

Interdisciplinary Learning by Bridging Theory and Literature: Exploring Feminist Discourse through Fiction

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Abstract: This article argues for the pedagogical value of using literary texts—specifically Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*—as an entryway into foundational concepts in feminist theory. It identifies three thematic clusters essential to feminist thought: (1) material conditions and gendered inequalities, (2) representation and discursive power, and (3) language, subjectivity, and gendered expression. Through close textual analysis, the article demonstrates how Woolf’s narrative not only illuminates these themes but also renders abstract theoretical debates accessible to students encountering them for the first time. Integrating concrete classroom strategies, the study shows how Woolf’s text can scaffold students’ understanding of feminist concerns related to economic precarity, epistemic authority, gender construction, canonical exclusion, and the politics of language. Ultimately, the article contends that teaching feminist theory through literature enhances conceptual comprehension, strengthens critical and interpretive skills, and cultivates a nuanced awareness of how gender, power, and discourse intersect across both historical and contemporary contexts.

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1. Introduction

Teaching feminist theory frequently confronts a pedagogical challenge: many foundational concepts—discursive power, gender performativity, *écriture féminine*, canon formation, material oppression—may emerge as theoretically dense and sometimes too abstract for students encountering them for the first time. While these concepts form the backbone of twentieth-century Euro-American feminist criticism, they may often appear inaccessible when introduced solely through theoretical or philosophical texts. Literature, however, may offer an accessible, narrative-driven entry point that can help students grasp and contextualise these complexities. By its hybrid form combining fictional narration, reflective essay, and theoretical (philosophical) meditation, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* proves to be particularly effective in bridging this gap between theory and accessibility.

Euro-American feminist criticism has developed through a variety of methodological approaches, each shaped by different historical and intellectual contexts. Elaine Showalter's (1981) influential overview in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" captures this diversity by outlining a tripartite schema: British feminist criticism—largely Marxist in orientation—foregrounds oppression; French feminist criticism—shaped by psychoanalytic theory—emphasises repression; and American feminist criticism—often textual and literary in focus—centres on expression (186). Although Showalter's summary offers a concise historical snapshot, it seems to have significant limitations. The classification conflates intellectual approaches with geographical identities, obscures internal disagreements within each group, and fails to capture the profound cross-national exchanges that have shaped feminist theory. Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/1989) analysis of material oppression, for instance, aligns with themes Showalter (1981) labels *British*, while American (US) feminists such as Audre Lorde (1984), Kate Millett (1969/2000) and the Combahee River Collective (1977/1981) dismantle discursive constructions of gender in ways that exceed Showalter's (1981) *American* category. French theorists such as Luce Irigaray (1977/1985) and

Hélène Cixous (1976) differ markedly from Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1989), despite being placed under the same national label.

For these reasons, the article reframes Showalter's categories not as national taxonomies but as pedagogical themes that represent recurring questions in feminist thought across time and place. When taught through such a thematic lens, *A Room of One's Own* becomes a powerful text through which students can encounter three central clusters of feminist inquiry: 1) Material conditions and gendered inequality; 2) Representation, discourse, and canon formation; 3) Language, subjectivity, and gendered expression. This reframing allows students to engage critically with feminist ideas without inheriting the conceptual limitations of geographically defined categories. Woolf's novella is especially suited to introductory feminist pedagogy because it embeds many of key aspects of feminist theories within a compelling fictional scenario, providing a loop input for the mainstream Euro-American feminist criticism. The text is narrated by a fictional speaker—a crucial literary detail that invites students to question narrative authority, to interpret rhetorical strategies, and to reflect on the constructed nature of argumentation. Engaging with a fictional narrator also enables students to acquire theoretical knowledge through literary analysis, thereby modeling an interdisciplinary learning process that bridges literature and theory. In this way, the text introduces students to feminist concerns not abstractly but through concrete, contextualised examples that dramatise economic constraints, intellectual exclusion, representational distortions, and linguistic limitations.

Published in 1929, *A Room of One's Own* remains a foundational text in feminist circles, continually inspiring new scholarship and classroom applications. Not only does this work showcase Woolf's innovative narrative techniques—such as stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue, and self-reflexive commentary—but it also fundamentally resonates with major strands of Euro-American feminist thought that would be formalised decades later. Woolf's narrator's analysis of women's economic oppression and its impact on women's artistic expression prefigures materialist feminist arguments concerned with gender inequality; her reflections on women's absence from literary tradition speak directly to agitations that later shaped feminist criticism addressing issues of discourse, representation, and canon

formation; and her explorations of gendered language and creativity anticipate debates regarding language, subjectivity, and gendered expression as well as French feminist discussions of *écriture féminine*. Through its content and form alike, Woolf's text provides a rich textual foundation for introducing university students to these otherwise complex and often abstract theoretical frameworks.

The aim of this article is therefore twofold. The primary aim is pedagogical: to demonstrate how *A Room of One's Own* can be used strategically to teach major concepts in feminist theory across disciplines such as English Language and Literature, American Literature and Culture, English Language Teaching, Gender Studies, Women's Studies, and English Translation Studies. The secondary aim is literary: to illuminate how Woolf's text intersects with key strands of feminist thought and why this makes it an effective instructional tool. Through selective close readings and targeted classroom strategies, the present article offers a practical model for using Woolf's novella to scaffold students' comprehension of feminist theory and to cultivate interdisciplinary analytical skills. The paper proceeds by examining the three thematic clusters outlined above, pairing each with classroom strategies and concise theoretical connections. The goal is not to exhaust all possible theoretical intersections between Woolf's text and feminist theory, but to model how instructors can utilise selective, purposeful connections to enhance student learning as well as to illustrate how literary texts can serve as intellectually rigorous, engaging, and pedagogically effective gateways into feminist studies.

