
Virginia Woolf

SHE NEVER WON A MAJOR AWARD AND SHE WAS NEVER HAILED AS "THE GREATEST OF HER GENERATION." YET WOOLF'S WORKS HAVE STOOD THE TEST OF TIME BASED ON THEIR OWN MERITS. IN 2002 THE FILM *THE HOURS* WAS RELEASED, THE LATEST REMINDER OF THE GREATNESS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF.

BY LISA LEVY

In her introduction to *To the Lighthouse*, Eudora Welty says: "It is that bolt of lightning Virginia Woolf began with, an instantaneous burst of coherence over the chaos and the dark. She has shown us the shape of the human spirit." Chaos and dark are apt words to describe Woolf, whose life was marred by periods of deep depression. But Welty is also correct to point out Woolf's abiding humanity and her gift for bringing the messiness and struggles and darkness of life to the page, beautifully rendering its rhythms and complexities.

For if life was chaotic, Woolf argued that fiction should not attempt to bring order to it. In her essay "Modern Novels," Woolf railed against the tyranny of plot, the tidy endings, and the organized presentation of life in traditional fiction: "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. . . . Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."

To present life as she experienced it, Woolf developed her own style of stream-of-consciousness writing, perhaps inspired by James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Her

work is decidedly modern with internal monologues, symbolic characters, and explorations of sexuality (reflecting Woolf's own interest in women). Woolf's focus on inner thoughts and external symbols often left some readers wishing more was actually *happening* in her work. But her emphasis on character over plot allowed her to explore much of life—madness, individuality, and the struggle against despair—with an emphasis on how people change internally. As E.M. Forster wrote: "It is easy for a novelist to describe what a character thinks of. . . . But to convey the actual process of thinking is a creative feat, and I know of no one except Virginia Woolf who has accomplished it."

A Born Melancholic

WHERE TO START

MRS. DALLOWAY is Woolf's most fully realized novel (and is receiving new attention as the basis for Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, now a film.) **TO THE LIGHTHOUSE** touches on most of the theme most important to Woolf. **ORLANDO** was the bestselling of her novels when published and is lighter and more humorous than the others.

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 as the third of four children in the London household of Leslie and Julia Stephen. The family was both a source of profound inspiration and trauma for Woolf. Leslie wrote several books of philosophy before editing the *Dictionary of National Biography* for nine years. Virginia was a sickly child but her father doted on her and recognized her burgeoning curiosity and talent. She



was encouraged "to read what one liked because one liked it" in her father's extensive library, "never pretending to admire what one did not." Woolf's mother was warm and kind-hearted, "the creator of felicity."

All was not well, however, with her extended family. Woolf's half-sister was mentally ill, as was a cousin who suffered from madness due to a head injury. Woolf's mother died in 1895, and 13-year-old Virginia suffered the first of five nervous breakdowns. She was prescribed a "rest cure," consisting of rest, reading, milk, and occasional walks, a regimen continued for the rest of her life. Her father succumbed to cancer in 1904, and Woolf attempted suicide for the first time soon thereafter. In addition to the death of her parents, Woolf also suffered molestation at the hands of her half-brother, George Duckworth; many critics and biographers hypothesize that this was a significant factor in her lifelong struggle with mental illness.

It was in the aftermath of her father's death that Woolf began to write. By 1905, she had submitted articles to the *Times Literary Supplement*, with which she was affiliated for the next 30 years. At this time, Woolf was living in a London neighborhood called Bloomsbury with her brothers and sister. Their house became a gathering place for her older brother Thoby's intellectual friends, and Virginia found herself in the compa-

ny of John Maynard Keynes, Clive Bell, E.M. Forster, and others. The Bloomsbury Group as they came to be called (see sidebar) was an ongoing source of support and encouragement.

In 1912 Woolf married one of Thoby's friends, Leonard Woolf. By 1913 she finished the manuscript for her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, and suffered another breakdown. But with Leonard's support she—and her writing—grew stronger.

