



WHAT WAS VIRGINIA WOOLF AFRAID OF? A NEW PERSPECTIVE

*“If anybody could have saved me it would have been you.
Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness.
I can’t go on spoiling your life any longer.
I don’t think two people could have been happier than we have been”*
From Virginia Woolf’s suicide letter to Leonard Woolf

On the 28th March 1941, with her overcoat pockets full of stones, Virginia Woolf walked slowly and deliberately into the River Ouse.

“Like a long wave, like a roll of heavy water, he went over me, his devastating presence dragging me open, laying bare the pebbles on the shore of my soul.”

The Waves

This new documentary explores the life of the writer Virginia Woolf. It starts with her suicide. Her husband Leonard Woolf eventually realises what has happened, though her body was not found until the 18th April. Leonard Woolf had effectively kept his wife alive throughout their marriage supporting and encouraging her through her numerous dark times and breakdowns.

Drawing upon key biographers, literary critics and psychologists, the programme seeks to understand a remarkable but deeply troubled and disturbed life. Virginia Woolf had started life with the same darkness that was to haunt her throughout her life. She was allegedly abused as a child by her much older half-brother Gerald Duckworth. Her mother died when she was only 13 and this led to her first of many mental issues and nervous breakdowns.

“Let us never cease from thinking – what is this ‘civilisation’ in which we find ourselves?”

Virginia Stephen was born in London 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, first editor of the Dictionary of National Biography, and his second wife, Julia Stephen. She was surrounded by an extended family that was so well-connected that she met virtually all the great figures of the time. Her sister was the painter Vanessa Bell.

From 1915, when she published her first novel *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf maintaining an astonishing output of fiction, literary criticism, essays, letters, diaries and biography. In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf, and in 1917 they founded the Hogarth Press. She was a founder member and at the centre of what was to become the Bloomsbury Group.

*“If I live. I mean I think I am about to embody, at last, the exact shapes my brain holds. What a long toil to reach this beginning – if *The Waves* is my first work in my own style!”*

Virginia’s parents disapproved of formal education for girls. She and her sister Vanessa were home schooled. However, writing was considered a respectable profession for women and her father encouraged her to read. At the age of 15 she was allowed to study at the Ladies Department of Kings College, London. However, she always felt deep resentment of her brothers who had gone to Cambridge.

Virginia was deeply ambivalent towards her parents and knew this through both reading and publishing the works of Sigmund Freud with her husband Leonard Woolf. She experienced powerfully the death of her mother and suffered sometimes from the dominance of her father.

“In me, rage alternated with love. It was only the other day when I read Freud for the first time, that I discovered that this violently disturbing conflict of love and hate is a common feeling; and it is called ambivalence.”

Virginia Woolf deeply disliked what she regarded as the cruel male-dominated world and the complacent and harsh attitudes associated with it, made explicit she believed in the death and destruction of the First World War. She was distinctively preoccupied with self-awareness. She focused on her own sense experience and how sense experience could be portrayed. She also loved landscape, particularly the Sussex Downs.

The programme draws out the remarkable character and commitment of her husband Leonard Woolf, who was distinguished in his own right and the guardian of Virginia Woolf’s life during their marriage. It explores Virginia Woolf’s overwhelming desire for individuality with its lesbian affairs, most notably with Vita Sackville-West; her mix of snobbery and anti-Semitism with radicalism; and her eventual suicide, when she feared that she would be unable to manage her incipient move towards forms of unbearable insanity.

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