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SPATIAL CONSTRUCTS AND SUBJECT FORMATION IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*: AN ANALYTICAL INQUIRY

Everton Rocha Vecchi[1*]

Humberto Fois Braga[1**]

Guilherme Augusto Pereira Malta[1***]

[1]Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, Juiz de Fora, MG, Brasil

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between spatiality and the formation of feminine subjectivity in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. By tracing the protagonist Mary's intellectual journey, the study examines how space — material and symbolic — shapes agency, autonomy, and visibility within gendered constraints. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Victoria Rosner, and Mark Wigley, the analysis foregrounds the role of spatial practices in negotiating identity under Victorian social norms. The article contributes to feminist literary criticism by offering a spatial reading of Woolf's essay and reaffirming its relevance to contemporary debates on gender and space.

Keywords: spatial constructs; subject formation; gender dynamics; Virginia Woolf; feminist literary analysis.

[*] Everton Rocha Vecchi is a master's student in the Graduate Program in Literary Studies at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Brazil, with a CAPES scholarship. He holds degrees in Law (UFJF), Business Administration and Human Resources (Estácio de Sá University), as well as teaching degrees in Portuguese, English, Spanish, and Pedagogy. A member of the research group *Travessias e Feminismo*, his research focuses on Virginia Woolf and her translations in Brazil. E-mail: everton.vecchi@ufjf.br. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5713-9444.

[**] Humberto Fois-Braga is a professor and researcher affiliated with both the Department of Tourism and the Graduate Program in Literary Studies at UFJF. He holds a BA in Tourism from UFJF, a postgraduate certificate in Literary Studies, a Master II in Industries du Tourisme from Université de Toulouse II – Jean Jaurès, an MA in Communication and Society from UFJF, and a PhD in Literary Studies from UFJF. He coordinates the research group *Performances e Narrativas de Viagem* (PeNaVia). E-mail: humberto.braga@ufjf.br. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4179-2564.

[***] Guilherme Augusto Pereira Malta holds a PhD in Geography from the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). He is an Associate Professor in the Department of Tourism and a permanent faculty member of the Graduate Program in Geography at UFJF. His research interests include tourism, innovation, cultural landscapes, literary geography, and public tourism policy. E-mail: guilherme.malta@ufjf.br. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8778-7763.

Introduction

The 1980s marked a turning point in the humanities and social sciences, ushering in the spatial turn and calling for a reconceptualization of space as a cultural and political construct. No longer understood as a neutral container, space became recognized as actively shaped by and shaping power relations, identity, and social practices. In *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), Edward Soja emphasizes how spatial arrangements are both culturally produced and productive (16-21, 39-42), highlighting the political implications of spatiality in knowledge formation and subject constitution. Within this critical paradigm, space emerges as a dynamic site of meaning-making, where cultural and ideological tensions unfold through lived practices and representations.

This article explores how spatial practices participate in the construction of feminine subjectivity in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Woolf's essay presents a narrator whose reflections on gender inequality, literary tradition, and economic access unfold through a dynamic engagement with space — libraries, gardens, streets, and rooms serve not merely as settings but as elements that shape the possibilities for autonomy, agency, and visibility. The investigation draws on a theoretical framework grounded in spatial studies, especially the works of Michel de Certeau (1992), Henri Lefebvre (1991), Victoria Rosner (2005), and Mark Wigley (1992), to examine how Woolf constructs a narrative in which space is intimately linked to questions of gender, authorship, and identity.

Central to this inquiry is the notion that the subject is not formed in isolation, but through spatial negotiations that reflect broader cultural conditions. Woolf's assertion that "women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force" (*A Room of One's Own*, 86) encapsulates her understanding of space as historically gendered and symbolically charged. This perspective aligns with recent feminist spatial theory, which recognizes how physical and symbolic spaces mediate access to discourse and influence self-construction.

The analysis begins by tracing the spatial movements and digressions within the essay, drawing on Tracy Seeley's Flights of Fancy (2007), which highlights how Woolf's narrative structure mimics the act of wandering and reflects the limitations and possibilities of female mobility. It also engages with Christina Stevenson's reading in "Here Was One Room, There Another" (2014), which suggests that Woolf's spatial configurations extend beyond physical boundaries to create a framework for imagining female autonomy. In both readings, space functions not as a backdrop but as a generative force in Woolf's feminist aesthetics.

By examining *A Room of One's Own* through the lens of spatial theory, this article contributes to ongoing debates on the intersection of space, gender, and subjectivity in modernist literature. Woolf's essay offers a powerful critique of institutional exclusions while envisioning alternative spatialities through which women might write, think, and exist. Her configurations of space remain

foundational for contemporary feminist literary criticism, offering insight into how spatial politics continue to inform the possibilities of voice, presence, and authorship.

A Room of One's Own in Context

A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf is a foundational work in feminist literary theory, emerging from two lectures she delivered in October 1928 at Newnham and Girton Colleges — the only women's colleges at Cambridge at the time. Published in 1929 by Hogarth Press, the essay argues for financial independence and personal space as essential prerequisites for women's creative autonomy. Her assertion that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 2) encapsulates the central argument: material conditions are inseparable from intellectual freedom. Woolf's text thus invites readers to consider how structural inequalities have historically constrained women's creative expression.

In advancing her argument, Woolf employs four primary strategies. First, she interrogates the historical exclusion of women from education and economic resources, which has severely limited their literary output. Second, she examines the absence of a female literary tradition and the challenges this poses for contemporary women writers, who often lack role models and predecessors. Third, Woolf addresses the literal and metaphorical confinement of women to domestic spaces and their exclusion from male-dominated institutions. Finally, she contends that basic living conditions, such as financial security and educational access, profoundly shape individual consciousness and creative potential.