2. Fiction Enhancing the Teaching of Feminist Theory

Before turning to the thematic clusters, it is useful to outline why literature—especially hybrid literary-theoretical works such as Woolf's—supports the teaching of theories. The pedagogical value of teaching theory through literature draws on a long humanistic tradition that recognises narrative as a uniquely powerful medium for conveying complex ideas. As early as the Renaissance, Sir Philip Sidney in his famous *An Apology for Poetry (Or The Defence of Poesy)*, written around 1580 and published in 1595, argues that abstract philosophy often fails to reach the target audience because it

usually communicates through generalisations and conceptual formulations that may feel remote or inaccessible. Poetry and fiction, by contrast, translate ethical and intellectual principles into vivid, memorable forms. As Sidney observes, philosophical knowledge “standeth so upon the abstract and general, that happy is the man who may understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand” (Sidney 1973, 102). For Sidney, literature is therefore not a lesser form of knowledge but a more accessible one—an intellectual mode capable of engaging those who might struggle with purely abstract discourse. His claim that literature “can both teach and delight” (101), moving readers to understanding through concrete images, characters, and stories, anticipates modern pedagogical insights into how narrative scaffolds complex thought. The defence of literary meaning-making resonates strongly with the teaching of feminist theory today. Many feminist concepts—gender performativity, discursive power, structural oppression, or the politics of representation—can feel distant or inaccessible to students encountering theoretical language for the first time. Yet when these same ideas are embedded in narrative, metaphor, or fictional scenarios, they become easier not only to grasp but also to connect to lived experience. Texts such as Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, with its interplay of argument and story, exemplify the pedagogical role Sidney envisioned. Woolf’s novella offers philosophical insight through form that engages, delights, and illuminates by animating them through imagined histories, metaphorical scenes, rhetorical play, and a vividly constructed narrative voice. In doing so, her work models the very interpretive, reflective, and critical habits that feminist analysis demands. By embedding theoretical concerns in the texture of narrative—through story, character, imagery, irony, and voice—Woolf transforms complex feminist arguments into experiential knowledge. Literary texts thus operate as cognitive bridges, enabling students to approach abstract feminist concepts through the more intuitive logic of narrative, and without compromising analytical depth.

One of the primary reasons literature enhances the teaching of theory lies in its function as cognitive scaffolding for complex ideas: it provides concrete, embodied, and narrative-rich contexts through which students can grasp abstractions that might remain opaque in dense, purely theoretical prose (William and William 2003; Marek 2006; Cunningham 2024; Hansen

2023; Yazell et al. 2021). Literature, by contrast, grounds philosophical ideas in concrete detail. Woolf's novella accomplishes this by presenting hypothetical scenarios, imagined histories, and vividly staged scenes that render theoretical concerns more tangible. Her portrayal of a fictional narrator, her reconstruction of Judith Shakespeare's fate, or her contrasting depictions of Oxbridge meals embody feminist arguments about material inequality, patriarchal structures, and gendered exclusion. Through narrative, students witness theory in action. Instead of encountering concepts in isolation, they see how these ideas inform and shape lived realities. Fiction thus may become a pedagogical intermediary: it supports comprehension, provides memorable mental images, and allows students to process abstract ideas incrementally.

Closely connected to this is the historical entanglement between feminist theory and literary form. Feminist thinking has long emerged through literary modes of expression. Many feminist theorists—from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792/1999) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949/1989) to Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976)—blend argumentation with rhetorical flourish, autobiography, allegory, and metaphor. These works resist rigid disciplinary boundaries, demonstrating that feminist theory is not neatly divisible into *literary* and *philosophical* categories or *fiction* and *non-fiction* alike. Instead, it thrives through hybridity. Woolf's novella exemplifies this tradition: it merges fictional narration with social critique, historical analysis with speculative narrative, humour with earnest argument as well as fabrication with personal observation and experience. When students study feminist theory through such texts, they are not merely learning feminist concepts; they are being introduced to the very modes of expression through which feminist thought has historically evolved. The literary form itself becomes evidence of feminism's methodological innovation.

Additionally, literature fosters critical reading as a feminist practice, a skill fundamental to the discipline. Feminist inquiry demands attentiveness to silence, absence, and voice; to who is speaking and who is spoken for; to power structures encoded in language; and to representational norms and biases that shape cultural meaning. Close reading—understood as the careful, sustained analysis of textual detail—is therefore inherently aligned with

feminist aims. Classic feminist theorists have long emphasised this connection: Adrienne Rich (1971) frames feminist reading as an *act of re-vision* that uncovers what has been suppressed or distorted; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) demonstrate how attentive interpretation exposes gendered power within narrative structures; and Elaine Showalter (1985) and Toril Moi (1985) articulate close textual engagement as central to feminist critique. Recent scholarship continues and expands this tradition, highlighting close reading as a flexible, accountable feminist method attuned to voice, positionality, and interpretive responsibility (Holmes 2021; Lukić and Sánchez-Espinosa 2019; Kier-Byfield 2024). Woolf's text, for example, invites students to question narrative authority, trace ideological assumptions in male-authored history books, examine the symbolic significance of domestic and academic spaces, and interpret metaphors of confinement and possibility. Such practices cultivate the analytical habits that later allow students to engage more confidently with theoretical arguments about discourse, gender construction and representation, intersectionality, canon formation, and artistic production and distribution. Through literary analysis, students learn to recognise how power operates not only in institutions but also in language itself.

The interdisciplinarity of feminist methodology further underscores the value of literature in teaching feminist theory. Feminist inquiry traditionally draws from a wide range of fields—history, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and cultural studies (Jaggar 1983; Harding 1987; Haraway 1988; Lykke 2010; Hesse-Biber 2012). Literature provides a flexible platform that naturally accommodates these intersections, functioning as a site where narrative, theory, history, and cultural analysis converge (Hemmings 2011; Eagleton 1991). Woolf's novella, for instance, invites historical contextualisation (women's education in the early twentieth century), sociological analysis (class mobility, labour divisions), psychological exploration (interior consciousness, identity formation), philosophical reflection (epistemic authority), and linguistic inquiry (gendered language and the construction of subjectivity). Because literary texts contain narrative, imagery, historical reference, and philosophical speculation, they allow instructors to demonstrate the interdisciplinarity of feminist theory seamlessly. Students come to understand that feminist analysis is not an

isolated intellectual activity but rather an integrative method capable of crossing disciplinary boundaries.

