

Orlando: A Biography Study Guide

Orlando: A Biography by Virginia Woolf

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Plot Summary

Orlando is a fictional biography of a person called Orlando who lives over three hundred years from Queen Elizabeth's reign in the sixteenth century through to King Edwards reign in 1928, the year Virginia Woolf wrote the novel. In the beginning of the book Orlando is a nobleman who has literary ambitions. As a man he writes plays and poems every day of his life while courting some of his generation's most beautiful women. Everything changes when he turns into woman, and for the remainder, Woolf draws comparisons between the thought processes of men and women across the different eras.

In the first chapter, Orlando is a fifteen-year-old boy living with his parents. He dreams of joining his father and grandfather in the war against the Moors, but Queen Elizabeth takes to his exceptional beauty and refuses to allow him to fight. However, he falls out of favor with the Queen when she catches him kissing another girl. Shortly afterwards, King James takes over the throne and welcomes Orlando back to the royal court. By this time, the Great Frost has taken hold of the country. To increase his popularity, the King builds upon the ice, creating a carnival type atmosphere. While skating, Orlando meets a Russian girl called Sasha. Their relationship causes scandal, but Orlando is deeply in love with her. Unfortunately, during one of Orlando's melancholy moods, Sasha cheats on him. He forgives her, but soon after, she sets sail back to Russia.

In the second chapter, grief overcomes Orlando and he goes back to his country house and sleeps for seven days. When he wakes, he remembers little of Sasha, though he sinks into depression if anyone mentions Russia. To get over his mood, he begins to read and write again. After a long period of seclusion, he arranges a meeting with a famous poet named Nick Greene. Greene comes to his house and entertains everyone with stories about Shakespeare and Marlowe, and Orlando shows him some of his own work. Greene promises to read it once he gets home. When he arrives home, Greene decides to write a satirical piece about Orlando, using some of the extract of Orlando's poem. Orlando is so upset when he reads the book he denounces all men, replacing them with dogs. Eventually Orlando comes out of his mood and decides he should write about whatever takes his fancy. He decides the best thing to write about is his surroundings and his house. It is while writing he realizes his estate needs redecorating and he sets about making it all beautiful again. People come afar to see the new developments and Orlando becomes part of high society. One day he meets an Archduchess and falls in love. The feeling shocks him and he asks King Charles to assign him as Ambassador of Constantinople in Turkey.

Chapter three follows Orlando's time as Ambassador of Constantinople. His good looks mean he is popular with everyone and particularly women. Orlando, however, does not form any close relationships and focuses on his work. Such dedication impresses the King and he sends over a friend to award Orlando with the highest ranked position in his peerage. Celebrations follow the ceremony, but Orlando disappears into his room. In the morning, he does not wake up and stays asleep for seven days. During this time, the Turks rise against the Sultan and enter Orlando's room, intent on killing him. Seeing



Orlando fast asleep, they think he is already dead. When Orlando awakes, he has changed into a woman. She leaves with a Gypsy and joins their way of life. Unfortunately, the difference in lifestyle is too great and she pays for a ship back to England.

Chapter four details Orlando's time aboard the ship and his struggles at accepting his new identity as a woman. Immediately, he sees the power women can hold over men when the Captain gives her her own awning. The relationship with the captain develops and he invites her ashore when they anchor in Italy. On her return to the boat, she finally feels like a real woman. Soon they arrive back in England. Orlando goes back to her house in Blackfriars and discovers she has legal problems due to her change in sex and three men claiming to be her sons, therefore having a legal right to her property. She decides to go back to the country. Here she meets the Archduchess again. Strangely, when she invites the Archduchess back to her house, it turns out he is a man. The Archduke wants to marry Orlando, but she has no feeling for him whatsoever. She manages to get rid of him by disappearing into society life and finding many male admirers, including the poet Mr. Pope. She soon gets bored of their company and starts dressing up as a man and walking through London. At the end of the chapter, the city clouds over and the eighteenth century becomes the nineteenth century.

In the fifth chapter, Orlando struggles to cope with Victorian times. Everywhere she looks, people are married and women have numerous children. She knows society expects the same from her and she feels torn about wanting her independence and the need to conform. One day she takes a walk in the park and meets the seaman Shelverdine. Immediately they decide they should get married. Orlando loves him and even more so when she discovers he used to be a woman. They spend every day together until Shelverdine heads back to sea. Before he goes, one of Orlando's servants marry them.

