A Room of Her Own: Space for Creating

by Susan Ioannou

“A Room of Her Own”. It’s a phrase that women writers, especially, find very comforting. Also, it comes with excellent credentials. It was given prominence by British novelist Virginia Woolf in 1928, in a lecture given at Newnham and Girton Colleges. She said: “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

Although she never had children, Virginia Woolf did understand what women writers were up against. In fact, to illustrate, she hypothesized that William Shakespeare might have had a sister. Why, she asked, did that sister never write great plays, or became famous? The answer was simple, Woolf suggested. The poor girl was too busy, forever “washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed.” (Newnham/Girton lecture “Women and Fiction”)

Of course, Shakespeare’s imagined sister was not exceptional. Women’s lives have always been filled with such duties to others: to parents, husbands, children, community--and nowadays, colleagues and clients. What a luxury it is for a woman to have a separate, physical space, tucked away from runny noses, telephone canvassers, and a husband who can’t find a matching sock. But, I wondered, how did Virginia Woolf herself picture such a “room”?

To find out, I leafed through A Writer’s Diary, her journals edited and published after her death by her husband Leonard. Here, Virginia Woolf often recounted her frustrations and joys in writing. I learned that in 1919 she bought her summer home Monk’s House in Rodmell, Sussex, and behind it, overlooking the South Downs, stood a separate small building which she called the Writing Lodge. However, she did not give a full description of its interior or, for that matter, of any other spots in which she wrote. Instead, there are only occasional glimpses. For instance, on September 13, 1925, she described herself writing in a bedroom in the main house:

A disgraceful fact--that I am writing this at 10 in the morning in bed in the little room looking into the garden, the sun beaming steady, the vine leaves transparent green, and the leaves of the apple tree so brilliant that, as I had my breakfast, I invented a little story about a man who wrote a poem, I think, comparing them with diamonds and the spiders’ webs, (which glance and disappear astonishingly) with something or other else. (p. 82)

During her travels, she also found space to write, although it was often less agreeable. For example, on May 21, 1933, her diary recorded:

To write to keep off sleep--that is the exalted mission of tonight--tonight sitting at the open window of a second rate inn in Draguignan--with plane trees outside, the usual single noted bird, the usual loudspeaker. Everybody in France motors on Sunday; then sleeps it off at night. . . . This is the tax for travelling--these sleepy uncomfortable hotel nights-- sitting on hard chairs under the lamp. (p. 205)

Regardless of where a room of her own may be, in it a woman writer can sit by herself, and
scratch her pen across paper. In blocking out the practical world, her room serves as a kind of bunker. In fact, its very lack of comfort often fulfills an important purpose. In his memoir Author! Author! Encounters with Famous Writers, contemporary Canadian novelist and playwright Dave Williamson tells of visiting the home of Winnipeg novelist Susie Maloney:

She then took me downstairs to a dark, dank basement chock full of used and broken furniture and other people’s stuff. . . . She pointed to a dingy corner under a beam too low to allow her to stand up straight . . . in keeping with her belief that you couldn’t get your head into a book if you were in beautiful surroundings—they were too distracting. Put her in a room with a view and she wouldn’t write a line. (p. 250)

Frankly, many writers, including myself, do prefer a room with a view. Green fields springing with crickets, or a rackety downtown street—anything other than solid brick. Yes, walls can lock out boisterous children and bleeeting telephones. But a writer needs something beyond herself to look toward—doesn’t she?

I ask the question for a reason. I have often wondered how much the physical space a woman chooses to write in is a reflection of her aesthetics. For instance, many novice poets write as if they are crouching in a match-lit closet. The poems are self-absorbed, deep in private loves, disappointments, and fears. The whole focus is inward, more personal record or therapy, than art. Such poets have no interest in windows.

Over the years, a poet may grow bored with the dark cell of her ego and begin to let in technicolour and Dolby sound. As the window opens wider, sniffing adventure, she sticks out her head, her shoulders, then swings one leg through. Off into imagination she leaps. And if she returns whole, her art may develop to a third stage. I say “may” because of one crucial point. For her art to grow, she must use the experiences she brings back to enlarge her writer’s vision of the real world.