A striking narrative device in *A Room of One's Own* is Woolf's imagined Judith Shakespeare, the fictional sister of William Shakespeare, who possesses equal talent but is denied educational and social opportunities due to her gender. Judith's tragic fate — her unrecognized genius, restricted autonomy, and ultimate suicide — serves as a metaphor for the countless women throughout history who were prevented from realizing their creative potential. Woolf's tale underscores the gendered barriers to artistic expression and the price women pay under patriarchal constraints.

Woolf's reflections on women's legal advancements, such as the right to own property in 1880 and the partial extension of suffrage in 1918, highlight her broader critique of material conditions. These legal gains, though significant, are insufficient to ensure genuine intellectual freedom. Woolf asserts that "intellectual freedom depends upon material things" in this context, underscoring the idea that financial independence and personal space are prerequisites for the full development of women's creative faculties (*A Room of One's Own* 106). In accordance with Literary scholar Laura Marcus, *A Room of One's Own* remains "the most significant model for feminist criticism" (43) in the twentieth century, providing a lasting framework for examining the intersections of gender, literature, and material realities. Woolf's focus on the material conditions necessary for

creative freedom was groundbreaking and established her as a pivotal figure in feminist thought.

At the beginning of the essay, Woolf contemplates the question of "women and fiction" through the character of Mary, who wanders through the fictional Oxbridge — a blend of Oxford and Cambridge — and Fernham, a fictional women's college modeled on Newnham. During her journey, Mary encounters several disruptions, such as a university beadle directing her off the lawn, which symbolize the societal restrictions imposed on women. These interruptions serve as metaphors for the institutional barriers women faced, particularly within the realms of education and intellectual pursuit. Woolf contrasts the prosperity of men's institutions with the poverty of women's colleges, capturing "the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer" (*A Room of One's Own* 21).

These observations support Woolf's central argument on the necessity of financial autonomy and personal space. During her visit to the British Museum, Woolf's protagonist discovers that most writings about women are authored by men, with an undercurrent of anger that suggests a vested interest in maintaining women's subordination. Woolf comments that for centuries, women have acted as "looking glasses," possessing "the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (*A Room of One's Own* 33).

Through the hypothetical figure of Judith Shakespeare, Woolf further illustrates the oppressive constraints that stifled women's intellectual development. Judith's story embodies the brutal consequences of systemic repression, a fate Woolf suggests might only be reversed if women attain the "habit of freedom" and cultivate "the courage to write exactly what [they] think" (*A Room of One's Own* 112). This vision implies that women can only escape patriarchal constraints by envisioning themselves in relation to reality rather than in relation to the male-defined world.

As the narrative progresses, Woolf shifts her focus to the contributions of women writers, examining traces of exclusion within their works. She attributes the scarcity of female perspectives in literature to the absence of a robust female literary tradition. Woolf's analysis culminates in her discussion of women's relationships, particularly those that defy patriarchal norms. Through the fictional text *Life's Adventure* by the imagined Mary Carmichael, Woolf illustrates a friendship between two women that breaks from the traditional male-centered narrative framework. The statement "Chloe liked Olivia" becomes a revolutionary expression of female subjectivity, untethered from male validation or expectation, symbolizing a departure from patriarchal literary paradigms.

Ultimately, *A Room of One's Own* stands as a revolutionary critique of the conditions that have historically limited women's intellectual contributions. By asserting that financial independence is essential for creative autonomy, Woolf offers a compelling vision for women's participation in cultural and literary spheres. Her work continues to serve as a cornerstone of feminist criticism, inspiring scholars and readers to this day.

Virginia Woolf and the Victorian Legacy

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf frequently parodies Victorian conventions to critically examine the historical construction of female subjectivity, which was predominantly shaped by male perspectives. Woolf, who grew up during the Victorian period — a cultural era defined by the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) — was profoundly influenced by a cultural milieu that prioritized moral and aesthetic principles, especially those reinforcing ideals of female chastity and modesty. These gendered norms extended beyond the private sphere, manifesting in the spatial separation of men and women within domestic and public settings. Such a socio-cultural environment significantly influenced Woolf's literary production. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf not only critiques the customs and material conditions of the past but also grapples with the aesthetic legacy of the Victorian age.

Woolf's relationship to Victorian aesthetics is characterized by ambivalence and complexity. In her 1927 essay, *How It Strikes a Contemporary*, Woolf conveys a deep sense of generational rupture, identifying a decisive break between her contemporaries and their Victorian forebears. She observes: "We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale — the sudden slip of masses held in positions for ages — has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past, and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present." This separation, Woolf argues, fosters an era uniquely rich in writers "determined to give expression to the differences which separate them from the past and not to resemblance which connects them with it" (*Collected Essays* 157-158).

This critical reflection accentuates Woolf's recognition of a distinct break with the past, one that, in her view, was essential to the post-war literary landscape. Woolf and her contemporaries consciously distanced themselves from the rigid conventions of Victorian literature. She abandoned melodramatic narratives and traditional portrayals of love in favour of new forms that sought to capture the fluidity of consciousness and broader impressions of the world. In Virginia Woolf's autobiographical writings, particularly in *Old Bloomsbury*, she reflects on the transformation from the oppressive aesthetic of her childhood home at 22 Hyde Park Gate — characterized by dark, heavy Victorian interiors — to the more open and minimally furnished space of Gordon Square. This spatial shift not only signifies a personal change in taste but also represents a broader cultural rejection of Victorian intellectual and artistic values in favour of modernist sensibilities. Woolf describes her former home as "tall, narrow, begloomed" and filled with "small irregular rooms crammed with heavy Victorian furniture" (*Moments of Being* 138), a stark contrast to the liberating atmosphere of the Bloomsbury environment. Scholar Hermione Lee (1996) interprets this move as emblematic of a broader transformation in Woolf's life and work — from the constraints of inherited tradition to a space of creative autonomy, intellectual freedom, and feminist-aesthetic innovation. This rejection of the Victorian domestic ideal is crucial to Woolf's conceptualization of space, authorship, and subjectivity in *A*

Room of One's Own, where the interior becomes a politically charged site, shaped by gendered power relations.

