Chained Thoughts Broken by Chains of Thoughts
An Analysis of the Narrative Style in *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf

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Abstract

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The purpose of this essay is to analyse the narrative style used in Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own in order to show in which ways it supports and reinforces the author’s arguments in her quest for a more equal society. One of the most prominent stylistic means applied by Woolf is her ‘train of thought’, linking one reflection to another like wagons in a railway convoy or like loops in a chain (therefore also sometimes referred to as ‘chain of thought’ in dictionaries). By examining how different rhetorical devices are applied within this train or chain of thought and in which ways these strategies are linked to the main elements of persuasion (ethos, pathos and logos) in Aristotelian Rhetoric, I have found that one of Woolf’s central themes - the resentment against confinement and the advocacy of androgyny or mixed-gendered thinking - is mirrored in her style. It reflects the author’s call to resist society’s restrictions by its unrestricted combination of different rhetorical strategies; this mixture of stylistic, partly gender-neutral devices helps her to create a common ground where she can reach and appeal to both genders in a very effective and innovative way, thus enabling her chain of thoughts to break some of our chained thoughts.

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A Room of One’s Own was one of Virginia Woolf’s best-selling books. Thousands of readers have been intrigued by her investigation of the underlying mechanisms operating in a society that has produced innumerable male authors, but very few women writers; and most of those readers would certainly agree that Woolf’s ideas have “enlightened, outraged, provoked and comforted”, as claimed by the publisher Penguin. But what is it exactly that has made such an impression on the readers? In this essay I will examine the narrative style in A Room of One’s Own and show how it reinforces Woolf’s arguments and helps to increase the reader’s awareness of the problems connected with patriarchal society’s restrictions of women.

First, I will start with a short description of the book’s background, since the form of the book is relevant for the analysis. This background will be followed by an account of the main strategies used in Aristotelian Rhetoric (that is, a definition of the terms pathos, logos and ethos), as these strategies play a major part concerning the impact of Woolf’s text on the reader. Secondly, I will discuss some of the most important literary devices and strategies used in A Room of One’s Own and show how they are linked to the Aristotelian Appeals mentioned before.

A Room of One’s Own was based on two lectures for women students at Newhawn and Girlington College in Britain in 1928. Woolf had been asked to talk about the subject “Women and Fiction” and the very beginning of the book looks like an essay. However, the essay form is quickly replaced by the genre fiction, since “Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact” (Woolf, ROO 4). First of all, this statement questions the often held perception that truth is solely based on (historical) facts, and this questioning is in line with Aristotle’s notion about the role of rhetorics: “The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. […] The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may

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1 It sold well from the very beginning: “The sales of A Room are unprecedented […], have beaten Orlando […]. We have sold, I think, 5500; & our next year’s income is made” (Woolf’s diary 1929, qtd in Rich)
happen [...] - what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. [...] [P]oetry tends to express the universal, history the particular” (Aristotle 68). Moreover, Woolf backs up her statement by giving an account of her attempts to find facts about women in the library – “If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself [...] is truth?” (Woolf, ROO 29-30) - but has to conclude that there were hardly any facts or details available about women in history, so fiction is indeed likely to contain more truth than fact.

Thus, a fictional approach replaces the traditional form of an essay; there is no doubt, however, that one of Woolf ‘s aims is to promote gender equality, so her fiction contains very much social criticism, which has made it difficult for literary experts to categorize this particular book. Even though it consists to a large degree of fiction, it is for example listed under Non-fiction in Wikipedia and under Criticism (by the publisher) in Three Guineas. And while professor Catherine Lavender calls it an "extended essay", some others avoid the classification of this fictitious story-essay altogether. An example of this avoidance can be seen in the following quote made by Elaine Showalter: "In her fiction, but especially in A Room of One's Own, she is the architect of female space" (Woolf Seminar); by using the conjunction "but" instead of "and" she marks that there is a difference between fiction and A Room of One's Own, without actually defining the genre of the latter. The form of the book can thus be seen as one example (of many others, as we will see below) of how Woolf abandons conventions and creates her own form instead.

The fact that the manuscript for this book was based on a speech is interesting in this context, since many speeches employ strategies found in Aristotelian Rhetorics, which, originally, were strategies for oral presentations, even though they work very well in the written form as well. “Rhetorics has as its concern the alteration of opinion, feeling and judgement by effective verbal means” (Hochmuth 134), or, as the eighteenth-century
rhetorician George Campbell put it, “[Rhetorics sees] to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will” (qtd. in Corbett and Connors 2). According to Aristotle, this act of ‘influencing’ or ‘persuading’ is based on the interaction of three critical elements: logos, pathos and ethos (Boechat 3). Aiming at a person’s intelligence, logos appeals to the head with the use of logic, numbers, explanations and facts. Strategies as “compare and contrast” or “cause and effect” demonstrate logos to the reader. Pathos, on the other hand, appeals to the addressee’s heart, emotions, sympathy, passion, etc and aims at making the reader/listener “‘see and feel’ what one is saying”.