Another crucial pedagogical advantage of literature is its ability to engage and motivate students. Fictional scenarios, humour, irony, and vivid description often resonate more deeply with students than abstract theory, fostering cognitive and emotional involvement in the learning process (Freire 1986; Rosenblatt 1994; Egan 1997; Coles 1989). Woolf's narrator, with her conversational tone and self-reflexive wit, creates an intimate relationship with the reader, inviting curiosity and reflection. Students become invested in the story of Judith Shakespeare, the narrator's wanderings, or the absurd logic of male-authored treatises on women. These narrative elements make feminist ideas relatable and memorable. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by theoretical abstraction, students find themselves drawn into a reflective, imaginative space where learning becomes an active, pleasurable process. Literature's capacity to evoke empathy, provoke emotional responses, and stimulate interpretive engagement significantly enhances motivation—an essential factor in classroom learning.

These qualities illustrate why Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in particular becomes an ideal pedagogical resource for introducing feminist concerns in an accessible yet intellectually rigorous ways. Its blend of storytelling and argumentation, its engagement with historical realities, its interrogation of discourse, and its stylistic experimentation all align with central concerns of feminist theory. The text both models and enacts feminist methodology: it critiques patriarchal institutions, analyses material conditions, exposes gendered structures of representation, and explores the relationship between language and subjectivity. At the same time, it demonstrates the interpretive skills—close reading, contextual analysis, critical inquiry—that students must develop to engage meaningfully with feminist scholarship. By providing theoretical insight within a literary form, Woolf's text offers students a way to approach feminist concepts not as abstract demands but as lived, embodied experiences. In this sense, literature does more than supplement the teaching of feminist theory; it transforms the learning process itself. It enables students to enter feminist debates through narrative familiarity, emotional resonance, and intellectual curiosity. Through works such as *A Room of One's Own*, students discover that feminist theory is woven

into everyday life as well as language. Literature thus becomes both a pedagogical tool and a methodological bridge—one that leads students from textual experience to theoretical understanding with clarity, depth, and engagement.

3. Material Conditions and Gendered Inequality

Material conditions—economic independence, access to education, labour distribution, and institutional exclusion—are central concerns in feminist thought worldwide. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* provides a compelling entry point into these themes through vivid narrative scenes that dramatise economic disparities and their effects on women's intellectual and creative potential. The text's pedagogical strength lies in its ability to concretise abstract feminist concepts, offering students a clear framework for understanding the material and structural constraints shaping women's lives.

3.1. *Conditions of Creativity*

Early in the text, Woolf's narrator famously asserts that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write” (Woolf 2004, 4). This line serves as a gateway into discussions about the economic restrictions historically faced by women, the relationship between financial independence and creative autonomy, and the gendered nature of space, privacy, labour, and institutional access.

Situating Woolf within the longer history of feminist thought enriches student understanding. Feminism's intellectual roots reach back to Enlightenment debates about social and political rights, which—though not explicitly feminist—laid the groundwork for later critiques of gender inequality. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792/1999) is particularly relevant here, advocating for women's equal access to education. Woolf extends this argument more than a century later by demonstrating how limited educational privilege suppresses not only intellectual development but also artistic expression. Subsequent legal reforms such as the Married Women's Property Act (1882) and the Representation of the People Act (1918) further illustrate the slow, uneven expansion of women's

civil rights, forming the historical backdrop against which Woolf exposes the economic disadvantages that shaped women's intellectual and creative lives.

Woolf's narrator, imagining herself addressing an audience of female scholars at Oxbridge, offers a sharply drawn contrast between the sumptuous luncheon provided to male academics and the meagre dinner served to women. These scenes provide a vivid visual metaphor for gendered educational inequality, illuminating the gendered nature of space and institutional wealth, and underscoring how institutional wealth structures opportunities for intellectual growth. These scenes in the text also form a natural bridge to Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's secondary status in *The Second Sex* (1949/1989), demonstrating how material deprivation and spatial exclusion reinforce women's subordinate position. Furthermore, the juxtaposition invites students to consider contemporary feminist concerns with intersectionality—how gender intersects with class, institutional privilege, and the politics of space.

3.1.1. Teaching Strategy: Guided Close Reading

Students can annotate the sensory details of the two meals scenes and discuss how institutional resources structures intellectual opportunity. The activity can then extend to identifying contemporary parallels—such as disparities in university funding or gendered patterns in workplace allocation. This approach offers a concrete illustration of a key Marxist feminist principle: material conditions shape consciousness, a principle echoed across thinkers from Mary Wollstonecraft *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792/1999) to Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive* (2004).

3.2. *Judith Shakespeare and the Structural Barriers to Genius*

Woolf's thought experiment about Shakespeare's imagined sister, Judith, offers a powerful pedagogical tool for introducing students to structural inequality. Judith is endowed with the same innate talent as her brother, yet every aspect of her social environment—lack of schooling, limited mobility,

parental expectations, sexual vulnerability, and exclusion from the theatre—conspires to extinguish her creative potential. Through Judith’s story, the narrator demonstrates that women’s historical absence from the literary canon is not the result of biological inferiority but of systemic restriction.

