

Bloomsbury, Modernism, and the Reinvention of Intimacy



JESSE WOLFE

BRIDGE

BLOOMS, MODERNISM,
AND THE QUESTION
OF INTIMACY

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BLOOMSBURY, MODERNISM, AND THE REINVENTION OF INTIMACY

Bloomsbury, Modernism, and the Reinvention of Intimacy integrates studies of six members and associates of the Bloomsbury group into a rich narrative of early-twentieth-century culture, encompassing changes in the demographics of private and public life, and Freudian and sexological assaults on middle-class proprieties. Jesse Wolfe shows how numerous modernist writers felt torn between the inherited institutions of monogamy and marriage and emerging theories of sexuality which challenged Victorian notions of maleness and femaleness. For Wolfe, this ambivalence was a primary source of the Bloomsbury writers' aesthetic strength: Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and others brought the paradoxes of modern intimacy to thrilling life on the page. By combining literary criticism with forays into philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology, and the avant-garde art of Vienna, this book offers a fresh account of the reciprocal relations between culture and society in that key site for literary modernism known as Bloomsbury.

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Introduction: narrating Bloomsbury

Popular and scholarly interests in Bloomsbury have been robust in recent years, with film adaptations of Virginia Woolf's and E. M. Forster's novels, homages by Michael Cunningham and Zadie Smith, biographies of several group members, critical examinations of its literary and philosophical importance, and studies of its role in the history of liberalism, feminism, pacifism, gay liberation, and other aspects of culture and politics.¹ This interest suggests that Bloomsbury illuminates many dimensions of modern life. The current turn in modernist studies – toward examining modernity (a social phenomenon) as the context for modernism (aesthetic responses to this phenomenon) – also suggests that Bloomsbury deserves a central role in the story of literary modernism.

The following six chapters accord Bloomsbury such a role, and explore how early-twentieth-century modernity, with its demographic and intellectual shifts, both inspired and resulted from a reinvention of intimacy that was a primary source of the group's finest work. From the increased frequency of divorce (which seemed ominous at the time, but seems more modest in retrospect), to the emergence of women in higher educational and professional institutions, to the rise of sexology, psychoanalysis, and subcultures – such as Bloomsbury – organized around loves that had dared not speak their name in the nineteenth century, the period that I examine (roughly 1900 to 1930) saw many signs that an old order was crumbling.

The challenges precipitated by these changes were multidimensional. Early-twentieth-century men and women felt themselves to be more courageous than their parents and grandparents in the kinds of intimacies they sought – sexually frank ones with spouses and lovers of the same or opposite sex, emotionally honest ones with friends – and believed nineteenth-century forms of association to be staid and unfeeling. Lytton Strachey accused Victorians in a 1903 letter of living in “the Glass Case Age. Their refusal to face any fundamental question fairly – either about people or God . . . was simply the result of an innate incapacity for penetration . . . It's

damned difficult to copulate through a glass case.”² In his disdain for his predecessors, Strachey expresses a value that Bloomsburians share with early-twenty-first-century men and women: their sense that the burden of a meaningfully lived life falls largely on its romantic and sexual partnerships. Because moderns felt their milieu in transformation, they were compelled to redefine, rather than inherit, their roles as friends, lovers, and spouses. This predicament at once threatened the stability of such relationships and held the promise that they could be deeply fulfilling.

This challenge both to forge intimacies and to figure out *on what grounds* to do so provoked theoretical questions – *What are men and women like?* – and practical ones – *What models of intimacy shall we advocate*, both in life and in literature? Regarding men’s and women’s natures, are the two sexes fundamentally alike or different? What place does sexual desire – including that for their own sex – occupy in their hierarchy of needs? Are male and female desires products of nature or culture, and if the latter, what kinds of desires are produced, satisfied, and frustrated by various epochs, including the Victorian and modern ones? Regarding models of intimacy, shall our attachments be sexual, platonic, or both? If sexual, erotic or agapic? Exclusive or polyamorous? Shall they assume marital, non-marital, or extra-marital forms? Shall they be exclusively heterosexual? Each text in this study gives answers to these two genres of questions that stand in productive tension with each other. The dual shapes of this tension – anti-essentialist accommodations to, and essentialist rejections of, such pillars of the Victorian middle-class social order as marriage and monogamy – will be my primary thematic foci. In close readings of works by three writers who were central to Bloomsbury – G. E. Moore’s philosophical treatise, *Principia Ethica* (1903), Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), and Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) – and works by three writers within the group’s orbit – Sigmund Freud’s *Dora* (1905), D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1920), and Vita Sackville-West’s *All Passion Spent* (1931) – I will discuss how the new century’s transformed landscape of intimacy inspired, and was in turn enriched by, their ambivalent reactions to Victorian precedents, and how their ambivalence was one of their defining aesthetic strengths.

