UNIT 14: VIRGINIA WOOLF: CHAPTER 1 FROM *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

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14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own*
- explain the significant themes that emerge in the first chapter
- discuss the style and language employed by Virginia Woolf
- gain an interest to further explore the works of Virginia Woolf

14.2 INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf literally takes the reader into the realm of her thought through her remarkable narrations that weigh heavy with layered meanings, symbolism and thoughtful reflections. The present unit will explore the reflections on 'women and fiction' as discussed in the first chapter from one of Virginia Woolf's significant literary works titled *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the chapters of which were essentially drawn and compiled from some of her academic lectures. As discussed in the previous unit and revealed in the introductory chapter of this text, Woolf firmly believes that the subject of 'women and fiction' remains an "unresolved problem" and therefore, she tries to provide some relevant insights and address its related issues in the hope that it may inspire a solution to these unaddressed issues.

14.3 EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT

In continuity with the discussion on 'women' and their creative space, the narrator provides the readers with some food for thought on the importance of money and a personal space for any woman to be able to bloom into creativity. She assumes herself a character in the first person "I" while also leaving to the reader to give her any name they please. She leaves the name to the reader's imagination saying that it could be Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or any other as it hardly matters to her. Similarly, she does not provide any particular time, mentioning that she could well be seated beside a river bank, a week or even two before "in fine October weather, lost in thought" (3).

She writes about having come across a beadle i.e. a church officer who seems annoyed and shows her the path, saying the turf or the grassy plots are only meant for Fellows and Scholars of reputed academic institutions. That was the tradition for some 300 years and her being seated there only meant that she was trespassing or going against their traditions. Somehow, this takes her back to some old memory of an essay by Charles Lamb on one of his visits to 'Oxbridge'. She admires Lamb for his literary genius and imagination, expressing her desire to visit the famous library where his works were archived among many other literary greats like William Thackeray and others.

In her curiosity, when she reaches the library, she finds that a kind gentleman guarding the great door of the library tells her that ladies were only allowed when they came with a Fellow of the College or provided a reference letter certifying their identity. This offends her and she almost vows to never step into that library saying, "[t[hat a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library" (6). Thus, while she wonders where she would spend her time, she hears music from a church somewhere nearby. Almost immediately, the thought comes to her mind that there might be some church official who would like the beadle ask her to produce a baptismal certificate or a letter of introduction from the Dean in order to enter the church. So, she decides to watch the

church from a distance and in her observation she finds, "[a]s I leant against the wall of the University indeed seemed a sanctuary in which are preserved rare types which would soon be obsolete if left to fight for existence on the pavement of the Strand" (6).

She imagines how the grand buildings and its well-maintained lawns had been marshy land centuries before it came to be developed into a hallowed institution of repute. She imagines the centuries of labour that must have gone into the construction work and the amount of wealth that must have been poured by kings, queens and noblemen. That was the age of faith but the same process continued into the age of reason, where fellowships and lectureships were founded and money now flowed from merchants and manufacturers. Thus, she writes, "Hence the libraries and laboratories , the observatories; the splendid equipment of costly and delicate instruments which now stands on glass shelves where centuries ago the grasses waved and the swine rootled" (8).

It was now time for her lunch and she finds herself in one such luncheon party. She observed that in such parties, novelists while engaging in their intellectual talks often forgot to take notice or even appreciate the 'food' that was offered. Therefore, in defiance of this convention, she takes a minute to take notice of the exotic food that is presented in the party. At this moment, she sees the Beadle at the party in a milder mood than he seemed to be earlier at the library gate. The lunch party seemed to be a buzz of intellectual discussions over several glasses of wine and buds of cigarettes. Suddenly, her notice turns to a cat without a tail sitting in middle of that lawn as if questioning the world like she did. This took her back to the memory of yet another lunch party that took place a long time before the war. She notes that nothing much had changed in the discussions held at parties then and now, except that earlier there was a poetical or rather musical that to her ears had "changed the value of the words themselves" (10).

