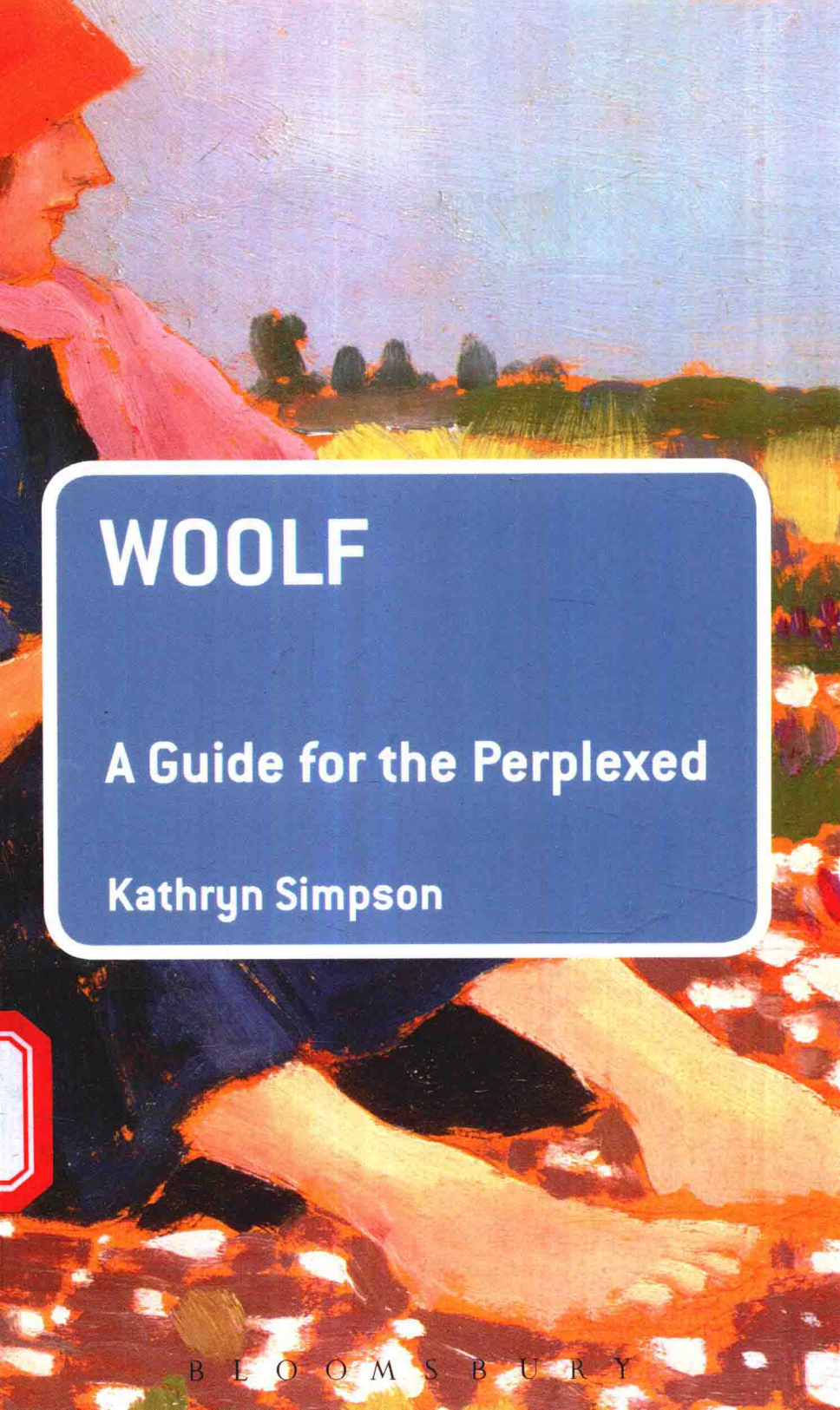
WOOLF
A Guide for the Perplexed
Kathryn Simpson
BLOOMSBURY