Finally, ethos appeals to the reader’s conscience, ethics, morals and values. A writer’s ethical credibility is a decisive factor in the success of the text (“Classical Appeals”; “Rhetorical Strategies”). The fact that the world’s most powerful politicians base their speeches on these three rhetorical ingredients proves that these classical appeals are (still) very successful.2

In what follows, I will analyse how A Room of One’s Own makes use of logos, pathos and ethos and in which ways this usage contributes to Woolf finding new ways of appealing to the reader.

According to Aristotle, ethos is perhaps the most persuasive factor of the three mentioned above, because people are more easily convinced by writers/speakers they trust (Boechat 6). Therefore it is essential for Woolf to establish credibility early on in her book. After having uncovered the contradictory ‘facts’ men have written about women, Woolf concludes that there is no absolute truth in gender issues and chooses instead to show the reader how she reached her conclusion about the topic: “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” (Woolf, ROO 4, italics added). Consequently, she describes “as fully and freely” as possible “the train of thought”

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2 See for example Professor Sean Gordon Lewis’ analysis of the rhetoric devices used in George W. Bush’s “State of the Union Address for the year 2006”.
(Woolf, *ROO* 4) which brings her to her conclusion. As opposed to the traditional (male) writers she looked up in the library, she does not claim to write the TRUTH; instead she even says that “Lies will flow from my lips”, but there will be some truth mixed up with these lies and this approach allows the author to involve the reader: “It is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping” (Woolf, *ROO* 5). By this self-positioning – the admission of her subjectivity - Woolf appears to be an honest person and, more importantly, by making her readers ‘judges’, the ethos is strengthened even more, since the readers do not feel as if any argument is imposed upon them. This is a very skilful move made by the author, because it changes the focus of ethos from the narrator to the reader, who, naturally, will not question her/his own ethos.

The above mentioned ‘train of thought’ is one of the most prominent stylistic devices used by Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* as it is used throughout the whole book. This rhetoric means links one thought to another like wagons in a railway convoy or like loops in a chain (in dictionaries therefore also sometimes referred to as ‘chain of thought’) and it is closely connected with what Woolf calls a “moment of being”, that is, “when the daily business of life, the routines of linear time, are interrupted by the mind’s escape into reverie, symbolism, and introspection” (Shaw 163). That this kind of stylistic approach was new and diverged from the norm is confirmed by Quentin Bell, Woolf’s nephew, who published her biography: “her manner of writing was still unfamiliar” (qtd. in Rich). But not only did it diverge from what was ‘familiar’ at the time, it was, as Marion Shaw points out, also special or innovative within the group of authors who belonged to the new Modernist movement:” [She was] creating her own style as a Modernist writer [...]” (164).

As readers we can follow the narrator’s chain of reflections through every thought that emerges in her mind and its essence is magnificently described by a metaphor: “Thought […] 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 and sink it” (Woolf, ROO 5). All the reflections described in this train of thought, as unconnected as they seem at first, give us information about the narrator’s emotional motives. We can see through her eyes and almost experience ourselves what she or her invented characters feel. This enables the author to reach her readers’ pathos in a very effective way. In addition to the appeal to pathos, her train of thoughts creates the opportunity of identification and switching point of view, and by this change of perspective it is easier to follow the logical development (logos) of her argumentation as well; suddenly the connection becomes clear and the effect is that her arguments seem much more profound and well-supported than a traditional argumentation would have been.

Within this train of thought Woolf experiments with some different stylistic ideas. Her use of very long sentences and her unusual punctuation are, for example, characteristic features of her style:

