

# Virginia Woolf and Stream-of-Consciousness Form of Writing (Nonfiction/Fiction)

*Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)*

- Born in 1882 in Kensington, London, England, one of the most significant, pioneering authors of her times (early twentieth century) and also a significant literary voice throughout literary history.
- One of the most innovative, experimental voices in the history of writing prose (fiction/nonfiction) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—a prolific literary figure in nonfiction (essays, diaries, letters and biographies)
- *Style and theme/subject matter in Woolf's works:*

Woolf's work captures the fast-changing world in which she was working (the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, fast transforming into the dynamics of today's world—the first seeds of modernism had been sown by then)

## *Themes:*

From transformations in gender roles, sexuality and class to technologies such as cars, airplanes and cinema.

## *Woolf's influences:*

Influenced by seminal writers and artists of the period such as Marcel Proust, Igor Stravinsky and the Post-Impressionists, Woolf's work explores the key motifs of modernism.

She explored in her writing:

Themes related to the subconscious, themes related to time, perception, the city and the impact of war.

Her 'stream of consciousness' technique enabled her to portray the interior lives of her characters and to depict the montage-like imprint of memory.

*Notable Novels:*

Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, Orlando (Fiction)

The Death of The Moth and Other Essays, A Room of One's Own—an important feminist text (Nonfiction/essays)

**Important Resource:**

<https://www.bl.uk/people/virginia-woolf>

*Woolf's contemporary authors:*

James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein (Stream-of-consciousness writers whose pieces reflected the rich inner life of their subjects)

**A famous quote by Virginia Woolf:**

*The question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography – the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious*

**Published in 'The Art of Biography' (1939)**

**\*\*Speaks about the worth of documenting all our inner lives, our emotional, spiritual journeys (the question about the quintessential essence of memoir/biography)**

## ***Woolf, the Feminist & the Humanist:***

### *Notable works:*

Woolf wrote polemical works about the position of women in society, such as [\*A Room of One's Own\*](#) (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). In *Flush* (1933) she wrote of the life of the spaniel owned by the poet [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#), in *Orlando* (1928), she fictionalised the life of her friend Vita Sackville-West into that of a man-woman, born in the Renaissance but surviving till the present day.

Besides her writing, Woolf had a considerable impact on the cultural life around her. The publishing house she ran with her husband Leonard Woolf, the Hogarth Press, was originally established in Richmond and then in London's Bloomsbury, an area after which the 'Bloomsbury Set' of artists, writers and intellectuals is named. Woolf's house was a hub for some of the most interesting cultural activity of the time, and Hogarth Press publications included books by writers such as [T S Eliot](#), Sigmund Freud, [Katherine Mansfield](#), [E M Forster](#), and the Woolf's themselves.

### **Did Woolf herself think she was a feminist?**

Woolf herself did not consistently identify as a feminist. The word "feminist," for example, shows up infrequently in her private and public writing but it does appear just often enough to indicate her complicated and changeable attitudes about identifying as one.

However, her quotes when collected, shows strong promise and credibility as a feminist scholar when women's liberation had not even ushered fully in the west.

*A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.*

*From 'A Room of One's Own' (collection of her essays)*

*For most of history, Anonymous was a woman.*

*As a woman I have no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.*

*The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself.*

*Style, voice, narration/storytelling:*

*Before Virginia started writing, her predecessors gave greater emphasis to PLOT/Storyline*

*Virginia's writing: characterized by*

**REPETITION OF IMAGES**

*The exploration of TIME, MEMORY, ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS*

*The establishment of her SENSE OF IDENTITY through her essays, letters, biographies*

*Her literary legacy:*

*Her style/voice in the 'stream-of-consciousness' genre of writing, or in other words, 'interior monologue', where she tries to express the multiple layers of thoughts running through the mind at the same time, concentrated on a particular subject.*

*Great example: Death of the Moth*

*A Room of One's Own*

**References:**

<https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/virginia-woolf-amazing-facts-on-feminist-literary-critic-1153835-2018-01-25>

**Mental Illness and Death:**

**Reference:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia\\_Woolf#Mental\\_health](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_Woolf#Mental_health)

**More resources:**

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-37018>

**Virginia Woolf-Women Writers: Voices in Transition (OpenLearn from the Open)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snpEICZii84>

**Virginia Woolf Documentary:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Hnlsh8WyPE>

**Why should you read Virginia Woolf? - Iseult Gillespie**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcMLkce\\_BLg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcMLkce_BLg)

## **The Death of the Moth: Analysis**

**Prominent, recurrent image/metaphor:**

**The imagery of death**

- **By exemplifying the physical struggling of the moth, Woolf presents the dual images of death pitted against life through the literary style of the ‘stream-of-consciousness’**

- Physical description of the moth in terms of her intimate physical surroundings—

- Vivid details:

*‘a moth that flies by the day’,*

*‘hybrid creature, neither gay like the butterflies nor somber like their own specimen’,*

