

# **A Primer in Feminist Criticism and Theory**

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*A Primer in Feminist Criticism and Theory*  
by Susan Wilson

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## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Preface  | 5  |
| 1 Virginia Woolf: <i>A Room of One's Own</i>                                     | 7  |
| 2 Elaine Showalter on Woolf  | 13 |
| 3 Rejecting the Canon: Kate Millett <i>versus</i> D.H. Lawrence                  | 19 |
| 4 Rewriting the Canon: Angela Carter, Charles Baudelaire and "Black Venus"       | 26 |
| 5 Hélène Cixous: "Sorties"   | 35 |
| 6 Julia Kristeva: "Postmodernism?"   | 42 |
| 7 Luce Irigaray: <i>This Sex Which Is Not One</i>                                | 47 |
| 8 Self-Defeat in Feminist Criticism and Theory?                                  | 53 |
| 9 Camille Paglia: Libertarian Feminism?  | 59 |
| 10 Black and Third World Feminism: bell hooks, Barbara Smith and Chandra Mohanty | 65 |
| Supplementary Bibliography   | 71 |

## Preface

The work of the feminist writers, critics and theorists considered in this Primer represents only one version of the feminist approach to literature. Other feminist writers, critics and theorists could have been chosen to exemplify the practice of feminist literary criticism; similarly, other texts by those writers who are examined here are equally worthy of attention. This book offers only a sample of the work which makes up the Anglo-American tradition in feminist criticism and French feminist theory. Its intention is to introduce readers to some of the key issues in feminist criticism and theory in a concise, and therefore restricted, format. Readers should always refer to the full texts of the books and essays sampled here and, where possible, consider the other works of each author.

The Primer begins by examining Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which is itself a valuable introduction to many of the debates which still surround women's writing. Chapter Two examines feminist criticism as it has been practiced in relation to Virginia Woolf herself. The text selected, Elaine Showalter's "Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny", comes from her study *A Literature of Their Own*, which, as Showalter knows, has been "both imitated and reviled" in feminist discourse.<sup>1</sup> Chapter Three concentrates on Kate Millett's critique of D.H. Lawrence in one of the first texts of American feminist criticism, *Sexual Politics*. In Chapter Four, we turn to Angela Carter's short story "Black Venus" which, like Millett, disputes the use of female figures in canonical literature by male authors, in this case in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire.

The next three chapters shift the focus to French feminist theory. Given the greater difficulty of literary "theory", as opposed to the literary "criticism" produced in the Anglo-American tradition, the texts for study in chapters five to seven are all short essays. Chapter Five assesses both the style and content of Hélène Cixous's "Sorties" and points to parallels between her work and that of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Chapter Six attempts to exemplify the arguments of Julia Kristeva's essay "Postmodernism?" by reference to the poetry of Peter Reading. Luce Irigaray's work is represented by several essays from her collection *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Chapter Seven follows her critique of psychoanalysis by assessing what she calls the "phallogocentric" discourse of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

The final chapters invite readers to reflect on feminist criticism and theory as it has been construed thus far. Chapter Eight examines whether there is a danger of self-defeat implicit in some of the arguments put forward in feminist discourse. Peter Washington's denunciation of "theory" in *Fraud: Literary Theory and the End of English* is assessed here. Chapter Nine asks whether the work of Camille Paglia, which is antagonistic to both Anglo-American feminist criticism and French feminist theory, can itself still be seen as in any way "feminist". Finally, the work of bell hooks, Barbara Smith and Chandra Mohanty is surveyed in Chapter Ten. Each of these writers emphasize how feminism has focused its attention upon the concerns and interests of white women to the exclusion of black and third world female perspectives.

