

ROOM

Good evening.

Before I begin, I must ask you to imagine a room.

Any room. But it must be your room.

A room of which you are mistress, and where you can close the door to the world outside, and sit and think; perhaps even write.

A retreat.

A sanctuary.

A refuge.

Call it what you will. But it must be a room that you can call your own.

Do you have such a room?

I pity you if you do not.

A room of one's own is not a luxury but a necessity.

This is not a pretty room, is it? Some of the furniture, well, I have seen better. But it will do.

It is our room now.

How are your seats? (Are they) comfortable?

Good.

(She smiles)

But you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction - what has that got to do with a room of one's own. I will try to explain.

When you asked me to speak about women and fiction, I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant. They might mean simply a few remarks about women writers in general, a few about women writers in particular; a tribute, some witticism if possible, a respectful allusion, a reference and one would have done. But at second sight the words seemed not so simple. The title women and fiction might mean women and the fiction they write and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light.

But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer - to hand you

after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantel-piece forever.

All I could do was offer you an opinion upon one minor point - a woman must have a room of her own if she is to write fiction, and that as you will see leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and the true nature of fiction unsolved. I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions - women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems. But in order to make some amends I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room. I am going to develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought which led me to think this. Perhaps if I lay bare the ideas, the prejudices, that lie behind this statement you will find that they have some bearing upon women and upon fiction.

At any rate when a subject is highly controversial - and any question about sex is that - one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncracies of the speaker.

Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact.

As I try to answer it, I may perhaps turn up a memory or two; I may perhaps revive certain of your memories; at any rate, I will try to give you facts; and though of course I shall not tell the whole truth, perhaps I shall tell enough to set you guessing.

It is true I am a woman. My profession is literature.

It seems to me possible, perhaps desirable, that I may be the only person in this room who has committed the folly of writing, trying to write, or failing to write, a novel.

"I" is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being.

Lies will flow from my lips but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them.

It is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping.

If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the wastepaper basket and forget all about it.

Here then was I.

"Now may I pluck," Isa murmured, picking a rose, "my single flower. The white or the pink? And press it so, twixt thumb and finger ..." She dropped her flower. What single, separate leaf could she press? None. Nor stray by the beds alone. She must go on.

Call me Emily

Call me Mary

Call me Isa

Or by any name you please, it is not a matter of importance.

It is so difficult to describe any human being.

English is a mixed language, a rich language; a language unmatched for its sound and colour, for its power and imagery and suggestion.

As I was going to St. Ives,
I met a man with seven wives.
Each wife had seven sacks,
Each sack had seven cats,
Each cat had seven kits.
Kits, cats, sacks, and wives,
How many were going to St. Ives?

If life has a base, it is memory.

My first memory was - was of red and purple flowers against a black background, my mother's dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close, and can still see purple and red and blue, I think against the black; they must have been anemones, I suppose.

Anemones. (She smiles again.)

Perhaps we were going to St Ives; more probably, for from the light it must have been evening, we were coming back to the city. But it is more convenient artistically to suppose that we were going to St Ives, for that will lead to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories.

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills - then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.

This room explains a great deal.

Is it not possible - I often wonder - that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it - the past - as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen to the past ... I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start.

I can only note that the past is beautiful because one never realizes an emotion at the time. It expands later, and thus we don't have complete emotions about the present, only about the past.

What is meant by "reality"? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable - now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech - and then there it is again, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates.

I hope I am not giving away professional secrets if I say that a novelist's chief desire is to be as unconscious as possible; to induce a state of perpetual lethargy so that nothing may disturb or disquiet the mysterious nosings about, feelings round, darts, dashes and sudden discoveries of that very shy and illusive spirit, the imagination.

