

A Room of One's Own?

On the Feminist Spatial Concept and Strategy

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Abstract

This paper attempts to put Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in the feminist context and thus discuss the constructing procedure of the domestic spatial ideology. In order to obtain a space for the female's literary creation, Woolf not only marks the importance of the financial support, but also advocates the necessity of a locked room. However, according to our analysis, the spatial construction is often the product of the conceptualized gender consciousness. Consequently, Woolf's spatial concept and strategy designed for the female writers need to some extent revision. That is, only when the female learn to face, not escape from, the social reality and living space can they sufficiently achieve the literary creation.

Key Words: knowledge, space, man/woman looking-glass inter-reaction, literary creation

In *A Room of One's Own* (1945), which was the text of lectures on "Women and Fiction" in 1928, Virginia Woolf theorizes the human thought is just like a fisherman who lets the fishing line down into the stream, so that it "swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until...the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line..." (Woolf 7)¹ appears. According to this concept, as long as one possesses enough patience and talent, one, either man or woman, can surely "angle" his or her own significant ideas from the daily life. Through this meditating process, one obtains the scarce but sophisticated ideas for one's literary creation. Practically, however, the real situation for Woolf is much more different from what she has thought about: While the male cherish their ideas, the female tend to despise their own, because they are "the sort of fish that a fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating" (*AROO* 7). In order to provide with an answer to this doubt, Woolf focuses her study on the domestic life, viewing it as the transitive field of the human beings' socialization, especially for women.

In studying the art of feminism, Herbert Marder points out, the domestic life in Woolf's mind is exclusively social; there is no privacy for women. While the son of the house may be granted freedom of his own, the daughter is expected to be at everyone's beck and call (34). Owing to the endless life trivia that interrupt their literary creations, the works composed by the female tend to be fragmented, without a coherent plot or deduction. To put it in another way, the space under the roof of the family symbolizes the prevalence of male standards and style: Only men are allowed to pursue the wholeness in their life either inside or outside the family; women, on the contrary, should stick to the isolated roles confined inside the family.

¹ All further references to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* will be abbreviated as *AROO*.

It seems that the feminist author of *A Room of One's Own* will possibly denounce the prison-like family in its obstructing the female's development, especially the intellectual and creative one. However, Woolf adopts a broad sense of the family's function: If the domestic life disintegrated, the whole socializing procedure would surely lose its function. So, Woolf tries very hard to retain "the domestic wisdom traditionally cultivated by women" (Marder 33), and emphasizes the training and molding role played by the domestic life. In her mind, the profoundest problem of the traditional domestic training is that the dividing line between the two sexes is drawn in the wrong place. While "thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer" (*AROO* 26), Woolf manipulates such problem by suggesting a new condition for each female (the literary creator in particular) within the domestic realm: an annual income of five hundred pounds to prevent from financial problems, and, especially, "a room with a *lock* on the door" (*AROO* 103; my own emphasis). In other words, she optimistically believes that the female writers will undoubtedly create better works under these two external supports.

Although the female's financial self-support has been the major issue since the early twentieth century, highlighting the effect of a self-owned space still psychologically and socially remains debatable. Jean Guiguet, in *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, indicates that Woolf's "room" is:

the symbol of her [the girl's] autonomy, not only the protecting shell which will allow her to be herself, but her very substance, born of the fusion of her being with the outside world. This room, in fact, is...a *closed room yet an open one at the same time*, attainable only by universal consent.... (171; my own emphases)

How can a locked room be “a closed room yet an open one at the same time”? Literally, one can make a room open simply by unlocking the door; however, such a room certainly does not work in Woolf’s definition, because various interruptions will come immediately from the outside—the family. Yet, there emerges other questions: Can one, taking her refuge in a locked room, really get rid of the interruption and influence from the rest of the world? Does Woolf’s optimistic project create a great future for female writers simply by proposing “locking” or “self-locking” themselves in their room? Accordingly, Guiguet’s statement of emphasizing the conflicting features of a room, both closed and open, provides a deconstructive force to Woolf’s ideas. Consequently, basing on this thinking process, I’d try in this paper to round out an idea by studying the female spatial concept as feminist strategies, taking *A Room of One’s Own* as an example.

First of all, it is necessary to go over Woolf’s basic ideas about the two sexes discussed in the text. For her, it is “absurd to blame any class or any sex, as a whole,” since “great bodies of people are never responsible for what they do. They are driven by instincts which are not within their control” (*AEEO* 39-40). Even the male patriarchs have countless difficulties and terrible drawbacks to contend with. Woolf sufficiently understands that both men and women play *the role of the complicity* with each other in establishing the social morality and public opinions. In *A Room of One’s Own*, she vividly describes this delicate relationship:

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown. (37)

It is this looking-glass that constructs the whole illusion of a harmonious human life. Men need women to help perform the whole drama, so that, upon entering the house

from work, they can re-legitimize and re-create their status and confidence, which might be torn down outside the house.² Obviously, such a kind of relationship is the fantasy in the reality (Meaney 84-85).