Woolf's writing and her illness were intertwined; in her diary, she wrote, "What a born melancholic I am! The only way I keep afloat is by working." Her illness eventually got the better of her, and Woolf committed suicide in 1941. She put a large stone into the pocket of her coat and walked into the river Ouse near her home. In a note to her husband, she said: "I am doing what seems the best thing to do....I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been."

MAJOR WORKS

Jacob's Room (1922)

Woolf's third novel represents a major step in her writing. The structure of the book is modern and ambitious: the character of Jason is woven together from descriptions of objects in his room,

AN OVERVIEW OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S WORK

The Voyage Out (1915)

This account of a young woman's travels through South America reflects Woolf's interest in women and education. "Nearly every action, nearly every event in *The Voyage Out* is made to be symbolical," wrote James Hafley in 1954, and it's rough going because of it.

Kew Gardens (1919)

Woolf's short fiction is not generally read, but these interior monologues offer clues to how she came to develop her style and tone.

Night and Day (1919)

Woolf was more satisfied with this than *Voyage*, though critics, including Katherine Mansfield, found it less ambitious than its predecessor. The plot is a throwback to one of Woolf's favorite writers, Jane Austen: a story of mismatched couples finding more suitable partners.

**Jacob's Room* (1922)

Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown (criticism), (1924)

Woolf's essay on character and fiction and repudiation of realism (as both of the named writers practiced it) has been widely reprinted. Her famous assertion that "on or about December 1910, human character changed" is a mission statement for her own writing: the purpose of fiction is to explore character.

The Common Reader (1925) and *The Second Common Reader* (1932)

These volumes of Woolf's reviews and essays are primers in literary history and remarkable artifacts of taste. She advocates "truth-tellers" like Daniel Defoe and Anthony Trollope, loves the "Psychologists" like Henry James and Proust as well as the "Poets," Melville and Emily Brontë. These are a pleasure to dip into, astute and easily digestible.

**Mrs Dalloway* (1925)

**To the Lighthouse* (1927)

**Orlando* (1928)

**A Room of One's Own* (1929)

**The Waves* (1931)

The Years (1937)

A chronicle of three generations of the Pargiter family from 1880 to the present, *The Years* resembles *The Waves* in the absence of a plot. The theme is how modern society interacts with personality; if that sounds very abstract, so is the prose. Some found it brilliant, others uninspired.

**Three Guineas* (1938)

Roger Fry (biography) (1940)

Fry was a neo-impressionist painter and a stalwart of the Bloomsbury set. Woolf's one incursion into biography was not well received.

Between the Acts (1941)

Published posthumously, the consensus is that Woolf would have revised this novel had she not been so ill. The action, such as it is, focuses on members of an audience at a village pageant. Though not generally liked, some critics praised the final confrontation, which John Lehmann claims had the power "to make frissons run through" him. ■

his observations of others, and others' observations of him.

THE STORY: *Jacob's Room* is an anti-bildungsroman, about how society fails a promising young man. As in *The Voyage Out*, Jacob travels to find himself, but it is circumstances that define people. Woolf says in the novel: "It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done."

"There is no writer who can give the illusion of reality with more certainty and with so complete a concealment of illusionary devices behind a perfection of style which is at once solid and ethereal." *The Spectator*, 1922.

"Very strongly has Mrs. Woolf preferred Jacob's room to his company. Jacob lives, but that is hearsay. Jacob dies; there could be nothing more negative than the death of one who never (that we could learn for certain) lived; reported by a mouth that makes every human event she speaks of seem as if it had not happened....She is at once a negligible novelist and a supremely important writer." *New Statesman*, 11/1/22.



THE BOTTOM LINE: Not her best work, but a good place to start. Woolf introduces some themes that characterize her next two novels: the impact of war and the complexity of family ties.

