

"We are all women you assure me?" : (De)Constructing the woman in Virginia Woolf's A room of one's own

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«We are all women you assure me?»

(De)Constructing the Woman in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

von NeR

But, you may say, we asked you to speak of the WOMAN¹ – what has that got to do with all these opposing constructions? I have thought long and hard about what the WOMAN is or what she is supposed to be, and I have caught myself striding down a long spiral of words and concepts. My only orientation was Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, in which I tried to find reference points to pin down the conflict WOMAN seems to hold with her own category.

On the one hand, I have found the desire to fight for the acknowledgement of her struggle and systematic oppression, and with that, the desire to pay close attention to her history, her material conditions and her unacknowledged potential – in short, I have found the desire for a definition of the WOMAN in contrast to other concepts, mainly to her supposed opposite that is the man. On the other hand, I have found a vision of the future that not only imagines the absence of oppression and injustice, but also envisions the absence of hierarchy and distinction – a vision of a time and space in which the WOMAN need not be distinguished from anything else, in which she practically does not exist any more.

Virginia Woolf asks «Are there no men present? [...] We are all women you assure me?» (79) and opens up an essential distinction she will question again in her final chapter: «Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. [...] Why do I feel that there are severances and oppositions in the mind, as there are strains from obvious causes on the

body?» (93–94). She imagines a mind that suffers from separation and longs for a «unity of the mind» (cf. 94). In that condition, nothing would have to be held back, no uncomfortable states of mind would have to be endured by any individual. That unity of the mind, or the «androgynous mind» (cf. 95), does not care for distinctions.

So with this on my hands, I am dealing with a visionary image of the WOMAN – a WOMAN that is not a WOMAN any more but is gendered neutrally and no longer concerns herself with issues of the WOMAN. This step, however, only appears in the last chapter of Woolf's essay. Before she lays out her contradicting vision she engages closely with materialistic and historical conditions of the WOMAN. These two approaches so intricately displayed by Woolf show us two competing – or perhaps non-competing – strategies which have developed over time into two strands of feminism or feminist critique.

Literary theorist Jonathan Culler describes these two strands as follows:

On the one hand, feminist theorists champion the identity of women, demand rights for women, and promote women's writings as representations of the experience of women. On the other hand, feminists undertake a theoretical critique of the heterosexual matrix that organizes identities and cultures in terms of the opposition between man and woman. Elaine Showalter distinguishes «the feminist critique» of male assumptions and procedures from «gynocriticism», a feminist criticism

concerned with women authors and the representation of women's experience. (141-142)

Woolf described these two developments before they even really broke apart, mapping the future course of feminist thought and its conflicts and making a suggestion how one could deal with these issues.

This gap between the two strands is also engaged with in other theoretical texts. Texts on feminist writing, thought or critique describe and explore these two opposing fractions. They often have different names for each of the positions and therefore differ slightly in meaning, but they nonetheless all try to grasp this conflict. Political scientist Linda Zerilli puts it into the following words: «As a feminist theorist, I would doubt the category of women, but as a feminist activist, I would take it as the ground of political action» (25). She makes a distinction between a practical side and a theoretical side, one of which makes use of WOMAN and the other wants to stop making use of WOMAN.

These two opposing fronts have also been described as «advocates of identity politics» (cf. Leitch 25-26) and feminists that emphasize solidarity and unity among women and feminists. In these terms: Woolf works with solidarity and unity among women in her first chapters, and goes over to identity politics in her conclusion. She addresses and criticises the foundations of issues to come before these issues reached their present extend.

