

Virginia Woolf's Writing Table

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“[A] woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved.”^[1] This is the only opinion that the British writer and book publisher Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is willing to put forth during speaking engagements at Cambridge's Newnham and Girton Colleges in October 1928. A few years later, addressing the London National Society for Women's Service in January 1931, Woolf claims that money and a room of one's own are not enough. She adds that a woman must have a *mind* of her own. She writes: “You have won rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men. You are able, though not without great labour and effort, to pay the rent. You are earning your five hundred pounds a year. But this freedom is only a beginning; the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms?”^[2] One may ask what it is about furniture, decoration, and room sharing that makes it difficult, or ambiguous. Answers to these questions can be found in Woolf's memoir. She writes, for starters, that: “The tea table rather than the dinner table was the centre of Victorian family life—in

our family at least. Savages, I suppose, have some tree, or fire place, round which they congregate; the round table marked that focal, that sacred spot in our house. It was the centre, the heart of the family. It was the centre to which the sons returned from their work in the evening; the hearth whose fire was tended by the mother, pouring out tea.”^[3] Luckily, there is, next to the tea table and the dinner table, a third type of table: “Left alone in the great house, with Father shut up in his study at the top, the housemaid polishing brass rods, Shag asleep on his mat, and some maid doing bedrooms while Sophie I suppose took in joints and milk from tradespeople at the back door, I mounted to my room and spread my Liddell and Scott upon my table and sat down to make out Euripides or Sophocles for my weekly lesson with Janet Case. From ten to one we escaped the pressure of Victorian society.”^[4] This writing table—this *desk*—is a most precious piece of furniture in patriarchal times, also for the upper classes of a society. First, Woolf explains: “I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people’s hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters Women and Fiction, but no more.”^[5] And then: “[...] the very first sentence that I would write here, I said, crossing over to the writing-table and taking up the page headed Women and Fiction, is that it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-

manly or man-womanly. [...] The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness.”^[6] The Angel in the House should be killed at the desk.^[7] A woman must be androgynous if she is to write fiction.

^[1] Woolf, Virginia. [1929] 2001. 'A Room of One's Own.' In *A Room of One's Own & Three Guineas*, edited by Hermione Lee, 1-98. London: Vintage. Page 2.

^[2] Woolf, Virginia. [1931] 1979. 'Professions for Women.' In *Women and Writing*, 57-63. London: The Women's Press. Page 63.

^[3] Woolf, Virginia. [1939] 2002. 'Sketch of the Past.' In *Moments of Being*, 78-160. London: Pimlico. Page 125

^[4] *Ibid.* Page 150.

^[5] Woolf. [1929] 2001. Page 20.

^[6] *Ibid.* Pages 89-90.

^[7] Woolf. [1931] 1979. Page 58.