I think that Mr. Eliot has written some of the loveliest single lines in modern poetry. But how intolerant he is of the old usages and politenesses of society - respect for the weak, consideration for the dull! As I sun myself upon the intense and ravishing beauty of one of his lines, and reflect that I must make a dizzy and dangerous leap to the next, and so on from line to line, like an acrobat flying precariously from bar to bar, I cry out, I confess, for the old decorums, and envy the indolence of my ancestors who, instead of spinning madly through mid-air, dreamt quietly in the shade.

Recall, then, some event that has left a distinct impression on you - how at the corner of the street, perhaps, you passed two people talking. A tree shook; an electric light danced; the tone of the talk was comic, but also tragic; a whole vision, an entire conception, seemed contained in that moment. But when you attempt to reconstruct it in words, you will find that it breaks into a thousand conflicting impressions. Some must be subdued; others emphasised; in the process you will lose, probably, all grasp upon the emotion itself.

It is very difficult to do.

Here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties - one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened.

I have recently begun writing a memoir - my sister Vanessa said that if I did not start writing my memoirs I should soon be too old. So I have been thinking about these difficulties, and about the past as I have been making my sketch of the past.

Forgive me if I digress for a while.

The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say "This is what happened"; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened. And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened.

Every one in this room is a judge of character. Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practiced character-reading and had some skill in the art. Our marriages, our friendships depend on it; our business largely depends on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help.

I still seem to myself a subject of inexhaustible and fascinating anxiety - a volcano in perpetual eruption. Am I alone in my egotism when I say that never does the pale light of dawn filter through the blinds but I open my eyes and exclaim, "Good God! Here I am again!" - not always with pleasure, often with pain; sometimes with a spasm of acute disgust - but always, always with interest.

And if I speak in the first person, with intolerable egotism, I will ask you to excuse me.

Who was I then?

Adeline Virginia Stephen, the second daughter of Leslie and Julia Prinsep Stephen, descended from a great many people, some famous, others obscure; born into a large connection, born not of rich parents, but of well-to-do parents, born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate world; so that I could if I liked to take the trouble, say a great deal here not only about my mother and father but about my uncles and aunts, cousins and friends.

But I do not know how much of this, or what part of this, made me feel what I felt in the nursery at St. Ives. I do not know how far I differ from other people.

To describe oneself truly one must have some standard of comparison; was I clever, stupid, good looking, ugly passionate, cold - ? Owing partly to the fact that I was never at school, never competed in any way with children of my own age, I have never been able to compare my gifts and defects with other people's.

But of course there was one external reason for the intensity of this first impression: the impression of the waves and the acorn on the blind; the feeling, as I describe it sometimes to myself, of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow - it was due partly to the many months we spent in the city. The change of nursery was a great change. And there was the long train journey; and the excitement. I remember the dark; the lights; the stir of the going up to bed.

"Where do I wander?" she mused. "Down what draughty tunnels? Where the eyeless wind blows? And there grows nothing for the eye. No rose. To issue where? In some harvestless dim field where no evening lets fall her mantle; nor sun rises. All's equal there. Change is not; nor the mutable and lovable; nor greetings nor partings; nor furtive findings and feelings, where hand seeks hand and eye seeks shelter from the eye."

The mind is certainly a very mysterious organ, about which nothing whatever is known, though we depend upon it so completely. Why do I feel that there are severances and oppositions in the mind, as there are strains from obvious causes on the body? What does one mean by "the unity of the mind,"? For clearly the mind has so great a power of

concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being.

It can separate itself from the people on the street, for example, and think of itself as apart from them, at an upper window looking down on them. Or it can think with other people spontaneously, as, for instance, in a crowd waiting to hear some piece of news read out. It can think back through its fathers or through its mothers.

I was gazing out the window of my room yesterday, thinking of nothing in particular. I had just finished writing for the morning. There was a complete lull and suspension of traffic as so often happens in the city. Nothing came down the street; nobody passed. A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner down the street, and took people and eddied them along, as a stream takes a boat or dead leaves.

Now it was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxicab; it brought all three together at a point directly beneath my window; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere.

