

Virginia Woolf Special – Teacher’s Notes

Introduce Virginia Woolf to your students following our easy steps.

Step 1: The Exhibition

1 The Portrait of Virginia Woolf

Discuss the following questions:

- Who is this woman?
- When and where do you think she lived?
- What was her profession?

(Image: Portrait of Virginia Woolf)

2 Virginia Woolf

Listen to this short text about the life of Virginia Woolf. Retell her life in your own words using the phrases below. Read the following text from the Helbling Reader *To the Lighthouse* to your students. The phrases your students should use to retell the text are highlighted in yellow.

About the Author (page 6)

Virginia Woolf was born on 25th January 1882 in London. Her parents were wealthy and their home was comfortable. Virginia grew up surrounded by books and intelligent conversation.

Virginia Woolf had a tragic life. Many of the people closest to her died prematurely and she suffered a number of nervous breakdowns throughout her life. After her father’s death in 1904, Virginia moved to the Bloomsbury area of London. Here, with her brother and friends, she helped form the Bloomsbury Group. The group was an intellectual circle of writers and artists who greatly influenced cultural attitudes in Britain in the early 20th century.

In 1912, Virginia married Leonard Woolf. He was the stable presence that Virginia needed. Virginia Woolf is acknowledged as one of the greatest innovators in the English language and is a leading writer of the Modernist movement. She used a literary device called ‘stream of consciousness’ to give voice to her characters’ thoughts.

She wrote nine novels, two biographies, a volume of short stories, five volumes of collected essays and reviews, and a volume of selections from her diary. Her most famous novels are: *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One’s Own*.

In March 1941, Virginia drowned herself in a river near her East Sussex home. In a letter to her husband she said that she felt she was going insane and she did not want to spoil his life, too.

3 Timeline at the National Portrait Gallery

Follow [this link to study a timeline](#) of Woolf’s life.

What happened in Woolf’s life on these dates?

October 2 1905

December 22 1910

September 9 1913

April 24 1917

July 1 1919

Project the timeline onto an IWB or screen. Ask students to find information about five significant dates in Woolf’s life. Either use the ones above or choose another five.

4 Portraits at the Exhibition

Go to [the main page](#) of the Exhibition. Look at the portraits and choose your favourite. Why do you like it?

You will see some images on the Exhibition page. Let your students choose one and ask them to talk about it.

Step 2: The Film

1 Film trailer: *The Hours* (2002, directed by Stephen Daldry)

Watch the film trailer with your students (Type 'The Hours film trailer' on YouTube)

Discuss the following questions:

- Do you notice anything similar between the three storylines?
- When do you think the stories of the three women are set?
- Study the definition of the literary device 'leitmotif'. Can you recognize an example of it in the film trailer?

The **leitmotif** is the leading motif in a work (e.g. film or novel). It can be an object or the repetition of a phrase. Woolf uses leitmotif a lot in her work to create a sense of continuity of thought through non-linear time.

Teacher's Notes:

Remember that although this film was rated PG-13, it deals with difficult topics like death and frustration. This film trailer and film can provide excellent talking points for adult learners, but you might find it hard to engage teenagers with this film.

Ask your students if they notice anything interesting about the structure of the film. It tells the story of three women, living in different decades, each going through a difficult moment in their lives. The first woman is Virginia Woolf writing the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1923, the second is a young pregnant mother reading the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1951, and the third is a single mother, called 'Mrs. Dalloway' by one of her friends, organizing a party in 2001.

There are a number of leitmotifs running through the film. The line 'I will buy the flowers myself' is an example of a leitmotif in the form of a sentence.

2 Watch the film and find information about Virginia Woolf's family.

- Who was Vanessa Bell?
- Who was Leonard Woolf?

Teacher's Notes:

These two people appear in the film trailer.

Vanessa Bell was Virginia's sister. She was a famous painter.

Leonard Woolf was Virginia's husband. He and Virginia founded the Hogarth Press together.

3 Mapping the life of Woolf

Find information about the places where Virginia Woolf lived. Mark them on a map.

Teacher's Notes:

Follow [this link](#) to see an example of a literary map on Google Maps.

You can simply add landmarks by dropping the pin onto the map.

You can read more about the map in our Readers Blog post '[Travel the World](#)'.

Step 3: *To the Lighthouse* (Virginia Woolf, 1927)

1 Cornwall, England

Explore the place that inspired the setting of the novel.

Look at the illustration from [To the Lighthouse](#) by Virginia Woolf, Helbling Reader Level 5.

Then go on Wikipedia and find an image about the [Godrevy Lighthouse](#) in Cornwall, England. You will see a photograph which is very similar to the image.

2 Two literary devices of Modernist fiction

Talk about the following two devices with your class: 1) stream of consciousness, 2) shifting point of view. Tell your students that Virginia Woolf and other authors experimented with new techniques in literature. Their style was different from the traditional novelist styles.

Stream of consciousness: The narrator is not present in this narrative technique, we are fully inside the mind of the character. The stream-of-consciousness technique conveys the character's thoughts and their memories and impressions. Stream of consciousness wants to show us how the human mind works before we start speaking or writing down our thoughts. This technique is not logical and does not focus on correct grammar use, and often there are no full sentences.

Shifting point of view: It happens when different parts of the same action are told from different points of view in a story.

3 Write a paragraph using the stream of consciousness technique.

Tell your students to experiment with this technique. Ask them to choose a theme from below, and start writing about it. They do not have to worry about the grammar or the right word choice. Tell them not to stop, and if they are stuck, they can write down the same word that is stuck in their mind until a new idea comes to their mind. Let them to write for about five minutes.

Themes:

- 1 My first day at school
- 2 My best summer day
- 3 My worst summer day
- 4 My favourite journey
- 5 My favourite Christmas

Try to answer questions like:

'What can you hear?'; 'What can you see?'; 'How do you feel?'; 'Can you smell or taste anything?'

In the resource book [Imagine That!](#) (The Resourceful Teacher Series, Helbling Languages), you can find a guided visualization activity on pages 54 and 55. You can download the two pages from our Readers Blog.