

Feminist Woolf, her Literary Mothers, Sisters and Daughters by Elizabeth O'Toole

Abstract:

A look at the works of Virginia Woolf and her treatment of the marriage plot. She advocates for autonomy and education in a "Room of One's Own" but many times does not give that option to her protagonists. I looked at other female authors such as Bronte, Austen, Shelley, L.M. Montgomery, Chopin, Morrison, and the autonomy they give their female protagonists. I explain the historical and personal context of Woolf's work and what may have influenced her.

Keywords: English literature, Virginia Woolf, Marriage plot, Feminism, *Room of One's Own*

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Dedication

“I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman” Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

I would like to thank my advisor Vicki Tromanhauser, for taking so much time out of her already busy schedule to help me flesh this out. As well as Patricia Sullivan, Alicia Ivan, and my family, especially my parents, all of my professors and classmates for inspiring me and encouraging me to write this.

Introduction

While studying in Wales I took a class called “Jane Austen in Context” in which we read five out of her six books and critical works around her. It did not put her in context of contemporaries, or inspirations, but we did look at some adaptations. I also took “16th and 17th Century Women Writers” where I wrote my final paper on whether or not men should be included in the study of female writers. I thought ‘of course!’ How can one get a full picture of the female authors without looking at male contemporaries. How will they know what the readers were familiar with? I am seeking to put Virginia Woolf in context of other female novel writers and how they portray female characters. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf agrees with this sentiment;

Without those forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue. For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter--the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn. (*A Room of One's Own*)

Woolf comes from a tradition of literary role models, some female and some not. Woolf did not invent feminism, nor was she the first female writer. In *A Room of One's Own* she references

female writers that she drew inspiration from including the Brontes, Jane Austen, and some lesser known ones like, Joanna Baillie (1762-1851 poet), Fanny Burney (1752-1840, satirical novelist), Miss Mitford (1787-1855 character studies), George Eliot; aka Mary Ann Evans (1819-1880 novelist), and Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865 biographer). She kept company with a number of female writers like Vita Sackville-West and Katherine Mansfield. Before *A Room of One's Own*, there was Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Women* which focused on how girls are raised and educated differently than boys as well as Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* in 1791. There was also Rudyard Kipling, Hemingway, Joyce, Edgar Allen Poe, her husband Leonard Woolf. Virginia Woolf built upon everything these authors were working with and thinking about.

My first exposure to Woolf was my first semester at SUNY New Paltz in "The Individual and Society" when I read *To The Lighthouse*. I was shocked I had made it this far without reading her. In "Intro to British Lit" we again looked at Woolf and the aspects of her life that inspired her books. In "16th and 17th..." we looked at *A Room of One's Own* to see what early writers had inspired Woolf. I loved it, but then thought, wait a second, does Woolf follow her own advice? Are her works feminist novels that show how society ought to be?

Context of the speech *A Room of One's Own*

Virginia Woolf gave the speech titled "A Room of One's Own" at Newnham College and Girton College, women's constituent colleges at the University of Cambridge in 1928 and published the essay a year later. This was an instrumental moment in women's rights. They could only vote for the last 10 years and that was only if they were over 30 and owned land where men only had to be 21 according to the "Representation of the People Act of 1918." The same year as

the speech, all people over 21 were given a vote "Representation of the People Act (Equal franchise Act)." Girton College, founded in 1869 and located in Cambridge was a residential school for women, but it did not award degrees until the 1940s. The students needed to ask permission to attend lectures and were not allowed to submit work or take exams. In 1921 Newnham College and Girton College became part of Cambridge University. There was a riot the day of the vote deciding how they would be accepted. One option was "offering degrees but not membership of the senate, the other only a 'titular degree' (ie. the certificate but none of the rights that went with a degree)" (Watling). The second option won and men were furious. Male undergraduate students marched to Newnham college and caused thousands of pounds worth of damage and intimidated/ harassed all women they saw. The Queen Mother was the first woman awarded a degree from Girton College in 1948, and it was honorary. Elsewhere in England, in 1896, a group of women called the "London Nine" were accepted into London College and six of them graduated the next year with a generalized degree which covered everything from chemistry to Greek tested in the "General Examination for Women." In another ten years, they would have access to the same departments men were in (Dearnley). Unequal access to education has been a burden on women for centuries. Cambridge has yet to have a year where they accepted more women than men, even with women being more likely to go to university. Because of their gender, both Virginia and her sister Vanessa received no formal education while her male siblings were sent to university. Woolf points out this discrepancy in her character Judith Shakespeare, a fictional brother to William Shakespeare who, because of her gender was not allowed to be as successful.

Background on Woolf

Woolf draws much inspiration for her books from her own life. For example, parts of the settings in *Orlando* are based on her parents' travels. Sally in *Mrs. Dalloway* is based on her uncle's wife. *To the Lighthouse* is based on her childhood home. Her sister Vanessa, an artist, is likely the basis for Lily in *To The Lighthouse*. Kitty Maxse, a friend, is the inspiration for Clarissa Dalloway.