Many of Woolf's peers shared this desire to reject Victorian aesthetics and customs, but Woolf's relationship with her Victorian heritage remained complicated. As literary critic Kate Flint notes in her essay *Virginia Woolf and Victorian Aesthetics*, Leonard Woolf reflects on his student days at Cambridge, describing the time as being characterized by a "conscious revolt against the social, political, religious, moral, intellectual, and artistic institutions, beliefs, and standards of our fathers and grandfathers" (20). This revolt, however, did not entail a wholesale rejection of the past. Kate Flint also notes in her essay that Woolf's relationship to her Victorian inheritance was nuanced — she neither entirely escaped nor wholly wished to discard this legacy.

In *A Sketch of the Past*, one of Woolf's final autobiographical works, she reflects on what she terms the "double consciousness" of her upbringing, in which two distinct eras — the Victorian and Edwardian — were in constant tension: "Two different ages confronted each other in the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate: The Victorian age and The Edwardian age" (*Moments of Being* 147). While her father and half-brothers remained deeply entrenched in Victorian values, Woolf and her sister Vanessa were orientated towards the future, though not without the acknowledgement that "We were living, say, in 1910; they were living in 1860" (*Moments of Being* 147). This tension between two temporalities permeates Woolf's writing, and, as Flint observes, "Woolf's perception of the present was richer when one recognized the layers of the past that sustained it" (32). This layered understanding of time is central to Woolf's broader literary project, which often explores the interconnection between memory, history, and modernity.

In Woolf's fiction and autobiographical works, descriptions of the moral and material environments in which she lived are intricately intertwined. The heavy, ornate, and often oppressive Victorian interiors function as a synecdoche for the restrictive familial and societal structures that subtly constrained women's lives, particularly those of Woolf and her sister Vanessa Stephen. Both women were profoundly shaped by the weight of familial obligation and tradition, further reinforced by the physical environment of their home, which symbolized the inescapable presence of the past.

As Flint also states, Woolf's reflections on the drawing rooms of Hyde Park Gate capture this sense of confinement (22). She evokes an atmosphere of overwhelming darkness and claustrophobia, drawing a parallel between the physical space and the psychological weight of Victorian heritage. She describes the drawing room as "divided by black folding doors picked out with thin lines of raspberry red" (Woolf, *Moments of Being* 164), further adorned with "mounds of plush Watt's portraits, busts shrined in crimson velvet", all contributing to the oppressive gloom that permeated the room, particularly during the summer when shaded by thick foliage. This depiction underscores Woolf's symbolic use of Victorian aesthetics as a representation of values that felt increasingly alien and restrictive to her modern sensibilities.

However, Woolf's rejection of Victorian values was not absolute. As Flint notes, Woolf believed that "the present was richer when one recognized the layers of the past that sustained it" (32). This suggests that Woolf's engagement with the Victorian legacy was one of negotiation rather than dismissal. While she sought to transcend the aesthetic and ideological confines of her upbringing, she also recognized that the past continued to underpin her literary and intellectual outlook. This tension between rejecting and acknowledging the past is a defining feature of Woolf's literary engagement with the aesthetics and ideologies of the Victorian era, making her work a site of complex temporal and aesthetic negotiation.

Space and Identity in *A Room of One's Own*

In her examination of spatial representation in *A Room of One's Own*, Tracy Seeley proposes a range of literary practices that engage with concepts of space, including spatial digressions and wanderings, alongside their corresponding literary functions. She investigates the notion of ideological space, emphasizing the intricate relationship between the subject and space as well as the conceptualization of the body as space. Consequently, literature emerges as a medium that not only reflects spatial practices but also elucidates their impact on the female subject. By articulating daily activities and experiences through literature, an alternative spatial domain is created for women, fostering independence and enabling the inscription or rewriting of their identities within their spaces through their bodies.

To better understand how these spatial dynamics operate within Woolf's writing, Seeley turns to the concept of the "trope", traditionally defined as a figurative or rhetorical device. However, she expands the definition by exploring its etymological roots, noting that *tropos* in Greek also implies "turning," movement, or deviation. This expanded view allows Seeley to propose two specific modes of tropic function in *A Room of One's Own*: tropes-as-evasion and tropes-as-aim. The first — *evasion* — refers to Woolf's frequent narrative turns away from direct argument or linear progression, which can be read as a refusal to be confined by traditional patriarchal forms of discourse. The second — *aim* — captures the subtle, purposeful direction of these movements, where apparent digressions ultimately reinforce the essay's political goals. Rather than being signs of incoherence, these tropes reflect a feminist narrative strategy: they resist closure and control while also gesturing toward new possibilities of meaning and spatial agency.

Seeley challenges Harold Bloom's (1975) assertions in *A Map of Misreading*, which frame tropes primarily as expressions of individual, psychological resistance within a literary genealogy. Instead, she argues that tropes in *A Room of One's Own* operate as forms of resistance not just to textual predecessors, but to literal meaning itself — resisting the fixed, linear, and authoritative structures traditionally associated with male discourse. In Woolf's essay, tropes function as deviations that both evade conventional rhetorical expectations and aim

toward alternative, more open-ended forms of meaning. This movement is not purely aesthetic; it is politically charged. By expanding Bloom's theory to include spatial and social dimensions, Seeley reveals how Woolf uses tropes to negotiate constraints imposed by gendered power structures. Thus, Woolf's figurative language becomes a strategy for displacing dominant ideologies and articulating new modes of female subjectivity and spatial agency.