Mrs. Dalloway (1925)

There is considerable debate about the extent of *Ulysses's* influence on *Mrs. Dalloway*: published the same year, both take place on one day and utilize the stream of consciousness technique associated with modernism. Woolf herself disliked *Ulysses*: "a memorable catastrophe—immense in daring, terrific in disaster." *Mrs. Dalloway* is also the basis for Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel (and the film released of the same name), *The Hours* (1998).

THE STORY: Woolf based the character Clarissa Dalloway on society hostess and Bloomsbury doyenne Ottoline Morrell. "I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense," Woolf wrote. She does that and much more in this magnificent novel, which intertwines the lives of Mrs. Dalloway, the wife of a politician who is throwing a party in her London home, and Septimus Smith, a victim of shell shock living in the city with his Italian wife.

"In Mrs. Woolf's new novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, the visible world exists with a brilliance, a luminous clarity....it is not by its vividness that her writing ultimately stays in mind, but by the coherent and processional form which is composed of, and transcends, that vividness." *Saturday Review of Literature*, 5/16/25.

Review of Literature, 5/16/25.

THE BLOOMSBURY GROUP

The Bloomsbury Group as we know it did not begin in London but at Cambridge University with a group of young men who were enamored with the philosopher G.E. Moore (as was Virginia Woolf, though she comes later). The men, including writer Lytton Strachey (*Eminent Victorians*), art critic Clive Bell, economist John Maynard Keynes, Leonard Woolf, and Thoby Stephen (Virginia's brother who died of typhoid in 1906), later assembled in the London neighborhood of Bloomsbury, initially gathering at the house where the Woolf siblings lived. Other notable personages associated with Bloomsbury included T.S. Eliot, Vita Sackville-West, E.M. Forster, and painters Duncan Grant and Roger Fry.

The American expatriates, the Beats, the Algonquin Round Table: each of these groups owe some debt to Bloomsbury. Beyond their varied individual works, these Bloomsbury writers left a legacy of authors who repudiated Victorian mores. As Strachey biographer Michael Holroyd said, "They really were the progressives and the embodiment of the avant-garde in early years of this century. Every time we look at them again they seem to have something for the contemporary world, whether in sexual ethics, liberation, biography, economics, feminism or painting."

The various couplings certainly feel very contemporary. Besides the married pairs of Leonard and Virginia Woolf (she had turned down a proposal from close friend Strachey, a homosexual, who then pushed her and Leonard Woolf together) and Clive and Vanessa Bell, there were affairs between genders and sexual orientations. Where some of their contemporaries regarded the group as snobbish and insular—"little swarming selves," as D.H. Lawrence called them—there is no quibbling with the impact they had on their time and on cultural history. ■

"I could not finish it, because I could not discover what it was really about, what was its direction, and what Mrs. Woolf intended to demonstrate by it. To express myself differently, I failed to discern what was its moral basis." Arnold Bennett, novelist and Woolf's literary nemesis



"The novel is rather a portrait of Mrs. Dalloway's society than of the lady herself...this life is brought into focus in the character of Mrs. Dalloway." A.D. Moody in *Virginia Woolf*, 1963.

THE BOTTOM LINE: *Mrs. Dalloway* is Woolf's most fully realized work. Heartbreaking and inventive, this is a novel that one lives in rather than reads.

To the Lighthouse (1927)

◆ #15, Modern Library's 100 Best Novels

THE STORY: *To the Lighthouse* chronicles the Ramseys, a family like Woolf's own: a scholarly, preoccupied father; a warm, loving mother; several children; and guests at a house off the coast of Scotland (much like one where the Woolfs spent summers). Each of the three sections in the novel is dominated by a symbol, the first being "The Window," focusing on the family; followed by the

poetic middle section, "Time Passing," which describes Mrs. Ramsey's death and its effects on the household; finally, "The Lighthouse," which picks up the family ten years later.

"To the Lighthouse is a novel about art, what it aims for, what it might achieve, and what means it should employ to reach its end." Alice Van Buren Kelley, 1987.