In the sixth chapter, Orlando wants to become a writer again. She has a chance meeting with Nick Greene. Greene looks completely different, but Orlando soon discovers his views on life are similar as before as he claims to hate the modern Victorian poets, but loves the Elizabethan poets he once despised. Orlando shows him her poem, the Oak Tree, and Greene promises to find a publisher and get it good reviews. Orlando then goes to a bookshop and buys all the Victorian literature available. When she has finished reading, she has a child, and the period changes to 1928. Now in the present, she reflects on old times and even thinks she sees her old Russian flame Sasha. Such thoughts frighten her and she goes back to wait for her husband to return. The book finishes with the reuniting of Shelverdine and Orlando.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The chapter opens with Orlando trying to slice the head of a Moor hanging from the rafters of his house. He states that the head is the prize of either his grandfather or father who fought in Africa. Orlando has ambitions to follow their footsteps, but at sixteen he is not old enough.

He describes his family as noble ever since they came into existence. His good family have handed him his good looks, which Woolf describes as rosy cheeked, big shouldered, and with shapely legs, among other perfections. His only problem is that he is slightly clumsy, and perhaps that is the reason his main hobby is writing poetry, particularly sonnets. During this chapter, he writes ten pages of poetry before going out into his garden to look for a solitary place to hide and think. In his hiding place he looks out into the distance, pointing out the heaths and houses his family own.

A call rings up in the distance, signaling the arrival of Queen Elizabeth. The elderly Queen has a great liking for Orlando and invites him to serve her in Whitehall. His beauty increasingly forces the Queen's admiration. Seeing him as the picture of a nobleman, she sends him on missions, such as to Scotland to cheer up the Scottish Queen. However, she stops at sending him to the Polish war because she cannot bear the thought of any harm done to his looks. Their relationship turns sour though when she spies Orlando in her mirror kissing a young girl.

From here, Orlando discovers his attraction to women and finds many suitors. Firstly, the Earl catches him lying with a lady called Sukey, which leads to a scandal, and Orlando to look for a more interesting life among the commoners. When King James takes over the throne, he accepts Orlando back into Royal court, and Orlando finds a number of suitable women. Woolf cites three of them, Clorinda, Favilla, and Euphrosyne as marriage material. She describes Clorinda as a sweet, religious girl who does not like the sight of blood. She tries to convert Orlando and clean him of his sins, but it only drives him away. Orlando feels relief when she dies of smallpox. Favilla is from a poor family, but her beautiful look has helped her to rise through the ranks of society and into the royal court. Orlando loses interest when he spies her whipping a spaniel to an inch of its life when the dog steals her stockings. Euphrosyne was Orlando's most serious flame. She shared a similar upbringing as Orlando, coming from a noble Irish family. The relationship becomes so serious they would have married if the Great Frost did not hit Britain and initially cause so many problems.

To make the best of a difficult situation, the King, trying to garner favor with the public, orders people to build on the frozen river, setting up a carnival type atmosphere. During this happy time, Orlando meets a young Russian lady called Sasha. She is a princess, and Orlando gets to know her at the king's banquets where they are the only two people



who speak French. She impresses him by making fun of the British and how ugly she thinks they are in comparison with Russians.

Woolf describes their affair as scandalous. In many people's eyes, Orlando already has a suitor called Lady Margaret O'Brien, yet he drops her immediately for Sasha. Rarely leaving each other, they go on walks to get away from the crowds and have sex on the ice. Orlando likes Sasha so much he claims she makes him feel warm even naked, outside in the winter.

Everything changes when Orlando becomes depressed and he begins talking about death. Sasha is not used to this English melancholy and she begins to distance herself from him, so much so that when Orlando begins to question her about her family, she refuses to answer and Orlando begins to wonder if she is not just a commoner. Sasha reinforces Orlando's paranoia when they visit her Russian ship. She wants to find some clothes she left and asks one of the sailors to help her while Orlando waits on the deck. After an hour and a half, she is still missing, so Orlando goes to look for her. Below deck, he sees Sasha in the dark sitting on the sailor's knee. The shock is so great he faints. When he wakes up, Sasha denies any wrongdoing and says the sailor was helping her move some boxes. Her statement initially does not convince Orlando, but over time, he realizes she could do anything with such a commoner.