Expanding on this argument, one can posit that metaphorical avoidance serves as a deviation leading to deeper truths, a concept articulated by Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse* (1978). Indeed, Seeley asserts that tropes do not merely affect "a defensive sidewise move"; rather, they foster a developmental trajectory that ultimately clarifies meaning and logic (32). The protagonist's continual avoidance and circumvention reflect a strategic engagement with language that reveals the layers of meaning embedded within Woolf's narrative.

Woolf employs the motifs of wandering and fiction to exemplify both varieties of tropes: tropes-as-movement (to evade) and tropes-as-direction (to aim). These tropes create divergence from linear argumentation, resulting in two significant outcomes. On one hand, by deviating from logical linearity, Woolf unveils an alternative space for women; on the other hand, by steering clear of general abstractions, she portrays female subjectivity as multifaceted. In this manner, Woolf constructs a communal vision of womanhood grounded in the material specificity of lived experiences, drawing attention to the intricacies of female identity.

Set against the backdrop of a purported lecture to a female audience at a university, the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own* initiates with a digressing narrative that culminates, over a hundred pages later, in the revelation of her lecture's opening line: "Even so, 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" (Woolf 103). This deliberate avoidance of a direct conclusion exemplifies Woolf's narrative strategy. As she embarks on her excursion, commencing two days prior to the lecture, her digressive stops articulate non-linear and non-literal movements, effectively merging avoidance with an aim towards profound truths.

The physical settings — the riverbank, the lawn of Oxbridge, and the library inaccessible to women — serve as analogies for the wandering thoughts that underscore the necessity and desirability of employing tropes. When the protagonist's reflective wanderings are abruptly interrupted by the janitor or the locked library door, she is compelled to shift her direction. This disruption illustrates how her ideas, akin to a fish drawn from the depths of her mind, are simultaneously evoked and displaced. These forced detours — movements brought about by outside obstacles — illustrate the social and political ramifications of space and the strength of spatial conditions on women's experiences (Seeley 32). By navigating these complex dynamics, Woolf effectively utilizes tropes to articulate a nuanced understanding of women's identities and experiences. Such

an analysis not only enhances our comprehension of Woolf's literary contributions but also opens avenues for further scholarly exploration, particularly regarding the intersection of feminist literature and spatial theory.

According to Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, space is never merely "empty"; rather, it is not an absence a priori that necessitates filling with social actions. He argues that social space is distinct from spatial engagement, with the resulting space serving as both a tool of thought and action. This conception reveals that natural surroundings often become mere backdrops to the continuous practices of individuals, elucidating the intricate connections between the social relations of reproduction and production through spatial structures and conditions. In this context, familial structures, sexual relationships, reproduction, divisions of labour, and class hierarchies are productive, coded, and enforced by space. Thus, when considering the private home — along with its internal and external boundaries, as well as distinctions between suburban and urban environments — it becomes evident that ideology and habit shape the spaces that reinforce them. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf's exploration of patriarchy, which operates as a system of views and customs, spatially enacts its power by depicting Oxbridge as a bastion of privilege maintained through rules and exclusions that perpetuate patriarchal dominance.

Woolf's text demonstrates a keen awareness of spatial engagement and the relationship between space and women, particularly regarding privileges. This awareness manifests in her reflections on the separation of places and roles in locales such as Hyde Park Gate or the chapel at Cambridge, as well as the disruptive thoughts that arise during her walks along Whitehall. Woolf highlights the advantages conferred upon men in a patriarchal society as they traverse spaces like the Admiralty Arch, employing irony to emphasize that such privileges stem from educational disparities and exclusions from valuable experiences. These examples underscore her remarkable awareness of the spatial rules dictated by patriarchy. When Woolf contemplates the privileges associated with Oxbridge and Fernham, the protagonist Mary reconsiders "the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space" (*A Room of One's Own* 21). This recognition suggests that space is ideologically charged, with both mental and physical movements proceeding historically in analogous manners. The evasive movements Woolf depicts illustrate her relationship with spatial practices that physically and mentally constrain Mary's movements, compelling her to confront material and intellectual boundaries. The caretaker's direction towards the gravel path or the gentleman's exclusion from the library does not merely redirect her physically; it disrupts her flow of thought, steering it along an alternative course.

While Woolf often portrays forced detours, Seeley emphasizes that such instances are relatively rare within *A Room of One's Own*. Instead, Woolf's tropes more frequently suggest alternative spatial conditions. Seeley notes, "There may be, after all, more desirable goals than getting inside the walls at Oxbridge" (33), drawing attention to the passage where the protagonist stands before the

chapel, contemplating her lack of desire to enter had she possessed the right. This perspective allows thoughts, text, and physical movement to coalesce into a mental wander, leading to the unwelcoming thresholds of numerous patriarchal spaces. As such, the first-person narrator diverges through recurring digressions; Woolf avoids declarations. On multiple occasions, she brings a fish — an idea or thought — ashore yet refrains from imparting clear insights to her audience: "I will not trouble you with that thought now" (*A Room of One's Own* 3). Through this rhetorical manoeuvre, Woolf signals that she has reached a conclusion while simultaneously pondering the immense resources invested over centuries in constructing university buildings, laboratories, and libraries, as well as in the consumption of wine: "It was impossible not to reflect" (*A Room of One's Own* 8). The alarming clock that signals it is time to go to lunch, however, abruptly ends this reflection. In this context, Seeley contends that Woolf employs tropes as a strategy to circumvent anticipated criticism regarding her conclusions. She writes early in the text: "At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial [...] one cannot hope to tell the truth" (*Woolf, A Room of One's Own* 2). Thus, expressing the truth becomes a matter of distortion, leading her to evade potential collision with a hostile audience.

