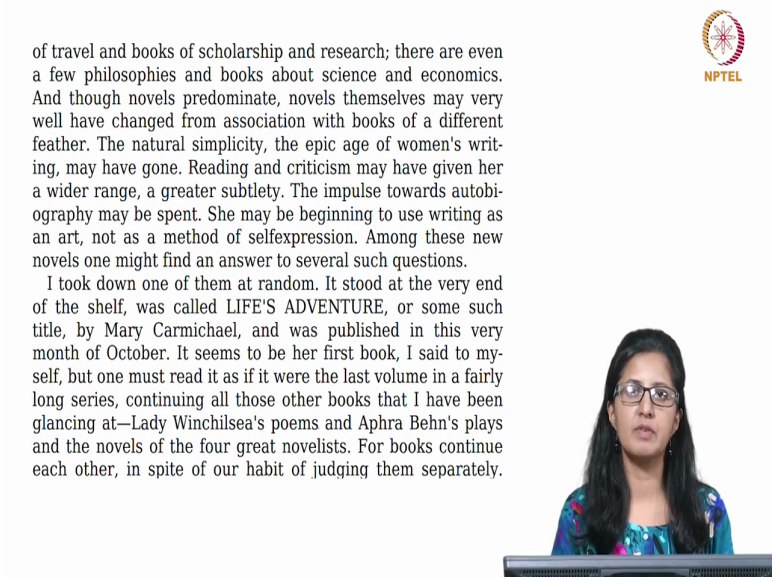
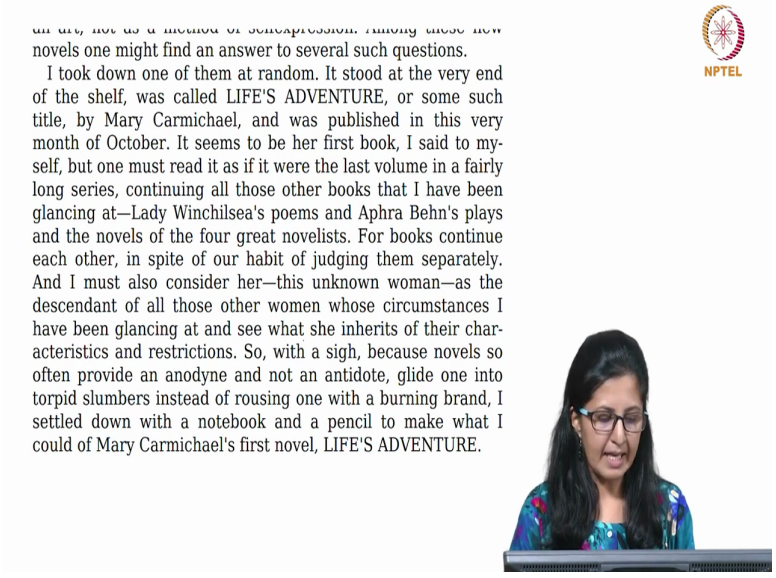
Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own"

Dr. Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

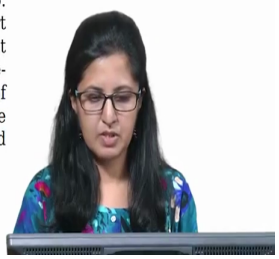
Session 3

(Refer Slide Time: 0:16)





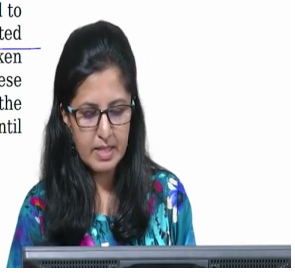
my memory with blue eyes and brown and the relationship that there may be between Chloe and Roger. There will be time for that when I have decided whether she has a pen in her hand or a pickaxe. So I tried a sentence or two on my tongue. Soon it was obvious that something was not quite in order. The smooth gliding of sentence after sentence was interrupted. Something tore, something scratched; a single word here and there flashed its torch in my eyes. She was 'unhanding' herself as they say in the old plays. She is like a person striking a match that will not light, I thought. But why, I asked her as if she were present, are Jane Austen's sentences not of the right shape for you? Must they all be scrapped because Emma and Mr Woodhouse are dead? Alas, I sighed, that it should be so. For while Jane Austen breaks from melody to melody as Mozart from song to song, to read this writing was like being out at sea in an open boat. Up one went, down one sank. This terseness, this short-windedness, might mean that she was afraid of something; afraid of being called 'sentimental' perhaps; or she remembers that women's writing has been called flowery and

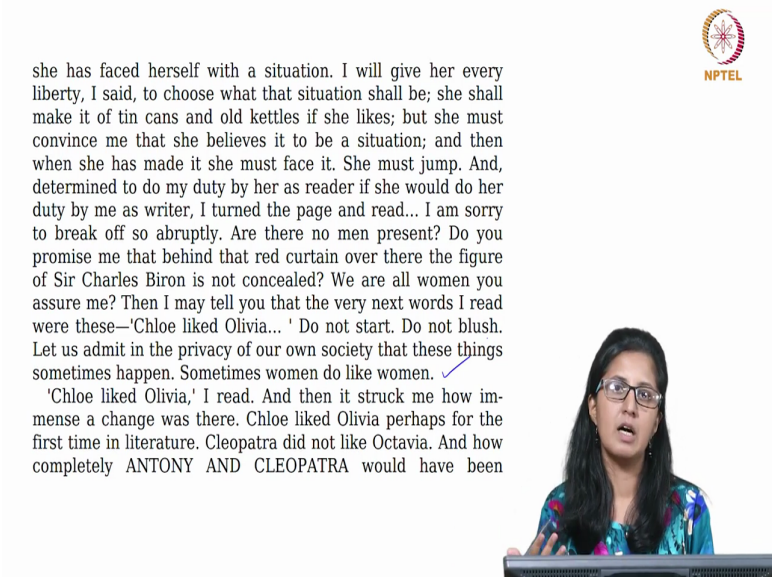


To begin with, I ran my eye up and down the page. I am going to get the hang of her sentences first, I said, before I load my memory with blue eyes and brown and the relationship that there may be between Chloe and Roger. There will be time for that when I have decided whether she has a pen in her hand or a pickaxe. So I tried a sentence or two on my tongue. Soon it was obvious that something was not quite in order. The smooth gliding of sentence after sentence was interrupted. Something tore, something scratched; a single word here and there flashed its torch in my eyes. She was 'unhanding' herself as they say in the old plays. She is like a person striking a match that will not light, I thought. But why, I asked her as if she were present, are Jane Austen's sentences not of the right shape for you? Must they all be scrapped because Emma and Mr Woodhouse are dead? Alas, I sighed, that it should be so. For while Jane Austen breaks from melody to melody as Mozart from song to song, to read this writing was like being out at sea in an open boat. Up one went, down one sank. This terseness, this short-windedness, might mean that she was afraid of

scene with some care, I cannot be surewhether she is being herself or someone else. At any rate, she does not lower one's vitality, I thought, reading more carefully. But she is heaping up too many facts. She will not be able to use half of them in a book of this size. (It was about half the length of JANE EYRE.) However, by some means or other she succeeded in getting us all—Roger, Chloe, Olivia, Tony and Mr Bigham—in a canoe up the river. Wait a moment, I said, leaning back in my chair, I must consider the whole thing more carefully before I go any further.