So you see, in aesthetic terms, a window can be significant indeed. Most writers do need light and air for inspiration, and Virginia Woolf, too, records their generative powers. On August 18, 1921, as she sat at her desk in the Writing Lodge at Monk’s House, she looked out the window over the South Downs and wrote:

The sun streams (no, never streams; floods rather) down upon all the yellow fields and the long low barns; and what wouldn’t I give to be coming through Firle woods, dirty and hot, with my nose turned home, every muscle tired and the brain laid up in sweet lavender, so sane and cool, and ripe for tomorrow’s task. How I should notice everything—the phrase for it coming the moment after and fitting like a glove; and then on the dusty road, as I ground my pedals, so my story would begin telling itself. (pp. 38-39)

Without such a window, what would inspire the sensuous details as bold as Virginia Woolf’s streaming sunshine, or the pastel insights a poet discerns at dusk, or a silvery romance illumined by the moon? On a practical level, a writer needs a window also for inspiration in the purely physical sense—to circulate fresh air. Anyone gets dull from recycling her own carbon dioxide.

And here lies the paradox. The very walls that lock out the everyday world, must at the same time throw open the boundlessness of imagination. In other words, the writer’s physical containment is exactly what makes her artistic freedom possible. But juggling such
opposites remains tricky indeed.
Growing older helps, because age gives a woman the gift of ruthlessness. In contrast, like Shakespeare’s imagined sister, young women with small children find it particularly hard to step back from the day’s hurly burly. As writers, they fret about twenty minutes snatched from their babies. If they can manage any retreat in which to work, it is often only a few feet of borrowed space.

I remember how taxing it was. When my children were very small, of necessity I wrote only poems. Poems were short. I could piece them together much as a beaver builds its one-room lodge—a twig here, another there. Every evening after supper, my husband sat with the children, while I—as slowly as I could get away with—cleaned up the kitchen. At last, between washing and drying the dishes, I had a few precious minutes for writing. And write I did, a phrase at a time, on soggy pink scraps of telephone-message paper, which magnets stuck to the metal cupboards above my sink.

Among those old poems, I found one in which a writer’s room—or rather, multiple “rooms”—actually serve as the central image. These rooms, however, are dark with maternal guilt at stealing time from my offspring. Architecturally, they feel less like Virginia Woolf’s Writing Lodge than a nun’s cell of conscience. There, I must do penance for poems that are not composed, so much as “committed” like sins, and from which my neglected children have run away. To win my little ones back, there is no other recourse. I must get down on my knees and scrub the family threshold clean.

MEA CULPA

Into quiet rooms I go,
locking out the dark
and looking in.

Penance must be done:
such poems committed
while my children wild,
unwanted and alone
ran—a hundred years away
for all I cared
then.

I shall efface myself
scrubbing thresholds.

I shall unravel
beneath mounds of mending.

I shall wash my hands white
in hot waters.

I shall breathe mother-love
into loaves.
I shall recite picture books,
offer up rhymes,
do ring-around-rosies
till I fall down . . .

Until children, calm, cherished,
my only, again,
come running
home.

Such heavy psychological baggage! Its implication is clear: while temporary access to a room for writing is good, owning the place outright is even better. Just borrowing or renting space offers no long-term security. The human cost can skyrocket at any time. The property manager may threaten eviction. In her poem “The Landlady”, Margaret Atwood vividly describes the pitfalls of rented space. No doubt the poem was based on Atwood’s flesh-and-blood encounters with actual landladies in her youth. Yet, I can’t help reading her landlady as a powerful metaphor. I thought maternal guilt was harsh. What psychic havoc would Atwood’s landlady have added?

This landlady is not just a presence in the background, but a feral creature who ranges up and down in her “lair”. Set “loose” from civilized constraints, she is small, mean, and dangerous, a noisy predator darting like a weasel into a henhouse. Her role is a “continuous” stirring up of unease, whether the loud “squabble” below, or the steady and irritating “bicker” intruding on the thoughts of those upstairs. Imagine the tenant-writer seeking retreat in such a rented space. Constantly on edge, she would wait to be ambushed by the nightmare figure, who “is everywhere, intrusive as the smells / that bulge in under my doorsill” and who even stalks her dreams.

