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Tour: Women's Writing

Feminists argue that writing by women has been by and large undervalued by literary culture for centuries. There were women who were writing, but often they struggled to get into print and when they did, even if their work was popular, they work was considered frivolous and forgotten beyond their lifetime.

A good starting point for considerations of gender on Great Writers Inspire is the Feminist Approaches to Literature collection [1]. However, this site tour will introduce you to some of women writers included on Great Writers Inspire, and highlight some interesting resources which will help you to give women writers the attention they deserve.

Abigail Williams and Kate O'Connor introduce Aphra Behn [2] as 'a woman in a world of men, a staunch Royalist, a spy, and a scarlet woman condemned for loose morals'. She was also the first woman in England to identify herself as a professional writer. If this description alone is not enough to convince you of Behn's importance, she is described [3] by another significant woman writer, Virginia Woolf [4] in a chapter from her work *A Room of One's Own [5]*.

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own [5]* also offers other suggestions you might like to learn more about on this tour. She introduces her discussion of women and fiction in chapter one:

'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 Fanny Burney [6]; a few more about Jane Austen [7]; a tribute to the Brontës [?] a respectful allusion to George Eliot [8] [?] and one would have done.'

Woolf doesn't deliver exactly on this, although *A Room of One's Own [5]* is certainly a recommended text. Instead she goes on to discuss the need for the literal and figurative space required for women's writing. You can learn more about Burney [6], Austen [7], Charlotte Brontë [9], and George Eliot [8] here on Great Writers Inspire.

Kate O'Connor takes her title from Woolf's description of Frances Burney as the 'Mother of English Fiction' in a short essay [6] which introduces the author of courtship novels such as *Evelina* [10] (which you can read online).

Jane Austen [7] certainly needs little introduction as a major author, and her most well known novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* [11] are available for free download. However, on this website you can view and share a fascinating lecture by Professor Kathryn Sutherland [12] which discusses the drafting process of Austen seen in an unfinished manuscript, 'The Watsons?, recently purchased by the University of Oxford.

Charlotte Brontë [9] was one of three literary sisters, and it says something about women's writing that all three approached publishers under male pseudonyms (in Charlotte's case, Curer Bell) in order to have their early works published. Erin Nyborg draws on feminist theories on literary femininities in an intriguing discussion

[13] which covers both Brontë's *Jane Eyre* [14], but also the 2002 novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* by Michael Faber.

Dr Catherine Brown introduces George Eliot in a video [15] which not only indicates her sizable intellect (evidenced by ?a very large brain', observed by a phrenologist), but situates her intellectual unpopularity with previous generations within a feminist framework. If your brain is large enough, you could follow up with Dr Brown's lecture series of George Eliot [16].

Finally, having viewed these major figures in literary history, but not head to our Library [17] and seek out other works by women, or literary representations of women. Simply searching for 'women' in the title will bring up some resources for you to explore.

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