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The use of Irony in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

Emerging from a series of lectures given at two women's colleges in the late 1920s, Virginia Woolf's essay, *A Room of One's Own* stands as a seminal work in feminist literary criticism. Set against the backdrop of the gender-stratified nineteenth-century society, Woolf seeks to create space for the development of female-authored literature. Central to her approach is the strategic deployment of verbal and situational irony—subversive tools challenging prevailing norms and fostering a tradition of female writing. This essay explores the nuanced role of ironic language and narrative structure in Woolf's work, exploring how these tools are used to critique the societal constraints placed upon women, and how they contribute to the formation of a distinctive tradition in female literature. In her essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf utilizes the subversive power of verbal and situational irony through her use of narrative language and structure to critique and challenge gendered societal norms, while laying the foundation for a unique tradition of female-authored literature that transcends historical constraints of the patriarchal literary tradition.

A Room of One's Own was published in the year 1929, a time when “most people believed that woman was both finer and weaker than man” (Stankiewicz, 49). The consensus understood that women were to be protected from the rough world, that they were more spiritual than men yet less intellectual, and that they were more moral yet in less control of that very

morality (49). It's important to acknowledge how context plays a very large role in the inner workings of Woolf's ironic narrative. It is because of the distinct differences in gender roles between men and women of the nineteenth century that this narrative structure works. The text can read as ironic in many cases, because of the different interpretations that men and women would have of the text based on societal conventions of gender and the drastic differences in the lived experiences of men and women. Woolf plays into and calls upon the absurdity of this notion of women as less capable beings, by using both verbal and situational irony to create a barrier between the men and women reading her text. Verbal Irony often evokes emotional responses, such as amusement, empathy, or even frustration. In literature, irony implies that on the figurative level of the author's presentation of a subject, the meaning is opposite to what is presented on the literal level (Kitch, 8). By demanding readers to question their emotional understanding of the texts' tone, Woolf ensures that her critique goes beyond a purely intellectual exercise and requires an emotional analysis of the text to understand the irony in the figurative meanings hidden behind the literal plot and narrative. In the introduction of her essay, Woolf explains that it's impossible to conclude the topics of women and fiction because women's fiction hasn't been able to flourish due to the societal circumstances that don't allow space for women to write. Referencing the title, she is literally saying that "a woman must have money and a room of her own to write fiction" (Woolf, 3) but figuratively she is implying that women do not have this space available to them. The implications of this ironic statement challenge the societal norm that limits women to the domestic sphere of society and their access to academic spaces or the pursuit of higher education.

It is also important to note that in the introduction of the text, Woolf discusses her challenges with discussing the topic of women and fiction, yet throughout the nineteenth-century women are restricted from obtaining the required resources for writing fiction. This is yet another layer within the structure of the narrative that contributes to the ironic tone and allows for the tools of verbal and situational irony to be employed which challenge the nineteenth-century social conventions relating to gender. Women are not able to write about their lived experiences and perspectives on the world that surrounds them, yet they are expected to understand and express an understanding of where they fit in the world. What's even more challenging than being restricted from any means of writing fiction, is that the men who can write fiction because of the resources made naturally available to them by a patriarchal society use writing to express emotions and sentiments that would be considered 'feminine' (Kitch, 10). As a result of the historically patriarchal structure of Western society, the male voice is the dominant one. This voice was used to create the female archetype that is only capable of "emotion, sentiment, and domestic virtue in the private domain" (10), yet this female archetype is actually a "projection of male emotional 'leftovers'" (10). Here, Kitch is explaining the fact that the conventions of feminine characteristics are actually characteristics of men that they decided were of lesser value than the ones they attributed to themselves, like strength, honour, and intellect. This understanding of literary traditions concerning gender highlights the strength of Woolf's narrative structure that allows authentic feminine thoughts and feelings to thrive in a literary structure that is specifically made to express the male literary tradition.

