UNIT 13: VIRGINIA WOOLF: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- gain an insight into the life of the author Virginia Woolf
- discuss the literary works by the author
- gain a brief idea on the content of the text *A Room of One's Own*
- throw light on the introductory chapter of the text
- appreciate the issues that have been taken up by Virginia Woolf

13.2 INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf is considered as one of the most prominent modern women writers of the 20th century and is credited with some of the most significant works in the field of English Literature. Her prominence as a writer had sprung from the established credibility of her self-styled writings, as well as, her feminist articulations. Apart from highlighting some of the modern narrative techniques or literary practices, she had also invited newer approaches to modern literature and literary criticism through some of her seminal works. Therefore, it is not a surprise to find that Virginia Woolf is

widely considered as one of the representative authors of the modern age along with the literary figures of James Joyce and Charles Baudelaire. In the present unit, we shall gain a concise idea on the biography of Virginia Woolf and briefly discuss the content of the book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and the prescribed chapter before we explore the text in details.

13.3 VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE AUTHOR

The famous words by Virginia Woolf, "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end," also reflect the kind of philosophical reflections that Woolf poised towards life. She lived a very interesting life herself and we shall explore some of the significant phases of her life and her literary treasures in the following subsections.

13.3.1 Her Life

From a very early age, Virginia Woolf (25 January 1882- 28 March 1941) was surrounded by writers, thinkers, artists and scholars who had a fascinating influence on her literary and artistic sensibilities for life. She was born as Adeline Virginia Woolf to one of the most prominent intellectuals of London, Leslie Stephen, her father and mother Julia Duckworth Stephen. She had three siblings, her younger sister, Vanessa and brothers,Thoby and Adrian Stephen with whom she shared a close relationship.They were raised in the comforts of a wealthy and a well-established family that resided at Hype Park Gate, Kensington in London. The Stephens had been married and widowed before they had settled down together. So, their children also had two half -sisters and two half-brothers from their previous marriage.

While their brothers studied at Cambridge, the girls Virginia and Vanessa had received much of their early education at home. Although, their little world was confined to their home and social

circles, their father's library (at their Hyde Park residence) contributed much in terms of shaping their literary and worldly interests. Woolf even tried to pick up Greek and Latin through her interactions with the visiting scholars at home. Both the Woolf sisters had also enrolled themselves in the Ladies' Department of King's College where Virginia studied languages and history from the period 1897 to 1901. By nature, she was a sensitive young woman who suffered several nervous breakdowns having lost her parents and two of her siblings early in life.She lost her motherin the year 1895 followed by a string of deaths and personal loss in the family. Her half-sister Stella passed away in 1897 followed by her father's demise in the year 1904 and brother Thoby's untimely demise in 1906 which had left her completely shattered. This tragic phase of her life saw her battling with severe depression and later on, she had sought medical assistance for her periodic nervous disorders. Nevertheless, it did not take away from her intellectual and literary credibility although she was prone to panic attacks occasionally.

Moreover, her life became much smooth and stable after her marriage to Leonard Woolf in 1912, who was a caring husband and almost like a guardian to her with whom she shared an intimate bond. Together they founded a hand-operated printing press that came to be known as the 'Hogarth Press' in 1917. Apart from publishing some of the literary works of writers such as T. S. Eliot, Vita Sackville-West and Maxim Gorky among others, the press was also instrumental in publishing some of their own works.The couple resided at the Green Richmond, Hogarth House, the Round House for relatively shorter periods of time before they settled down at the Monk's House, which was surrounded by a patch of garden and an orchard. Vanessa had married the English art critic Clive Bell in 1907 and they were very much part of the Bloomsbury Circle as was Adrian who along with his wife came to be known as the first English psychoanalyst. With time Vanessa began a relationship with the art critic Roger Fry possibly because Clive Bell began affairs

while they were still married Vanessa lost her son Julian Bell in the Spanish Civil War in 1937, three years after she had lost Roger Fry and for this reason Woolf left aside her work for a while to be with her. The three siblings remained close for life.

Also, despite the ups-and-downs of their married life, Woolf always admired her husband, Leonard for his constant patience and goodness towards her throughout their married life. He left aside a lot of his writing work so that he would be able to take care of his wife who underwent phases of severe depression. In fact, Woolf's last note addressed to him is a moving piece of writing that expresses her gratitude towards his positive influence and contribution to her life and the incredible happiness that they had known together as a couple. That was just before she had decided to end her life and her bouts of depression once and for all. She had decided to embrace her final hours by walking into the river that flowed behind their home and ease her own drowning by filling her coat pockets with plenty of stones. It took several days to find her body, following which her husband buried her cremated remains under a tree at their Monk House residence. Leonard passed away in the year 1969 suffering from a stroke and his cremated remains found a place beside his wife's at the same spot under the elm tree in their Monk House garden.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What was Virginia Woolf's contribution apart from highlighting modern narrative techniques?