The sight was ordinary enough; what was strange was the rhythmical order with which my imagination had invested it; and the fact that the ordinary sight of two people getting into a cab had the power to communicate something of their own seeming satisfaction. The sight of two people coming down the street and meeting at the corner seems to ease the mind of some strain, I thought, watching the taxi turn and make off.

Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives. But some of these states of mind seem, even if adopted spontaneously, to be less comfortable than others. In order to keep oneself continuing in them one is unconsciously holding something back, and gradually the repression becomes an effort. But there may be some state of mind in which one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back.

For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab the mind felt as if after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion.

The obvious reason would be that it is natural for the sexes to cooperate. the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction that it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the sexes in the body, and whether also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness. And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates the man.

If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and the woman also must have intercourse with the man in her.

I am telling myself the story of the world from the beginning.

I wish you could live in my brain for a week. It is washed with the most violent waves of emotion. What about? I don't know. It begins on waking; and I never know which - shall I be happy? Shall I be miserable.

I never really know which.

But one could perhaps go a little deeper into the question of novel writing and the effect of sex upon the novelist. If one shuts one's eyes and thinks of the novel as a whole, it would seem to be a creation owning a certain looking-glass likeness to life, though of course with simplifications and distortions innumerable. At any rate, it is a structure leaving a shape on the mind's eye, built now in squares, now pagoda shaped, now throwing out wings and arcades, now solidly compact and domed-like the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Constantinople. This shape, as I think back over certain famous novels, starts in one the kind of emotion that is appropriate to it. But that emotion at once blends itself with others, for the "shape" is not made by the relation of stone to stone, but by the relation of human being to human being. Thus a novel starts in us all sorts of antagonistic and opposed emotions. Life conflicts with something that is not life.

Hence the difficulty about coming to any agreement about novels, and the immense sway that our private prejudices have upon us, On the one hand we feel you - John the hero - must live, or I shall be in the depths of despair. On the other, we feel, Alas, John you must die, because the shape of the book requires it. Life conflicts with something that is not life. Then since life it is in part, we judge it as life. James is the sort of man I must detest, one says. Or, This is a farago of absurdity. I could never feel anything of the sort myself. The whole structure, it is obvious, thinking back on any famous novel, is one of infinite complexity. The wonder is that any book so composed holds together for more than a year or two, or can possibly mean to the English - or American - reader what it means for the Russian or the Chinese. But they do hold together occasionally very remarkably.

And what holds them together in these rare instances of survival (I am thinking of War and Peace) is something that one calls integrity, though it has nothing to do with paying one's bills or behaving honourably in an emergency. What one means by integrity, in the case of the novelist, is the conviction that he gives one that this is the truth. Yes, one feels, I should never have thought that this could be so; I have never known people behaving like that. But you have convinced me that so it is, so it happens.

One holds every phrase, every scene to the light as one reads - for Nature seems, very oddly, to have provided us with an inner light by which to judge of the novelist's integrity or disintegrity. Or perhaps it is rather that Nature, in her most irrational mood, has traced in invisible ink on the walls of the mind a premonition which these great artists confirm; a sketch which only needs to be held to the fire of genius to become visible. When one so exposes it and sees it come to

life one exclaims in rapture, But this is what I have always felt and known and desired!

If on the other hand, these poor sentences that one takes and tests rouse first a quick and eager response with their bright colouring and their dashing gestures but there they stop: something seems to check them in their development; or if they bring to light only a faint scribble in that corner and a blot over there, and nothing appears whole and entire, then one heaves a sigh of disappointment and says, Another failure. This novel has come to grief.

And for the most part, of course novels do come to grief somewhere. The imagination falters under the enormous strain. The insight is confused; it can no longer distinguish between the true and the false; it has no longer the strength to go on with the vast labour that calls at every moment for the uses of so many different faculties.

But how would this be affected by the sex of the novelists? Would the fact of her sex in any way interfere with the integrity of a woman novelist - that integrity which I take to be the back bone of the writer.

Now begins the part I always like.

