

GENERAL BACKGROUND

I. BIOGRAPHICAL LANDMARKS

Read the seven major items relating to the life of Virginia Woolf while trying to memorize the main information.

1. An extended family

25 January 1882: Adeline Virginia Woolf (née Stephen) was born, the third child and second daughter of Leslie and Julia Stephen.

- **Leslie Stephen** (1832-1904)

Critic, biographer (first editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*), essayist and 'man of letters', he was professionally committed to writing as a member of the late Victorian upper middle class English intelligentsia. Among the many visitors to the household were a number of artists, poets and writers: Henry James (1843-1916, US born English novelist, short story writer and critic), George Eliot (pen name of Mary Ann Evans, 1819-1880, English novelist noted for her analysis of provincial Victorian society), George Meredith (1828-1909, English novelist and poet), and James Russell Lowell (1819-1891, US poet, essayist and diplomat) who became Virginia's godfather (*parrain*). Together with a great concourse (*multitude*) of visiting aunts, uncles and cousins, the family included a fairly large number of children as Leslie and his wife Julia had both been married before.

✓ Leslie Stephen's first wife, **Harriet Marian** a.k.a. 'Minnie', was the eldest daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863, English novelist).

She died in 1875, leaving a daughter, **Laura** Makepeace Stephen (1870-1945), who was mentally deficient and spent most of her life in institutions. Minny's sister, Anne ('Aunt Anny'), a novelist, was a great help in the Stephen household.

✓ Leslie Stephen's second wife, Mrs **Julia Princep Duckworth**, née Jackson, (1846-1895), a close friend of the Thackeray sisters, was a widow with three Duckworth children:

- **George** (1868-1934)

- **Stella** (1869-1897): she looked after the family when her mother died, until she got married.

- **Gerald** (1870-1937): he was to become a publisher later on. After becoming Leslie's confidante and consoler, Julia married him in 1878. Within the next five years they had four children:
- **Vanessa**, 'Nessa' (1879-1961): she later became a painter.
- **Thoby** (1880-1906): he had been a student at Cambridge before he died.
- **Virginia** (1882-1941), the author
- **Adrian** (1883-1948): he became a psychoanalyst.

Julia was descended from an attendant (*domestique*) of Marie Antoinette (18th century queen of France), and came from an aristocratic family of **renowned 'beauties'**, among whom her mother Maria, one of the seven Pattle sisters, famous models for **the Preraphaelite artists**¹ and early photographers in mid-Victorian London society.

2. Education

Virginia grew up in a family background in which there were two competing traditions: one of beauty (on her mother's side) and the other of talent. Thanks to her father who owned (*possédait*) **an immense library** (*bibliothèque*) at **22 Hyde Park Gate**, the family home near Kensington, London, she could quench (*étancher*) her thirst for **reading**, all the more so since (*d'autant plus que*) her father was very much impressed by her **intelligence** and **quick-wittedness** (*vivacité d'esprit*). She soon availed herself of (*tira parti de*) her free handling of books of **English literature**, which widely contributed to her formation as a writer. It was also in the library that Virginia was taught **the classics** and was given private lessons in Latin and Greek. However, she resented being restricted to learning at home (as was suitable for a girl in the late Victorian days!) while her elder brother, Thoby, was enjoying a costly education at Cambridge. However, at an early age, she and her brother had started **a hand-written periodical** between them, the *Hyde Park Gate News*, whose writing could easily be ascribed to Virginia, as Thoby was at school most of the time. It might be tempting to consider this early 'literary' activity as the seed (*graine*) of Virginia's lifelong creative writing.

1. **The Preraphaelite artists**: members of an association of painters founded to combat conventionalism, and revive the fidelity to nature and the realistic colour that they considered typical of Italian painting before Raphael (1483-1520, painter and architect, one of the greatest artists of the High Renaissance).

As for her **powerful imagination**, the **holidays** the whole family spent in their house at St Ives, **in Cornwall**, turned out to be long-lived experiences. What with boating, fishing, watching the passing ships in the Portsminster Bay, admiring the view with the Godrevy Lighthouse (*phare*) nearby, playing cricket or trapping moths (*phalènes*) at night, these were so many memories that would be transmuted later into the writer's fiction.

3. Damaging events

April 1895: Julia Stephen died, which caused **Virginia's first nervous breakdown** (*dépression*) a month later. For her, her mother's death was "the greatest disaster that could happen", since they had been very close to each other. Virginia once depicted her as "the Angel in the very centre of that Great Cathedral space which was childhood". As a matter of fact, she had long been 'haunted' by her mother whose 'invisible presence' she often felt.