Woolf also experienced a lot of trauma early in her life which she uses in her plots. She developed trust and abandonment issues after the early deaths of her mother Julia, half-sister Stella, father Leslie, and brother Thoby. Virginia had the first of her mental breakdowns in 1895, 1897, 1904, and 1906 after each death. She and her sister Vanessa were also molested by their half-brother George after her mother and mother figure Stella were not around to protect them. Woolf later feels that Vanessa abandons her in choosing to marry Clive Bell, and have a family rather than dedicating herself completely to her art career and staying by Virginia's side. Virginia had other stresses including a family history of mental illness and a looming world war. Virginia's half-sister Laura was institutionalized, deemed insane and unfit to care for herself. Virginia had anxiety, heard voices, suffered from insomnia, had mania and panic attacks and compared herself to Laura a lot. Her mother had a depressive episode following the death of her first husband. During the War a certain level of anxiety can be expected, as she did not know if her husband Leonard would be conscripted and she, institutionalized without his protection.

Woolf starts to experience independence in 1905 when she joins the 'Bloomsbury group.' She accompanied her brother Thoby and was thrilled by the intellectual stimulus. The group included Clive Bell, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, John Maynard Keynes, Desmond

MacCarthy, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, Virginia and her sister Vanessa as well as others who passed through. At age 23 Virginia starts writing. Clive Bell, from the Bloomsbury group married Vanessa. Another member, Lytton Strachey proposed to Virginia, but she turned him down, likely because of his sexuality. In 1912, Virginia accepted Leonard Woolf's proposal, but the couple never had any children. Woolf's early sexual trauma and questions about her sexuality contribute to that childlessness. Another consideration, is the affect a baby would have on Woolf's mental health, and her work. She had a mental breakdown from 1912-1915 due to her change in situation becoming a wife.

Woolf despises the 'marriage plot,' yet so many of her characters do not. She does not strictly conform to it in her own life. What Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own* is both proven and ignored in her novels. She says that women have innate competencies that aren't nurtured because they are not afforded a space to be creative.

Woolf Texts

Night and Day

Mrs. Hilbery wants her daughter Katherine to follow in her footsteps and those of her grandfather. "Mrs. Hilbery's father, Richard Alardyce, who was a poet. Katherine, who would much prefer to secretly study mathematics, works on the research and her mother, a flighty and disorganized woman, writes the flowery prose" (Savino, 21). She wants Katherine to be a literary genius, while she prefers math. Katherine rejects these expectations by preferring maths and breaking her engagement. "Watching Katherine talk with Mr. Denham brings joy to Mrs. Hilbery, who expects the traditional marriage plot from her daughter and it does not occur to her that Katherine may suffer in its confines" (Savino, 21-22). Mrs. Hilbery values great writers like her

father, Richard Alardyce, a poet whom she is seeking to write a biography of. She also goes to visit William Shakespeare's tomb at one point. Katherine tires of her mother's writing that seems to not accomplish anything. Mrs. Hilbery cannot follow an outline or a plot and instead writes anecdotes for Katherine to edit together into something resembling a biography.

When she wishes to finish the biography "as we had meant to" one can also hear that she means for Katherine to finish out her life plan in the same way, according to a predestined plot line. Katherine's ability to produce an heir – both for property as well as for the literary tradition – is not about Katherine as a mother but about the future of the family at large. Mrs. Hilbery as the matriarch wishes to further the family rather than create legitimate happiness in her distressed daughter. (Savino, 24)

Mrs. Hilbery has always lived in a man's shadow- her father's. She could never be as successful, and not simply because she has a frivolous character. She also feels like a disappointment for being born female and therefore not carrying on the family name.

Mrs. Hilbery is not a wise mother, she is still trying to make up for her shortcomings in being born female and having borne a daughter. "Although mothers are supposed to guide their daughters into the future of wifehood and childbearing, Mrs. Hilbery's obsession with the past prevents Katherine from living in the moment or focusing on the future" (Savino, 22). Katherine does not care for legacy and it does not matter to her whether or not the biography gets written. Similar to Orlando's poem, the biography is Mrs. Hilbery's baby, her legacy.

Her suitor, William Rodney is similar to Mrs. Hilbery, interested in Katherine's grandfather and the family's fame. Although they are engaged for a short while, Katherine wants to leave her grandfather in the past and instead introduces him to her cousin Cassandra. It is a

good thing too, because of the old fashioned beliefs he holds. For example, he says, "I dare say there are only five men in England whose opinion of my work matters a straw to me." (Night and Day, 130.) He genders the minds whose opinions matter to him. Besides Cassandra, Katherine has another cousin, Cyril, the black sheep. He has two children but is not married to their mother. He represents the modern couple, and Rodney and Cassandra the Victorian marriage plot that Woolf despises. When Mrs. Hilbery learns of the dissolving of the engagement, and Katherine's intention to live with Ralph Denham without marrying, "she reverts once again to belittling mathematics as a symbol of Katherine's autonomy and radical views" (Savino, 24). Woolf takes Mrs. Hilbery's power out of Katherine's decision by making her be away visiting Shakespeare's grave while this is decided. Because she is too wrapped up in the past, she misses the opportunity to influence the future.

Mary Datchet is from another level of society than the Hilberys. She works in an office as a suffragette. She does not do it for money, but chooses to because she finds it fulfilling. She, like Lily Briscoe, and Doris Kilman, represent the independent woman who is not accountable to a man. Woolf writes about a society of women that want to maintain appearances. Women worked for necessity, not for passion. They needed the money and security a job gave them. Few jobs were available to them as a result of their lower education and stereotypes. Literary Success was something Woolf hoped for, and she had to break out from the shadows of male authors.

