

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 30
Feminism and Literature II: Woolf and de Beauvoir

Hello and welcome again to this lecture series on Literary Theory. As you know we are in the middle of the section discussing feminism and its relation to literary studies. And in our previous lecture we have tried to fix a tentative definition of the term feminism, and we have then discuss the life and works of one of the major early modern feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. In today's lecture we will discuss two more important theories of the feminist tradition Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir and we will start with Virginia Woolf.

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Virginia Woolf
(1882 - 1941)



Source: Wikipedia

Her dates are 1882 to 1941, and Woolf was born in London, in a family which had with strong literary and artistic connections.

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Leslie Stephen
(1832 - 1904)



Source: www.english-heritage.org.uk

So, her father Leslie Stephen was a literary critic journalist and well known editor during his time. And Woolf's mother's Aunt Julia Margaret Cameron was one of the greatest portrait photographers of the 19th century.

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Julia Margaret Cameron
(1815 - 1879)



Source: [Encyclopedia Britannica](https://www.britannica.com)

Woolf grew up in a family which included a large number of siblings, not only the children of her parents but her half brothers and half sisters as well who are children of Leslie Stephen and his wife from there early marriages. And it is now known that unfortunately as a child Woolf was sexually abused by some of her half brothers, and a

number of Woolf's biographers have connected this sexual abuse in her early years with her little mental health issues.

However, the dark shadow of sexual abuse aside. Woolf's childhood was spent in an intellectually invigorating atmosphere. As a young woman Woolf was an integral part of what is referred to as the Bloomsbury group or the Bloomsbury set which was a circle of friends and associates, and included people like the economist John Maynard Keynes, the literary critic Leonard Woolf, the novelist E. M. Forster and the biographer Lytton Strachey. Woolf's future husband the author and publisher Leonard Woolf was also part of this bohemian circle, and they together during the first half of the 20th century represented the British intellectual (Refer Time: 03:24).

Today Woolf is primarily remembered as a novelist who works like *Masters Galloway* or *To the Lighthouse*, transforms the ship of modern British fiction. But apart from these novels Woolf also wrote a number of very important non-fictional works which are central to the feminist tradition of the 20th century they are at the core of the feminist movement that define the 20th century.

In a lecture today we are going to focus on one of these non-fictional works titled, "A Room of One's Own", which was initially delivered as two separate lectures in the University of Cambridge and then woven together and published in the year 1929.

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A Room of One's Own (1929)

But before moving on to explore this particular work I would like to briefly talk about Woolf's resistance to the term feminism.

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Three Guineas (1938)

In her book link essay, "Three Guineas" which is also another very important non-fictional work that Woolf wrote, she argues that feminism is a disparaging term that was forced upon individuals in the history who tried to speak on the behalf of women's rights.

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Woolf considers feminism to be a dated word which needs to be "destroyed" because, according to her, it was "a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day".

And also it is very interesting to note that in *Three Guineas*, Woolf considers feminism to be a dated term which needs to be quote unquote destroyed because as she explains, it was quote of “a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day.”

In any case irrespective of Woolf’s resentment towards the word feminism her works can be read and indeed has been read as among the most impassioned pleas for women’s right, which as per the definition that we are using or lectures mixer a feminist per excellence.

So, now let us come to the text a room of one’s own. We had ended a previous lecture you remember on Mary Wollstonecraft by discussing how she (Refer Time: 05:58) the problems, as well as the possibilities of women emerging on the socio political stage as rational agents, who were at par with men. In a Woolf’s text the focus is much narrower and it deals with the question “How can women write fiction?”

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“How can women write fiction?”

Yet this very specific question leads Woolf to explore the norms and limitations of the patriarchal society at large, which gives her work a scope that is almost as broad as Wollstonecraft a vindication of the rights of women.

Woolf’s thesis is that and I quote “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” This statement which occurs at the very beginning of Woolf’s text the simple in its freezing actually hides a rather revolutionary argument.

In our discussion of Wollstonecraft life we had seen how a very limited number of jobs were open to respectable women in the 18th century British society. And about the century and half when Virginia Woolf was writing *A Room of One's Own* not much had changed. Women could still not be gainfully employed which forced them forever to be at the mercy of men as far as financial assistance was concerned. Woolf argues that having an income of 500 pounds a year would completely change this scenario for women. It would free them from the humiliation of having to do those union jobs which allow them to earn but only appetent and this will result in a see change in the way women carry themselves within the society.

