

## Virginia Woolf

### Contents

#### Virginia Woolf

**Given Name:** Adeline Virginia Stephen

**Born:** January 25, 1882; London, England

**Died:** March 28, 1941; The River Ouse, near Rodmell, Sussex, England



*Virginia Woolf (Courtesy D.C. Public Library)*

#### [Principal Works - Virginia Woolf](#)

##### **long fiction**

Melymbrosia, wr. 1912, pb. 1982, revised pb. 2002 (early version of *The Voyage Out*; Louise DeSalvo, editor)

*The Voyage Out*, 1915

*Night and Day*, 1919

*Jacob's Room*, 1922

*Mrs. Dalloway*, 1925

*To the Lighthouse*, 1927

*Orlando: A Biography*, 1928

*The Waves*, 1931

*Flush: A Biography*, 1933

*The Years*, 1937

*Between the Acts*, 1941

##### **nonfiction**

*The Common Reader: First Series*, 1925

A Room of One's Own, 1929  
The Common Reader: Second Series, 1932  
Three Guineas, 1938  
Roger Fry: A Biography, 1940  
The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays, 1942  
The Moment, and Other Essays, 1947  
The Captain's Death Bed, and Other Essays, 1950  
A Writer's Diary, 1953  
Letters: Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, 1956  
Granite and Rainbow, 1958  
Contemporary Writers, 1965  
Collected Essays, Volumes 1-2, 1966  
Collected Essays, Volumes 3-4, 1967  
The Flight of the Mind: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. I, 1888-1912, 1975 (pb. in U.S. as The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. I: 1888-1912, 1975; Nigel Nicolson, editor)  
The London Scene: Five Essays, 1975  
Moments of Being, 1976 (Jeanne Schulkind, editor)  
The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II, 1912-1922, 1976 (pb. in U.S. as The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II: 1912-1922, 1976; Nigel Nicolson, editor)  
A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, 1923-1928, 1977 (pb. in U.S. as The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III: 1923-1928, 1978; Nigel Nicolson, editor)  
Books and Portraits, 1977  
The Diary of Virginia Woolf, 1977-1984 (5 volumes; Anne Olivier Bell, editor)  
A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV, 1929-1931, 1978 (pb. in U.S. as The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV: 1929-1931, 1979; Nigel Nicolson, editor)  
The Sick Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. V, 1932-1935, 1979 (pb. in U.S. as The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. V: 1932-1935, 1979; Nigel Nicolson, editor)  
Leave the Letters Til We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. VI, 1936-1941, 1980 (Nigel Nicolson, editor)  
The Essays of Virginia Woolf, 1987-1994 (4 volumes)  
Carlyle's House, and Other Sketches, 2003 (David Bradshaw, editor)

### **short fiction**

Two Stories, 1917 (one by Leonard Woolf)  
Kew Gardens, 1919  
The Mark on the Wall, 1919  
Monday or Tuesday, 1921  
A Haunted House, and Other Short Stories, 1943  
Mrs. Dalloway's Party, 1973 (Stella McNichol, editor)  
The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf, 1985

### **Biography**

Born into a family in which literary concerns and artistic pursuits were enthusiastically encouraged, Virginia Woolf was predisposed as a child for a writing career. She was born in London, England, on January 25, 1882. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, achieved academic fame as the editor of the Dictionary of National Biography between 1882 and his retirement in 1891. Her mother, Julia Duckworth, who died when Virginia was thirteen, came from a family with aristocratic connections and artistic sensibilities that sometimes inclined toward the frivolous. Woolf's parents brought to their union (March 26, 1878)

children from previous marriages, besides producing four of their own, of whom Virginia was the third. Vanessa, the eldest, who was later to become an important artist, was extremely close to her younger sister; two boys, Thoby and Adrian, completed this tight-knit family group.

Virginia Woolf matured in an intellectual and artistic milieu stimulating to the spirit. Although she envied her brothers' going away to school and resented the exclusion of women from the then-male province of education to the end of her life, she received instruction hardly to be bettered, studying mathematics, literature, history, and foreign languages (both Latin and Greek) privately with her parents or with selected tutors. By age fifteen she enjoyed free access to her father's library and directed her own reading program with a voracious appetite, discussing many works she read with her father.