Monday or Tuesday

Woolf's novella, *Monday or Tuesday* depicts a group of enlightened women. Unlike Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, in Woolf's *Monday or Tuesday* a group of women choose to be made aware of the world around them. One female character is challenged to read every book in the London Library, and her friends join her. They discover

“On we went through a vast tangle of statistics. We learnt that England has a population of so many millions, and that such and such a proportion of them is constantly hungry and in prison; that the average size of a working man's family is such, and that so great a percentage of women die from maladies incident to childbirth. Reports were read of visits to factories, shops, slums, and dockyards. Descriptions were given of the Stock Exchange, of a gigantic house of business in the City, and of a Government Office. The British Colonies were now discussed, and some account was given of our rule in India, Africa and Ireland.(Woolf, 28-29)

Notice how the perils of motherhood is enjambed into that list, “so great a percentage of women die from maladies incident to childbirth.” Woolf is criticizing motherhood to people who previously thought that was their only purpose. In finding out about the world, they find out that motherhood is not the only, nor the best choice for them. They decide that instead of producing as many babies as they can, their purpose is "to produce good people and good books”, and that a good man is defined as “honest, passionate and unworldly” (Woolf, 36). This changes the course of their lives and how they raise their children.

Castalia regrets becoming awakened to the world,

If we hadn't learnt to read," she said bitterly, "we might still have been bearing children in ignorance and that I believe was the happiest life after all. I know what you're going to say about war," she checked me, "and the horror of bearing children to see them killed, but our mothers did it, and their mothers, and their mothers before them. And *they* didn't complain. They couldn't read. (Woolf, 37)

Furthermore, she wants something different for her daughter, unlike Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Dalloway. Unfortunately, it is a step backwards by advocating that ignorance is bliss and that women cannot handle being educated.

I've done my best," she sighed, "to prevent my little girl from learning to read, but what's the use? I caught Ann only yesterday with a newspaper in her hand and she was beginning to ask me if it was 'true.' Next she'll ask me whether Mr. Lloyd George is a good man, then whether Mr. Arnold Bennett is a good novelist, and finally whether I believe in God. How can I bring my daughter up to believe in nothing?" she demanded. (Woolf, 37)

Unfortunately Cassandra's answer is to "teach her to believe that a man's intellect is, and always will be, fundamentally superior to a woman's" (Woolf, 37). Castalia saves this conversation by refuting Cassandra saying, "Don't you know that our belief in man's intellect is the greatest fallacy of them all?" (Woolf, 38). She recognizes the role that mothers play in educating their sons and not their daughters.

What could be more charming than a boy before he has begun to cultivate his intellect? He is beautiful to look at; he gives himself no airs; he understands the meaning of art and literature instinctively; he goes about enjoying his life and making other people enjoy theirs. Then they teach him to cultivate his intellect.

With this education men are not doing anything useful.

He becomes a barrister, a civil servant, a general, an author, a professor. Every day he goes to an office. Every year he produces a book. He maintains a whole family by the products of his brain—poor devil! Soon he cannot come into a room without making us all feel uncomfortable; he condescends to every woman he

meets, and dares not tell the truth even to his own wife; instead of rejoicing our eyes we have to shut them if we are to take him in our arms. True, they console themselves with stars of all shapes, ribbons of all shades, and incomes of all sizes—but what is to console us? That we shall be able in ten years' time to spend a week-end at Lahore? Or that the least insect in Japan has a name twice the length of its body? (Woolf, 39-40)

Sure, they make money to support their families, but they are wasting everyone's time. Does the world need more books, or to name all of the insects? Castalia wants men to do something useful to distract them, "Oh, Cassandra, for Heaven's sake let us devise a method by which men may bear children!" (Woolf, 40). She sums up mother's complicity in their sons becoming educated if unnecessary members of society, "if men write such rubbish as this, should our mothers have wasted their youth in bringing them into the world?" (Woolf, 28). She decides to change this and be a different mother to her daughter. "Once she knows how to read there's only one thing you can teach her to believe in—and that is herself" (Woolf, 40). That beautiful sentiment is the takeaway Woolf wants the reader to leave with. Knowledge is power, and women are powerful.

Mrs. Dalloway

The female role models in *Mrs. Dalloway* for Elizabeth are Clarissa Dalloway and Doris Kilman. Clarissa's life is consumed by society and societal expectations. Similar to Mrs. Ramsay, Clarissa is a people pleaser who throws parties. The only choice she ever made was whether to marry Peter or Richard. She feels like this defines her, that she is Mrs. Richard Dalloway, not Clarissa.

She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs.

Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (Woolf, 11)

Sally Seton offers another choice for Clarissa. Not only does she represent a nontraditional relationship different from the marriage plot. She represents choosing oneself over their children. As children, Sally and Clarissa had spoken of reform and not succumbing to English society (which they both did by marrying into it). Lady Bruton on the other hand is so proud of her status in English society, relationship with the Prime Minister and her ancestor General Sir Talbot Moore. The passing of the queen reminds the readers that although the British sovereign is a woman, she is but a figurehead with no real power. The power is held by the male Prime Minister.

Doris Kilman is Elizabeth's tutor who takes her out to shop. Doris does not have a man in her life either protecting her or telling her what to do. She uses her own abilities and schooling to have a professional life and support herself. She is afraid of being alone her whole life and not having the fulfillment and companionship of having raised a child. Elizabeth would like to be self-sufficient like her tutor. Lucrezia Smith represents a woman overwhelmed by her responsibilities. Her husband suffers from depression and PTSD and it is recommended he escape to the country alone. She wants someone to tell her what to do and to share this burden with. She is given a sedative for being too emotional. While Elizabeth returns home she thinks how her mother, Clarissa would not like that freedom.

Atop the omnibus, Elizabeth has the potential for unencumbered movement and possibility. She is on the verge of womanhood and enjoying the transition. Yet, her responsibilities toward Clarissa remain. She remembers, “Her mother would not like her to be wandering off alone like this. She turned back down the Strand.”

(Woolf, 138) (Savino, 35)

Clarissa discourages independence and mobility. Clarissa does not want to persuade Elizabeth but does not understand her own anger at Mrs. Kilman. Elizabeth still wants approval from her mother, something Woolf never got because of her mother's early death. Clarissa, also similar to Mrs. Ramsay, envies her daughter's youth and ability to make different choices than she did. Yet she still encourages Elizabeth to make the same decisions she did. By the end of the novel, Elizabeth has not made a decision.

To the Lighthouse

Mrs. Ramsay's duties include entertaining and ensuring everyone's comfort. She panders to her husband's guests, her horde of children and even the neighbors at the lighthouse. Mrs. Ramsay would have been more successful if she did not worry about everyone else. “She felt bound to protect ‘the whole of the other sex’ (Woolf, 13) and to guard and support her children (Woolf, 27), and even her husband (Woolf, 60) if he insisted upon her support” (Pedersen). Mrs. Ramsay enjoys being defined by motherhood because it makes her feel needed. “She would have liked always to have had a baby” (Woolf, 90). She does not like to realize that her two youngest children, Cam and James are growing up. James takes an active role in steering the boat at the end to show that he can make adult decisions and he is grown up. Cam is a leader who makes her desires known, for example, taking down the boar's head, and later her desire to get to the

lighthouse and read on the boat. Mrs. Ramsay sees her role as mother as defining and when she isn't actively creating life she feels useless. One day her children will no longer need her and she will cease to matter (Pedersen). Mrs. Ramsay makes matches for her children and all of the people that come to the house attracted by her husband's moderate success even though Mr. Ramsay says that she makes him less successful, "he would have written better books if he had not married" (Woolf, 106). Mrs. Ramsay dies having never had any professional success and is content in her husband's shadow, "Not like, even for a second to feel finer than her husband" (Woolf, 61)." She even encourages her children to follow suit. Her only purpose is to worry and meddle. Mrs. Ramsay realizes her shortcomings,

when she looked in the glass and saw her hair grey, her cheek sunk, at fifty, she thought, possibly she might have managed things better – her husband; money; his books. But for her own part she would never for a single second regret her decision, evade difficulties, or slur over duties. She was now formidable to behold, and it was only in silence... that her daughters, Prue, Nancy, Rose – could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other; for there was in all their minds a mute questioning of deference and chivalry, of the Bank of England and the Indian Empire, or ringed fingers and lace... which called out the manliness in their girlish hearts. (Lighthouse 6-7)

She believes that her daughters are her legacy while simultaneously envying their youth and ability to make a different decision than she did, choosing a family life over one of intellectual renown. Her daughters could travel, and not be tied down, could obtain great wealth. Even though she thinks this, she encourages her children to wed. The children that follow her design

do not have happy endings, Paul and Minta have affairs, Prue dies in childbirth and Andrew dies at war. The Ramsays have no grandchildren. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are not loving towards each other, Mrs. Ramsay says, "How she had ever felt and emotion or affection" for Mr. Ramsay? (Woolf, 125). This is Woolf showing that family life is not always the best choice. When Mrs. Ramsay thinks "that something had happened, someone had blundered. But she could not for the life of her think what" (Woolf, 48), it is she that has blundered by choosing this path for herself.

Mrs. Ramsay seats Lily next to Mr. Bankes in an effort to make them wed. Lily is trying her hardest not to be trapped in by 'female duties' and give her full attention to her art. She wants to be taken seriously as an artist, but her gender is a constraint. She remembers multiple times, Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, "Women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf, 111) and it bothers her. It makes her doubt her abilities and her creations,

She could have wept. It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad! She could have done it differently of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealized; that was how Paunceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that. She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral. Of all that only a few random marks scrawled upon the canvas remained. And it would never be seen; never be hung even, and there was Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, "Women can't paint, women can't write." (Woolf, 111)

Lily thinks about marriage while painting, she says, "she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle (Woolf, 102). Lily saw marriage as giving up on herself and her career. Lily

does not want to follow Mrs. Ramsay's lead and become a wife and a mother, always in their husband and children's shadows. "[Mrs. Ramsay] led her victims, Lily felt, to the altar" (Woolf, 101). Woolf felt that her sister Vanessa was throwing away her talents by becoming a mother. There are other similarities between the book and Woolf's life.