A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

Woolf

KATHRYN SIMPSON

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Woolf

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For lovely B.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AROO	*A Room of One's Own*
BTA	*Between the Acts*
CSF	*The Complete Shorter Fiction*
D	*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (5 vols)
E	*The Essays of Virginia Woolf* (6 vols)
JR	*Jacob's Room*
L	*The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (6 vols)
MD	*Mrs Dalloway*
MOB	*Moments of Being*
O	*Orlando*
TG	*Three Guineas*
TTL	*To the Lighthouse*
TW	*The Waves*
TY	*The Years*
VO	*The Voyage Out*

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Introduction

Virginia Woolf is now an iconic figure in our culture. She is best known as a novelist, but also as a prolific essayist, reviewer and a writer of short fiction. She is recognized as a feminist, socialist and pacifist, as a central figure of the Bloomsbury Group, as part of the fabric of Englishness as well as a national commodity to be exploited and exported.[1] As critics explore her work in ever more diverse ways it is also clear that she was in many ways a 'cultural magpie', her thinking and writing critically engaging with a vast range of new ideas and modern phenomena emerging in her contemporary period – from avant-garde movements in the visual arts, developments in cinema and photography, experience of new technologies such as the telephone, gramophone, broadcast radio and the motor-car, to philosophical ideas, psychoanalysis and the 'new physics'. The exciting and challenging possibilities these new experiences created also shaped and informed Woolf's literary experiments and aesthetics suggesting as they did new ways of perceiving, experiencing and representing reality and the self. Woolf also lived in a period of dramatic social, political and economic change, all of which impacted on her writing in significant ways. She saw the rise of the Labour Party, successes in feminist politics and the achievement of female suffrage, developments in mass industrialization and the of expansion commodity culture, as well as significant changes in the empire and in the international sphere resulting in war. She is, as the plethora of critical assessments demonstrates, an inherently complex and contradictory figure, as much the subject of controversies as a promoter of them.

Critic Brenda Silver has demonstrated that there are now innumerable 'versions' of Virginia Woolf in circulation, produced by the many and various ways in which readers, taking wildly different perspectives on her and her work, have interpreted and constructed her. These sometimes impassioned and clashing versions, Silver

suggests, are a result of the powerful responses Woolf's writings provoke, leading readers to feel intimately connected to her work and her life. These many versions are a testimony to the lasting influence of Woolf's writing, but also highlight the many 'Woolfs' we have to negotiate as readers of her work, 'Woolfs' that are multiple, varying, contradictory and still emerging. This makes it impossible to limit her cultural meaning and to arrive at hard and fast interpretations of her writing. Yet given that Woolf asserts (in many different ways) that 'nothing was simply one thing' (*TTL* 177) and that acceptance of both/and rather than either/or is the only way to live and be, it would seem that acceptance of diversity, plurality, contradiction and an on-going fluidity of interpretation is what we need to aim for as readers of her work.

Woolf and the modernist canon

Although Woolf and her work are now unquestionably recognized as belonging to 'modernism', her position in the modernist canon has not always been so secure. The retrospective delineation of modernism as an artistic and cultural movement, begun in the 1950s, constructed it as male dominated, masculine in values and ethos, gender blind and middle class. It was the 'Men of 1914' (Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis and James Joyce) whose work was seen as definitive and 'canonical'. As Bonnie Kime Scott notes in her ground-breaking study, *The Gender of Modernism*, 'Typically, both the authors of the original [modernist] manifestos and the literary historians of modernism took as their norm a small set of its male participants, who were quoted, anthologized, taught, and consecrated as geniuses' (Scott 1990: 2). Growing out of a male-dominated academic context, early critical views of Woolf saw her as asexual and apolitical, a feminine or 'lady' writer of exquisite works and also as a weak woman subject to nervous illness. These are views that subsequent criticism has done much to correct.