Her writing career began at the age of nine when she created almost single-handedly a weekly family newspaper, which she continued to produce for more than four years, publishing in this way her own earliest stories. At fifteen she began keeping a diary. Her first professional publication was an unsigned review in *The Guardian* in 1904. *The Voyage Out*, her first novel, begun in 1907 but not completed until 1913 because of illness, was published in 1915. After that, books flowed regularly from her pen in a constant stream, interrupted only by periods of poor health or mental instability. She wrote novels, stories, literary criticism, biographies, and occasional pieces for various periodicals. More than 3,800 of her letters have been preserved and printed, and the five published volumes of her diary (1915-1941) shed much light not only upon her private life and her circle of friends but also upon the troubled years in which she lived.

Virginia and Vanessa became friends with students whom Thoby met at Cambridge — Lytton Strachey, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Leonard Woolf, and Clive Bell; they remained lifelong friends, with the latter two eventually marrying Virginia and Vanessa, respectively. Shortly after their father's death, showing an independence rare in 1905, the children gave up the large family home to establish a more modest household of their own, where there was generally much talk of intellectual matters. Virginia's marriage to Leonard Woolf proved salutary for her; he provided a firm base of emotional stability upon which she could rely and provided a free intellectual atmosphere that fostered the growth of her aesthetic ideas. Through their joint direction of the Hogarth Press, which they founded in 1917, they came into contact with men and women of letters who often became their close personal friends. Vanessa's career as an artist and her marriage to Clive Bell, who was soon to become an important art critic, brought the Woolfs into frequent friendly relations with such artists as Duncan Grant and Roger Fry. These companions, as well as the novelist [E. M. Forster](#) and the economist John Maynard Keynes, are often referred to as the Bloomsbury Group since most of them lived near each other in the Bloomsbury neighborhood of London.

Virginia Woolf was an interesting photographic subject; among the photographs of her that are often printed in biographies, there are three that reveal contrasting aspects of her character. The first, taken by Marianne Beck for *Vogue* in 1926, shows her seated at a table, her hands resting together, gazing pleasantly to the side. She is wearing a dress of her mother's, with puffed sleeves and lace cuffs. She radiates the tranquil loveliness of a young and innocent Victorian woman looking wistfully toward adulthood, but she was actually forty-four years old and had already survived the horrors of World War I and several serious mental breakdowns.

Another photograph, taken about a year later by Man Ray, reflects a quite different person. Seated again at a table, wearing a simple dark jacket with a scarf, her hair austere pulled back, she looks into the lens of the camera in an honest and friendly way, inviting sincere and open communication. One

wishes to speak to her. Gisèle Freund's 1939 photograph reveals still another facet of her being. Seated before a modern painting, a book in one hand and a cigarette in the other, she gazes, troubled perhaps by thoughts of madness, death, and disaster, into a distant void beyond her. Physical and mental illnesses dogged her steps and another war seemed imminent, but in spite of internal and external threats, she directed her being toward the perfection of her art.

These three different images reveal the complexity that constitutes the totality of Woolf as woman and as artist: the joyful, sweet loveliness masking anxiety and awful dread; the simple, candid honesty and sincerity with which she faced the world; and the distressed resignation with which she accepted the inevitable arrival of the destruction of all that mattered to her. Overwhelmed by the horrors of war and fearing the onset of yet another serious mental breakdown from which she might not recover, she took her own life on March 28, 1941, in Rodmell, Sussex, England.

### Analysis

Anyone unfamiliar with the work of Woolf will doubtless be perplexed and confused by the apparent incoherence of her novels. She provides little background for the narrative situation, major characters are often difficult to distinguish from minor ones, and there is usually no important romantic interest. Instead of a story with a beginning, middle, and end consisting of events arranged in chronological order with occasional flashbacks and leading to a satisfying climax, Woolf presents instead an exploration of minds that perceive subtle variations among almost insignificant details (which themselves seem to flow at random), occasionally interrupted by essaylike commentaries. Her nine novels include *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Waves* (1931), and *The Years* (1937). Many of her excellent essays are to be found in *The Common Reader: First Series* (1925), *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932), and *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (1942).