Q 2: Where was Virginia Woolf born and brought up?

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Q 3: Where did the Stephen sisters receive their early education? What had significantly inspired their literary interests?

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Q 4: What was the name of the printing press founded by Leonard Stephen and Virginia Woolf?

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Q 5: What did Virginia Woolf write in her final note to her husband?

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13.3.2 Her Works

Monk's Home was an ideal place for Woolf to write as it provided the right ambience and environment that was necessary for her to concentrate on her creative work. Virginia Woolf was very much inspired by various writers like Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, James Joyce, E.M. Forster, George Eliot, Emily Bronte, Marcel Proust and Anton Chekhov among others. Her early exposure to the classics and various literatures shaped her literary tastes and interests. Although, she suffered from severe bouts of depression and nervous disorder, yet she continued writing to produce some of the best works of her time. Her first novel titled *The Voyage Out* (1915) was written at one such point of depression and the work went through several drafts before it came to be published. Some of her best known novels are *Night and Day* (1919), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To The Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), *The Years* (1937) and *Between The Acts* (1941) (earlier titled *Pointz Hall*) which was published after her demise.

Woolf made a significant contribution to both modern fiction and modern literary criticism through her major works such as *Modern Fiction* (1919), *The Common Reader* (1925), *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932), *A Room of One's Own* (1929), *Three Guineas* (1938), *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942) and *Women and Writing* (1979). She wrote two anthologies of short stories namely *Kew Gardens* (1919), and *Mrs Dalloway's Party*

(1978) and a drama titled *Fresh water* (1976). Moreover, she wrote a total of three biographies namely *Orlando* (1928), *Flush* (1933) and *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940). Her early journals together with the six volumes of letters and diaries also reveal her intellectual perspectives and personal reflections.

Together they formed the Hogarth Press in 1917, through which she also published her works along with those of writers T.S. Eliot and others. Virginia's close acquaintance with the writer Vita Sackville-West infused a sense of confidence in herself as a writer despite her frequent illnesses and medical restrictions. Her works have been translated into more than 50 languages.



LET US KNOW

Being driven by their convictions on the importance of arts, as well as, on the aspects of redefining the conventional socio-cultural norms and values of the English society, a closed circle of friends came together to form the famous **'Bloomsbury Group'**.This group comprised some of the noted intellectuals, writers and thinkers like Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, Julia Strachey, Rupert Brooke, E.M. Forster, Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell, Julian Bell, Mary MacCarthy, Thoby Stephen, Adrian Stephen, John Meynard Keynes, David Garnett, Saxon Sydney Turner, Duncan Grant among a few others. Most of the members of the group were educated at Cambridge, Trinity or King's College and formed the group before they established themselves as leading writers and thinkers of their time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Name the writers who had inspired Virginia Woolf.

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Q 7: Name some of the best known novels by Virginia Woolf.

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Q 8: Where were most of the members of the 'Bloomsbury Group' educated?

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13.4 OVERVIEW OF THE TEXT: *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in a chapter from their seminal text *Madwoman in the Attic* make a significant point writing thus, "[a]s Woolf's comments imply, women who did not apologize for their literary efforts were defined as mad and monstrous: freakish because "unsexed" or freakish because ''fallen'' (63). Although, women desired to articulate their voices that had been suppressed for too long, yet their male counterparts never took them seriously. However, it was time for women to not only celebrate their side of the stories but also to move beyond the confines of gendered notions as also mentioned by Virginia Woolf.

In the introductory chapter of her work *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf begins to ponder on the aspect of 'woman' and 'fiction', an area that had long been forgotten or dismissed in the literary canons. In her final chapter, she encourages women to write across genres and to travel around the world to broaden their mental horizons instead of being confined to their own limited spaces. She writes thus,

> "Like most uneducated Englishwoman, I like reading books in the bulk. Lately my diet has become a trifle monotonous; history is too much about wars; biography too much about great men; poetry has shown I think, a tendency to sterility, and fiction-but I have sufficiently exposed my disabilities as a critic of modern fiction and will say no more about it. Therefore, I would ask you to write all kinds of books and loiter at street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream. If

you would please me- there are thousands like me –you would write books of travel and adventure, and research and scholarship, and history and biography, and criticism and philosophy and science." (pg.103)

Thus, the frame of the text is designed in a way that both articulates and advocates for women to make their (long over-shadowed) presence felt through their writings just as women poets and writers like Sappho, Lady Murasaki and Emily Bronte did as the "inheritor" and the "originator" of their literary achievements (98). Woolf writes that writers must cease to worry about their gender and if at all they must try to be "woman-manly" or "manly-woman" which necessitates the presence of both the feminine and masculine attributes in an individual, thereby proposing the concept of 'androgyny' as opposed to the concept of gender binary or division.