This narrative allows students to grasp a core feminist argument: creativity is shaped by social conditions, not natural aptitude alone. Woolf’s portrayal of Judith’s curtailed life resonates strongly with feminist thinkers who have analysed the material and institutional obstacles facing women artists. For example, in *Silences*, Tillie Olsen (1978) documents the silencing of working-class women writers, how working-class women, mothers, and women burdened by domestic labour were systematically prevented from developing their talents. Her focus on the *silenced* writer directly parallels Woolf’s construction of Judith as a figure whose potential is crushed long before it can manifest. Silvia Federici (2004), in *Caliban and the Witch*, similarly argues that reproductive and domestic labour, imposed through patriarchal and capitalist structures, restricts women’s access to creative and intellectual work. Federici’s analysis helps students see how the constraints placed on Judith are not historical anomalies but symptoms of broader socio-economic systems. Judith’s story thus becomes an accessible narrative gateway through which students can enter these broader theoretical debates about labour, gender, and creativity.

In addition, the exclusion of women artists can be extended beyond literature to other artistic fields. Linda Nochlin’s (1971) landmark essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” provides a parallel critique within art history, demonstrating how institutional, educational, and economic barriers—not lack of talent—explain the historical invisibility of women artists. Introducing Nochlin helps students recognise recurring feminist concerns across disciplines and artistic traditions. Consequently, the Judith episode may offer a productive entry point into contemporary feminist activism. Students can explore how Judith’s fictional obstacles echo in the modern struggles around representation, publication, and recognition—issues addressed by groups such as the Guerrilla Girls, whose campaigns expose ongoing sexism, racism, and classism within the art world. These connections allow students to see Woolf’s text not as a historical relic but as an early articulation of problems that persist today.

3.2.1. Teaching Strategy: Collaborative Reconstruction

In small groups, students reconstruct Judith’s imagined life, identifying key structural barriers and mapping them onto present-day inequities. They then compare Judith’s obstacles with those faced by marginalised writers today, making intersectional connections across class, race, sexuality, and nationality. This exercise encourages students to see Woolf’s narrative as both historically grounded and urgently contemporary.

3.3. *Intersection: Class, Gender, and Space*

Woolf deepens her critique of material inequality by explicitly linking gender to class. The narrator observes that “genius like Shakespeare’s is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people” and asks how such genius could have emerged among women whose labour began “almost before they were out of the nursery” and who were constrained “by their parents” and “by all the powers of law and custom” (Woolf 2004, 56–57). In this reflection, women appear as a social class in their own right: structurally positioned, economically disadvantaged, and systematically denied the conditions necessary for intellectual development.

The concept of gendered space and class further illuminates this argument. Woolf’s repeated emphasis on rooms, libraries, lecture halls, and dining spaces demonstrates how architecture itself can become a material manifestation of gender hierarchy. This theme connects readily to contemporary feminist debates—including those within British radical feminism—about women-only spaces, institutional belonging, and the politics of access.

3.3.1. Teaching Strategy: Mapping Gendered Space

Students brainstorm contemporary examples of gendered spaces—both exclusionary and protective—and analyse how such spaces shape gender identities and opportunities. This activity helps students recognise the spatial dimension of inequality and encourages them to consider the socio-political implications of who is allowed to occupy which spaces, when, and under what conditions.

3.4. *Introducing Theoretical Connections*

Woolf's narrative form provides an ideal opportunity to explore another dimension within feminist inquiry: the interdependence of artistic representation and lived material conditions. *A Room of One's Own* continually blurs generic boundaries between essay, fiction, satire, and lecture, thereby enacting the very argument it advances—that art does not stand apart from social reality but is shaped by it.

Directing students' attention to this formal experimentation might help them understand feminist theory's longstanding concern with genre, narrative voice, and the politics of representation. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's narrator, for instance, imagines addressing a group of women scholars at Oxbridge, a scene that evolves from Woolf's earlier non-fiction essay entitled "Women and Fiction" (1929), which is based on the author's two lectures she delivered at Cambridge in 1928 (Rosenbaum ed. 1992). Introducing this context serves two pedagogical functions: it situates students within Woolf's real intellectual milieu, and it demonstrates how the novella transforms documented historical events into a fictionalised, self-reflexive narrative. The text's opening lines illustrate this transformation vividly. Beginning *in medias res*—"But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" (Woolf 2004, 3)—Woolf adapts a technique associated with classical epic while simultaneously critiquing the patriarchal literary inheritance from which that technique derives. The narrator's shifting identity—"call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please" (5)—destabilises the assumption that the speaker is identical with the historical author. This deliberate ambiguity complicates distinctions between author and narrator, fact and fiction, lived experience and imaginative elaboration. As the narrative progresses and the fictional narrator gradually recedes, readers are left in productive uncertainty about who is speaking—an uncertainty that performs, rather than merely describes, a key Marxist-feminist claim: that artistic form is inseparable from the material and ideological structures that shape it.

Foregrounding this interplay between literary form and feminist argumentation enables instructors to introduce students to a broader constellation of feminist thinkers. Woolf's analyses resonate with Simone de

Beauvoir's (1949/ 1989) account of how social conditions shape women's possibilities; with bell hooks's (1982, 1984) critique of economic marginalisation and structural oppression; with Tillie Olsen's (1978) reflections on the silencing of women's creative labour; and with Silvia Federici's (2004) examination of reproductive labour under capitalism. These theorists need not be introduced exhaustively. Instead, selective pairing—using Woolf as a pivot—demonstrates how the text anticipates, echoes, or complicates major strands of feminist thought.

3.4.1. Teaching Strategy: Genre and Critical Discourse Analysis

Students examine passages where Woolf explicitly collapses the boundaries between fact and fiction—for example, the fictional reimagining of her 1928 Cambridge lectures or the narrator's refusal of a fixed identity. Through guided close reading, students analyse how Woolf's narrative strategies shape meaning and reflect on how form enacts a Marxist-feminist claim: that art is not an autonomous realm but one deeply entangled with the social world.

3.5. Addressing Critiques of Woolf

A rigorous pedagogical approach must also acknowledge that *A Room of One's Own* does not present a universal feminist perspective. While Woolf's insights into material inequality and women's exclusion remain influential, they are shaped by her own social position and by the historical circumstances in which she wrote. Introducing students to these critiques enriches their understanding of the text and deepens their engagement with the broader feminist conversation.

