

Virginia Woolf: An Introduction to
Orlando and *To The Lighthouse*

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Woolf: Life and Work

Virginia Woolf, original name Adeline Virginia Stephen, (born January 25, 1882, London, England—died March 28, 1941, near Rodmell, Sussex), English writer whose novels, through their nonlinear approaches to narrative, exerted a major influence on the genre. While she is best known for her novels, especially *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf also wrote pioneering essays on artistic theory, literary history, women's writing, and the politics of power. Virginia Woolf wrote far more fiction than Joyce and far more nonfiction than either Joyce or Faulkner. Six volumes of diaries (including her early journals), six volumes of letters, and numerous volumes of collected essays show her deep engagement with major 20th-century issues.

Woolf: Life and Work

Though many of her essays began as reviews, written anonymously to deadlines for money, and many include imaginative settings and whimsical speculations, they 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. Woolf's haunting language, her prescient insights into wide-ranging historical, political, feminist, and artistic issues, and her revisionist experiments with novelistic form during a remarkably productive career altered the course of Modernist and postmodernist letters.

Important Essays

The key critical nonfiction longest work of literary criticism by Woolf is *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a founding feminist text, and a major source of debate in literary criticism concerning gender, sexuality and feminism. Her essays 'Modern Fiction' (1919, 1925) and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924) are standard texts in the field of modernist studies. Another highly influential book is *Three Guineas* (1938), her pacifist tract analysing correlations between patriarchy and fascism.

Woolf as a Modernist Writer

“Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol (so it seemed to Mr. Bentley, vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich) of man's soul; of his determination, thought Mr. Bentley, sweeping round the cedar tree, to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory. . .” (MrsD,p. 30)¹

This aeroplane scene in *Mrs Dalloway* combines many of the perspectives relevant to Virginia Woolf's modernism: intellectual, technological, social, and literary. As the aeroplane suggests, modernism was also a response to technological innovation, particularly in the urban environment.

The Aeroplane Scene

As the setting in Greenwich suggests, it explored the nature of time. The distinction between psychological time and clock time, the *duree* and *temps* of Bergson's philosophy, underlies the modernist experiments with time and narrative form.

The aeroplane's evanescent sky-writing raises other issues: of reading and interpretation; of the transitory nature of modernist beauty; and, in the way that the spectacle unites a disparate group of characters, the nature of the crowd in the urban environment. As 'Einstein' suggests, modernist literature responded to radical intellectual developments in philosophy and science.

Explanation of *duree* and *temps*

Time is distinguished from duration . This designates, in Bergson's terminology, psychological time which is subjective and relative. While time is external to man, duration is intimate to him. As it is experienced by the subject, it cannot be divided or measured, because consciousness is a homogeneous flow. Bergson illustrates this specificity of duration by giving the example of the perception of the melting of a sugar in water: "*if I want to make myself a glass of sugar water, says Bergson, I can do whatever I need to do, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is full of lessons.*

Because the time I have to wait is no longer that mathematical time that would apply as well along the entire history of the material world, even when it is suddenly spread out in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say with a certain portion of my duration which is neither extendable nor shrinkable at will. It is no longer thought, it is lived "(Essay on the immediate data of consciousness). Thus, the duration experienced by consciousness is different from the time of clocks because it is specific to the individual, to a state of mind, to certain circumstances, or to a society. It is for Bergson real time, inaccessible for science.

Influence on Woolf

Woolf thought of herself as one of the 'moderns', as part of a more fluid grouping, encompassing thinkers and literary journalists as well as writers and artists. The moderns existed as a web of affiliations, not as a coherent artistic movement. Woolf was acutely aware of the dangers inherent in generalisation and, in exploring her modernism, we need to acknowledge her differences from, as well as her similarities to, a generalised 'modernism'.

Influence on Woolf

In 1911, as Leonard Woolf recalled, 'Freud and Rutherford and Einstein' had begun 'to revolutionise our knowledge of our own minds and of the universe'. The late nineteenth-century philosophical work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson was equally significant. Of the influential thinkers mentioned above, Woolf met only Freud. She never met, and may never have read, Einstein, Bergson, Nietzsche or Rutherford. Yet her novels apparently respond to their works and employ their ideas. Leonard Woolf doubted that she had ever read Bergson or attended his lectures. One may reply that Bergsonism was part of the intellectual atmosphere of the years from 1910 to 1912, as Einstein was to be in the years from 1919 to 1930.

