“It is feminist propaganda, yet it resembles an almond-tree in blossom.”
Desmond MacCarthy, Sunday Times, 1929

“I shall be attacked for a feminist and hinted at for a Sapphist.”
Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own
Stream of consciousness (sometimes confused with automatic writing): a literary technique that approximates the flow (or jumble) of thoughts and sensory impressions that pass through the mind each instant. Great value is placed on the interior mental and emotional processes of individuals, rather than on the exterior world that their thinking reflects. (Examples of stream-of-consciousness writers: Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner)

➢ “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?” (first sentence A Room of One’s Own)
The nature of thought

- Thought—to call it by a prouder name than it deserved—had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it [thought] and sink it, until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? (5)

- Woolf’s pattern of thoughts may seem random (think of the cat without a tail) but every thought carries meaning and importance.
Woolf's implicit argument in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”: Edwardian writers, such as Bennett and Galsworthy, are primarily interested in describing a material world, because this world is ruled by men. Therefore, their novels often fail to describe the lives of women.
Woolf’s thesis and narrative method:

A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved. I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions--women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems. But in order to make some amends I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money. I am going to develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought which led me to think this.

(first paragraph)
➢ Women’s exclusion from education

➢ Married Women’s Property Acts in 1870 and 1882, which enabled married women to keep their own earnings.

➢ Women did not always have control or ownership over the money, however.

➢ Besides these external constraints, there are internal constraints to writing: the Angel in the House.
You may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it---she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace.

Patmore's wife Emily, the model for the Angel in the House, portrayed by John Everett Millais.
The two luncheons

- The luncheon on this occasion began with soles, sunk in a deep dish, over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream, save that it was branded here and there with brown spots like the spots on the flanks of a doe. After that came the partridges, but if this suggests a couple of bald, brown birds on a plate you are mistaken. (9)
- Here was the soup. It was a plain gravy soup. (15)
Shakespeare’s Sister

- She was denied education: “She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers.” (43)
- She is beaten by her father, when she refuses to get married.
- She is denied access to the theatre.
- Eventually, she becomes pregnant and commits suicide.
I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must--to put it bluntly--tell lies if they are to succeed.
Whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. ("Professions for Women")
The room of one’s own signifies not only financial autonomy, but also signifies the freedom to think for oneself.

Woolf argues that women weren’t able to write poetry and wrote mainly novels, because they were sitting in the living room with their families.
Woolf’s unreliable and multiple narrators:

I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the waste-paper basket and forget all about it.

Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please--it is not a matter of any importance) sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought. (End of first paragraph, beginning of second paragraph)
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Narrative Structure of *A Room*:

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In the ballad, the four Marys are ladies-in-waiting to a Scottish queen, also named Mary. Mary Hamilton is about to be executed for infanticide, having become pregnant by the queen's husband.
Four Marys

Last night there were four Marys  
Tonight there'll be but three  
There was Mary Seaton and Mary Beaton  
And Mary Carmichael and me.

Oh, often have I dressed my Queen  
And put on her braw silk gown  
But all the thanks I've got tonight  
Is to be hanged in Edinborough Town.

Full often have I dressed my Queen  
Put gold upon her hair  
But I have got for my reward  
The gallows to be my share.

Oh, little did my mother know  
The day she cradled me  
The land I was to travel in  
The death I was to dee.

Oh, happy, happy is the maid  
That's born of beauty free  
Oh, it was my rosy, dimpled cheeks  
That's been the devil to me.

They'll tie a kerchief around my eyes  
That I may not see to dee  
And they'll never tell my father or mother  
But that I'm across the sea.
• (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please--it is not a matter of any importance)

• In the Scottish ballad “The Four Marys” are Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael, and Mary Hamilton—the narrator of the ballad.

• Mary Hamilton is about to be executed for infanticide, having become pregnant by the queen’s husband.

• The Marys in A Room of One’s Own

• The Scottish Ballad

• The Mary who is absent from the text
• (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance)

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The Scottish Ballad

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The Mary who is absent from the text

Mary Hamilton suffers a similar fate as Judith Shakespeare: she becomes pregnant and is about to be executed.
How to attain an “I” when...

Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.

— Virginia Woolf —

A Room of One’s Own, 32 (Chapter II - third-last paragraph).
But after reading a chapter or two, a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow something like the letter ‘I’. (90)
Narrative Structure and Collage

- The different narrators also makes A Room of One’s Own **collage-like and multivocal**.
- “Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact.” (4)

**PABLO PICASSO (1881-1973)**

'Still Life with mandolin and Guitar', 1924 (oil on canvas) – “Influenced by the introduction of bold and simple collage shapes, Synthetic Cubism moved away from the unified monochrome surfaces of Analytic Cubism to a more direct, colorful and decorative style.”
Returning to Vanessa Bell’s partial representation of Virginia…

➢ “One can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker.” (A Room 1)

➢ Fragmented knowledge expressed in cubist art forms, in which objects are broken up:
  ➢ But do not expect just at present a complete and satisfactory presentment of her. Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. Your help is invoked in a good cause. For I will make one final and surpassingly rash prediction—we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown.
“Chloe liked Olivia”

For if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been.

— Virginia Woolf —
“I told Nessa the story of our passion in a chemists shop the other day. ‘But do you really like going to bed with women’ she said – taking her change. ‘And how’d you do it?’ and so she bought her pills to take abroad, talking as loud as a parrot.” (Diary of Virginia Woolf, 1929)
Woolf’s 1928 novel Orlando

“The longest and most charming love letter in literature, in which [Virginia] explores Vita, weaves her in and out of the centuries, tosses her from one sex to the other, plays with her, dresses her in furs, lace and emeralds, teases her, flirts with her, drops a veil of mist around her, and ends by photographing her in the mud at Long Barn, with dogs, awaiting Virginia’s arrival the next day.” - Nigel Nicholson (Vita’s son)
In her diary on August 31 of 1928, Virginia Woolf described a conversation she had with fellow Bloomsbury member E.M. Forster about his attitude towards lesbianism: “He said he thought Sapphism disgusting; partly from the convention, partly because he disliked that women should be independent of men.”

Were the Bloomsberries more accepting of homosexuality than lesbianism?
In August of 1940, when Britain was under attack from Germany, Virginia wrote Vita a letter telling her how much she meant to her:

“I’ve just stopped talking to you. It seems so strange. It’s perfectly peaceful here–they’re playing bowls–I’d just put flowers in your room. And there you sit with the bombs falling around you. What can one say– except that I love you and I’ve got to live through this strange quiet evening thinking of you sitting there alone. Dearest– let me have a line...You have given me such happiness...”
Radclyffe Hall’s lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) became the target of a campaign by James Douglas, editor of the Sunday Express newspaper, who wrote "I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel."

Although its only sexual reference consists of the words "and that night, they were not divided", a British court judged it obscene because it defended "unnatural practices between women"
Self-Censorship

Woolf and self-censorship—an earlier draft of the “Chloe liked Olivia” section in *A Room of One’s Own*:

“Chloe liked Olivia; they shared a —,’ the words came at the bottom of the page; the pages had stuck; while fumbling to open them there flashed into my mind the inevitable policemen; the summons; the order to attend the court; the dreary waiting; the Magistrate coming in with a little bow; the glass of water; the counsel for the prosecution; for the defence; the verdict; this book is obscene; & flames rising, perhaps on Tower Hill, as they consumed masses of paper. Here the pages came apart. Heaven be praised! It was only a laboratory.”
In a powerful contrast, Abrams shows that until the Romantics, literature was usually understood as a mirror, reflecting the real world, in some kind of mimesis; but for the Romantics, writing was more like a lamp: the light of the writer's inner soul spilled out to illuminate the world.
Women writers can shed new light on the lives of women.

“As I watched the Manx cat pause in the middle of the lawn as if it too questioned the universe, something seemed lacking, something seemed different. But what was lacking, what was different, I asked myself, listening to the talk?”

The androgynous mind

The balance between feminist ideas and aesthetics