Feminist criticism of the 1970s and 1980s opened the doors for recuperating 'lost' and forgotten women writers and for challenging the gender politics of the canonical male modernists and the critics defining such a canon. Feminist readings alongside other critical approaches (such as post-colonial, queer and class-focussed criticism) consider Woolf's work in a wide range of ways that draw

attention to the political as well as aesthetic dimensions of her writing and thought. However, critical assessments also take on board the tensions running through modernist literature generally – between the radical nature of the literary experiment and the embracing of 'the new' and conservative, even sexist, politics and views. Even the most forward thinking writers were not immune to the anxieties generated by the social and political changes of the early decades of the twentieth century in relation to gender roles, class and sexual identities and the disruption of established hierarchies of all kinds. Like that of her contemporaries, Woolf's writing simultaneously embraces change even as it registers anxieties and stumbling blocks and her work can be seen to foreground processes of transition.

Woolf's writings – a wider view

Woolf's novels are still the primary focus of critical assessments of her work but the critical scope is now significantly extended to encompass Woolf's successful and prolific publication as a reviewer and essayist. She wrote over 500 pieces during the course of her lifetime, spanning writing from the Renaissance to her present day. Her first foray into the world of the literary professional was the publication of a review in 1904 in the clerical newspaper, the *Guardian*, and she became well respected and well-known in this capacity with articles published in important journals, such as the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Nation and Athenaeum*, the *Criterion* and *Scrutiny* (see Rosenburg and Dubino 1997: 1–2). This work played a significant role in extending her knowledge and understanding of contemporary writing and of the political and philosophical ideas in circulation, but also in developing a wider audience for her own fiction, creating opportunities to connect with what Woolf called the 'common reader'. The huge project that Andrew McNeillie began in 1986 to publish all of Woolf's critical writings has given readers and critics access to a plethora of Woolf's writings and this in turn has altered and exponentially expanded the critical landscape of Woolf studies. Woolf's non-fiction is now seen as valuable in its own right as well as in informing critical assessments of her fiction (see Lee 2000). Similarly, there has been a more recent surge of critical interest in her shorter fiction. Although Woolf published only one collection of short stories in

her lifetime, *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), she wrote and published shorter fiction throughout her career. While her shorter fiction has often been treated as a kind of 'testing ground' for ideas and literary experiments more fully developed in her longer works, this extensive and protean body of work is now considered to be fundamental to her emergence as a modernist writer and of value in its own right (see Benzel and Hoberman 2004). The publication of Woolf's diaries and letters has also broadened and complicated our understanding of her as an individual woman, a writer and a political thinker. The information and insights gleaned from her personal writings would, we might assume, go some way to 'explaining' this complex figure. However, this is far from the case and these fascinating writings open up many new avenues for exploration of Woolf's work.[2]

Woolf's life

Understanding Woolf's literary innovation, her attitudes and politics depends in part on understanding her perspectives on the past and on her own Victorian upbringing in a patriarchal family. In her essay 'How It Strikes a Contemporary' (1925)[3], she discusses the critical reception of contemporary fiction and reflects on the necessity of marking a separation from the past given the vast changes that have taken place in every aspect of experience:

> We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale – the war, the sudden slip of masses held in place for ages – has shaken the fabric from top to bottom... No age can have been more rich than ours in writers determined to give expression to the differences which separate them from the past and not to the resemblances which connect them with it. (*E*4 238)