Proximity with Other Moderns

But the idea of an all-pervading 'intellectual atmosphere' easily obscures the partisan affiliations of modernist sub-cultures, their specific patterns of ignorance and knowledge, and the material means by which knowledge is disseminated. The biographical and bibliographical contexts of Woolf's career indicate how she was able to encounter these thinkers indirectly. Moreover, they suggest that her identity as one of the 'moderns' was sustained by the proximity of other moderns, socially and textually.

Who are the Other Moderns?

Bloomsbury

- Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)
- E. M. Forster (1879-1970)
- the literary journalist and literary critic Desmond MacCarthy (1877-1952)
- the critic and postimpressionistic painter Roger Fry (1866-1934, also a painter) and Clive Bell(*Significant Form, Art* ,1881-1964)
- the biographer and essayist Lytton Strachey (1880-1932)
- the painters Duncan Grant (1885-1978) and Vanessa Bell (1879-1961, Virginia Woolf's sister)
- the political writer and worker, publisher and autobiographer Leonard Woolf (1880-1969)
- the economist John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946).

A Cross Discipline Bloomsbury

Woolf's diaries suggest that conversations in Bloomsbury were wide-ranging, across disciplines and moving from the intellectual to the intimate. In 1930 Woolf records an evening spent with David Cecil, Lytton Strachey and Clive Bell, shortly after the publication of Sir James Jeans's best-selling popular science book *The Mysterious Universe*: 'Talk about the riddle of the universe (Jeans' book) whether it will be known; not by us; found out suddenly: about rhythm in prose' (D3, p. 337)

Similarly, in May 1932, on holiday with Roger Fry and his sister, Woolf describes Leonard 'discussing prison reform with Marjorie, informing Roger about the break up of the atom' (D4, p. 96). Roger Fry had studied science, and remained open to influences from a wide range of sources (RF, p. 116).

Bertrand Russell was equally comfortable in the realms of mathematics, politics, philosophy and the new physics, about which he wrote two compact accounts, *The ABC of Atoms* (1923) and *The ABC of Relativity* (1925).

Woolf's Response

Less central to Woolf's circle, but as intellectually significant, were C. P. Sanger and Sydney Waterlow. A barrister by profession, the polymathic Sanger had co-translated a work on the new physics, and reviewed many scientific books. Waterlow worked as a diplomat, but also wrote on philosophical topics including the work of Henri Bergson.

Woolf's fluid syntax indicates the ease with which borders could be crossed. Such conversational acquaintance with ideas creates fragmentary, unsystematic knowledge, but, for these very reasons, is all the more valuable to the literary artist. The systematic treatise can stifle rather than stimulate.

Other Influences

Woolf's sense of modernity was further shaped by other groups which overlapped with Bloomsbury. Lady Ottoline Morrell combined the roles of society hostess and patron of the arts, allowing writers, artists and philosophers to mingle at both 44 Bedford Square in Bloomsbury and Garsington Manor near Oxford. Among those who adopted Garsington as their meeting-place were Aldous Huxley, T. S. Eliot and the modernist painter Mark Gertler. Garsington reinforced its habitues' sense of belonging to a progressive cultural movement.

Garsington Circle

Intersecting with the Garsington circle was one which formed around the literary weekly *The Athenaeum* under the editorship of John Middleton Murry between 1919 and 1921. This circle included Eliot, Huxley and occasionally Waterlow; also central were Samuel Solomonovitch Koteliansky, a translator of Russian fiction, and J. W. N. Sullivan, an important interpreter of the new physics and its implications for art and philosophy.

Woolf and Publishing

Woolf's modernity was sustained further by her publishing context. Literary journals and publishing houses create imaginary communities, geographically disparate, but possessing some degree of cultural or ideological agreement. Journals like *The Athenaeum* and *The Times Literary Supplement* also displayed a surprising heterogeneity of content. In reading *The Athenaeum* one could move from Eliot reviewing a literary work to Sullivan discussing the implications of Einstein's theory to Fry on aesthetics. Heterogeneous journals reproduced some of the cross-disciplinary qualities of a Bloomsbury conversation, and this potential was at a maximum for a reader like Woolf, who relished the possibility of reading in a non-linear, free-associative way.