I love talking about reading. It is impossible to read too much.

Listen to this.

"Then I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen: that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character than was here in my reach. I valued what was good in Mrs Fairfax, and what was good in Adele; but I believed in the existence of the other and more vivid kinds of goodness, and what I believed in I wished to behold.

"Who blames me? Many, no doubt, and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes-.

"It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

"When thus alone I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh-."

That is an awkward break.

Isn't it?

It is upsetting to come upon Grace Poole all of a sudden. The continuity is disturbed.

And what were they blaming Charlotte Bronte for when Jane Eyre went up on the roof and looked over the distant fields?

The woman who wrote these words has genius in her, but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself when she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die, young and cramped with her lot.

"Anybody may blame me who likes."

One has only to skim those old forgotten novels and listen to the tone of voice in which they are written to divine that the writer was meeting criticism; she was saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was "only a woman", or protesting that she was "as good as a man". She met that criticism as her temperament dictated, with docility and diffidence, or with anger and emphasis. It doesn't matter which it was; she was thinking of something other than the thing itself. Down comes her book on our heads. There is a flaw in the centre of it. She had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others.

But how impossible it must have been for them not to budge either to the right or to the left. What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society to hold fast to the things as they saw it without shrinking.

It would have needed a very stalwart young woman to disregard all those snubs and chidings, and sometimes even promises of prizes - if they would be good and keep with certain limits. One must have been something of a firebrand to say to oneself, Oh but they can't buy literature too. Literature is open to everybody.

You cannot write without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex.

(She had come into the stable yard where the dogs were chained; where the buckets stood; where the great pear tree spread its ladder of branches against the wall. The tree, whose roots went beneath the flags, was weighted with hard, green pears. Fingering one of them she murmured: "How am I burdened with what they drew from the earth; memories; possessions. This is the burden that the past laid on me, last little donkey in the long caravanserai crossing the desert. -Kneel down, said the past. - Fill your pannier from our tree. Rise up, donkey. Go your way till your heels blister and your hoofs crack.")

But to tell you my story - it is a simple one. You have only got to figure to yourselves a girl in a bedroom with a pen in her hand. She had only to move that pen from left to right.

I discovered that I needed to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her - you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can.

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult areas of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it - in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.

And when I came to write, I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell upon my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen, she slipped behind me and whispered: "My dear, you are a young woman. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own."

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing.

Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had dispatched her. The struggle was severe; it took much time that had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar; or in roaming the world in search of adventures. But it was a real experience.

What a subject to talk about on a night like this.

If I have laid stress upon these experiences of mine, it is because I believe that they are, though in different forms, yours also.

But to fix my mind back to the nursery. It had a balcony - there was a partition, but it joined the balcony of my father's and mother's bedroom. My mother would come out onto her balcony in a white dressing gown. There were passion flowers growing on the wall; they were great starry blossoms, with purple streaks, and large green buds, part empty, part full.

If I were a painter I should paint these impressions in pale yellow, silver and green. There was the pale yellow blind; the green sea, and the silver of the passion flowers. I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent. I should make a picture of curved petals, of shells, of things that were semi-transparent; I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline.

Everything would be large and dim, and what was seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf - sounds indistinguishable from sights. Sound and sight seem to make equal parts of these first impressions.

When I think of the early morning in bed I also hear the caw of rooks falling from a great height. The sound seems to fall through an elastic, gummy air; which holds it up; which prevents it from being sharp and distinct. The quality of the air seemed to suspend sound. To let it sink down slowly, as if it were caught in a blue gummy veil. The rooks cawing is part of the waves breaking - one, two, one, two - and the splash as the wave drew back, and then it gathered again, and I lay there half awake, half asleep, drawing in such ecstasy as I cannot describe.

