**Bloomsbury**

**Thumbnail:**

Bloomsbury is an area of Central London located in the Borough of Camden between Euston Road and Holborn. The neighbourhood is home to The British Museum and the University of London as well as a number of Georgian residential buildings arranged around manicured squares and gardens. In the context of Modernist literature, art, and culture, Bloomsbury is associated with a loosely defined social circle known as “The Bloomsbury Group,” “The Bloomsbury Set”, or simply “Bloomsbury,” a gathering of writers, artists, and intellectuals who lived and worked in the area in the early part of the twentieth century. There is some critical disagreement about exactly who belonged to the group, but some of its key figures included Leonard and Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, Lytton Strachey, and Duncan Grant. Members of the group contributed to various aspects of Modernist thought and culture including feminism, analytic philosophy, psychoanalysis, macroeconomics, progressive domestic arrangements, left-oriented politics, Post-Impressionist art, and literary experimentation.

**Detailed Entry:**

**Bloomsbury the Neighbourhood**

The Bloomsbury area of London was described in 1928 by the writer and critic Raymond Mortimer as “a quarter honeycombed with spacious squares, where houses built for the gentry in the eighteenth century declined later into boarding-houses for impoverished foreigners and students at the University of London” (‘London Letter’ *The Dial* LXXXIV, February 1928, 238-40).

[Image 1: Map of Bloomsbury]

The early twentieth century saw the transformation of Bloomsbury from a “well to do” but not “wealthy” neighbourhood housing mostly bankers and lawyers in the 1890s, to a community of arts professionals, “educated men’s daughters” (Blair 820) and people involved in the burgeoning publishing industry a couple of decades later, whose means might actually be relatively slender despite a certain level of cultural and educational privilege and who included “upstart cuckoos, colonials, ethnic outsiders, other aspirants to culture” (Lock qtd in Sarah Blair 822).

[Image 2: 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury, where Virginia and Leonard Woolf lived]

Beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, ‘Bloomsbury’ could refer not only to this geographical area of London (and its inhabitants), but also to a specific intellectual circle. Desmond MacCarthy describes the transformation of the name of the neighbourhood into a description associated with his particular social group in “Bloomsbury, An Unfinished Memoir” (1933): “‘Bloomsbury’ is a regional adjective […] It is chiefly used as a term of abuse in reviews.” Virginia Woolf mocked the “regional” nature of the term by threatening in the 1930s to call her younger friends “Maida Vale” or “Hampstead,” which were the newly fashionable areas of London for artists and writers by that time. As MacCarthy’s comment suggests, the work of The Bloomsbury Group was controversial during the period. Although many of the Group’s works were culturally significant, with that fame (and with origins in the social and educational elite of Cambridge) came a backlash: there were many readers and critics who associated Bloomsbury with a level of experimentation and modernity that was cliquish and snobbish.

**Who were the Members of the Bloomsbury Group?**

In 1929, E. M. Forster described the Bloomsbury Group as “the only genuine *movement* in English civilization” (i). Despite its prominence, even the most basic elements of the Bloomsbury Group are surprisingly difficult to pin down. Raymond Williams’s important 1978 essay, “The Bloomsbury Fraction,” outlined the challenges of studying social groups and friendship circles too small to provide a statistical basis for analysis and too informal to provide a manifesto. Further complicating matters is the fact that, as Quentin Bell remarked, the Group’s social boundaries were relatively porous, and it possessed “no body of doctrine, no code of conduct, no masters” (ii). Indeed, its disdain for rules and customs was one of its defining features.

So uncertain was the makeup and nature of the group that even Clive Bell, one of its early members, wondered in a 1954 essay: “who were the members of Bloomsbury? For what did they stand?” (i). Attempting to set the record straight, Leonard Woolf identified thirteen core members of what came to be called “Old Bloomsbury” in his autobiography: himself and Virginia Woolf, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Molly and Desmond MacCarthy, Adrian Stephen, Lytton Strachey, J. M. Keynes, Duncan Grant, E. M. Forster, Saxon Sydney-Turner, and Roger Fry. These early members participated in what they called “The Memoir Club,” a series of evening gatherings in which the friends would read personal essays aloud to one another. Thursday night parties were also held at 46 Gordon Square, and were famous for their bohemian atmosphere and their high level of intellectual conversation.