. . . a bulk, a knot
swollen in space. Though I have tried
to find some way around
her, my senses
are cluttered by perception
and can’t see through her.

She stands there, a raucous fact
blocking my way:
immutable, a slab
of what is real,

solid as bacon.

(The Animals in that Country, pp. 14-15)
The last thing any writer craves is “a slab / of what is real // solid as bacon” scaring off the imagination. What Atwood presents—and perhaps what makes her poem so compelling—is a dramatic, archetypal image. The landlady is not just some annoying harridan, but, for me, she has a special symbolic meaning. She represents that dreaded menace: Writer’s Block,
Despite the inherent dangers, there are times when a writer chooses to leave a room of her own at home in favour of a more public writing space. Packing up a notebook or a laptop computer, she composes on park benches, or in coffee shops. In fact, I’ll wager that every Starbucks in Toronto has its own unacknowledged writer-in-residence. Ironically, the surrounding hustle and bustle is not a distraction, but serves three purposes. First, it can prime the creative pump. Watching young lovers embrace, or a bag lady shuffle along the sidewalk, may start a poem flowing. Second, the swirl of white noise—the espresso machine, chairs scraping back, muffled voices—acts as a buffer zone. It keeps the tug and shove of a woman’s private life at a manageable distance from the work of creating. Third, a public space anchors the writer’s body in the real world, as her mind leaps into the limitless of imagination.

For have no illusions. The imagination is exciting, but also dangerous territory, from which some never return. As Virginia Woolf pointed out in her essay “Women and Fiction”,

... with memoirs and letters to help us, we are beginning to understand how abnormal is the effort needed to produce a work of art, and what shelter and what support the mind of the artist requires. (Granite and Rainbow, p. 78)

She knew whereof she spoke. Virginia Woolf herself went mad, more than once. A first sign of a coming breakdown was hearing the sparrows outside her window talking in Greek. Just how frightening the images outside the window can become is shown in a poem I wrote right after my father’s death from emphysema. Called “The Green Room”, it gives architectural expression to my angst. The title refers to my own living room, both as a physical part of the house and, with its deep green walls, as a symbol of life itself. From the first through the third and fifth stanzas, as the speaker grows dizzy with grief, the room spins faster and faster, pulling her into its desperate dance. In contrast, the second, fourth, and sixth stanzas switch to the view through imagination’s picture window. However, what lies outside is no comfort at all. It is the silver, frozen world of death, made visible only by warm breath blowing a small circle in the ice-covered glass. Throughout the poem, the two views are pitted against each other in counterpoint. The activity in the green room reflects not only the upheaval in the family’s life, but also the writer’s psychic balance knocked askew. The vision of a wider world revealed through the window of imagination is terrifying. “Mooncold”, its stars stud the blackness like ice-picks—that scratch.

THE GREEN ROOM
(after the death of my father)

Walls hung high with tilted dreams
that reach into the dark and dance,
the green room breathes
out, in,
sucks the corners smooth of dust.

The silver world outside is cracked.
Do not block the frozen glass.
Blow a bigger circle back.
Tonight no squat brown china lamp pokes light through a broken shade. The whole house swings, one darkened lung, swaying the children over their beds, rolling them into sleep.

Outside the mooncold world grows twigs. Do not pin the curtains fast. Let the ice-pick stars scratch.

The green room breathes deeper and deeper, pumping the furniture round. Pictures jiggle frame upon frame, cushions poof, the dust twirls high. Dreams spin fat with sound.

The silent world outside is sharp. Not one escapes its waiting edge. Breathe deep--oh, dance, dance.

(Familiar Faces/Private Griefs, p. 57)

Over the past three decades, Virginia Woolf’s phrase, a room of her own, has appeared repeatedly in literary criticism. It has become a watchword for feminists. It has comforted many a struggling woman writer. A little over a year ago, it took a fresh twist for me. My mother was about to turn 90. Before her gala birthday party, she made an announcement. She was tired of mowing her lawn and harvesting bushels of fruit every summer. She had painted her last wall. Forget the bundle-buggy and oven mitts. Her decision was made. She was going to retire to a seniors’ high-rise downtown.

