

Excerpt taken from Biography.com, "Virginia Woolf" (2016).

Synopsis

Born into a privileged English household in 1882, writer Virginia Woolf was raised by free-thinking parents. She began writing as a young girl and published her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, in 1915. Her nonlinear, free form prose style inspired her peers and earned her much praise. She was also known for her mood swings and bouts of deep depression. She committed suicide in 1941, at the age of 59.

Early Life

English writer Virginia Woolf was raised in a remarkable household. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was an historian and author, and also one of the most prominent figures in the golden age of mountaineering. Woolf's mother, Julia Prinsep Stephen (née Jackson), had been born in India and later served as a model for several Pre-Raphaelite painters. She was also a nurse and wrote a book on the profession. Woolf had three full siblings and four half-siblings; both of her parents had been married and widowed before marrying each other. The eight children lived under one roof at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington.

Two of Woolf's brothers had been educated at Cambridge, but all the girls were taught at home and utilized the splendid confines of the family's lush Victorian library. Moreover, Woolf's parents were extremely well connected, both socially and artistically. Her father was a friend to William Thackeray and George Henry Lewes, as well as many other noted thinkers. Her mother's aunt was the famous 19th century photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. For these reasons and more, Virginia Woolf was ideally situated to appreciate and experiment with the art of writing.

From the time of her birth, on January 25, 1882, until 1895, Woolf spent her summers in St. Ives, a beach town at the very southwestern tip of England. The Stephens' summer home, Talland House, which is still standing today, looks out at the dramatic Porthminster Bay and has a view of the Godrevy lighthouse, which inspired her writing. In her later memoirs, Woolf recalled St. Ives with a great fondness. In fact, she incorporated scenes from those early summers into her modernist novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

As a young girl, Virginia was light-hearted and playful. She started a family newspaper, the *Hyde Park Gate News*, to document her family's humorous anecdotes. She had, however, been traumatized at the age of six when her half-brothers George and Gerald

Duckworth sexually abuse her. This dark spot was only made deeper and more permanent when her mother suddenly died at the age of 49. The hormones of early adolescence and the undeniable reality of this huge loss spun Woolf into a nervous breakdown, only made worse when two years later, her half-sister Stella also died.

Despite her misery, Woolf managed to take classes in German, Greek and Latin at the Ladies' Department of King's College London. Her four years of study introduced her to a handful of radical feminists at the helm of educational reforms. In 1904, her father died. His passing was climactic; during this time she was institutionalized. Virginia Woolf's dance between literary expression and personal desolation would continue for the rest of her life.

When Virginia was in her early 20s, her sister Vanessa and brother Adrian sold the family home in Hyde Park Gate, and purchased a house in the Bloomsbury area of London. Through her siblings' connections, Virginia became acquainted with several members of the Bloomsbury Group, a circle of intellectuals and artists who became famous in 1910 for their Dreadnought hoax, a practical joke in which members of the group dressed up as a delegation of Ethiopian royals and successfully persuaded the English Royal Navy to show them their warship, the HMS Dreadnought. Woolf disguised herself as a bearded man. After the outrageous act, Leonard Woolf, a writer and a member of the group, took a fancy to Virginia. By 1912, she and Leonard were married. The two shared a passionate love for one another for the rest of their lives.

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