The effect of his wife's death on Sir Leslie was appalling (*effroyable*): he became gloomy (*maussade*), querulous (*bougon*) and demanding (*exigeant*), often upbraiding (*réprimandant*) the children over trifles (*vétilles*).

July 1897: Virginia's half-sister Stella died in the course of an operation, after being taken ill on her return from her honeymoon in Italy.

During the next seven years, life at home was very difficult for a highly strung (*nerveuse*, *tendue*) girl like Virginia, on account of her father's recurrent complaints and grumpy (*grincheux*) mood. It was then that she started keeping **a diary** (*journal intime*) to give vent to (*donner libre cours à*) her thoughts, emotions and feelings.

Feb. 1904: Sir Leslie died of cancer, which had a far more damaging effect on Virginia: in May, she had **her second serious breakdown**, verging on madness. She even attempted to commit suicide by throwing herself out of a window, although she was attended by three nurses (who actually embodied evil in her mind). She was then briefly sent to an institution.

Other depressive periods were induced by the **sexual abuse** she and Vanessa were subjected to by their half-brothers George and Gerald, and which had a long-term impact on her life and work.

Her deep, most certainly congenital, '**manic-depressive' condition** and 'mood swings' (*sautes d'humeur*) would plague (*harcelaient*) her more or less severely throughout her life, at times affecting her social functioning, or colouring her work to some extent, but fortunately leaving her literary skills intact.

4. The Bloomsbury years

Some time after their father's death, the four Stephen grown-up children decided to leave the gloomy (*lugubre*) family home and move away into a large house north of the British Museum, **No. 46 Gordon Square**, in Bloomsbury. **Thoby**, now reading for the Bar (*qui étudiait le droit*), made the house a meeting-place for discussions, on Thursday evenings, about art, literature, politics, sex and other subjects. The nucleus of this intellectual circle, which was to be known as '**the Bloomsbury Group**', was influenced by the philosophy and ethics of **G. E. Moore** (1873-1958), and included Thoby himself, his two sisters and his friends from Cambridge: Bertrand Russell (1872-1970, philosopher and mathematician), **Lytton Strachey** (1880-1932, biographer and critic), **Clive Bell** (artist and art critic), Desmond MacCarthy (dramatic critic and brilliant talker) and Saxon Sydney-Turner (a dilettante often as silent as the Stephen sisters at those gatherings).

In **November 1906, Thoby's death**—after he contracted typhoid fever on a holiday in Greece—, came as another blow to Virginia, who, in addition, suffered from her separation from Vanessa when the latter married Clive Bell early the following year. This also meant that Virginia and Adrian would have to leave the house in Gordon Square. So, in **April 1907**, they both moved, not so far away, to **No. 29 Fitzroy Square** and decided to go on with the weekly meetings and widen the Cambridge circle to a number of new male and female friends, among whom: **Roger Fry** (1866-1934, art critic and painter who introduced **post-impressionism**¹ to Britain), E. M. Forster (1879-1970, novelist, short story writer and essayist), **Duncan Grant** (artist, Lytton Strachey's cousin), John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946, English economist), **Leonard Woolf** (1880-1969) and Lady Ottoline Morrell, an eccentric aristocrat, who later had her own '*salon*' in Bedford Square. The Virginia of those years gradually gained self-assurance and used her **wit** (*esprit*), **humour**, and **imagination** as she playfully made guesses about people's lives. In the meantime, she had already embarked on her career as a professional writer.

In **February 1910**, the Bloomsbury Group became famous with **the H.M.S. Dreadnought hoax** (*canular*) played upon the officers of the greatest warship in

1. **Post-impressionism**: a movement in painting in France at the end of the 19th century, begun by Cézanne and exemplified by Gauguin, Van Gogh and Matisse, which rejected the naturalism and momentary effects of impressionism, but adapted its use of pure colour to paint subjects with greater subjective emotion.

the Royal Navy: Adrian Stephen and his 'suite' (including Virginia), with heavily blackened faces, passed themselves off as Abyssinian princes on an official visit to the famous ship. They were finally found out when one of the pseudo-visitors gave the game away (*vendit la mèche*).

However, Virginia's health was somewhat impaired (*détériorée*) after this episode and she had to undertake a three-month rest cure.

In **1911**, Virginia and Adrian took a lease (*bail*) on a four-storeyed house at **38 Brunswick Square** and shared it with friends, among whom Leonard Woolf, theoretically on a year's leave from Ceylon, where he had been an administrator in the Colonial Service from which he finally resigned.