I pondered why it was that Mrs Seton had no money to leave us; and what effect poverty has on the mind; and I thought of the queer old gentlemen I had seen that morning with tufts of fur upon their shoulders, and I remembered how if one whistled one of them ran; and I thought of the organ booming in the chapel and of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer, I thought at last that it was time to roll up the crumbled skin of the day, with its arguments and its impressions and its anger and its laughter, and cast it into the hedge. (Woolf, ROO 28)
These long sentences underline the essence of train of thoughts: the thoughts move from one to another with only few stops and consequently few full stops. However, too many of these long sentences would obstruct the reading process and therefore they are counter-balanced by shorter sentences, as Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors (who have statistically analysed the length of Woolf’s sentences) have shown is the case in some of her other essays.³ There is thus a great variety in the actual overall length of her sentences, which has a positive impact on the flow of the reading (Corbett and Connors 474-75). It creates a rhythm in the text and thus we have another appeal to our (musical) senses. Many of her sentences are also interrupted by descriptions of momentary actions: “But why, I asked myself, having returned to the books, why, I repeated, standing under the colonnade among the pigeons and the prehistoric canoes, why are they angry?” (Woolf, ROO 38, italics added). These descriptions facilitate visualisation and thereby increase credibility, which, again, appeals to the readers’ ethos.

The quote above also contains another effective rhetorical strategy: anaphora – “the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses” (Lewis) - in this case, the repetition of the interrogative ‘why’. Sean Gordon Lewis explains its effect on the reader or listener: “Anaphora drives ideas into the minds and hearts of an audience”. Looking at another example, we can see how the repetition of the conditional “if” underlines both the number of conditions which would have to be fulfilled and the final collapse of the whole argument. Here we have a strong appeal to both pathos and logos:

Now if she [Mary Seton’s mother] had gone into business; […]; if she had left two or three hundred thousand pounds to Fernham,…. 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 …

³ I have found that this seems to be true for A Room of One’s Own as well.
appropriated to the use of their own sex, … we might have been exploring or writing. […] Only, if Mrs Seton and her like had gone into business at the age of fifteen, there would have been […] no Mary. (Woolf, ROO 24-25, italics added)

This breakdown of argument raises many attendant questions such as “Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?” (Woolf, ROO 29). These direct questions are another effective strategy, since they require an answer which can be reached through fictional ‘cause and effect’ explanations, such as the struggle of Shakespeare’s imaginary sister Judith, or by non-fictional ‘cause and effect’ and ‘compare and contrast’ descriptions as for example the financing of universities. Here again Woolf manages to combine pathos and logos very successfully.

The above mentioned struggle of Judith Shakespeare also serves as an example of the ambiguity of what is rendered to us as the TRUTH: Judith is created as a response to the claim made by an aged bishop that “it was impossible for any woman, past, present or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare” (Woolf, ROO 53-54). By creating an equally gifted sister of Shakespeare and describing the insuperable obstacles that a female genius during that time would have had to overcome and the scorn she would have suffered, Woolf brings a character into being with whom the reader (male or female) can easily sympathize. It is clear that the outrageous claim made by the bishop is true (at least for his past and present), but also that it, in fact, is a lie, since the non-existence of a woman with the genius of Shakespeare does not depend on female inferiority at all; instead, it depends on society’s definitions and restrictions of women. Judith Shakespeare becomes true through Woolf’s fiction (a lie),\(^4\) and one understands that there might very well have been an equally gifted sister of Shakespeare, but that her genius was smothered before it could even start to develop. And this feeling of

\(^4\) I owe this insight to a comment made by Mark Troy
empathy with a fictional character is of course another, very effective way of appealing to the readers’ pathos, but it is also an appeal to our logos, since it plays with our traditional conceptions of the term “truth” and shows how language itself can function as a means to confine our way of thinking (as described by Derrida, who maintains that binary oppositions, such as truth and lie, tell us something about the ideology promoted by a society ([Tyson 247])). We are taught to believe in the “truth”, but what if our conception of truth is in fact built on lies, which have helped the people in power (men) to keep their dominance? By using a lie, such as the creation of Shakespeare’s imaginary sister, Woolf helps us to deconstruct the terms and see them from another angle, showing what could be the real, underlying truth instead. This kind of deconstruction is in fact what 30 years later became one of New Historicism’s and Cultural Criticism’s main focuses:

We might say that in bringing to the foreground the suppressed historical narratives of marginalized groups – such as women […] – new historicism has deconstructed the white, male Anglo-Europoean historical narrative to reveal its disturbing, hidden sub-text: the experiences of those peoples it has oppressed in order to maintain the dominance that allowed it to control what most Americans [or other Western citizens] know about history. (Tyson 284)

