

WOMEN in the ARTS

VIRGINIA WOOLF



Cliff Mills

INTRODUCTION Congresswoman Betty McCollum
Missouri, Fourth District • Member, National Council on the Arts

Women in the Arts

Sarah Bernhardt

Coco Chanel

Agnes de Mille

Dorothea Lange

Nina Simone

Virginia Woolf

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He who neglects the arts when he is young
has lost the past and is dead to the future.

—Sophocles, *Fragments*

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Introduction

Congresswoman Betty McCollum

Minnesota, Fourth District

Member, National Council on the Arts

I am honored to introduce **WOMEN IN THE ARTS**, a continuing series of books about courageous, talented women whose work has changed the way we think about art and society. The women highlighted in this series were persistent, successful, and at times controversial. They were unafraid to ask questions or challenge social norms while pursuing their work. They overcame barriers that included discrimination, prejudice, and poverty. The energy, creativity, and perseverance of these strong women changed our world forever.

Art plays a critical role in all our lives, in every culture, and especially in the education of young people. Art can be serious, beautiful, functional, provocative, spiritual, informative, and illuminating. For all of the women in this series, their respective forms of artistic expression were a creative exploration and their professional calling. Their lives and their work transformed the world's perception of a woman's role in society.

In reading this series, I was struck by common themes evident in these women's lives that can provide valuable lessons for today's young women.

One volume tells the story of Coco Chanel, the first fashion designer to create clothing for women that was both attractive and utile. Chanel was one of the first women to run a large, successful business in the fashion industry. Today, it is hard to imagine the controversy Chanel stirred up simply by making women's clothing beautiful, comfortable, and practical. Chanel understood that women wanted a sense of style and professionalism in their fashion, as men had in theirs.

Chanel's extraordinary success demonstrates that we should not be afraid to be controversial. Even today, women

of all ages worry far too much about stepping on toes or questioning authority. To make change, in our own lives or in our community, we need to stand up and speak out for our beliefs. The women of this series often defied convention and ruffled some feathers, but they never stopped. Nina Simone sang beautifully, but she also spoke out against the injustice of racism, regardless of how it affected her career.

It is equally important for us women to ask ourselves, “What do I want from my life?” We all struggle to answer this deceptively simple question. It takes courage to answer it honestly, but it takes far more courage to answer the question and then *act* on that answer. For example, Agnes de Mille realized she had “nothing to lose by being direct.” She stuck to her vision for *Rodeo*, insisted on the set and composer she envisioned, and eventually produced her ballet—the way she wanted to. She believed in her vision, and the result was a great success. Dorothea Lange, having decided she wanted to become a photographer, asked for photography jobs, even though she had no experience and it was a profession that few women pursued.

In our society, we expect that all people should be treated with respect and dignity, but this has not always been true. Nina Simone faced discrimination and overcame social norms that promoted racial injustice. She confronted prejudice and disrespect directly, sometimes refusing to perform when an audience was unruly or rude. One evening, when she was only eleven years old, she even delayed her performance until her own parents were allowed to sit in the front row—seats that they had been asked to vacate for white people. Her demand for respect took courage.

Women's equality not only benefits women, but also brings a unique perspective to the world. For example, the brilliance of Dorothea Lange's photography was in large part due to her empathy for her subjects. She knew that to tell their story, she needed to earn their trust and to truly understand their lives.

Each of these women used her art to promote social justice. Coco Chanel used her designs to make women's lives easier and more comfortable, while Nina Simone was as committed to civil rights as she was to her music. Dorothea Lange's photographs convinced Washington of the need to establish sanitary camps for migrant families, and Virginia Woolf's writing pushed the question of equal rights for women.

Because the women in these books, and so many others like them, took risks and challenged society, women today have more opportunity than ever before. We have access to equal education, and we are making great strides in the workplace and in government.

As only the second woman from Minnesota ever elected to serve in Congress, I know how important it is to have strong female role models. My grandmothers were born in a time when women did not have the right to vote, but their granddaughter is now a Member of Congress. Their strength, wisdom, and courage inspire me. Other great women, such as Congresswoman Barbara Jordan and Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, also inspired me with their leadership and determination to overcome gender and racial discrimination to serve in Congress with distinction.

Dorothea Lange once said, "I have learned from everything, and I'm constantly learning." I know that I too am constantly learning. I hope the women in this series will inspire you to learn and to lead with courage and determination. Art, as a profession or a hobby, can be either an expression or an agent of change. We need to continue to encourage women to add their voices to our society through art.