The next memory - all these colour and sound memories hang together at St. Ives - was much more robust; it was highly sensual. It was later. It still makes me feel warm; as if everything were ripe; humming; sunny; smelling so many smells at once; and all making a whole that even now makes me stop - as I stopped then going down to the beach; I stopped at the top to look down at the gardens. They were sunk beneath the road. The apples were on a level with one's head. The gardens gave off a murmur of bees; the apples were red and gold; there were also pink flowers; and grey and silver leaves. The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked. But again I cannot describe that rapture. It was rapture rather than ecstasy.

The strength of these pictures - but sight was always then so much mixed with sound that picture is not the right word - the strength anyhow of these impressions makes me again digress.

Those moments - in the nursery, on the road to the beach - can still be more real than the present moment. This I have just tested. As I was walking around our room just now, and talking to you, I was seeing you through the sight I saw here - the nursery and the road to the beach. At times I can go back to St Ives more completely than I can just this moment. I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there.

Is it not possible - I often wonder - that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it - the past - as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen to the past ... I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start.

But the peculiarity of these two strong memories is that each was very simple. I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture. Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories, perhaps it accounts for their strength. Later we add to feelings much that makes them more complex; and therefore less strong, less isolated, less

complete. But instead of analyzing this, here is an instance of what I mean - my feeling about the looking glass in the hall.

Who was I then?

There was a small looking glass in the hall. It had, I remember, a ledge with a brush on it. By standing on tiptoe I could see my face in the glass. When I was six or seven perhaps, I got in to a habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I were sure I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed attached to it. Why was this so?

One obvious reason occurs to me - my sister Vanessa and I were both what was called tomboys; that is we played cricket, scrambled over rocks, climbed trees, were said not to care for clothes and so on. Perhaps therefore to have been found looking in the glass would have been against our tomboy code. But I think my feeling of shame went a great deal deeper than that. And it has lasted all my life, long after the tomboy phase was over. I cannot now powder my nose in public. Everything to do with dress - to be fitted, to come into a room wearing a new dress - still frightens me; at least makes me shy, self conscious, uncomfortable. Yet femininity was very strong in my family. We were famous for our beauty - my mother's beauty, my sister Stella's beauty, gave me as early as I can remember, pride and pleasure. What then gave me this feeling of shame, unless it were that I inherited some opposite instinct.

My father was spartan, ascetic, puritanical. He had I think no feeling for pictures; no ear for music; no sense of the sounds of words. This leads me to think that my natural love for beauty was checked by some ancestral dread. Yet this did not prevent me from feeling ecstasies and raptures spontaneously and intensely and without any shame or the least sense of guilt, so long as they were disconnected with my own body. I thus detect another element in the shame which I had in being caught looking at myself in the glass in the hall. I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body.

(The pear was hard as stone. She looked down at the cracked flags beneath which the roots spread. "That was the burden," she mused, "laid on me in the cradle; murmured by waves; breathed by restless elm trees; crooned by singing women; what we must remember: what we would forget." She looked up. The gilt hands of the stable clock pointed inflexibly at two minutes to the hour. The clock was about to strike. "Now comes the lightning," she muttered, "from the stone blue sky. The thongs are burst that the dead tied. Loosed are our possessions.")

A self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living.

It is almost impossible that I should be here.

Another memory, also of the hall, may help to explain this. There was a slab outside the dining room for standing dishes upon. Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth, my half brother, lifted me on to this, and as I sat there he began to explore my body. I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop. His hand explored my private parts too. I remember resenting, disliking

it - what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling. It must have been strong since I still recall it. This seems to show that a feeling about certain parts of the body; how they must be touched; must be instinctive. It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on her birthday but was born many thousands of years ago: and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past.

What a subject to talk about on a night like this!

We are all women here, however, and let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen.

I do not know how much of this, or what part of this, made me feel what I felt.

Why should I have felt shame then?

I don't know.

And this throws light not merely on my own case, but on one of the problems I touched at the beginning of this evening; why it is so difficult to give any account of the person to whom things happen. The person is evidently immensely complicated. Witness the incident of the looking glass. Though I have done my best to explain why I was ashamed of looking at my own face I have only been able to discover some possible reasons; there may be others; I do not suppose that I have got at the truth; yet this is a simple incident; and it happened to me personally; and I have no motive for lying about it.