Though her aesthetic roots are firmly established in the European literary tradition, her genius lies in exploring the inner world of her characters, leading her to elaborate a psychological complexity without parallel in the literature of the past. She invents new methods that permit her to explore this inner world of her characters by allowing them to express their abstract thoughts and feelings in mental monologues that externalize the hidden and secret by means of metaphors, poetic images, and symbols. Thus her novels fall into the realm of psychological studies rather than the adventure stories written by authors she referred to as "materialist writers." She deals primarily with the spiritual side of humanity, not its activities and adventures, by presenting a synthesis of an individual's total response to life and reality, for these responses, colored by the emotions of the character, are never static. The inner world of her characters is constantly shifting and changing, for them as well as for the reader, since their inner life approximates the reader's. Moreover, an individual is not the same from one moment to the next — his or her identity is unstable and changes as his or her perceptions change. Reality becomes a series of momentary fragments that ebb and flow; the reader must mentally arrange them into a story. A reader is not a passive spectator of events in Woolf's novels but must become actively involved emotionally in the character's thoughts, feelings, and senses.

Woolf's preoccupation with the representation of this reality made up of fleeting moments (the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms," as she put it) leads her to deal extensively with the passing of time and the changes that measure it, whether that duration is only one day or many years. Since the mind is capable of mingling past, present, and future simultaneously, a few seconds of present experience can include variable patterns of memories and fantasies. For example, a woman simply walking down the street may be thinking primarily about her destination, but thousands of other conflicting and divergent thoughts and sensations may flash through her mind in only a few seconds.

This stream of thoughts, sometimes tranquil and sometimes troubled, constitutes the true subject matter of all Woolf's novels.

If thoughts tumble so helter-skelter through the mind, reflecting different atoms of reality moment by moment, then often they will be incomplete, interrupted by others before they can be finished. These fragments of thoughts and feelings are certainly related to one another — one thought or sensation has suggested or inspired another — but the connections are not particularly logical. Or rather, the logic is one of suggestion, or of association of ideas, perceptions, feelings, or emotions. Woolf enters into this process and reveals these fragmentary, interrupted thoughts while they are occurring by developing a kind of “mental speech” with which to express them. Her characters talk to themselves, explain to themselves, question themselves; this technique is generally called interior monologue or stream of consciousness. It requires some effort on the part of the reader to determine what kind of pattern makes a particular sequence logical, what sort of logic it possesses, and the direction of the flow of the stream.

If this complexity of consciousness were rendered literally, Woolf's novels would be extremely difficult to read, but her style is simple and direct, clear and lucid, making few syntactic demands on the reader, who is guided through a story that demands absolute attention and concentration. The vocabulary is simple and words are generally used with their primary meanings. Sentences tend to be rather short and concise, never overwhelming in their volume. The sentence structure is masterly and clear, seldom demanding that the reader ponder the essential meaning. There is nothing flashy or tricky about her writing; the content is highlighted by her invisible style.

To understand and appreciate a novel by Woolf fully, one should be willing to read it several times, first determining the overall design, then later connecting details and linking images into patterns that gradually become clearer and acquire deeper meanings. A reader discovers the world expressed in a novel by Woolf in a way that is similar to comprehending a great symphonic work through repeated hearings: One is always attentive to slight variations in the melodies, changes in harmony and rhythm, contrasts of key and tempo, and instrumental coloring. Like a great composer, Woolf plots the design of her fictional compositions, orchestrating them with words that form complex patterns and images and creating intricate designs. Her works, accessible to the average reader, nonetheless demand attentiveness and patience. The rewards to be gathered enrich a spirit seeking truth.

Mrs. Dalloway **First published:** 1925

**Type of work:** Novel

A fashionable, middle-aged woman gives an elegant party for a number of social and professional acquaintances.

Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf's fourth novel, is the first in which she attained the design she would characteristically impose upon her works of fiction. Rejecting an organization centered on conventional story lines, she focuses upon Clarissa Dalloway, a lady of London high society who is planning a party for her husband's acquaintances. The action takes place on a Wednesday in June, 1923, between 10:00 a.m. and approximately 3:00 a.m. the next day. In the morning, Clarissa goes out to buy flowers and gives final instructions to her staff. In the afternoon, she receives an unexpected visit from a former suitor named Peter Walsh, talks with her husband, who has brought her flowers, and then takes a nap. In the

evening, she entertains her guests as a perfect hostess should. The activities and thoughts of Clarissa during the day provide the core of unity in the book. Other characters and their situations appear when they touch or reflect, ever so slightly or symbolically, Clarissa's life and its meaning. The reader observes the behavior of her husband Richard at lunch, watches her teenage daughter Elizabeth with her history tutor Miss Kilman (whom Mrs. Dalloway hates), and accompanies Clarissa on a bus ride through London. The reader catches glimpses of unknown strangers who cross Clarissa's path during the day, among whom figures Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked war veteran who is suffering an episode of insanity.