I am almost sure, I said to myself, that Mary Carmichael is playing a trick on us. For I feel as one feels on a switchback railway when the car, instead of sinking, as one has been led to expect, swerves up again. Mary is tampering with the expected sequence. First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence. Very well, she has every right to do both these things if she does them not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating. Which of the two it is I cannot be sure until





Hello and welcome to this session, we are looking at Chapter 5 of the celebrated essay by Virginia Woolf: “A Room of One’s Own”. We find that Woolf is doing this exercise of looking through the bookshelf of modern writers and she is noticing that a lot has changed in the twentieth-century-- self-expression, especially by women has become an art form. She is also writing within that modernist period where self-expression is the key to literary writing. So Woolf, like she had been doing from the outset, examines a contemporary writer, who is again hypothetical, and this writer, this woman writer is named as Mary Carmichael and she “was published in this very month of October.It seems to be her first book, I said to myself but one must read it as if it were the last volume in a fairly long series, continuing all those other books that I have been glancing at – Lady Winchilsea’s poems and Aphra Behn’s plays and the novels of the four great novelists.”

So, there is a certain kind of a literary tradition also that she begins to identify over here from the discussions that she has been having. “For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately. And I must also consider her, this unknown woman, who is Mary Carmichael as a descendant of all those other women whose circumstances I have been glancing at and see what she inherits of their characteristics and restrictions.” So, look at the way in which she begins this essay on a note of a discussion on women and fiction, talks about their need to have a room of one’s own, need to have the, woman need to have her own money if she were to write. And look at how in this chapter, in the penultimate chapter, in Chapter 5, she is beginning to delineate a very distinct female literary critical tradition.

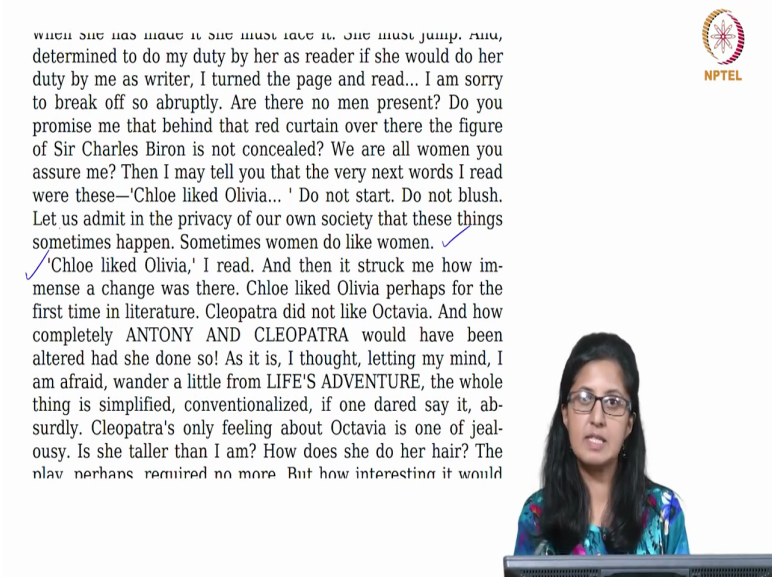
“So with a sigh, because novels so often provide an anodyne and not an antidote, glide one into torpid slumbers instead of rousing one with a burning brand, I settle with a notebook and pencil to make what I could of Mary Carmichael’s first novel, *Life’s Adventure*. She is trying to read this imaginary work written by this imaginary author. So this is a highly different kind of writing altogether, this is not like reading Aphra Behn, or Jane Austen or Emily Bronte for that matter. I am almost sure, I said to myself that Mary Carmichael is playing a trick on us. For I feel as one feels on a switchback railway when the car, instead of sinking, as one has been let to expect, swerves up again. Mary is tampering with the expected sequence.”

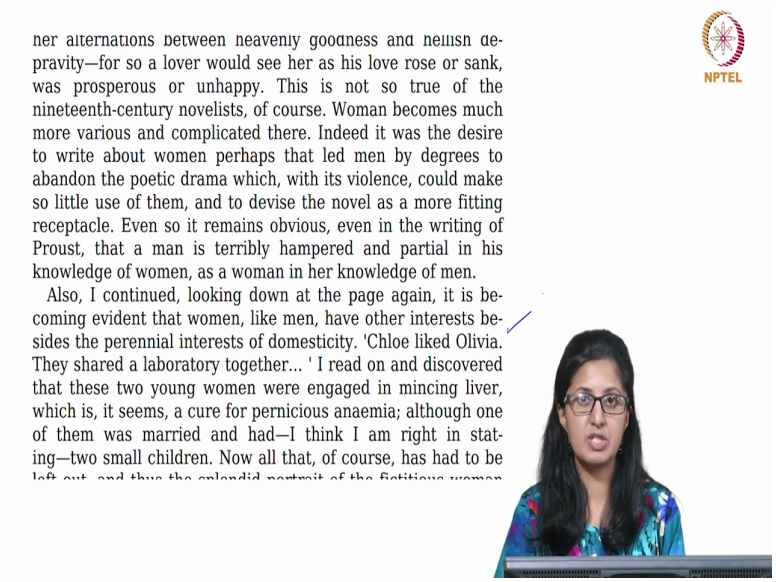
This is very interesting, she is seeing how there is a certain imaginary writer whom she identifies as role model at this point of time, Mary Carmichael. She is breaking the literary tradition, there is something jarring about Mary Carmichael’s writing, she is not really playing to the gallery, she is not really fitting within the patterns which Woolf had identified so far. Mary is tampering with the expected sequence. “First she broke the sentence, now she has broken the sequence, very well, she has every right to do both these things if she does them not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating.” So this is an important point as far as literary criticism is also concerned, as far as literary valuation is also concerned.

