

VIRGINIA WOOLF

(London, 25th January 1882 – Rodmell, 28th March 1941)



English novelist, critic, and essayist she ranks as one of England's most distinguished and influential modernist writers of the 20th century. She is famous for pioneering the *stream-of-consciousness* technique and is best known for such works as her novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*.

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1. V. Woolf's LIFE & WORKS.



VIRGINIA WOOLF



- **1882:** Adeline Virginia Stephen was born into an affluent household in London, the seventh child in a blended family of eight.

Both of her parents had been married and widowed before marrying each other. Her mother, **Julia Prinsep Jackson**, celebrated as a Pre-Raphaelite artist's model, had three children from her first marriage, while Woolf's father, **Leslie Stephen**, a notable man of letters, had one previous daughter. The Stephens had another four children together.



- **1885-1895:** while the boys in the family received college educations, the girls were home-schooled in English classics and Victorian literature. All the children were given unfettered access to their father's vast library.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

An important influence in Woolf's early life was the rather dishevelled **Talland House**, the summer home the family used in St Ives, **Cornwall**, where she first saw **the Godrevy Lighthouse**, which was to become iconic in her novel *To the Lighthouse*.



- **1895:** Woolf's childhood came to an abrupt end with the death of her mother. She had **her first mental breakdown**.

Early traumas had darkened her childhood, including **being sexually abused by her half-brothers** George and Gerald Duckworth. Moreover in **1897** her stepsister and surrogate mother, **Stella Duckworth**, died.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

- **1897-1901:** she attended the Ladies' Department of King's College, London, where she studied classics and history and came into **contact with early reformers of women's higher education and the women's rights movement.**

Encouraged by her father, Woolf began writing professionally in **1900.**

- **1904:** her father's death caused her **another mental breakdown.**

The Stephen family moved from Kensington to the more bohemian **Bloomsbury**, where they

adopted a free-spirited lifestyle and, with their friends, they formed the artistic and literary **Bloomsbury Group**. Woolf's sister **Vanessa**, a prominent member of the group, would eventually become a celebrated **Post-Impressionist painter.**



VIRGINIA WOOLF

- **1912:** she married Leonard Woolf, a brilliant young writer and critic from Cambridge. The two shared a passionate love for one another for the rest of their lives.
- **1913:** she attempted suicide as a consequence of her manic depressive worries of being a failure as a woman and as a writer.
- **1915:** after nine years and innumerable drafts, her first novel *The Voyage Out* was released. In it her attempt to “re-form” the novel was already apparent.



- **1917:** the Woolfs founded the Hogarth Press and two years later purchased **Monk's House**, a cottage at Rodmell. 7

VIRGINIA WOOLF

- **1925:** she published her novel *Mrs Dalloway* which was followed by *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928).

- **1929:** her book-length essay *A Room of One's Own* was released. In it she examined **women's role in literature** and set forth the idea that “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

- **1934 - 1937:** other losses characterised Woolf's life like that of her nephew, Vanessa's elder son, **Julian Bell**, killed in the Spanish Civil War while driving an ambulance for the Republican army.



- **1940 - 1941:** the German bombing campaign against the UK took place. Known as **The Blitz**, it began with the raids of London. All of this added to Woolf's anguish.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

- **1941:** on 28th March **Woolf** put on her overcoat, filled its pockets with stones, walked into the River Ouse near her home and **drowned herself**.



Her body was not found until 18th April: her husband buried her cremated remains under an elm in the garden of Monk's House, their home in Rodmell, Sussex. Her final writing were these words, addressed to her husband:

"I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will, I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that—everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been."

A CURIOSITY ...

- The circle of intellectuals known as the **Bloomsbury Group** enjoyed acting in an outrageous manner!
- They became famous in 1910 for **the Dreadnought Hoax**, a practical joke in which members of **the group dressed up as a delegation of Ethiopian royals** and successfully persuaded the English Royal Navy to show them their warship, the *HMS Dreadnought*. **Woolf herself was disguised as a bearded man!**
- The fake delegation received the royal treatment, had a photo taken, and were quite proud of themselves for pulling it off. Much to their surprise (maybe), word got out about the prank, and they ended up on the cover of *The Daily Mirror*: the humiliated Navy called for their arrests. That didn't quite happen, but it was a close shave! ¹⁰



... or TWO!

- Woolf was the type of woman who always left a strong impression and, according to the book *Virginia Woolf's Women*, the **local kids** were both **terrified of and fascinated by her**.
- As Dirk Bogarde, an actor who grew up in a nearby village, recalled of her,



*“She sometimes wore a **big floppy straw hat** and we **all thought she was a witch**. Or could put spells on you... **she never spoke to us, but sometimes sang to herself**, a sure sign that **she was ‘barmy’ as we said...**”*



2. A NEW IDEA of NOVEL...



A NEW IDEA of NOVEL...