Clarissa Dalloway represents a rational attitude toward life: She functions well on a day-to-day basis, tends to that which requires attention, and meets the demands made upon her in her situation. She regrets somewhat her marriage to Richard (Peter Walsh seemed to suggest a less predictable and more exciting life) and now realizes that she has lost the sense of individuality she possessed as a young woman, for her identity has been absorbed by her husband's. Clarissa is also distressed because Elizabeth seems to be too strongly influenced by Miss Kilman, an unattractive but educated woman who has recently converted to religion and seeks a recruit in Elizabeth. The book contains a scathing denunciation of those who, intolerant of diversity, seek to destroy the intellectual liberty of others. Though saddened by life, Clarissa seeks to maintain an inner core of joyfulness while fulfilling her various obligations. An unhappy person deep within, Clarissa is nonetheless filled with a great love for life, a zest for living, and a capacity for temporary but intense joy in her daily experiences.

Beginning work on Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf noted in her diary (October 14, 1922) that she wanted to show the world as seen by the sane and the insane side by side. If Clarissa reflects the sanity of adjustments to reality, Septimus Smith reflects the rejection of rational compromise with life. Though he married a gentle Italian woman (Lucrezia, or Rezia) immediately after the war, their relationship has done little to rescue him from the abyss of terror that madness creates within him. At noon he consults Sir William Bradshaw, a noted medical authority who believes that mental illness is caused by a lack of a "sense of proportion" that can be restored by solitude, rest, and silence. The fate of Septimus now seems sealed: Diagnosed immediately as an advanced case of total breakdown, he is to be committed to an institution later that same day. Septimus, however, prefers death to life on someone else's terms and kills himself by jumping from a window. Learning during the party of this stranger's death, Clarissa withdraws to meditate alone. Feeling a kinship with the dead man, she acknowledges that she herself lives close to death, often feeling the terror, an awful fear of being, and draws courage to continue from the simple presence of her husband. She is recalled from reverie by her social obligations and, putting aside these painful thoughts, returns to her guests.

The conviction that a happy life cannot be lived on another's terms is an important theme of the book. Clarissa lost an important part of herself by marrying Richard and allowing his life to control hers. Peter came to nothing through his failure to choose for himself, longing instead for domination by Clarissa. Mrs. Bradshaw gave her will over in submission to her husband, as did the majority of the doctor's patients who acquiesced to his judgments concerning "proper proportions" in life. Clarissa fears that her daughter will dedicate her will to God through religious conversion promoted by Miss Kilman, who has already abandoned her own will to a force outside herself that she imagines to be superior.

To the Lighthouse **First published:** 1927

**Type of work:** Novel

A vacationing family cancels its projected excursion to a nearby lighthouse because of bad weather. Ten years later, some family members finally visit it together.

Most critics regard *To the Lighthouse* as Woolf's finest achievement, and she herself shared this view. Woolf perfected her method in this book, developing a highly individual technique in which structure, form, content, and meaning are extremely complex as they are used to develop individual characters, their relationships to one another, to life itself, and to the most profound problems of human existence, love, art, and death. Her method consists in elaborating a multiple point of view presenting both past and present through her characters' eyes as well as through those of an omniscient writer. She thus reveals to the reader in manifold perspective the extraordinary range of emotional and mental processes that make up human experience for her characters.

The structure of the novel resembles that of a two-act play with an interlude between the acts. In the first and by far the longest part, "The Window," Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay (unmistakably based on her own parents) with their eight children are vacationing at their summer home on an island off the coast of Scotland; some friends are spending a weekend with them. Their six-year-old son James wants to visit the nearby lighthouse the next day; his mother agrees, but his father is certain that the weather will not be fine. The guests intermingle; the artist Lily Briscoe works on a painting. In the evening they all enjoy a meal of *bœuf en daube* and experience a sense of unity and happiness in the perfection of this moment that, like an artist, Mrs. Ramsay has created by controlling the elements that united to produce it. Most of these events are narrated through interior monologues with numerous flashbacks and shifting points of view.

In a second, very brief part, "Time Passes," the events of the next decade are poetically related by the omniscient writer or by the house itself. The house has stood unused for many years and has deteriorated outside and inside; weeds proliferate, and ghostly airs inhabit the empty shell. The reader discovers the destinies of the house and its former residents. Mrs. Ramsay soon died; her oldest son Andrew was killed in the war; her daughter Prue expired during childbirth; a would-be poet became famous. After ten years, two cleaning ladies arrive to restore and prepare the place to receive guests once again. This section of the book constitutes a beautiful prose poem on the devastation time brings to human matters and must be ranked high among the finest pages Woolf ever wrote.