While it is tempting to think of Woolf and other modernists making a break completely with the past to 'make it new', Woolf's relationship to the past, and specifically to her own past, involves both a sense of connection as well as separation. This is seen very clearly in her feelings for her mother who died in 1895 when Woolf was thirteen. This led to the first of Woolf's major breakdowns and her grief was compounded by the sudden death of her older half sister, Stella, two years later. Her loss had a profound and life-long

effect on Woolf even though she rejected her mother as a role model for womanhood, conforming as Julia Stephen did to Victorian ideals of femininity summed up in the phrase taken from the title of Coventry Patmore's mid-century poem celebrating marriage, 'The Angel in the House'. More recent critics take a nuanced view of Woolf's personal and political engagements with the Victorian period (see, for example, Jane de Gay 1999; Emily Blair 2007; Steve Ellis 2007). Woolf clearly felt the need to resist the detrimental impact of the social 'machinery', the pressures exerted on her as a middle-class woman to conform to cultural expectations. As she explained in her memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past', 'the machine into which our rebellious bodies were inserted in 1900 not only held us tight in its framework, but bit into us with innumerable sharp teeth' (*MOB* 166). Throughout her life Woolf challenged the dominant ideologies of gender, sexuality, race and class that shaped the Victorian period and persisted into the twentieth century, as she also engaged critically with the political contributions of members of her own family who played prominent roles in the building of Victorian society. Yet Woolf, her outlook, her literary and intellectual aspirations, and her political views are inevitably shaped in sometimes complex and highly problematic ways by her experience and her response to this experience. She may be able to stand back and, to a certain extent, create a critical distance from which to assess and represent the past, but she is also inextricably connected it and her writing articulates some of the complexities in understanding these connections. See 'Woolf's (perplexing) politics' below for discussion of gender, sexuality, class, empire and antisemitism.

Bloomsbury

Following the death of her father, Leslie Stephen, in 1904, Woolf (then Virginia Stephen) and her siblings set up a new home at 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury. Leaving behind the claustrophobic respectability of Hyde Park Gate in Kensington, Woolf entered not only a new geographical area of London (a more dubious, Bohemian and cosmopolitan milieu) but also a new space in which she could engage in the political life and pursue her profession as a writer (see Jean Moorcroft Wilson 1987; Anna Snaith 2000: 24–30).

Although the Stephens still had a cook and servants, Woolf records the emancipation and newness that her new living arrangements signified: 'Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial' (*MOB* 201). Woolf also entered a new social, intellectual and cultural space as Gordon Square became a meeting place for Thoby Stephen's Cambridge friends (including the writers E. M. Forster and Lytton Strachey, the economist John Maynard Keynes and Leonard Woolf) and what became known as the 'Bloomsbury Group' developed. The group included contemporary artists – Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, Bell's lover, the artist Duncan Grant, the artist and critic Roger Fry as well as Vanessa's husband, the writer and art critic Clive Bell, amongst others. The group is frequently criticized for its elitism and the predominance of male figures has led to accusations of sexism and even misogyny. However, Woolf flourished in this liberal and lively political and artistic context in which she could debate a wide range of issues. It not only afforded her the necessary ingredients of intellectual, social, political and creative stimulation for her success as a professional writer, but also provided support, encouragement as well as critique. Woolf's early short story 'Phyllis and Rosamund' (c. 1906) conveys the importance of the uninhibited nature of Bloomsbury 'talk'. Her female characters, visitors to a Bloomsbury party, are startled yet thrilled by the 'hot and serious' combative debate about art they hear there (*CSF* 24). This open, frank, 'new, but unquestionably genuine' talk is part of a lively atmosphere of 'merrymaking' for the 'feasters' and proves a stark contrast to the staid and conventional conversation that dominates their ordinary lives (*CSF* 25, 26). This (semi-autobiographical) story seems to confirm that for Woolf the transition to membership of this radical group, her proximity to the various feminist societies based in Bloomsbury itself and 'the symbolic power' of independent living in Bloomsbury were felt to be powerfully liberating (Snaith 2000: 29).