Another unusual trait of Woolf’s style is her frequent use of the personal pronoun “one” instead of the first person singular pronoun “I”. According to Woolf, the “I” should not dominate the literary work of anyone, since “the dominance of the letter ‘I’ and the aridity, which, like the giant beech tree, it casts within its shade” (Woolf, ROO 116) will preclude growth and make the work dull. The “I” Woolf refers to in this passage is from a book written by Mr A, and the phallic quality of “the straight dark bar”, the “I”, becomes very obvious when she describes the consequences of the shade this “giant” casts: “The worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman. […] Then
Alan got up and the shadow of Alan at once obliterated Phoebe. For Alan had views and Phoebe was quenched in the flood of his views” (Woolf, ROO 115-16). These images of nature help to visualise the dominance men have had over women and explain why it was so difficult for women to find enough ‘nourishment’ to develop. Hence, the imagery appeals to both our pathos and logos. Woolf’s use of the pronoun “one” in A Room of One’s Own could therefore be seen as a strategy to cultivate a common ground where she can reach both genders and allow women and men to grow, since “one” is neutral with no phallocentric associations and since it is probably easier for a man to identify with this unbiased pronoun instead of the female “I” of a woman narrator.

However, something that might cause the male reader some difficulties are the author’s so called tentative phrases such as “it seems”, “perhaps”, “I suppose”, etc. These phrases have traditionally been associated with typical female language (Aitchison 125). From a male point of view they have been interpreted as signs of insecurity, but viewed from another angle, they can be seen as supportive devices instead (Aitchison 125). Supportive language is co-operative and promotes the interaction with the reader. It also manifests Woolf’s intention not to furnish us with absolute facts, but to involve us in her way of thinking and therefore these tentative phrases are another appeal to ethos.

In addition to the different rhetorical strategies discussed above, the author interweaves irony, parody and humour into her story in order to relieve some – but not too much – of the resentment one feels when reading about the injustices described. One example of irony is when the narrator reacts towards the old bishop’s arrogant assertions: ”How much thinking these old gentlemen used to save one!” (Woolf, ROO 54). And parody and humour are neatly combined in: “One does not like to be told that one is naturally the inferior of a little man – I looked at the student next to me – who breathes hard, wears a ready-made tie, and has not shaved this fortnight. One has certain foolish vanities” (Woolf, ROO 37). This student serves
as a mild caricature of men and has to endure some more mockery: “The student by my side, for instance, who was copying assiduously from a scientific manual, was, I felt sure, extracting pure nuggets of the essential ore every ten minutes or so. His little grunts of satisfaction indicated so much” (Woolf, ROO 32). The smile these strategies evoke is of course a result of an appeal to our emotions (pathos), but according to Lewis “Humour helps make [the narrator] more trustworthy”, hence there is an appeal to ethos as well.

Towards the end of the book Woolf changes genre again and addresses the audience of her lectures directly. Now that she has described the train of thought which has led her to her conclusion, she feels the need to warn her listeners (potential women writers) of a trap which can influence the writer’s originality and integrity: She cautions them against writing “on purpose” (Woolf, ROO 117), that is with the intention of wooing a certain group of readers, either by writing in anger (as Mr A on page 117 or as, perhaps, militant feminists) or by aiming for titles and awards. Anger, however justified, about the past should not interfere with the future, because then we have just turned the angry professors into equally angry Miss Kilmans (a character in Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway, who is full of bitterness and hatred, because she feels rejected by men and society) and consequently nothing can “grow in the minds of others” (Woolf, ROO 120); and titles or “ornamental pots” (Woolf, ROO 122) are dangerous as well since they are very likely to influence the detachment of a writer:

But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery, and the sacrifice of wealth and chastity which used to be said to be the greatest of human disasters, a mere flea-bite in comparison. (Woolf, ROO 123).

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5 I owe this insight to another comment by Mark Troy.
As the last word in this passage indicates, this is a comparison and the juxtaposition of counterpoints describing minimums such as “a hair”, “shade”, “flea-bite” contrasted with superlatives like “most abject treachery” and “greatest” is rather powerful, since it shows both ends of extremes. Moreover, the comparison of “head of your vision” and “Headmaster” and especially the repetition of the word “head”, combined with two opposing lexical items such as “vision” (connoting intellectual or artistic freedom, no boundaries, etc) and “master” (marking dominance and oppression), underlines the opposition of these two expressions. It emphasises the importance Woolf puts on this aspect, an aspect which is essential in her analysis of the underlying mechanisms of the patriarchal power structure. The need to feel superior is what Woolf discloses as one of the main reasons for men’s oppression of women: “Hence the enormous importance to a patriarch […] of feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed, are by nature inferior to himself” (Woolf, ROO 40-41). This is a kind of othering, that is, the diminishing of other groups (in this case women) in order to confirm the superiority of one’s own norm (in this case the male norm) (Tyson 366). Titles and rewards are thus not only a threat to the writer’s authenticity and integrity, they also reinforce the practice of othering since they, in themselves, are based on the concept of distinction, marking superiority. In Three Guineas this idea is developed even further: ”We can say that for educated men to emphasize their superiority over other people, either in birth or intellect, by dressing differently, or by adding titles before, or letter after their names are acts that rouse competition and jealousy-emotions which […] have their share in encouraging a disposition towards war” (Woolf, TG 40). With the exception of one award which was handed out by women (The Fémina Vie Heureuse-prize), Woolf remained true to her conviction and never accepted any rewards or doctorates (Rich).