In spite of all this, people write what they call "lives" of other people; that is, they collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown.

Let me add a dream; for it may refer to the incident of the looking glass. I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face - the face of an animal - suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened. Was I looking in the glass one day when something in the background moved, and seemed to me alive? I cannot be sure. But I have always remembered the other face in the glass, whether it was a dream or a fact, and that it frightened me.

This leads me to another digression, which perhaps even explains a little of my own psychology; even of other people's. Often when I have been writing one of my so-called novels I have been baffled by this same problem; that is how to describe what I call in my private shorthand - "non being". Everyday includes much more non being.

Yesterday for example was as it happened a good day; above average in being. It was fine. I enjoyed writing a few pages of a new "memoir", I walked over the down and along the river; and save the tide was out, the country which I notice very closely always, was coloured and shaded as I like - there were the willows, I remember, all plummy and soft green and purple against the blue. These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being.

I have already forgotten what Leonard and I talked about at lunch; and at tea; although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool.

This is always so. A great part of everyday is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner, cooking dinner, washing. When it is a bad day the proportion of non being is much larger. I had a slight temperature last week; almost the whole day was non-being. The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being. I think Jane Austen can; and Trollope; perhaps Thackeray and Dickens and Tolstoy.

I have never been able to do both. I have tried -

As a child then, my days, just as they do now, contained a large proportion of this cotton wool, this non being. Week after week passed at St Ives and nothing made any dint on me. Then for no reason that I know about, there was a sudden violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life.

I will give a few instances.

The first: I was fighting with my brother Thoby on the lawn. We were pummelling each other with our fists. Just as I raised my fist to hit him, I felt: why hurt another person? I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me. I remember the feeling. It was a feeling of hopeless sadness. It was as if I became aware of something terrible, and of my own powerlessness. I slunk off alone, feeling horribly depressed.

The second instance was also in the garden at St Ives. I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; "that is the whole", I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower: and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower.

It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later on.

The third case was also at St Ives. Some people called Valpy had been staying at St Ives, and had left. We were waiting at dinner one night, when somehow I overheard my father or my mother say that Mr Valpy had killed himself. The next thing I remember is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it. I stood there looking at the grey green creases of the bark - it was a moonlit night - in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralyzed.

These are three instances of exceptional moments. I often tell them over, or rather they come to the surface unexpectedly. But now that for the first time I have said them in public, to you, I realize something that I have never realized before. Two of the moments ended in a state of despair. The other ended, on the contrary, in a state of satisfaction. When I said about the flower "that is the whole", I felt I had made a discovery. I felt that I had put away in my mind something

that I should go back to, to turn over and explore. It strikes me now that this was a profound difference. It was the difference in the first place between despair and satisfaction.

This difference I think arose from the fact that I was quite unable to deal with the pain of discovering that people hurt each other, that a man I had seen had killed himself. The sense of horror held me powerless. But in the case of the flower I found a reason; and was thus able to deal with the sensation. I was not powerless. I was conscious - if only at a distance - that I should in time explain it. I do not know if I was older when I saw the flower than I was when I had the other two experiences.

I only know that many of these exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant, myself passive. This suggests that as one gets older one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation; and this explanation blunts the sledgehammer force of the blow. I think this is true, because though I still have the peculiarity that I receive these sudden shocks, they are now always welcome; after the first surprise, I always feel that they are particularly valuable.

And so I go on to suppose that the shock receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it.

I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words.

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together.

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.

All artists I suppose feel something like this.

This intuition of mine - it is so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me - has certainly given its scale to my life ever since I saw the flower in the bed by the front door at St Ives. If I were painting myself I should have to find some - rod, shall I say - something that would stand for the conception. It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says or does; one is

living all the time in relations to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool. And this conception affects me everyday. I prove this, now by spending the morning writing, when I might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful. I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else.

