the educational opportunities afforded male students at the various “Oxbridge” college. This last point can be difficult for modern readers to fully appreciate.

Colleges in Oxford, such as Christ Church, have a history and circumstance that is difficult for modern students to recognize, apart from the use of the College’s facilities in the Harry Potter films for Hogwarts Academy. Christ Church, or the House, was founded in 1525 and has produced 13 British Prime Ministers. Yet, it currently enrolls only 425 undergraduate students and 250 graduate (post-graduate) students. Yet, it has an endowment of several hundred million pounds and is represented in the University of Oxford’s centrally managed endowment of £3.3 billion. It sits only a few minutes from the Bodleian Library, one of the finest libraries in the world, a copyright library that must receive, by law, a copy of every book published in the United Kingdom. Its alumni (members) include the likes of [Albert Einstein](#) (creator of general and special relativity) and John Locke (the central philosopher of the Enlightenment and inspiration for the Constitution of the United States of America), as well as King Edward VII. In comparison, the colleges at which Woolf spoke are approximately the same size but have produced no Prime Ministers, are comparatively poor (having endowments at this time that were insufficient for the running of the college, though they are now *much* stronger), and were relatively distant from the central libraries.

Woolf’s emphasis on everyday life, such as the food served in the residential college or having a shared room (a student’s residential room and study space), may seem peculiar, but based on her ties to John Maynard Keynes and the Fabians, we should see this as a direct comment on how the conditions available to female students shaped their capacity to succeed and to successfully study. This is to say, material conditions influence or determine social consciousness and

cultural life.

Ask yourself how your own studies are shaped by the food you can afford to eat, how distant you live from campus, and whether or not you have a room of your own. Do these things influence your academic success? Will your studies influence your future financial success? Will your future financial success influence your willingness and capacity to donate funds to your *alma mater* in order to support the studies of future generations of students? Woolf is combining an allegorical discussion of women's independence in British society with a simple and materialist examination of how they are able to go about their studies.

As a student, ask yourself how seriously you should take her questions – they may be nearly 80 years old, but they surely apply to the comparatively poor, public facing, new college you have chosen to study at and its future success and service to you as a student. At the same time, consider how the supports you receive attempt to bridge that enormous difference in wealth. Does this differ from the experiences of and future successes possible for students studying today at Christ Church or Magdalen College at the University of Oxford, Yale University, Harvard University, or St. Andrews University (where Britain's Royal Family traditionally studies)? Bear in mind, Columbia College has approximately half the same number of students as an Ivy League school like Dartmouth College, and significantly more undergraduate students if you compare only the first two years of study. However, that comparison changes with endowments: Dartmouth's endowment is nearly \$6 billion. Oxford has £3.3 billion (distinct from individual college endowments and assets), Yale has \$20 billion, Harvard has \$32 billion, and Cambridge has £4.3 (distinct from individual college endowments and assets). Does this influence how successful students will be? Is Woolf speaking to *your* experiences during your studies and your future contributions to your society? When Woolf compares the students at Fernham College and speaks to the importance of their success and the difference in privilege and wealth in comparison to students at the most elite institutions, does her argument apply to you as well?

Questions for Self-Review

1. Do the material conditions in which a student studies influence his or her success?
2. Would a room of your own influence your academic success and thereby your future political and financial success? Why?
3. Why does Woolf discuss Shakespeare's sister and Mary?
4. Who are the intimately oppressed and how have their conditions changed today?

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