One prominent critique concerns Woolf's emphasis on money, private rooms, and access to education—conditions that reflect a distinctly bourgeois ideal of artistic production. Working-class women, colonised women, and Black women rarely possessed such resources, which raises critical questions about who is included in Woolf's imagined community of women writers. Furthermore, while Woolf foregrounds gender oppression, her analysis pays limited attention to the racial and imperial contexts that shaped women's

lives in Britain and across its colonies. These omissions remind students that feminist theory must be understood in relation to its historical and social frameworks, not as a universally applicable model.

Engaging with these limitations does not diminish the value of Woolf's work; rather, it situates her arguments within ongoing debates about privilege, access, and intersectionality. Students learn to recognise how feminist texts both illuminate and obscure different dimensions of women's experiences, and how subsequent feminist thinkers—particularly Black, postcolonial, and working-class feminists—have expanded and challenged Woolf's claims.

3.5.1. Teaching Strategy: Reflective Writing Prompt

To foster critical engagement, instructors can ask students to respond to the following question: *Who is excluded from Woolf's vision of the woman writer, and why does this matter for feminist theory?* This exercise encourages students to reflect on the relationship between privilege and creativity, the role of material inequality in shaping artistic possibilities, and the importance of intersectional approaches in contemporary feminist scholarship.

4. Representation, Discourse, and Canon Formation

Representation and discursive power form a second major cluster of feminist thought that *A Room of One's Own* introduces with exceptional pedagogical richness. Woolf's British Museum episode, in which the narrator seeks authoritative knowledge about women, becomes a productive gateway into the politics of discourse, canon formation, and the ideological construction of gender. Through this scene—as well as through her discussions of literary stereotypes, narrative binaries, and the absence of a women's tradition—Woolf equips instructors with an accessible entry point into several strands of feminist theory, including discursive power (Beauvoir 1949/1989; Millett 1969/ 2000), performativity (Butler 1990; Butler 1993), feminist poetics (Gilbert and Gubar 1979), and *gynocriticism* (Kolodny 1980; Showalter 1988/1997).

4.1. The British Museum Scene as Gateway to Discursive Power

When Woolf's narrator visits the British Museum to "consult the learned authorities" on the nature of women, she finds shelves filled almost exclusively with books written by men—texts portraying women as inferior, irrational, morally weak, or inherently subordinate (Woolf 2004, 30). The narrator notes the striking uniformity of these male-authored accounts, which range from pseudo-scientific claims to religious condemnation, hostile opinion, and trivial anecdote.

This scene offers an accessible entry point into key feminist concerns: the discursive construction of gender, the gendering of epistemic authority, the historical male dominance in knowledge production, and the misogyny embedded in ostensibly *objective* scholarship. The British Museum scene underscores that the category *woman* has historically been defined primarily by those who wielded institutional and intellectual authority. This insight aligns closely with Simone de Beauvoir's foundational claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"—that gender is a socially produced through discourse and representation (1989, 267). It also resonates with Kate Millet's (1969/2000) argument in *Sexual Politics*, which demonstrates how sexual difference is constructed and reinforced through patriarchal ideology embedded in cultural narratives, academic disciplines, and artistic traditions.

Moreover, this passage can serve as a bridge to introducing queer scholarship, particularly Judith Butler's work in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), which theorises the concept of gender as being ideologically constructed and performative. Woolf's depiction of the misrepresentation of women by male discourse emphasises the relational nature of discursive power and its constitutive role in shaping both the image and identity of women, whether fictional or real. As such, the text provides a framework for introducing students to feminist concerns in a concrete and reflective manner.

4.1.1. Teaching Strategy: "Canon Audit"

Students can be asked to examine the authors represented in their programme or departmental curriculum and to map patterns of gender

representation. This exercise concretises Woolf's critique and highlights the extent to which contemporary curricula continue to reflect inherited structures of epistemic power.

4.2. Deconstructing Binaries and Anticipating the Madwoman Thesis

Woolf's critique of the patriarchal imagination anticipates Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's (1979) argument in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that women in literature are confined to the binary of *angel* or *monster*. Woolf's narrator observes that women in fiction oscillate between "heavenly goodness and hellish depravity" (2004, 96), reflecting not their real lives, but patriarchal fantasy. Her narrator further explains how dramatists limited women to roles defined by their relations to men: "Married against their will, kept in one room, and to one occupation, how could a dramatist give a full or interesting or truthful account of them? Love was the only possible interpreter" (97), and as a result, "The poet was forced to be passionate or bitter" (97). These constraints echo the patriarchal symbolism Gilbert and Gubar (1979) identify, in which women embody either idealised purity or threatening rebellion. This scene also provide a natural entry point to Woolf's short essay "Professions for Women", published in 1931, in which she famously calls on women writers to "kill the Angel in the House" (2017, para. 3)—a metaphor for dismantling these unrealistic yet profound archetypes. In Woolf's (1929, 1931) view, challenging stereotypical representations of women in literature is essential to a woman's literary vocation.

Woolf's narrator also anticipates Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) *madwoman* figure when she speculates that the burning of witches or the persecution of "a wise woman selling herbs" may mark "a lost novelist, a suppressed poet," women driven to madness by thwarted creative energy:

...any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gifts for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts,

that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.
(Woolf 2004, 57)

This passage aligns strikingly with the madwoman thesis: when women's creative energy is blocked by patriarchal repression, it may re-emerge in distorted or destructive forms. Woolf thus provides an interpretive foundation for the feminist analysis of madness, confinement, and silenced creativity. Thus, engaging with Woolf's text allows students to explore and reflect on complex concepts such as the relationship between discourse and power, the discursive construction of gender, and the binary representation of women in male-dominated narratives. This reflection ultimately illuminates the feminist imperative to deconstruct and reconstruct the cultural and literary image of a woman.