The form and style of these six works mold their treatments of intimacy, making them valuable illustrations of how moderns respond to Victorian precedent at once in philosophical and formal ways. Freud’s and Woolf’s texts are the most aesthetically radical, with his genre blending and her use of post-realist techniques such as free indirect style. Sackville-West’s novel is the most aesthetically conservative: though an homage to *Mrs Dalloway*, it eschews Woolf’s experimental methods. The other two novels occupy

formal and stylistic middle grounds between Victorian realism and modernist experimentation. I will explore how the stylistic choices of all six works open up and close off opportunities for posing questions about modern intimacy.

While Bloomsburians did not employ the terms “essentialist” and “anti-essentialist,” they did think through the ideas captured by these terms. Their Cambridge colleague Ludwig Wittgenstein codified what anti-essentialist thinking entails with regard to such concepts as “games,”³ while Woolf put anti-essentialist principles to work in examining more existentially pressing concepts such as “femaleness.” *Bloomsbury, Modernism, and the Reinvention of Intimacy* performs an “archaeological” study – to adapt a term from Foucault – of what “intimacy” meant to a diverse group of influential thinkers in the early twentieth century. Uncovering a layer of textual artifacts roughly a century old, we find that modernists’ notions about healthy intimacy were not monolithic, but nonetheless the questions they asked share enough family resemblances to distinguish their quandaries from those of the Victorians, and also to distinguish them from our own.

As much as any twentieth-century movement, literary Bloomsbury made intimacy central to its work, interrogating its meaning and imagining models – both positive and negative – of intimate relations. Modernism is frequently associated with newness of various kinds, including a turn toward subjectivity, away from Victorian realism.⁴ For Bloomsbury and its satellites, an examination of inwardness means an examination of intimacy: they bring to life the ways in which inwardness is not manifested *in vacuo*. In focusing on Bloomsburians’ social approaches to subjectivity, in the context of couples, families, and friendships, this study sketches possible terrain for “New Modernisms,” a scholarly movement which explores connections between modernist inwardness – so crucial to modernist newness – and the larger culture.⁵

Newness, then – new ideas and new ways of expressing them – will be a recurring motif through these six chapters. But although the years 1900 to 1930 witnessed the social transformations mentioned above, they also confirmed the durability of marriage as a social norm. They lie at the heart of what marriage historian John Gillis terms the “era of mandatory marriage,”⁶ between 1850 and 1960. The 2001 British census attests to the distinctness of this era in its commentary on the “declining” percentage “of married couples in the population” beginning in the 1970s (see Tables 1–2 in Appendix).

Standing as we do on the far shore of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, after which being single (for example) is less stigmatized than it

used to be, we have a critical distance on Bloomsburians' predicaments. What can appear to our hindsight as an ongoing challenge – a debate about love and marriage spanning the Victorian and modern eras – often appeared to moderns as a crisis of intimacy, a sharp feeling of alienation from Victorian mores. Hence Lawrence says in the Foreword to *Women in Love* that “we are now in a period of crisis” – a period in which old ways of feeling (such as those excoriated by Strachey) were dying, and new ones were struggling for expression. He even begs excuse for the repetitive qualities of his novel, claiming that they capture this process of coming-into-expression. Woolf made a similarly sweeping claim about history, psychology, and the power of art – albeit in the guise of an aperçu – when, alluding to Roger Fry's Postimpressionist exhibition, she said that “on or about December 1910, human character changed.”⁷ And subsequent commentators concur with Lawrence's sense that modern thinkers were “smashing the frame,”⁸ that their aesthetic experiments constituted a “cataclysmic upheaval,” a “fundamental convulsion.”⁹