[Image 3: Memoir Club Portrait]

Later, this initial core group grew to include other artists, writers, and “Edwardian Bloomsbury” saw the addition of H. T. J. Norton, Gerald Shove, Sydney Waterlow, and “innumerable Stracheys” (iii) to the Group. “War-time Bloomsbury” brought in a second generation, including David Garnett, but also Francis Birrell, Mary St. John Hutchinson, Karin Costelloe, Barbara Hiles, Arthur Waley, Alix Sargant-Florence, Dora Carrington, and Ralph Partridge. Raymond Mortimer, George Rylands, Angus Davidson, Stephen Tomlin, Frances Marshall, Roger Senhouse, and Lydia Lopokova, among others, “were all involved with Bloomsbury in one way or another during the 1920s” (iii).

The philosopher Bertrand Russell; the authors Vita Sackville-West, Harold Nicolson, and T. S. Eliot; and the literary hostess and socialite Lady Ottoline Morrell were *not* consideredmembers of Bloomsbury, although they are commonly erroneously included in discussions of the Group because they attended the parties and Gordon Square and participated in many of the same social and literary networks.

A complicated array of romantic and familial relationships existed among members of Bloomsbury. The most well-known and scandalous example is detailed in Angelica Garnett’s memoir, *Deceived with Kindness* (1984). Garnett was the daughter of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, but until she was 18 she believed that her father was Clive Bell, Vanessa’s husband. Although the Bells remained married, Duncan Grant and his lover David Garnett lived with Vanessa at Charleston in Sussex throughout Angelica’s childhood. Angelica later married David Garnett (her biological father’s ex-lover). She didn’t discover the details of her husband’s past until after they were married.

[Image 4: Angelica Garnett and Virginia Woolf, 1932]

**The Nature of the Movement**

Although members of the group were often reluctant to define Bloomsbury with reference to a precise aesthetic or philosophical character, some specific works and endeavours remain important to most understandings of the Group. Virginia Woolf herself pointed to the friends’ capacity for fun and social pleasure: “We were all easy and gifted and friendly and like good children rewarded by having the capacity for enjoying ourselves thus. Could our fathers?” Woolf’s question is indicative of one of Bloomsbury’s defining features: a tendency to renounce the work of Victorian predecessors and to define new modes of work and life in contrast to the generation that came before.

In art, Post-Impressionism and an emphasis on hand-made domestic decorations inspired by principles of what Clive Bell called “Significant Form” were characteristic of the group’s aesthetic. Theoretical writings on art from this period, including Roger Fry’s essays, collected in *Vision and Design* (1920),emphasized the visual relationship between strong outlines and organic forms that reflected the essential nature of a subject without resorting to a literal or overly detailed form of realism. Fry’s theories of art, like Woolf’s theories of fiction, emphasized interior, emotive qualities and their links to form: “I conceived the form and the emotion which it conveyed as being inextricably bound together in the aesthetic whole” (29). Vanessa Bell’s soft colours and her emphasis on bold lines were recognizable examples of the style.

[Image 5: Vanessa Bell, “Still Life on the Corner of a Mantelpiece,” 1914]

Roger Fry’s Omega Workshop, which ran from 1913 to 1919, was an artists’ collective that emphasized the deliberately hand-made. Artists left their works unsigned and the pieces were produced and sold through the workshop. Omega focused on a cross-disciplinary artistic approach: the artists painted chairs, tables, and even bathtubs and toilets in order to bring the decorative and fine arts together.

[Image 6: Omega Workshops Furniture]

In literature, by far the most prominent figure was Virginia Woolf, whose experimental novels are now among the most famous and most studied of modernist texts. She and Leonard Woolf began the Hogarth Press, a publisher for their works and those of other members of Bloomsbury, in 1917. Although the press began as a part of the Bloomsbury world (often collaborating with Omega artists who designed dust jackets and illustration blocks for the books), even by the 1920s, the publisher’s reach extended far beyond even the broadest definition of the social group and published works by a wide variety of authors working in all different styles and genres. Other important Bloomsbury writers included E. M. Forster, the author of many ethically challenging and character-rich modernist novels, including *A Passage to India* (1924)and *A Room With A View* (1908) and Lytton Strachey, known primarily for his contributions to biography. The group as a whole is associated specifically with what Virginia Woolf called “The New Biography,” a mode of modernist life writing that emphasized amusing, telling details and experimental methods over comprehensive but dull accounts.