She then draws our attention to a book written by the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson and mentions a few lines "[m]y heart is like a singing bird" (11) that she feels would define the kind of poetical or musical atmosphere of the lunch parties held earlier. And in a moment she burst into laughter at

the sight of the scared tailless cat. The party continued into the afternoon and she describes the beautiful October day with its falling leaves as she walked across the avenue. She resents the thought of finding so many doors closed to her at the campus of Oxbridge. The end of the avenue leads to the campus of 'Fernham' and she heads along that way. She finds it amusing to notice that a scrap of poetry that comes to her mind almost harmonises or matches her footsteps down that road. The lines that come to her mind are"

"There has fallen a splendid tear
From the passion-flower at the gate
She is coming, my dove, my dear"" (11)

She walks towards Headingley singing the lines "my heart is like a singing bird…" and thinking about the greatness of the earlier poets. She writes thus, "[i]n a sort of jealousy, I suppose, for our own age, silly and absurd though these comparisons are, I went on to wonder if honestly one could name any two living poets now as great as Tennyson and Christina Rossetti were then" (12). Perhaps, their poetry owed its beauty to the musical discussions of luncheon parties before the war. Unlike the lyrical quality of earlier poetry, she feels that modern poetry became too difficult and lacked that earlier poetical element for one to even remember more than two lines of poetry by any modern poet at once. She misses the love of poetry that was felt by the poets Alfred Tennyson and Christina Rossetti. She writes thus, "[s]hall we lay the blame on the war? When the guns fired in August 1914, did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other's eyes that romance was killed?" (14). Fighting the war was unnecessary for the Germans, the French and the English alike. Nevertheless what had sprung from it was 'realism', reality from the illusions of earlier romanticisms expressed by the great poets. Although, she also mentions that it was difficult to determine the extent of truth and illusion in the same breath.

This is when she finds out that she had gone into the wrong direction and turns back to head towards Fernham. She takes another moment to describe her surroundings which again expresses her love of details in her narration. It was close to evening and she found herself near a garden, the

door of which had been perhaps left open (and there were no beadles this time). The garden in the twilight hour seemed "carelessly flung" "wild and open" (14) with flowers and long grasses under the evening clouds. There she found a figure resting in a hammock (a sling suspended between two poles) and it was difficult to decide if it was a person or some phantom. On the terrace was a lady breathing the fresh air and looking at the garden " who appeared humble in a worn out dress. The narrator then imagines the lady could be one of the famous scholars 'J"H"' (providing only the initials).

Finally, it was time for dinner which was served in the great dining hall where everyone had assembled. Although, the food served was plain compared to the luncheon at Oxbridge, there seemed to be no complaining. Perhaps, they felt blessed and self-sufficient in whatever they received which was a lot more than that the little supplies that coal-miners had for dinner. Soon the meal was over and in a disciplined way the tables were cleaned and made ready for their morning breakfast. In her observation, she writes "[t]he human frame being what it is, heart, body, and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments as they will be no doubt in another million years, a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One talk well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well" (16). There were no such intellectual discussions that took place there like the ones she had overheard during lunch.

The narrator meets her friend Mary Seton after retiring to her room and the two begin a conversation imagining the days when the colleges were founded. They imagine that the kings and queens during their time had ordered for the very foundation of great institutions to be laid in gold but the women's college, always being given less importance was perhaps simply laid in red brick. Mary Seton then begins to describe the long struggles against the lack of political goodwill in order to receive funds from the government. Thus, the two women at the inn discuss these women related issues, as well as, the limitations that had prevented their mothers from excelling in their own fields of interest. Therefore, in her realization of the "effect of tradition and the lack of tradition" on a writer's mind, the narrator expresses her opinion that "one seemed alone with an inscrutable society" (22).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What happens to the narrator when she reaches the library at Oxbridge?