Being the eldest daughter, I was elected to “help”. Of course, that word was a euphemism--for “take charge”. Step one would begin forthwith: disposing of her house of 28 years. The months ahead, I realized, were going to be very, very long.

As a writer, I have always been a loner. I need dream-time. I enjoy my solitude. By temperament, I have no patience with arranging practical matters in the real world. My mother is the opposite. She has never put much truck in imagination, and until her retirement, she thrived on physical activities. Resettling her happily downtown was something she looked forward to, and I dreaded. Nonetheless, I was sympathetic to her desire for change. Why be a slave to a house that was too big and a garden that annually overshot her production quotas? Like Virginia Woolf, she wanted, quite literally, “a room of her own” in which to catch her breath. After 90 years, she deserved it. With no choice but to help her, I rolled up my sleeves and began.

First, came the puzzle. How would her favourite furnishings fit into a bedsitting room? I drew up a floor plan and made paper cutouts to scale. Let’s see: maybe the chest here, an
armchair there, her desk at an angle by the window. Shifting the imaginary furniture pieces this way and that gave me the illusion of being efficient and in control. In this silent white world, there loomed no spectre of the endless sorting, packing, negotiations, e-mails, telephone calls, foot-stamping, and growls in the stomach that lay in wait ahead. On paper, everything took its own time and found its best order.

Little by little, my spirits brightened. Indeed, my mother would have a fine new room of her own. Of course, she would never write fiction there. She had no interest. But what about me? If these cutouts could symbolize her new home, what hideaway might other paper bits represent for me? The more I daydreamed, the more its plan became clear. Indeed, its dimensions were very modest: my hideaway would be less than a foot square, its white walls decorated with neatly spaced black lines. It would not be in a high-rise downtown, but much closer to hand, and as portable as a tortoiseshell. If you haven’t already guessed, the “room” I planned for myself was a manuscript. I was going to live part-time in a nonfiction book.

For over a decade, I had been gathering thoughts on the art of writing poetry. I had revised the text off and on several times. For a few years, it lay forgotten in the proverbial bottom drawer. Now, after a long hiatus, of course it would need fresh thinking. Even better, I’d have to rewrite large sections. In other words, as a project it was perfect: sufficiently complex and absorbing to carry me through the many long months ahead. Every time the lawyer, the banks, Bell Canada, the real-estate agent, the auction house, or the movers frayed my nerves and patience, the snowy pages would give me an hour’s peace in which to recover. In that world of imagination, there would be none who were rude, or forgot appointments, or neglected to return calls. Impatience would melt away, as I lost myself in the pleasures of rephrasing a clumsy sentence, or savouring a new quotation. A whole book—Yes! That would become my own room of my own, to disappear inside whenever the chores of resettling my mother became frustrating.

And I did. For the next nine months I slipped inside its quiet pages almost daily. Instead of popping antacid pills, I reworked a key idea. Miffed by a rude clerk or a broken appointment, I mailed out another dozen requests for reprint rights and felt in charge again. With every rephrasing that made a murky sentence sparkle, my ruffled spirit hummed a ditty. Write, read, research, revise; type, read, revise again. What a wonderful rhythm there was to the process. It reminded me of dropping pebbles into the water, each fanning out yet another circle of calm, as the long days wore on.