The women profiled in this series broke barriers, followed their hearts, refused to be intimidated, and changed our world. Their lives and successes should be a lesson to women everywhere. In addition, and importantly, they created lasting and meaningful art. I hope that you will enjoy this series as much as I have.



1

Fame Captures Virginia Woolf

Literature is strewn with the wreckage of men who have minded beyond reason the opinions of others.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

TIME FOR FAME

The year 1937 was among “the worst of times”—a year of international state-sponsored terrorism and economic uncertainty. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini were increasing the scale of their violence in Europe, and the world had yet to escape from the Great Depression. The American magazine *Time* gave its readers a break from this grim reality when it featured a “new and exciting” writer on the cover of its issue for April 12, 1937. The writer was a woman with a strong profile and striking face. The caption read: “Virginia Woolf: ‘It is fatal to be man or woman pure and simple.’”



International acclaim. Woolf's appearance on the cover of *Time* in early 1937 brought her name far beyond her homeland of Great Britain and into the international arena. Although she was perpetually shy and critical of her work, exposure like this increased her tremendous success as an author and sparked interest for her writing in the hearts of readers worldwide. At this point, in 1937, Woolf had already written *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, *A Room of One's Own*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waves*, and other works, and it was understood that she would have a profound impact on the literature of the time.

Woolf was well-known to many in her homeland of Great Britain, but her appearance on the cover of *Time* caused her popularity to spread around the world. The writer of the cover article even predicted that Woolf's fame would place her among the great figures of literature, calling her "not just a highbrow writer but perhaps a great one." Her star status faded somewhat over the next thirty years, only to burn more brightly in the 1970s and later. Among critics, she is considered one of the most influential writers of modern fiction, a woman who experimented with the English language and literary conventions and left both changed forever.

Despite her popularity, Woolf tended to avoid the public spotlight and was protective of her privacy and writing time. When asked about the parade of people coming to visit and interview her, she wrote, "I like when people come, but I love when they go." (Nicolson, 136) She was always shy, and she declined many honors that required public speaking. Still, she recognized the benefits of advertising and must have been relieved when the *Time* cover helped her newest book, *The Years*, to become a best-seller. Critical of her own work, Woolf thought *The Years* was "a long weary dreary book" and was afraid it would not sell well. (Nicolson, 146) She need not have worried; the novel's candid attitudes toward sex, war, the trials of youth, and the conflicts between rich and poor took the literary world by storm.

AN EXTRAORDINARY MIND AT WORK

Woolf recorded the details of her life, including her desires, thrills, dreams, annoyances, hatreds, and fears in journals and personal correspondence. She kept a diary from the age of fifteen and wrote as many as six letters a day. In addition to finding personal compositions soothing, she used these informal writings to practice her craft, experimenting with words, images, and metaphors. Woolf never intended for

the public to read these intimate writings (her husband, Leonard, published her diaries and letters posthumously against her wishes); however, these writings have provided Woolf scholars with a rare glimpse of her extraordinary mind at work.

Beyond her letters and diaries, Virginia Woolf played with and often broke writing conventions. She wrote novels

WOOLF ON THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

From *A Room of One's Own*:

[T]he majority of women are neither harlots nor courtesans; nor do they sit clasping pug dogs to dusty velvet all through the summer afternoon. But what do they do then? and there came to my mind's eye one of those long streets somewhere south of the river whose infinite rows are innumably populated. With the eye of the imagination I saw a very ancient lady crossing the street on the arm of a middle-aged woman, her daughter, perhaps. . . . The elder is close on eighty; but if one asked her what her life has meant to her, she would say that she remembered the streets lit for the battle of Balaclava, or had heard the guns fire in Hyde Park for the birth of King Edward the Seventh. And if one asked her, longing to pin down the moment with date and season, but what were you doing on the fifth of April 1868, or the second of November 1875, she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie.

All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded. . . .

that contained plays and poems, stories that read like essays, and biographies that read like fiction. She started her career as a journalist, writing about subjects such as architecture, aviation, travel, and emerging technologies. Later, she composed essays, biographies, traditional fiction, and experimental novels. Due to the breadth and complexity of her writings, some critics have considered her more a poet than a novelist. Her texts, never pure and simple, have enabled generations of readers to invoke her ideas in discussions about feminism, multiculturalism, “highbrow” versus “lowbrow” culture and entertainment, political correctness, civil rights, and gay and lesbian rights. Her ideas challenged people to treasure their private lives, to respect their differences, to fight repression of all kinds, and to transform traumatic experiences into learning opportunities.