FEMINISM AND WOOLF'S ESSAYS

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN (1929)

THREE GUINEAS (1938)

Without a formal education and possessing an avant-garde writing style, Virginia Woolf nevertheless is regarded as among the shrewdest and most probing essayists of her day. Seen as the "high priestess of feminist literary criticism" by Harold Bloom, her analysis of the place of women in society reverberates with present-day readers as surely as it shook up her contemporaries.

Woolf began her career writing reviews, many of which were collected in the *Common Reader* volumes. But these two book-length essays are much more far-reaching than literary criticism. Roughly speaking, they tackle the issues of war, education, political engagement, money, and, of course, vast inequalities between the sexes.



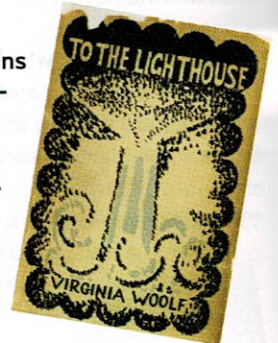
In *A Room of One's Own*, the purported topic is women and fiction, but by the second page she's hit on her conclusion: "All I could do was offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and the true nature of

fiction unsolved." Woolf invents a sister for Shakespeare, just as talented as William but unable to write because she lacked the necessities that Woolf articulated at the start of her treatise.

Three Guineas addresses the problem of the many barriers to women's education. Asked the not so simple question, "How in your opinion are we to prevent war?" she writes a suitably complex answer, moving from the problem of war to the problem of the allocation of educational resources. Though the conclusion that equal access to education would end war may seem willfully naive, the basis of Woolf's argument—that money talks—is irrefutable. ■

"The technical brilliance glows, melts, falls away; and there remains a poetic apprehension of life of extraordinary loveliness. Nothing happens, in the houseful of odd nice people, and yet all of life happens. The tragic futility, the absurdity, the pathetic beauty of life—we experience all of this."

Conrad Aiken, in "The Novel as Work of Art," *Dial*, July 1927.



"The only good one in which her talent fulfills itself in a satisfactory achievement." The *Leavises* in their anti-Bloomsbury journal, *Scrutiny*.

"To reach the lighthouse is to make contact with a truth outside oneself, to surrender the uniqueness of one's ego to an impersonal reality." David Daiches, in *Virginia Woolf*, 1963.

"A miraculous concentration of her varied gifts." Harold Bloom.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A good place to start, as it touches on so many of Woolf's interests. The place of women in society, the role of art, how families change, the impact of time—all are written about in *Lighthouse*, and beautifully. A lyrical novel that also manages to be satisfying on an intellectual and narrative level.

Orlando (1928)

Orlando was the best-selling of her novels in its day; it's also the funniest, full of in-jokes, parodies, and a real sense of high spirits as opposed to the somber *Lighthouse* and *Dalloway*. The subtitle of *Orlando* is "A Biography," as Woolf was very interested in biography as a form (she reviewed many biographies and also discusses the topic in *Three Guineas*, see sidebar).

THE STORY: Of course, Woolf's version of a biography isn't exactly the standard "he ate this for breakfast" fare. The story, an account of a branch of her friend Vita Sackville-West's family, looks at an individual who changes gender and sexuality, as well as travels recklessly through time. Through these exploits, Orlando even manages to have several affairs with luminaries, including Queen Elizabeth).

"I think it was made fairly clear in the recently published extracts from Virginia Woolf's diary that the idea of her book *Orlando* was inspired by her own strange conception of myself, my family, and Knole my family home. Such things as old families and great houses held a sort of Proustian fascination for her." Vita Sackville-West in *The Listener*, 1/27/55.

"Woolf's criticism of society is a slipshod mockery and analysis of customs." T.E. Apter, *Virginia Woolf: A Study of Her Novels*, 1979.