The story takes place on the Isle of Skye, Woolf summered in St. Ives Bay in Cornwall overlooking the beach and a lighthouse, and this would become the setting for many of her stories. Another parallel between *The Lighthouse* and Woolf's own life is the lack of a mother. "a successful mother in her life but in her abrupt death, she fails her family" (Savino, 37). Woolf's own relationship with her mother is reflected in the emptiness felt after Mrs. Ramsay dies. After writing *To the Lighthouse* she says,

'I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.' Lily's gradual discovery of Mrs. Ramsay's failings parallels Woolf's own realization that her own idealized mother could not possibly have been as splendid and as pure as the Madonna to whom her husband compared her." (Savino, 37)

Mrs. Dalloway is both virgin and mother, and Orlando both male and female. Woolf never allows for a one-dimensional depiction of maternal figures and creates multifaceted characters as complex as her love and aggression toward Julia herself (Savino, 10). Woolf herself was never a mother and perhaps if she had she would have a different perspective on motherhood.

Orlando

The main character in *Orlando* has skills for diplomacy and an interest in poetry and retains these skills as they transition from male to female. She is not afforded the same opportunities as a woman as she was as a man and therefore is not in as esteemed a position. She

is not allowed to own her manor house because it has to be in a man's name. In the transition scene, qualities of womanhood, purity, chastity and modesty take form in "Our Lady of Purity, Our Lady of Chastity, and Our Lady of Modesty. They are meant to Orlando during this process and only Truth portrayed as a man is guiding. Woolf is suggesting that the search for truth is masculine but that Orlando was truly meant to be female.

She has a child she abandons as to not let motherhood define her. Orlando achieves ultimate femininity in her experience of sex and childbirth, yet she quickly abandons her child in favor of other experiences and her poem (Savino, 4).

Orlando is delivered of a son, emphasizing his burden to her. The child is an interruption, and an inconvenient one at that, arriving in the very early morning. Nothing more is said of the child, rather Orlando resumes her life as it had proceeded before. Her motherhood completes her transition into womanhood, but the relationship does not matter. (Savino, 50).

Orlando's real child is her poem "The Oak Tree" which she keeps close to her bosom and protects from wear and damage.

She does not believe in the sanctity of marriage and once as a female enjoys to have a lot of sex even outside of marriage. Both Orlando and Woolf had marriages of convenience, designed to make them less dangerous than independent women. Orlando experiences the freedom of a room of her own while her husband is away at the Cape of Good Hope,

"Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote" (Orlando 266)... She has created a historical place and context within the confines of the spirit of the age. She has her money and her marital protection, while maintaining her freedom and a room of her own" (Savino, 49).

Woolf in *Orlando* breaks down female stereotypes by offering this strange protagonist.

The only other female in Orlando is Sasha, his fiance, and she is one dimensional and a sex object or a diplomatic bartering pawn. She does not speak up for herself, and is pushed around by men. Orlando when assuming a female identity assumes meek characteristics associated with femininity,

[Orlando] remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled. ... for women are not (judging by [her] own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled by nature. They can only attain these graces without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline.

(Orlando 156-7)

Observing her transition were the guiding presences of Our Lady of Purity, Our Lady of Chastity, and Our Lady of Modesty. Woolf does not create a man inside a woman's body, but Orlando is expected to act as a weak woman.

Other Authors

Charlotte Bronte

Jane Eyre was published under the pseudonym Currer Bell. All of the Brontës did; “the Brontë sisters published their novels *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* under the masculine pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell” (Nyborg). Perhaps this was to avoid press and enjoy their anonymity but more likely it was about the stigma attached to female authors. Women did not write novels, they were confined to letters, short stories and poems about nature or their affinity for their daily lives. The Brontës wrote as men because their novels

examined subject matter which was 'unfeminine' for their early Victorian readers: sexual passion, slang, alcoholism, domestic abuse and violence. Nevertheless, commentators were quick to accuse the 'Brothers Bell' of being women writers, or equally using their writings to affirm that they must be male. Mr Rochester's slang and sexual exploits were said to prove Jane Eyre's male authorship, while the detailed evocation of Jane's psychology and emotions gave away the woman's hand in the novel" (Nyborg). Woolf says that authors like Bronte and Austen are special because they were not noble women like Lady Winchilsea or Lady Mary Worsley Montague. They were not financially secure. *Jane Eyre* is orphaned and left in the charge of her aunt who much prefers her own two children. Jane is sent off to school for misbehaving (but what orphaned little girl wouldn't act out a little) (plus she was framed). This education allows her to fend for herself. She has no father nor brothers to provide for her and becomes a teacher then a governess.

Jane Austen

Jane Austen (1775 -1817), never married, yet is one of the most famous romance writers of all time. Her characters both support the idea in "A Room of One's Own" and discourage independent women. In *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor and Marianne need to marry so that their mother and younger sister will have someplace to live. There is no option for them to be professionals and rent a place. They faint and catch cold and are carried by their heroes. Jane Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* similarly falls ill in an effort to catch a husband. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett's insufficient education leaves her ill prepared for an adult independent life. Lady Catherine points out that the Bennets did not have a governess nor were sent to school but merely educated by Mrs. Bennett (arguably the silliest character in the story).