4.2.1. Teaching Strategy: Mapping Patriarchal Binaries across Media

To deepen students' understanding of how the angel/ monster binary persists across cultural forms, this activity invites them to analyse representations of women not only in literature, but also in visual art and contemporary advertising. Students can begin by identifying and charting examples of the angel/ monster binary in selected literary texts, noting how female figures are idealised, constrained, or demonised. They then extend this analysis to visual materials—for example, paintings, magazine covers, fashion campaigns, or digital advertisements—tracing how similar archetypes emerge in visual culture. This might include contrasting depictions of women as pure, passive, nurturing, or domestic with portrayals that frame women as dangerous, seductive, unruly, or chaotic.

Once students have identified these patterns, they compare them with Woolf's critique of stereotypical femininity and her call to *kill the angel in the house*. This comparative, cross-media approach encourages students to connect literary analysis with broader feminist concerns, including the discursive construction of gender, the visual policing of women's identities, and the cultural pressures that shape female subjectivity. It also highlights the continued relevance of Woolf's insights by demonstrating how patriarchal binaries persist—and are visually reproduced—in contemporary culture.

4.3. *Teaching Gynocriticism through Woolf*

Woolf's narrator's attempt to reconstruct a women's literary lineage—through figures such as Lady Winchilsea (1661–1720) (2004, 70), Margaret of Newcastle (1623–73) (71), Dorothy Osborne (1627–95) (73), and Aphra Behn (1640–89) (76)—provides a compelling entry point into the principles of *gynocriticism*. Her reflections on the material and ideological barriers faced by earlier women writers foreground the historical absence of a sustained women's tradition, a lack she identifies as a major impediment to future women authors. This concern anticipates later American feminist critics such as Annette Kolodny (1980), who in “Dancing through the Minefield” insists on the importance of recovering women's writing and revising canons governed by patriarchal values. By assembling an embryonic women's literary heritage, Woolf effectively performs the early work of *gynocriticism* and models its aims: restoration, contextualisation, and recognition of women's shared artistic conditions. Her narrator's catalogue of noblewomen writers underscores Woolf's earlier argument about the necessity of financial independence for artistic production and illustrates the social constraints that enabled or inhibited women's creativity. This gesturing toward canon revision also aligns Woolf with broader feminist interventions in other artistic domains, including the activism of the Guerrilla Girls and feminist art historians who likewise seek to expose the systematic exclusion of women artists.

Woolf's analysis of women's writing further opens a pathway into the methodological concerns of *gynocriticism*. Her assessment of the anger at women's conditions shaping the poetry of Lady Winchilsea and Margaret of Newcastle—diminishing the artistic quality of their work, rendering it “disfigured and deformed by...the same outburst of rage” (Woolf 2004, 71)—alongside her insistence that even “innumerable bad novels” written by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (75) constitute an essential literary heritage, anticipates arguments later articulated by Elaine Showalter. Showalter's (1981) claim in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” that women's writing expresses a collective cultural experience, an experience that “binds women writers to each other over time and space” (197) resonates strongly with Woolf's assertion that women's books “continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately” (2004,

93) and her reminder that “masterpieces are not single and solitary births” (76). This call for recognising a women’s tradition echoes Showalter’s (1988/1997) definition of *gynocriticism* in “Towards a Feminist Poetics” as the effort to uncover women’s writings to establish a distinct canon and “reconstruct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature” (131).

Woolf’s text thus becomes an accessible pedagogical bridge to Showalter’s (1977/1999) framework elaborated on in *A Literature of Their Own*, which charts the evolution of women’s writing through the Feminine, Feminist, and Female phases. Woolf’s observations exemplify each stage of Showalter’s framework: the adoption of male pseudonyms (Woolf 2004, 58) and internalised patriarchal values, evident in letters by Dorothy Osborne (72–73) (Feminine); the rage and protest found in writers such as Lady Winchilsea (68–69) and Charlotte Brontë (81) (Feminist); and the emergence of self-defined artistic autonomy in figures like Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, and Woolf’s contemporary, Mary Carmichael (78–79) (Female). As Woolf’s narrator notes, Carmichael’s “Chloe liked Olivia” (95) encapsulates this final phase, signalling a shift toward centring relationships and experiences between women, independent of male mediation, and anticipating later radical feminist concerns with female bonds and representation.

Through Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, students gain a clear view of how *gynocriticism* shifts feminist inquiry from economic oppression to textual repression, recovery, and re-evaluation. Analysing Woolf alongside Showalter reveals the coherence of these feminist genealogies and makes visible the ways patriarchal power operates not only through material conditions but also through literary history itself. In this way, Woolf’s text not only historicises the evolution of feminist literary criticism but also provides a conceptual and methodological bridge between fictional representation and the lived structures of patriarchal power.

4.3.1. Teaching Strategy: Mini-Archive Task

Students collaboratively build a small digital or physical archive of overlooked women writers or artists, presenting the historical conditions that led to their marginalisation. This exercise enables students to practice

feminist methodologies of recovery, canon revision, and critical reclamation—core principles of *gynocriticism*.

5. Language, Subjectivity, and Gendered Expression

A third thematic cluster opened by *A Room of One's Own* concerns the relationship between language, subjectivity, and gendered expression. The narrator's reflections on "a man's sentence" (Woolf 2004, 89) and her observation that some women "wrote as women, not as men write" (87) invite students to consider how linguistic form is shaped by cultural norms, how subjectivity is mediated through available modes of expression, and how women writers have historically struggled to articulate experience within linguistic structures designed by and for men.

