

WOOLF, VIRGINIA (1882–1942)

English novelist and essayist. The daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, a prominent Victorian intellectual, Virginia Woolf was educated largely through reading books in the family library. Unlike her brothers, she did not go to university, and this perceived slight was later to sustain her feminist critique of discrimination against women. In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf, a brilliant Cambridge graduate who had served as a judge in Ceylon, and her sister Vanessa married the art critic Clive Bell. The two couples were major figures in the Bloomsbury group, which also included such male homosexual writers as E. M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, and Lytton Strachey. Through much of her life Virginia suffered from severe spells of mental depression, and it was partly to provide work therapy that she and Leonard founded the Hogarth Press in 1917. At this time she also became a regular reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement*, a task which brought her knowledge of a wide range of modern literature and laid the foundations for her later more substantial essays.

Virginia Woolf remained a virgin until her marriage, and found the idea of sex with a man repellent. At the time of their engagement she warned Leonard of this aversion, and their sexual relations seem to have been rare. Before marriage Virginia Stephen was closely attached to her sister Vanessa—loving her almost to the point of “thought-incest”—and was deeply involved platonically with Madge Vaughan, a daughter of John Addington Symonds, and Violet Dickinson, to whom she wrote an enormous number of letters. Throughout her life, Woolf was to draw emotional sustenance from her intense relations with other women.

Her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), concerns the trip of a young Englishwoman to South America, followed by her engagement and death there. While this novel was conventional in form,

Jacob's Room (1922) joined the mainstream of innovative modernism through its poetic impressionism and indirection of narrative development. After this work, which marks her real beginning as a literary artist, Woolf secured her place in modernism by a series of carefully wrought books. *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) blends interior monologue with the sights and sounds of a single day in central London. *To the Lighthouse* (1927) explores the tensions of the male–female dyad in the form of a holiday trip of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey. Its fantastic form notwithstanding, *Orlando* (1928) is of great personal significance, tracing the biography of the hero–heroine through four centuries of male and female existence. This book is a tribute to, and portrait of, her lover Vita Sackville-West, whom she had met in 1922. Woolf's most ambitious novel is probably *The Waves* (1931) which presents the contrasting personalities of six characters through a series of “recitatives” in which their inner consciousness is revealed. Shortly after completing her last book, *Between the Acts* (1941), she suffered a final bout of mental illness and drowned herself in a river near her country home.

The posthumous publication of Virginia Woolf's *Letters* and *Diaries* have revealed some unattractive aspects of her personality: she was xenophobic and snobbish, sometimes given to expressions of personal malice, as well as anti-Semitic and homophobic asides. Yet she participated wholeheartedly in the Bloomsbury ethic of individual fulfillment and social enlightenment. Her use of stream-of-consciousness techniques, and other sophisticated literary devices, places her very near the front rank—if not within it—of modernist writers in English.

With the general decline of the Bloomsbury ethos in the middle decades of the century, Woolf's reputation seemed to fade. In the 1970s, however, feminist critics hailed her as a major champion of their cause. There is no doubt that *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and its sequel, *Three*

Guineas (1938), are powerful pleas for women's creative independence. Yet her own feminism was fluid and variable, and thus not easily accommodated to present-minded uses. Throughout her life she struggled valiantly against mental illness, succeeding in building up an imposing corpus of writings while expressing her own emotional feelings in her deep relationships with women.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972; Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work*, Boston: Beacon, 1989; Lyndall Gordon, *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life*, London: Oxford University Press, 1984; Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968; S. M. Squier, *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City*, Durham: North Carolina University Press, 1985.
Evelyn Gettone

WORKING CLASS, EROTICIZATION OF

For at least several generations, upper-class Englishmen have sought sexual companionship among the working class, including the enlisted men of the military (the availability at a fee of Guardsmen for these purposes has become legendary). While this practice, which Timothy d'Arch Smith termed the "Prince and Pauper Syndrome" after Mark Twain's 1882 novel, is hardly limited to England, it is there that it has been most documented, particularly in literature.

E. M. Forster, whose novel *Maurice* celebrates the aspiration for a permanent version of such a relationship, remarked: "I want to love a strong young man of the lower classes, and be loved and even hurt by him." (1938). Oscar Wilde described his own forays, which tended to involve the criminal underworld, in the striking image of "feasting with panthers." In a more idealizing fashion, John Addington Symonds wrote in 1893, "The

blending of social strata in masculine love seems to me one of its most pronounced, and socially hopeful, features. Where it appears, it abolishes class distinctions, and opens by a simple operation the cataract-blinded eyes to their futilities." One of the reasons why Walt Whitman had such an impact on English homosexuals of this period was that his praise of democracy was (mis)understood in large part as a veiled plea for such prince-and-pauper liaisons. In France, the leftist writer Daniel Guérin justified his innumerable one-night stands with blue-collar workers as a device for achieving collective revolutionary solidarity.

The psychological roots of the aristocracy's attraction to the working class have not been systematically examined, but are undoubtedly related to a sense that the upper class (in particular its intellectuals) has lost some of its masculine vitality, has become "effete," refined, sophisticated, removed from the exercise of physical power, while the (young) males of the lower class are more robust, earthy, grounded, more in touch with their sexuality, more physically aggressive, in short, more macho. For economic reasons alone, the ranks of male prostitutes tend to be filled from the underclass, and these are more readily available than the sons of the higher classes. There are suggestions of a streak of masochism connected with guilt derived from perceived inequities of class standing. Perhaps it is as much the attraction of opposites, the tension of distance temporarily resolved in the intimacy of sex. The homosexual aristocrat often appears to enjoy a reversal of usual power relationships, giving the working-class male the upper hand in the bedroom, yet paradoxically retaining a firm control over the general relationship. Indeed, the disparity in financial power between the two parties serves to strengthen the aristocrat's sense of overall security (the poor male being too dependent on the largesse of the rich one). At the same time the coarse machismo of the aggressive, disorderly,