A LIFE OF CONTRADICTIONS

Woolf’s life and lifestyle were as shockingly progressive as her writing. Her life was filled with tensions and contractions. She had bursts of intense creativity and crippling bouts of mental illness. She loved several men and women deeply, including her husband Leonard Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, an aristocratic celebrity authoress. Woolf experienced personal triumphs, such as the success her writing and publishing brought her, and she knew personal tragedies, including the deaths of her parents, her brother, and her half-brother by the time she was twenty-two. She never received a college education or attended high school, but she was extremely well educated. She had a gift for friendship and loved to listen to people; however, people whose wit and intelligence could not keep up with those of her and her friends were often the subject of her sharp tongue and pen. When her friend Lytton Strachey was criticized by an acquaintance, she wrote, “Lytton has more love in his little finger than that castrated cat in the whole of his mangy,

stringy, partless, gutless, tailless body.” (Nicolson, 137–138) Even at her most depressed, she never neglected her friends or her family.

Her lifestyle also defied convention. After the deaths of her parents, Woolf and her siblings moved to Bloomsbury, a questionable neighborhood for upper-class children. There, she and her sister Vanessa engaged in discussions with their brother’s Cambridge friends as equals. The Bloomsbury Group, as they were later known, discussed academic, artistic, political, and even sexual subjects—no topic was sacred. Each member exaggerated the faults of the others for sport; indeed, some said the difference between the Bloomsbury gatherings and Cambridge was that at Cambridge nothing funny was ever said unless it was also philosophical, and at Bloomsbury nothing philosophical was ever said that wasn’t also funny. The group generally accepted homosexuality, and many practiced it; they also considered extramarital affairs normal. Their frank recognition of these “deviancies” contrasted sharply with the prudish Victorian values set by the previous generation and gained the group the notoriety it became famous for. Biographer Hermione Lee quotes Woolf’s recollection: “Sex permeated our conversation. . . . We discussed copulation with the same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of good. . . . [Before the war] when all intellectual questions had been debated so freely, sex was ignored. Now a flood of light poured in upon that department too. We had known everything but we had never talked. Now we talked of nothing else. . . .” (Lee, 196–196)

The *Time* cover that fueled her popularity in 1937 helped to fulfill the prediction that Woolf would one day be heralded as a leading literary figure. Since the 1930s, her image has been used to inspire change and has become synonymous with feminism, creative experimentalism, disestablishment, and sexual tolerance. Her essays and fiction



Lytton Strachey. Giles Lytton Strachey (1880–1932), widely considered a successor to Oscar Wilde's wit, was one of Woolf's greatest friends. He was also a vital and somewhat scandalous member of the Bloomsbury Group, and his *Eminent Victorians* (1918) is counted among the key antiestablishment Bloomsbury works. Woolf supported him without question, even sharply lambasting his critics. His death in 1932 seriously affected her mental and physical health. (Strachey's longtime admirer Dora Carrington, a peripheral member of the Bloomsbury Group, took her own life soon afterward.)

have been incorporated into the academic canon for English literature and have withstood the test of time, despite critics' attempts to categorize her writing. This ability of her works to defy interpretation only strengthens her position among the literary elite.

2

A Childhood Bright and Shattered

1882–1905

The interest in life does not lie in what people do, nor even in their relations to each other, but largely in the power to communicate with a third party, antagonistic, enigmatic, yet perhaps persuadable, which one may call life in general.

— Virginia Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek” (1925)

Young women[,] . . . you are, in my opinion, disgracefully ignorant. You have never made a discovery of any sort of importance. You have never shaken an empire or led an army into battle. The plays by Shakespeare are not by you, and you have never introduced a barbarous race to the blessings of civilization. What is your excuse?

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

THE STEPHENS

Virginia Woolf was born Adeline Virginia Stephen on January 25, 1882, in London, at 22 Hyde Park Gate, the third child of

aristocratic and intellectual parents. Her father was Leslie Stephen, a well-known journalist, editor, philosopher, and literary figure in England. He had come to London from his hometown of Cambridge in 1859 with no money and no job prospects. Finding work as a journalist, Leslie traveled to America to meet and interview Abraham Lincoln, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. He embraced many controversial views. For example, he was sympathetic to the United States and Lincoln in the American Civil War. Like his father and grandfather, Leslie hated slavery and advocated its abolition. Still, he upheld the puritanical values of the Victorian era. The year Woolf was born he became the editor for *The Dictionary of National Biography*. As editor, he befriended the great writers of the day, including Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Henry James.

Woolf's mother was Julia (Jackson) Stephen, a beautiful model who had posed for several famous painters and photographers. Unlike her husband, Julia radiated confidence and self-assurance. She encouraged wit in her children and dominated Leslie with her submissiveness. Although initially reluctant to wed the middle-aged, conservative Leslie, Julia had fallen in love after a slow courtship. Leslie and Julia Stephen were married on March 26, 1878.