Virginia Woolf is saying, if one is breaking the tradition for the sake of breaking it, maybe it is not worth engaging with at all. But if it is for creation, that is what most modernist writers believe that they did, then it is certainly a laudable kind of a gesture as far as their writing is concerned. So, modernism was a clear break from whatever had been considered traditional until that point of time in terms of form, in terms of genre, in terms of expression, in terms of themes, in terms of articulation and we find that, that is seen as creativity and not like a break in any form. And here she is very succinctly pointing that out as well.

“One has every right to do both these things if she does them not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating.Which of the two it is, I cannot be sure until she has faced herself with a situation. I will give her every liberty to choose what that situation shall be.” She is keeping a very open mind while engaging with this work and here she realizes that, there is a certain situation which is presented before her, which is very unconventional, about women who like women. She is presenting this hypothetical writer, Mary Carmichael as writing about two women in a relationship and this is certainly a very stark departure, very significant departure from the traditional ways in which women have been represented and women have been written about, about relationships, about the feelings within this traditional set pattern.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:04)

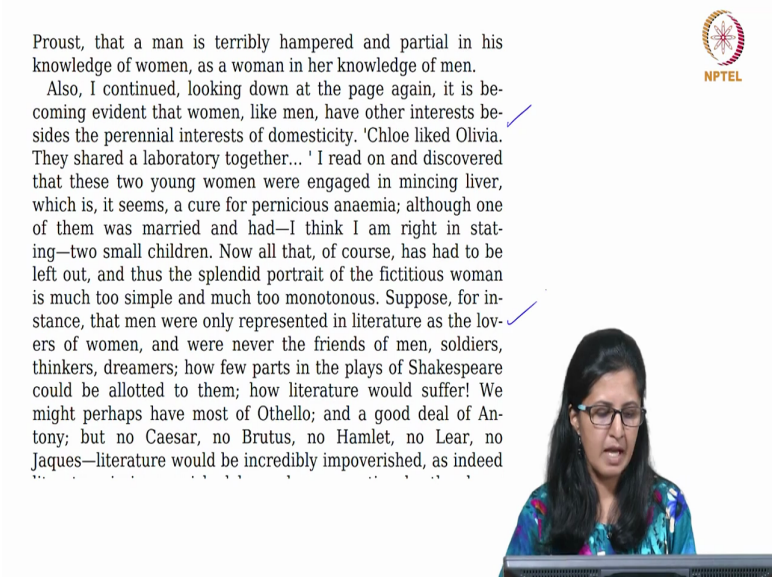


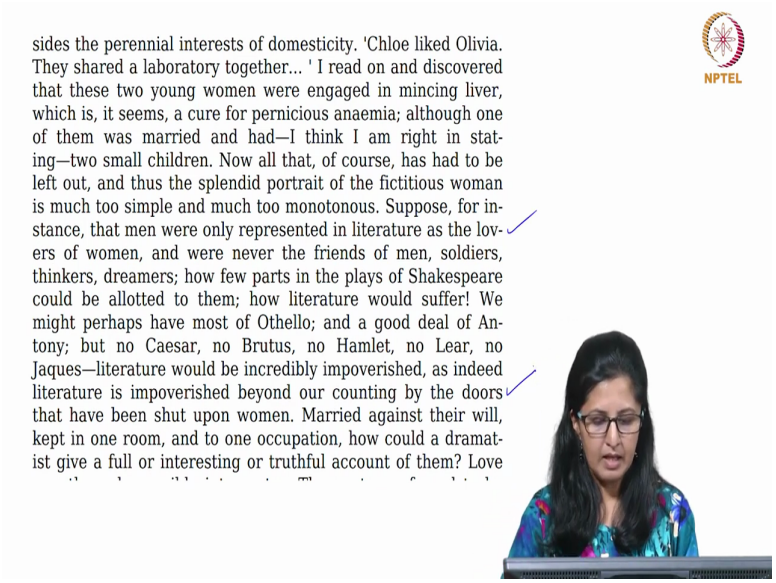


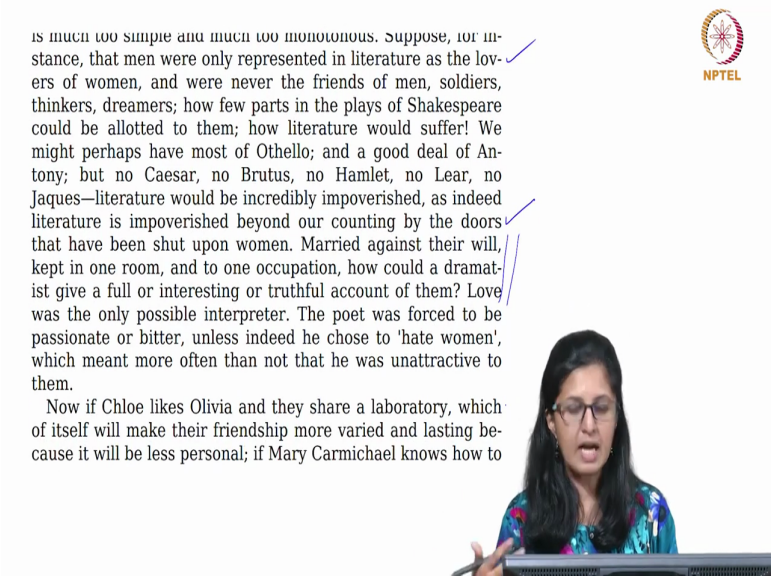
So, this is what causes a break over here. "'Chloe liked Olivia,' I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. Cleopatra did not like Octavia. And how completely ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA would have been altered had she done so!" So, this is about this fictional character, Mary Carmichael talking about two women who are in a relationship and this is certainly a very significant milestone. This changes different stories, this changes the sequences that one is familiar with and there are a lot of these sequences which are being broken over here as Virginia Woolf realizes. "As, I continued, looking down at the page again, it is becoming evident that women, like men, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity."