- In 1908 Woolf had already **determined to *re-form* the novel** by creating a **holistic form** embracing aspects of life that were “*fugitive*” from the Victorian novel. She believed that **the novel** was not so much a form but an “*emotion which you feel*”, to the point that, when writing,

“any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers”

- She also claimed that **fiction writers should be less concerned** with naive notions of reality and more with **language and**

design: with James Joyce and William Faulkner she was **one of the three major English-language Modernist experimenters in *stream-of-consciousness* writing.**



...& the “*stream-of-consciousness*”...

- In Woolf’s novels **perception is fluid**, as is the world she presents, and **interior monologues interweave with events and actions**.
- While Joyce and Faulkner separate one character’s interior monologues from another’s, Woolf’s **narratives move between inner and outer and between characters** without any clear demarcations.



- As a consequence her **novels** can perhaps best be described as **impressionistic**, since **they attempt to inspire impressions** rather than recreate reality: the point of view is shifted inside the characters’ minds through **flashbacks** and **associations of ideas**, presented as a **continuous flux**.



3. ... in MRS DALLOWAY.

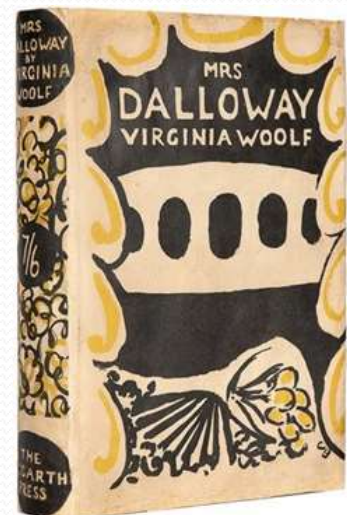


... in *MRS DALLOWAY* (1925)...

- *Mrs Dalloway* examines a **single day** in the life of **Clarissa Dalloway**, a 51-year-old upper-class Londoner married to a member of Parliament who has conventional views on politics and women's rights.
- Woolf offers the reader multiple interwoven stories, particularly that of **Clarissa** as she prepares for and hosts a party, **and** that of the mentally damaged war veteran **Septimus Warren Smith:**

although we trace their movements through the streets of London the novel is essentially plotless.

- The story travels **forward and backward in time** and **in and out of the characters' minds** to construct an image of Clarissa's life and of the inter-war social structure.





FEATURES & STYLE



- The two **characters** can be seen as **foils for each other**: Woolf paired the highly sensitive woman with the shell-shocked war victim

so that “*the sane and the insane*” would exist “*side by side*”. By digging caves out from behind them into their pasts she created “*tunnels*” through which they connected and merged at specific moments within the narrative (*tunnelling technique*).

- The novel shows how the First World War continued to affect those who had lived through it, five years after it had ended, and presents **an eloquent condemnation of militarism and war**. It also raises issues of **feminism, homosexuality and mental illness**.
- In terms of **style**, the novel blurs the distinction between direct and indirect speech, freely alternating between **omniscient description, indirect interior monologue, and soliloquy**.

JOYCE vs WOOLF

- Like Joyce, Woolf decided to set her work on a single day in a city in the middle of June: Joyce had selected 16th June 1904, in Dublin while Woolf chose 13th June 1923, in London.



- Unlike Joyce's characters, though, **Clarissa is not mythologised**, and the stages of her day are not compared to a classical epic: she is an ordinary woman of her time. Yet, **following her thoughts, memories, anxieties and epiphanies**, and entering the minds of the people she passes or meets, **we see a broad and deep cross section of London.**
- Curiously enough, though Woolf had been "*amused, stimulated, charmed, interested by the first 2 or 3 chapters*" of *Ulysses* and had acclaimed it as a masterpiece, when she finished reading it she wrote "*I think it is a mis-fire. Genius it has I think; but of the inferior water. The book is diffuse. It is brackish. It is pretentious. It is underbred, not only in the obvious sense, but in the literary sense...*" 18

... in *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE* (1927)...

- In *To the Lighthouse*, published on the 32nd anniversary of her mother's death, Woolf examined the subtext of human relationships through the lives of **the Ramsay family** as they vacation on the Isle of Skye in Scotland.
- The novel evokes **childhood summers at Talland House** and breaks narrative continuity into a tripartite structure:
 - ❑ **Part I: The Window**, which sets the story of the Ramsays and their eight children in their summer home with their friends;
 - ❑ **Part II: Time Passes**, which focuses on the empty house during a 10-year hiatus during which Mrs Ramsay and a son and a daughter have died;
 - ❑ **Part III: The Lighthouse**, in which Mr. Ramsay and the now-teenage children return to the lighthouse and achieve a moment of reconciliation.