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Woolf argues, whereas now women have to do “work one did not wish to do, and to do it like a slave, flattering and fawning”, with an access to £500 there will be a complete change in temper:

“No force in the world can take from me my five hundred pounds. Food, house and clothing are mine forever. Therefore not merely do effort and labour cease, but also hatred and bitterness. I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me. So imperceptibly I found myself adopting a new attitude towards the other half of the human race.”

So, where as now they have to work quote, unquote, they have to do things which one did not wish to do, and to do it like a slave flattering and fawning with an access to 500 pounds a year, there will be a complete change in temper.

To quote Woolf’s own words, “No force in the world can take from me my five hundred pounds. Food, housing and clothing are mine forever. Therefore, not nearly do effort and labour cease, but also hatred and bitterness. I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me. So, imperceptibly I found myself adopting a new attitude towards the other half of the human race.”

Having a room of one’s own just like having money of her own brings for the women a sense of freedom. This is because it helps her retire, even if temporarily from the routine

of domestic chores. In other words a room of one's own helps a woman to create a world of her own, and to escape the role of being merely an angel of the house that is determined for her by the patriarchy.

So, in this text the question that Woolf takes up as to why there is so little great literature quote unquote great literature written by women compared to that written by men is actually similar to the question of why women or less rational than men that was taken up by Wollstonecraft. And like Wollstonecraft, Woolf too argues that those, such differences might be true on the surface, they are caused not by any inherent shortcomings on the part of the women. Rather they are the result of the lack of equal treatment and the lack of opportunity that a woman experiences within the patriarchal society. And to exemplify this point Woolf presents brilliant portrayal of a fictional character named Judith, who she imagines to be the sister of at the most celebrated English author of all times William Shakespeare.

Now, to make this imaginative portrayal of Judith effective Woolf first presents a brief sketch of William Shakespeare's life. Woolf narrates how the famous playwright being born as a male child in a well to do family was given formal education, which meant that he went to school, he learnt Latin, he learnt classical literature, he also learnt elements of grammar and logic. And clearly such a formal training contributed heavily towards his subsequent development as a playwright.

As a young boy William Shakespeare also had the necessary liberty to develop wild habits like poaching rabbits and shooting deer. And he also had the gumption to marry a girl of his own choice, and marry at a time which suited him. Later when William Shakespeare ended up in London he wanted to join the theater, and he was able to fulfill this wish by initially holding horses at the stage door and then getting admission inside the theatre where he got a job. And since then there was no looking back for him.

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“[He] became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practising his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen.”

In Woolf’s words, “He became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practicing his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen.” This life of the celebrated William Shakespeare is used by Woolf to act as a foil to her depiction of the imaginary history of Judith.

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Judith is introduced as Shakespeare’s “wonderfully gifted sister”.

Judith is introduced as Shakespeare’s quote unquote “wonderfully gifted sister.” And this phrase wonderfully gifted sister is important because the point that Woolf is trying to

drive home here is that even if a woman is inherently as talented as man within the patriarchal society she cannot be as successful as a man.

Now, being a girl child, Judith would not have been sent to any school which meant that she would not have had any knowledge of grammar, let alone any exposure to classical literature. And even if she was adventurous as her brother she would have been asked to stay at home, and perhaps if out of curiosity she would pick one of her brother's books and start reading it. Woolf says and I quote, her parents would come in and tell her to mend the stocking or mind the store and not moon about with books and peoples.

Now, though when compared to the brain of William Shakespeare this might look like cruelty. Woolf is careful to point out that her parents would treat Judith like this, not because they felt any sense of hatred towards her. On the contrary Woolf argues that they might even have been excessively concerned, excessively loving towards their daughter. The treatment that Judith receives as a child would rather be determined by the fact that is a girl, who is destined to be a woman and who like all respectable women of her time would be expected to perform domestic chores, rather than concern herself with books and papers. So, the way her parents would treat her was a reflection of the social norms rather than any personal hatred that they have towards their daughter.

Now, Woolf says that eventually Judith parents decide to get her married and when she protests she says that she does not want to get married, her father first beats her up and then begs her with tears that she should not hurt him, not shame him in this matter of her marriage. Here again note that within the framework of patriarchal society such an attitude towards Judith does not reflect hatred on the father's part but rather love and excessive concern for the daughters future. Judith who loves her father as much as he loves her is therefore, quote in a dilemma. Yet she decides to allow her in it talent to flourish and rather than marry and settle down as a wife she decides to run away to London.

