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Definition: **Woolf** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(Adeline) Virginia Woolf 1882–1941 née *Stephen* Eng. author

Summary Article: **Woolf, Virginia**

From *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was a novelist whose innovations in narrative form and point of view have earned her acclaim as one of the most accomplished modernist writers. She was also an active literary critic, who composed nearly 500 critical pieces (more than 1,000,000 words) over almost 40 years as a professional writer. Her essays, reviews, lectures, journalistic articles, biographical studies, and two books - *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) - also mark her out as one of the greatest of English essayists. If it had not been for the central role played by her novels in defining the literary revolution of “high Modernism” and in forming a crucial model and inspiration for feminism and women's writing since 1920, Woolf's essays alone would have guaranteed her a central position in twentieth-century literature.

At least four interlinking areas of interest can be identified in Woolf's theoretical thinking: her critique of “traditional” realist conventions of novel writing and the need for new forms of representation; her “materialist” argumentation regarding the historical conditions which determine cultural production; her radical engagement with women's writing and “female language”; and finally, her view of the creative role of the reader in the production of the text.

However, to call Woolf a “theorist” would belie both the form and occasion of her writing. Hers is not a conceptualized model of critical understanding to be “applied” to particular texts. Rather, her “theory” consists in a formidable and thoughtful account of how literature might relate to the broader social and political concerns of the age. Most important, she argues that the new conditions of modernity (in all its political, gendered, and class dimensions) require new aesthetic representational *forms* as well as political change. Her essays often embody radical stylistic innovations that resist the critical conventions of argumentation in formal academic discourse. Her style is demotic, self-questioning, hesitant in making broad universal judgments; it is in constant and affirming conversational “dialogue” with “the common reader” even when she is talking of so-called high culture.

Woolf did not hold hard to genre distinctions and her critical ideas on writing and culture can be found as much embedded in the self-reflexive nature of her novels (especially *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and *Between the Acts*) as in her nonfiction writings, and this crossing of boundaries is essential to Woolf's purpose. She writes critical essays which contain extensive imaginative fictional elements; novels which self-reflexively foreground their own status; conversational pieces on the active, productive role of reading; light sketches and quasi-biographies - all of which establish her theoretical interests and interventions. Her resistance to definition is what defines her. The prevailing tone, style, and substance of her writing undermine hierarchical and patriarchal order to the exclusion of other ways of thinking and being.

Woolf grew up in a privileged, intellectual upper-middle-class family, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen,

compiler of the *National Dictionary of Biography* and the liberal patriarch model for Mr Ramsay in Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927). As a woman she was denied access to the public school and university education enjoyed by her brothers and their male friends - a crucial aspect of her critique of cultural production in *A Room of One's Own*. But she exploited the riches of the extensive family library and was formidably well read, though more or less self-educated. Later, as a member of the Bloomsbury group - among whom were her brother Thoby and his Cambridge friends Leonard Woolf, Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and, on the periphery, E. M. Forster - Woolf was able to recognize and come to challenge what she realized was a male elite, albeit a liberal and "permissive" one. Her intellectual position, both inside and outside of this elite, undoubtedly influenced her awareness of class and gender relations in the literary and political life she variously wrote about. She married Leonard Woolf in 1912 and in 1917 they established the Hogarth Press.

They not only published her own works but also, crucial for their cultural ambiance, the first translations of Sigmund Freud. They introduced Russian writers (Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Maxim Gorky) to an English readership and helped establish modernist experimental works by T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Katherine Mansfield.

Woolf's first critical piece appeared in 1904 in the *Guardian* (a clerical weekly newspaper) and she subsequently wrote numerous (anonymous) reviews for *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Statesman*, and other leading publications in England and America. Many of her essays appeared in collections during her lifetime in *The Common Reader* and *The Second Common Reader* (1925 and 1932). Most were later edited by Leonard Woolf in *Collected Essays* (1966-7), categorized (roughly) as literary critical essays (volumes 1 and 2) and biographical essays (volumes 3 and 4). These essays have recently been re-edited, fully annotated, and reorganized (by date of publication) by Andrew McNeillie (and latterly Stuart N. Clarke) in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* (1986-), which includes many hitherto unpublished pieces. Of the many essays that shed light on Woolf's critical aesthetic, the following are generally recognized as central: "Modern fiction" (1919), "On re-reading novels" (1922), "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924), "How should one read a book?" (1926), "The narrow bridge of art" (1927), and "The leaning tower" (1940). A much-cited passage in "Modern fiction" is taken not only as an expression of Woolf's own aesthetic but as a literary manifesto for modernism with its emphasis on interiority, on the rendering of the subjective, psychological reality of individual consciousness rather than on the externalities of social documentation more characteristic of earlier nineteenth-century realism. The lines are often taken as defining the "impressionist" method of "stream of consciousness" writing which her novels are thought to exemplify:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. ... Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (Woolf 1986-, 4:160)

After this "look within" comes a call to arms for the modern writer: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern ... which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (160-2).