5. Love and married life

In her early 20s, Virginia seemed to be inclined to fall in love with a person of her own sex. However, it has been suggested that her passion for one of her cousins, **Madge Vaughan** and for **Violet Dickinson**—an older woman friend who had helped her after her father's death—, cannot have been anything but 'pure', as she showed signs of being sexually retarded on account of the emotional traumas caused by her half-brothers' recurrent 'attentions' when she was younger.

Over the years, she had had her suitors (*prétendants*), but she either rejected them or had a 'dead-end' (*sans lendemain*) flirtation with them; or else she was faced with 'an impossibility', as was the case with **Lytton Strachey**, who proposed to her, was accepted, but finally balked (*recula*) partly because of his homosexual tendencies. Strangely enough, it was Lytton who suggested to **Leonard Woolf** that he should marry Virginia!

Early in 1912, with Leonard's help, Virginia took a five-year lease on **Asheham House** in the Sussex countryside. Consequently, they were seeing a lot of each other, both in town and in the country. After they became engaged (*fiancés*) shortly after, Virginia **married** her 'penniless Jew'—as she jokingly said—, **in August 1912**. They then went on their honeymoon journey to France, Spain and Italy.

When they returned to London, they moved into **Clifford's Inn, Fleet Street**, a neighbourhood that had known famous writers, poets and playwrights. A few months later, **in the summer of 1913**, while Virginia worked on the final draft (*ébauche*) of *The Voyage Out*, Leonard noticed that, though she loved him, she could not respond to him sexually, and that she was becoming nervous as she suffered from headaches and sleeplessness, recurrent symptoms of her previous breakdowns. As a matter of

fact, she had **the most serious attack in her whole life**, and was found unconscious after taking an overdose of veronal. Those bouts (accès) of mental insanity often came in the last stages of the writing of her novels.

6. The Hogarth Press

In **1915**, Virginia and Leonard had the lease of the beautiful eighteenth century **Hogarth House**, in Paradise Road, **Richmond**. While World War I was already in its second phase, and some of the Bloomsbury Group had left, the Woolfs agreed on starting printing on their own, which would be therapeutic for Virginia on her way to recovery.

In **March 1917**, they bought a small hand press with the necessary printing material. A month later, they could produce their first work, a booklet with two stories: Virginia's *The Mark on the Wall* and Leonard's *Three Jews*.

During the next three years, they enjoyed printing and binding (*relier*) their own works as well as their friends': *Prelude* by Katherine Mansfield (whose relationship with Virginia was extremely ambiguous), poems by T. S. Eliot (1888-1965, US born British poet, dramatist and critic) , and translations from Russian literature. Later, they had their catalogue, often illustrated by Virginia's sister, Vanessa Bell.

In **the summer of 1919**, the Woolfs moved into a new country home, **Monk's House**, in the little village of **Rodmell** in Sussex, where Virginia did a great deal of her writing, and where they also received numerous weekend guests; while they went on doing their printing work in their house in Richmond.

In **March 1924**, they bought the lease of a typical Bloomsbury terrace house at **52 Tavistock Square**, in whose basement they established the Hogarth Press, with Virginia's writing-room at the back; and which remained their London home until 1939. The publications went on together with the frequent socializing activities, which brought the Woolfs new friends, in particular, **Vita Sackville-West**, whose 'switchback' (*en dents de scie*) love affair with Virginia lasted at least until 1928, when the writer presented her with *Orlando* , "the longest and most charming love letter in literature" according to Vita's son, Nigel Nicolson.

7. Decline and fall

Soon the Hogarth Press became a source of **worry** as it was demanding too much time. Besides, it failed to keep the authors it published, partly on account of Leonard's temperament. Although the basement was fairly dilapidated, he was determined

to keep the Press going on a shoe-string (*en se serrant la ceinture*), and became very testy (*susceptible*), and even rude (*grossier*) towards his rare trainee (*stagiaires*) managers, when things were not to his liking.

Over the years, what with the **strain** (*tension*) of social activity and the amount of writing and revising of her works she did, Virginia collapsed (*s'effondra*) of **exhaustion**, sometimes nearer to the verge of madness than she had ever been before. Hers was a life of total dedication to her work, in spite of a short interlude with seventy-one-year-old **Dame Ethel Smyth**, a lively composer, the 'giant crab' that had fallen in love with her.