This rhetorical evasion in *A Room of One's Own*, characterized by a lack of confrontation and anger, has led critics to argue that Woolf's method diminishes its ideological impact. Julie Robin Solomon, in "*Staking Ground*," (1989) contends that the "metaphoric of trespass" does not genuinely manifest in *A Room of One's Own*. Instead, she asserts that the room symbolizes a power gain that also defines patriarchy, tied to property and capital accumulation. In this context, Solomon interprets the protagonist's compliance with the caretaker as a "metaphor for her willingness to acquiesce, at least publicly, in the institutional structures of patriarchy" (Solomon 335). Furthermore, she argues that the fictional narrative framework, which Seeley views as another type of trope, is folkloric and "a ruse" (Solomon 337), a trick that renders the essay less substantive.

While Woolf's methods in *A Room of One's Own* may be indirect, the text's rhetorical intelligence cannot be underestimated, nor can the historical context be downplayed. Woolf's original lectures were straightforward, lacking a narrator or framing narrative, as well as any emergence of anger. About six months after revising "Women and Fiction", Woolf began to write the manuscript for *A Room of One's Own*, during which time she included many of the "troping" elements that some have criticized. It is essential to consider an audience to understand the changes and additions made during this revision. In this light, Seeley asserts that "Woolf was hardly preaching to a choir. She had to anticipate a non-believer's response, even a hostile one, and write persuasively without losing a chance to convert them" (35). As a result, fictionalization and digressions are responses to these persuasive strategies, since using effective rhetorical tools to persuade people who already have biases cannot be seen as giving up. Woolf distributes the authority of her argumentative claims across layers of personalities, embedded descriptions, and fictional ideas, enabling her to articulate audacious insights.

However, where polemical conclusions might typically demand polemical meanings, the ellipses, fragments, breaks, and reflections within *A Room of One's Own* provoke critical discomfort when they surface.

Lisa Low (1987) asserts that the argument that the identity-less "I" in Woolf's work avoids confrontation with established norms while simultaneously representing a modern transformation of the writing self into a formless collective remains significant (194–195). She also states that Herbert Marder, author of *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf (1968)*, observes that Woolf embodies a split persona: on one side stands the reformist polemicist, while on the other stands an artist who insists that "there is a higher reality, a realm which practical politics cannot enter" (Low 266). Low analyses the impersonality in *A Room of One's Own*, arguing that Woolf's subjectivity is entwined with identity feminism. She posits that any representation of female impersonality in art corresponds to a decorous invisibility within a patriarchal structure. Conversely, postmodern feminist perspectives contend that such views "reinforce the very ideals of a masculine culture it strives to overthrow" (*Low* 258), thereby perpetuating existing gender categories. Low also asserts that Woolf's intent is to undermine such dualistic thinking; for Woolf, impersonal writing is empathic and democratic, seeking to transcend identity rather than celebrate it.

If Woolf's aim is indeed to create alternative spaces free from fixed representations, her detours into these spaces and her use of tropes can be understood as strategies to generate subjective voices devoid of a clear "I". Nonetheless, Seeley emphasizes that Woolf's circumvention of her class and gender limitations serves to challenge prevailing gender norms; yet, the actual impact of her writings diverges from these implications. In *A Room of One's Own*, this is evident in Woolf's treatment of the female reader, who is left with empty pages or absent perspectives yet remains deeply involved in the text's creation. Consequently, *A Room of One's Own* serves as a site of productive contradictions and complexities surrounding female authorship. By engendering alternative spaces liberated from rigid representations, Woolf's essay reveals how spatial and gendered identities intersect, illuminating the potential for women to reimagine their roles and experiences within a patriarchal framework. Ultimately, the recognition of such alternative spaces fosters a discourse that transcends historically established boundaries, empowering women to navigate and challenge oppressive structures, thereby asserting a complex female subjectivity that resists fixed definitions.

In examining the body as a central site of subjectivity, feminist critics have highlighted how *A Room of One's Own* articulates not only an aesthetic agenda but also a call for spatial and intellectual autonomy for women. Within this framework, Laura Mulvey's theory of the body as a signifier offers a critical lens through which to understand the spatial inscription of gender. In her analysis of visual culture, Mulvey (1996) argues that the female body operates as a "phantasmagoric projection" — a constructed surface that conceals deeper psychic and ideological structures shaped by patriarchy (57). This notion aligns with Seeley's view that

space, like language, is ideologically encoded, reinforcing the authority of the subject who produces it. When read alongside Woolf's text, Mulvey's theory sharpens the critique of how women are spatially and symbolically excluded: the female body, projected as alluring and deceptive, justifies restrictions on women's presence and participation in public and intellectual spheres (58). In this sense, the body becomes both a medium and metaphor for spatial containment — an idea that resonates with Woolf's broader concern for a room, a space, where women might reimagine both their identities and their narratives. Integrating Mulvey's insights thus reinforces the argument that spatial autonomy in *A Room of One's Own* is inseparable from a critique of how the female body has been historically represented and controlled.

In her examination of Shakespeare's sister, Woolf elucidates the impact of patriarchal spatial practices on the female body. Seeley concludes that "rules of chastity enforce both the secrecy and danger of women's sexuality, as much as that "privacy" seems an invitation to discovery and even violation" (Seeley 40). Woolf implies that in complete freedom, women can redefine the significance of the body, beginning with Shakespeare's sister. Her revival — both body and spirit — depends on women's spatial practices (Seeley 40).

