



VIRGINIA WOOLF

1882-1941

Virginia Woolf

- **Mother** : Julia Duckworth, a member of the Duckworth publishing family
- **Father** : Sir Leslie Stephen, the Victorian critic, philosopher, biographer, and scholar
- Educating herself in her father's library
- Learning Greek from the essayist and critic Walter Pater's sister

Virginia Woolf

- Childhood suffering: sexually abused by her older half-brother
- Sequence of death of her mother, half-sister, her father, and a brother
- Mental breakdown in 1895 after her mother's death
- Settling in Bloomsbury
- The Bloomsbury group: center of middle and upper-class London intelligentsia
- Notable members such as the biographer Lytton Strachey, the economist John Maynard Keynes, the art critic Roger Fry, and the novelist, F. M. Forster.

Virginia Woolf

- Sexual Topic: Woolf's freedom of thinking about gender relations
- Bisexual → falling in love with the poet Victoria Sackville-West after thirteen years of marriage with Leonard Woolf
- Androgynous nature → protagonist in *Orlando* (1928), shifting identities from masculine to feminine
- Suffering severe depression, particularly after finishing a book
- Drowning herself in a river in 1941, an act influenced by her dread of WWII

Virginia Woolf

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- The Woolfs : Leonard Woolf, founding the Hogarth Press with Virginia and publishing interesting literature of their times, including T. S. Eliot's *Poems* (1919), fictions of Maxim Gorky, Katherine Mansfield, and E. M. Forster, the translation of Freud, and also Virginia's novels
- Woolf rebelled against "materialism" of novelists
- In "Modern Fiction," the task of novelist → "a myriad impressions," "luminous halo," "semi-transparent envelope"
- Writing techniques: nonlinear narratives, in favor of interior monologues and stream of consciousness narration

Virginia Woolf

- Literary works: *Jacob's Room* (1922); *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) written with experimental writing techniques
- *To the Lighthouse* (1927) → memorializing Woolf's parents
- *The Waves* (1931) → the most difficult and experimental work
- *Between the Acts* (1941) → discontinuous pageant of English history
- Woolf as the critic → writing criticism for *Times Literary Supplement* (1905), *The Common Reader* (1925), and *The Second Common Reader* (1932)
- Her prose: suggestive rather than authoritative, an engaging air of spontaneity; informal, personal, and playfully polemical tone. Other informal revealing: the six volumes of her *Letters* (1975-80) and five volumes of her *Diary* (1977-84)

Virginia Woolf

- Woolf concerning women's position, especially for professional women and the constrictions. (Works such as *The Years* 1937 and later separated and published as *Three Guineas* 1938)
- “Women and Fiction” in *A Room of One's Own* → Shakespeare's sister
- Proposing literature that would be “androgynous in mind” and resonate equally with men and women

MODERN FICTION

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf as Critic

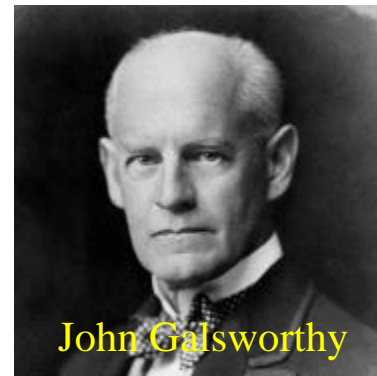
- Criticizing materialists:
H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy, writing about unimportant things.



H.G. Wells



Arnold Bennett



John Galsworthy

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- Praising Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and James Joyce for their innovation.



Thomas Hardy



Joseph Conrad



James Joyce

Virginia Woolf as Critic

- Differences between British literature and Russian literature:
 - ✓ “In every great Russian writer we seem to discern the features of a saint, if sympathy for the sufferings of others, love towards them, endeavour to reach some goal worthy of the most exacting demands of the spirit constitute saintliness” (Norton 2154 / 281).
 - ✓ “English fiction from Sterne to Meredith bears witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the intellect, and in the splendor of the body” (Norton 2154 / 281).

Virginia Woolf as the Writer/Reader on the Novel

- Woolf suggests writers simply write what interests them in any way that they choose to write:
 - ✓ “Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist’s intention if we are reader” (Norton 2153 / 280).
 - ✓ “The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (Norton 2155 / 282).