That manuscript eventually became A Magical Clockwork: The Art of Writing the Poem. As I mentioned earlier, a writer’s aesthetics will often reflect the room she chooses to write in. Since the book itself had become the room of my own, the similarity between the role it played in my life and my own theory of art described in its pages is hardly surprising. Both were based on the same idea, that of the parallel world. At the beginning of Chapter One I explain:

First, I assume that art of any kind is neither life nor its direct imitation. Art, whether narrative, antinarrative, or nonnarrative, is made; life just happens. The outside world is fluid and resists all attempts to pin it down, as philosophers over the centuries have discovered. For writers that should be a dead issue, since their creations inhabit a separate make-believe space. Art never has, and never will, become the outside world; it exists apart, a parallel world created by the
imagination. Within the boundaries of that parallel world, the author can choose to play god, whose power is exercised through the word. (p. 1)

Play god? Yes, I had rediscovered that thrill when I first moved my paper cutouts over the floor plan of my mother’s bedsitting room. And by having the manuscript to work on, I had extended that same symbolic control to my own creative life, when threatened by the chaos of moving. What I preached from cover to cover in the book was exactly how I myself was managing. In the long months it took to complete A Magical Clockwork, I sold my mother’s house, manoeuvred through countless logistical complications, and finally got her settled into her own new room of her own downtown. I prevailed by the very grace of having the manuscript to slide into. I even scheduled my writing deadlines to match each step in her move. By the time she’d completed her first month in the seniors’ high-rise, my finished manuscript, right on schedule, was on an airplane out west to the printer. Indeed, her retirement and my art had rooms of our own in parallel worlds.

Virginia Woolf was fortunate to achieve financial independence early in life. By age 22, she was receiving an allowance of 50 pounds a year from her father’s estate. Of greater monetary significance, five years later she also inherited an income of 500 pounds a year from her role model and aunt, the Quaker writer Caroline Emelia Stephen. Since it made such a difference in her own life, Virginia Woolf saw material security as the gift that would free a woman writer to realize her full potential. In “Women and Fiction”, she predicted, “With money and leisure at their service, women will naturally occupy themselves more than has hitherto been possible with the craft of letters.” (p. 84) Money and leisure, she believed, would open a space for the mind. There it could play freely, as quoted earlier from her diary, like “coming through Firle woods” or “looking into the garden, the sun beaming steadily.”

As a woman writer, I am grateful for Virginia Woolf’s insights on the challenges we face. Nonetheless, I believe that she was partly wrong. Yes, money can help to free us from everyday chores and concerns. It does buy leisure. However, money and leisure are no guarantee that a woman will write more often, or better--or, for that matter, that she will even write at all. When an afternoon can be spent playing tennis, or enjoying the ballet, who wants to drudge all alone over a manuscript? Only we women who write because we must--and we do so not by benefit of material circumstances, but in spite of them.

Which brings me to September 11. The day after the terrorist attacks on the United States, American Poet Laureate Billy Collins was asked if he was composing a poem for the nation. No, he said. The events had stripped him of words, as they had countless other poets, including myself. How could a few lines scrawled on paper come to terms with such evil? In its wake, our work felt utterly trivial. Was art, we agonized, now meaningless?

Certainly, the enormity of those monstrous acts will take time to digest. After two months of soul-searching, however, I have been able to accept that, yes, art does indeed matter, very much. While terror destroys, art is the counterforce. The simple act of writing a poem or a story, no matter how modest the result, in itself is an affirmation. Out of nothing, something has been created. Through its images and symbols, art celebrates our ability to shape, to order, and to find meaning, and by so doing, to nurture good. As Sir Winston Churchill said long ago, art embodies the values of a civilized life that we are fighting for.

Within this new context, I am going to repeat what I said a few moments ago. We continue
to “write, because we must--and we do so not by benefit of material circumstances, but in spite of them.” Whether novelists, essayists, or poets, women shall go on as before, to scribble on dripping pink pieces of paper in the midst of washing the dishes, or hunch over a notebook in a noisy Starbucks, even compose on a crowded subway train.

In short, for the woman writer, especially now, a room of her own exists not just as a physical structure, owned or borrowed, in the real world, out there. It also exists inside her skull, as a frame of mind. It is, if you will, a virtual castle--or cubby hole--in the air. An inheritance, or a nine-to-five pay cheque, or a generous husband are not the only means to creative housing for a woman writer. To inhabit that room of our own, independent of bricks and wallboard, we can construct it of our very words.

**SOURCES**


Susan Ioannou is the author of *A Magical Clockwork: The Art of Writing the Poem*. She recently delivered this essay as a talk for The Literary Table of The Arts and Letters Club of Toronto.