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Q 2: Where does the narrator go after the luncheon party?

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Q 3: Mention the difference in the writings of modern poets with that of poets like Tennyson and Rossetti.

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14.4 MAJOR THEMES

Some of the themes that emerge from the text of the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own* are as discussed below:

Women and Fiction: The narrator expresses her firm opinion that a woman requires 'money' and her own 'private space' to pursue writing. An absence of these two above mentioned factors made writing"an extremely difficult proposition for women altogether. Thus, through her writing, the narrator attempts to highlight the ways in which social conventions and socio-political structures pose restrictions on women who desire to pursue an individual career especially as a writer. Woolf writes, "[f]iction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction" and through her masterly writing (14). She creates fictitious names, characters and situations to reflect the realities of how women were compelled to play roles that had been defined by men. They were assumed to be incapable of intellectual thought and were never expected to step outside their confined world.

In her discussion with Mary Seton, the two women find themselves disturbed at the ignorance and apathy of the government to even provide sufficient funds for the development of women's institutions. The "reprehensible poverty of our sex" as the narrator writes forms her central

concern. She raises a significant question, "what had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us?" Had women been given equal opportunities to education and employment, they would have had the same privileges as their male counterparts. If they were exposed to the world outside instead of being confined to their limited world, perhaps women like them would have discussed varied disciplines such as that of chemistry, mathematics, astronomy, relativity and geography.

She writes, "[w]e might have been exploring or writing; mooning about the venerable places of earth; sitting contemplative on the steps of the Parthenon, or going at ten to an office and coming home comfortably at half past four to write a little poetry" (19). Thus, she justifies the importance of women setting precedents so that 'they' and the future generations of women are able to continue an established literary tradition, enjoy their own creative space and a sense of artistic freedom. The "fatal drawback" that she finds with regard to the discussion on 'women and fiction' is the difficulty of winding it up or even concluding such a significant and challenging subject.

Oxbridge and Fernham: The fictitious name of 'Oxbridge' is symbolic of hallowed institutions of 'Oxford' and 'Cambridge' which produced some of the greatest minds and geniuses of the world. Oxbridge in the text is a male-dominated academic institution that seemed almost out of bounds for women. The narrator is refused an entry to the library, presumably the church and is rather made to feel like a trespasser. 'Fernham' symbolises lesser known women's college which lacked the glory of Oxbridge, as well as, sufficient funds for the development of its infrastructure and maintenance. Moreover, there were insufficient "amenities" or basic facilities for women to enjoy their own space as they were not provided with their own room.

In the text, we find that academic institutions for women took a long time to come into existence and it was in around 1860s that newspapers like *The Saturday Review* wrote unfavourable issues, editors had to be requested to print letters in favour of the same, the issues taken up by John Stuart Mill who spoke on women's rights came to be considered before the establishment of such a college for women. Due to insufficient funding, they could not be provided with separate rooms or other luxuries and

"amenities". Thus, the narrator imagines "Fernham might have been endowed with fifty thousand pounds by the stroke of a pen" of an educated and well-established woman had she seen the possibilities of stepping outside her own confines (19-20).

14.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Woolf is known for her experimental use of a free prose style through the technique of the 'stream of consciousness' in which a narrator or a character uses a free flowing narration in keeping with the natural flow of thoughts. Her literary narratives tends to be fragmented in nature, figuring out the inner workings of the mind with all its possible associations combined with the lyrical quality of her prose that creates a lasting impression on readers. With regard to the present text, she writes that when one traverses a difficult subject or rather a controversial topic such as that of 'women and fiction', one cannot state the truth bluntly which is why she takes recourse to elaborate narrative techniques to establish her ideas.