This is the ideal kind of writing that Virginia Woolf is looking forward to about women writing differently, breaking sequences of not just sentences and literary forms, but also about different relationships, also about different domestic and societal patterns that they are used to. This breaking is definitely a sort of creation as far as Woolf is concerned.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:14)





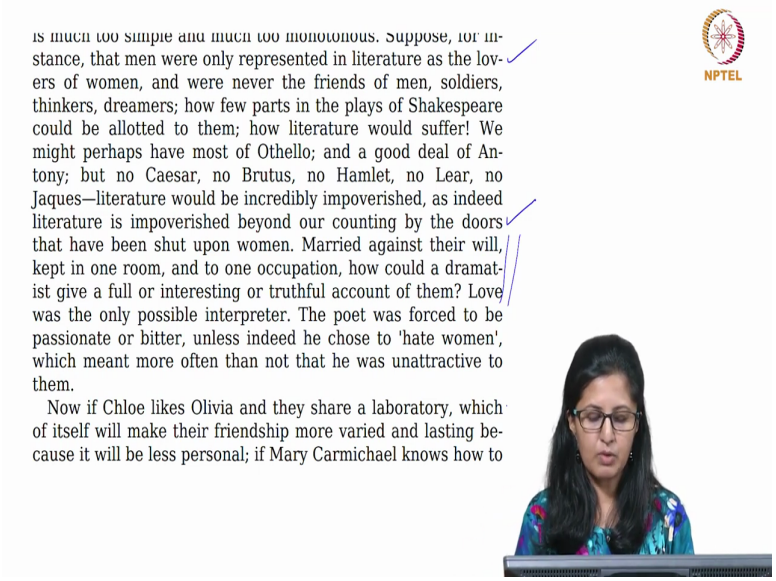


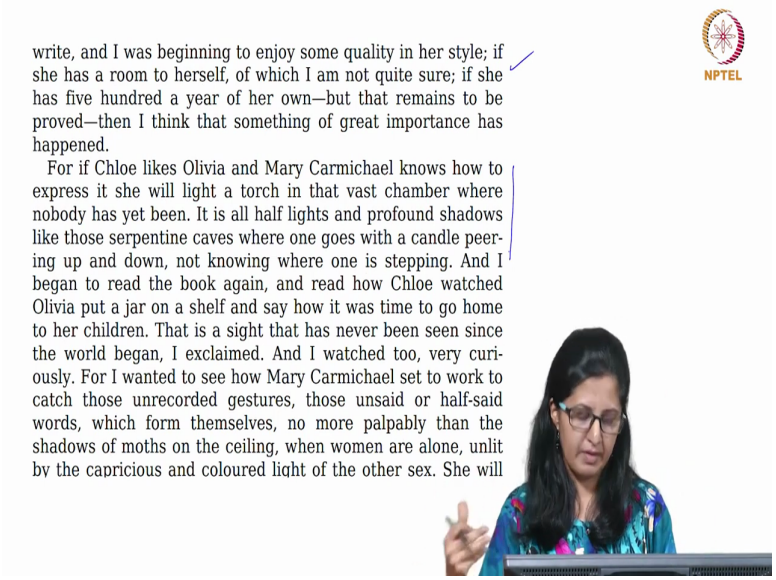
Now she is making this interesting comparison from the available literature. She says, “Suppose for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and never as the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them, how literature would suffer?” So, this is what male writers had been doing to women; their role was only to be, to remain as lovers and objects of interest for these male protagonist and she says if the same had happened to the male characters, how immensely literature would have suffered.

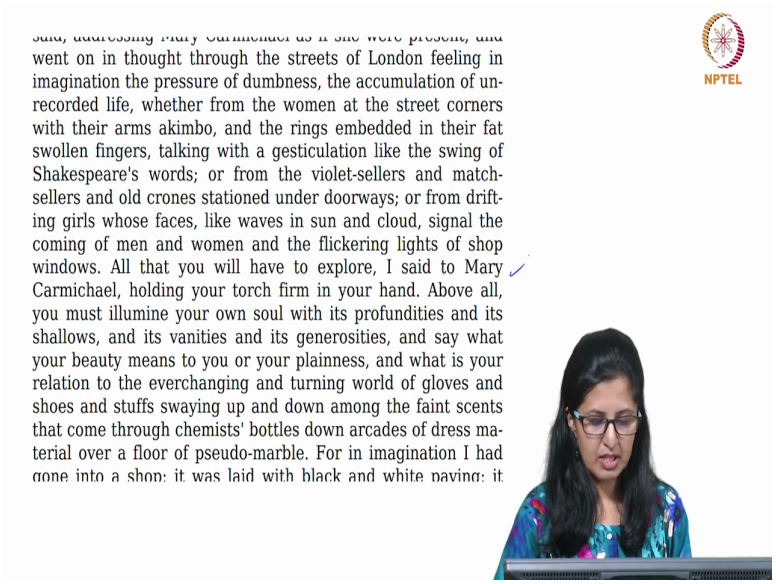
We might perhaps have most of Othello and a good deal of Anthony, but no Caesar, no Brutus, no Hamlet, no Lear, no Jaques – literature would be incredibly impoverished, as indeed literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women. So, this is how she is highlighting this very pertinent point. Look at the structure of this essay, look at the order in this essay and look at the way in which she is able to pursue her line of argument with a lot of conviction and clarity. She says this is how literature has been impoverished by impoverishing women’s lives themselves, by impoverishing their lived experiences itself.

“Married against their will, kept in one room and to one occupation, how could a dramatist give a full or interesting or truthful account of them? Love was the only possible interpreter. The poet was forced to be passionate or bitter, unless indeed he chose to ‘hate women’ which meant more often than not that he was unattractive to them.”

(Refer Slide Time: 7:48)







These are the many patterns which Mary Carmichael begins to disrupt. Here, when Carmichael is writing in a different way altogether with Chloe liking Olivia, Woolf also realizes that this is about women outside the domestic sphere. It offers immense possibilities and it is also about new kinds of creatures who are to be found, who were never found before within the space of literature. “If Mary Carmichael has a room to herself, of which I am not quite sure; if she has five hundred a year of her own, but that remains to be proved, then I think that something of great importance has happened.”

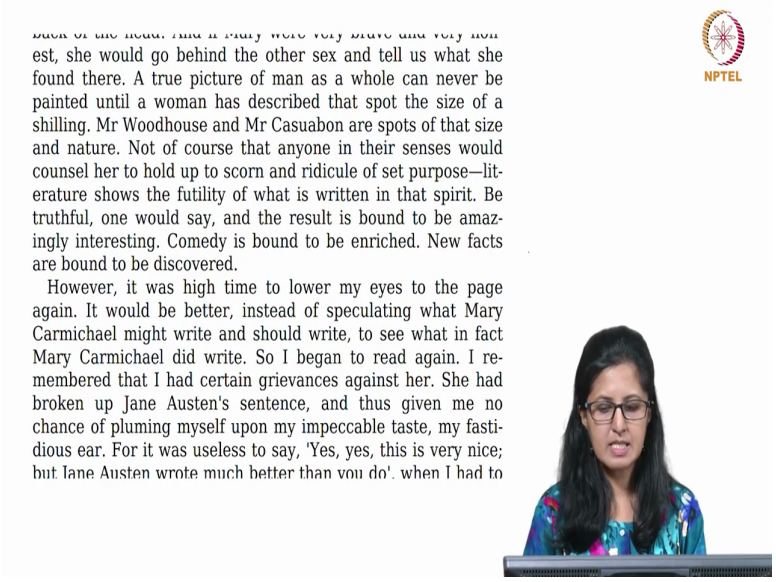
“For if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it, she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been. It is all half lights and profound shadows like those serpentine caves where one goes with a candle peering up and down, not knowing where one is stepping.”

