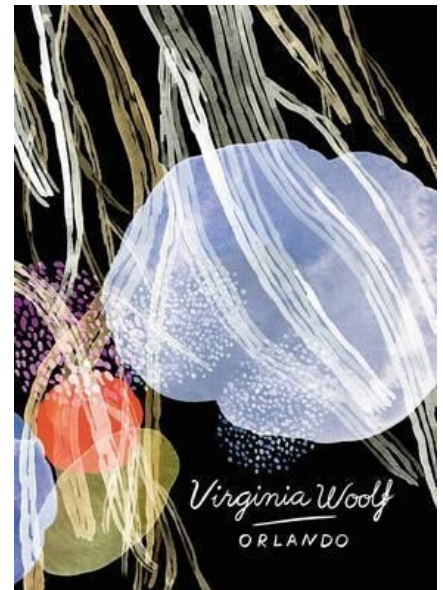


# Orlando

Virginia Woolf

*"I'm sick to  
death of this  
particular self.  
I want another."*



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## A Not-So-Brief Author Biography



### Who Was Virginia Woolf?

Born into a privileged English household in 1882, author 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. She wrote modernist classics including *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*, as well as pioneering feminist works, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. In her personal life, she suffered bouts of deep depression. She committed suicide in 1941, at the age of 59.

### Early Life

Born on January 25, 1882, Adeline Virginia Stephen was raised in a remarkable household. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a historian and author, as well as 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. Both of her parents had been married and widowed before marrying each other. Woolf had three full siblings — Thoby, Vanessa and Adrian — and four half-siblings — Laura Makepeace Stephen and George, Gerald and Stella Duckworth. 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.

From the time of her birth 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 curious, light-hearted and playful. She started a family newspaper, the *Hyde Park Gate News*, to document her family's humorous anecdotes. However, early traumas darkened her childhood, including being sexually abused by her half-brothers George and Gerald Duckworth, which she

wrote about in her essays *A Sketch of the Past* and *22 Hyde Park Gate*. In 1895, at the age of 13, she also had to cope with the sudden death of her mother from rheumatic fever, which led to her first mental breakdown, and the loss of her half-sister Stella, who had become the head of the household, two years later.

While dealing with her personal losses, Woolf continued her studies 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 from stomach cancer, which contributed to another emotional setback that led to Woolf being institutionalized for a brief period. Virginia Woolf's dance between literary expression and personal desolation would continue for the rest of her life. In 1905, she began writing professionally as a contributor for *The Times Literary Supplement*. A year later, Woolf's 26-year-old brother Thoby died from typhoid fever after a family trip to Greece.

After their father's death, Woolf's sister Vanessa and brother Adrian sold the family home in Hyde Park Gate, and purchased a house in the Bloomsbury area of London. During this period, Virginia met several members of the Bloomsbury Group, a circle of

intellectuals and artists including the art critic Clive Bell, who married Virginia's sister Vanessa, the novelist E.M. Forster, the painter Duncan Grant, the biographer Lytton Strachey, economist John Maynard Keynes and essayist Leonard Woolf, among others. The group became famous in 1910 for the Dreadnought Hoax, a practical joke in which members of the group dressed up as a delegation of Ethiopian royals, including Virginia disguised as a bearded man, and successfully persuaded the English Royal Navy to show them their warship, the HMS Dreadnought. After the outrageous act, Leonard Woolf and Virginia became closer, and eventually they were married on August 10, 1912. The two shared a passionate love for one another for the rest of their lives.

### Literary Work

Several years before marrying Leonard, Virginia had begun working on her first novel. The original title was *Melymbrosia*. After nine years and innumerable drafts, it was released in 1915 as *The Voyage Out*. Woolf used the book to experiment with several literary tools, including compelling and unusual narrative perspectives, dream-states and free association prose. Two years later, the Woolfs bought a used printing press and established Hogarth Press, their own publishing house operated out of their home, Hogarth House.

Virginia and Leonard published some of their writing, as well as the work of Sigmund Freud, Katharine Mansfield and T.S. Eliot.

A year after the end of World War I, the Woolfs purchased Monk's House, a cottage in the village of Rodmell in 1919, and that same year Virginia published *Night and Day*, a novel set in Edwardian England. Her third novel *Jacob's Room* was published by Hogarth in 1922. Based on her brother Thoby, it was considered a significant departure from her earlier novels with its modernist elements. That year, she met author, poet and landscape gardener Vita Sackville-West, the wife of English diplomat Harold Nicolson. Virginia and Vita began a friendship that developed into a romantic affair. Although their affair eventually ended, they remained friends until Virginia Woolf's death.

In 1925, Woolf received rave reviews for *Mrs. Dalloway*, her fourth novel. The mesmerizing story interweaved interior monologues and raised issues of feminism, mental illness and homosexuality in post-World War I England. *Mrs. Dalloway* was adapted into a 1997 film, starring Vanessa Redgrave, and inspired *The Hours*, a 1998 novel by Michael Cunningham and a 2002 film adaptation. Her 1928 novel, *To the Lighthouse*, was another critical success and considered revolutionary for its

stream of consciousness storytelling.

Woolf found a literary muse in Sackville-West, the inspiration for Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando*, which follows an English nobleman who mysteriously becomes a woman at the age of 30 and lives on for over three centuries of English history. The novel was a breakthrough for Woolf who received critical praise for the groundbreaking work, as well as a newfound level of popularity.

In 1929, Woolf published *A Room of One's Own*, a feminist essay based on lectures she had given at women's colleges, in which she examines women's role in literature. In the work, she sets forth the idea that "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Woolf pushed narrative boundaries in her next work, *The Waves* (1931), which she described as "a play-poem" written in the voices of six different characters. Woolf published *The Years*, the final novel published in her lifetime in 1937, about a family's history over the course of a generation. The following year she published *Three Guineas*, an essay which continued the feminist themes of *A Room of One's Own* and addressed fascism and war.

Throughout her career, Woolf spoke regularly at colleges and universities, penned dramatic letters, wrote moving essays and self-published a long list of short stories. By her mid-forties, she had established herself as an

intellectual, an innovative and influential writer and pioneering feminist. Her ability to balance dream-like scenes with deeply tense plot lines earned her incredible respect from peers and the public alike. Despite her outward success, she continued to regularly suffer from debilitating bouts of depression and dramatic mood swings.

### Suicide and Legacy

Woolf's husband, Leonard, always by her side, was quite aware of any signs that pointed to his wife's descent into depression. He saw, as she was working on what would be her final manuscript, *Between the Acts* (published posthumously in 1941), that she was sinking into deepening despair. At the time, World War II was raging on and the couple decided if England was invaded by Germany, they would commit suicide together, fearing that Leonard, who was Jewish, would be in particular danger. In

1940, the couple's London home was destroyed during the Blitz, the Germans bombing of the city.

Unable to cope with her despair, Woolf pulled on her overcoat, filled its pockets with stones and walked into the River Ouse on March 28, 1941. As she waded into the water, the stream took her with it. The authorities found her body three weeks later. Leonard Woolf had her cremated and her remains were scattered at their home, Monk's House.

Although her popularity decreased after World War II, Woolf's work resonated again with a new generation of readers during the feminist movement of the 1970s. Woolf remains one of the most influential authors of the 21st century.

[<https://www.biography.com/people/virginia-woolf-9536773>]



## Themes, Symbols and Motifs in *Orlando*

### THEMES

#### Fact and Imagination

One of the most important themes in *Orlando* is the connection between fact and imagination. In Woolf's review of Harold Nicholson's *Some People*, she opened with this analogy: "if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers, for the most part failed to solve it." The metaphor of granite and rainbow emerges again in her own novel when she discusses Nature "who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them into a case."

Woolf suggests that there is no realm of imagination separated from a realm of fact; "rainbow and granite" are stuffed into one case. Everything (internal and external, fact and imagination) are linked together by our memory, and we will grow to "understand" when we realize that neither memory nor history can be easily ordered and divided. Fact is a subjective quality, and the 'truth' emerges when we realize the interconnectedness and relativity of everything and everyone around us. It is such a unity of experience, not a triumph of "fact" that emerges victorious over time.