FEATURES & THEMES



- The plot unfolds through shifting perspectives of each character's consciousness. **Shifts** can occur even mid-sentence, and in a way they **resemble the rotating beam of the lighthouse** itself.
- The novel is cited as a key example of the **literary technique of multiple focalization**: it includes **little dialogue** and **almost no action**; most of it is written as thoughts and observations.
- Among the book's many **themes** are those of **loss, subjectivity, the problem of perception** and **the nature and function of art**. The character of Lily Briscoe, the painter who had been a houseguest of the Ramsay family in the first part of the story, argues for nonrepresentational but **emotive art**, echoing the abstract structure of Woolf's novel.

WOOLF vs JOYCE



- Woolf's use of the *stream-of-consciousness* is very different from Joyce's.
- Woolf never lets her characters' thoughts flow without control and she maintains **logical** and **grammatical organization**:

“He was watching her. She knew that he was thinking, You are more beautiful than ever. And she felt herself very beautiful. Will you not tell me just for once that you love me? He was thinking that...but she could not say it”

- Joyce lets his characters show their **thoughts directly** through interior monologue, even in an **incoherent** and **syntactically unorthodox way**:

“Mr Bloom stood far back, his hat in his hand, counting the bared heads. Twelve. I'm thirteen. No. The chap in the macintosh is thirteen. Death's number. Where the deuce did he pop out of? He wasn't in the chapel, that I'll swear. Silly superstition that about thirteen...”



...and in *ORLANDO* (1928).

- *Orlando: A Biography* is a rather fantastic work which tells the story of a **character who lives** from Elizabethan times through the entire 18th century **as a man**. He **then becomes female** and as such lives into the 20th century, **experiencing debilitating gender constraints**.
- Woolf is likely to have taken the title from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, where the heroine Rosalind disguises herself as Ganymede, and in that guise teaches the man she loves, Orlando, how to love in return.
- The **novel is written in mock-heroic imitation of biographical styles** that change over the same period of time.



THEMES & STYLE



- In the novel Woolf fictionalised the life of her friend (and, for a period of time, lover) **Vita Sackville-West** into that of a man-woman, exposing the **artificiality of both gender and genre prescriptions**.

- The central **theme** of the novel is **gender differences**: Woolf is suggesting that gender

roles are NOT biological but societal, imposed on people, and that we would be more free as individuals to act according to our nature and personality if society allowed the freedom of gender neutrality.

- As for its **style**, *Orlando* smashed up literary categories: Woolf called it a biography, but in fact it is a novel, a **postmodernist** work which mixes **fact and fiction, history and invention**.

JOYCE vs WOOLF

- Both Joyce and Woolf introduced the idea of **special moments** in a person's life...

- Joyce spoke of *epiphanies* i.e. the sudden spiritual manifestation caused by a trivial gesture, an external object, through which the character is led to a self-realisation about him- or herself;



- Woolf called them *moments of being* by which she meant rare moments of insight during the characters' daily life when they could see reality behind appearances. She wrote:

“Is it not possible – I often wonder – that things we have felt with great intensity have an experience independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?”





6. CONCLUSIONS & LEGACY.



LEGACY: during her lifetime...

- Woolf had a considerable impact on the cultural life around her. Together with the rest of the Bloomsbury Set, she **rejected Victorian ideals** and was highly progressive in her attitudes: among others, she **supported**
 - ❑ gay rights,
 - ❑ women in the arts,
 - ❑ pacifism,
 - ❑ free love.
- During her lifetime, her house was a hub for some of the most interesting cultural activity of the time, and **Hogarth Press** publications included books by writers such as **Rupert Brooke, T.S. Eliot, Katherine Mansfield, E.M. Forster**, the economist **John Maynard Keynes** and translations of **Sigmund Freud**.



... and beyond!



- She became **one of the central subjects of the 1970s movement of feminist criticism** and her works have since garnered widespread attention for *“inspiring feminism”*.
- She left us a number of essays which are serious inquiries into reading and writing, the novel and the arts, perception and essence, war and peace, class and politics, privilege and discrimination, and the need to reform society.
- A large body of literature is dedicated to her life and work, and she has been the **subject of plays, novels and films**. She is commemorated today by **statues, societies** dedicated to her work and a **building at the University of London**. Her works have been translated into more than 50 languages.