

The Scope of Woolf's Feminism in *A Room of One's Own*

A highly contested statement on women and fiction, Virginia Woolf's extended essay *A Room of One's Own* has been repeatedly reviewed, critiqued, and analyzed since its publication in 1929. Arnold Bennett, an early twentieth-century novelist, and David Daiches, a literary critic who wrote an analysis entitled *Virginia Woolf* in 1942 (Murphy 247), were among those to attempt to extricate the themes and implications of Woolf's complex essay. The two critics deal with the often-discussed feminist aspect of Woolf's essay in interestingly different ways. Bennett states that Woolf's essay is not a feminist work, rejects the idea that Woolf's discussion of women and fiction may lean towards the political, and reduces the essay's scope to a collection of musings on women and fiction. Daiches responds to *A Room of One's Own* in the opposite way: he claims that Woolf's work is feminist, and Woolf's feminism emphasizes not only women and their relationship to fiction, but all people of genius who have not had an opportunity to use it because of their lack of money and privacy. While Bennett restricts the scope of the essay to a non-feminist, completely apolitical ideology and Daiches enlarges the scope to a wide, universal feminism, Woolf's own intention in writing *A Room of One's Own* may have actually been to create a work that lay somewhere in between these two extremes.

In one of the earliest reviews of *A Room of One's Own*, British novelist Arnold Bennett addressed the question of feminism in the essay and concluded that Woolf was not writing from a feminist perspective. "It is a book a little about men and a great deal about women. But it is not 'feminist.' It is non-partisan," Bennett declared. In

Describing Woolf's perspective as "non-partisan," Bennett labels it non-political, and therefore defines feminism as an inherently political system of thought. As Professor Wendy Nicholson said in her lecture on *A Room of One's Own*, at the period in which Woolf was writing, feminism, by popular definition, meant wanting the vote for women. This is certainly not Woolf's brand of feminism; having received the news of her inheritance at the same time as women won the vote, Woolf wrote that "of the two-the vote and the money-the money, I own, seemed infinitely more important" (Woolf 37). But although such matters as the vote are an important part of feminism, the word has evolved to embrace many non-political beliefs. Indeed, during Woolf's time, there was a strong feminist movement outside of the political sphere, but the common conception was that feminists were only interested in the vote. In the most general sense, today's definition of feminism is simply the belief in securing equal rights and opportunities for women. That women should be allowed equal opportunities to write fiction is the thesis of Woolf's essay. Though her thesis is confined to fiction and does not extend into any other facet of society, the idea is feminist by this broader, more recent definition. In Bennett's time, however, when the words "feminist" and "suffragist" were considered synonyms, Woolf's blatant nonchalance about women's suffrage may have been considered not only non-feminist, but anti-feminist.

Arnold Bennett also claims that Woolf "comes to no satisfactory conclusion about the disparateness between men and women." Bennett, in this critique, is again limiting the scope of what Woolf is attempting to accomplish in *A Room of One's Own*. She makes no pretense of attempting to explain the differences between men and women. She acknowledges that these discrepancies exist, and that one must recognize them in

order to write fiction of integrity. She warns against women trying to use men's style in their writing: "The weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike [woman's]...for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully" (Woolf 76). Later in the essay, she queries, "Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences [between the sexes] rather than the similarities?" (Woolf 88). Woolf is certainly aware of the differences between women and men, and she advocates that these differences be cherished. However, her concern is that women have not been allowed to develop their own style throughout history—they have had not the time, the money, the privacy, or the tradition. Only a few women writers have been able to shed the impediments that afflict their sex and write "as women write, not as men write" (Woolf 74). Bennett limits the span of Woolf's essay by narrowly defining it as an attempt to explain the differences between the sexes. Woolf's intent is actually quite different: she praises the differences between the genders, and focuses her essay on why, if there are so many differences, women have not been able to develop their own personal style in the area of fiction.