But moderns had complex feelings about their relation to their parents' culture. Notwithstanding their revolutionary claims, they also saw themselves in more modest ways. “I belong to the fag-end of Victorian liberalism,” Forster said.¹⁰ Demonstrating his flair for the illuminating paradox, Strachey says that moderns “know too much” about the Victorian age to write a history of it, and lack the “requisite . . . ignorance, which simplifies and clarifies.”¹¹ And Woolf wrestled with her connections to her mother's generation as much as she marked her distance from it. Little wonder, then, that recent scholars on modernism and Bloomsbury have focused more on continuities than on ruptures between the Victorian and modern eras.¹²

This study weighs claims of “crisis” such as Lawrence's against those of belatedness such as Forster's, but it also opens beyond the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition to seeing the reinvention of intimacy in its late- and post-Victorian aspects, I follow the sociologist Anthony Giddens in viewing it through a wider lens, as part of a post-Enlightenment project of making equality and freedom (for men and women with opposite- and same-sex desires) into realities of daily, domestic life, not just of a male-dominated public sphere.

With this broader narrative in mind, notwithstanding the continuities in Western life since the French and American revolutions, my choice of 1900 to 1930 as a period of focus supports modernists' claims of their differences from Victorians: it suggests that the early twentieth century witnessed a renaissance of intimacies, a renewal of the radical promises of freedom and equality, after the pendulum had swung, through much of the nineteenth

century, toward a model of stability and separate spheres. World War One falls in the middle, not at the beginning nor end, of these three decades; thus they open onto a cultural stage where domestic dramas, rather than geopolitical ones, can assume starring roles. Scholarship has long recognized connections between the war's cataclysms and the formal bravado of works such as *Guernica* and *The Waste Land*.¹³ But the reinvention of intimacy helps to explain how avant-gardism was equally inspired by disorientation and ambivalence on the battlefields of familial love and friendship.

THE MODERN MIDDLE CLASS AND BLOOMSBURY'S AMBIVALENCE

The "crisis" so named by Lawrence did not exist merely in his passionate, nor Woolf's exquisite, imagination. It was acted out through massive demographic and conceptual changes, some gradual and others more sudden, centered in the middle classes but affecting all of society, as Britain, Europe, and the United States entered the twentieth century. Moderns continued several Victorian trends, including those of urbanizing and suburbanizing England. Eight years before the Queen's death, for example, in 1893 the 14-year-old Forster moved with his mother to Tunbridge Wells. This town's population has kept pace with the expanding national population for the last two centuries. Thirteen years after Victoria's passing, in 1914 the 32-year-old Woolf moved with her husband to Richmond. Like other suburbs in Greater London and elsewhere in Britain, Richmond grew more rapidly than the nation in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as the capital overflowed its boundaries, its population soaring from 950,000 in 1800 to 6 million in 1900. As they transported the matrimonial "mandate" into such crowded environs, modern couples altered the nature of wedded life. They blurred Victorian "spheres," negotiated the limits of female emancipation, and increasingly saw marriage in terms of equality and companionship, in contrast to their parents and grandparents. They differed from their ancestors also in more frequently owning their own residences. They formed small nuclear families, as opposed to Victorian families with multiple domestics and children. While not eager to forgo the convenience and prestige of domestic service, after World War One many households employed only one servant, and no "resident," or live-in, domestics. The latter were replaced by workers including charwomen, hired to perform discrete tasks, such as carpet cleaning, to whom home owners related on a contractual, rather than master-servant, basis (see Tables 3-9 in Appendix). With the "turning

inward”¹⁴ of these smaller, more atomized domestic societies, moderns could not only seek companionship, alone together as a family, but they could also indulge more frequently in independent thought and activity. Because new opportunities engender new expectations, and because high expectations can lead to disappointment, the specter of divorce haunted some modern households.

By today’s standards, though, moderns’ divorce rates were modest. It was within the context of mandatory (and usually lifelong) marriages that they fashioned new selves. The newfound spaciousness of rooms of their own, an increasingly feminized professional sphere, and the influence of sexology and Freudianism led some to develop anti-essentialist attitudes toward sexuality and selfhood. They doubted, for example, that all women share an essential nature that distinguishes them from men. Such doubts hastened the erosion of strict “masculine” and “feminine” roles in households and in society: demographic realities and anti-essentialist interpretations of them reinforced one another in a feedback loop.¹⁵

Their skepticism also made some moderns anti-foundationalists regarding institutions such as marriage, which they did not see as rooted in natural necessity or divine will, but instead viewed as a social creation, subject (perhaps) to reform. These anti-foundational sensibilities contained the seeds of revolutionary social attitudes.