Literary Magazines

Many critics have noted the importance of the 'little magazines' to the development of modernism: small in circulation, often short-lived, they published experimental writings and reviewed new works. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was serialised in *The Egoist*, and parts of *Ulysses* appeared in *The Little Review*, *The Waste Land* first appeared in Eliot's own *Criterion*, and in the USA in *The Dial*. Some magazines, such as Wyndham Lewis's *Blast*, with striking typography, were works of modernist art in themselves. However, Woolf generally contributed to journals that were less stridently avant-garde: *The Athenaeum*, though it defined itself in opposition to the traditionalist *London Mercury*, was itself conservative in appearance and moderate in its tone; *The Criterion*, in which 'Character in Fiction' appeared, resembled a respectable academic review more closely than its modernist predecessors.

The Victorian Affiliation

In the essay 'Modern Novels' (1919) she emphasises the differences between the Victorian 'materialist' and the 'modern' approaches. In 'On Re-reading Novels' (1922) and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1923) that her distinction between the 'Edwardian' and the 'Georgian' generations appears. In rejecting Victorian 'materialism', Woolf is rejecting the Victorian idea of reality itself. This marks her experimental work from the outset. In her diary, Woolf satirises the 'Orderly solidity' (Dz, p. 235) of the Victorian culture. She was influenced by Rutherford's discovery that the atom was 'porous'; and alludes clearly to the new-found porosity of matter in *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, and more mutedly in earlier works. In doing so, she asserts her modernity of outlook. Throughout her fiction and criticism, Woolf expresses a preference for a reality which is semi-transparent, combining the solidity of granite and the evanescence of rainbow.

The Victorian Affiliation

She borrowed selectively from the Victorian non-fiction prose writers, suppressing the pompous, the sage-like and the patriarchal in their writing, and simultaneously recovering their particularity, their non-linearity and their fragmentariness. The examples of Carlyle and Ruskin suggested to Woolf the possibility of an 'impassioned prose' which would address the feelings and imagination without taking on the 'overdressed' appearance of the prose poem (E4, p. 361). In Ruskin, Woolf found a man who combined 'the austerity of the puritan, and the sensuous susceptibility of the artist' (E4, p. 503). Though Woolf alludes to the puritan Ruskin in *Night and Day* (p. 9) as one of the oppressive 'great dead', the hyper-aesthetic Ruskin resembles Woolf in many respects. There may also be a concealed intellectual debt to the Victorian sages, and, beyond them, to the Romantics, in Woolf's recurrent distinction between mechanical and rhythmic modes of thought.

The Victorian Affiliation

The distinction between the mechanical and some non-mechanical other - be it organicism, hellenism or gothicism - was central to the thought of Carlyle and Arnold, and was significant in that of Ruskin. Woolf reproduces this opposition most clearly in the distinction between the linear-thinking Mr Ramsay and his laterally thinking wife, and between the mechanically minded Holmes and Bradshaw and the non-mechanical Septimus and Clarissa. Woolf developed Pater's ideas of perception and art in important respects. Pater saw reality as being in a constant state of flux. Its apparent solidity was merely an illusion created by language: 'That clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, under which we group them - a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it.'

Order/Chaos

While Woolf celebrates forms of rhythmical order which seem to emerge from chaos itself, she directs her most forceful satire at imposed systems of order, whether the 'real and standard things' of Victorian life, the social hierarchies, or Mr Ramsay's idea of thought progressing from A to Z. These systems of order are all based either on ideas of linearity, or of hierarchy, the Victorian 'pyramidal accumulation' (Mrs D, p. 178). Woolf extends her rejection of these systems to literary aesthetics, criticising 'Bennett, Galsworthy and so on' for adhering to a 'formal railway line of sentence' (L3, p. 135), and praising the fictitious Mary Carmichael for breaking both the sentence and the sequence (ROO, p. 81).