With the fictional figure of Mary Carmichael, whose novels pave new avenues for women's literature, a step towards reviving the deceased poetess is taken. However, after reading Carmichael's texts, the protagonist remarks, "She will be a poet [...] in another hundred years' time" (*A Room of One's Own* 93). Seeley observes that Carmichael embodies not merely a singular representation but symbolizes numerous future female writers, a multiplicity that Woolf bestows upon her, suggesting that Carmichael will articulate the experiences of diverse female figures. The first-person narrator envisions this host of female figures while wandering through London, "handing over to Mary Carmichael the freedom to wander, too" (Seeley 41).

Mary Carmichael emerges as one of the final tropes in *A Room of One's Own*, rejecting "the essential oil" (*Woolf* 23). Much like Shakespeare's sister, Woolf's protagonist creates a space for women to congregate, a space whose commonalities do not diminish their specific identities. For Woolf, two genders are insufficient "considering the vastness and variety of the world" (*A Room of One's Own* 86). By invoking the tropes of Judith Shakespeare and Mary Carmichael, Woolf gathers all women while simultaneously rejecting the universal "woman", who could easily serve as a target for patriarchal scrutiny. Who, then, should they compare themselves to if "woman" encompasses many?

Since the category of "woman" is multifaceted, the self-awareness Woolf envisions for the future must emerge from the "I." What lies hidden behind the "I"? "Is it a tree? No, it is a woman. But... she has not a bone in her body [...] For Alan had views and Phoebe was quenched in the flood of his views" (*A Room of One's Own* 99). It is not merely women's views and words that stir Woolf; it is also their bodies and the freedom to imbue them with flesh and life. The freedom of body and thought in a space free from patriarchal definitions could redirect

energy into struggle. However, Seeley cautions that one should not expect an end to Woolf's wandering. For Woolf, wandering constitutes a spatial practice of body and mind. Her walks are most famously associated with London, a place embodying both freedom and danger.

In exploring the significance of wandering, Seeley references Michel de Certeau's spatial theory. In *Walking in the City*, Certeau contrasts the panoptic view of New York from the World Trade Centre with the experiences of the "ordinary practitioners of the city" who navigate its streets (93). The eye from above captures a total perspective, while those walking inscribe a "text" with their bodies— "intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others" (96). These signs, termed "surreptitious creativities," reclaim urban spaces, rewriting them and undermining the panoptic perspective of planners (95). The wandering bodies create many cities, as Woolf's urban explorations exemplify Certeau's ideas. Woolf reconsiders her concerns within the urban environment, humorously asserting that the British Library will reveal the truth about women, as it is where truths are produced by "the learned and the unprejudiced" (*A Room of One's Own* 23). To uncover that truth, she traverses the dark streets of London, past coal mines and carriages transporting families seeking fortune, which embodies the intertwining, unrecognized narratives of Certeau — a realm where her body inscribes the city and records her subjectivity. Her gaze creates space as she navigates shifting perspectives. In contrast, when she enters the British Museum among illustrious male writers, she becomes "a thought in the huge bald forehead" (23). As she engages with the accumulated material on women, she becomes "a single but by now somewhat harassed thought" (27) within the institution.

Ultimately, in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf establishes internal spaces where women are not merely thoughts in a patriarchal mind. Space is inscribed by moving minds and bodies, shaped by individual perspectives that rewrite and challenge the panoptic view. Seeley argues that countless viewpoints and "the many varieties of error" through which space is inscribed provide pathways to truth. Thus, spaces defined by the panoptic gaze are reimagined and called into question.

The Interior Space as a Reflection of the Female Subject

In her article *Here Was One Room, There Another*, Christina Stevenson (2014) examines the theme of interior spaces as a reflection of female subjectivity in *A Room of One's Own*. She argues that space functions not only as a physical entity but also as a material construct infused with ideological significance. This interplay allows Virginia Woolf to explore the representation of female desire and subjectivity, establishing a framework where the materiality of space facilitates a nuanced understanding of femininity.

Stevenson's spatial analyses provide a compelling counterpoint to Tracy Seeley's investigations, particularly in their exploration of specific spaces, such as the study and communal areas of the Victorian era, which intersect with

femininity in distinct ways. Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, suggests that after centuries of confinement, the creative energies of women have so deeply permeated the walls around them that this force must now find expression in art, literature, and public life (86). This assertion underscores a well-established trope in English literature that links women to space or spatiality, which, as Stevenson emphasizes, represents for Woolf a vision of a future where female authorship can flourish (112). Consequently, space becomes charged with feminine potential.

To Christopher Reed, the aesthetics and sociopolitical implications of space are central to the Bloomsbury Group's reimagining of modernity, particularly in the works of Virginia Woolf. In *Bloomsbury Rooms*, Reed asserts that the Bloomsbury Group reframed domesticity as a model for modern life, projecting the private values of home into the public realm through both aesthetic and sociopolitical endeavors (112). This reinterpretation blurs the conventional divide between private and public spheres, suggesting that the boundary between domestic and political spaces is neither fixed nor "natural" but inherently permeable. Through her nuanced rethinking of interior spaces, Woolf does not merely question but actively subverts normative notions of "home," thereby transforming space into a framework for ideological critique and progressive redefinition.

Stevenson also contends that Woolf's conception of space — especially the study — represents a reclamation of space for female creativity through a reconfiguration of the relationship between space and the author. This reconfiguration results in the conception of an author who is not merely an occupant of space but is fundamentally intertwined with it. In discussing "occupation", Stevenson observes, "If 'occupation' relies upon a fantasy of individual autonomy that Woolf associates with authorial egotism, Woolf positions herself in an ironic relation to the room, speaking as the room rather than from within it" (113). Thus, space in *A Room of One's Own* is intrinsically linked to the female form on both physical and metaphorical levels. This text effectively shifts the narrative focus from a male voice within the room to a female voice of the room, thereby transforming the emphasis from the hidden depths of the interior to a concentration on surfaces. This shift undermines the distinctions between inside and outside, fact and fiction while proposing new avenues for representing female concerns.