This diversity of focus is necessary because there exists no founding statement of the tenets of feminism. As Elaine Showalter argues, this has a crucial impact on feminist criticism and theory too: "Feminist criticism differs from other contemporary schools of critical theory in not deriving its literary principles from a single authority figure or from a body of sacred texts. Unlike structuralists who hark back to the linguistic discoveries of Saussure, psychoanalytic critics loyal to Freud or Lacan, Marxists steeped in *Das Kapital*, or deconstructionists citing Derrida, feminist critics do not look to a Mother of Us All or a single system of thought to provide their fundamental ideas".<sup>2</sup>

What constitutes best practice in feminist criticism and theory is still open to negotiation. This is the rationale for the critical engagement that this book invites in relation to the "key" feminist perspectives it presents. Each chapter includes questions and exercises which require readers to reflect upon and assess the merits of the samples of writing and argument provided. Model answers are not given. It is hoped that debate and disputes may proceed instead.

**Susan Wilson**  
**Cambridge, 1 September 2004**

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Showalter, "Twenty Years On: *A Literature of Their Own* Revisited", in *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (1977) Revised and Expanded Edition (London: Virago, 1999), p. xv.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Showalter, "Introduction: The Feminist Critical Revolution", in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. 4.

# 1 Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own*

In 1928 Virginia Woolf was invited to lecture at Girton College, Cambridge on the subject of women and fiction. Initially leaving aside “the great problem of the true nature of women and the true nature of fiction”, Woolf begins with a simple, and startlingly materialist, statement: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”.<sup>1</sup> These are the minimum conditions that make writing, and even thinking, possible. In reality, or at least in England in 1928, Woolf argues, intellectual work is not done in a social vacuum by a series of solitary disembodied thinkers; rather, it is supported and developed by university institutions, their scholarships, endowments, fellowships and lectureships, and so, ultimately, by money. And in 1928, scholarships, endowments, fellowships and lectureships were largely male preserves.

Nevertheless, the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* is still free to sit “lost in thought” beside the banks of a river that flows through a fictionalised “Oxbridge” location. Here, we share the narrator’s “stream-of-consciousness” reverie; the reason for its interruption is the starting-point of her feminist consciousness:

**Thought – to call it by a prouder name than it deserved – had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until – you know the little tug – the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one’s line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating. I will not trouble you with that thought now, though if you look carefully you may find it for yourselves in the course of what I am going to say.**

But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind – put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still. It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. Instantly a man’s figure rose to intercept me. Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me. Such thoughts were the work of a moment. As I regained the path the arms of the Beadle sank, his face assumed its usual repose, and though turf is better walking than gravel, no very great harm was done. The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that in protection of their turf, which has been rolled for 300 years in succession, they had sent my little fish into hiding.

Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928) (London: Penguin, 1945), pp. 7-8

## QUICK QUESTIONS

1. Find the precise point in the passage above when a gender-divide is activated. On whose side is power and authority then invested?
2. Examine the narrator’s language and use of metaphor before the arrival of the Beadle. Is there any clue to the narrator’s gender earlier in the passage?
3. Why should Woolf construct an apparently un-gendered narrator during the “reverie” portion of the passage?
4. Why does the narrator say “Instinct rather than reason came to my help”? What does this imply about the Beadle’s, and by extension the university’s, reaction to women?

The narrator is soon soothed, however, for “if the spirit of peace dwells anywhere, it is in the courts and quadrangles of Oxbridge”; once more “the mind ... (unless one trespassed on the turf again),

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928) (London: Penguin, 1945), p. 6.

### **A PRIMER IN FEMINIST CRITICISM AND THEORY**

was at liberty to settle down upon whatever meditation was in harmony with the moment".<sup>2</sup> The meditation settled upon is a decidedly scholarly one, concerning Charles Lamb's essay on the manuscript of Milton's poem *Lycidas*, Max Beerbohm (momentarily) and the merits of Thackeray's "eighteenth-century style" in the novel *The History of Henry Esmond*. Again, apparently, the narrator's Oxbridge location could not be more propitious to learned research:

**It then occurred to me that the very manuscript itself which Lamb had looked at was only a few hundred yards away, so that one could follow Lamb's footsteps across the quadrangle to that famous library where the treasure is kept. Moreover, I recollected, as I put this plan into execution, it is in this famous library that the manuscript of Thackeray's *Esmond* is also preserved. The critics often say that *Esmond* is Thackeray's most perfect novel. But the affectation of the style, with its imitation of the eighteenth century, hampers one, so far as I remember; unless indeed the eighteenth-century style was natural to Thackeray – a fact that one might prove by looking at the manuscript and seeing whether the alterations were for the benefit of the style or of the sense. But then one would have to decide what is style and what is meaning, a question which – but here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, 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.**

**That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library. Venerable and calm, with all its treasures safe locked within its breast, it sleeps complacently and will, so far as I am concerned, so sleep for ever.**

Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 9-10

Despite her animation by the spirit of critical inquiry, the narrator is denied access to the raw materials of the library, primarily by reason of gender. Women are barred from certain centres of knowledge and, thereafter and as a consequence, certain forms of authority. This is a self-perpetuating situation; in these circumstances, women lack the authority to insist upon the reforms that would allow them access to power and authority. The seat of learning visited by the narrator does not offer a disinterested dispensation of knowledge to all-comers; instead it educates and trains the sons of the men it had educated and trained a generation before. The ages and generations succeed one another but the key to access remains finance, whether secured from Church, Court or commerce:

**An unending stream of gold and silver, I thought, must have flowed into this court perpetually to keep the stones coming and the masons working; to level, to ditch, to dig, and to drain. But it was then the age of faith, and money was poured liberally to set these stones on a deep foundation, and when the stones were raised, still more money was poured in from the coffers of kings and queens and great nobles to ensure that hymns should be sung here and scholars taught. ... And when the age of faith was over and the age of reason had come, still the same flow of gold and silver went on; fellowships were founded; lectureships endowed; only the gold and silver flowed now, not from the coffers of the king, but from the chests of merchants and manufacturers, from the purses of men who had made, say, a fortune from industry, and returned, in their wills, a bounteous share of it to endow more chairs, more lectureships, more fellowships in the university where they had learnt their craft.**

Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 11-12

The contemporary effect of such a backlog of riches is manifested for the narrator in a fabulous luncheon at one of the ancient colleges. Here, the scholars partake of "soles ... over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream", followed by "partridges, many and various ... with all their retinue of sauces and salads", "potatoes, thin as coins" and "sprouts, foliated as rosebuds but more succulent"; afterwards comes "a confection which rose all sugar from the waves"; all the while

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<sup>2</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 8.

## VIRGINIA WOOLF: A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

“wineglasses had flushed yellow and flushed crimson; had been emptied; had been filled”.<sup>3</sup> The narrator’s analysis of character, behaviour and opportunity stretches, only half-comically, to the effect of such a meal upon the soul and intellect of its devourers:

**And thus by degrees was lit, half-way down the spine, which is the seat of the soul, not that hard little electric light which we call brilliance, as it pops in and out upon our lips, but the more profound, subtle, and subterranean glow which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse. No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself. We are all going to heaven and Vandyck is of the company – in other words, how good life seemed, how sweet its rewards, how trivial this grudge or that grievance, how admirable friendship and the society of one’s kind, as lighting a good cigarette, one sank among the cushions in the window-seat.**

Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 13

By contrast, Fernham, the fictional shadow of Cambridge’s all-women Newnham College, can offer only a dinner of “plain gravy soup”, beef from the “rumps of cattle in a muddy market”, served with “sprouts curled and yellowed at the edge”, followed by “prunes ... mitigated by custard” and accompanied throughout by water.<sup>4</sup> The whole, a product of “bargaining and cheapening”, is an index of the relative poverty of the female branch of the institution.<sup>5</sup> And likewise, this poverty is an index of the absence of women’s independent means throughout the generations. “What had our mothers been doing”, our now clearly-gendered narrator asks her friend Mary Seton, “that they had no wealth to leave us?”<sup>6</sup> The very existence of “us” has a lot to do with the matter:

**If only Mrs Seton and her mother and her mother before her had learnt the great art of making money and had left their money, like their fathers and their grandfathers before them, to found fellowships and lectureships and prizes and scholarships appropriated to the use of their own sex, we might have dined very tolerably up here alone off a bird and a bottle of wine; we might have looked forward without undue confidence to a pleasant and honourable lifetime spent in the shelter of one of the liberally endowed professions. We might have been exploring or writing; mooning about the venerable places of the 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. Only, if Mrs Seton and her like had gone into business at the age of fifteen, there would have been – that was the snag in the argument – no Mary.**

Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 23

The narrator identifies a gendered and generational disinheritance. There is no cash-value in women’s work; for women, “to endow a college would necessitate the suppression of families altogether”.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, even had women worked, “the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned”; save for the last forty-eight years (counting back from 1928), all female wealth “would have been her husband’s property – a thought which, perhaps, may have had its share in keeping Mrs Seton and her mothers off the Stock Exchange”.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, generations of women up to the point in time of the narrator’s world, have lacked the material supports of intellectual development.

### ACTIVITY 1 (Time: 15 minutes)

1. Either on your own or in pairs, consider the strengths and weaknesses of Woolf’s materialist analysis of intellectual development. Is the quality of the sprouts one is served a crucial determinant of the value of one’s thoughts? Is the age and grandeur of one’s college any more of

<sup>3</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 24.

## **A PRIMER IN FEMINIST CRITICISM AND THEORY**

a determinant of intellectual quality? Is the social standing of educational institutions as important now as in 1928?

2. Can you fill in more of the argumentative steps which link the nineteenth-century property laws which assigned a wife's wealth to her husband to the lack of educational opportunities for women?
3. Is this materialist argument a specifically feminist one? Does Woolf ignore the class divide that excluded the majority of men as well as women from a university education in 1928?
4. Does Woolf have anything to say to women outside the upper-middle classes? She celebrates "the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space",<sup>9</sup> but does this presuppose the existence of a servant-class to minister to the material needs of her scholars?

A materialist approach to intellectual work examines the impact of the real circumstances of life upon the production of art, writing and the development of the mental faculties in general. The core of this argument in *A Room of One's Own* is stated in the following two paragraphs. Read these extracts carefully and assess whether they confirm your answers to the Activity Questions above or whether they lead you to modify your opinions about the narrator's arguments.

**It is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary [Elizabethan] literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet. What were the conditions in which women lived, I asked myself; for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible; Shakespeare's plays, for instance, seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the works of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.**

Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 43

**Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own.**

Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 106

### **ADDITIONAL QUICK QUESTIONS**

1. "A room of one's own" is, the narrator confirms, part of a metaphorical framework. Likewise "five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate", "a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself".<sup>10</sup> What do you think of the narrator's tendency to conduct arguments through metaphorical devices?
2. Is *A Room of One's Own* a fictional or factual book? Can "true" arguments be made through "fictional" means?

In this argumentative movement from the material and the mental, the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* recognises that more research is required:

**What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art? – a thousand questions at once suggested themselves. But one needed answers, not questions; and an answer was only to be had by consulting the learned and the unprejudiced,**

<sup>9</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 105.

*VIRGINIA WOOLF: A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

who have removed themselves above the strife of tongue and the confusion of body and issued the result of their reasoning and research in books which are to be found in the British Museum. If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?

Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 27

In the British Museum, the narrator is confronted by a bewildering array of ungrounded, but clearly gendered, opinions. "Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year?" asks the narrator, "Have you any notion how many are written by men?"<sup>11</sup> Moreover, these books "had been written in the red light of emotion",<sup>12</sup> a flaw more usually described in the very same books as a female failing. There is also a fundamental flaw in the narrator's research programme; the problem is set out in the questions below.