Rejection of Linearity

The phrase about the 'railway line' of sentence might suggest that in rejecting linearity, Woolf rejects technological modernity. In *The Waves* Bernard makes a similar association, likening a 'sound like the knocking of railway trucks' to 'the happy concatenation of one event following another in our lives. Knock, knock, knock. Must, must, must. Must go, must sleep, must wake, must get up' (W, p. 180). These skeletal narratives suggest the 'appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner' (D3, p. 209). However, technological modernity is not Woolf's real target. Woolf repeatedly associates linearity and measurement with the shopkeeping classes: both Sir William Bradshaw and Charles Tansley are the sons of grocers; elsewhere she ridicules the idea that gifts of mind and character 'can be weighed like sugar and butter' (ROO, p. 104). Moreover, she repeatedly associates linearity and regimentation with the exclusively male world of the public schools, the army and the empire. These associations link Woolf's rejection of linear form with her critique of patriarchy.

Stream of Consciousness

Stream of Consciousness narrative technique in nondramatic fiction intended to render the flow of myriad impressions—visual, auditory, physical, associative, and subliminal—that impinge on the consciousness of an individual and form part of his awareness along with the trend of his rational thoughts. The term was first used by the psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). As the psychological novel developed in the 20th century, some writers attempted to capture the total flow of their characters' consciousness, rather than limit themselves to rational thoughts. To represent the full richness, speed, and subtlety of the mind at work, the writer incorporates snatches of incoherent thought, ungrammatical constructions, and free association of ideas, images, and words at the pre-speech level.

Stream of Consciousness

The stream-of-consciousness novel commonly uses the narrative techniques of interior monologue. Probably the most famous example is James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), a complex evocation of the inner states of the characters Leopold and Molly Bloom and Stephen Dedalus. Other notable examples include *Leutnant Gustl* (1901) by Arthur Schnitzler, an early use of stream of consciousness to re-create the atmosphere of pre-World War I Vienna; William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), which records the fragmentary and impressionistic responses in the minds of three members of the Compson family to events that are immediately being experienced or events that are being remembered; and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), a complex novel in which six characters recount their lives from childhood to old age.

Stream of Consciousness

In these novels the depicted consciousness serves as a screen on which the material in these novels is presented. "Consciousness" should not be confused with words which denote more restricted mental activities, such as "intelligence" or "memory." The justifiably irate comments of the psychology scholars deplore the layman's use of the term. One of these scholars writes: "It has been said that no philosophical term is at once so popular and so devoid of standard meaning; as consciousness; and the layman's usage of the term has been credited with begging as many metaphysical questions as will probably be the privilege of any single word."

Stream of Consciousness

Since our study concerns persons who are laymen in psychology, it is necessary that we proceed with the "layman's usage." Consciousness indicates the entire area of mental attention, from preconsciousness on through the levels of the mind up to and including the highest one of rational, communicable awareness. Stream-of-consciousness fiction differs from all other psychological fiction precisely in that it is concerned with those levels that are more inchoate than rational verbalization—those levels on the margin of attention.

Virginia Woolf on Modern Fiction

In her essay “Modern Fiction” Woolf writes:

It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle.

Woolf's major novels, by common consent, are

Mrs. Dalloway (1925)

To the Lighthouse (1927)

Orlando (1928)

The Waves (1931)

The Years (1937)

Between the Acts (1941)

Formally speaking, Woolf's finest novel is *To the Lighthouse*, which is a miraculous concentration of her varied gifts. In her introduction to the Penguin edition, Hermione Lee writes that Woolf knew very well what she was doing for herself in writing *To the Lighthouse*, explaining it on at least two occasions: "I used to think of [my father] & mother daily; but writing The Lighthouse laid them in my mind." "I suppose that I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest."

Critics tend to agree that Woolf's finest novel is *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which is certainly one of the central works of the modern imagination, comparable to Lawrence's *The Rainbow* or Conrad's *Victory*, if not quite of the range of *Women in Love* or *Nostramo*. Perhaps it is the only novel in which Woolf displays all of her gifts at once. Erich Auerbach, in his *Mimesis*, lucidly summing up Woolf's achievement in her book, could be expounding Pater's trope of the privileged moment: "What takes place here in Virginia Woolf's novel is ... to put the emphasis on the random occurrence, to exploit it not in the service of a planned continuity of action but in itself. And in the process something new and elemental appeared: nothing less than the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment to which we surrender ourselves without prejudice.

To be sure, what happens in that moment—be it outer or inner processes—concerns in a very personal way the individuals who live in it, but it also (and for that very reason) concerns the elementary things which men in general have in common. It is precisely the random moment which is comparatively independent of the controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair; it passes unaffected by them, as daily life. The more it is exploited, the more the elementary things which our lives have in common come to light. The more numerous, varied, and simple the people are who appear as subjects of such random moments, the more effectively must what they have in common shine forth.”

Lily Briscoe's vision, which concludes the novel:
"Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision."

Orlando

Orlando is considered 'the longest and most charming love letter in literature', and is dedicated to Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West. Woolf conceived of it as 'an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books'. She wanted 'the main note' of this mock biography to be 'Satire'; '- satire and wildness'. And the target of the satire is to include her 'own lyric vein' (D3 131). 'Half laughing, half serious; with great splashes of exaggeration' (D3 168), the novel tells the story of Orlando, perennial heir to Knole, the Sackville stately home, who at the start of the book is a young nobleman and aspiring poet of the Elizabethan period and by the close, after a few hundred years of literary, amorous and heroic adventures and encounters with nearly all the great literary canonical figures through the ages, is married, and a successful woman poet. Her poem 'The Oak Tree', hundreds of years in gestation, wins a literary prize and critical acclaim.

Orlando

Orlando may also be seen as a satirical Künstlerroman, (Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).) exploring the gender politics of poetics and artistic subjectivity across the ages. This is a new form of biography; and Woolf boasted that she 'could revolutionise biography in a night' (L3 429). Woolf thought it would 'be great fun to write; & it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work which I want to come next' (D3 131). But as well as being a pleasurable diversion, she also conceived of *Orlando* as a new form of memoir and biography: 'One of these days . . . I shall sketch here, like a grand historical picture the outlines of all my friends. . . . It might be a way of writing the memoirs of one's own times during peoples lifetimes' (D3 156–7).

Orlando

Again, the reader of *Orlando* is put on treacherous ground, between granite and rainbow, between recognising portraits of real people at the same time as acknowledging the licence of fiction. Woolf herself understood the challenge of writing this work to be that of carefully balancing ‘between truth & fantasy’ (D3 162). On its completion, she found that writing *Orlando* had taught her ‘how to write a direct sentence; taught me continuity & narrative, & how to keep the realities at bay. But I purposely avoided of course any other difficulty. I never got down to my depths & made shapes square up, as I did in *The Lighthouse*’ (D3 203). This seems to suggest a certain facile lightness of touch in *Orlando*; and Woolf even records feeling bored as she writes the closing chapter: ‘One gets bored. One whips oneself up. I still hope for a fresh wind, & don’t very much bother’ (D3 175).

Orlando

Orlando: A Biography (1928)

“Orlando? Still the Orlando she needs may not come; these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter’s hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will (and for many of these things there is no name) so that one will only come if it is raining, another when Mrs Jones is not there, another if you can promise it a glass of red wine – and so on; for everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him – and some are too wildly ridiculous to be mentioned in print at all.” (O 277)

Orlando

This sentence allows modern understanding of subjectivity as something multiple and in process, something shaped by material circumstance and social constellation. Orlando's fluctuating between genders, evident in her transition from male to female, and his and her cross-dressing, may be understood to fulfil Woolf's theory of androgyny (see *A Room of One's Own*). On the other hand, it might be argued that such masquerading actually serves elliptically to celebrate lesbian identity, rather than destabilising sexual identity altogether. On first reading *Orlando*, its dedicatee Vita Sackville-West discovered a 'new form of Narcissism' by falling in love with Orlando (L3 574). Arnold Bennett thought *Orlando* 'a high-brow lark' (CH 232) while Rebecca West deemed it 'a poetic masterpiece'.

Guide to further reading to Virginia Woolf's
works

PDF Attached

Thank You

Essays

The Common Reader (London: Hogarth, 1925)

The Common Reader: Second Series (London: Hogarth, 1932)

The Moment and Other Essays (London: Hogarth, 1947)

Collected Essays, 4 vols., ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1966–7)

Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing, ed. Michele Barrett (London: Women's Press, 1979)

The Essays of Virginia Woolf, vols. 1–4 (of 6), ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1986–94)

Moments of Being, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd edn (London: Hogarth, 1985)

The London Scene (London: Snowbooks, 2004)