This contributes to her unsuitability to be with Lady Catherine's nephew Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth enjoys writing, and her sister Mary thinks that she will catch a match with her horrid piano playing and equally terrible singing. Elizabeth Bennett is pushed upon her cousin, the heir to her home by virtue of his being male, so that her family would not be evicted upon her father's death. Elizabeth cannot save her family by her own virtues but by the money her marriage and her sister Jane's marriage brings the family. Perhaps because she has five siblings, but more likely because she was a woman, Elizabeth was not given the space to encourage her talents.

Jane Fairfax in *Emma*, has recently returned from working as a lady's maid and is shamed by Emma Woodhouse. Even though Jane has many lovely attributes like her intelligence, beauty, ability to write well and play music, she does not have any financial backing and now faces life as a governess unless she can marry someone suitable who can provide for her. Emma has money but a meddling personality and no education. She has experience running a manor house because she has no brothers. Her sister Isabel falls into the marriage plot and is strapped down by her children. The more modern practice where women choose a career over family life would be absurd to Austen. Achieving value and self worth externally rather than internal gratification and seeing success in their children.

Austen's nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh who wrote her memoir wonders how his aunt was productive without a room of her own,

How she was able to effect all this is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own

family party. Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper. (*A Room of One's Own*)

In comparing Austen with Shakespeare, Woolf notes the effect their differences in gender had on their daily lives. "It was impossible for a woman to go about alone. She never travelled; she never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon in a shop by herself" (*A Room of One's Own*). It is unfair to compare the two because of how different their lives and their works are.

Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, was the daughter of the feminist author Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication on the Rights of Woman*), and the wife to another writer, Percy Shelley. Her work was heavily edited by Percy Shelley. The only females featured in *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* die or are merely companions. Elizabeth marries Victor and is killed. The creature wants female companionship but is denied it. Justine is blamed for one of the creature's murders and is killed. The creature scares a little girl when he is realizing his strength and appearance. They advance the plot and represent some of the limited roles available for women, wife and housekeeper.

Similar to the Woolfs, the Shelley's got their own publishing business to print their works. Mary Shelley says, "Even if women are writers, they are not publishers." The Shelleys and the Woolfs broke this barrier. They printed James Joyce, Sigmund Freud, M.R. Forester, and T.S.Eliot, expanding their literary circle beyond the Bloomsbury group. Not only did they make money, but they made new friends and influences. It is even harder for female authors to get published than male authors and they might face dozens of rejections. The use of a pseudonym

made it easier for authors like George Eliot, the Brontes, and even J. K. Rowling. Publishing is about making money first, then intellectual and literary success.

L.M. Montgomery

Lucy Maud Montgomery (1874-1942) was a Canadian author of *Anne of Green Gables*, who also suffered from mental illness and the weight of the expectations placed on women in the late 1800, and early 1900s. This is reflected in her character, Anne Shirley, an orphan who is unwanted by her adoptive family because she is not a boy. Even though Anne is a headstrong, pragmatic girl, in the end her professional hopes are dashed when she has to drop out and take care of her adoptive family. Similar to Woolf, Montgomery took inspiration from her experiences, all of her books are set where she grew up. Montgomery also had to take care of her grandmother later in her life. Montgomery was raised by her strict grandparents after her mother's young death and father's abandonment and new family. She saw herself as a kind of orphan. As a child she was awakened to the unfair world she lived in; "she soon realized that boys were given advantages and allowed to have ambitions that were considered unnecessary or unsuitable for girls" (Rubio). Her grandparents did encourage reading and she had a similar reading list to Woolf including Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot (Rubio). As an adult, Montgomery attempted to be a teacher but had to take care of her mentally ill husband, Ewen MacDonald, and children. All of these distractions were detrimental to her writing.

In addition, her publisher discouraged any writing that was not related to the 'Anne' franchise. She, similar to many other writers, had trouble with publishers and sued hers when he withheld royalties; "In an era when women did not normally stand up for their rights, especially in courts of law, Montgomery sued the arrogant, bullying Page for non-payment of royalties and

damages for fraudulently selling the reprint rights to *Anne's house of dreams*" (Rubio).

Montgomery also wrote *Courageous Women*, a compilation of biographies, but could not get it published (Rubio). Difficulties in publishing are universal, and the audience was uncertain. She, like Woolf, suffered from "insomnia, exhaustion, and frantic mental restlessness," (Rubia). What is supposed to be a suicide note was released in 2010. The family were not proud of Montgomery's struggle with mental illness that likely took her life.

Montgomery, like Woolf, was proposed to many times. She settled in an unhappy marriage where MacDonald didn't challenge her intellectually and was a drag as she had to keep his mental illness a secret from the community he was the minister of. She wanted children, and loved them, even when they drew her away from her writing. In "The Life and Times of Lucy Maud Montgomery" they suppose what would Montgomery have produced in Woolf's position; "Virginia Woolf also had a husband who took care of her, was proud of her and arranged for her to have time to write and it is really interesting to speculate what Maude would have produced if she had been married to Leonard Woolf instead of Ewen MacDonald."

Kate Chopin

Katherine Chopin (1850-1904), was the American writer of *The Awakening*. She also writes from feminine perspectives, "most of her best-known work focuses on the lives of sensitive, intelligent women" (Clark). She played with similar ideas as Woolf in placing the independent woman against the mother figure. Mademoiselle Reisz is an unwed musician who thinks that only Edna (the protagonist) can hear the music while the others are merely listening because it is what society demands of them. Adèle Ratignolle on the other hand is the "perfect wife," (Williams 11) the "faultless madonna"(Chopin 56). Her children are her life and she does

not exist without them. She sees her role in life as to procreate and raise those babies to procreate. She is described as outwardly beautiful and someone to be emulated, but she does not know the depth that Reisz and Edna find.