David Daiches, a later critic, also seems to have misunderstood the scope of *A Room of One's Own*. While Bennett claims that it is not at all a feminist work but simply a study of men and women, Daiches does believe that Woolf's essay is feminist. He labels her feminism as "rooted in a larger democratic feeling," and asserts that Woolf utilizes her analysis of woman's situation to make a more universal statement. Daiches's interpretation of Woolf's underlying theme is this: "All those who have talent should be given the opportunity to develop and use it...[and] should be allowed to have an income and a room of their own." Though Woolf often uses generalizing statements about the near impossibility of a working class person creating good fiction, she does this only as

an argumentative tactic to prove her point about women. It is not the other way around, as Daiches implies. Woolf's interest, in this essay, is in women. She uses many devices to support her point about the necessity of money for creating great fiction, including lines such as, "For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among uneducated, servile people...it is not born today among the working classes" (Woolf 48). This might lead one to believe that her point does extend beyond the situation of women, as Daiches believes, to address the larger issue of genius and the effect of class on its actualization. However, Woolf quickly continues, "How then, could it have been born among women...?(Woolf 48). Her focus is women, and particularly, British upper middle-class women. In her exploration of money as a necessity for women to create art, she is not addressing money as a class issue, but as a gender issue. Woolf's major point is that women have never been allowed to have money, even the aristocratic women; it was their husbands who owned the property and the money. Though Woolf is aware of the effect of class on creation of fiction, in this essay she is concerning herself only with the fact that women, who were inherently poor, had no chance of writing fiction.

Daiches attempts to expand Woolf's scope to be larger than it is, and is therefore disappointed with Woolf's result. He describes her view as one that is "largely concerned with ends and tends to ignore discussion of means." Daiches has universalized Woolf's theory and placed on it a set of expectations which it cannot fulfill, and indeed was never intended to fulfill. He seems to expect that if Woolf makes a sweeping statement about how genius must be nurtured-with money and a private room in which to write-then she must provide some solutions for how this is to be accomplished. In Daiches's interpretation, Woolf's essay appears an idealistic, silly idea that poses no

practical solutions for how those who exhibit potential for genius should be picked out and placed in a situation in which they have money and privacy. Woolf's intentions, though, are not at all what Daiches suspects. She is an intellectual, not a politician, and does not concern herself with the practical aspects of her theory. *A Room of One's Own*, is not meant to be a socially prescriptive work that lays out a plan for the betterment of society; the essay, in fact, is much more limited in application than Daiches believes. Woolf is focused on the issue of women and why they have not created great works of fiction, not on the universal problem of unrealized potential among the working classes.

“But, you may say,” Woolf begins her essay *A Room of One's Own*, “we asked you to speak about women and fiction-what has that got to do with a room of one's own?” (Woolf 3). Hence, the thesis of Woolf's essay emerges-that in order for women to write fiction, they must have 500 pounds a year and a room of their own. Critics Arnold Bennett and David Daiches both wrestle with Woolf's essay and ultimately misinterpret the scale of her point. Bennett underestimates the scope of the essay by denying its feminist nature and incorrectly defining the point Woolf was attempting to explore, and Daiches mistakenly universalizes Woolf's feminism by claiming that her theory applies not only to women, but to all members of the lower class. Though these two critics distort the scope of the essay, their comments do point out important limits on Woolf's feminism. As Arnold Bennett says, Woolf's concerns are not political; although our modern definition of feminism is wider than Bennett's was, Woolf's lack of political interest does certainly limit the scope of her feminism. David Daiches's critique of the essay points out another important characteristic of Woolf's feminist thought. Her feminism is not, as Daiches believes based in a “larger democratic feeling.” Woolf's

feminism is in actuality quite limited in that she only applies it to British, upper middle-class women writers. Virginia Woolf's essay-which to Bennett seemed non-feminist and to Daiches seemed feminist-universalist-is, by our modern definition, feminist; however, the borders of culture, class, and profession that composed her frame of reference drastically limit the scope of Woolf's feminism.