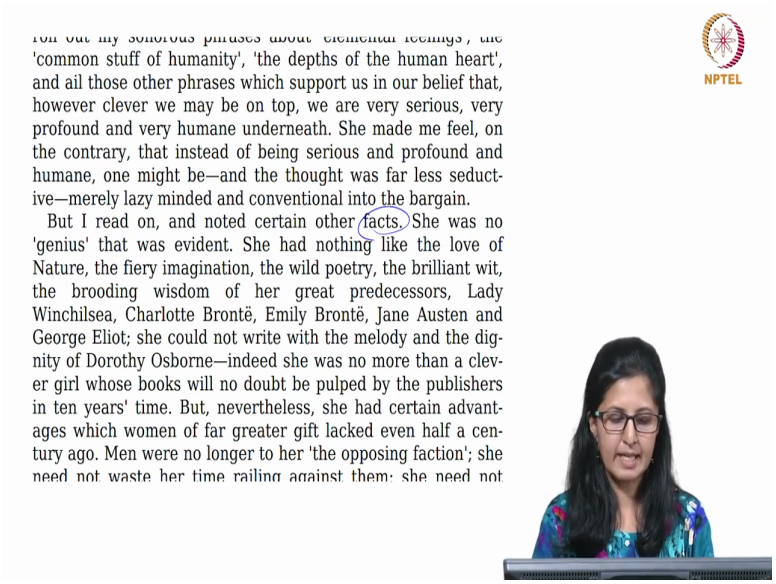
This is certainly a new milestone which is being covered when Mary Carmichael writes about Chloe liking Olivia. And this disruption in sequence also changes many other conceptions, many other notions about how women have been represented so far and this breaking out is seen as a very important, new creation within this field of writing.

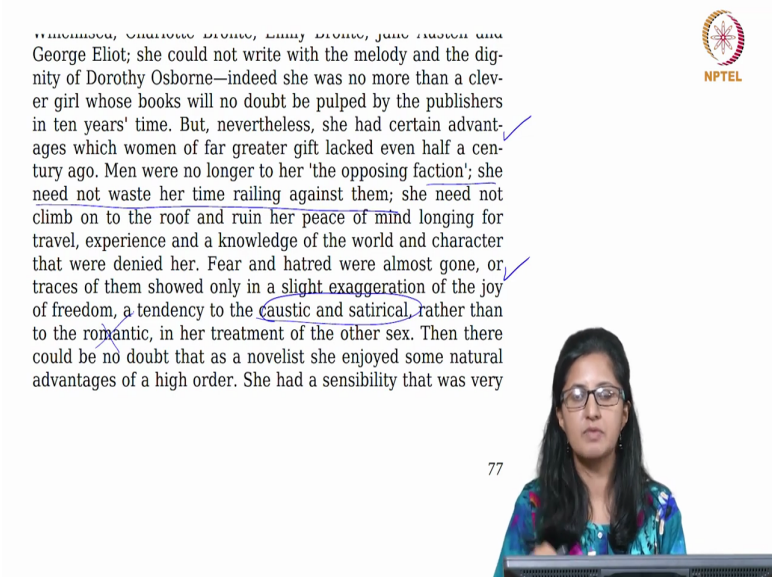
So, continuing her critique of Mary Carmichael and also talking about the immense possibilities that such new patterns have opened up, such disruption sequences have opened up, she says, “I said to Mary Carmichael, holding your torch firm in your hand. Above all, you must illuminate your own soul with its profundities and its shallows and its vanities and its generosities, 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 stuff swaying up and

down among the faint scents that come through the chemist's bottles, down arcades of dress material over a floor of pseudo-marble."

(Refer Slide Time: 9:50)







And she is also trying to understand what made Mary Carmichael write. “It would be better, instead of speculating what Mary Carmichael might write and should write to see what in fact Mary Carmichael did write. So I began to write again. I remembered I had certain grievances against her. She had broken up Jane Austen’s sentence, and thus given me no chance of pluming myself upon my impeccable taste, my fastidious ear.

For it was useless to say, “Yes, yes this is very nice, but Jane Austen wrote much better than you do”, when I had to admit that there was no point of likeness between them.” This is another significant intervention that she is speaking in terms of identifying a feminist, a female literary tradition. It need not be similar, the continuity is just like within the male tradition, there is no point in expecting certain kinds of sequences; one should also be willing to see the disruption of these sequences.

“Then she had gone further and broken the sequence – the expected order. Perhaps she had done this unconsciously, merely giving things their natural order, as a woman would, if she wrote like a woman. But the effect was somehow baffling; one could not see a wave itself, a crisis coming round the next corner.” This is about this disruption of sequence, she is trying to engage with it as a writer, as a critique who is also used to finding certain kind of order, certain kinds of sequences and expectations as far as form, as far as themes, genres are concerned.

And there are certain things, certain facts that Woolf begins to notice, and this is very significant. “She was no ‘genius’ that was evident. She had nothing like the love of nature, the fiery imagination, the wild poetry, the brilliant wit, the brooding wisdom of her great predecessors; Lady Winchilsea, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Jane Austen and George Eliot; she could not write with the melody and the dignity of Dorothy Osborne. Indeed, she was no more than a clever girl whose books will no doubt be pulped by the publishers in ten years’ time.” But this is the advantage that Woolf wants to focus upon towards the end of Chapter 5.

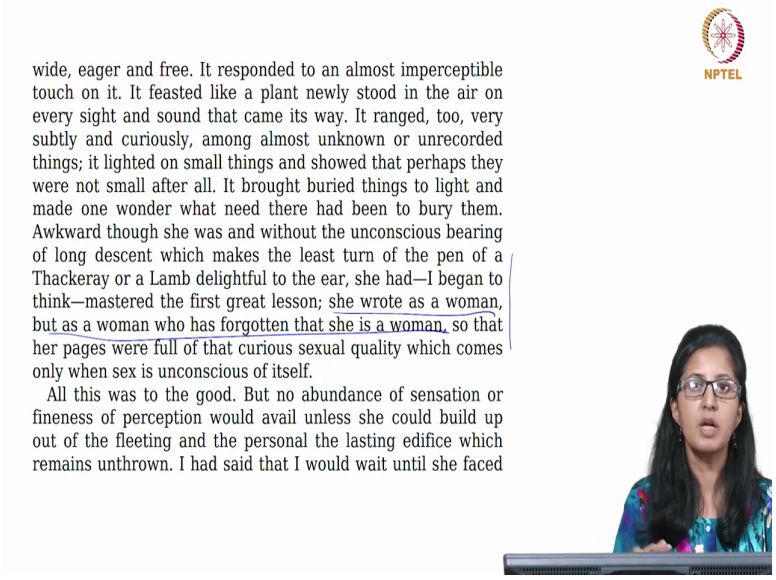
“Nevertheless, she had certain advantages which women of far greater gift lacked, even half a century ago. Men were no longer to her the ‘opposing faction’; she need not waste her time against them.” A properly feminist rhetoric is emerging over here. It is not about having a set of men on the other side, on the enemy camp and writing against them or articulating things against them. It is entirely stopping to see them as your opposing faction altogether.