13.5 INTRODUCING CHAPTER ONE

In the first chapter of the book, the narrator begins with the words "[b]ut, you may say…" in an argumentative mode, as if she were in the middle of conversation or discussion and then goes on to elaborate why "a room of one's own" stands as an extreme necessity when it comes to the aspects of women and fiction. This itself may provide you with the clue that this happens to be a feminist text with its articulations on the issues of women and their 'right' to a creative space in which they are able to come up with the best of their literary work. Thus, the narrator offers her serious contemplations as it were, on the banks of a river to try and gain a sense of clarity in thought.

Thus, while pondering on the subject of women and fiction, the narrator figures that a 'room of one's own could symbolise or literally mean many different things. It could be just a few remarks about Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, a tribute to the Bronte sisters or perhaps a sketch of Haworth Parsonage where they lived, wise words of Mitford, reference to women writers like George Eliot or Elizabeth Gaskell. But, it was not as easy as that because it could mean several other interrelated aspects such as:

a. Women and what they like
b. Women and the fiction they write

c. Women and the fiction that is written about them

d. All of the above taken together as inextricably interrelated aspects of the discussion

Therefore, the narrator speculates that she may be expected to make her observations in the light of the above possibilities. She establishes her ground of argument, well before she begins articulating her thoughts to highlight some of these interrelated issues. Thus, the first chapter opens in a conversational tone where the narrator shares her natural flow of thoughts to the readers. Let us then move on to the next unit in order to gain a detailed idea of the textual content, themes and stylistic aspects focusing on the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own.*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What is the overall discussion in the introductory and the final chapter of Virginia Woolf?

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Q 10: How is the frame of the text *A Room of One's Own* designed?

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Q 11: What are some of the interrelated aspects with reference to the discussion of women and fiction?

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13.6 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, the learner will be able to gain an insight into the life and literary works of the author Virginia Woolf**.** The learner will be able to gain a brief idea on the text *A Room of One's Own* as well as, the introductory chapter of the work before exploring the details of the text in the next unit. Moreover, the unit will stir the learner's interest and enable

the learners to further appreciate the issues that have been taken up by one of the most prominent writers of the modern age, Virginia Woolf.



13.7 FURTHER READING

1. Woolf, Virginia. (2007). *A Room of One's Own*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors Pvt. Ltd.



13.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Apart from highlighting some of the modern narrative techniques or literary practices, she had also invited newer approaches to modern literature and literary criticism through some of her seminal works.

Ans to Q No 2: Virginia Woolf was born and brought up in the comforts of a wealthy and a well-established family that resided at Hype Park Gate, Kensington in London.

Ans to Q No 3: While their brothers studied at Cambridge, the girls Virginia and Vanessa had received much of their early education at home. Although, their little world was confined to their home and social circles, their father's library (at their Hyde Park residence) contributed much in terms of shaping their literary and worldly interests.

Ans to Q No 4: They founded a hand-operated printing press that came to be known as the 'Hogarth Press' in 1917.

Ans to Q No 5: Woolf's last note addressed to Her husband Leonard Stephen is a moving piece of writing that expresses her gratitude towards his positive influence and contribution to her life and the incredible happiness that they had known together as a couple.

Ans to Q No 6: Virginia Woolf was very much inspired by various writers like Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, James Joyce, E.M. Forster, George Eliot, Emily Bronte, Marcel Proust and Anton Chekhov among others.

Ans to Q No 7: Some of Woolf's best known novels are *Night and Day* (1919), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To The*

Lighthouse (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), *The Years* (1937) and *Between The Acts* (1941).

Ans to Q No 8: Most of the members of the group were educated at Cambridge, Trinity or King's College and formed the group before they established themselves as leading writers and thinkers of their time.

Ans to Q No 9: In the introductory chapter of her work *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf begins to ponder on the aspect of 'woman' and 'fiction', an area that had long been forgotten or dismissed in the literary canons. In her final chapter, she encourages women to write across genres and to travel around the world to broaden their mental horizons instead of being confined to their own limited spaces.

Ans to Q No 10: The frame of the text is designed in a way that both articulates and advocates for women to make their (long over-shadowed) presence felt through their writings just as women poets and writers like Sappho, Lady Murasaki and Emily Bronte did as the "inheritor" and the "originator" of their literary achievements (98).

Ans to QNo 11: Women and what they like; women and the fiction they write, women and the fiction that is written about them, all of the above taken together as inextricably interrelated aspects of the discussion



13.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: Discuss the life of the writer Virginia Woolf.

Q2: Write a short note on the literary works of Virginia Woolf.

Q3: Give a brief idea on the textual content of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

Q4: How does Virginia Woolf begin the introductory chapter of *A Room of One's Own*?

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