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN



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Virginia Woolf

Introduction

- The use of the first-person narrator “I”
- Characterized by a playful shifts and changes of perspective
- Depicting the daunting task that any woman may face when she tries to establish herself as a writer in a country governed almost exclusively by the desires and dictates of men.

Chapter Three

- The material conditions of women in the time of Elizabeth (Renaissance)
 - ✓ Description of women in the fictions written by men (p.393)
 - ✓ Shakespeare's sister—Judith (p.395)

“This may be true or it may be false—who can say?—but what is true in it, so it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it ...any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared or mocked at (Norton 2269 / 397).
- The difficulties that women encounter in the enterprise of writing
 - ✓ The material difficulty: not having a room of one's own
 - ✓ The hostility of the world towards women

Women and Fiction

- Judith Shakespeare: a parable of the woman writer's experience in male-dominated culture.
- The story of Judith Shakespeare's London journey has important implications for contemporary women writers.
 - ✓ testify to the necessity of a supportive environment if a woman is to become a writer,
 - ✓ suggests the subject with which those new writers should concern themselves
- The London of Judith Shakespeare V.S. The modern city of Mary Carmichael:

The London: hostile to women → a later city: possibility for the emergence of authentic female voices and values.

Women and Fiction

- The city stands as the tantalizing incarnation of the cultural world she is “agog to see” (Norton 2267 / 395).
- Yet Judith’s struggle to create a place for herself as a writer in London fails because her “poet’s heart” is “caught and tangled in a woman’s body” (Norton 2268 / 396).
- Writer’s obstacles: An inadequate education, the limiting and oppressive force of her father’s protective love, the heavy social restrictions placed on her both within and beyond the family.
- The task of the contemporary woman writer → put that female presence into words: “All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded, I said, addressing Mary Carmichael as if she were present ... All that you will have to explore, I said to Mary Carmichael, holding your torch firm in your hand” (Norton 2139 eighth edition).

Setting

- Setting: actions and persons are placed in literary works, an integral means through which authors communicate their ideas including historical time, location and place, and general environment or social milieu.
- A female narrator on the move:
 1. on the grounds of a university campus →
 2. into various rooms and halls belonging to two of the many colleges →
 3. visiting the British Museum in the heart of London→
 4. her London home
- The mobility of this narrator points to the importance of setting in the novel.

Oxbridge

- The first major setting of the novel
- Cambridge and Oxford Universities
- Invoking the entire cultural heritage and history of England: The Greatness, Promise, and Identity of the Nation.
 - ✓ the country's two most prestigious centers of learning.
 - ✓ where England as a nation defined itself
 - ✓ where the nation's beliefs and traditions were handed down from generation to generation.
- Woolf's polemic for women's access to education:
Mary's exclusion from various parts of the university → a representative of all women who have been denied an education and entry into the precincts of male power and culture.

The British Museum

- The British Museum: located in London, founded in 1753 and completed in 1847. Housing art from around the world and the largest public library in England.→ an institution redolent of British history, heritage, and national pride.
- Mary finds nothing truly useful about the history of women
 - ✓ The void and blank in the extensive holdings of the British Museum underscores: How women are marginalized.
 - ✓ The dearth of worthwhile books on women: How women need to be educated.
 - ✓ Women scholars are needed to write the history of their female forebears.

Fernham/Newnham/Girton

- Fernham: Newnham College, Cambridge, which was established specifically for women students in 1871.
- Girton: originally an all-male college, opened its doors to women in 1869.
- The fictitious women's college "Fernham": evokes a bright future.
 - This invocation of fresh growth also connotes how good things will come to society when gender equality is embraced.

London/The Streets of London

- “Next day, the light of the October morning was falling in dusty shafts through the uncurtained windows, and the hum of traffic rose from the street. London then was winding itself up again. ...Here came an errandboy; here a woman with a dog on a lead” (Norton 2141 eighth edition).
- An invisible force in the world that acts like a river, moving people and things along: “Now it was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxicab ... and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere” (Norton 2142 eighth edition).
- The reader is invited to contemplate, for a moment, the contemporaneous, everyday, and real world.
- A dynamic and modern world filled with automobile and foot traffic, factories, and business: A bright, certain future in which women and men are on an equal footing.

Supplementary Teaching Materials

- Carol Dell'Amico. “Critical Essay on ‘A Room of One’s Own’,”
NonfictioClassics for Students, Vol. 2.
- Susan Merrill Squier. *Virginia Woolf and London: the Sexual
Politics of the City*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina
Press, 1985.