

# Hub Edits

- **Virginia Woolf – A Room of One’s Own**
- Woolf, a novelist and critic, lived from 1882 to 1941 and was one of the founders of literary modernism in fiction
- She was the daughter of a Victorian intellectual and educated herself using the resources of her father’s library and friends
- She lived in the Bloomsbury neighborhood of London with her sister where they gathered round them a group of artists and intellectuals who became known as the Bloomsbury group
- Woolf founded the Hogarth Press with her husband Leonard Woolf – the Hogarth Press published Virginia’s own works along with the works of D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot and the English translations of Sigmund Freud
- She wrote during the most difficult period for England during the early part of WWII when it was thought the German army could invade at any moment
  - She knew such an invasion would cause terrible havoc, for England at large and specifically for her Jewish husband
  - Anxiety over this re-triggered her depression (depression she had suffered since childhood) and she drowned herself in the River Ouse
- She was prolific as an essayist – her complete essays contain over a million words
  - Working rapidly for the journalistic deadlines of the weekly *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Nation and Athenaeum*, and T. S. Eliot’s *Criterion*, Woolf took up in her writing individual authors, schools, and aspects of contemporary culture
  - Although her subjects were often dictated by journalistic assignment, she used them to explore her own central aesthetic beliefs about the bankruptcy of the realist literary tradition and the importance of what we today call modernism
- Her book *A Room of One’s Own* became one of the key inspirations for the second-wave feminist movements in the 1970s and 80s
- The most famous section of *A Room of One’s Own* is one in which Woolf traces the tragically wasted career of an imaginary “Shakespeare’s sister,” whose creativity and talent would have found no outlet in the society of 16<sup>th</sup> century England
  - This fictional history is the premise for a historical sketch of actual women writers and the difficulties they experienced in their work, from Aphra Behn, to Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot
  - Woolf is aware of the challenges faced by female writers but remains convinced that the birth of a female Shakespeare is possible within the century
- Her ironic commentary on the way women have traditionally been defined and analyzed as inferiors by men previews the issues later raised by Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Mary Ellmann
- Woolf analyzes women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and shows how the masculine prose adopted by Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot hampered their expressiveness, and how Jane Austen succeeded in devising a feminine prose that allowed her to say what she needed to
- Woolf is convinced that the key role of the artist is to create a world whose validity stands independent of the testimony and personal life of the artist herself
  - Like Eliot’s *catalytic creator*, Woolf’s must be impersonal and detached, with the ego shaping a sensibility but not expressing a personality

# Hub Edits

- Thus Austen's delicacy and disinterestedness wins Woolf's highest acclaim, as does Emily Bronte's masterful creation of a Transcendent Yorkshire world of pure poetic imagination
- But Woolf criticizes Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* for allowing the signs of its author's rage to show through in the text
  - Woolf says Bronte obviously felt repressed by her mundane life when she wanted to be traveling across the world and that this rage led to a swerve in her text where her own fear and acidity over her repression contracts the emotion of her book rather than expanding it
- Woolf understands that the causes of Charlotte Bronte's aesthetic imperfections were social—
  - It would be a miracle for any woman under the oppression of that patriarchal society, deprived of the financial independence and quiet leisure that men often took for granted, to produce texts that transcend the creative self
- Woolf concludes her treatise by arguing that it will take the transformation of society, giving women the titular “room of one's own,” to make a space where Shakespeare's future sisters can evolve
- *Shakespeare's Sister from A Room of One's Own*
- “Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say.”
- Shakespeare himself went, very probably – his mother was an heiress – to the grammar school, where he may have learned Latin – Ovid, Virgil, Horace – and the elements of grammar and logic
- He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached rabbits
- He married a woman in the neighborhood sooner than he should have and had a child rather quicker than was right
- He went to London to seek his fortune – he had, it seemed, a taste for the theater
  - He began by holding horses at the stage door – very soon he got work in the theater, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practicing his art on the board, exercising his wit in the streets
- Meanwhile, his extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home
  - She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was
  - But she was not sent to school – she had no chance of learning grammar or logic, let alone reading Horace and Virgil
  - She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages – but then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers
  - Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them
  - Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighboring wool-stapler
    - She cried out that marriage was hateful to her and for this she was severely beaten by her father

# Hub Edits

- He then begged her not to shame him and bribed her with gifts
  - She couldn't go through with the marriage though and ran off to London – she was not seventeen
  - Like her brother she had a passion for the theater, she wanted to act
    - The manager of a theater scoffed at the idea saying as a woman she could never get training as an actor
  - Yet her genius was for fiction and she lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways
  - At last an actor took pity on her, she found herself with child, and seeing her poet's heart about to be permanently suppressed, she killed herself one winter's night
- When one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Bronte who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to
- Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them was often a woman
- Any woman born in the 16<sup>th</sup> century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at
- A highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts that she would have lost her health and sanity
- Had she survived, and lived a free life in London, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination
  - And undoubtedly, since there were no plays by women, her work would have gone unsigned – this actually would have been a relic she would have sought
    - Pericles: the chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of
    - So anonymity runs in her blood
- That woman who was born with a gift of poetry in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself
  - All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain
  - To write a work of genius is almost always a feat of prodigious difficulty – everything is against the likelihood that it will come from the writer's mind whole and entire
    - Generally material circumstances are against it – dogs will bark, people will interrupt, money must be made, health will break down
      - Further accentuating all these difficulties and making them harder to bear is the world's notorious indifference: it does not ask people to write poems and novels; it does not need them
        - It does not care whether Flaubert finds the right word or whether Carlyle scrupulously verifies this or that fact