5.1. Woolf's "Man's Sentence" and Gendered Language

When Woolf's narrator remarks that the conventional literary sentence "was a man's sentence" (2004, 89), she foregrounds the gendered nature of stylistic conventions and the deep entanglement between language and identity. She observes that traditional prose—"behind it one can see Johnson, Gibbon and the rest"—is shaped by male habits of thought and male experiences of the world, making it "unsuited for a woman's use" (89–90). Women writers, she argues, thus inherit not only a male literary canon but also a male-shaped syntax, form, and genre. This idea provides a powerful starting point for examining gendered stylistic norms, the politics of literary/ artistic form, and the ways signifying systems sustain or constrain subjectivity. Having already explored the implications of discursive power in earlier sections, students can now examine its operation at the level of linguistic form by analysing how Woolf locates this power within the sentence itself.

Woolf's insight that form itself is gendered can be extended beyond literary language to visual culture, particularly film. Here, instructors can introduce Laura Mulvey's (1975) influential theory of the male gaze, discussed in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which argues that classical cinema constructs women as objects of visual pleasure for a presumed heterosexual male spectator. Mulvey contends that cinematic

techniques—camera angles, framing, point-of-view shots—produce a *to-be-looked-at-ness* that fixes women within structures of male desire and narrative control. This offers a compelling parallel to Woolf's *man's sentence*: just as prose is shaped by male experience, visual representation is shaped by male spectatorship. Contemporary scholarship on the *female gaze*, such as “Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze” (Soloway 2016) complicates this issues by examining how women filmmakers disrupt, resist, or reconfigure dominant modes of looking. Incorporating Mulvey (1975) and Soloway (2016) into discussions of Woolf's novella enables students to see how gender shapes not only linguistic structures but also visual and aesthetic ones, thereby enriching their cross-disciplinary grasp of feminist theories of representation.

5.1.1. Teaching Strategy: Stylistic & Visual Comparison

This activity encourages students to recognise how gendered structures shape both linguistic and visual forms of representation. Instructors begin by providing short excerpts from Virginia Woolf, Hélène Cixous, and a male author, for instance, Charles Dickens, and ask students to compare syntactic patterns, use of imagery, and narrative perspective. This illuminates the feminist claim that language is neither neutral nor universal. Through this comparative exercise, students observe how literary style is culturally coded and often shaped by gender politics. This foregrounds the feminist insight that language is never neutral: it reflects and reproduces cultural norms, hierarchies, and assumptions about subjectivity.

To expand this textual analysis into a multimodal feminist practice, instructors then introduce a visual comparison. Students watch two short clips: one from a classical Hollywood film and another from a woman filmmaker such as Jane Campion or Sofia Coppola, and then analyse the camera's gaze and point of view, the framing and positioning of women's bodies, and the ways the viewer is invited to identify with certain characters or perspectives. By recognising how patriarchal structures shape both linguistic and visual expression, students develop multimodal feminist literacy. They learn to identify gendered patterns that operate across artistic media and to see how writers and filmmakers challenge, disrupt, or reinvent those forms. This integrative strategy reinforces Woolf's broader claim: that

gender is embedded not only in discourse and representation, but in the very forms through which culture expresses meaning.

5.2. *Writing the Body: Woolf and Écriture Féminine*

Woolf's reflections on gendered language offer an accessible entry point into feminist psychoanalytic theory—particularly Hélène Cixous's (1976) concept of *écriture féminine* as a mode of writing grounded in the body, fluidity, multiplicity, and sensory experience, discussed in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”. Rather than overwhelming students with dense theoretical terminology, instructors can use Woolf's stylistic observations to scaffold the central insights of French psychoanalytic feminism. Woolf's narrator repeatedly notes that women inherit linguistic forms not designed for them: “there was no common sentence ready for her use” (2004, 88). Because the literary tradition has been shaped by male predecessors, the narrator suggests that language, form, and genre themselves bear a masculine imprint. This allows students to grasp, in concrete terms, the psychoanalytic claim that language is culturally and sexually coded rather than neutral or universal.

Within this framework, Cixous's call for women to write their bodies into language becomes particularly tangible as she insists that “woman must write herself...must write about women...must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (1976, 875). Woolf anticipates this injunction when her narrator laments on the disappearance of women's gestures, emotions, and daily experiences from cultural memory—“Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it” (2004, 104). Similarly, Cixous emphasises that women must reclaim their identities through embodied expression: “Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity” (1976, 886). Despite their different historical contexts, both writers stress that women must reshape linguistic forms to express experiences long excluded by patriarchal discourse.

The parallels extend to questions of form. Woolf's narrator's urges women to “knock the sentence into shape” (2004, 89) and to cultivate “the habit of writing naturally” (126), prefiguring Cixous's (1976) plea for women to break inherited structures and write through their bodies—producing a language of

fluidity, multiplicity, and sensory movement. In Cixous' words, a woman ought to "put herself into the text... by her own movement" (875). Woolf's own narrative style—digressive, rhythmic, and impressionistic—enacts many qualities later associated with *écriture féminine*, enabling students to encounter the theory as embodied literary practice rather than abstract doctrine. Both thinkers also insist on rejecting internalised patriarchal ideals: Cixous exhorts women to "kill the false woman" (880), while Woolf (1931) famously commands in "Professions for Women" that women writers must "kill the Angel in the House" (2017, para. 3).

Cixous's argument that sexuality and textuality must be rejoined—"its infinitive and mobile complexity" (1976, 886)—finds a clear echo in Woolf's hope that "those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words" will someday appear in women's writing (2004, 98). Both stress that bodily experience should shape women's linguistic production and encourage women to write with unrestrained freedom: Cixous implores, "let no one hold you back... not even yourself" (877), while Woolf reassures, "So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters" (123).

By drawing out these continuities, instructors can present these complex feminist philosophies not as an isolated or esoteric body of thought but as a meaningful extension of Woolf's project. Students can thus come to understand *écriture féminine* as a practical feminist strategy—grounded in the same structural challenge Woolf identifies: the need to transform inherited discourse in order to articulate women's subjectivities fully.

