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Women Writers

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## Life: A Single-Version Anthology

Virginia Woolf's *Women & Writing* is an attempt to draw a portrayal of women through time and how their literature came into being. In search for answers, Virginia Woolf conducted thorough research to see if she could find indications that would help her understand women's lack of proficiency in literature. Descriptions of women's lives, habits, and thoughts cannot be found in ordinary history books, fictions, poem or novels. Only "in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, half-obliterated in the memories of the aged" can one hope to find answers. Women were the last worries of men and unless they played an important role in history, they were perceived as negligible pawns.



The laws and customs of patriarchal society seem to be largely responsible for these periods of silence, according to Woolf. A flagrant example of such a statement is that, in the fifteenth century, it was perfectly comprehensible and common for a woman to be beaten and hurled around the room by her parent if she refused to marry the man she was assigned to be with for the rest of her life. One cannot possibly think that women had any chance of growing in the public sphere while they were openly and legally mistreated.

In the nineteenth century, the status of women in England slowly began to change for the better due to numerous but still slight changes in the laws and customs. Consequently women were able to get themselves a better education and some leisure. Four of the most eloquent women novelists—Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot—are the result of such changes; the four of them had no children and two of them were not even married. These women were granted more freedom and their literary production evolved systematically. Women's literature was about to forge itself into history as much as women themselves. The novels that were produced by women displayed two unique characteristics that differentiated them from men's writing. First, women were compelled to stay at home; hence, the variety of their life experiences was rather limited. They had no concrete idea of what war, seafaring, politics or business were about. Their emotional life was restricted exclusively to the private sphere and the writings followed that pattern quite well too. Second, readers were not only brought to be conscious of the various characters of a plot but also to be conscious of the

presence of a woman. This element was “entirely absent” from men’s writing; one could now understand the events or daily situations from a woman’s perspective.

This innovative approach in writing fiction was about to become a new standard for all women. However, in order to assess this unique way of writing, barriers had to be broken and old patriarchal trends shattered. The attitudes of women had to change; they had to be stronger to resist the temptation of expressing only anger. “The ridicule, the censure, the assurance of inferiority in one form or another” were obstacles women were going to have to deal with. The attitude of “lesser women writers,” according to Woolf, would exhibit “their unnatural self-assertiveness and their unnatural docility.” Their greatest change—attitude—was also going to be their greatest challenge. Another obstacle resided in the technicality of writing. Sentences made by men were far too “loose”, “heavy”, and “pompous”, women would have no use of those forms of sentences for the simple reason that they would not suit their style. Women had to shape their own style so that their ideas could be expressed as naturally as possible. Once they managed to have an attitude of their own and the appropriate tools to express their ideas, they had to confront men on their own territory: conventions. Women’s values, in life and in art, are very different from men’s. Thus this disagreement had to surface somewhere in women’s literature. However, since men are the arbiters of the conventions revolving around the values of life and since fiction is largely based upon those values, bending and even breaking those pre-established rules would not be a simple task. Those three major obstacles were hard to cope with but they allowed women to bring a whole new flow of ideas to compete with previous theories enhancing the literary repertoire significantly.

In the early nineteenth century, women mainly wrote autobiographical novels because they felt they needed to “expose their own suffering” but this was rapidly going to change. Women were now going to share other aspects of their lives as they explored their own sexuality. Women were now “voters”, “wage-earners”, and “responsible citizens”. Their relation with the world was not only emotional; it was intellectual and political. This shift in status was also going to change the way they wrote fiction. “Their men and women would not be observed wholly in relation to each other emotionally, but as they cohered and clashed in groups and classes and races.” This radical modification of the status of women in society was inevitably going to have repercussions on their writing.



Women went from having not much status to having leisure, money, and a room to themselves. This era of women’s enlightenment is only beginning to flourish, let us hope that novels, poetry, criticism and history books will benefit from the empowerment of women in our contemporary society so that, like millions of us, we can, one day, have an answer for the main enigma of literature: What is the meaning of life?

## Cited Work

Woolf, Virginia. Women and Writing. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.