Another aspect that plays into the ironic tone of the narrative is the use of situational irony. In literature, this is a tool that allows the reader to know something about another character

or the development of the plot, that the characters within the text are not aware of. In the case of this essay, much of the text is written so that only female readers would be able to fully grasp the implied meanings, and male readers would be left in delusion (Kitch, 8). In Woolf's aforementioned statement that "a woman must have money and a room of her own to write fiction" (3), it is the female readers who are intended to receive the implicated message behind the literal meaning of the need for a room of one's own. This is significant because the literary tool of irony is not only being used to challenge gender roles of the nineteenth century by claiming that women are capable of writing notable literature if given the space for it, but to also have an exclusive conversation between women alone and amplify the resistance of the hegemonic power of the patriarchal society. This then creates an overarching effect of irony wherein the male readers would be left out of the loop of intellectual conversation, which is the opposite of the societal conventions of the nineteenth century. Woolf cleverly and strategically layers verbal and situational irony using the language and structure of the text, to amplify her presence as a female writer who is creating traditions for women's literature. In Kathleen Wall's article, *Frame Narratives and Unresolved Contradictions in Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own"* she discusses this exact layered narrative structure that illustrates "the capacity of narrative structures to express what cannot literally be said" (Wall, 187). Through the narrative structure of *A Room of One's Own* which is embedded with an ironic tone, Woolf demonstrates how the silent discourse surrounding the oppression and socially imposed limitations of women can be communicated by structuring man-made language in a feminine way. This is not to say that the writings of Woolf are 'feminine' by the colloquial use of the word implying that her writing is to be associated with conventionally feminine traits. This statement is instead meant to

emphasize the weight of Woolf's work in opening up a space for women to write about their experiences and perspectives with a language that was created by men for men to use. The requirement of an emotional analysis of the text to reach the figurative implied meaning of the literal text also speaks to this point, as women of the nineteenth century are typically seen as the more emotionally driven gender, and men, the intellectually driven.

In the second chapter of the essay, Woolf searches through the library to find the truth about women and fiction. While she does not feel as though she has successfully obtained any definition of woman's fiction, her journey within the library leads to many insights into man's inner workings of the mind. Again, this implied message is hidden underneath the literal text, employing both verbal and situational irony together to create this narrative effect. During her time at the library, Woolf discovers that of the ample number of books that are written by women, most of them, if not all, are written by men. There are numerous quotes from various texts that make generalized claims about the characteristics, capabilities, and roles of women, but Woolf leaves her study space thinking that "one might as well have left their books unopened" (Woolf, 12). This one sentence consolidates a whole new meaning to the entire paragraph before it. With this one sentence, Woolf can take all of the information that was discovered in her study of men's writing, and invalidate that same information through the use of irony. The text is telling the reader that she did not find her answers in the books that she picked out, but figuratively the weight that the sentence carries as coming from a female writer invalidates the works of many male-authored works and amplifies the theme of the resistance of patriarchal power.

This is also a strategic way of contributing to the ironic and humorous tone of the narrative that also seeks to create a larger space for women's literary traditions. Throughout the elaborate description of the information that Woolf acquired in her attempted studies of women, Woolf manages to speak a lot more about the men who wrote the texts rather than the women they were attempting to describe. One of the key points that is communicated in this part of her essay is man's obsession with women, almost as if they were an animal to be studied and researched (Woolf, 23). There is a contradiction between men's confident notion that women are inherently less intellectually inclined than men and their incessant need to prove it to other men by writing what seems to be an endless slew of literary works about just how supposedly incapable women can prove to be. At a later point in the text, she points out that "men's books are full of men" (15), emphasizing the patriarchal literacy canon and its exclusion of female voices. In this second chapter of the text, it is made clear that men write of men and women, but women write of neither. This also contributes to that hidden or exclusive narrative that is happening between Woolf and her female readers, as there is an underlying question of why men are spending so much time writing about the 'inferior woman' if they are already burdened with being the only intellectually capable species. The act of writing in a way which allows female readers to feel like they belong to the community of readers also plays into the makings of female writing traditions, suggesting that the traditions should consider both the women writing the literature, as well as those reading it.