*‘his narrow hay-colored wings, fringed with a tassel of the same color’*

*Vivid description/imagery of nature-*

*The vigor/festivity of the rolling fields and the plough scoring the field—*

*‘The earth was pressed flat and gleamed with moisture...The rooks soaring around the tree tops which looked like a vast net with thousands of black knots in it’—imagery of the vigor and vitality of raw, elemental life and energy.*

*“The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various...”*

*“a moth’s part in it appeared a hard fate’....through this depiction, she wants to convey that the moth’s continuous struggle to survive is in contrast to the energy and vigor of life outside the window of her house*

*Juxtaposition: Her Microcosm (her home and window, the position of the moth) v/s her macrocosm (the enormous energy of the physical world outside that she sees).*

### ***The imagery of the moth/central subject:***

*The moth fluttering from one side of the window pane to the other exhibits the same energy and vigor of life.*

*His opportunities in life might be meager, but he is enjoying them with full zest, and Woolf things that it’s a pathetic pursuit.*

*The vulnerability of the creature is juxtaposed with its iron determination in spite of its meager stature*

*Depicted in these lines:*

*“...he was so small, so simple a form of energy” that defined both the outside world and the author’s own mental world, which she illustrates, as both ‘marvelous’ as well as ‘pathetic’.*

***The 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the essay:***

**Woolf illustrates the moth’s gradual surrendering to death—**

**“...trying to resume his dancing, but seemed either so stiff or awkward that he could flutter to the bottom of the window pane; when he tried to fly across it, he failed...**

**After seventh attempt, he slipped from the wooden ledge and fell, fluttering his wings, onto his back at the windowsill.”**

**The moth’s helplessness arouses pity in Woolf...she realizes the failure and awkwardness in the moth—the symbolism of death.**

**She watches intently “the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom”—She herself is submerged in the invincible power of death and its inevitability.**

**Again, in contrast to the magnitude and power of death, she sees life as ‘a pure bead.’**

**In death’s arm, she sees the moth that “lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed.”**

**Symbolism in this part:**

**The moth decides to rest and then tries again, fails multiple times, finally dying.**

**While observing the spectacle of this insignificant creature's death, Woolf realizes that death/the end of existence is inevitable, there's no point in trying to stop the death of a moth—death is unavoidable. No matter how long we try to prolong life/resist death, death will always swing its fatal strike.**

**Inherent reality: Even in the moth's death, Woolf is able to appreciate the beauty of the situation.**

**With the death, Woolf sees the moth in a new light—**

**She realizes that the moth is indeed not an insignificant creature in demand of pity, but a creature of the world, a pure being defined by the gift of life and death.**

**The day moth may apparently seem a dull, gray creature, a lowly creature, often despised, but the 'bead of life' was evident in the moth, his fluttering, flying from one end of the windowpane to another.**

**He was intent on a cause, willing to 'dance', even though he may show himself to be futile in the end, he had a cause for living and passion to fight which touched Woolf.**

## **Initial feelings evoked in Woolf:**

**'queer feeling of pity' at his helplessness—but then his valiant battle/ struggle against death's grip opens Woolf's eyes to the beauty of the moth, to the beauty of the struggle.**

**Through his dancing/fluttering of wings, the moth doesn't allow the pane of the glass to separate him from his ideal world—does everything to prevent the pane of the glass to manipulate his life.**

## **What attracted Woolf towards the moth?**

**The sense of purpose of the creature, his simple form of living in whichever way he could seemed admirable to her. She lifts a pencil to help the moth when he fails to dance, but then she realizes she must withdraw—because the moth's beauty lies in his struggle towards achieving success.**

## **The metaphor/image of the moth:**

- **The moth's struggle and final surrendering to death—an enduring metaphor of our own struggle.**
- **The window—depiction of our boundaries we all recognize...the moth, unlike us knows no boundaries, no self-limitation, doesn't see the boundaries of the window.**
- **He is willing to fight, keep pressing on towards his goal, towards his freedom.**
- **The simplicity of his fight, the purity of his struggle moves Woolf as he seems willing to fight/dance in the face of his inevitable death, and Woolf becomes drawn towards him. Though he knows he has no power/control over death, he never gives up.**

## **Finale:**

**Last line: “Oh yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am...” depicts Woolf's final acknowledgement that the moth stands up against the inevitable phenomenon of death and exerts: “so great a force.”**

**The creature's ability to overcome his fear of death is the abiding image of the piece. Woolf, the narrator of the essay learns not to ‘pity’ the ‘insignificant’ moth, but to admire his simple existence and courage to dance upon the windowpane that brings his death.**

**Characteristic emotions:**

**Empathy, Pathos, Discomfort and finally, the sense of attaining catharsis**

**Film based on the theme of Death of the Moth:**

**[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTbnOLII\\_2M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTbnOLII_2M)**

**Annie Dillard's explanation/analysis of Death of the Moth:**

**[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6jgVa\\_W7ng](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6jgVa_W7ng)**