Edna is not fulfilled as a mother, she does not sew or enjoy domestic tasks, or take much joy in her sons. Her husband is often absent and tries to make up for that with bonbons (chocolates). She starts to see her wedding ring as a receipt. Throughout the novel is the looming marriage of her sister, confining her to the same unhappy fate. Edna's sexual awakening is what got this novel banned for a long time.

“In 1899 Chopin published *The Awakening*, a realistic novel about the sexual and artistic awakening of a young wife and mother who abandons her family and eventually commits suicide. This work was roundly condemned in its time because of its sexual frankness and its portrayal of an interracial marriage and went out of print for more than 50 years” (“Kate Chopin.”).

Chopin grew up with slaves in her house and was very familiar with racial tensions, a boundary she pushes in *The Awakening*. “Critics called it morbid, vulgar, and disagreeable. Willa Cather, who would become a well known twentieth-century American author, labeled it trite and sordid” (Clark). The idea of female pleasure and of a woman demanding to be satisfied turned many audiences off. Edna was not happy fulfilling the role assigned to her and Chopin was not going to limit her story to conventional standards.

Often thought of as a foundational or introductory feminist text, *The Awakening* does not promote autonomy or hope for equality in the future.

Many literary critics label Edna Pontellier as a radical feminist whose journey of awakening is one of woman reaching beyond the boundaries of masculine

subjugation; however, analysis of the gender relations and social constructs at Grand Isle and in New Orleans reveal that, as an anomaly of both gender and society, Chopin's heroine makes no such leaps of feminist grandeur. (Williams)

Edna is not someone who undertakes an adventure or seeks out her change. She doesn't choose to awaken, it just happens to her. "Any text written by a female author and focusing on a female character cannot avoid feminist trends, but Chopin's *The Awakening* is not a feminist novel in the modern sense. It is instead "a study of identity, regardless of sex (Williams). In the end of the novel, Edna drowns herself once she sees the helplessness of the female plight. This is really the only choice Edna makes for herself. The way it is described is not direct.

She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul. How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! "And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies." Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her. "Good-by—because I love you." He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand. Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him—but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone. (Chopin)

Edna does not possess the strength to be on her own. She is not courageous nor defiant. She is exhausted. Tired of her role in society and feeling those confines. Her family does not need her, especially what she has become now. She walks out into the ocean naked, all alone, at night. One of the reasons people wear clothes is shame of nakedness. Edna is reclaiming her female body. The story goes on for many more chapters. Edna, is not even given the last word or scene in the

story of her awakening. This book does not offer hope or what society can change to be more inclusive, it is just an observation.

Female leadership and friendship was important to Chopin,

“As a girl, she was mentored by woman—by her mother, her grandmother, and her great grandmother, as well as by the Sacred Heart nuns. Kate formed deep bonds with her family members, with the sisters who taught her at school, and with her life-long friend Kitty Garasché. Much of the fiction Kate wrote as an adult draws on the nurturing she received from women as she was growing up” (Clark).

Due to her close connection with the women of her family it is strange to think how her character Edna rejects this tutelage. Chopin herself had to be a strong woman and role model because she was widowed at 32 with six children to raise and financially support. Chopin felt that she had to be a mother and that hindered her literary success since she had so many kids to raise. Again, overcoming adversity forced her to choose alternate routes to survive. Would she have written if she wasn't widowed and in need of additional income? Would her life have changed in this direction if her husband lived longer?

Toni Morrison

Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison (1931-2019), was born 10 years before Woolf would drown herself. Yet she saw fit to write her Masters thesis on suicides as portrayed in the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. Morrison is both a woman, and a person of color. She had to break through two barriers unlike Woolf. Like many authors before her, Morrison's pen name is ungendered to help her break into the literary world.

Woolf was a huge influence on Morrison, both use a form of “stream of consciousness,” to show characters emotions and thoughts. Woolf was playing on the ideas of Sigmund Freud, but Morrison wanted her books to sound more conversational, true to the storytelling tradition. Neither author stick to one narrator. In the middle sections of both *Beloved*, and *To the Lighthouse* it is impossible to tell who is narrating, or who is speaking. This shows great emotional growth and learning to cope with tragedy. The novel as a form, emerged along with the growth of the middle class. It portrayed middle class characters to engage with its audience. Morrison had to change the standard of the novel to fit her intended audience, Black Americans without just including a character and giving an accent She wanted to reflect traditions like a matriarch in the home and the oral tradition that stems from a lack of education.

Morrison again shows her fascination with suicides when she creates the character Shadrack in *Sula* who, similar to Septimus in Mrs. Dalloway, suffers from PTSD from WWI. However, Shadrack does not kill himself and instead turns to raising awareness. Both Woolf and Morrisons' books are not about war so much as trauma, even though they take place in war times. These authors each lived through a world war and saw the devastation and anxiety felt at home. Woolf never portrayed war as a good thing, it gives Septimus PTSD (*Mrs. Dalloway*), takes Andrew and Jacob away (*To the Lighthouse, Jacob's Room*). Morrison instead shows how war has advantages, particularly in social mobility. World War I caused the “Great Migration” which gave many Black Americans skilled jobs. Both Woolf and Morrison thought that showing too much trauma would scare off audiences.

