Building “A Room of One’s Own”
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Though published seventy years ago, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* holds no less appeal today than it did then. Modern women writers look to Woolf as a prophet of inspiration. In November of 1929, Woolf wrote to her friend G. Lowes Dickinson that she penned the book because she "wanted to encourage the young women—they seem to get frightfully depressed" (xiv). The irony here, of course, is that Woolf herself eventually grew so depressed and discouraged that she killed herself. The suicide seems symptomatic of Woolf’s own feelings of oppression within a patriarchal world where only the words of men, it seemed, were taken seriously. Nevertheless, women writers still look to Woolf as a liberating force and, in particular, at *A Room of One’s Own* as an inspiring and empowering work. Woolf biographer Quentin Bell notes that the text argues:

> the disabilities of women are social and economic; the woman writer can only survive despite great difficulties, and despite the prejudice and the economic selfishness of men; and the key to emancipation is to be found in the door of a room which a woman may call her own and which she can inhabit with the same freedom and independence as her brothers. (144)

Woolf empowers women writers by first exploring the nature of women and fiction, and then by incorporating notions of androgyny and individuality as it exists in a woman’s experience as writer. Woolf’s first assertion is that women are spatially hindered in creative life. "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," Woolf writes, "and that as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of women...and fiction unresolved" (4). What Woolf seems to say is that being female stifles creativity. Woolf does not assume, however, that a biological reason for this stifling exists. Instead, she implies that a woman’s "life conflicts with something that is not life" (71). In other words, mothering, being a wife, and the general daily, culturally defined expectations of women infringe upon creativity, in particular the writing of fiction. The smothering reality of a woman’s life - - housekeeping and child-rearing duties, for example - - distract a woman from writing. Sadly, Woolf notes, even if a woman in such circumstances manages to write anyway, "she will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters" (69-70). Woolf posits here that an angry woman, writing out of the repression of her everyday life, will be an ineffective writer. Finally, Woolf blames the patriarchal culture, as if the freedom of women writing is "some infringement of [man’s] power to believe in himself" (35). She suggests that men resist women writers because fiction by women somehow diminishes their belief in their own works. Woolf’s message, it seems, is that women must rail against the resistance of the patriarchal culture and attain some degree of independence and androgyny.

Woolf does not suggest that women write the same as men. In fact, Woolf asserts that "it would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men" (88). Woolf believes that a man’s sentence is not a woman’s sentence, that the two will be vastly different from each other, though not necessarily one better than the other. Her assertion is that men’s sentences are awkward in the hands of women because "the nerves that feed the brain would seem to differ in men and women" (78). This difference of gray matter and neurons would necessarily result in a difference of perspective.
and sentence structure. Woolf suggests that for fiction to be artfully done, there must exist a measure of androgyne, "a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female" (98). In essence, Woolf claims that this state of androgyne would allow women the same freedom to express themselves that men seem to have been inherently endowed with. "The androgyneous mind is resonant and porous," Woolf continues, "it transmits emotion without impediment; it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (98). What Woolf overtly states here is that the ideal creative mind is a marriage, or balance, of the supposed female traits of emotionalism with the supposed male traits of productivity and style. What is implicit, however, is that the female mind can be resonant and porous only when undivided. In other words, a woman can write well only when her mind, like a man's, is not forced to choose between gender and identity, or between her art and society's expectations of her. A woman will write with fluidity and resonance only when she has the same freedom of expression as a man.

An additional notion Woolf presents is that women must maintain individuality in their experiences as writers. This intimacy with one's identity nurtures the creation of fiction, but only when written out of one's own personality and not imitated through another's. "Why are Jane Austen's sentences not the right shape for you?" Woolf asks Mary Carmichael (80). The idea Woolf reinforces here is that a woman should find and develop her own writing style, not simply mimic her predecessors. Notice, though, that Woolf does not suggest we glean no stylistic inspiration from women writers like the Brontes and Jane Austen, who paved the way for generations of women writers. "Books continue each other," Woolf says, "in spite of our habit of judging them separately" (80). Continuing something, however, does not mean using the same blueprints or tools during the creative process. What Woolf implies is that every book a woman, sitting in that room of her own, produces will generate books from other women. A degree of mimicry, of course, is impossible to avoid. "A woman writing," Woolf admits, "thinks back through her mothers" (97). The "mothers" here are not only biological mothers who give birth to our physical bodies, but also those women who meticulously scratched their way out of patriarchal constraints and into print; the women who acted as surrogates to birth generations of women writers. Subtle mimicry would seem a natural act under such circumstances, much as a child unconsciously develops personality traits of either parent.

Finally, a woman reading Woolf's book has to wonder if that "room of one's own" is strictly a spatial, physical concept. It is possible that Woolf writes of a psychological construct as a room of one's own, a place one can emotionally go to and write from. Few of us have the luxury of a concrete room of our own, and if we are to be writers, emotional space of our own is the barest necessity. Women who want to write must find some quiet space in their psyches from which they can create. "So long as you write what you want to write, that is all that matters," Woolf encourages, "and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say" (106). What Woolf seems to say is that what we create within that space of ourselves, within a single moment, is what matters so long as we do it with an eye toward our own individual, androgynous hearts.

Works Cited
