



***READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF  
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: MODERNISM AND MODERNITY***

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## 4.5. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

### Reading Skills

I

1. Consider the title. In the light of the text that follows, it might have been "Room of Her Own". What do you see to be the particular impact of the title chosen?
2. The text of *A Room* is based on papers delivered by Woolf at two colleges in Cambridge in 1928. Which colleges? Why would the content be particularly appropriate for the majority of the audience listening to her?

### Chapter 1

1. What sort of tone is set as the text begins (see sentences 1 and 2)?
2. What sort of approach to the subject of women and fiction does the speaker ("I") reveal?
3. How is "the first duty of a lecturer" defined? Would you agree with the definition?
4. What are seen to be the requirements if a woman is to write fiction?
5. On what grounds is the narrator denied access to the university library?
6. The narrator hears the sound of music from the chapel and declares: "The organ complained magnificently". What is the conjunction of "complained magnificently" an instance of rhetorically speaking? Why is the organ described as "[complaining]"?
7. What reasons does the narrator supply for not going into the chapel?
8. Towards the end of the chapter, the narrator observes that "our mothers had not provided us with any thing comparable to ... the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity" found in the university town. Why not?
9. Where is Oxbridge?

### Chapter 2

1. The visit to Oxbridge sets off "a swarm of questions" in the narrator's mind. What are the questions and what are they concerned with?
2. Where does the narrator go with a view to finding answers to the questions?
3. What is the statement about that the narrator finds in a professor's book and which makes the narrator angry?
4. Why is the narrator angry?
5. What conclusion does the narrator draw about the pile of works consulted?
6. What conclusion would a visitor to the planet draw if s/he were to pick up the newspaper as the narrator does over lunch?
7. How does the narrator see women to have served "all these centuries"?
8. The narrator refers to "the act [that] was passed that gave votes to women". When was the act in question passed?

9. What change for women does the narrator envisage within a hundred years?

### Chapter 3

1. What does the narrator discover about women in fiction and women in fact?
2. What does the narrator challenge the audience at Newnham or Girton to do?
3. What does the narrator find “deplorable, looking about the bookshelves again”?
4. According to the narrator, why would it have been “impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare”?
5. Who is Judith Shakespeare?
6. What does Judith Shakespeare’s life illustrate?
7. The narrator will claim in Chapter 4 that to find Shakespeare’s state of mind in a woman in the sixteenth century would have been impossible. Why?

### Chapter 4

1. What is a blue-stocking?
2. Who, according to the narrator, is Pope or Gay said to have satirized “as a blue-stocking with an itch for scribbling”?
3. Why, again, according to the narrator, does Aphra Behn signify “a very important corner on the road” and what is the road in question?
4. What does the narrator consider a “profoundly interesting subject [that] suggests itself for discussion , and might provide an interesting book if any student at Girton or Newnham cared to go into the matter”?
5. As the narrator sees it, what did “[h]undreds of women” begin to do over the eighteenth century?
6. What change does the narrator record as coming about towards the end of the eighteenth century?
7. In the narrator’s view, what are masterpieces?
8. Why, according to the narrator, should “[a]ll women together .. let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn”?
9. Why, according to the narrator, did middle-class women in the nineteenth century take to writing novels?
10. In the narrator’s view, why are nineteenth century novels written by women flawed?
11. Who are the two women novelists in the nineteenth century who were exceptions to the above?
12. What do contemporary (1928) views on the part of the critical Establishment reveal about attitudes to women and writing?
13. What major difficulty, in the opinion of the narrator, did early nineteenth century women novelists face?

## Chapter 5

1. What is the narrator's explanation for the impoverishment of literature?
2. According to the narrator, what should education do for men and women?
3. What, in the narrator's view, does the future hold for Mary Carmichael's books?
4. The narrator considers that Mary Carmichael has "mastered the first great lesson". What is the lesson in question?
5. What does the narrator consider to be the three "desirable things" that Carmichael does not have enough of?

## Chapter 6

1. What does the narrator see to be missing in "some of the finest works of our greatest living writers", such as Rudyard Kipling and John Galsworthy?
2. In the narrator's opinion, what is required before the art of creation can be accomplished?
3. The narrator makes a request and expresses a hope towards the end of the final chapter. Explain what the request and hope consist of.
4. Where is Shakespeare's sister at the narrator's time of writing?

## II

1. Explain the narrator's statement: "we think back through our mothers if we are women".
2. Comment on what the narrator is getting at with the claim: "In the shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless as mist".
3. What sort of attitude is expressed in relation to the concept of truth in Chapters 1 and 2?
4. The narrator introduces the notion of "[rewriting] history". Why, according to the narrator, should history be rewritten?
5. The narrator sees Aphra Behn as possessing three "plebeian virtues", which are enumerated. What are they?

## Writing Skills

1. Woolf's text was produced in the period between two world wars (WWI and WWII), what features of the period are to be found there?
2. How may the creative writer be identified in the text of *A Room*?
3. The African-American feminists Alice Walker and bell hooks have mentioned Virginia Woolf's *A Room* ("In search of our mothers' gardens" (1974) and "Zora Neale Hurston: a subversive reading" (1999), respectively). What do these two writers highlight in Woolf's text which has been meaningful for them? Find two other writers who refer back to Woolf and explain the impact that her writing or, more particularly, *A Room*, has had on them.

4. “*A Room of One’s Own* remains a controversial text.” (“Introduction”, *A Room of One’s Own*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. p. 9). Would you agree that over ten years on from the above statement, *A Room* remains controversial? Argue your case.
5. “... rarely, if ever, was a polemic delivered or a claim upheld with such good humour, such imaginative illumination or such absence of rancorous rhetoric.” (John Lehmann, *Virginia Woolf and Her World*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1975). Illustrate “good humour”, “imaginative illumination” and the “absence of rancorous rhetoric” with examples from Woolf’s *A Room*.
6. “Woolf seems to practise what we might now call a ‘deconstructive’ form of writing, one that engages with and thereby exposes the duplicitous nature of discourse. [...] She also reveals a deeply sceptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity.” (Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 1985). Discuss Moi’s claim in relation to *A Room*.