The concept of space as property that women must possess to ensure their voices are heard emerged as a focal point during the 1970s when Woolf's text experienced a revival within feminist discourse. Elaine Showalter contends that Woolf "was advocating a strategic retreat, and not a victory; a denial of feeling, and not a mastery of it" (284). According to Showalter, Woolf's retreat from political discourse to find refuge in a space ultimately results in the erosion of her feminist voice. Building on this critique, Julie Robin Solomon argues that Woolf's very conception of space is shaped by the logic of capitalist ownership, which, rather than empowering women, compels them to yield to patriarchal ideological pressures. From this perspective, the emphasis on "ownership" undermines Woolf's feminist politics, revealing that even gains like possessing

space remain entangled in dominant frameworks (Solomon 334). This critique implies that while possessing space may signify a notable gain for women, it exists and unfolds within a patriarchal framework.

The feminist shift of the 1980s, which introduced deconstructive theories of language and psychoanalytic critiques of subjectivity, sought to protect Woolf from accusations of political withdrawal or complicity with patriarchal structures. Toril Moi endeavours to recontextualize Woolf's text considering Showalter's critique, which Moi associates with "traditional humanism" (Moi 8). Moi extols Woolf's discursive evasions and her insights regarding the inherent instability of language, which casts doubt on the restoration of female "experience" as lived through "a whole and self-present consciousness" (Stevenson 114). This skepticism towards the possibility of accurately conveying human experience challenges Showalter's and Solomon's critiques, which rely on a belief in individual autonomy and dismiss textual duplicity and the unconscious. As highlighted, the category of "truth" is patriarchal and must therefore be sought through alternative means to validate it for their texts (Stevenson 113-114).

Although the deconstructive argument may appear enticing in both political and theoretical contexts, Woolf does not readily persuade the reader. Seeley (2007) notes that Stevenson also emphasizes how *A Room of One's Own* prioritizes the material over the textual, underscoring this inescapable reality (34): "Fiction is like a spider's web […] [but] one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in" (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 40). While language has the capacity to transform geographical peculiarities into symbolic references, Woolf foregrounds materiality as the essential foundation for imaginative creation. Indeed, space (and money) engenders the very possibility of literature.

Woolf seeks to reconfigure the relationship between women and space by uncovering the material history that is both supported by and obscured by metaphorical constraints, thereby linking women to domestic spaces. In this process, Woolf delineates the universal concept of "space" into more specific realms with gendered histories. For instance, when she addresses the memoirs of Jane Austen's nephew in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf highlights Austen's remarkable ability to pursue her literary endeavours while navigating the generally accessible "sitting room," where she faced constant interruptions. The "common sitting room", where women attended to their obligations, starkly contrasts with "the separate study," the exclusive men's workspace. As Woolf elucidates, the study was reserved solely for men's affairs: "In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question. […] She was debarred from such alleviations as came even to Keats or Tennyson or Carlyle […] [which] sheltered them from the claims and tyrannies of their families" (*A Room of One's Own* 50). Stevenson argues that for Woolf, the root of "the apparent inequalities of talent" lies in the unequal separations and distributions

of space. Consequently, literature has predominantly been authored by men, who had retreats, "studies," while women lacked similar spaces (115).

Victoria Rosner and Mark Wigley have explored the function of the study within bourgeois domestic architecture and its contribution to the ideological production of masculine subjectivity. Rosner elucidates in her work *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*: "It is the most private room in the house, a place where the writer can consider the world without being watched by it. Left alone, the writer seemingly dissolves into a universal subjectivity free from self-consciousness" (122). One of the study's advantages lies in its status as a protected space, where one can reflect on the world in a nearly voyeuristic manner. Rosner emphasizes the discursiveness of space, positing that it is not merely an empty container but is always laden with ideology. Wigley further discusses how the rise of individualism coincided with the modern formation of domestic space, structured according to a patriarchal hierarchy. In other words, space embodies an understanding of gender difference, or it represents the same. The material and discourse, fact and fiction, intertwine and condition one another.

Wigley's interpretation of the study questions the potency of feminine activity, allowing for an exploration of an alternative form of women's relationship to spaces. His analyses of the history of space and sexuality extend Rosner's inquiry into the interplay between materiality and the discursive construction of space. In his examination of classical and Renaissance texts, he argues that the spatial-discursive construction of masculinity relies on the inclusion and control of female bodies. Classical writings frequently depicted women as "dangerously fluid" (Stevenson 117), implying that they could undermine the boundaries necessary for securing not only individual autonomy but also the essential division of space. Consequently, "The house then assumes the role of the man's self-control. The virtuous woman becomes man-plus-house or, rather, woman-as-housed, such that her virtue cannot be separated from the physical space" (Wigley 337). Wigley's exploration of the ideology of the study reveals that men do not merely occupy spaces; rather, they occupy "feminized rooms," where the control over female bodies serves to demonstrate masculine power. Thus, masculine subjectivity can be understood as one that occupies space, while feminine subjectivity is less about occupying space and more about being equal to it (337).

In contrast, Stevenson examines how Woolf proposes a divergent vision of space and authorship that counters the exclusionary tendencies associated with the study. For Stevenson, Woolf constructs an alternative relationship between female authorship and space by intertwining identity with the shared experience of domesticity. This perspective allows women to reclaim space while simultaneously illustrating how their displacement within it can yield a productive relationship. Stevenson also says that *A Room of One's Own* shows a different relationship between women and the space of home life than the male-centered view: "By setting out a very clear connection between women's

experiences of space, social relationships, and authorship, Woolf offers a strong challenge to that dominant construction" (118).