# Hub Edits

- If anything comes through in spite of all this, it is a miracle, and probably no book is born entire and uncrippled as it was conceived
  - But for women, these difficulties were infinitely more formidable
  - In the first place, to have a room of her own was out of the question (unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble)
  - The indifference from the world that men like Keats and Carlyle found hard to bear was changed to outright hostility for a woman
- Austen – Bronte – Eliot from *A Room's of One's Own*
- By the 19<sup>th</sup> century you could fill your bookshelf with works by women – but why, Woolf wonders, were the works all novels
  - The original impulse was to poetry – both in France and England the women poets precede the women novelists
  - Looking at George Eliot, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, and Jane Austen – four more incongruous characters could not have met
    - Yet by some strange force they were all compelled, when they wrote, to write novels
    - A look at the middle class in the early nineteenth century – where these women come from – shows they would not have had a lot of time or space to themselves in order to write a novel
    - Jane Austen's nephew said: “how she was able to effect all this is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to.”
      - Austen 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
        - To Jane Austen there was something discreditable to writing *Pride and Prejudice* and Woolf wonders whether it would have been an even better novel if Jane had not thought it necessary to hide her manuscript from visitors
        - Woolf concludes that these circumstances did not harm Austen's genius or her work
    - All the literary training that a woman had in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion
      - Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room
        - Personal relations were always before her eyes
- Austen wrote around the year 1800, without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching – that was how Shakespeare wrote
- If Jane Austen suffered in any way from her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed on her
  - It was impossible for a woman to go about alone – she never traveled; she never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon in a shop by herself
  - But, says Woolf, perhaps it was in the nature of Jane Austen not to want what she had not
- In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* we see a longing for this kind of travel

# Hub Edits

- Jane says, “I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen: that then I desired more practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character that was here within my reach.”
- Jane says: “It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it.”
- “Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.”
- Charlotte Bronte had more genius than Jane Austen but was never able to get her genius expressed whole and entire, says Woolf
  - Because Charlotte Bronte writes in a rage where she should write calmly – she writes of herself where she should write of her characters
  - Bronte knew how much she would have benefited if experience and intercourse would have been granted her
- While these women were confined to their common sitting room, with not enough money to buy sufficient paper to write on – at the same time, on the other side of Europe, Tolstoy was living freely with this gipsy or with that great lady; going to the wars; picking up unhindered and uncensored all that varied experience of human life which served him so splendidly later when he wrote his books
  - Without these experiences he could not have written War and Peace
- The shape of a novel starts in one the kind of emotion that is appropriate to it – but that emotion at once blends itself with others, for the shape is made by the relation of human beings to human beings
  - Thus a novel starts in us all sorts of antagonistic and opposed emotions
    - Life conflicts with something that is not life
      - Hence the difficulty of coming to any agreement about novels and the immense sway that our private prejudices have upon us
- The whole structure, it is obvious, thinking back on any famous novel, is one of infinite complexity, because it is thus made up of so many different judgments, of so many kinds of emotion
  - It is amazing that such complex things actually hold together
  - But what holds them together is integrity, meaning the conviction in the novelist that she is giving the truth
    - One holds every phrase, every scene to the light as one reads

# Hub Edits

- Nature seems to have provided us with an inner light by which to judge the novelist's integrity as we read
- A great book makes us say, in rapture: "But this is what I have always felt and known and desired!" – and one boils over in excitement
  - This makes a person treat a book with reverence
  - But if, on the other hand, these poor sentences that one takes and tests rouse first a quick and eager response with their bright coloring and their dashing gestures but there they stop, or they bring to life only a faint scribble in that corner and a blot over there, and nothing appears whole and entire, then one heaves a sigh of disappointment and says, "Another failure"
- Most novels come to this grief somewhere – the imagination falters under the enormous strain
  - But we see in Charlotte Bronte that anger got in the way of her integrity (her truth telling)
    - She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance
      - She remembered that she had been made to stagnate in a parsonage mending stockings when she wanted to wander free over the world
      - Indignation over this caused her imagination to swerve and we feel it swerve
- Since a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life
  - But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values of men – yet it is the masculine values that prevail
    - Football and sport are "important" – the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes "trivial" – and this seems an arbitrary opinion
  - This spills over to the novel and a critic assumes a book is important because it deals with war but a book dealing with the feelings of women in drawing-rooms is insignificant
    - A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop – this difference of value persists everywhere at great levels of subtlety
- Thus the structure of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, as it was practiced by women, reflects a deference to this patriarchal authority
  - This deference rotted the core of many novels
  - But Woolf recognizes how impossible it was not to budge or defer to this authority
    - It would have taken an enormous amount of integrity in the face of all that criticism and patriarchy (only Jane Austen and Emily Bronte did it)
      - Another feature for Austen and Emily Bronte is that they wrote as women write, not as men write
      - They were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now

# Hub Edits

angry, now avuncular – that voice which cannot let women alone, admonishing them to keep within the bounds that gentlemen set

- Whatever effect discouragement and criticism had on these female novelists' writing – and Woolf believes it had a great effect – that was unimportant compared with the other difficulty which faced them, that is that they had no tradition behind them (or one so short and partial it was of little help)
  - The great male tradition would have taught a woman writer a few tricks but it would not have been much of a help because the weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike a woman's for her to lift anything substantial from a man
- Jane Austen devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it – thus with less genius than Charlotte Bronte she got infinitely more said
  - Freedom and fullness of expression are the essence of art
- Women wrote novels because when they started to be women writers the novel was young enough a form to be soft in their hands (but even the novel is not rightly shaped for woman's use)
- A book is not made of sentences laid end to end but of sentences built into arcades or domes