

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Sir Leslie Stephen was fifty years old when his second daughter, Virginia, was born January 25, 1882. He had been married before, to a daughter of Thackeray, and after her death had remarried a widow with three children. He reared that family and now was in the midst of rearing one of his own. Sir Leslie was a renowned literary critic, and was also a cantankerous old man, not always a pleasant father to live with. Years after her father was dead, Virginia, over fifty herself, wrote in her journal that had her father lived she would never have produced either her novels or the many volumes of essays. Her father dominance would have prevented all creativity.

Virginia inherited her father passion for books, and, from her mother, she inherited beauty. Virginia and her sister Vanessa were strikingly good-looking girls, their beauty being classic Greek rather than pretty. When they were children, Henry James thought that they were unusually attractive creatures but, after they were grown, he revised his estimate. The girls were still attractive, physically, but James was shocked by their most unladylike behavior. Both girls radiated a certain demure shyness but underneath they were, like their father, out-spoken and satirical.

The Stephen children (Thoby, Vanessa, Virginia, and Adrian) were a closely-knit group and though Virginia was frail, stayed at home, and educated herself with her father library, she was never left out of a gathering or an outing. Leonard Woolf, who married Virginia, recalls that Virginia and Vanessa were invariably together. He also recalls that when they came up to Cambridge to visit their brother, Thoby, he fell in love with Virginia immediately; many years later George Bernard Shaw wrote Virginia that she had had the same effect on him.

From the first, Virginia Stephen was unusual. Besides having James Russell Lowell as godfather, and besides being self-educated, in her mid-teens she filled a number of copybooks with original compositions, imitating first one literary style, then another. Later, after both her father and mother were dead, Virginia moved out of the family home in Hyde Park. Eventually she took a lease on a large four-storied house in Brunswick Square and rented the top floor to Leonard Woolf; she occupied the third floor; her brother Adrian lived on the second; and Maynard Keynes and Duncan Grant occupied the bottom apartment. In 1911 this arrangement was very daring for most young women but to Virginia it seemed the pleasant and practical thing to do.

Leonard Woolf had been in the Civil Service for seven years and was happy to re-acquaint himself with his old friends, the Stephens. Not surprisingly, while he was living in the apartment above his landlady, during his leave of absence, he fell in love with Virginia all over again. He tried to prolong his leave so that he might return to Ceylon if Virginia refused his proposal of marriage but the Service demanded an answer, so Leonard decided to resign and gamble on Virginia saying yes to him. He courted her with long walks, tickets to the theater and to the ballet, but Virginia was reluctant to give him an answer. When she did agree to marry him, they made a special day of it. They took a train out from London, then hired a boat, and rowed up the river. A little over a month later, they were married.

The Woolfs spent a long and leisurely honeymoon traveling through France, Spain, and Italy, and when they returned to London they moved into Clifford Inn, Fleet Street. It was a sooty section of London but the rooms were fine and both Virginia and Leonard felt very free in this neighborhood that had known Chaucer, Shakespeare, Pepys, Johnson, Boswell, and Tennyson. During the day Virginia worked on *The Voyage*

*Out* and Leonard wrote *The Village in the Jungle*. In the evenings, they would cross Fleet Street and dine at the Cock Tavern.

During 1913, when Virginia was finishing *The Voyage Out*, Leonard noticed that his wife was becoming irritable and nervous. She had worked on perhaps a dozen drafts of her first novel and now that it was almost done, she was developing excruciating headaches and was unable to sleep. Leonard was not unaware that Virginia had a history of mental instability before he married her. During her childhood, Virginia suffered a breakdown, and after her mother's death in 1895 she suffered another breakdown. Now the old symptoms were recurring. For a few weeks, Virginia agreed to rest in a nursing home, but after she returned home, the delusions and sleeplessness returned, and although Leonard tried to get his wife to rest in Holford, a quiet little village where Coleridge and Wordsworth once lived, Virginia's condition remained unstable. The Woolfs returned to London, and a few days later, Virginia attempted suicide. She swallowed an overdose of veronal tablets. Four trained nurses were required during her recovery and, had it not been for Leonard, Virginia would probably have been committed. The doctors who treated Virginia during these periods of semi- and acute insanity were either ready to place her in a hospital or they were (like the doctors in *Mrs. Dalloway*) only able to suggest that she be given plenty of rest and good food. In 1913 very little was known about mental illness; nearly all cases were diagnosed as various stages of neurasthenia.