The ongoing interplay between complicity and resistance to patriarchal ideologies prompts a critical inquiry into how women negotiate their spatial identities. In reframing Virginia Woolf's argument as a narrative centered on women's authorship, Christina Stevenson elucidates how the intertwining of identity and domesticity can foster female creativity. Stevenson's alternative model is consistent with Woolf's vision of a time when women can occupy and claim space both literally and figuratively without giving in to patriarchal norms. This scholarly dialogue thus reveals the complexities of space as a contested site within feminist discourse, enhancing our understanding of how women navigate and redefine their relationships with space through literary expression.

In this way, Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* transcends conventional literary analysis by interrogating the nexus of femininity, space, and authorship. Rather than relegating women to a superficial discursive role, Woolf asserts the "creative force" embedded in space, suggesting that the very walls of a room carry the weight of female subjectivity. As she observes, "one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face" (*Woolf*, *A Room of One's Own* 86). This assertion implies that femininity actively shapes space, challenging established boundaries of control. Women do not merely inhabit spaces; they infuse them with vitality, creativity, and symbolic significance. By positing that femininity manifests more as the essence of space rather than as its mere occupant, Woolf fundamentally reconfigures the relationship between women writers and their writing environments.

This perspective sharply contrasts with Rosner's claim that "the male space of the Victorian study can become the crucible of an autonomous, potent, and female author figure" (123). Woolf longs for authorship cultivated within the study to transcend mere imitation, critiquing what she terms "the damned egoistic self," which revolves in isolation, detached from others and external experiences. This sentiment is evident in her assessment of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where she articulates a sensation of being "in a bright yet narrow room, confined and shut in, rather than enlarged and set free" (Stevenson 118). Stevenson further notes that Woolf conceptualizes space not merely as a physical entity but as a critical framework for self-understanding in relation to the world. Consequently, space serves as a literary device that symbolizes social isolation and self-absorption. As Stevenson says, to engage with what Woolf refers to as "life itself", a writer must break free from spatial confines that hinder the ability to establish "the right relationship […] between yourself that you know and the world outside" (118-119). Thus, the notion of writing as space, as Woolf suggests in relation to Joyce, can limit the scope of literature. However, it also offers a revitalizing perspective on the intersection of women and literature, prompting further exploration into how these dynamics can reshape literary discourse.

Conclusion

In the theoretical framework of this study, an in-depth exploration of spatial practices in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* reveals the complex interrelations of space and subjectivity, as elucidated by scholars such as Seeley and Stevenson. Woolf adeptly employs a range of stylistic devices to engage with the text's central theme — the intricate relationship between women and literature — ultimately seeking to unveil a nuanced truth. This examination prompts Woolf to articulate a pivotal assertion: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (*A Room of One's Room* 6).

Woolf's narrative deftly illustrates the significance of spatial practices, including tropes of physical movement and evasion, as well as engagements with the natural environment, such as the flow of a river, to establish parallels with the protagonist's cognitive processes. Initially, the protagonist's ability to engage with her ideas is obstructed by various interruptions, stressing a historical dilemma faced by women writers, who were often unable to devote themselves to their creative endeavours due to continual disruptions and exclusion from certain spaces. In *A Room of One's Own*, these excluded spaces encompass the university lawn, the chapel, the library, and the study. Woolf identifies the problematic nature of female subjectivity that remains stunted, as women were not empowered to act independently, depriving them of essential components for a writing career — most notably, intellectual freedom. Since space is not merely an empty container but is invariably imbued with ideology, it serves as a locus for political power. Within Woolf's framework, the patriarchal system operates to include female bodies in specific domains while simultaneously excluding them from others, thereby securing its dominance.

Intriguingly, Woolf integrates tropes of physical transgression throughout her essay, which serve to disrupt existing systems of oppression. The protagonist frequently refrains from entering certain spaces, thereby cultivating her independence and evolving into a multifaceted subject capable of making autonomous decisions. This discussion foregrounds another critical aspect concerning space and the subject: the body, often conceptualized in feminist theories as the locus of subjectivity. The repercussions of a system that subjugates the female body are poignantly illustrated in the figure of Judith, Shakespeare's sister, who ultimately resorts to suicide, relinquishing her body. Nevertheless, bodies can also facilitate inscription within spaces, as Certeau posits with his panoptic perspective on the city and "walking rhetorics." In London, a narrative emerges from wandering bodies, each inscribing its own line.

Stevenson argues that the association of women, space, and spatiality presents significant opportunities for female authorship. Woolf's re-examination of the aesthetics of domestic spaces culminates in a critique of traditional notions of home. By reconceptualizing the female form not merely as an occupant of space but as synonymous with space itself, Woolf asserts that the author writes as space, appropriating it and transcending her limitations through creative expression. In

a symbolic sense, because femininity permeates all spaces, women do not need to physically occupy them to engender subjectivity. Woolf contends that replicating male authorship, grounded in concepts of occupation, is undesirable, since space transcends mere physicality and serves as a means of understanding one's place in the world.

Furthermore, a key element in Woolf's style is her subtle engagement with the socio-cultural constraints placed upon women, often articulated through narrative strategies that reveal the complexities of female subjectivity. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf questions Victorian conventions at various junctures, exposing their limitations and drawing attention to the gendered dimensions of physical and intellectual space. The influence of Victorian aesthetics, which profoundly marked Woolf's childhood and adolescence, played a significant role in shaping her literary imagination. The dark, constrictive spaces characterized by heavy curtains and studies reserved exclusively for male family members fostered Woolf's early awareness of the dynamics between women and space and how domestic environments could reflect broader structures of exclusion. Ultimately, this study illuminates how Woolf's nuanced engagement with spatial practices not only critiques existing power structures but also reimagines the possibilities for female authorship within literary discourse.

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