

VIRGINIA WOOLF

(25 January 1882–28 March 1941)

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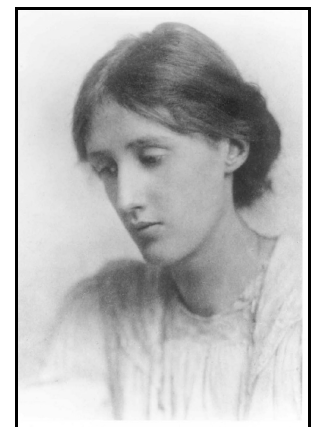
Virginia Woolf, English novelist and critic, was one of the foremost modernists of the twentieth century and is still considered one of the greatest novelists of the century. During the period between the World Wars, she was a significant figure in London literary society and a central figure in the influential Bloomsbury Group of intellectuals. Her most famous works include the novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928), as well as several important essays, including the book-length *A Room of One's Own* (1929), with its famous dictum, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” Her works have been translated into over 50 languages by eminent writers such as the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges and the Belgian-born French novelist Marguerite Yourcenar.



Virginia Woolf 1927

Virginia Woolf was born Adeline Virginia Stephen at 22 Hyde Park Gate in London to a talented and distinguished family. She was the daughter of Leslie Stephen (1832–1904), the noted Victorian critic, philosopher, historian, biographer, and scholar, and Julia Prinsep Duckworth Stephen (née Jackson, 1846–1895), the niece of the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron and a model for Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Edward Burne-Jones. Her parents had each been married previously and been widowed, and, consequently, the large household contained the children of three marriages. Julia had three children by her first husband, Herbert Duckworth; and Leslie had one daughter, who was mentally disabled and eventually institutionalized, by his first wife, Harriet Marian (Minny) Thackeray (1840–1875), the daughter of William Thackeray. Leslie and Julia also had four children together.

Leslie Stephen was a founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a work which would influence Woolf's later experimental biographies, and Virginia educated herself growing up in her father's magnificent library, learning Greek from Walter Pater's sister. Her world was from the beginning the cultured world of middle-class and upper-middle-class London intelligentsia. Leslie and Julia entertained many eminent Victorians, among them Henry James, George Henry Lewes, and Virginia's honorary godfather, James Russell Lowell. Early on, the intellectual atmosphere even carried over to the Stephens' summer home, Talland House in St. Ives, Cornwall, which overlooked Porthminster Bay and where



Virginia Woolf

impressions of the landscape, including Godrevy Lighthouse, later informed Woolf's fiction such as *To the Lighthouse*. In addition, although Virginia and her sister Vanessa were not, like their brothers, sent to be educated at Cambridge (a difference Virginia would resent), they did study at King's College London, coming into contact with some of the early reformers of women's higher education and did benefit from their brothers' Cambridge contacts.

The sudden death of her mother in 1895, when Virginia was 13, and that of her half-sister Stella two years later, precipitated the first of her several nervous breakdowns, thought to have been the result of what is now termed "manic-depressive" bipolar disorder (although Woolf's nephew and first authoritative biographer Quentin Bell, among other modern scholars, have suggested that her breakdowns and recurring depressive periods were also influenced by sexual abuse from her half-brothers George and Gerald Duckworth). The death of Woolf's father in 1904 provoked her most alarming collapse, after which she was briefly institutionalized, but throughout her life she suffered from severe bouts of mental illness—spending short periods in 1910, 1912 and 1913 at the facility Burley House, 15 Cambridge Park, Twickenham. Although Woolf's instability often affected her social life, her literary productivity continued with few breaks throughout her life.



Virginia Woolf 1902

After the death of their father and Virginia's second nervous breakdown, sister Vanessa and brother Adrian sold 22 Hyde Park Gate, and Virginia settled with her sister and two brothers in the house they purchased 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury. When Vanessa, a noted painter, married art critic Clive Bell in 1907, Virginia and her brother took another home in Bloomsbury and there entertained their literary and artistic friends—the famous "Bloomsbury group," which included Lytton Strachey, the biographer; J. M. Keynes, the imminent economist; the painter Duncan Grant, art critic Roger Fry; and E. M. Forster—at evening gatherings where the conversation sparkled, not least perhaps because the atmosphere was fueled by subtextual sexual tension. Duncan Grant, for example, was at different times a lover of Maynard Keynes, Virginia Woolf's brother Adrian, and her sister Vanessa, and he was the father of Vanessa's daughter, Angelica. Virginia herself was bisexual and, 13 years after her marriage to the journalist and essayist Leonard Woolf, she fell passionately in love with the poet Vita [Victoria] Sackville-West, wife of the bisexual diplomat and author, Harold Nicolson. Nigel Nicolson, Vita Sackville-West's son, called Woolf's novel *Orlando* "the longest and most charming love letter in literature," in which Woolf "weaves [Vita] in and out of the



Virginia Woolf 1902

centuries.”