So, in London just like her brother Judith also visited theatre and she also asks for a job there, but being a woman she is denied entry, she is denied a job. And this is because we will have to remember that in Shakespearean, England all actors including those who played women's parts were male. So, Judith is laughed at and humiliated, and not only does she not get a job, being a woman she is also unable to do simple things like for

instance go to a tavern alone, and ask for dinner or to roam around in the street in the middle of the night.

Now, in this state of destitution, homeless, without access to proper food, a theatre person takes pity on Judith but he ends up sexually exploiting her, and leaving her when she becomes pregnant. Woolf says that this imaginary figure of Judith kills herself on a winter night, and her body is now buried at a cross road in London and buses now pass over it. Yet nobody knows about Judith, who was this wonderfully gifted sister of William Shakespeare.

Now, at one level this story is very disturbing because it is a tale of how a woman might literally be driven to kill herself by the expectations and parochialism of a patriarchal society. But at another level the story sets the agenda for feminist literary theory, because just like Woolf brings a focus on to the invisible Judith that nobody knows of nobody has heard of, and a person who is as talented as her brother William Shakespeare. So, the entire point of the story is not that Judith is a fictional character, the point of the story is even if Judith was real you would most probably not have known her as a playwright.

So, what Woolf does is she brings the focus on to this invisible spaces of female writers, and a large part of feminist literary criticism would also concerned itself with foregrounding the unknown, half gotten or marginalize women authors who have not been able to make it to the great canons of literature, simply because they are women. We will talk about this later in further details when we discuss gyno criticism in our next lecture. But today let us move on to another major feminist theorist of the 20th century Simone de Beauvoir.

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Simone de Beauvoir
(1908 - 1986)



Source: Aeon

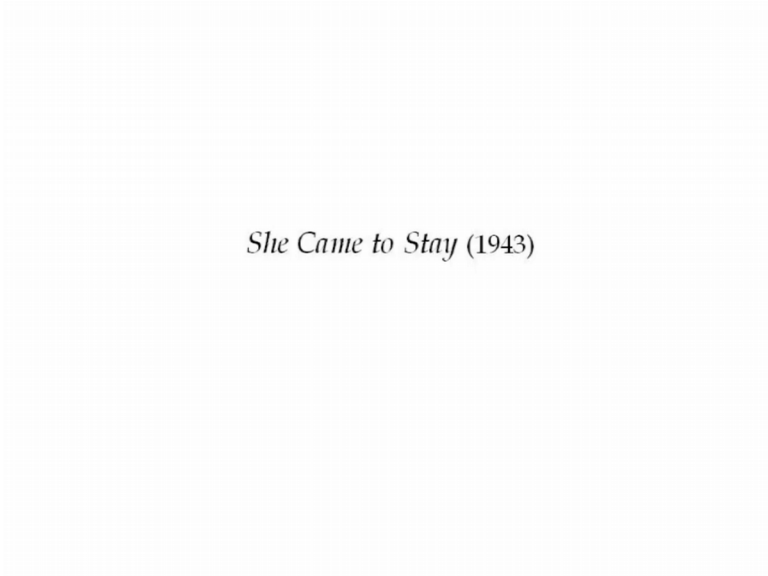
The Beauvoir dates are 1908 to 1986, and she is easily one of the most talented and multifaceted personalities of the 20th century western intellectual history. She was a novelist, she was a philosopher, a political activist, the travel writer and of course, the key figure who inaugurated what is known as a second wave of feminism.

But for along a she had been known primarily as the partner, simply as a partner of the French intellectual drop all (Refer Time: 20:14). This was of course, partly due to the fact that Beauvoir was a woman and as we have seen in course of these lectures, women are usually placed second in importance to men within patriarchal society. But this repetition of being just a shadow of search was also partly something of her own making because the Beauvoir herself categorized her own works as little more that elaboration of (Refer Time: 20:47) philosophy. Other were later generation of feminist surprise to decouple the Beauvoir as an intellectual from (Refer Time: 20:59), and they have to a large extent succeeded in establishing her reputation as a major intellectual figure of the 20th century by her own rights.

Now, the Beauvoir like a Woolf did receive a formal education and was in fact, the 9th woman to receive a degree from salon and the first woman to qualify the prestigious competitive examination of agriculture in philosophy. And (Refer Time: 21:35) accidentally stood first in that examination, and Simone de Beauvoir stood second, and this being second, the notion of standing second to a men would play a major role in how

Beauvoir would theorize about the condition of women we will see that. Between 1929 and 1943 de Beauvoir worked as a school teacher after which she economically sustained herself through her writings.