Virginia's breakdown lasted almost two years with only short periods of respite but Leonard stayed with her constantly. Meals, he remembers, would often take an hour, sometimes two. Occasionally Virginia could be induced to feed herself but often Leonard had to spoonfeed her. At times Virginia was violent, even with the nurses; at other times, she was depressed and suicidal; once she lapsed into a coma for two days.

In 1915, *The Voyage Out*, which had been held up from publication for two years, appeared. It received fairly good reviews and Virginia was cited as being an important new novelist. Immediately she began *Night and Day*. In 1917, Virginia began to return to a normal social life and it was during this time that she met Katherine Mansfield and Middleton Murry. It was also during this period that Leonard and Virginia founded the Hogarth Press. Many myths surround the Press, supposing it to have been the toy of eccentric moneyed dilettantes. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Woolfs had been living off Virginia investments and had very little money. Leonard bought the hand press in order to occupy Virginia mind with something manual. During 1917 and 1918, there was not a single month that she did not have reviews in *The Times Literary Supplement* and, of course, she was working on her second novel. Leonard was fearful of another breakdown. But this creative tempo was typical of Virginia output all during her life. She always tried to keep a flow of creative writing pouring during the mornings, then, during the afternoons and in odd hours, she would write critical essays as relief and as a different sort of mental discipline.

The Hogarth Press was begun in the Woolf dining room, with the press on the table and Virginia and Leonard teaching themselves to print by the instructions in a 16-page manual. Their first publication was *Two Stories* one by Virginia, *The Mark on the Wall*, and one by Leonard, *Three Jews*. The book was entirely hand-printed, hand-bound, and sold 134 copies. Ten years later, the Press was recognized as an important publishing house and their publications schedule was so full that the printing had to be jobbed out. During this time, the Woolfs published *Kew Gardens* by Virginia and *Poems* by T. S. Eliot (including *Sweeney Among the Nightingales* and *Mr. Eliot Sunday Morning Service*); later the Press published another of Eliot poems, *The Waste Land*.

The Woolfs and Eliot were close friends and it was he who suggested that, since no other English publisher would touch it, the Hogarth Press publish a large, bulky manuscript by James Joyce. Virginia and Leonard agreed to consider the manuscript, and Eliot had a friend deliver a portion of *Ulysses*. Virginia read it and thought it was raw and not particularly well-written but she did recognize a strata of genius in it, so she and Leonard promised to publish it, provided they could find someone willing to set it up in print. That was in 1918; in 1919, they had to return the manuscript. All the printers they contacted were wary of the voluminous anomaly.

The Woolfs lived in Hogarth House from 1915 to 1924. The Press was begun and became famous during the time WWI ran its course and ended. *Night and Day* appeared and received praise, but less than *The Voyage Out*; both books were financially unprofitable. In April 1920, Virginia began *Jacob Room*, her first masterpiece. The novel concerns Jacob Flanders, a man remembered first through one person memory, then another. The viewpoint changes continually. It was Virginia first successful attempt since *Kew Gardens* to fashion a multidimensional reality and to concoct a plot that abolished pat formulas for writing fiction. She was revealing many faces of reality when her contemporaries were insisting on a one-viewpoint, unified approach.

*Jacob Room* was not an easy book to write because Virginia had no models; she was creating a new medium of narration. In addition, she was again suffering terrible headaches and insomnia and was required to spend much time in bed. She was diagnosed for lung trouble, then for heart trouble. Again the doctors suggested (as they do for Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*) that all she needed was rest and relaxation. When she was able, however, Virginia continued to write, using a large piece of plywood with an inkstand glued to it, filling self-bound notebooks with her almost indecipherable, sharp script.