The Stephens lived in a large, wealthy section of London, and their house was often bustling with activity. Aside from relatives, scholars, artists, and friends who visited continually, both Julia and Leslie had been married and widowed before their first meeting. They both had children from previous marriages. Leslie had a daughter named Laura Stephen from his marriage to Harriet Marian Thackeray, who had died in childbirth; Julia had sons George and Gerald and daughter Stella, all of whom bore the surname of their father Herbert Duckworth. After their wedding, Julia and Leslie had their own four children in rapid succession: Vanessa (1879),



Virginia Stephen with her father, c. 1900. Woolf acquired many of her “social activist” traits from her father, an outspoken and prolific journalist and editor who enjoyed a very wide acquaintance in literary circles. The two got along well and shared many ideas about life and politics. Woolf’s father was her main tutor and guide in her literary education, and, as a scholar himself, he encouraged her love of reading.

Julian Thoby (1880, called Thoby), Virginia (1882), and Adrian (1883).

The children adored their parents. In 1907, Woolf wrote, “Beautiful often, even to our eyes, were their gestures, their glances of pure and unutterable delight in each other.” (Nicolson, 4) The Stephens were supportive of each other and of their children. Altogether, they were a happy, talented family whose affections for one another dispelled any tensions.

As a child, Woolf worried her parents. She did not talk until she was almost four years old, and they feared she might have developmental problems. When she did learn to speak,

she learned the private language created by the Stephen children, and her parents were relieved to see her share private jokes with her siblings. Around this time, Vanessa became protective of her younger siblings, and the four Stephen children became very close. They were sensitive to one another's needs and involved with one another's interests, and they remained much closer than the Duckworth children were. This friendship among the Stephen children remained all their lives. In particular, Woolf admired Vanessa, relishing her older sister's calm honesty and quiet practicality that was so similar to their mother's.

WOOLF'S EDUCATION

When the Stephen children reached school age, Julia and Leslie decided to educate the children at home, an unusual decision given their lower-upper-class status and the time period. Julia taught them Latin, history, and French, while Leslie taught math. Leslie was an impatient teacher and became angry whenever the children had trouble grasping mathematical concepts. As a result, only Thoby learned math; Woolf's math expertise was limited to counting on her fingers.

Despite unpleasant math lessons, Leslie endeared himself to Woolf by allowing her full access to his extensive library. This was a rare freedom for a young girl, and Woolf took full advantage of it. Initially, Leslie guided her choices, but soon he was unable to keep up with her appetite for learning. He found that she was "devouring books almost faster than I like." Still, Leslie encouraged her reading and writing and frequently discussed literature with her. His letters to Julia revealed his hope that Woolf might one day become his literary and intellectual heir, stating, "Yesterday I discussed George II with 'Ginia. She takes in a great deal and will really be an author in time; though I cannot make up my mind in what line. History will be a good thing for her to take up as I can give her some hints." At the time of these comments, Woolf was eleven. When

her interests leaned toward the classics, Leslie paid for lessons in Latin and Greek, so that she could read Homer and Sophocles. Perhaps, through reading, Woolf secured her father's favor and gained the attention she craved. (Leaska, 75)

When the Stephen boys were sent away to school, Vanessa and Woolf continued their home education with tutors to instruct them in music, riding, and dance. Woolf was never accomplished at music and hated both dance and piano lessons. Instead, she honed her talents for mockery and observation through her letters to family and friends. She resented her informal education and wished for the same education as her brothers. "Think how I was brought up!" she later wrote to Vita Sackville-West. "No school; mooning about alone among my father's books; never any chance to pick up all that goes on in schools—throwing balls; ragging; slang; vulgarities; scenes; jealousies!" (Nicolson, 9) Woolf also resented what she deemed her inadequate schooling, and as an adult, she became an outspoken advocate for equality in education.

To channel her budding literary talents, Woolf initiated ways to express herself. She and Thoby started a family newspaper, *The Hyde Park News*, that they distributed to family and friends. Although Woolf was only nine when the newspaper began, most of the articles were attributed to her, as Thoby was already away at school. She reported on events at home and on vacation, and scholars have linked material in her articles to some of her later masterpieces. For example, in an article dated September 12, 1892, Woolf reports,

On Saturday morning Master Hilary Hunt and Master Basil Smith came up to Talland House and asked Master Thoby and Miss Virginia Stephen to accompany them to the light-house as Freeman the boatman said that there was a perfect wind and tide for going there. Master Adrian Stephen was much disappointed at not being allowed to go. (Lehmann, 12)

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