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She Came to Stay (1943)

Though de Beauvoir is primarily known outside France today as a philosopher, her first major publication was a novel titled, “She Came to Stay”, which was published in 1943 and in fact, it was as a novelist that she would receive one of the major awards of France the literary prize (Refer Time: 22:33) which was given for her 1954 fiction “The Mandarins”.

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The Mandarins (1954)

But undoubtedly the Beauvoir's most influential work was *Le Deuxieme Sexe* or *The Second Sex* which was published in 1949 and which acted as a trigger that unleashed the second wave of feminist movement.

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Beauvoir's most influential work was *Le Deuxième Sexe* or *The Second Sex*, which was published in 1949 and which acted as a trigger that unleashed the second-wave of feminist movement.

In the remaining time today our focus would therefore, be on this work and will try and understand some of the arguments that the Beauvoir mix in the second sex.

Now, this book the second sex is a text which has multiple layers and therefore, it is difficult to summarise or paraphrase it, but the main argument in that book is that women

within the patriarchal society is looked upon as and other of the man. That is to say whereas men are regarded as a norm women are regarded as some sort of a corrupt deviation from that norm, making them as a title change the second sex.

Now, this argument in itself is nothing new, we have in fact, already encountered this argument as far back as the late 18th century in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft a vindication of the rights of women. What is unique however, is the comprehensive way in which de Beauvoir elaborates this central feminist argument which references philosophy, references history, science, literature as well as the concrete day to day lived experiences of women.

The Beauvoir start her thesis by looking at the various explanations which are usually provided to justify women's position as the deviant other to the normal men and she first attacks the claim that women are quote unquote naturally different from men. Thus as we know it is often argued that nature made men and women as distinct and separate entities, and this is this argument is often used to justify their sexual as well as their gender which are supposedly inferior to that of men.

Now, de Beauvoir argues that there is nothing inherently natural in the sexual and gender distinction, because she says that there are one celled organisms in nature, there are harmful right species which procreate without any need for this sexual distinction. So, to label the othering of women as natural and as based on their sexual distinction is unsuitable, is as unsustainable rather because if it was natural then it would be a universally occurring phenomenon. She then goes on to attack that is goes of Freudian psychoanalysis which too provides an apparently natural reason for women's inferiority.

So, as we know from our earlier discussion for Freud the male child was taken as the norm and Freud's theory of the normal psychosexual development of the human being as articulated through the idea of the oedipal complex was predicated on the presence of the male penis. And since a girl child does not have a penis, Freud regarded the woman's body as a site of lack and he argued that their psychosexual development preceded via a much more convoluted and therefore, quote unquote unnatural root. De Beauvoir challenged this Freudian lens of looking at women as simply damaged men and question the psychoanalytic theory which defines identity almost entirely in terms of unconscious drives, and impulses, and largely neglects the role of individual choice for intense. And

even more importantly the role of social values and norms in shaping one's gender identity, and this is something that the Beauvoir is going to focus on.

Now, de Beauvoir also attacks the Marxist or rather more specifically the theory proposed by Ingles that women are treated as inferior because of the division of labour, which identifies men as breadwinners. Now, de Beauvoir would be affiliated to the Marxist philosophy in general, but here she picks up a difference with Ingles and she argues that this theory does not explain how such a division of labour at all came into place, and it is this that she then such on such how to explain in her text.

So, de Beauvoir argues that women's othering happened in the primitive human society because she was identified with the process of reproduction and procreation. Now, since this is at the core of de Beauvoir argument we will go over it slowly.

According to de Beauvoir sexual reproduction though important is looked upon as a repetition of the same, which is you vacuities in the whole of the animal world, all animals procreate and they repeat their sameness is through that procreation. For de Beauvoir human being as race from the very beginning valued progress over repetition.

So, in other words humans valued productive action which would help them surpass their own conditions of existence over reproduction which would merely help them sustain as race through the repetition of the same. This resulted in the original devaluation of women with in the society, because women were caught up in the cycles of reproduction and child bearing, and in contrast men could afford to be more adventurous, more outgoing and they became inventors who in order to increase their tribes resources to sustain life produced various things.

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In de Beauvoir's words:

"Because housework alone is compatible with the duties of motherhood, [the woman] is condemned to domestic labor, which locks her into repetition and immanence; day after day it repeats itself in identical form from century to century; it produces nothing new. Man's case is radically different. [...] to appropriate the world's treasures, he annexes the world itself. Through such actions he tests his own power; he posits ends and projects paths to them: he realizes himself as existent. To maintain himself, he creates; he spills over the present and opens up the future."