Yet, between men and women, there is no stable fantasy or reality; what exists is the continuous inter-performing of the mirror-reflection drama. Considering from this aspect, Marder is to some extent right: "The central fact of social relations between men and women, as Virginia Woolf saw them, is that men are socially sterile. Without the harmonizing influence of women there would be no civilization" (41). When women begin to tell the truth (instead of providing the illusive reflections in the mirror), the "coherent" figures in the looking-glass will shrink, since men's fitness for life has long been diminished.

However, too much emphasizing men's passive status³ before the looking-glasses and women's positive imaging ability certainly obscures one of the important arguments in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: female's being dominated in the domestic life. In Woolf's opinion, since women get less benefits than men do in the real life, there emerges a contradiction between the looking-glass fantasy and the daily life reality. This is to say, while obsessed by the overt relationship between the mirror and the one standing before it, one should never disregard the other side of this phenomenon—the covert relationship. What is the essential force which makes women function as looking-glasses for men? Undoubtedly, women play sufficient roles in this reflection drama; but, never can they self-create as the looking-glasses

² Julia Kristeva, in "About Chinese Women," observes a similar situation of the inter-relationship between men and women, using the mother-son inter-dependence as an example: "In an analogous situation a man can imagine an all-powerful, though always insignificant, mother in order to 'legitimize' himself: to make himself known, to lean on her and be guided by her through the social labyrinth, though not without his own occasional ironic commentary" (158).

³ John Burt Foster in an article about the irreconcilable habits of thought also stresses the ambiguous psychology of men's identification, which is "not motivated by men's will-to-power over women but rather by men's doubts about themselves..." (193).

indicated by Woolf. It is men—more precisely, the whole patriarchal society—that make them the identifying medium. It is men who need women to stick to such a kind of role on the excuse of the social harmony.⁴ Therefore, any theory emphasizing either sex as the totally dominating or dominated part will be incorrect. The identifying process is always the endless interaction between men and women, so long as human beings still live together in the man-made society. Woolf never forgets this reality, which is one of the greatest obstruction to the establishment of an exclusively female space for literary creation. Before going back to her image/strategy of a room with a lock on the door, I'd like to discuss her adoption of a narrative speaker, "I," in *A Room of One's Own*.

Near the very beginning of this text (originally a lecture),⁵ Woolf states that "what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them..." (6; my own emphases). Superficially, the effect of the no-body "I" "is to play down the sense of personal grievance and to increase the feeling of detachment" (Zwerdling 255), since Woolf believes that one "can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker" (6). From this we know, Woolf eagerly takes a neutral stance in arguing about women's literary creation. Yet, how can such a kind of unreal persona "I" work in this feminist text? Why does Woolf make this arrangement while speaking about women and fiction, which are supposed to be put in the context of creating authority? Why doesn't she choose a concrete female

⁴ Moreover, pinned down in this status as the identifying medium for the other sex, women can hardly achieve self-fulfillment or self-identification as men do through the reflecting process.

⁵ Guiguet, in a brief introduction of *A Room of One's Own*, notices the retaining of the speech tone and oral form in this text: "The lecture's 'I' appears on every page, almost in every sentence..." (168).

being, e.g., herself, as the narrator in this text?⁶

In the male text (*AROO* 98), Woolf finds a “straight dark bar... ‘I’”. This is a different “I” from the one Woolf uses in *A Room of One's Own*. It is “honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding.” To some extent, Woolf admires and respects it from the bottom of her heart. She simply cannot ignore its all-pervasive power in the family, society and even in the literary works. However, “in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman.” She eventually acknowledges that under the dominating phallic shadow (the male “I”), women have no existence, just being mute and inactive. Under the domination of the male “I,” the female can never find a pure space for the free creation. It is in this sense that, to get rid of the male persona and syntax, Woolf strongly urges a specifically feminine sentence at the same time. In other words, “in *A Room of One's Own* the speaker’s ‘I’ is both female and plural—‘a woman’s voice in a patriarchal literary tradition’—and another ‘I,’ shadowing the page, is ‘polished, learned, well-fed,’ an explicitly male subject speaking of and from dominance” (DuPlessis 475). Thus, by manipulating a tricky narrator—merging opposite sexual features into a new whole—Woolf chooses to swing between the double marginalization.⁷

Now, with Woolf’s ideas of the man-woman relationship in mind, let us go back to the spatial issue, stated at the beginning of this article. Does this strategy—letting the female create in a private room without any interruption—accord with

⁶ S. P. Rosenbaum also raises a similar question: “In the context of this essay, this statement is at least odd: Why would she choose to stand behind this unreal “I”? ... in denying a ‘real’ existence, the narrator associates herself with anonymity, immanence, and silence—all, apparently, the enemies of literary tradition” (160).