In some of Bloomsbury’s profoundest writings, however, these seeds did not flower into thorough rejections of the middle-class social order, but rather into critiques that balance a sense of belonging and not belonging to society, of loyalty and disloyalty to its dominant values. These writings, influential from their time through today, illustrate how reformist ideas can be as efficacious as revolutionary ones: the kinds of men and women who inhabited the roles of “husband,” “wife,” and “friend” in 1930 differed greatly from those in 1880. Moore, Freud, Lawrence, and Woolf both record and contribute to these evolutionary changes in the history of gender as they articulate four varieties of *anti-essentialist accommodations*. Though they doubt Victorian theories of “masculine” and “feminine” essences, they largely share Victorians’ faith in the practical value of marriage.

Conversely, novels by Forster and Sackville-West articulate *essentialist rejections*. They largely reproduce Victorian treatments of gender, choosing not fully to explore the psychological and moral potential of an “intermediate sex,” though characters in each novel provide them opportunities to do so. Such philosophical conservatism might seem to fit logically with a conservative defense of marriage on a “separate-spheres” model. Strangely, though, these two novels reject such marriages as prisons for women.

Each of these two groups of Bloomsburian texts is conceptually self-divided, and in each text the divisions play out in unique ways. But conceptual self-divisions are not necessarily drawbacks: more often than not, these works' internal tensions are sources of aesthetic strength, means to capture the complexity of intimacy as it is simultaneously dreamed of, logically analyzed, and actually experienced. I explore the aesthetic value of Bloomsbury's ambivalence by interweaving analyses of these six works and of other Victorian and modern discourses about sexuality and love. These non-Bloomsburian works often achieve rhetorical potency by articulating a tight fit between their ideas about sexual selfhood on the one hand, and about a good society or a healthy intimacy on the other hand. The contrast between their tight fits and Bloomsburians' ambivalences underscores both the productively disoriented – i.e., modern – nature of Bloomsburians' thought, and the avant-garde aesthetic strategies of Bloomsburian texts – from free indirect style to open endings – so useful for registering paradox and uncertainty.

THE VICTORIAN RIGHT, THE MODERN LEFT, AND THE VALUE OF AMBIVALENCE AS AN AESTHETIC TOOL

Conservative nineteenth-century authors, by contrast to Bloomsbury, conveyed no sense of confusion or crisis in their parallel answers to questions about sexual selfhood and good societies. Such thinkers held, first of all, that the sexes are innately distinct. Nature, and perhaps God – not mere social constructs – account for differences between masculinity and femininity, they believed. These attitudes were as often implicit in Victorian texts as they were carefully spelled out. Second, conservative attitudes toward marriage held that separate male and female “spheres” reflect a natural plan and afford the sexes their best route to shared happiness. Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*, a celebration of marriage for love's sake published in four volumes between 1854 and 1862, is a paradigmatic expression of these attitudes, and thus a useful foil for Woolf in her essay “Professions for women,”¹⁶ to which the poem owes its place in the cultural canon. The poem expresses in a literary form a sexual ideology that many of Patmore's contemporaries propounded in magazine articles, newspaper editorials, and essays. Mary Poovey ably delineates this discourse that combines such elements as a conservative view of marriage, essentialist ideas of maleness and femaleness, religious symbolism, and national pride.

Even at the time of the poem's publication, but especially in the new century, this network of ideas about marriage, gender, and Britishness was

challenged by an array of feminists and other social critics from what can broadly be called the left. Like many fictional and non-fictional socialist works, Cicely Hamilton's 1909 *Marriage as a Trade* depicted marriage in economic terms – the kind of rhetoric that raised Lawrence's ire – with the aim of exposing its injustice to women. Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* likens nineteenth-century marriage not just to any trade, but to prostitution; other texts reiterate the idea that middle-class women prostitute themselves in legal and “respectable” ways when they trade their bodies to their husbands in exchange for comfort and security. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* employs an arguably bleaker trope, likening marriage to a prison.