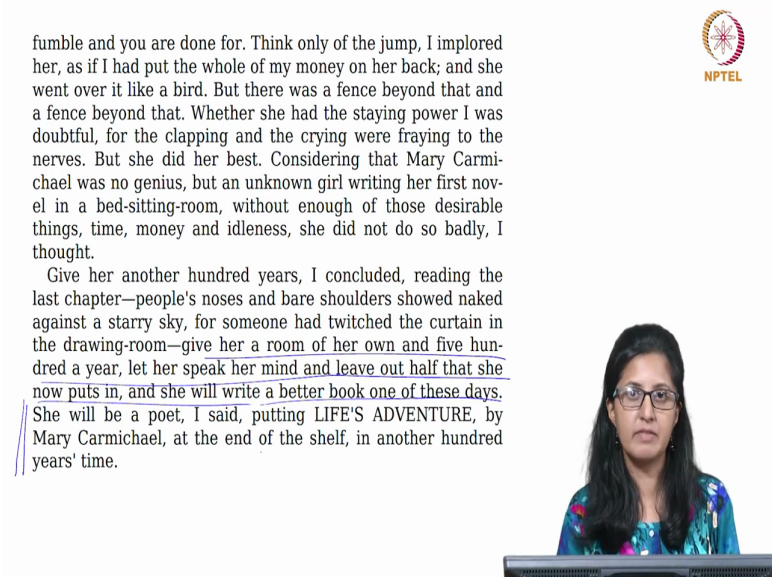
“She need not climb onto the roof and ruin her peace of mind longing for travel, experience and a knowledge of the world and character that were denied her.” Those were the patriarchal systems that women traditionally had longed for, women traditionally felt left out of. Here, Woolf is encouraging through this fictional character, through this hypothetical character of Mary Carmichael to think about disrupting the patterns in all ways, not just within genres and forms but also in world views and in the emotional responses to these issues related to gender. “Fear and hatred were almost gone, or traces of them showed only in slight exaggeration of the joy of freedom, a tendency to the caustic and satirical, rather than to the romantic, in her treatment of the other sex.”

Here, the caustic and the satirical are being elevated vis-à-vis, the romantic. And here, the woman who is writing over here, Mary Carmichael, she is disrupting the sequences in terms

of the expected emotional responses as well, the expected gender emotional responses as well. "Then there could be no doubt that as a novelist she enjoyed some natural advantages of a high order. She had a sensibility that was very wide, eager and free. I responded to an almost imperceptible touch on it."

(Refer Slide Time: 13:28)





She makes this huge discovery in this passage. "She had mastered the first great lesson; she wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex in unconscious of itself."

This is the place which Virginia Woolf thinks one should ideally reach. Women writing should ideally reach there when one is unconscious about the gender that one belongs to. So

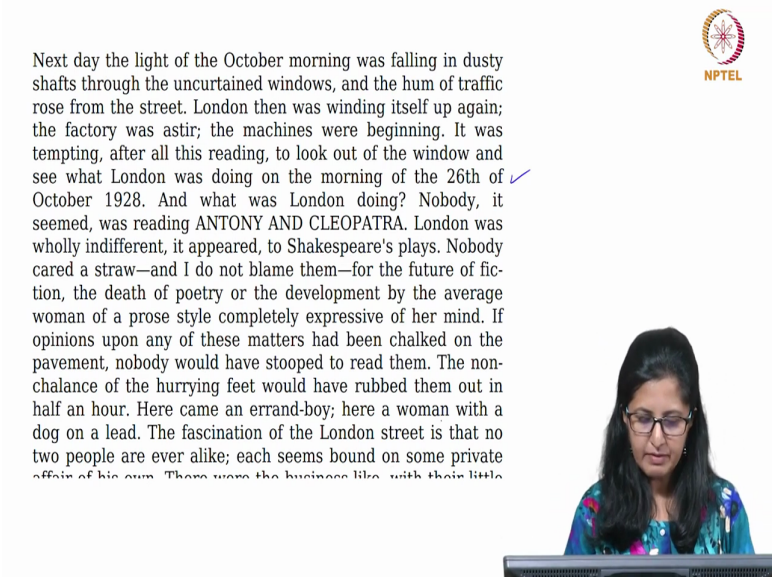
in one of Virginia Woolf's novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, we find that, there is a certain kind of a fluidity between the genders. We find that the novel is about shifting across these gendered spaces, which cannot be designated as exclusively for one or the other.

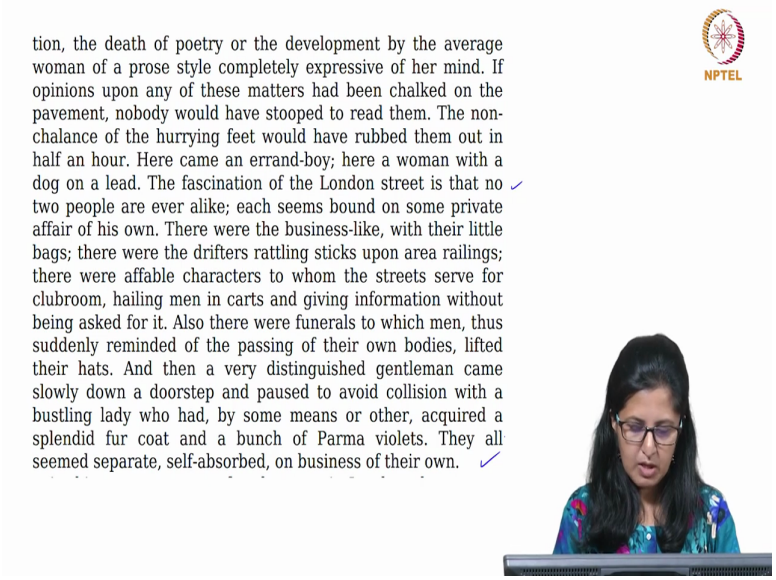
That we may say is perhaps that theoretical framework that she also wants to give to her audience. That it is important to move away from these binaries in order to produce good literature. "Give her another hundred years, I concluded, reading the last chapter – people's noses and bare shoulders showed naked against a starry sky, for someone had twitched the curtain in the drawing room – give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days."