⁷ Rachel Blau DuPlessis marks the fact that one, especially the female in this case, affirms the patriarchal authority even while one appropriates it, either to “negate any possibility for a critical stance, seeking instead ‘conformity and inclusion’...or...[to enliven] the potential for critique by the marginalized dialogue with the orders... [one] may also affirm” (476).

Woolf's ideas in *A Room of One's Own*?

All through the text, the narrator, meditating on the subject "Women and Fiction," travels from the Oxbridge to British Museum, from the public restaurants to the room in her house. She attempts to search out some meaning with the aid of the change of locations. However, she fails to find any final solution because she is unable to recognize the fact that the space is in whole constructed by the thinking pattern of the dominant patriarchal knowledge. How can she discover the "pure" female status suitable for the topic, "Women and Fiction"? In fact, meditating in the male space, what she constantly faces is countless interruptions, e.g., the prohibition she meets while walking on the college turf (7-8) or attempting to enter the college library (9). These interruptions not only physically influence her behavior but, what is worse, also break in upon her thoughts. In a word, the female cannot have consistent thoughts if they fail to follow the patriarchal recognition.

Michel Foucault indicates in the "Prison Talk":

Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power.... It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. (52)

In other words, to gain knowledge is to appropriate the power relation within which knowledge is constructed, and vice versa. In *A Room of One's Own*, we see that women need not only the knowledge but also the opportunity to present and express themselves. However, to "make the woman's voice heard, one might be led 'to destroy the very foundation and rules of literary society.... Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated'" (Pinkney 7). Consequently, it is impossible for the female to create freely and independently in an isolated room without any consideration of the external influence. Thus, in addition to cutting off the external interruption, what

does “a room with a lock on the door” work in supporting Woolf’s argument? From this aspect, the claim for private rooms for women loses its revolutionary sense in Woolf’s whole argument in *A Room of One’s Own*.

No wonder, masculine system “has until now required women to assume material continuity—of daily life and of the species—while men assume the function of discontinuity, discovery, change in all its forms, in essence, the superior, differentiating function” (Hermann 172). But, in appropriating and objecting to such a kind of meditating process, women need not to stick to another vision, totally refusing their continuity⁸ as Claudine Hermann observes in “Women in Space and Time.” Rather, women should on the one hand face the masculine influence, and on the other hand manage to pursue a new feminist way out. From this aspect, Woolf does elaborate a precious perspective in recognizing the inter-operation of men and women, which is extraordinarily special in comparison with the radical feminist advocacy to exclude the other half of the human beings from the gender-stage.

To sum up, since this world consists of both sexes, what women pursue should not be Woolf’s exclusive room but Guiguet’s room, closed yet open at the same time (171). It is closed because of its insisting on women’s privacy; open, because of its guaranteeing their participation in social lives, either inside or outside of the domestic field. Only when they are able to claim a new exercising space for their latitude can they bring their ability and intelligence into full play (just like the other sex). Then, there will be “a constant repositioning between dominant and muted, hegemonic and oppositional, central and colonial, so that a woman may be described as (ambiguously) nohegemonic or, with equal justice but less drama, as (ambiguously) hegemonic if her race, class, and sexuality are dominant” (482). Only

⁸ In Hermann’s opinion, Woolf’s works often provide with a sense of “a series of little islands [discontinuity] that point toward an uncharted sea and that the waves conceal and reveal at whim” (172).

when we get rid of the confinement of the locked room can we envision this oscillating phenomenon in *A Room of One's Own*.

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屬於自我的房間？

淺析女性空間概念與策略

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摘 要

本文以維金妮雅·渥兒夫的小品講稿《屬於自我的房間》為據，在女性主義意識的框架下，分析在家庭中空間意識的建構過程。為求一個完全屬於女性自我文學創作的空間，渥兒夫除了強調女性經濟收入的重要性，更主張女性居家需有一個上鎖的房間。然而，由本文分析可知，空間的建構往往是性別意識概念化的產物。因此，渥兒夫的女性空間策略需做某種程度的修正，亦即唯有以正視而非退避的開放態度去面對社會現實與生活空間才能獲致真正的女性文藝創作表現。

關鍵字：知識、空間、兩性鏡象互動、文藝創作