

Lecture Series on Contemporary Theories Feminist Criticism: Lecture 4

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Feminist Criticism

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941): *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

Main Ideas: 1. Financial and Intellectual Freedom

The title of Woolf's essay is a key part of her thesis: that a woman needs money and a room of her own if she is to be able to write. Woolf argues that a woman needs financial freedom so as to be able to control her own space and life—to be unhindered by interruptions and sacrifices—in order to gain intellectual freedom and therefore be able to write.

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2. Women and Society

The text does not assign blame for the state of society to particular men or as a conscious effort by men as a whole to suppress women. Rather, she describes a society formed by the instincts of the different sexes (for example women to have children, marry early, be tasked with mending and caring for the family and not being educated) that together define society and together influence individual's behaviors and opportunities.

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This is not to say that Woolf sees society as being anything other than dramatically tilted in favor of men. She explores just how it is tilted, in two ways. First, she shows how she herself has been shut out of the fictional college “Oxbridge,” an amalgamation of the two elite English universities Oxford and Cambridge. For Woolf herself, this “Oxbridge” idea was significant in her life; her brothers and male contemporaries all seemed to go off to Oxbridge while she tried to challenge herself and educate herself with what little external resources she had.

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Second, she creates an imaginary woman named Judith Shakespeare, sister of William Shakespeare and his equal in talent. She then shows how, while William rises to fame and becomes an “incandescent” poet, Judith is prevented by the structure of society from doing so and ends up committing suicide.

3. Creating a Legacy of Women Writers: Woolf as the narrator invokes the women writers of the past and present to help her make her argument. From real authors like George Eliot and Lady Winchilsea to the invented Mary and Judith Shakespeare characters, Woolf presents a network of women who've missed out on their potential because of their status as women and the conditions of poverty and lack of education that that status implies.

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By creating an imaginary sister for Shakespeare, Woolf emphasizes the anonymity and invisibility of women; she makes us imagine many more forgotten women that history has left behind and whose minds will never be expressed.

Woolf describes male geniuses like Shakespeare as incandescent figures, known entirely by virtue of their work and not by their own lives. Woolf shows that it is very difficult for women to be this way, because their lives necessarily impose on them to such a degree, with childbearing, with homemaking, and with suffering. Therefore both women's fiction and the women themselves are defined by their deprivations rather than being incandescent, like the major male writers.

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Simone De Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1949)

Main Ideas: Alterity and Opposition

Man and woman are not opposites, although linguistically, they are constituted as an opposing pair. One might say humanity consists of two kinds of individuals, and the relation between them is just the notion of asymmetrical differences—or alterity. The human infant's first recognition of the boundaries of his body, and his separateness from other bodies and objects in his world, is characterized by the British analyst D.W. Winnicott as “me” and “not-me.” In other words, the earliest trope of cognition recognizes difference. Beauvoir follows the German philosopher Hegel (1770–1831) when she states, “The subject ... asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object.” The male, the sovereign subject, operates through opposition.

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Simone De Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1949)

Alterity and Reciprocity

Alterity is the term for the relation between the sexes, best understood as a cognitive mode, a way of perceiving difference. For example: in a foreign land, a stranger appears, easel under her arm, an artist seeking new vistas. She is a standout at nearly seven feet tall. The locals raise their eyebrows and look away. She is seen not as she is, but as alien, as Other. This response to difference is—in an existential vocabulary—oppositional. Oppositional alterity characterizes male perception. The man sees himself as essential, and the other as non-essential. The initial response is defensive.

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Transcendence and Immanence

Transcendence is the expansion of the individual toward an open future. The moral subject accomplishes his freedom only by perpetual surpassing towards other freedoms. The moral life consists of a reaching out, a progress toward the good of humankind. Immanence is a turning inward. Beauvoir states that when woman is defined as Other, as a womb or sexual body, "an attempt is made to freeze her as an object, and doom her to immanence." Even the independent woman finds herself divided between her femininity, her potential immanence, and her desire to function as a transcendent human being.

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Simone De Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1949)

The Dream of a Common Reality

In the conclusion to *The Second Sex*—"Men and women must ... beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood"—two words stand out: differentiations and brotherhood. The first is a transcendent process, the act of sorting out differences, holding them in one's hand, and examining them. Beauvoir's history and biology of women has clearly done the sorting, and with the sorting she has provided an understanding, an appreciation for the act of respecting difference rather than reading it as oppositional.

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Simone De Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1949)

The second word, brotherhood, reveals that in a world of appreciation for difference, in acceptance of difference, self and other dissipate. What takes their place is self and self, two sovereign selves in which biological sex is no longer the determining factor of a relationship. In such a world, alterity is a richness, and leads to potential for exchange, a community of sovereign selves, and a brotherhood of individual human beings.

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Simone De Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1949)

Some famous quotes from the text:

- “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”
- “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.”
- “Women's mutual understanding comes from the fact that they identify themselves with each other; but for the same reason each is against the others.”

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Simone De Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1949)

Some famous quotes from the text:

- “To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive, and docile.”
- “Art, literature, and philosophy are attempts to found the world anew on a human freedom.”
- “If so few female geniuses are found in history, it is because society denies them any means of expression.”
- (Some of the content has been taken from open sources on Internet)