### QUICK QUESTIONS

1. Can any research or reasoning ever be "above the strife of tongue and the confusion of body" as the narrator hopes? What would it be like to be "above ... the confusion of body"?
2. The discussion of all gender questions necessarily takes place between gendered agents; can objectivity and disinterest ever be expected when disputes arise?
3. From the evidence of the universities, the British Museum and even a daily newspaper, the narrator concludes that "England is under the rule of a patriarchy".<sup>13</sup> Male authority sets the standards of good sense and truth under such a system, including the proper opinions to hold concerning women. As a result of their lack of education, women can hardly be qualified to object to such a system – how could the uneducated know what is best? Can you see a way out of this circle which always seems to protect male advantages?

Many of the narrator's arguments, and her most famous exploitation of metaphorical and rhetorical devices, come together in the discussion of the fate of a fictional and frustrated female writer, "Shakespeare's sister". This is "how the story would run ... if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius":

**It would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare. Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say. ... She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. ... Soon, ... before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighbouring wool-stapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father. Then he ceased to scold her. He begged her instead not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage. He would give her a chain of beads or a fine petticoat, he said; and there were tears in his eyes. How could she disobey him? How could she break his heart? The force of her own gift alone drove her to it. She made up a small parcel of her belongings, let herself down by a rope one summer's night and took the road to London. She was not seventeen. The birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she was. She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager – a fat, loose-lipped man – guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting – no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted – you can**

<sup>11</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 35.

## A PRIMER IN FEMINIST CRITICISM AND THEORY

imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last ... Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so – who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body? – killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.

Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 48-50

The impact of material social conditions, including, of course, specific historical attitudes to the roles and capacities of women, is sufficient to thwart the potential of even the most talented and determined individual. Genius, in this scenario, may be innate but it is not sufficient; under these social and familial conditions, it could “never [get] itself on to paper” and prove its existence.<sup>14</sup>

Consider finally, however, a later, and only problematically feminist, review of the “Shakespeare's sister” scenario. The following extract is from Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*:

**In the beautiful hypothesis of “Shakespeare's sister,” Virginia Woolf imagines a girl with her brother's gifts whom society would have “thwarted and hindered” to insanity and suicide. Women have been discouraged from genres such as sculpture that require studio training or expensive materials. But in philosophy, mathematics, and poetry, the only materials are pen and paper. Male conspiracy cannot explain all female failures. I am convinced that, even without restrictions, there still would have been no female Pascal, Milton, or Kant. Genius is not checked by social obstacles: it will overcome. Men's egotism, so disgusting in the talentless, is the source of their greatness as a sex. Women have a more accurate sense of reality; they are physically and spiritually more complete. Culture, I said, was invented by men, because it is by culture that they make themselves whole. Even now, with all vocations open, I marvel at the rarity of the woman driven by artistic or intellectual obsession, that self-mutilating derangement of social relationship which, in its alternative forms of crime and ideation, is the disgrace and glory of the human species.**

Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990) (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 653-54

To assess what is at stake for feminist theory in Paglia's disagreement with Woolf, consider the questions set in Activity Two below:

### ACTIVITY 2 (Time: 15 minutes)

1. Paglia contends that “Genius is not checked by social obstacles: it will overcome”. The narrator of *A Room of One's Own* argues precisely the opposite and thereby provides an explanation for “female failures”. How does Paglia account for the absence of a female Pascal, Milton or Kant?
2. What is the role of education, training, tradition and recognition in the development of latent talent?
3. Paglia locates the best and worst of human behaviour in male activity. Examine some of her assumptions in the above passage: is she an essentialist, that is, does she describe how *all* men and *all* women are predisposed to behave under *all* conceivable material circumstances? Do you find this a convincing way of understanding human behaviour?
4. If Paglia appeals to nature, does Woolf appeal to nurture to explain the evident differences in male and female behaviour? Could changes in social circumstances and expectations alter the behaviour of Paglia's men and women? Can Woolf's people change alongside society?
5. According to your answer to Question 4, is it worthwhile trying to alter social conditions in order to enhance the life chances of men and women?

<sup>14</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 50.