

Virginia Woolf

1-Biography :

by Jessica Svendsen and Pericles Lewis

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was an English novelist, essayist, biographer, and feminist. Woolf was a prolific writer, whose modernist style changed with each new novel.^[1] Her letters and memoirs reveal glimpses of Woolf at the center of English literary culture during the Bloomsbury era. Woolf represents a historical moment when art was integrated into society, as T.S. Eliot describes in his obituary for Virginia. “Without Virginia Woolf at the center of it, it would have remained formless or marginal...With the death of Virginia Woolf, a whole pattern of culture is broken.”^[2]

Virginia Adeline Stephen was the third child of Leslie Stephen, a Victorian man of letters, and Julia Duckworth. The Stephen family lived at Hyde Park Gate in Kensington, a respectable English middle class neighborhood. While her brothers Thoby and Adrian were sent to Cambridge, Virginia was educated by private tutors and copiously read from her father’s vast library of literary classics. She later resented the degradation of women in a patriarchal society, rebuking her own father for automatically sending her brothers to schools and university, while she was never offered a formal education.^[3] Woolf’s Victorian upbringing would later influence her decision to participate in the Bloomsbury circle, noted for their original ideas. As biographer Hermione Lee argues “Woolf was a ‘modern’. But she was also a late Victorian. The Victorian family past filled her fiction, shaped her political analyses of society and underlay the behaviour of her social group.”^[4]

2-Mental Illness

In May 1895, Virginia’s mother died from rheumatic fever. Her unexpected and tragic death caused Virginia to have a mental breakdown at age 13. A second severe breakdown followed the death of her father, Leslie Stephen, in 1904. During this time, Virginia first attempted suicide and was institutionalized. According to nephew and biographer Quentin Bell, “All that summer she was mad.”^[5] The death of her close brother Thoby Stephen, from typhoid fever in November 1906 had a similar effect on Woolf, to such a degree that he would later be re-imagined as Jacob in her first experimental novel Jacob’s Room and later as Percival in The Waves. These were the first of her many mental collapses that would sporadically occur throughout her life, until her suicide in March 1941.

Though Woolf’s mental illness was periodic and recurrent, as Lee explains, she “was a sane woman who had an illness.”^[6] Her “madness” was provoked by life-altering events, notably family deaths, her marriage, or the publication of a novel. According to Lee, Woolf’s symptoms conform to the profile of a manic-depressive illness, or bipolar disorder. Leonard, her dedicated lifelong companion, documented her illness with scrupulousness. He categorized her breakdowns into two distinct stages:

“In the manic stage she was extremely excited; the mind race; she talked volubly and, at the height of the attack, incoherently; she had delusions and heard voices...she was violent with

her nurses. In her third attack, which began in 1914, this stage lasted for several months and ended by her falling into a coma for two days. During the depressive stage all her thoughts and emotions were the exact opposite of what they had been in the manic stage. She was in the depths of melancholia and despair; she scarcely spoke; refused to eat; refused to believe that she was ill and insisted that her condition was due to her own guilt; at the height of this stage she tried to commit suicide.”^[7]

During her life, Woolf consulted at least twelve doctors, and consequently experienced, from the Victorian era to the shell shock of World War I, the emerging medical trends for treating the insane. Woolf frequently heard the medical jargon used for a “nervous breakdown,” and incorporated the language of medicine, degeneracy, and eugenics into her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. With the character Septimus Smith, Woolf combined her doctor’s terminology with her own unstable states of mind. When Woolf prepared to write *Mrs. Dalloway*, she envisioned the novel as a “study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side.” When she was editing the manuscript, she changed her depiction of Septimus from what read like a record of her own experience as a “mental patient” into a more abstracted character and narrative. However, she kept the “exasperation,” which she noted, should be the “dominant theme” of Septimus’s encounters with doctors.^[8]

3-Bloomsbury

Virginia began to teach English literature and history at an adult-education college in London, in addition to writing articles and reviews for publications, including *The Guardian*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *The National Review*. Woolf continued her journalistic endeavors throughout her life, reviewing contemporary and classical literature in modernist reviews like the *Athenaeum*, *The Dial* and *The Criterion*. It was also during this time that Woolf became close friends with young men who shared and stimulated her intellectual interests. The majority of these friends her brother Thoby met at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1899, including Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, and Clive Bell. This group started meeting for ‘Thursday Evenings’ at Gordon Square, London in 1906, which was soon followed by Vanessa Bell’s ‘Friday Club,’ to discuss the arts. With the emergence of these two literary and artistic circles, the unofficial ‘Bloomsbury Group’ came into existence.^[9]

4-Feminist Critiques

Woolf wrote extensively on the problem of women’s access to the learned professions, such as academia, the church, the law, and medicine, a problem that was exacerbated by women’s exclusion from Oxford and Cambridge. Woolf herself never went to university, and she resented the fact that her brothers and male friends had had an opportunity that was denied to her. Even in the realm of literature, Woolf found, women in literary families like her own were expected to write memoirs of their fathers or to edit their correspondence. Woolf did in fact write a memoir of her father, Leslie Stephen, after his death, but she later wrote that if he had not died when she was relatively young (22), she never would have become a writer.

Woolf also concerned herself with the question of women’s equality with men in marriage, and she brilliantly evoked the inequality of her parents’ marriage in her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Woolf based the Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay on her parents. Vanessa Bell immediately decoded the novel, discovering that Mrs. Ramsay was based on their mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen. Vanessa felt that it was “almost painful to have her so raised from

the dead.”^[10] Woolf’s mother was always eager to fulfill the Victorian ideal that Woolf later described, in a figure borrowed from a pious Victorian poem, as that of the “Angel in the House.” Woolf spoke of her partly successful attempts to kill off the “Angel in the House,” and to describe the possibilities for emancipated women independently of her mother’s sense of the proprieties.

5-The Effect of War

The theme of how to make sense of the changes wrought in English society by the war, specifically from the perspective of a woman who had not seen battle, became central to Woolf’s work. In her short story “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” (1922), Woolf has her society hostess, Clarissa Dalloway, observe that since the war, “there are moments when it seems utterly futile...—simply one doesn’t believe, thought Clarissa, any more in God.” Although her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915) had tentatively embraced modernist techniques, her second, *Night and Day* (1919), returned to many Victorian conventions. The young modernist writer Katherine Mansfield thought that *Night and Day* contained “a lie in the soul” because it failed to refer to the war or recognize what it had meant for fiction. Mansfield, who had written a number of important early modernist stories, died at the age of 34 in 1923, and Woolf, who had published some of her work at the Hogarth Press, often measured herself against this friend and rival. Mansfield’s criticism of *Night and Day* as “Jane Austen up-to-date” stung Woolf, who, in three of her major modernist novels of the 1920s, grappled with the problem of how to represent the gap in historical experience presented by the war. The war is a central theme in her three major modernist novels of the 1920s: *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Over the course of the decade, these novels trace the experience of incorporating the massive and incomprehensible experience of the war into a vision of recent history.

6-Hogarth Press

In 1915, Leonard and Virginia moved to Hogarth House, Richmond, and two years later, brought a printing press in order to establish a small, independent publishing house. Though the physical machining required by letterpress exhausted the Woolfs, the Hogarth Press flourished throughout their careers. Hogarth chiefly printed Bloomsbury authors who had little chance of being accepted at established publishing companies. The Woolfs were dedicated to publishing the most experimental prose and poetry and the emerging philosophical, political, and scientific ideas of the day. They published T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster, Roger Fry, Katherine Mansfield, Clive Bell, Vita Sackville-West, and John Middleton Murry, among numerous others. Though they rejected publishing James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, they printed T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the first English translations of Sigmund Freud. Hogarth additionally published all of Woolf’s novels, providing her the editorial freedom to do as she wished as a woman writer, free from the criticism of a male editor. When it was published in October 1928, *Orlando* immediately became a bestseller and the novel’s success made Woolf one of the best-known contemporary writers. In the same month, Woolf gave the two lectures at Cambridge, later published as *A Room of One’s Own* (1929),

7-Suicide

The Bloomsbury Group gradually dispersed, beginning with the death of Lytton Strachey in 1932 and the suicide of his long-time partner Dora Carrington shortly thereafter. Virginia felt the loss of Lytton acutely in her life and her writing; years later she still thought as she wrote, 'Oh but he won't read this!' Roger Fry's death in 1934 also affected Woolf, to such a degree that she would later write his biography (1940). As her friends died, she felt her own life begin to crumble. In January 1941, Woolf became severely depressed, partly due to the strain of completing her novel *Between the Acts*. She distrusted her publisher's praise of the novel; she felt it was "too slight and sketchy." She instead wanted to delay publication, deciding that it required extensive revision. Yet during this time, Woolf began feeling that she had lost her art; she felt if she could no longer write, she could no longer fully exist. It was "a conviction that her whole purpose in life had gone. What was the point in living if she was never again to understand the shape of the world around or, or be able to describe it?"^[19]

Woolf clearly expressed her reasons for committing suicide in her last letter to her husband Leonard: "I feel certain that I am going mad again: I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and can't concentrate."^[20] On March 18, she may have attempted to drown herself. Over a week later on March 28, Virginia wrote the third of her suicide letters, and walked the half-mile to the River Ouse, filled her pockets with stones, and walked into the water.^[21]

Virginia's body was found by some children, a short way down-stream, almost a month later on April 18. An inquest was held the next day and the verdict was "Suicide with the balance of her mind disturbed." Her body was cremated on April 21 with only Leonard present, and her ashes were buried under a great elm tree just outside the garden at Monk's House, with the concluding words of *The Waves* as her epitaph, "Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!"^[22]

Before her death, Virginia published an extraordinary amount of groundbreaking material. She was a renowned member of the Bloomsbury Group and a leading writer of the modernist movement with her use of innovative literary techniques. In contrast to the majority of literature written before the early 1900s, which emphasized plot and detailed descriptions of characters and settings, Woolf's writing thoroughly explores the concepts of time, memory, and consciousness. The plot is generated by the characters' inner lives, not by the external world.

Over the course of her many illnesses, however, Woolf had remained productive. Her intense powers of concentration had allowed her to work ten to twelve hours writing. Her most notable publications include *Night and Day*, *The Mark on the Wall*, *Jacob's Room*, *Monday or Tuesday*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, *A Room of One's Own*, *The Waves*, *The Years*, and *Between the Acts*. In total, her work comprises five volumes of collected essays and reviews, two biographies (*Flush* and *Roger Fry*), two libertarian books, a volume of selections from her diary, nine novels, and a volume of short stories.