5.3. *Speaking the Body: Woolf and Parler-Femme*

Woolf's work can serve as an accessible entry point into Luce Irigaray's (1977/1985) thought, particularly her concept of *parler-femme* (women's speech) as articulated in *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Irigaray conceives *parler-femme* as a form of feminine expression grounded in embodied difference and multiplicity, in contrast to the singular, hierarchical structures of phallogocentric discourse. This mode of speech breaks through the constraints of male-dominated linguistic systems, linking women's language intrinsically to the female body. It is characterized by polymorphism, fluidity, and the capacity to express experiences unique to women—qualities that sharply contrast with the unity and rigidity associated with the phallus.

Irigaray emphasises that female sexuality generates distinct expressive possibilities, which she associates with unique creative powers accessible only to women. She writes: “Woman has sex organs more or less everywhere...she finds pleasure almost everywhere...the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than commonly imagined” (1985, 28). Sexual difference, for Irigaray, produces a corresponding difference in linguistic potential: for women, language “always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them” (29). This fluid and generative mode of expression enables women to explore novel and unique forms of creativity.

Woolf anticipates these ideas in her reflections on women’s creative power. Her narrator observes: “But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men...It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men” (2004, 102). Like Irigaray, she emphasises that feminine creativity is distinct not only in content but in form. Woolf’s narrator further suggests that women should write in a distinct manner, “giving things their natural order, as a woman would, if she wrote like a woman” (106). She cites Jane Austen and observes that Austen “devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use” (89). Like Irigaray, Woolf’s narrator highlights how form must align with the body: “the book has somehow to be adapted to the body” (90).

Woolf’s own narrative style performs the very multiplicity and fluidity that Irigaray associates with *parler-femme*. By engaging with Woolf’s text, students can witness a direct manifestation of feminine creativity, observing how narrative form and style reflect embodied difference. This loop between theory and literary experience provides a concrete means of understanding Irigaray’s arguments about the connection between female bodies, sexual difference, and distinct modes of expression. In this way, Woolf’s writing becomes both a pedagogical tool and a model for *parler-femme*, grounding abstract feminist theory in a tangible reading experience.

5.4. *Teaching through Form: An Embodied Reading Practice*

Woolf’s narrative experimentation offers an ideal platform for exploring the formal dimensions of feminist writing. Students can analyse how

techniques such as fragmentation, stream of consciousness, shifts between fact and fiction, and impressionistic detail enact what later feminist theorists identify as features of *écriture féminine*. These strategies not only challenge conventional narrative structures but also model alternative modes of subjectivity and expression, highlighting the intimate link between literary form and embodied experience.

By the time students encounter psychoanalytic feminist theory, Woolf has already prepared them to ask its central questions: *What kinds of subjectivities are possible within inherited linguistic forms? How can women reshape literary conventions to articulate embodied experience? What does it mean to write outside patriarchal discourse?* Through close reading of Woolf's text, students can trace how narrative experimentation enacts answers to these questions, revealing the inseparability of style, form, and feminist inquiry.

5.4.1. Teaching Strategy: Embodied Writing Exercise

Students may be asked to rewrite a brief passage from a canonical male author in a *woman's language*, experimenting with fluidity, interiority, digression, or rhythm. By engaging directly with linguistic form, students may experience the conceptual shift Woolf describes, learning firsthand the ways of how form can embody feminist insight. This exercise fosters multimodal literacy, linking textual analysis, embodied practice, and theoretical reflection, and enables students to integrate the principles of feminist thought into their own writing and interpretive strategies. Through this embodied approach, Woolf's text functions not only as a source of ideas but as a model for the lived practice of feminist theory, showing that critical understanding emerges not only through intellectual engagement but also through the imaginative enactment of alternative forms of expression.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that *A Room of One's Own* offers a uniquely effective pedagogical bridge between literature and feminist theory, enabling students to approach complex philosophical arguments through the

embodied, rhetorical, and narrative strategies of Virginia Woolf's text. By situating feminist concerns—material inequality, gendered subjectivity, discursive power, and linguistic embodiment—within a vivid literary framework, Woolf anticipates key strands of feminist thought while providing a concrete context through which students can grasp them.

Close reading of Woolf's reflections on language, creativity, and gendered experience equips students with conceptual tools for analysing the intersections of gender, class, language, discourse, and power. Woolf's narrative thus becomes an accessible entry point into diverse trajectories of feminist theory, ranging from materialist and socio-political critiques to psychoanalytic and poststructural approaches such as *écriture féminine* and *parler-femme*. The parallels between Woolf's stylistic choices and the theories later articulated by Cixous (1976) and Irigaray (1977) demonstrate how literary form can illuminate abstract concepts—fluidity, multiplicity, embodied expression—in ways that are immediate and experientially grounded. Through Woolf's digressive, rhythmic, and imaginative prose, students encounter an enacted version of these theories, reinforcing conceptual understanding through literary experience.

More broadly, integrating Woolf into the teaching of feminist theory underscores the pedagogical value of interdisciplinary learning. Literature enables students to encounter theoretical arguments not as detached abstractions but as lived and narrated concerns, fostering critical reading skills, analytical nuance, and reflective awareness of how personal experience and structural inequality shape the production of knowledge—a central tenet of feminist epistemology. Engaging with fiction also makes theoretical material more accessible and memorable, encourages interdisciplinary connections across philosophy, psychology, cultural studies, and history, and invites creative and imaginative engagement with questions of gender and power.

By tracing feminist traditions in Woolf's text, this article has sought to demonstrate how literary analysis can enrich the study of feminist theory and deepen students' understanding of how language, gender, and power operate in both historical and contemporary contexts. In doing so, it contributes to broader conversations in feminist pedagogy about how best to cultivate meaningful, interdisciplinary, and transformative learning

experiences. Ultimately, teaching feminist theory through literature does more than illuminate feminist histories: it equips students with the intellectual flexibility, critical sensitivity, and empathetic imagination needed to engage thoughtfully with gendered realities in the world today.

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