Woolf addresses inequalities in opportunities and education in *A Room of One's Own*. Morrison faced these same inequalities, with a different set of circumstances.

Her so-educated father, Leslie Stephen, discriminated between her and brothers. While they were allowed to go to Oxford, she had to stay at home. But you, Toni Morrison, in the tradition of black families, precisely because you were a daughter, were encouraged to go to college. How else might you survive, without the brawn of a black man, the sentiment that circumscribed white women? Like so many black women, “[You] had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of [your] reality [you] may will have invented [your]self” (Christian, 486).

Morrison felt the opposite as Woolf. If she did not go to school, what would she do? She did not have the attributes that males had that made them tough.

Virginia was responding to the fact that women were not expected to write, and when they did write, their tone “admitted that [they] were only women or protesting that [they] were as good as any man” (Woolf, Room 80). When women wrote, they were still expected to write in specific ways about specific themes-- that is, within the romance genre--about love, marriage, manner (Christian, 487).

Morrison changed the voice of the female author to have a race. She was expected to be a writer, but wanted to break the genre confines.

Woolf never tackled racial confines. She stayed within Victorian and Modernist British society. While Woolf tried to separate the idea of motherhood, from womanhood, Morrison tried to show that Mothers were women first.

Unlike Virginia, you would become a mother, and for much of your adult life a single mother, who would write, not in a room of your own, but with the interruptions of children and the jobs necessary for your and their survival,

writing on scraps of paper at subway stops (“Interview”). You would see motherhood as “liberating,” as your “best” self, for your children respected those parts of you that had little to do with society’s demands, since they were fresh, not quite yet socialized. And through their eyes, you could see the world through an imagination not yet tainted by stereotypes. (Christian, 487)

Perhaps because of the trauma Woolf was victim to, parental abandonment, and statutory rape, she did not have children, “because of the incest she experienced in her childhood was concerned that having children would stifle her creativity and exacerbate her bouts of depression” (Christian, 487). Morrison and Woolf deal with issues of female autonomy and the expectation of women to be mothers. Morrison’s character Sethe murders her child to save it from a life of slavery. Sethe does not want her children to follow in her footsteps. She would rather kill them. Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Dalloway want their children to follow in their footsteps even though they have some regrets about their choices. Many of Woolf’s characters who chose a family life over a professional one try to make those younger than them follow suit.

Conclusion

This is not an exhaustive study of Woolf’s novels and does not even begin to scratch the surface on those that influenced her and were influenced by her. In *The Voyage Out* Woolf punishes those who choose marriage, Rachel dies while engaged. In *Jacob’s Room*, Fanny, a dancer, physically has to share a room with a roommate. These cramped conditions hinder her success. This novel features another mother, but this one is absent and passive. She leaves a note outside Jacob’s door. He does not read it. That shows how effective she is. She is also the only one of Woolf’s mothers to employ a nursemaid. She was not even good enough at being a mother

to do it by herself. Similar to Mrs. Ramsay, and the mothers in *Monday or Tuesday*, Jacob's mother, Mrs. Flanders she loses a child to war. Woolf also criticizes war and the effects on home life.

There are other writers I wanted to write about. Willa Cather (1873-1947), was an American pioneer author of *My Antonia*, and *O' Pioneers!* After her death, evidence was realized that suggests she may have been a homosexual. In addition to her sexuality, and the time she lived, her books feature female protagonists. Her 1913 novel *O' Pioneers* features a female immigrant running a farm and the family. Alexandra is forced to stay home by being the only daughter, and to take care of their parents and not seek financial success. However, she makes the best of it. Her success gives hope for more gender equality in the ever expanding frontier. She is intelligent and capable. I also wanted to write about T. L. Travers, author of the Mary Poppins series, not only because she published under an ungendered name, but because of the example her character Mary sets for children, encouraging them to go beyond her own position as a domestic servant. Agatha Christie could have made the list because of her struggles with mental health, but I found too many conspiracy theories about her disappearance. These are just contemporary female authors. I also wanted to write about Leonard Woolf, but decided to limit myself to female authors. Otherwise I would never stop! Woolf interacted with Pound, Forester, Joyce, Falkner, Twain, etc. I could have only looked at members of the Bloomsbury group, but that group was a revolving door, and not all obtained the fame Woolf did. I could have studied people Woolf had an intimate relationship with, such as Vita Sackville-West and Katherine Mansfield, but that felt too personal.

I want other people to do studies like I have. Not limiting themselves to one author, one time period, but their interactions and how they resemble each other. The final question is; Did

Woolf take her own medicine? She offers characters that both have skills that need to be nurtured, and characters that represent an obstacle to those artists. Woolf was a successful female. She imagined a mother figure, which she so yearned for, would hinder her success. She was conflicted by her beliefs about women and her desire for a mother. She rejects the marriage plot and punishes those characters that choose wrong. Woolf encourages independent women and women who strive for their own success. She was much more feminist later in her life, and if she had lived longer, perhaps her novels and essays would have provided a concise plan for young women to say no to their traditional role as wife and mother.

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