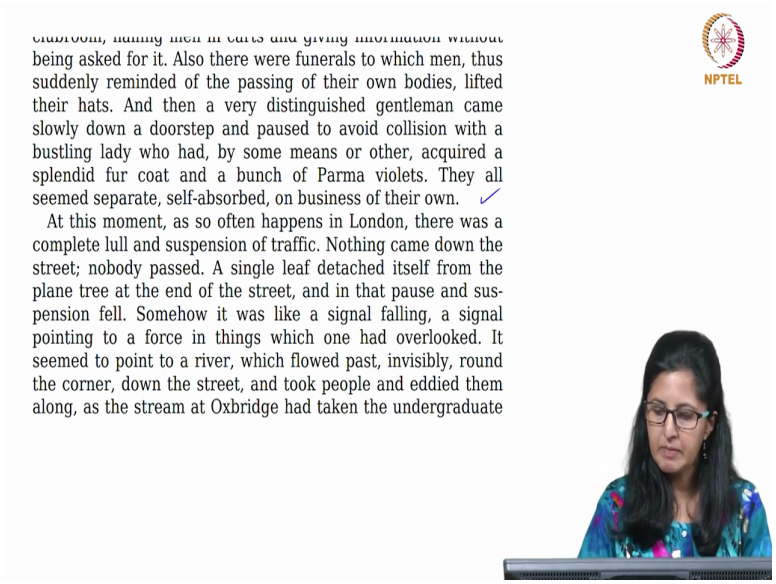
She is coming back to this point over again, over and again in order to reiterate that the sense of autonomy, the private space and this financial independence is extremely important for a woman writer. Only then one could begin to write as a writer, not conscious about the many delimiting things that are around a person but focusing on the inner energy and also focusing on the many things, the liberating things that one could talk about, like disrupting the pattern, like Mary Carmichael did when Chloe is allowed to like Olivia and that sort of a relationship is celebrated.

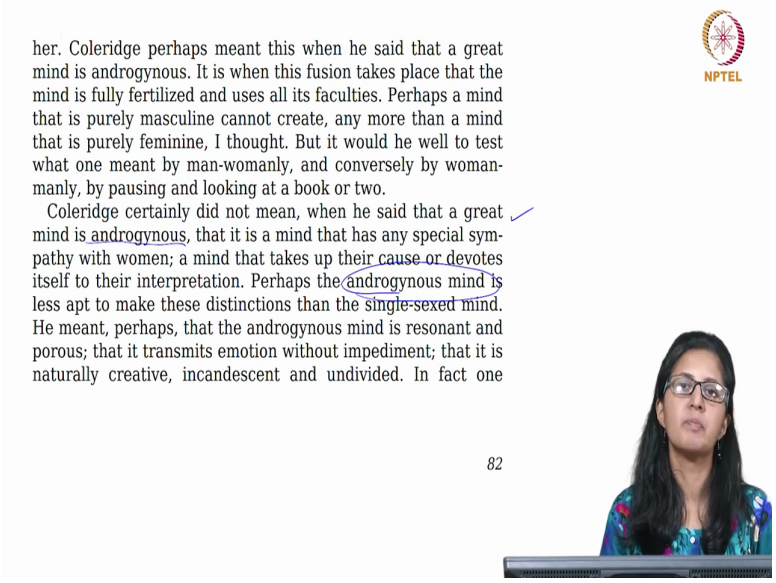
"She will be a poet, I said, putting *Life's Adventure*, by Mary Carmichael, at the end of the shelf, in another hundred years' time." So this is dismal as well as hopeful at the same time. Here is an imaginary character, Mary Carmichael that Virginia Woolf is putting forward before us, but she is also very much conscious of the fact that even Mary Carmichael in spite of this vigorous, radical energy that she has got, in spite of her unconsciousness as a woman, in spite of her putting gender aside entirely, she realizes that she is not really there yet. She may need another 100 years with a room of her own and also with a very generous allowance supporting her.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:17)









So with this we come to the final section of this essay in chapter 6 which is set in 1928. This is London and the morning of 26 of October 1928, “And what was London doing? Nobody, it seemed was reading ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA. London was wholly indifferent to Shakespeare’s plays. Nobody cared a straw-- and I do not blame-- them for the future of fiction, the death of poetry or the development of the average woman of a prose style completely expressive of her mind. So, if opinions upon any of these matters had been chalked on the pavement, nobody would have stooped to read them. The non-chalance of the hurrying feet would have rubbed them out in half an hour.” She is taking us to the present where no one has time for literature and these concerns do not matter at all, she is trying to tell us. And the fascination of London she says is that “no two people are alike; each seems

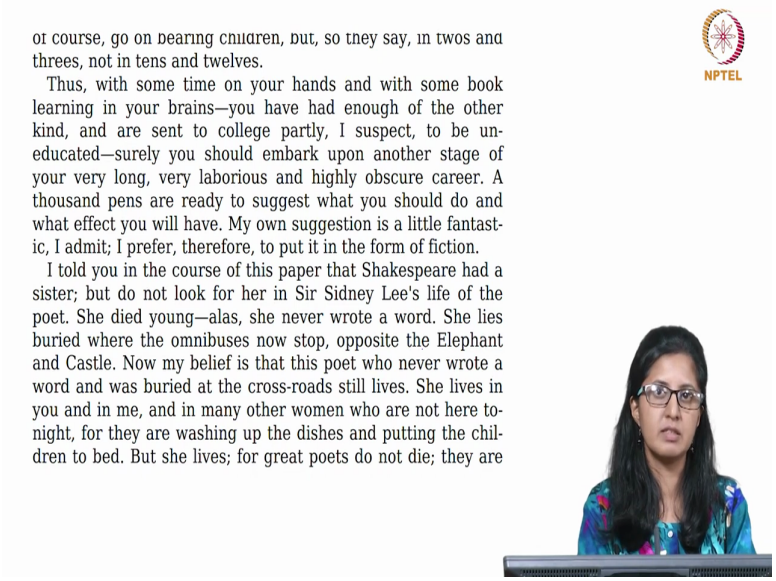
bound on some private affair of his own. These were the business-like, with their little bags; the drifters rattling sticks upon area railings."