The layer of situational irony that allows the female audience to make a direct connection with Woolf through the implicated meanings of the narrative is further highlighted by her references to foods. Throughout the nineteenth century, women were limited to the domestic

sphere where they would be watching over children, taking care of the household, and preparing meals for the family. Woolf cleverly makes note of the food that she encounters on several occasions to contribute to this side conversation that is happening between herself and her female readers. The first example is from chapter one when Woolf describes in extreme detail just how delicious and meticulously crafted their lunch was. It “began with soles, sunk in a deep dish over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream” (7), and ends with Woolf feeling at peace with the world, almost in a state of sublime as she reminisces over trivial grudges and grievances that once took the place of this newfound happiness. This attention that is placed upon the food works towards the idea that the work that women do is any less significant than that of men, even if they may be in different fields. The inclusion of this elaborate description also contributes to the theme of overthrowing the patriarchal standards and expectations that are often perpetuated in male-authored literature to continue to attach devalue to women. This is further highlighted by Kitch when she discusses how “domestic space ... tends to be offstage all together” (11). Here we can see that in all forms of nineteenth-century literature, it is proactive to exclude the mundane aspects of the role placed upon women, which emphasizes Woolf’s point in acknowledging the preparation of food throughout her essay. This also adds another aspect to the traditions of female literature that is being created by Woolf through the narrative, by pointing out aspects of the domestic sphere as a more feminine approach to writing. Another example of Woolf’s reference to food is when she states that “one cannot think well, love well, sleep well if one has not dined well” (17), wherein she is once again acknowledging the importance of the work that women do within the domestic sphere. This phrase too, has an underlying message to the female audience that must be implied beyond its

literal meaning, that highlights the irony in women supporting men in their success only to be treated as burdensome rather than equally responsible for their successes.

The reading of Woolf's narrative as completely and intentionally embedded in ironic statements and structure can be seen as extreme. Some scholars have challenged this idea that Woolf's work is a seminal work in feminist literary criticism, however, it is a circular debate because when the supposed contradictions are read under the pre-text of literary irony, they no longer seem so contradictory. One of these circumstances is in chapter six when Woolf "asserts that it is 'fatal' to think of one's sex" (Wall, 185) yet according to Wall, proceeds to do so for the first two chapters. While it is true that Woolf spends a great deal of the text discussing women as described by men, and the lack of literature written about men by women, as mentioned before it is done in a way that challenges the gender-based constraints of the nineteenth century rather than perpetuating them. Also, in chapter six when she does assert the aforementioned, she goes on to further explain that "it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple" (Woolf, 53) because of the conscious bias that comes with it. This explains Woolf's notion that it isn't the thinking of one's sex that emphasizes fatality in writing, but it is being a human embedded within a gendered society that proves to be problematic.

Virginia Woolf's seminal work, *A Room of One's Own*, serves as a pioneering piece in feminist literary criticism by employing verbal and situational irony to critique and challenge the gendered societal norms of the nineteenth century. Published in 1929, the essay strategically utilizes irony to create a narrative barrier between male and female readers, encouraging emotional analysis and transcending mere intellectual engagement. Woolf's exploration of gender roles, financial independence, and literary criticism exposes and undermines societal constraints

on women, fostering the development of a distinctive tradition in female-authored literature. The essay's exclusive narrative for female readers, coupled with references to food, challenges patriarchal standards and contributes to a feminine approach within the traditions of female literature. Despite scholarly debates about the extent of irony, *A Room of One's Own* stands as a powerful testament to Woolf's skillful use of irony, shaping feminist literary discourse and laying the groundwork for a unique tradition in female writing.

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