Woolf writes thus, "[f]iction here is likely to contain more truth than fact" thereby justifying her liberty to use fictional modes of narrative in order to highlight social truths and issues of reality. With regard to this narratorial interplay between truth and fiction, Woolf writes thus, "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" (2). She explains that she may have to take the support of "lies" in order to put across these controversial issues but the onus is on the readers to determine which aspects are worthy of attention, reflection and rejection. In other words, the readers are to critically examine if there are elements of truth that can be extracted from the text.

The first chapter of the book is replete with images, symbolical meanings that capture minute momentary observations. The power of her literary style almost conjures moving images in the minds of readers for an instance" "the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse" immediately strikes our imagination. There is also a poetical or lyrical quality in the careful selections of her words for e.g. the use of 'alliteration' in the sentence, "Old

stories of **o**ld **d**eans and **o**ld **d**ons came back to mind", "**f**or the **f**olly of the **f**ancy", "**q**uiet rooms looking across **q**uiet **q**uadrangles" where the same letters are used in a row to give it a rhyming quality. She also makes wide use of 'metaphors' such as "a nugget of pure truth", "train of thought", "willows wept in perpetual lamentation", "starred with poetry", "lightening crack of genius", "these words….sang in my blood", "flash of some terrible reality leaping" to mention a few.

She also makes use of interesting 'similes' (or words that liken one thing to the other) such as "chapel like bees at the mouth of a hive", "the spirit of peace descended like a cloud from heaven", "window panes like the beat of an excitable heart". Further, the learner may note some of her interesting usage of words such as: "lay bare the ideas", "set up such a wash and tumult of ideas", "groaning of the ancient organ", "the sudden conglomeration of an idea", "it went on swimmingly," "whatever meditation was in harmony with the moment", "halfway down the spine, which is the seat of the soul", "I had to think myself out of the room, back into the past" among others. Finally, the narrator mentions she does not intend to draw a conclusion on the subject that raises all sorts of "prejudices" and "passions" but ardently desires to address the subject of 'women and fiction' that necessitates a significant change. Although she admits that she tends to twist her narrations while trying to weigh difficult issues yet, that itself adds to the very beauty of her style and language, which is marked by her elegant prose studded with poetry at its best.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is the "fatal drawback" with regard to the subject of women and fiction?

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Q 5: Mention the two universities represented by the fictitious institution of 'Oxbridge'.

Q 6: Define the technique of stream of consciousness.

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14.6 LET US SUM UP

A complete study of the unit together with a reading of the introductory chapter to *A Room of One's Own* will enable you to discuss the text and its emergent themes in a detailed manner. The unit will enable the learner to discuss the style and language employed with reference to the present text. Moreover, the unit will stir the interest of the learner to further explore the entire text of *A Room of One's Own* and other works by Virginia Woolf.



14.7 FURTHER READING

1. Woolf, Virginia. (2007). *A Room of One's Own*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors Pvt. Ltd.



14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: When she reaches the library, a gentleman guarding the library door tells her that ladies were only allowed when they came with a Fellow of the College or provided a reference letter certifying their identity.

Ans to Q No 2: Unlike the lyrical quality of earlier poetry, she feels that modern poetry became too difficult and lacked that earlier poetical element for one to even remember more than two lines of poetry by any modern poet at once.

Ans to Q No 3: The narrator heads towards Headingley to visit Fernham.

Ans to Q No 4: The "fatal drawback" that she finds with regard to the discussion on 'women and fiction' is the difficulty of winding it up or even concluding such a significant and challenging subject.

Ans to Q No 5: The fictitious name of 'Oxbridge' is symbolic of the hallowed institutions of 'Oxford' and 'Cambridge'.

Ans to Q No 6: In the technique of 'stream of consciousness', a narrator or

a character uses free flowing narration in keeping with the natural flow of thoughts.



14.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Give a detailed explanation of the introductory chapter of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own.*

Q 2: Discuss the major themes of the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf.

Q 3: Analyse the style and language employed by Virginia Woolf in her work *A Room of One's Own.*

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