*Jacob Room* was published in October, 1922, and received fiercely partisan reviews; either the reviewers thought that the novel was a poetic, electric masterpiece or else they were shocked. Virginia Woolf, the latter clique said, had defied the form of the novel: she had gone too far! They bemoaned the end of English literature. But Virginia was already working into *Mrs. Dalloway* (first called *The Hours*) and although she was upset by the bad reviews, she continued to unfold yet another impressionistically told story. Looking through her diary, one notices her excitement of being able to battle words and form and being able to do so without also having to battle mental fatigue and illness. At this time, Virginia was using the hours not spent with *Mrs. Dalloway* to write and assemble *The Common Reader*, a collection of essays about English literature. And, while writing on these two projects during 1923 and 1924, she was already planning her next novel, one to be written about her father and mother, *To the Lighthouse*.

## SYNOPSIS

Mrs. Dalloway is a unique novel that it takes place in a single day-a Wednesday in mid-June 1923. The novel interweaves two seemingly unconnected storylines during this day.

At the beginning, Clarissa Dalloway, fifties and recently recovering from an illness, is preparing for a party she will host that evening. She begins her day running an errand to purchase the flowers for the party. Throughout the morning, Clarissa reflects on her past, including her decision to marry Richard Dalloway thirty years earlier, rather than her fierier suitor Peter Walsh.

Meanwhile, the second storyline begins with Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked war veteran, out on the street with his wife, Lucrezia. Septimus struggles with the aftereffects of the war, hearing voices and feeling that life has little meaning. A car backfiring paralyzes him, and he reflects on his life. Septimus lost his good friend and commanding officer Evans in the war and continues to carry on conversations with this lost friend. Clarissa has returned home and begins to remember a special friendship she shared in her youth with Sally Seton, a vivacious, slightly scandalous young woman. The two shared a special bond, bordering on a crush, and Clarissa remembers a kiss they shared.

Clarissa begins mending her green silk dress for the evening when she receives an unexpected visit from Peter Walsh, her former suitor. Peter had once told Clarissa disparagingly that one day she would become 'the perfect hostess', and it becomes more and more clear that his prediction was accurate. Clarissa and Peter talk to each other easily about the present, but both are thinking of their past and the decisions they made to get them to the place they are now. Clarissa's 17 year- old daughter Elizabeth enters and Peter ends his visit.

Peter goes to a park where Septimus and Lucrezia are also walking. The couple gets into a heated discussion about suicide, and Peter sees them as a young and in love couple quarreling. He does not realize the depth of their emotions or how unsteady Septimus is.

Lucrezia has made an appointment for Septimus to see a specialist, Sir William Bradshaw, who dismisses the complexity of Septimus' madness and suggest a rest in an asylum to get more perspective.

Meanwhile, Richard Dalloway has been to lunch with Lady Bruton. Clarissa was somewhat miffed that Lady Bruton invited only Richard and not her, and sees it as a remark on Clarissa's validity. Richard has realized during this lunch that he wants to come home and tell Clarissa that he loves her. Unfortunately, he never finds the word, as he has gone so many years without saying them.

Clarissa goes to see Elizabeth, who is studying with her tutor, Doris Kilman. Clarissa despises Doris, who she sees as a monster with 'hooves' taking her daughter from her. Doris also despises Clarissa, largely for her bourgeois ways and financial means.

Septimus and Lucrezia go to their apartment to wait for the attendants who will take him to the asylum. When they arrive, Septimus decides to escape from them, and not wanting to leave life but not wanting to meet the attendants, he jumps out the window to his death. Clarissa's party is underway, with several ghosts from her past-including Peter Walsh and Sally Seton-in attendance. Richard has still been unable to tell her that he loves her. Very late into the party, Sir William and Lady Bradshaw arrive, very apologetic for their tardiness. Lady Bradshaw explains that they were delayed as one of Sir William's patients (Septimus) had committed suicide that day. The party ends with Clarissa surprisingly disappointed at the success of her party.