Meanwhile, she had to face **more losses**: the deaths of her lifelong friend, Lytton Strachey in 1932; and of her much-loved nephew, Julian Bell, in the Spanish Civil War. After completing the manuscript of her last novel, *Between the Acts*, she fell victim to depression; some of the major factors for it being: the World War II bombings, the destruction of her London houses (at 52 Tavinstock Square and **37 Mecklenburg Square**, since 1939), the cool reception given to the biography of her late friend, Roger Fry.

On **28 March 1941**, feeling the symptoms of madness rising in her mind again, she wrote farewell letters to Vanessa and Leonard, filled her pockets with stones and **drowned herself** in the River Ouse near her country home. Her body was not found until April 18.

Main points

1. Describe the Stephen household as an extended family.
2. Outline the main features of Virginia's education.
3. To what extent did it contribute to her creative writing.
4. What various effects did deaths in the family have on her life?
5. Give an account of the Bloomsbury Group.
Focus on its creation, outstanding members, activities, evolution.
6. How important was the Group in Virginia Woolf's life?
7. What could she derive from her printing experience with the Hogarth Press?
7. Build up a portrait of her from the following points of view:
a. psychological; b. emotional; c. social; d. intellectual.
Use precise references from her biography.
8. List some of the main biographical items that might influence her fiction (for example: people, memories, experiences, ideas, etc.).
9. Check your guesses after reading some of her short stories.

II. VIRGINIA WOOLF'S WORKS

1. Chronology

First and foremost, it seems quite appropriate and helpful to the student to try and sort out, from a chronological point of view, Virginia Woolf's prolific works, which reputedly come second in complexity only to those of James Joyce¹.

Therefore, the main purpose of this section is for the student to have an overall view of some of Virginia Woolf's major works, so fascinatingly varied and challenging, whether they concern her novels, biographies, essays, letters, diaries and memoirs; not to mention her short stories, which will be dealt with in the second part of this booklet.

Read the "Chronology" on the next page, and answer the points.

Main points

1. Classify the types of works that Virginia Woolf wrote.
2. Comment on the rate (*rythme*) at which she produced her work.
3. How useful could her essays have been in her writer's career?
4. For what various reasons did she write a diary throughout her life?
5. How do you understand the phrase: "a holiday book"?

1. **James Joyce:** Strangely enough his life span is exactly the same as Virginia Woolf's (1882-1941). Born in Dublin, Ireland, he is known for his collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, and his novel *Ulysses*, in which he uses interior monologue and 'stream of consciousness'. Refer to Virginia Woolf's creative writing in this section.

Dec. 1904	Unsigned review in <i>The Guardian</i>
Jan. 1905	A journalistic piece about the Brontë family in Haworth
1905-1909	Reviews and articles for <i>the Guardian</i> & the monthly <i>Cornhill</i> magazine
1907-1909	Begins writing her first novel
March 1915	Begins to write a fairly regular diary First novel: <i>The Voyage Out</i> , published by Gerald Duckworth Company LTD
1917	First work published by The Hogarth Press: two short stories (VW's 'The Mark on the Wall' & LW's 'Three Jews')
1917-1918	Reviews in <i>The Times Literary Supplement</i> Reviews & essays in <i>The Athenaeum</i> & <i>The New Statesman</i> Works on her second novel
Oct. 1919	Second novel: <i>Night and Day</i> published by Duckworth
Spring 1919	An essay: 'Modern Fiction'
March 1921	' <i>Monday or Tuesday</i> ', first collection of short stories published by the Hogarth Press
Oct. 1922	Third novel: <i>Jacob's Room</i>
May 1924	Lectures resulting in essay, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'
April 1925	'The Common Reader', a collection of essays about English literature
May 1925	Fourth novel: <i>Mrs Dalloway</i>
Summer 1925	Works on fifth novel
May 1927	Fifth novel: <i>To the Lighthouse</i>
Oct. 1928	' <i>Orlando: A Biography</i> '
Oct. 1929	A 'holiday' book: ' <i>A Room of One's Own</i> '
Oct. 1931	Sixth novel: <i>The Waves</i>
Oct. 1932	<i>The Common Reader: Second Series</i>
Oct. 1933	A 'holiday' book: ' <i>Flush: A Biography</i> '
1935	Revision of <i>Freshwater</i> (a play)
March 1937	Seventh novel: <i>The Years</i> (a novel of 'fact')
June 1938	A non-fiction book: <i>Three Guineas</i>
July 1940	' <i>Roger Fry: A Biography</i> '
Feb. 1941	Eighth novel completed: <i>Between the Acts</i> (posthumously published)