

A Room Revisited: Dissonance in Virginia Woolf's Feminism from Essay to Novel

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Few texts have argued for the artistic rights of female authors as passionately as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, a provocative essay that joined the ranks of essential feminist texts by defending the ideal of an independent, creative working woman. Both Woolf's arguments for the breaking of patriarchal norms and her artful fictional depiction of the damage done by patriarchy have inspired her categorization as an empowering feminist author. However, upon closer examination, the positive, almost utopian vision of self-sufficient women found in *A Room* is surprisingly absent from two of her best-known novels, *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. The female characters portrayed therein, such as Lily Briscoe or Clarissa Dalloway, do not in fact strive for independence but rather fail to seize opportunities for social change, falling into obedience under traditional patriarchal control. Meanwhile, socially dictated feminine roles like Mrs. Ramsay's are portrayed in an accepting if not fairly positive light, with no equally strong models of successful working women to counter them. The range and setup of Woolf's fictional characters provide examples curiously unlike the standard striven for in *A Room*, calling into question whether she considered it genuinely possible, and furthermore casting doubt on the classification of these novels as patently feminist. Building upon such considerations, this project argues that the social vision proposed in *A Room* is more a quixotic ideal than a workable goal for Woolf, and that the failures of her characters reflect her underlying pessimism about the likelihood of women overcoming oppression in practice. This demands a reconsideration of Woolf's social philosophy, viewing her not as an optimistic and action-oriented feminist but as a critic of the fallibility of both men and women, who saw potential avenues for social improvement but did not confidently expect them to be fulfilled.

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