To further dissipate Orlando's mistrust, Sasha becomes increasingly friendly and Orlando increasingly in love. One day he grabs Sasha and speaks a French phrase in her ear, their signal for meeting at an Inn at midnight before running away together. Orlando arrives early and watches all the violent antics of the peasants. Suddenly he feels heavy and constant blows to his face and thinks about pulling his sword. Eventually he realizes they are drops of water landing on his cheek. By this time, he realizes Sasha is not coming and he walks back towards the Palace. Outside, the ice is melting and people are flowing past him on the river and to their deaths. He wonders if Sasha is okay, but then spies her Russian boat leaving unharmed in the distance.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The chapter begins with Woolf showing Orlando as a fifteen-year-old boy. At this point in his life he is still discovering himself, and the slicing of already decapitated heads show a virile imagination younger than his years, rather than a genuine thirst to follow in his father into war. If anything, Woolf is laying the foundation for a writer's mind. Firstly, his beauty, with a description of shapely legs and rosy cheeks, has a feminine aspect that the reader could never imagine destroyed in battle. Secondly, when Orlando trips on the edge of a chest, she describes him as clumsy, a further indication he is not for the masculine world of war and bloodshed. His place is at the writing desk where he spends almost his entire time. Woolf claims, even at that young age, he has written twenty plays.

The characterization of Orlando continues. Woolf describes how much property Orlando's family owns when he looks out towards London. In this regard, it is strange for



Orlando to claim his roots among the commoners later on in this chapter, as there is real hint of it here. Even when he stops at a peasants' bar and waits for Sasha to arrive, he never feels comfortable, his hand grasping his sword, ready to attack anyone that criticizes his presence. At the same time, it foreshadows his need for solitude, a need that comes through feeling he has little to identify with. He does not fit with the nobles because he writes, he does not fit in with the gypsies because he is too English, and in this chapter he cannot do little else other than observe the commoners. When his girlfriend Sasha cheats on him with a sailor, he initially shows as much distaste at her choice of partners as he does with her going with another man. He eventually finds his true self as a woman with a man's mind, and as such, is happily disconnected from a world he cannot grasp.

Orlando's difference attracts him to women from the beginning. In this chapter, Queen Elizabeth invites him into her court simply because she finds him attractive. In the end, she throws him out because she sees him kissing in another woman in the mirror. This is just many of the flings he partakes in. Woolf lists Clorinda, Favilla, and Euphrosyne as just a few of his lovers, all apparently willing to completely give themselves to him. Orlando displays little real feeling towards them and uses them to write, calling Clorinda, Favilla, and Euphrosyne his three sonnets. However, Woolf paints Orlando as a lonely soul, and from that the reader can see his sexual endeavors as being merely a search for the right person, which for Orlando has to be someone with whom he strongly identifies. It is no surprise then that he falls in love with the Russian princess Sasha. In many ways, she is exactly what he needs to grow as a person. **Firstly, Woolf describes her as having the androgynous quality that Orlando also possesses, and secondly, she has the outsider mentality that allows him to be himself. From this perspective, it is no problem their affair causes great controversy in the king's court.** Throughout the book, Orlando actively seeks seclusion from society, and his relationship with Sasha provides him with the excuse to become the loner he desires to be. The problem with Sasha is that her difference is to do with the fact she is from another country. Most likely, in Russia, she is a normal and sociable person. This does stop Orlando from idealizing her as his perfect woman, and when she leaves for home, he can forget her until he finally replaces Sasha with Shervaline in the fifth chapter."



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

After Orlando's fling with the Russian princess, the king sends him back to his country house in disgrace. Here he develops a routine of getting up at the same time every day. However, one day his servant cannot rouse him. They try everything to wake Orlando, but he continues sleeping. Finally, Orlando wakes up on the seventh day, yet in a state of melancholy. He remembers little of the previous six months and falls into a deep depression if anyone mentions Russia or princesses. Orlando's servants are fond of him and call a doctor. The doctor is no wiser to Orlando's problems and can only prescribe more sleep. Orlando takes the doctor's advice to a certain degree by becoming such a recluse not even people living under his roof know what he is doing. The servant's wonder whether he is dead, but in fact, Orlando has taken to reading books. The servants cannot understand why he would want to read, and feel such a hobby is unworthy of a noble. They think Orlando wants too much to become a writer and his obsession will lead to a commoner's death. However, Woolf describes Orlando as a strong person and his reading not as a new hobby, but one he has participated in since he was a young boy.