Other feminist texts, rather than condemning present-day (or Victorian) marriages, articulate their hopes for the happiness the institution can bring to both sexes. Marie Stopes's 1918 sex manual *Married Love* champions female sexual desire – in contrast to Patmore's association of Vaughan's Wife with spiritual purity – seeing such desire, in the spirit of current science and psychology, as coincident with ovulation, and insisting that marriage should be a partnership of equals. (*Married Love* was banned as obscene by the US Customs Service until 1931, when Judge John Woolsey – who would do the same two years later for James Joyce's *Ulysses* – lifted the ban.) Stopes also edited the journal *Birth Control News* (founded by the American Margaret Sanger), which provided anatomically exact advice; and in 1921 Stopes founded the United Kingdom's first family-planning clinic. In the 1910s and 1920s the birth-control movement succeeded in disseminating contraceptive knowledge especially among the educated classes, and in the 1930s it did so increasingly with the working class as well (see Table 10 of Appendix). Birth rates fell, until war-related fertility concerns led them to rise again after 1941.¹⁷

Stopes's career was mirrored in the United States by Sanger, whose 1926 *Happiness in Marriage* also celebrated physical passion (Stopes suspected Sanger of stealing her premise). Sanger established the United States' first legal birth-control clinic with the help of her sister, and founded the American Birth Control League, which became Planned Parenthood. Her commitment to sexual emancipation led her to edit a 1928 volume entitled *Motherhood in Bondage*, made up of correspondence from women across America begging for birth-control options, and later to help smuggle contraceptives (then illegal) into the country.

Such non-literary activists as Stopes and Sanger provide limit cases of how thinkers of the twentieth-century left, enlivened by an Enlightenment tradition of scientifically informed social radicalism, could approach questions of sexual selfhood and love – much as Patmore is illustrative of the

Victorian right. For Stopes and Sanger, the two sexes are (at least at their best) rational, freedom-loving, pleasure-seeking, and equal. They believed that, given everything that men and women have in common, heterosexual intimacies thrive on mutual respect and physical attraction. Each believed that men and women, unfettered by religious taboos, should be free to control their sex lives, with the help of scientific knowledge and contraceptive technology. While it was not the business of *Howards End*, *Women in Love*, or *Mrs Dalloway* to expound on such topical issues as birth control, nor to prescribe how “married love” should work, such socially engaged polemics were by no means absent from the many works of Bloomsbury and its satellites. Bertrand Russell, for example, echoes many aspects of these two feminists’ attacks on nineteenth-century sexual taboos and chauvinism.

In a series of articles, books, and debates over several decades, Russell variously broached the questions *What are men and women like?* and *How can happy marriages be sustained?* In the spirit of Voltaire and the Enlightenment, he argued against superstition and religion as reliable routes to happiness; largely sympathetic with psychoanalytic thought (though without its interest in polymorphous perversity), he echoed Freud’s opposition to Victorian prudery, treating sexual desire as natural, even while aiming to assign it a proper (not excessive) value in a hierarchy of human needs.

His polemics were consistently informed by his sense of historical transformations whose unsettling and potentially liberating influences were conditions of modern family life, including the rearing of children. A 1916 article entitled “Marriage and the population question”¹⁸ sees an “extraordinary change” taking place, with patriarchal authority breaking down, though reason and equality are not yet enshrined in its place. He wonders how marriage affects spouses’ characters, confident that the Victorians’ separate spheres had arrested (and continue to hinder) both sexes’ development. He is sympathetic to modern women’s decreased desire for children, but suggests that collateral damage could result from the push toward equality and the “individuality which springs inevitably from mental progress.”¹⁹ One danger with equal marriage is that couples may rely too heavily on their love for one another (what Birkin in *Women in Love* calls “egoïsme à deux”),²⁰ compromising their liberty and happiness, their ability to find pleasure in extra-marital friendships and activities.

Despite his concern for the possible collateral effects of modern morals, though, Russell advocated tirelessly for people’s freedom to pursue happiness in what he saw as reasonable ways. His 1927 *New Republic* article entitled “Education without sex taboos”²¹ examines free love, seeing infidelity as a fact