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An Introduction to Modern Feminist Theory

Jennifer Rich

*'the radical belief
that women are
human beings'*

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A Note on the Author

Jennifer A. Rich is an Assistant Professor of English at Hofstra University. Her published work includes essays on film, rhetoric, Shakespeare and composition.

She is also the author of *An Introduction to Critical Theory* in this series.

Introduction

At a cocktail party, a discussion of the definition of feminism was raging without a clear conclusion. Some participants suggested that feminism was the demand for ‘equal rights’, some that it involved the dismantling of the ‘sex/gender’ system, still others that it was the unending struggle against male domination in all its forms. Finally, an eight-year-old who had been listening intently to the conversation disingenuously asked the following—‘isn’t feminism the belief that women are human beings’? At this question, all conversation stopped; the eight-year-old *boy* had hit the nail on the head. All that was needed was a slight emendation of his interrogative—that is that feminism IS the radical belief that women are human beings.

While this definition might seem painfully obvious, it nevertheless touches on the trajectory of feminist theory of the last thirty years, what we will call ‘second-wave feminism’. All feminist theory has been concerned in divergent ways and through divergent means with establishing the ‘subject-position’ of women. To say that a woman is a human being is to disentangle her from the dangerous nexus of objectification, prejudice and cultural norms and it is, most importantly, to establish her on an equal footing with ‘men’ and all that this subject-position provides. The rehumanization of ‘woman’ is the goal of the feminist theoreticians that we will consider in this volume.

Initial Articulations of the ‘Woman’ Problem

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf is perhaps best known as one of the twentieth-century’s most important modernist novelists. Until the 1970s, her novels were far more widely read than her feminist essays (and the novels still enjoy much deserved popularity); since the advent of second-wave feminism, however, her feminist works such as *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*—have been reestablished as central reading for students of feminist theory. For the purposes of our discussion, we will consider *A Room of One’s Own*, a text that best articulates the materialist-based analysis of female oppression that will prove one of the most significant influences on feminist methodology of the second wave.

A Room of One’s Own

Written in 1928 for a lecture at Girton College, Cambridge, *A Room of One’s Own* is Woolf’s comprehensive answer to the ‘woman problem’: the accusation of female inferiority in the arts and elsewhere. Woolf was asked to talk to the female students at Girton College—the only college in the U.K. that in 1928 admitted women—about the issue of ‘women and fiction’. In her text, Woolf reconstructs the thinking process that leads to the pronouncement that serves both as the title of her talk and its main argument: in order to write fiction, a woman must have a room of her own and £500 per year. Although seemingly obvious—of course in order to write fiction you need space and money—Woolf’s argument necessarily involves disputing age-old observations of women’s capabilities and also encompasses a profound materialist analysis of the condition of women’s existence—at Girton and elsewhere.

In novelistic fashion, Woolf recreates for her audience the gradual step-by-step evolution of her thinking in the course of her text. Although an essay, Woolf departs from linear argumentation: she judges herself incapable of ‘fulfill[ing] ... the first duty of a lecturer—to hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever’

(3). The fact that the first word of *A Room of One's Own* is 'but'—an interruptive conjunction that usually indicates a shift in thinking—only prefigures Woolf's refusal to engage in traditional so-called 'rational' discourse. This introductory 'but' is no accident, but rather signals a departure from male-defined thinking practices, ones which proceed from 'a' to 'b' without any residue of the thinking process that underlies such an approach. Woolf's method is consciously messy: she wills the reader to experience with her her thinking process, and thus to be able more fully to appreciate the far-reaching implications of her seemingly facile conclusion (about the room and the money):

I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money. I am going to develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought that led me to think this. Perhaps if I lay bare the ideas, the prejudices, that lie behind this statement you will find that they have some bearing upon women and some upon fiction. At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one come to hold whatever opinion one does hold. (4)

As promised, Woolf starts with an account of her visit to 'Oxbridge'—a fictional combination of Oxford and Cambridge. She recounts sitting 'at the bank of a river', her head bowed down by the task before her—that is, coming to a meaningful conclusion about the topic of women and fiction. An idea eventually comes to her, and sends her on an agitated walk towards a library to examine a manuscript. Unfortunately, her idea and her sojourn to the library is interrupted by a beadle—a security officer—who stops Woolf because she has committed the unpardonable sin of walking on the grass rather than the gravel. While seemingly insignificant, the Beadle interrupts her process of thought—it sends, as she says, her little thought into 'hiding'. In this way, the Beadle represents the strictures that prevent women from thinking in significant ways at all. Just as they can not walk on the grass, they cannot sign their names to their works; they are expected to take care of children, and so on.

This anecdote is just one of the ways that Woolf demonstrates the materialist bases of women's oppression, and most importantly, that this oppression is not a result of the natural order of things, but is the inevitable product of social relationships and access to wealth. The most persuasive example of this material inequity is Woolf's discussion—humorously enough—of the differences between the food served at the Men's college at Oxbridge and the women's college.

While her discussion inspires hunger in the reader and in the writer (filet of soles, partridges, and a wonderful meringue are served) what is also inspired is a sense of ‘the good life’—of material comfort and the psychological feelings of confidence and aptitude that come with such comforts:

And thus by degrees was lit, halfway down the spine, which is the seat of the soul, ... the more profound subtle and subterranean glow, which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse. No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself. We are all going to heaven and Vandyck¹ is of the company ... (Woolf 11)

Woolf pairs the discussion of dinner at the men’s college with supper at the women’s college. She includes a similar description of the food served, and the differences between the two become depressingly apparent:

Here was my soup. It was a plain gravy soup. There was nothing to stir the fancy in that. One could have seen through the transparent liquid any pattern that there might have been on the plate itself. But there was no pattern. The plate was plain. (Woolf 17)

It soon becomes obvious that unlike the feelings of comfort and security inspired by the men’s college dinner, this supper would in no way inspire such feelings. Woolf describes the querulous and ‘dubious’ state of mind that is the inevitable result of dining on mutton instead of partridge:

One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes. We are all *probably* going to heaven, and Vandyck is, we *hope*, to meet us round the next corner—that is the dubious and qualifying state of mind that beef and prunes at the end of the day’s work breed between them. (Woolf 19)

Woolf’s focus on food telescopes the clear material differences between the men’s and women’s college—differences which can not but result in significant psychological and social inequities both within and without the academy. In order to understand fully the character of women’s oppression, however, Woolf explores the history of women’s lives and their relationship to material wealth.

¹ Anthony Vandyck (1599–1641) was the royal portraitist in seventeenth-century England. He was thus associated with aristocracy, comfort and privilege.