#### Gender differences

The determination of difference between the genders is a main theme in *Orlando*. Are men and women really different? If so, why? Orlando's sex change is a very important scene for determining the answers to these questions. As Orlando wakes up a woman, she looks at her body in a full-length mirror and composedly walks to her bath. She is not at all disconcerted by her change in gender because she feels no different than she did before. At first, she acts no differently, either. When she lives in the gypsy camp in the hills of Turkey, away from society and civilization, Orlando's sexuality seems to play no role in her life at all. But when she travels on board the English ship, in women's clothes, she immediately begins to feel the difference. The skirts that she is wearing, and the way that people react to her make her feel and act different. What Woolf is suggesting here is that gender roles are not biological, but societal. Gender is a concept imposed on people who live in society. When Orlando goes out into the night, a woman dressed as a man, she finds herself taking on traditional male mannerisms. The point is that when society allows the freedom of gender neutrality, people will be more free as individuals to act according to their nature and personality.

#### Conforming to society

As Orlando is introduced to each new age and each new situation, he changes himself to fit the rules of those around him. In the sixteenth century, he wears fine clothes and serves as a courtier to his Queen; in the seventeenth century, he learns the Turkish language and adapts himself to exotic customs; in the eighteenth century, he figures out how to fit in with London society; and in the nineteenth century, he dons petticoats and finds a husband. Orlando knows he must change with each new adventure in order to survive and become accepted in the new age.

But such conformity becomes oppressive to Orlando. She grows tired of changing herself to fit those around her. Ultimately, when she reaches maturity in the twentieth century, she resists conforming, choosing instead to exist in her own internal world. She realizes that though she has matured, as people do, she has always been the same person all along. This theme of 'conforming to society' plays an important role in the novel. As Orlando grows to be an independent mind, she rejects the idea of conformity, choosing to remain however she chooses to be.



## SYMBOLS

### Clouds over London

The clouds over London which move in at the end of chapter four mark the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. They symbolize the suffocation and oppressiveness Orlando feels in the Victorian age. Because the sunlight can never come in through the clouds, the characters live with a literal chill in their bones and a figurative chill in their hearts. The clouds indicate unhappiness at the oppressive nature of Victorian rules and social conventions, especially for women like Orlando.

### Orlando's manor house

Orlando's large home is mentioned frequently throughout the novel. It appears as a static and safe element in a chaotic and changing world. The house symbolically has 365 bedrooms and fifty-two stairways (the number of days in a year, and the number of weeks in a year, respectively). It is significant that the house is marked by static, traditional measures of time, because the house provides regularity for Orlando, something she can always return to when she tires of her adventures in London or Turkey. Thus, it reminds the reader that while the narrative itself may skip over decades or centuries, Orlando continues to live within a framework. Time, as a concept constructed by her ancestors, encompasses Orlando and provides her a home.

## MOTIFS

### Poetry

In every situation and adventure, Orlando carries with him the manuscript of his poem "the Oak Tree." When he begins the poem, he means it as a place to 'anchor his heart.' And indeed, the poem does become his anchor; the one thing which connects all his selves together. Poetry is not only an artistic release for Orlando; it functions in the work as a record of his maturation. As he grows, his writing style changes, from the simplistic metaphors of his teens, to the ornate language of his twenties, and finally to the simple lines of her thirties. Orlando guards the poem, as she guards her heart, utterly afraid of criticism and rejection. Ultimately, the poem ties the entire narrative together; it is a beginning (when a young boy sits under an oak tree) and an ending (when a middle-aged poem climbs to the tree to bury it). The poem is the record of Orlando's internal life.

### Cross-dressing

Cross-dressing in Orlando occurs fairly frequently. Archduke Harry dresses as a woman but reveals himself to be a man in chapter four. Similarly, even after Orlando's actual sex change, he continues to switch between clothes of both genders. This motif functions in the novel to emphasize the similarities between men and women, despite the different clothes (and different

roles) society would have them wear. Once she has experienced what it is like to be a woman, Orlando does not want to give this up, yet she longs for the freedom she had as a man. Here, Woolf suggests that perhaps society is too rigid with regard to the roles it forces men and women to play. Because they are so alike underneath their clothes, the genders should be allowed more freedom in their actions.

[<https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/orlando/>]

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## Notes

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