So, in de Beauvoir's own words, "Because housework alone is compatible with the duties of motherhood, the woman is condemned to domestic labour, which locks her into repetition and immanence; day after day it repeats itself in identical form from century to century it produces nothing new. Man's case is radically different; to appropriate the world's treasures he annexes the world itself. Through such action, through such actions he tests his own power; posits ends and projects paths to them: he realizes himself as existent. To maintain himself, he creates, he spills over the present and opens up the future."

De Beauvoir argues that it is because man is able to open up the future through his invention, through his productive activities that he establishes himself as the normative human being. The woman on the other hand had to keep away from this adventurous life but de Beauvoir calls quote unquote the absurd fertility and therefore, she becomes the second sex.

And this subservient status which is established in the primitive human tribe is then further continued and even confirmed as human society move towards the concept of private property and in that scenario women are reduced to the status of being property owned by one man or the other. De Beauvoir points out that the status of women as the other is constantly and consistently maintained within the society through constant mythologizing.

Now, this means that either in the form of religious course or in the form of literature we are constantly fed with images of women either as goddesses or as dangerous sexual temptresses. And in both the cases the images of women are constructed as being images that are beyond the normal human being and in both the cases the images are actually projections of men's own fears and desires and wishes. Which means that, even when she is being held as a goddess a woman is being defined by men, by their wishes, and their desires, their fears.

And if you want to understand how frustrating this situation can be for a woman I would suggest to watch Satyajit Ray's 1950 film *Debi*, literally the goddess which depicts the horrific process of defecation of a woman by a patriarch.

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Satyajit Ray's film *Debi* (1960)

Anyway coming back to de Beauvoir in the second sex, she supplements these abstract theoretical arguments about the status of the women as the other by providing a narration about the concrete life experiences of women within the patriarchal society. And by showing how these life experiences are affected by the consistent process of devaluation of women within the society.

And de Beauvoir argues that this process actually starts from the very childhood when the members of the family in particular and the society in general they try to groom the girl child as a woman, and teach her to be quote unquote feminine. This process of becoming feminine involves training the girl in domestic chores which fixes for her a

particular kind of roll within the society. It also involve alienating the girls from their own growing bodies by associating the notion of shame with female sexual desire and with puberty. A dosage of literature like Cinderella or the sleeping beauty teaches the girl to be submissive in love, and to believe that their redemption lies in the arrival of some prince charming.

And when the promised man arrives to quote unquote reading the women, through marriage it proves to be an ambiguous affair for her. Because at one level it does give the women financial stability, but at another level it also traps her in an unequal relation where she is expected to be guided by her husband, to serve her husband, and to connect with the wider world through him.

De Beauvoir points out that this lack of personal freedom within marriage has in turn dangerous consequences for the women's identity as a mother, because she then projects her marital frustrations on to her relations with her own children. And also de Beauvoir points out that a women's desired to gain agency which is usually frustrated within the marital relationship, within the relationship that she has with her husband manifests itself through an excessive attempt to control her children, which again in itself is rather unhealthy.

But then what does de Beauvoir suggest? How should women escape this trap of inferiority, this trap of being relegated to the second sex? De Beauvoir points out that women during her time has definitely for more rights and privileges then what they had earlier. But she also argues that even if one takes all of these rights together, they cannot really emancipate a woman until and unless she also has economic autonomy.

So, in other words though we see women gaining a lot of (Refer Time: 37:19) liberties in today's world, the key factor to watch out for according to de Beauvoir is women's participation in the productive workforce as fully paid workers. And here we see that in most countries the ratio of working men to working women is abysmally low, and even when we see women being incorporated within the workforce we know that their status as second sex is still maintain there, they are for instance paid less, often they are paid less to perform the same work as their male colleagues.

De Beauvoir solution therefore, is at women should escape from the trap of their quote unquote absurd fertility and move from merely performing reproductive functions in the

society to performing more and more productive roles. Yet de Beauvoir also acknowledges that this is a difficult move, because it is regarded in the patriarchal society as undermining a woman's femininity which usually defines her within the society. However de Beauvoir stresses that this is a move that is important and that must be accomplished in order for the men and the women to meet as equals for the rain of freedom to triumph in society, these are her words. And for the two sexes to meet not as battling counterparts, but rather as pairs who come together to quote unquote unequivocally a form there brotherhood.

So, with this we end lecture today. We will carry forward our discussion on feminism and literary studies in the next lecture.

Thank you.