The ROOM

Before I move on, I want to take a closer look at the ROOM in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. But, you may say, we asked you to speak of the WOMAN - what has that got to do with the ROOM? The ROOM finds many different uses in Woolf's argumentation. I would like to sort those into the two categories that mirror what has happened, is happening, and in Woolf's case, is about to happen to feminist criticism. The ROOM is both a material, tangible space that shuts something in, shuts something out or both. And it is also something I want to call a «*Denkraum*», a metaphorical, concep-

tual space of the mind, which can either shut in or out. Shutting out is related to entering a protective space and shutting in resembles a confinement. Woolf writes about both: «and I thought of the organ booming in the chapel and of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in» (21) - being locked out here meaning what I want to call being shut in, a sort of confinement, a restriction. The material ROOM is a restriction, while the *Denkraum* is a place of possibility, freedom, and safety. But, as I will investigate further, these two categories can hardly be kept apart strictly, since they are always in interplay with each other. One can even be shut in and shut out at the same time.

Woolf points out multiple times that «a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction» (4), thus drawing attention to the material conditions behind creative and intellectual thoughts and ideas a person may have. Further, she argues that

fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at four corners. Often the attachment is so scarcely perceptible [...]. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like wealth and money and the houses we live in. (41-42)

She states: «Intellectual freedom depends upon material things» (104)!

But, occasionally, Woolf also equals the notion of the ROOM with thought only: «five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate, [...] a lock on the door means to think for oneself» (103). It is the place one goes to think, and while it is attached to the material world, it exists in some way outside of it and can shut out the world for a while if necessary to make space for the mind. The reader of Woolf is invited to join her on her intellectual journey to explore with her what it can mean to be a WOMAN or to

be inside a ROOM: «I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people's hats and vans and motorcars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters WOMEN AND FICTION, but no more» (25).

Woolf asks us to wilfully go inside the ROOM, precisely the ROOM to which the WOMAN had been confined for ages, and to explore it and get to know every corner of it. Through reading, the reader starts to feel the ROOM as not only a space of confinement, but also a place of liberty. The reader starts to see the ROOM as a weapon that enables one, once discovered, to be in a position of strength and agency. The act of shutting in transforms slowly into the act of shutting out, and this shutting out is a state of mind only. It is in that moment that Woolf disproves her own argument and fiction and thoughts and words become slowly detached from material things. The crucial moment is when the WOMAN

enters the ROOM, fully realising its – and thus, also her own – potential. Discovering the ROOM requires the material ROOM, but once it is discovered, «the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room» (Woolf 85). I would argue, leaving the image of the ROOM behind us is equally as important as the act of going into the ROOM in the first place. While acknowledging the need for quiet and safe spaces, it is crucial to keep in our minds the vision of what we want the ROOM to become in the future. The goal is an open space in which the need for a ROOM of one's own is no longer necessary. That does not mean a ROOM of one's own is not necessary now. The goal lays and will always remain in the realm of the future, the space of visions, hopes and utopian dreams – but it can still relate to the very ROOM we are working with, and will always work with, in the present.

The WOMAN

Everything I want to argue about the ROOM I also want to argue about the WOMAN. Confining and defining in detail the category of the WOMAN is useful when and only when the possibility of abolishing the category itself is kept in mind. This is the way the two strands of feminism may work together. A step in that direction might be deconstruction. Culler writes:

To deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable but a construction. Produced by discourses that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of deconstruction that seeks to dismantle and reinscribe it – that is, not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning (140).

What deconstruction attempts is stepping away from the effort to destruct and demystify, and instead works toward assigning something else to the concept in question. This is a way of letting the WOMAN go inside her ROOM, which is, as soon as she enters, not a ROOM any more, as much as she is not a WOMAN any more. And it is also a way of letting her out again on the other side, changed and completely new, ready to step into the next ROOM.