Finally, there is one more important rhetorical means which I will discuss here since it permeates the whole book and since it suits the author’s ‘train of thoughts’ and ‘moments of
being’ very well, namely imagery such as metaphors or similes. There is hardly a page without an image which appeals to our senses and facilitates our visualisation of the ideas, problems or thoughts described, but I think that the one about a woman and a man taking a taxi and moving off together is one of the most important metaphors. It is multi-levelled, since it depicts both a future characterized by unity instead of opposition between the sexes and because it illustrates how this unity can be achieved by abandoning traditional notions about gender (in this case, that a woman cannot afford a taxi by herself or share it with an unknown man). It also contains the idea of combination (a man and a woman), an idea which is central in Woolf’s work. The variety of interpretations of Woolf’s imagery is conspicuous and invites the readers to think for themselves – or, as Hermione Lee observes: “In all, the reality that Woolf’s work spawns debates about what she did or did not imply shows that she gets her readers to think beyond the simple text and to make inferences from that text” (qtd. in Bechtholt). Lee’s statement refers to the connection between the text itself and its effect, just as the main question of this essay: In which ways does Woolf’s style support her arguments and how does her approach contribute to reinforce her message?

To answer this question, we can note that the first hint at the strong ties between form and content can be found in the fact that A Room of One’s Own is hard to categorize because it combines different genres. This combining or amalgamating is characteristic of Woolf’s attitude towards writing and - in a wider perspective - gender and society: We should not have to stick to one concept or follow one norm, but instead combine the parts that suit us best, since we can achieve much more that way. Women, for example, should write all sorts of literature, not only fiction (as indicated by her subtitle, where she alters the original subject “Women and Fiction” and leaves out the word ‘fiction’⁶), and they should neither feel that they have to follow any typical male norm nor think that they need to establish any strict

⁶ “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write”.

13 (17)
female norm as some kind of vengeance. Woman-manly/Man-womanly is the concept she suggests, again a combination of two different styles. Amalgamation or androgyny as opposed to conventional single-mindedness is essential for an equal society, or as Jane Varley and Aimee Broe Erdman conclude: “Until single-gendered thinking is no longer mainstream, the inequality of the sexes will continue, if not thrive” (280). The quest for a room of one’s own is a quest for space and freedom, and Woolf’s resentment against confinement (in life as well as in writing) is mirrored in her own literary style. It reflects the author’s call to resist our society’s restrictions by its unrestricted combination of different rhetorical strategies and it thereby helps us to see the idea of combination or androgyny as an opportunity for mutual growth instead of a threat. As the obvious opposite of othering, combination or, to use a perhaps more adequate term, integration can found the basis for real equality. The combination of different genres enables Woolf to create a strong appeal to ethos right from the start and the amalgamation of rhetorical means helps her to develop alterative and powerful combinations of pathos and logos, which all contribute to reinforcing her arguments and convincing the audience.

In conclusion, with the help of all the rhetorical strategies described above, Woolf establishes a deep and trustworthy contact with her readers and enables them to identify or feel empathy with her (female) characters, which in turn increases the readers’ awareness of the restrictions imposed on women in a patriarchal society. We can draw our own conclusions about what has been and still is wrong with society and its definitions of gender; the awareness comes, more or less, from within ourselves as opposed to the alleged truths rendered by many (male) writers or historians. By making use of all the rhetorical devices at hand, especially those that can be linked to pathos, ethos and logos, Woolf combines traditional devices (such as anaphora) with more personal ideas (such as fluid punctuation/long sentences) and thereby creates her own individual pattern of style with her
train or chain of thoughts as, to use a metaphor, the most important thread in the ‘knitwear’. This results in a piece of art which might be particularly suitable for women, but, even more importantly, fits both genders and leaves room for growth. Influential as it has turned out to be, one might say that *A Room of One’s Own*’s chain of thoughts has broken (some of) our society’s chained thoughts.
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“Rhetorical Strategies/Devices: Elements creators of text use to put forth their arguments.”