This room explains a great deal.

A self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living.

It is so difficult to describe any human being.

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there.

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.

There is no limit to the horizon, and no "method," no experiment, even of the wildest - is forbidden, but only falsity and pretense. "The proper stuff of fiction" does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss.

All that you will have to explore. Above all, you must illuminate your own soul with its profundities and its shallows, and its vanities and its generousities, and say what your beauty means to you or your plainness, and what is your relation to the ever changing and turning world of gloves and shoes and stuffs swaying up and down among the faint scents that come through the chemists' bottles down arcades of dress material over a floor of pseudo-marble.

You cannot write without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex.

To write a work of genius is almost always a feat of prodigious difficulty. Everything is against the likelihood that it will come from the writer's mind whole and entire. Generally material circumstances are against it. Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down. Further, accentuating all these difficulties and making them harder to bear is the world's notorious indifference. It does not ask people to write poems and novels and histories; it does not need them.

("That was the burden," she mused, "laid on me in the cradle; murmured by waves; breathed by restless elm trees; crooned by singing women; what we must remember: what we would forget." She looked up. The gilt hands of

the stable clock pointed inflexibly at two minutes to the hour. The clock was about to strike. "Now comes the lightning," she muttered, "from the stone blue sky. The thongs are burst that the dead tied. Loosed are our possessions.")

I am, as I have admitted, filled, not with forebodings of death, but with hopes for the future. But one does not always want to be thinking of the future, if, as sometimes happens, one is living in the present.

Therefore I would ask you to write all sorts of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast. For I am by no means confining you to fiction. If you would please me - and there are thousands like me - you would write books of travel and adventure, and research and scholarship, and history and biography, and criticism and philosophy and science. By so doing, you will certainly profit the art of fiction. For books have a way of influencing each other. Fiction will be much better standing cheek by jowl with poetry and philosophy. Moreover, if you consider any great figure of the past, like Sappho, like the Lady Murasaki, like Emily Bronte, you will find that she is an inheritor as well as an originator, and has come into existence because women have come to have the habit of writing naturally; so that even as a prelude to poetry such activity on your part would be invaluable.

There runs through these comments and discursions - and my very long digressions - the conviction - or is it the instinct - that good books are desirable and that good writers, even if they show every variety of human depravity, are still good human beings. Thus when I ask you to write more books I am urging you to do what will be for your good and for the good of the world at large. How to justify this instinct or belief I do not know, for philosophic words, if one has not been educated at university, are apt to play one false.

What is meant by "reality"? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable - now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech - and then there it is again, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is, But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates.

Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality. It is her business to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us. So that when I ask you to have a room of your own, I am asking you to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life, it would appear, whether one can impart it or not.

Here I would stop, but the pressure of convention decrees that every speech must end with a peroration. And a peroration addressed to women should have something, you will agree, particularly exalting and ennobling about it. I should implore you to remember your responsibilities, to be higher, more spiritual; I should remind you how much depends upon you and what an influence you can exert upon the future.

But when I rummage in my own mind I find no noble sentiments about being companions and equals and influencing the world to higher ends. I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be one self than anything else. Do not dream of influencing other people, I would say, if I knew how to make it sound exalted. Think of things in themselves.

And again I am reminded by dipping into newspapers and novels and biographies that when a woman speaks to women she should have something very unpleasant up her sleeve. Women are hard on women, Women dislike women. Women - but are you not sick to death of the word. I can assure you that I am.

Let us agree, then, that a lecture given by a woman to women should end with something particularly disagreeable.

But how does it go? What can I think of? The truth is I often like women.

Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.

I like their unconventionality. I like their subtlety. I like their anonymity. I like - but I must not run on in this way.

How can I further encourage you?

There must be freedom and there must be peace.

One has only to read, to look, to listen, to remember.

I have enjoyed myself in this room so much.

My time is up.

I must cease.

Thank you.