On 10 August 1912, Virginia married the writer Leonard Woolf, with whom she shared a close bond despite his lack of material status (she referred to him during their engagement as a “penniless Jew”). [Though happily married to a Jewish man, Woolf often wrote of Jewish characters in stereotypical archetypes and generalizations, including describing some of her Jewish characters as physically repulsive and dirty, even as she described the Jewish people as having “immense vitality.”] Virginia and Leonard also collaborated professionally, founding in 1917 (along with Sackville-West and Nicolson) the acclaimed Hogarth Press, which published some of the most interesting literature of its time. Even as late as 1937, Virginia described her marriage as “so complete,” but her bouts of depression continued. After completing the manuscript of her last (posthumously published) novel, *Between the Acts*, she fell into a depression similar to that which she had earlier experienced; the onset of World War II, the destruction of her London home during the Blitz, and the cool reception given to her biography of her late friend Roger Fry all worsened her condition until she was unable to work. On 28 March 1941, at the age of 59, she 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 18 April 1941; husband Leonard buried her cremated remains under an elm in the garden of Monk’s House, their home in Rodmell, Sussex. Woolf committed suicide because of a fear, exacerbated by her dread of World War II, that she was about to lose her mind and become a burden on her husband. She and husband hated and feared 1930s fascism, with its antisemitism, even before discovering they were on Hitler’s death list for Britain.



Virginia Woolf 1939

Virginia Woolf began writing professionally in 1900, initially for the *Times Literary Supplement* with a journalistic piece about Haworth, home of the Brontë family. Her first novel *The Voyage Out* was published in 1915 by her half-brother’s imprint, Gerald Duckworth and Company Ltd, but much of her work was self-published through the Hogarth Press. She is considered a major innovator in the English language. Her novels explore with great subtlety problems of personal identity and personal relationships as well as the significance of time, change, and memory for human personality. She rebelled against what she called the “materialism” of such novelists as Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy, seeking a more delicate rendering of consciousness and the truth of human experience. She eventually developed her own style, which skillfully handled “stream of consciousness” with a carefully modulated poetic flow and brought into prose fiction something of the rhythms and the imagery of lyric poetry—exploring the possibilities of moving between action and contemplation, between specific external events in time and delicate tracings of the flow of consciousness, where the mind moves between retrospect and anticipation. These technical experiments are fully reflected

in her later novels—*Jacob’s Room* (1922); *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), the first completed successful novel in her “new” style; *To the Lighthouse* (1927); *The Waves* (1931), the most stylized of her novels; and *Between the Acts* (1941), published posthumously. Woolf also wrote a great many reviews and critical essays, collected in *The Common Reader* (1925) and *The Second Common Reader* (1932). Informal and personal in tone, her criticism has an engaging air of spontaneity. She was keenly intrigued by what it would be like to be a quite different person living in a different age. The six volumes of her *Letters* (pub. 1975–1980) and the five volumes of her *Diary* (pub. 1977–1984) are at once more informal and more revealing, with their running commentary on her life and work, resembling the sketchbooks of a great painter.

It has been thought that Woolf’s peculiarities as a fiction writer have tended to obscure her central strength as arguably the greatest lyrical novelist in the English language. Her novels are highly experimental: a narrative, frequently uneventful and commonplace, is refracted—and sometimes almost dissolved—in the characters’ receptive consciousness. Intense lyricism and stylistic virtuosity fuse to create a world overabundant with auditory and visual impressions. The intensity of Virginia Woolf’s poetic vision elevates the ordinary, sometimes banal settings of most of her novels. For example, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) centers on the efforts of middle-aged society woman Clarissa Dalloway to organize a party, even as her life is paralleled with that of Septimus Warren Smith, a psychologically scarred, working-class veteran returning from World War I. *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is set in two days ten years apart, the plot centering on the Ramsay family’s anticipation of and reflection upon a visit to a lighthouse and the connected familial tensions; yet it investigates the creative process itself and meditates upon the lives of England’s inhabitants in the midst of war, the people left behind, the passage of time, and how women allow men to take emotional strength from them. Still more ingenious, *Flush: A Biography* (1933) is a part-fictional biography of the cocker spaniel owned by Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning and is written from the dog’s point of view. Woolf’s last work, *Between the Acts* (1941), written chiefly in verse, sums up and magnifies her chief preoccupations: the transformation of life through art, sexual ambivalence, and the flux of time and life as simultaneously corrosion and rejuvenation—all set in a highly imaginative and symbolic narrative encompassing almost all of English history.

Woolf’s reputation declined sharply after World War II, but her importance was re-established with the growth of feminist criticism in the 1970s. Recently, many scholarly studies have focused on feminist and lesbian themes in her work. Her best-known nonfiction works, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), address the future of women in education and society, examining the difficulties that female writers and intellectuals face because men have held



Virginia Woolf

disproportionate legal and economic power. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), names Virginia Woolf as one of only three female writers (the other two being Emily Brontë and “sometimes” Katherine Mansfield) who have explored this sad “given” of intellectual history. Woolf has of course been the subject of numerous subsequent works by other artists, including Michael Cunningham’s 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Hours*, which focuses on three generations of women affected by Woolf’s novel *Mrs Dalloway* and was in 2002 made into a film starring Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore, and Nicole Kidman (who won that year’s Best Actress Oscar), and featuring an award-winning score by the American composer Philip Glass. In another example, novelist Susan Sellers’s *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008), which was adapted for the stage by Elizabeth Wright in 2010, explores the close sibling relationship between Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell. Priya Parmur’s 2014 novel *Vanessa and Her Sister* also examines the relationship between the Stephen sisters, here focusing on the early years of their association with the “Bloomsbury Group.”



Man Ray Photo, Woolf 1934