In the third part, "The Lighthouse," Mr. Ramsay returns with his two youngest children, James (age sixteen) and Cam (age fifteen), to make — after ten years and the intrusions of time, change, and death — the promised excursion to the lighthouse. They are joined by several others, including Lily Briscoe, who hopes to complete the painting begun years earlier. The hostility of the children to their father, obvious all along, is transformed into compassion when, upon reaching the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay praises his son for steering the boat skillfully. The young people, alienated from their father since childhood because of his dominating and repressive ways, suddenly see him as a suffering human being, lost without his wife, seeking love and understanding in his awkward and insensitive way. Meanwhile, Lily Briscoe, back on shore, has discovered the stroke necessary to complete her painting perfectly. She says, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, "I have had my vision." It is an ordered vision of successful artistic creation, which Woolf has also fulfilled in this book.

Interpretations of this novel are as numerous as its commentators. Some admire the representation of ideal Victorian family life just before its demise, while others criticize a male-dominated marriage. Mrs. Ramsay may be an all-embracing principle of universal love in her role as wife and mother. The lighthouse can represent masculine power and supremacy, or the conjunction of the lighthouse with the

sea (a female symbol) may symbolize ideal marriage, a mutual cooperation between inseparable partners. Mrs. Ramsay had found the light it projects to be a source of serenity and strength. The child James saw it colored by secret joy, but the maturing James sees it merely as a stark tower on a bare rock. Whatever meaning readers may find, the lighthouse stands as a permanent source of order and light, cutting through the darkness.

The Waves **First published:** 1931

**Type of work:** Novel

Six lifelong friends (three men and three women) speak in soliloquies of their childhood, education, and adult experiences of life as they mature and age together.

After the relaxation of a satiric romp through English literary history in the novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), Woolf began the composition of the most intricate and complex of all her fictional constructions, *The Waves*. It could be called an “abstract novel” for, like many modern paintings, it is virtually nonrepresentational. Its mirror does not reflect easily recognizable objects or provide familiar images. Dispensing with conventional story line and fully drawn characters, the novel distills human reality and experience. Its six characters are essences without form. The reader has no idea what they look like, how they dress or move or smile. All that is known are their consciousnesses as they contemplate their passage through various stages of life from youth to old age, experiencing various changes as they grow older.

The six characters, who are about the same age and are given no surnames, have grown up together and have continued to keep track of one another as their lives took them in very different directions. Jinny and Susan balance each other as opposites, for Jinny is an urban woman, proud of her body, sensual and passionate with men, while Susan is from the country, where she eventually returns to marry a farmer and rear a family. Neville and Louis also balance as opposites, for Neville is intellectual, homosexual, and assured in the academic world, while Louis, ashamed of his Australian origin, counteracts feelings of inferiority by forcing his way to success in the business world. Rhoda is always a misfit; feeling ugly and alone, she never belongs anywhere and alienation finally drives her to commit suicide. The others continue to exhibit the basic personality traits they acquired as young children and never change internally in any significant way. The child of six remains intact in the adult of sixty. Only Bernard, who loves words and longs to be a writer, shows signs of spiritual growth near the end of the book, but this suggestion of change (he eventually abandons his notebook) seems open to question.

The novel is divided into nine unnumbered and untitled sections composed of fragmented interior monologues that cut back and forth between different speakers. The six rarely meet or engage in conversation. Instead, their isolated voices speak (“said” is the only verb of speech or thought used in the entire book) into an empty void to no imagined companion or listener in the universe. The language (vocabulary, syntax, sentence length) does not particularize any individual. They all speak with the same voice as if they were one person — as indeed they may be, for they can be understood as six facets of the same personality.

The nine sections of the book reveal the six as children in nursing school, secondary school, and college (the men) or entering social life (the women). They join together for dinner to send their friend Percival, whom they all admire and love, off to India. They later mourn his accidental death as they continue to



pursue their separate lives. As each acknowledges the approach of age, they meet once again for dinner to reaffirm their sense of unity. Bernard summarizes the essence of their lives in a long, final speech, attempting to discover what it has all meant, but he sees only inscrutable shadows in a room flooded with light. Truth and meaning seem ultimately to be unknowable.