The "myriad impressions" referred to here, which echo Walter Pater's idea of heightened

consciousness and the “moment of vision,” characterizes her “stream of consciousness” mode of narration. But this was what some critics, for example F. R. Leavis, complained about, taking up Woolf's word “trivial” against her, saying it lacked “moral seriousness” and that her preoccupation with the subjective mind was pursued at the expense of ignoring “all the ranges of experience ... with an external world.” Her writing was merely a “sophisticated aestheticism” (Leavis 1968[1942]: 99).

A different problem that this passage raises is that of the idea of the mind as a *passive receptor*, of consciousness as a blank tape recording “impressions.” This is in contrast to the *active intentionality* of consciousness and conscious artistic construction, reminiscent of phenomenologists like Roman Ingarden, which Woolf asserts elsewhere is the case (e.g., through the novelist Bernard in *The Waves*). The intentionality of the artist, and in turn that of the creative reader in constituting meaning, is what the portrayal of modern “reality” is about and hence Woolf's emphasis on the representation of psychological *interiority*.

We find this passive/active contradiction embodied in Woolf's seminal essay “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (1924), which criticizes the preceding generation of novelists - Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H. G. Wells - as the “materialist Edwardians” against whom Woolf placed herself and other “Georgians” (Forster, Eliot, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence) who represented the avant garde in literature. In an essay which characteristically makes reference to real people but also creates a fictional “Mrs. Brown,” Woolf claims that, when trying to realize the (fictional) Mrs. Brown sitting in a railway carriage, all the “Edwardian” writers do is *record* features of her “external” life: the rent she paid, the buttons on her dress. She becomes an object of their observations. These empirical facts are, in Woolf's view, superficial. Her aesthetic theory demands a different form of representation which captures the “real” inner life of Mrs. Brown. It is noteworthy that Woolf's aims are still towards a form of *realism*, as Erich Auerbach (1953[1946]) pointed out. But she is redefining what the “real” really means and why it requires new modes of artistic expression and freedom from old restrictive conventions of genre and form.

This would-be antimaterialist position seems to stand in contrast to *A Room of One's Own*, where Woolf offers a forthright materialist account of cultural production, the social and economic position of women, and the possibilities of women's writing. But terminological consistency is not uppermost in her mind: she adopts a rhetoric of dialogic play with the reader when she develops her analysis of the historical position of the English woman writer and her relative absence from the literary canon. What the woman writer lacks, Woolf argues, is not imagination, talent, or energy, but rather the material necessities for the writer's profession - the privacy of her own space to create (a room) and financial independence (£500 a year). The essay is by turns polemical, self-ironizing, and witty. She addresses the reader directly, as if she were a listener, which may reflect the origin of the text in a series of lectures at two women's colleges (Newnham and Girton) at Cambridge University in 1928. Fictionalizing for the sake of “reality,” she invents the life and plight of the would-be dramatist “Judith Shakespeare” to contrast with her brother's fame; by so doing, she becomes a “deconstructionist” *avant la lettre*, in her undercutting of an authoritative “I” subjectivity. This essay has been highly influential in articulating ideas later taken up by feminist thinkers, particularly since the 1960s (the advent of so-called “second wave” feminism), although attempts to wed her feminism with a Marxist materialism has been disputed (Barrett 1979).

Woolf's argument for “the woman's sentence,” a quintessentially female language and style of writing - she cites Jane Austen as exemplary - has been positively taken up particularly by those influenced by

French thinking on the concept of *écriture féminine* (writing the feminine, writing the body). *A Room of One's Own* ends with an arguably contentious ideal of “androgynous” writing (found in Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Proust) that transcends alleged gender differences. This has sometimes been criticized variously as utopian or as contradicting the exclusiveness of “female writing” (Showalter 1978; Bowlby 1997[1988]; Moi 2002).

Near the end of her life, Woolf published an even more forcefully polemical long essay, *Three Guineas* (1938), which is a critique of patriarchal political and cultural institutions, including academia and the law, particularly as they existed in the shadow of fascism. It forsakes the earlier fictional playfulness to voice Woolf's strong feminist, pacifist, and internationalist beliefs, a radicalism criticized by F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis as “nasty,” “dangerous,” and “preposterous.” As the response to her work indicates, critical attitudes toward Woolf's thinking can be extreme. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, these critical debates tend to mirror divergent opinions within feminist theoretical writing about an essentialist or heterogeneous understanding of feminist political and artistic positions. “Third wave” feminism (or “postfeminism”) tends to be less doctrinaire and more accepting of the subtleties of her position than some of their predecessors.

Woolf took her own life by drowning on March 28, 1941.

SEE ALSO: Auerbach, Erich; Canons; Cixous, Hélène; Deconstruction; *Écriture Feminine*; Eliot, T. S.; Feminism; Freud, Sigmund; Ingarden, Roman; Intentionality and Horizon; Leavis, F. R.; Materialism; Modernism; Modernist Aesthetics; Pater, Walter; Phenomenology; Psychoanalysis (to 1966); Reader-Response Studies; Showalter, Elaine

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