Recent attempts by postmodern feminist writers Irigaray and Kristeva have revolved around such a redefinition of the concept WOMAN and the contradictions this forges. For Irigaray «the search for «neutrality» [is] pointless (because no one is really neutral about anything)» and she is «very much opposed to the idea of trying to create a gender-neutral voice» (Tong 227). Kristeva, on the other hand, thinks that «even if the feminine can be expressed, it must not be. «Woman as such does not exist», [she] proclaimed [...]. Such concepts as «woman» and «the feminine» are rooted in metaphysics, the essentialist philosophy that deconstruction seeks to deconstruct» (Tong 230). In short,

postmodern feminists are struggling to discern the relationship between women's oppression and oppression in general. Should

The goal is an open space in which the need for a ROOM of one's own is no longer necessary.

feminists work for woman's liberation or for all oppressed people's liberation? [...] Should women passionately and proudly preserve all that is female, or should women work to go beyond the categories «man» and «woman» to a pluralistic society unconstructed by gender? (Tong 232)

A Room of One's Own provokes a valuable thought here. It clearly situates the two strands of feminist thought in time and in place. For the future, she imagines: «Anything may happen when womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation, I thought, opening the door» (40). Woolf figuratively opens the door of a ROOM to enter a new time and space. About the past, she writes: «literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women» (81). She recounts the figurative doors that have been shut in the past.

Present, future, and the freedom to think

The final sentence states: «But I maintain that she [the WOMAN] would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while» (Woolf 110). The female poet is a possibility for the future, someone who comes without the burden of gender or of WOMAN's oppression. She is someone who emerges after previous generations have worked for her, inside their own ROOM. And she is someone who comes, not to go in a ROOM, but precisely to step outside of it. Woolf maps out a course for a possible future of feminism; for the present she pleads for WOMEN and ROOMS, for the future she pleads for androgynous humans and for the unlimited and open space that is precisely not a ROOM, but something that does not confine or limit. This space that is not a ROOM, but everything that a ROOM is not, comes in *A Room of One's Own* after financial stability and, therefore, liberation:

And then in a year or two, pity and toleration went, and the greatest release of all came, which is freedom to think of things in themselves. [...] Indeed my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and

imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky. (39)

What subsequently follows from the last words of *A Room of One's Own* («she would come if we worked for her»), is that the resources of our language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before we could say what happens when a WOMAN leaves her ROOM.

Before Woolf ends her essay with a few pages addressing the WOMAN and her future, «Mary Seton ceases to speak» (101). And she ends on a thought that flows away into the distance. She states: «Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before

the art of creation can be accomplished. [...] The curtains must be close drawn» (101). So maybe, in that precise moment, the man joins the WOMAN in her ROOM, obscured from sight, so they might come out as something else. And whatever they then are, they will join the stream that intertwines everything with each other and that will carry away everything that once was and everything that once was going to be.

Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these few pages, of one time and one space as distinct from the other is an effort. Woolf had warned me about this, but at first, I would not listen. Why can the WOMAN not be in a ROOM and outside of it at the same time and why can she not stay outside the ROOM before and after she goes in? Turning again to deconstruction, Judith Butler describes Jacques Derrida's method of writing as: «We must do a thing and its opposite, and indeed we desire to do both, and so on indefinitely» («Introduction» ci). And with this in mind, I want to return to the very beginning of *A Room of One's Own*, in which Woolf promises us that there is no ultimate truth to be found in her essay: «I should never be able to fulfil what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer - to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever» (3-4). But

in promising us that she would not hand us something, she already does – she describes a convention and a break with that very convention. And in the course of her essay, she hands us WOMAN where there is nothing to hand, and then questions what she just handed to us, that way handing us another thing, which we will then question again. And we have seen the WOMAN come and go and we have felt her everlasting presence both inside and outside the ROOM, which she will use and has always used as protective space and as a space to be locked in, away from the opportunities and roles of the world, which she assumes and also lets pass by.

Notes

¹ When I write WOMAN or ROOM I want to make use of these terms with caution. They serve a specific purpose in this text and I want to set them apart from all the other words I use – this is why I made them to stand out. I will employ the perhaps outdated term ⟨WOMAN⟩ and not ⟨WOMEN⟩, ⟨WOMXN⟩, ⟨WOMYN⟩, or other terms kindred in meaning, simply because I am working so closely with *A Room of One's Own*, which uses the terms ⟨WOMAN⟩ or ⟨WOMEN⟩. ROOM also includes many differing meanings in itself, and I will specify later with which of them I want to engage with.

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