Each section of the narrative is introduced by an italicized passage tracing the movement of the sun across the sky from dawn to dark, the first describing the sunrise, the last the sunset. The course of the sun's journey parallels the maturation of the six characters. Woolf draws attention to the passage of time with descriptions of the changing patterns of light on the surface of the sea as the waves break on the shore, as well as to the effects of light and shadow on the sand and grass, the behavior of the birds, and the appearance of flowers. In creating verbal landscapes not unlike those of the great Impressionist and Postimpressionist painters, Woolf achieves an extraordinarily high level of "word painting." The language used for the images involving light and water is more intense than that used in the soliloquies, more condensed, compact, and complex. This language of nature seems somehow alien to humankind, however — lofty and remote, inhuman and insensitive to pain, coldly indifferent to human fate.

A Room of One's Own **First published:** 1929

**Type of work:** Essay

The right to earn an adequate living and to enjoy personal privacy is considered essential to the development of the independence of women.

Woolf's concern about the difficulties women face in a male-dominated world is expressed with force and vigor in her extended essay *A Room of One's Own*. Elaborating on her talks on "Women in Fiction," which she had given at two British women's colleges in 1928, she seeks to present certain facts about the treatment of women through the centuries and to show how patterns established long ago still prevail in modern times. Children, housework, and family obligations have deprived women of privacy and prevented them from earning a living, while social attitudes have approved their continued dependence on men for material necessities and their acceptance of roles as household servants. Though freedom and equality for women have increased considerably since 1929 in both England and America, the ideas Woolf promotes here, fundamental to modern feminist thinking, were radical — even shocking to some — at the time the book was written.

Retaining the tone and style of a casual lecturer, Woolf intends neither to preach nor to scold but to discuss some of her observations, exploring their implications at length. Her position can be stated quite briefly: In order to achieve an adequate sense of personal identity and the fulfillment of her intellectual potential with dignity and joy, a woman must command sufficient financial resources (money) to support herself and adequate privacy (a room with a lock on the door) to permit and promote mental activity. These two keys to spiritual freedom — material security and personal privacy — have been regularly denied to women through the ages. In the first chapter of the essay, Woolf imagines the rude treatment a woman receives if she (in contrast to a man) dares to walk on the grass or use the library of a men's college. She contrasts a luncheon served to college men (five elaborate dishes, with elegant dessert and wine) with a dinner in the women's dining hall (simple fare with prunes and custard, water liberally replacing wine). These examples forcefully illustrate how women are regarded as inferior and how they are expected to welcome their lot without protest.

After a bold and humorous elaboration of the implications of this twofold statement, Woolf goes on in the following five chapters to examine the position of women historically and to focus attention upon several writers who struggled, without total success, against their oppressed condition. Though she surveys only authors, her observations relate also to those women seeking any sort of professional career, for the obstacles blocking advancement in one field also obstruct the way in others. To illustrate her point historically, Woolf invents Judith Shakespeare, younger sister to William, a woman as brilliant and talented as her brother, and speculates about her destiny. The little fiction ends, after episodes of humiliation and failure brought upon Judith by male attitudes and responses, with the young woman's suicide.

Woolf finds the eighteenth century somewhat kinder to women like Jane Austen, willing to stay in her traditional place, writing casually as a pastime. Nineteenth century writers like the Brontë sisters suffered from a lack of exposure to the world, writing within the confines of a limited perspective on life. Charlotte Brontë, frustrated and angered by restrictions, sometimes turned away from her artistic purpose to vent her bitterness. Woolf believes that artistic creativity cannot be attained when thought is deformed and twisted by anger and frustration; she invokes William Shakespeare as one who, entirely purged of resentments, achieved a state of mental brilliance she calls "incandescence." Artists must rise above anger to create works unflawed by personal hostilities. Women, she believes, are learning to do this, but many decades will pass before bitterness is replaced by comprehension.

### Summary

Respecting the literary tradition that she inherited, Virginia Woolf nevertheless felt compelled to forsake its influence by inventing fictional techniques to explore even more deeply the minds and hearts of people. Like many modern painters and musicians who were her contemporaries, she sought new ways to render the realities of thought and feeling in her novels. By holding up her mirror of fiction at a different angle, she attempted to help readers see themselves in a more revealing light. Readers, troubled by the reflected images, feel moved to contemplate the meaning of their lives.