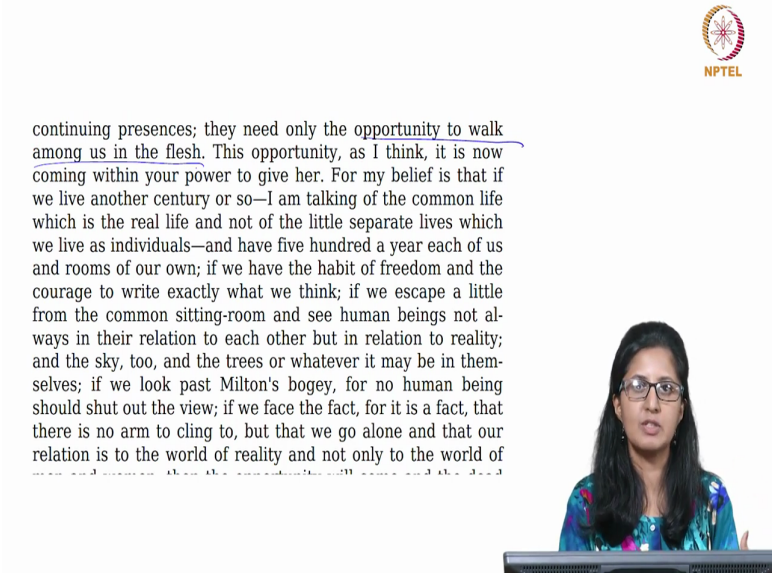
It is a very different London altogether, not the Elizabethan London, not the nineteenth century London, it is a different London altogether that she finds herself in, in the early twentieth-century. And what is the relevance of talking about these things, about women and fiction, about women and poverty, about a room of one's own, about the generous relevance, when one really does not care about, when the world around does not really care about what is being written, when the world really does not care about Shakespeare or for that matter, woman writing or not writing.

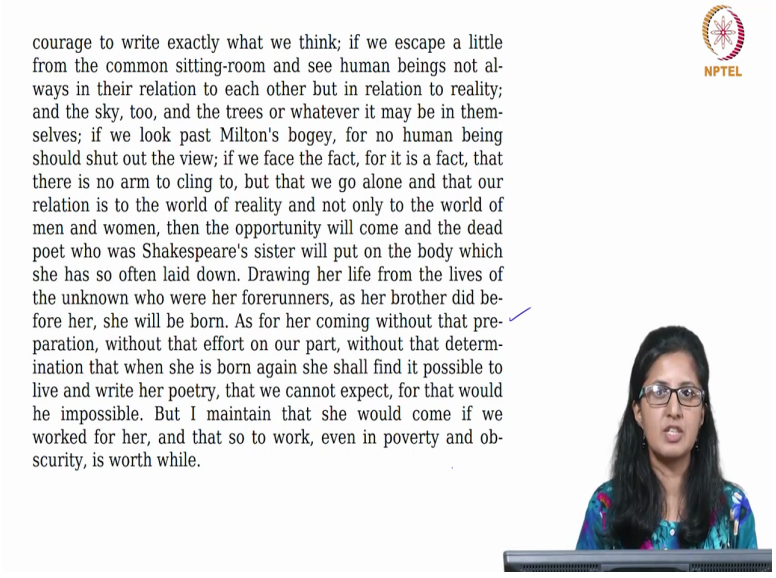
"They all seemed separate, self-absorbed on business of their own." And this is where she begins to highlight this point that maybe these two genders, these two sexes, they want to cooperate and work together and there is a need within every person to bring both these aspects together and work towards a more synthetic way of processing things.

Woolf's larger point is quite akin to what Coleridge made in his earlier works. "Coleridge certainly did not mean when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a mind that takes up their cause and devotes itself to their interpretation. Perhaps the androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than the single-sexed mind." She is talking about the immense possibilities that an androgynous mind would offer, where you would find the synthesis of both the sexes, both the genders which is what, as I mentioned we would find in her expressions, within this novel *Mrs. Dalloway* as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:52)







Taking this discussion along these lines which much in their infancy when Woolf is writing them, she comes to a very well-formed and a very promising conclusion. This is what she is trying to convey to her audience—she is encouraging her audience by talking about the immense possibilities that the twentieth century has opened up before women. Of course, there is a need to look at the female literary tradition, the absences, to engage with those and to be aware of these historical trajectories.

But she is also trying to tell her audience that the world offers them women's colleges, the right to own property, the right to vote and there are many more professions which are being opened up before women than any other time in history. So, it is a world of immense possibilities and the excuses about lack of opportunity, lack of education, they are no longer valid.

But it is important to situate those in a historical, empirical fashion in order to understand why women were not able to write in the sixteenth-century or in the seventeenth or the eighteenth-century and why they could write only certain kinds of works in the nineteenth-century. This is not a statement about their merits or the integrity of the writers but it is also about the social conditions. She is very open about the social conditions which are being made available to women in the twentieth-century and how London has changed and how there is more space for androgynous engagements and this is something which she feels is the right way to go forward.

And she is again reminding the audience of Judith Shakespeare, about William Shakespeare's imaginary, restricted sister. And she says that, Judith, this imaginary sister, actually lives in you, lives in the audience, lives in you and me.

And this is how this brilliantly orchestrated essay ends. "I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister; but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee's life of the poet. She died young – alas, she never wrote a word. She lies buried where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle. Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her.

It is a very promising, a very exalting kind of note with which she ends this essay. And unless this world is being made different for the many Judiths who are yet to be born, then perhaps these historical struggles may not really begin to bear fruition. “As for her coming, without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again, she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity is worthwhile.” So she is saying, women’s historical struggles in poverty, in obscurity, they all would be worthwhile when we finally allow these Judiths to speak up.

This ends on a very pronounced feminist note, it ends on a very pronounced promising note that women who have not been allowed to write, who never had the circumstances to write due to historical conditions, due to social conditions, they would eventually find their voices and that is when these historical struggles would be considered worthwhile.

As we wrap up this discussion, I want you to again remember that this is one of the earliest discussions within literature about women and literature, about women and gender, about the androgynous discourses which would make a new world possible within literary as well as non-literary spaces. And also about the significance of looking at, about going through the history of these struggles that women had to face historically within the domestic spaces, within the public spaces. And also to see how a certain kind of tradition could be identified and how that becomes significant in understanding, in comprehending and evaluating women’s writing in general.

So. with this we come to the end of our discussion of Virginia Woolf’s essay, “A Room of One’s Own.” I thank you for your attention and I look forward to seeing you in the next session, where we shall begin discussing Henry James’ essay, “The Art of Fiction.”