Cultural contexts and influences

Woolf's cultural experience was rich and extensive and this can be seen to have informed the development of her literary aesthetics and new modes of representation. Woolf engaged with new developments in technology and critics have explored the ways in

which modern phenomena from the motorcar to the gramophone can open up new avenues for exploring and understanding her work. Significantly, she lived in a period of innovation across the arts and her friendships and associations brought her into contact with a range of new and experimental artistic forms and visual cultures. The influence of painting on her aesthetic and formal development is well documented, particularly the influence of Roger Fry's ideas about Post-Impressionist art and his aesthetic theory of what Clive Bell in *Art* (1914) termed 'significant form' (8). These theories argue that artistic expression should not be mimetic but should find an equivalent in form to convey the sense and emotion of what is represented. In this popular critical art book, Bell explained significant form as the way that art, by certain arrangements of line and colour, can provoke our aesthetic emotions. Fry's formalist exposition on the work of the Post-Impressionists, especially Cezanne, resonates with Woolf's own quest to find new forms of representation. In *Vision and Design*, Fry explains that Post-Impressionists 'do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life' (167). In her biography of Fry, Woolf celebrated his encouragement of pleasure in 'the disinterested life, the life of the spirit ..."all those human faculties and activities which are over and above our mere existence as living organisms"' (1979: 205). Woolf's discussions with and writings about the artist Walter Sickert were also influential, as was the work of Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell. Woolf was inspired by her sister's paintings and influenced by their discussions about art. Bell designed the dust jackets for Woolf's novels, and they worked as co-creators on texts such as 'Kew Gardens' that combined text and woodcut illustrations. See Gillespie (1998) for detailed discussion of the mutual inspiration between them.

There is now a growing body of criticism that focusses on Woolf's interest in and experience of photography and the cinema, interests that grew out of her family experience (Woolf's great-aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, was a renowned photographer) and from her own engagements with visual representation. As a teenager Woolf took and developed her own photographs and 'By the time she entered womanhood... photography was a constant presence in Woolf's life and a constant reflection of her evolving visual consciousness' (Humm 2012: 296). As Maggie Humm suggests, Woolf's experience as a photographer and her knowledge

and understanding of 'photographic techniques, including framing, space and distance, would unconsciously shape her fictional use of frames' (297). Her own photograph albums were arranged with a disregard for chronology and, as with her fiction, the photographic 'narrative' is organized according to other principles (Humm 2012: 296, 298). Photographs also have a key role to play in Woolf's experiments with character and contribute to the ideas about identity, perspective and multiple modes of expression in *Flush*, *Orlando* and *Three Guineas*. Woolf also enjoyed the new developments in, and intellectual debates about, the cinema which flourished in the early decades of the century and which were discussed in specialist periodicals (such as *Close Up*) as well as in reviews in the popular media (Humm 2012: 292–3). Many critics have identified cinematic qualities in Woolf's literary method and the influence of cinema on Woolf's writing was noted by one of her earliest critics and biographers, Winifred Holtby, in *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir* (1932). Holtby devotes a whole chapter to the 'Cinematograph' and considers Woolf's narrative techniques to be cinematic in her early experimental story, 'Kew Gardens', as well as *Jacob's Room*. Woolf viewed 'an eclectic range of films' and was involved, along with other Bloomsbury Group members, with the London Film Society which was formed in 1925 and which screened an 'innovative mixture of avant-garde and popular film' (Humm 2012: 292). In her essay, 'The Cinema' (1926), Woolf outlines what she sees as avant-garde cinema's capabilities in relation to narrative technique and to the representation of psychological states and new ideas about the apprehension of reality (see Chapter Three). As Humm states for Woolf, 'film is a new, dynamic, psychic, and cognitive process' (2012: 294) and informs her literary techniques.

Less frequently discussed is Woolf's fascination with dance (particularly ballet) and music and the influence of these art forms on her writing. Rishona Zimring argues persuasively for the importance of everyday 'social dance' that grew in popularity in Britain in the interwar period (2013: 3). Exploring the representations of dance in Woolf's fiction, she suggests that dance was influential as a means of exploring issues of sociability, identity and connections. She also considers Woolf's response (and that of other Bloomsbury Group members) to the sensational new form of ballet introduced into Britain by Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes.