

2015

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Recommended Citation

Doolittle, Elizabeth R. (2015) "Virginia Woolf's Views on the Necessity of Education for Girls," *Papers & Publications: Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/papersandpubs/vol4/iss1/7>

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Virginia Woolf's Views on the Necessity of Education for Girls

Acknowledgments

"One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen, can change the world." -Malala Yousafzai Thank you to Judith Burdan, Connie St. Clair, Sally Blake, and my mother, Mindy Doolittle.

The turn of the twentieth century was an exciting time to be alive. The Industrial Revolution paved the way for smaller revolutions around the world, both political and social. One such revolution was the dawn of first wave Feminism, best known for the women's suffrage movements in the United States and the United Kingdom and for its important influences in the field of education. This educational shift occurred on the heels of child labor laws; with children no longer allowed to spend so much of their time working, they had a large amount of newly freed time. Kids filled the streets with childish mayhem. Thus, public schooling was revolutionized and improved drastically to get them off the streets. It granted access to a new and improved type of education that provided the twentieth century with the type of innovations that set record highs in patents and copyrights. It is to this period that the world owes many of the inventions that people use every day like cars, airplanes, light bulbs, and multitudes of medical equipment. This increase in educational quality did incredible things for society; however, one remnant of the old educational system, the Liberal education derived from Greek tradition, remained: the majority of students were male (Szczepaniak 1).

Unequal access to education for women has existed nearly as long as society itself with its roots in most major religions, enforced by cultures worldwide, and its origins reaching as far back as the Hellenistic Greeks (Szczepaniak 1). There were, however, a lucky select group of young women who had access to quality education and were able to elevate themselves above their circumstances to advocate for the equal education of girls; Virginia Woolf was one of them.

Woolf was born in 1882 to an elite, intellectual family in London. Her father was an author and historian, and Woolf and her siblings were fortunate enough to be self-educated with access to their father's library when they were young. What she read inspired her to take up the pen, and her first novel, *The Voyage Out* was published in 1915. Her work was very much influenced by the modernist tradition during and following the First World War. Woolf and her contemporaries, such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, questioned everything in society. This tendency to deconstruct and investigate is reflected in the critical nature of Woolf's works, especially regarding her assertion on the necessity of education for girls. Her short work *A Room of One's Own* explores this claim: in order for women to lead fulfilling and self-actualizing lives, they must have equal access to the same quality education that men receive. Education was very important to Woolf, and she was very aware of how privileged she was to be educated. She did not take her fortunate upbringing for granted but used it through her works to provide apt investigation and analysis of the education of girls.

The theme of educational equality can be observed throughout much of Woolf's work in non-fiction pieces like "Women Novelists," "Women and Fiction," and *Three Guineas* as well as in fictional pieces like *The Voyage Out* and *To the Lighthouse*. While not all of Woolf's female characters are formally educated, they are all concerned with the existential questions of life rather than the traditional roles and "trifles" of women, such characters as Rachel in *The Voyage Out* and Lily in *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf's main characters transcend the apparent limitations of their sex just as Woolf herself does in her non-fictional works. Woolf's unique circumstances qualify her to speak on the subject of educational equality for girls, and her contributions to this issue are paramount.

Woolf forms the foundation of her assertion that women must have access to education equal to that of a man in what is arguably her most important and undeniably her most well-known work of non-fiction, *A Room of One's Own*. The central argument of this piece is for women to create fiction, they must have money and a room of their own, but women have not been afforded these advantages. In her non-fiction, Woolf discusses writing fiction and how it

represents the ability to transcend oppressive ideologies like the patriarchal structure that has kept women from writing throughout history. Woolf links fiction and the ability to write it to access to education. For Woolf, writing fiction requires being educated, so one can substitute the concept of education for fiction when it is encountered in Woolf's writing. Once this substitution is made, Woolf's argument for the education of women becomes much clearer. Woolf explains that access to equal education and opportunities for women would result in "...rational discourse. No need to hurry. No need of sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself" (Woolf 14). If women are given access to education equal to that of men in a system that viewed both sexes as equals, they can lead lives in which they are free of pretention and able to truly be themselves. Woolf continues: "She had to work on equal terms with men. The importance of that fact outweighs anything that she actually wrote . . . for here begins the freedom of the mind" (82). Woolf's argument is clear: for women to lead a life marked by intellectual freedom, they must be educated like a man in a system that values both sexes equally. In order for women to be educated in a way that will free their minds and lives, the educational system must be deconstructed and rebuilt upon different principles.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf provides historical insight into girls' education over time, focusing on the education of women in England. At the start of her writing, she describes being turned away from the library of a college because of her sex, saying: "I must have opened it, for instantly ... barring the way... a depreciating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction" (9). Frustrated by this denial, Woolf continues with an investigation of how women were educated in the past. She asserts that the disadvantages faced by women and their traditional exclusion from formal education began with a flawed idea: "There was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually" (70). The debate over whether or not women are even capable of being educated kept them away from it for thousands of years as it also emphasized the idea that house and family work were women's work. Woolf explains that "making a fortune and bearing thirteen children – no human being could stand it. . . . To earn money was impossible for them . . . had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned... it would have been their husband's property- . . . To raise bare walls out of bare earth was the utmost they could do" (28-9). Busied by the obligations of home and family life, women have no time left to be educated.

Woolf, however, was freed of this oppressive ideology by living vicariously through her role model, the most independent woman she knew. She describes this influence saying, "My aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky" (50). Rather than being oppressed, Woolf's aunt frees her to look at the sky and all the possibilities in her life instead of at a husband and family, ultimately avoiding the traps created by patriarchal structures.

It is at this point that Woolf is able to analyze the historical education of women. She states, "I am not sure how they were educated; whether they were taught to write; whether they had sitting rooms to themselves; how many women had children before they were twenty-one . . ." (59). Woolf goes on to describe the fictional Judith Shakespeare, sister to the brilliant William Shakespeare, and explains how this fictional sister's sex kept her from writing masterpieces like her brother's. She describes Judith Shakespeare as her brother's equal in every way but oppressed by the expectations of her parents and the society in which she lived. Eventually

forced into marriage, she runs away and tries to work but is instead used by men in her field, becomes pregnant, and kills herself (Woolf 60-2). Here Woolf illustrates the rarity of education for women in England, implying that this circumstance is universal worldwide. She establishes in *Three Guineas* that women more often received a “not-paid for education” from the school of life and experience rather than a formal education (266).

Barry Turner, the author of *Equality for Some: The Story of Girls' Education*, elaborates saying, “Traditionally Western civilization has distrusted and discouraged clever women . . . [after the] 1870 Act. In the elementary schools, girls were often treated harshly and suffered uninspired teaching on a narrow curriculum”(7). Eventually broader curriculum developed and more groups of women were included. However, critic Robin Hayes provides further analysis: “Woolf realized that formal education in its existing condition was not the answer. It had been well funded and had educated men for over 600 years, yet oppression, discrimination and war still existed” (Hayes 84-5). Woolf’s solution to this continual failure is to remove the harmful ideology from education: to take education from being patriarchal to being “ungendered” (Hayes 116).

Woolf recognizes that women are as curious, clever, and creative as men yet are bound by societal expectations of patriarchal ideology. Thus, they are not able to lead fully self-actualizing and fulfilling lives. In Victorian England, the woman in the house referred to by Woolf as the Angel in the House in *A Room of One's Own* is required by an elaborate patriarchal code to always put others above herself and exist solely for the purpose of inflating men’s egos (45-7). Woolf points out that while this position is one of great power, it derives its power through indirect influence and cannot convey the true desires and opinions of women. Describing the oppressive nature of marriage and family life to the mind of the female intellectual, she concludes:

. . . To have lived a free life . . . would have meant for a woman . . . nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her. Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed... That woman... was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself. All the conditions of her life... were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain. (64-6)

Woolf further illustrates the oppressive nature of marriage and familial obligation in “Women and Fiction,” saying, “. . . a woman was liable, as she was in the fifteenth century, to be beaten and flung about the room if she did not marry the man of her parents’ choice” (45). As Woolf continues, she notes an important shift that occurs in the latter half of the nineteenth century and continues through 1920: “The change... has turned the English woman . . . to a voter, a wage-earner, a responsible citizen . . . they are intellectual, they are political” (50). Woolf suggests that this developing elevation of the status of women will continue in the future. Woolf views this education (revolutionized and changed) as a vehicle for change, which she strongly supports. However, critics note that school is the site of a gendered struggle because of the tension between what schools are and what they should be. Woolf sees traditional education as an obstacle for both men and women. She has a vision for emancipatory education (Hayes 27). Woolf is optimistic about the future of women’s education, its ability to free women (and men), and its power to act as a catalyst for world peace as long as the educational establishment undergoes fundamental changes to remove the harmful influence of patriarchal ideology, which Woolf suggests is the primary cause of war and conflict (Hayes, 43, 114).

In her later work *Three Guineas*, Woolf takes a step further the idea she developed about educational equality earlier in her career with *A Room of One's Own*. Instead of arguing only for

educational equality, in *Three Guineas* Woolf argues for a dismantling of the existing educational system and for its replacement with a more egalitarian system that would allow women the possibility for as much success as men were previously afforded in the traditional liberal education. Woolf argues that the institution of education must be reformed because the system in existence is an extension of patriarchal social structures that glorified violence and explicitly taught men how to engage in war. So when Woolf is asked how to prevent war, she looks to the system that perpetrates this status quo. Woolf posits that “the most effective way in which we can help you through education to prevent war is to subscribe as generously as possible to the colleges for the daughters of educated men . . . by so doing we are making a positive contribution to the prevention of war” (204-8). Woolf suggests that a more educated populous will stand up against war, especially women educated outside of the patriarchal education system that promotes violence and conflict (260).

Woolf advocates for the education of all women, regardless of color or class, and “looks critically at the education men have had, and finds serious flaws with it, ultimately concluding that it has been a dismal failure” (Hayes, 13). Woolf ponders this failure and finds that there must be some fundamental flaw with formal education, which she concludes is patriarchy (Hayes 1). Woolf does not want women to receive the same failed education of men but desires a radical shift that not only accommodates women but allows them to flourish. The traditional liberal education derived from Greek tradition, “does not pay particular attention to the lives of women . . . does not allow women to question the accuracy of their experience.” (Szczepaniak 267). Woolf’s mounting dissatisfaction is evident in *Three Guineas*. She writes:

. . . burn the old college to the ground. Set fire to the old hypocrisies. . . . And let the daughters of educated men dance round the fire and heap armful upon armful of dead leaves upon the flames. And let their mothers lean from the upper windows and cry, “Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done with this ‘education!’” (202-3).

When discussing the reform that she poses for the future of education, Woolf suggests that there needs to be a change in who is teaching. She says, “[In] The new college . . . the teachers should be drawn from the good livers as well as the good thinkers” (200). Woolf rejects the traditional structure of liberal education derived from the education provided to young men in ancient Greece and favors instead a more egalitarian system that places women on equal footing with men so that by starting off in the same place, they have equal opportunities for success in life.

One of Woolf’s closest contemporaries throughout her career was noted feminist and existential theorist Simone de Beauvoir. In her paramount work *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir expresses a similar view to that of Woolf’s on the education of women. In the last chapter of *The Second Sex*, titled “The Independent Woman,” Beauvoir states: “To be a complete individual, equal to man, woman has to have access to the male world” (725). She discusses educational inequality and comes to the conclusion that women must receive equal education to men in order to lead the type of self-actualizing and fulfilling lives that Woolf describes. Beauvoir continues, “. . . on the whole, those who begin on an equal footing with equal chances arrive at approximately the same standard of living . . .” (737). Like Woolf, Beauvoir sees education as the portal through which women are able to fully experience the world. While Woolf comments on her aunt providing her with a view of the sky and all the possibilities available to her in life, Beauvoir remarks, “The restrictions that education and custom impose on woman limit her grasp of the universe . . . the spirit with all its riches must project itself in an empty sky that is its to fill” (748-9). Woolf and Beauvoir share similar views also concerning professions for women, with Beauvoir stating very similarly to Woolf that “women raised and educated exactly like men

would work under the same conditions and for the same salaries” (760). The type of freedom available to women through education is the same type of self-actualization and fulfillment for women described by Woolf. For Beauvoir, the ability to work and earn wages represents the paramount of freedom for women, which both writers say can only be obtained through equal education.

Critics have made similar observations about the state of education for women. Marta Szczepaniak notes in her article “Liberalism and Feminism in Education,” that “education is one of the factors that gives women an opportunity to escape from the gender roles assigned to them, and it provides them with appropriate tools indispensable for living autonomously with freedom of choice” (268). This argument is similar to that of Woolf’s views expressed throughout her fiction and non-fiction, but also stresses the modification of educational tradition in order to accommodate women: “. . . There is inequality for women in... education as it supports patriarchy... policy and practice in education must be stressed which diminish inequity and inequality... women should be encouraged to participate and establish their priorities in all educational groups” (268). Szczepaniak’s assertion that the state of the educational establishment at present does not effectively accommodate the needs of young women seeking to be educated is reflected in Woolf’s non-fiction. Though the current educational practice does not effectively accommodate women, when it does it will be the key to women’s liberation and world peace.

The lack of accommodation is highlighted as Woolf ponders the benefits of a male education for women though she knows that it is inadequate. Woolf believes “much of what took place in male education does not apply to women. Much of male education was designed to brand men as superior” (Hayes 21). Barry Turner notes similarly that “educationists talk favorably of the need to create equality of opportunity” and that historically “with reforms in higher education and training of teachers, standards of school instruction improved immensely” (8-9, 147). The types of reforms Turner calls for are delineated by Woolf years earlier in *Three Guineas* where she addresses the fundamental problem with the existing liberal education described by Szczepaniak. The answers to many questions raised by modern scholarship about educational equality can be found in or are approached by *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One’s Own*.

Robin Hayes provides a brief take on the modern state of formal education in her piece *Virginia Woolf’s Treatise On Education: ‘Three Guineas’* wherein she argues that Woolf’s ideas about educational reform have never been fully realized. She states that while education has been reformed many times since Woolf’s era, “Woolf would describe present day American formal education as ‘ajar’, neither completely open nor completely closed to women . . . Schools provide numerous types of obstacles for females . . . [they do] not bar women from attending, but... also [do] not embrace their presence” (83-4). Hayes recognizes the many changes in the world of formal education but believes that these changes are not enough because they do not address the larger systemic problem that Woolf describes: the educational establishment was started by and remains controlled by patriarchy. Due to this larger issue, “schools reflect society’s values. Racism, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression are expressed in schools because they are present in the society at large” (84).

Hayes does believe, though, that there is hope for the educational system and that all they need to do, they can find in *Three Guineas*. She says, “Nearly every page speaks to the way in which education contributes to oppression and how that can be corrected” (84). Hayes feels that though schools do reinforce and strengthen gender roles as explained by Woolf but schools also have the power to change gender roles (113). Ultimately, Hayes believes that there is hope for

modern education as long as it approaches education from an egalitarian standpoint that actively tries to include and embrace women and all other minority groups. She concludes, “The state of formal education . . . is not ideal, but improvement can only occur through persistent . . . changes in practice . . . Improving education is a worthwhile and necessary endeavor” (118). Through concentrated effort toward a more equal educational environment, true educational reform on a deep level is possible, as long as those who seek it are committed to it.

A modern example of the application of Woolf’s ideas is the story of Malala Yousafzai. Malala is the daughter of a teacher and school owner in the Swat region of Pakistan. Despite having grown up in a culture where women are not typically educated, Malala attended school since she was a young child and, because of open minded, educated parents was never made to feel restricted by her gender. After the September 11th attacks and the rise of the Taliban in her home country, restrictions on girls’ education increased, and women were expected to stay indoors unless accompanied by a male relative at all times. Rather than have her freedoms restricted, Malala continued to attend school and began traveling the country with her father while giving speeches about the importance of education. She eventually began speaking about the topic to major news outlets like BBC. She also wrote a blog for BBC about the everyday threats girls face pursuing education like school bombings and occasional attacks, but she wrote under the safety of a pen name (Yousafzai, 154). She recalls an incident in which she knew she had to do something about educational equality:

I saw a young girl who was selling oranges. She was scratching marks on a piece of paper with a pencil to account for the oranges she had sold, as she could not read or write. I took a photo of her and vowed I would do everything in my power to help educate girls just like her. That's the war I was going to fight (217).

After a few years of activism and her father’s refusal to hide their identities because he believed it implied that they had something to hide rather than being the advocates for education that they were, Malala was tracked down by radical Taliban soldiers and shot in the head on the bus on her way home from school at the age of fifteen. She recovered from the attack, and after weeks in a coma, she and her family relocated to Birmingham, England, as they feared more attacks by the Taliban.

Malala still attends school in England and spoke in front of the United Nations on her sixteenth birthday. Since then she has been involved in various activism projects and met with world leaders all while preparing to graduate high school. In December of 2014, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work toward educational equality. She received the news that she won when she was in her chemistry class and plans to donate half of the million dollar prize to rebuild schools damaged in Gaza. In her acceptance speech, she emphasized the importance and revolutionary power of education equality, saying that “empty classrooms [mean] lost childhoods and wasted potentials.” She calls listeners to action: “Let this be the last time we see a child out of school. Let’s begin this ending together today.”

Malala is a living embodiment of Woolf’s ideas concerning the education of women and educational equality. Malala was educated in a system that embraced her and never told her that she could not do anything. While her education was not totally free of the oppressive ideology of patriarchy, she was encouraged to think and learn unlike Judith Shakespeare or the women of Woolf’s time. As a child her father told her when she was forbidden from going out on field trips because the Taliban believed women should stay in purdah (seclusion), “Down with them! You have every right to enjoy greenery and waterfalls and landscapes as boys do” (Yousafzai, 230). Malala is the crystallization of what Woolf hoped for future female students and epitomizes her

idea of the self-actualized, fulfilled, and educated woman. She famously remarked, “When someone takes away your pens you realize quite how important education is” (Yousafzai, 160). Malala finds herself in her education and is the person that she is today because of it. Individuals like Malala are who Woolf dreamt of as she wrote *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*. Despite the continued need for improvement in the educational system, Woolf’s ideas on education and their implications for modern society have enabled the increased freedom, liberation, self-actualization, and fulfilment of women.

Though known for her modernist fictional works like *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf’s highly insightful nonfiction works give stunning insight into her complex views on the education of women. Although Woolf stood for educational equality and believed men and women must start on the same footing to achieve the same quality of life, she did not believe that men’s education is appropriate for women because it has been founded on the ideals of patriarchy. Woolf believed that education was an extension of the masculine perception of violence and that its sole purpose was to teach men how to participate in war. Though founded on the Greek principle of liberal education, the educational system had strayed from its romanticized beginnings and served only as a tool to indoctrinate young men and force them to fit into their prescribed role in patriarchal society. In turn, this type of education could never be appropriate for women because it was founded on an ideology that forced women into private roles such as the wife and the mother. Solely from these roles, a woman cannot flourish; she is not free. Woolf thought for women to lead fulfilling and self-actualizing lives outside of their prescribed gender roles, the educational system must be burned down and built over again in a more egalitarian way. Woolf believed this restructuring of education will not only benefit women but promote world peace. Contemporaries of Woolf, such as Simone de Beauvoir, corroborated these ideas. Modern critics have agreed education still needs to be reformed even to this day to combat the institutionalized sexism and, in turn, its inherent racism, classism, and general exclusion of all those who do not fit into the patriarchal role. Woolf believed women could not be self-actualized and fulfilled individuals unless they had access to this type of reformed, egalitarian education. Hope remains, though, for the future of education and for the women of the future in individuals like Malala Yousafzai who fight tirelessly for every person’s right to an equal education that promotes peace and cooperation.

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