[Image 7: Mrs. Dalloway]

In economics, John Maynard Keynes’ important work began with *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, which detailed the conditions of the economy following the Treaty of Versailles. Keynes’ theories developed over the years and were particularly important during in the recession of the 1930s. “Keynesian” economics remains an important component of economic theory.

Other members of Bloomsbury were involved in a tremendous variety of different forms of art; for instance, Lydia Lopokova was a ballerina; Adrian and Karin Stephen were psychoanalysts; and Arthur Waley was a translator of Japanese and Chinese works.

[Image 8: Lydia Lopokova]

**Bloomsbury Afterlives**

Bloomsbury has attracted many devotees and has had an extremely rich literary and artistic afterlife. There also been much fun made of the group: its members and followers have been teasingly called all sorts of mocking names from “Bloomsberries” to “Bloomsbuggers.” The scholar Regina Marler has written extensively on all aspects of the fascination with Bloomsbury in her book *Bloomsbury Pie*: the industry profiting from the Group’s reputation has led to everything from Laura Ashley fabrics based on Vanessa Bell patterns to National Trust museums held at Charleston and Monk’s House. Innumerable exhibitions of Bloomsbury books, paintings, and portraits have appeared in museums and libraries since the middle of the twentieth century. Bloomsbury has been so well documented that it is possible to experience it with all the senses: recordings of the writers’ voices can be heard on *The Spoken Word: The Bloomsbury Group*, a British Library CD, and in 2014, Jans Ondaatje Rolls’ *The Bloomsbury Cookbook* was published, inviting readers to recreate the recipes of this illustrious and quirky group of cultural figures.

**References and Further Reading**

Blair, Sarah.“Local Modernity, Global Modernism: Bloomsbury and the Places of the

Literary,” *ELH*71:3 (Fall 2004), 813-38.

Rosenbaum, S. P. Ed (1975) *The Bloomsbury Group*. London: University of Toronto

Press.

Christopher Reed. *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*. Yale

University Press, 2004

Marler, Regina. (1997) *Bloomsbury Pie: The Making of the Bloomsbury Boom.* New

York: Henry Holt & Co.

Rosner, Victoria (2014) *The Cambridge Companion to The Bloomsbury Group.*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, Raymond (2010) “The Bloomsbury Fraction” in *Culture and Materialism:*

*Selected Essays*. London: Verso.

Image Information:

Images:

Image 1: Map of Bloomsbury

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury-project/images/stanford%201897.jpg>

Copyright: should be public domain

Image 2: 46 Gordon Square

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordon_Square#/media/File:46_Gordon_Square_London.jpg>

Copyright: Wikimedia Commons

Image 3: Memoir Club Portrait

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitLarge/mw85227/The-Memoir-Club>

Copyright info: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/use-this-image.php?mkey=mw85227>

Image 4: Angelica Garnett and Virginia Woolf

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitLarge/mw08590/Virginia-Woolf-Angelica-Vanessa-Garnett-ne-Bell?LinkID=mp05315&search=sas&sText=angelica+garnett&role=sit&rNo=0>

Copyright info: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/use-this-image.php?mkey=mw08590>

Image 5: Vanessa Bell, "Still Life on the Corner of a Mantelpiece"

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bell-still-life-on-corner-of-a-mantelpiece-t01133>

Copyright info: <http://www.tate-images.com/results.asp?image=T01133>

Image 6: Omega Workshops Furniture

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omega_Workshops#/media/File:Roubaix_Roger_Fry_mobilier_decor.JPG>

Copyright info: Wikimedia Commons

Image 7: Mrs. Dalloway

<http://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/File:Mrs_Dalloway.jpg>

Copyright: <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/research/permissions-copyright>

Image 8: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitLarge/mw112043/Lydia-Lopokova?LinkID=mp05480&search=sas&sText=lydia+lopokova&role=sit&rNo=16>

Copyright: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/use-this-image.php?mkey=mw112043>