



Women Writers: Voices in Transition

Virginia Woolf

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"I first discovered Virginia Woolf as a student. I found the text completely baffling. I think I'd opened *"Mrs Dalloway"* expecting a story, and what I got was a flow of ideas and memories. When I began to understand what Woolf was trying to achieve in her writing it made me rethink how memories from childhood, inconsequential moments, have actually come to be the basis of my own identity. There is always the desire to make fleeting moments something permanent and that's what she does in her patterning, in the structure of her work and the repetition of images. The writing, once you've stopped looking for a story, is stunning.

She felt that people who were writing fiction before she did were more interested in plot. She was interested in time, memory, association of ideas, and how any one character in her fictional writing, in her biographies, and indeed we her readers – how any of those establish a sense of identity.

I think her greatest legacy to other writers has been her development of what's often called stream of consciousness, what I prefer to call interior monologue, where she tries to express the multiple layers of thought that are going on in all of our heads all of the time.

Woolf thought of herself as an outsider in the world of education and writing. In her long essay, *"A Room of One's Own"*, she describes how she's shut out of the University library because she is a woman. She decides that the fact that women are locked out of these privileges could be turned to their advantage. If you're locked out – you have much more freedom.

This is a passage from Woolf's essay *"Sketch of the Past"*. It's a memoir which she wrote very close to the end of her life, and I think it's characteristic of the way that she writes and the way that memory helps to establish identity.

"If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach."

Woolf's achievements, I think, lie in her ability to take risks, experiment with form, and with subject matter. Five words to sum her up? Questioning. Searching. Fragments. Patterns. Unity."