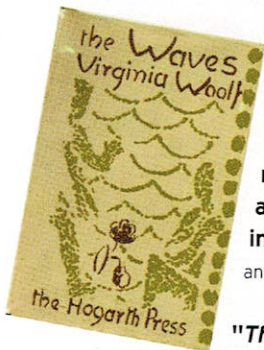
"Woolf sought to explode the fact-bound nature of fiction by externalizing the self-consciousness of the author..." Madeline Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences: The Mystical and The Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*, 1984.

THE BOTTOM LINE: For obvious reasons, *Orlando* has been the center of much feminist and queer criticism. It also does wonderful things with multiple perspectives, both through characters and historical time. Sally Potter's 1992 film (with Tilda Swinton as the title character and Quentin Crisp as Queen Elizabeth) is beautiful and true to the spirit of the book, if a bit muddled.

The Waves (1931)

After the relative accessibility of *Orlando*, Woolf authors a much more experimental novel. To the question "What endures?" *The Waves* answers, "Nothing but change."

THE STORY: Difficult to summarize as there is not much of a story, *The Waves* has six characters but no dialogue. Woolf relies on soliloquies and inner monologues to portray the three men and three women who assemble to eulogize their friend Percival. Woolf uses the occasion of a young person's death to discuss the mutability of life. She said of the book, "I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot."



"It is impossible to describe, impossible to do more than salute, the richness, the strangeness, the poetic illumination of this book. The characters are not analyzed,... they are entered into, intuited." Gerald Bullett in *New Statesman and Nation*, 1931.

"*The Waves* is a poetic title, charged with complex potency as well as with a multiplicity of meanings, and is thus mysterious. It stresses the continuity-and also the eternity-of the discontinuous; the conflict between time and duration, parallel to that between the transitory and the permanent..." Jean Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and her Works*, 1965.

"The book is, as it were, a piece of subtle, penetrating

magic. The substance of life, as we are accustomed to see it in fiction, is transposed and the form of the novel is transmuted to match it." *Times Literary Supplement*, 10/7/31.

THE BOTTOM LINE: This is an experimental, difficult novel, and opinion is quite divided. Leonard Woolf thought it was his wife's masterpiece, but many readers find it impenetrable. Not for the faint of heart or the novice. ■

WHO'S GOT THE FEVER?

Edward Albee entitled his 1962 play about marital strife *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (sung to the tune of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf") as a kind of joke among the literati. A more provocative question would be not who is afraid but who is entranced by Virginia Woolf, since she is the patron saint of many literary sects.

In her lifetime, Woolf didn't win any major prizes; she was well-reviewed in her day but not considered as major as James Joyce or even her erstwhile friend and admirer E.M. Forster. Her reputation receded in the 1930's and 1940's, and was revived in part by Erich Auerbach's treatment of *To the Lighthouse* in his influential book *Mimesis*, published in English in 1953.

By now every aspect of her life has been researched, documented and speculated about, in part because she so scrupulously documented herself. Leonard Woolf published the first extracts of her diary in 1953; six volumes of her journals were published between 1977 and 1990, as well as seven volumes of letters (six as *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* and one of the exchanges she had with Strachey). And there are numerous biographical studies of Woolf, the most prominent of which is her nephew Quentin Bell's *Virginia Woolf*, which was a bestseller in the U.S. and in the U.K. in 1972. Her participation in the Bloomsbury Group is also a factor, as a 1978 article, "Virginia Woolf Fever," notes: "By the time [the documentation] is completed, we shall know more about the members of the Bloomsbury Group than of any other set of people in English literary history."

So who suffers from this Virginia Woolf Fever? Modernists, obviously, as her experimental fiction has influenced many subsequent practitioners. The most ardent group championing Woolf is feminists, who draw liberally on both her fiction and essays. Gay and lesbian critics also count her as an ancestor, given her longstanding affair with Vita Sackville-West and moments of tenderness between women in *Mrs. Dalloway* and especially *Orlando*. Psychoanalytic critics have examined the connection between Woolf's sexual abuse and mental illness; next to Sylvia Plath, she's probably the most analyzed woman in twentieth-century letters. ■