Orlando finishes his self-enforced seclusion an inspired man, and he calls a friend in London who has contacts in the literary world. His friend puts him in contact with the famous poet Nicolas Greene. Surprisingly, Greene willingly travels to Orlando's estate where he imparts tales about the like of Shakespeare and Marlowe. Orlando originally wanted to show him his own work and talk about its potential, but Greene shows such displeasure towards Orlando's heroes he holds his tongue. Nevertheless, Orlando has a fun time listening to Greene's stories and is sorry to see him go the next day. Before he leaves, Orlando gives him a copy of his work and promises the poet he will pay his pension. Greene takes Orlando's work home, but instead of reading it, he writes a satirical piece using Orlando as the main character and making fun of passages in his manuscript. To make matters worse, Greene immediately and spitefully sends Orlando a copy.

Greene's piece hurts Orlando and he denounces all men, replacing them with dogs. Another long seclusion follows, ending with a walk in the park. The surrounding trees show him how much of life he is missing. He decides to write again, but this time not trying to please anyone but himself. Using his estate as his topic, he begins to write, cutting out the flowery language of his previous work and developing a tighter style. While concentrating on the brilliance of his house, he realizes he needs to improve it, and with the help of his servants, he begins to refurbish.

The developments improve not only the house, but also Orlando's mental state, and he starts inviting people around and making friends. They all think the house is marvelous, and Orlando once again begins to make his name. One day he spies a tall woman outside in his garden. The first time he ignores her, but when she keeps appearing, he



decides to approach. The lady shows little embarrassment about caught by the estate owner, confidently introducing herself as Archduchess Harriet Griselda. Orlando invites her up to his house, but to his disgust, he realizes he is in love. He asks King Charles to assign him as Ambassador Extraordinary to Constantinople and leaves the country.

Chapter 2 Analysis

At the beginning of the chapter, Virginia Woolf talks about the problems of writing a biography. Her self-reflexive style, taking the reader away from the narrative and into the problems of writing a book, occurs all through the novel. However, this style sits so much outside the story it has no real relevance other than a witty aside. It relates so little, the reader wonders if it acts merely to criticize the seriousness and pretense of modern writing. In other words, Woolf is questioning writer's use of such techniques, suggesting it often has more style than substance. Here she says, "Volumes might be written in interpretation of it; whole religious systems founded upon the signification of it".

Despite this playful and satirical tone, Woolf deals with the theme of serious writing within the narrative. Orlando copes with life through reading books and writing his poems. After both the king and Sasha reject him, he goes back to his country house where he lives a life of seclusion. Initially, his melancholy means he does little but sleep, but once the worst of it is over he finds solace in the written word. He reads prodigiously and then writes with great purpose. Furthermore, Woolf does not present it as an easy option away from life, but looks into the hard work that has to go in to create good work, including the continuous editing and rewriting of the pieces. It is through the satisfaction of Orlando achieving something he feels is worthwhile that he is lifted away from his seclusion and back into the real world. Unfortunately, his previous isolation means he has great difficulty in coping.

When the poet Nick Greene visits him at his country house, Orlando shows great naivety in thinking that he will live up to the handsome romantic he has always pictured. In fact, Greene is completely the opposite, short and blunt. Orlando does not have the literary conversation he desires, but hands Greene his manuscript to read anyway. Greene uses excerpts from the manuscript and Orlando's own character to write a book of his own. The release of Greene's unkind portrait of him sends Orlando back into seclusion. However, Woolf also presents this as another aspect of the writer's life. Eventually, Orlando comes to the realization he needs to write about what he knows and decides to write about the house and its surrounding area. In doing so, he finds his voice and his writing improves. As a comment on writing, Woolf seems to be saying we have to write for ourselves rather than other people.

This chapter also introduces time, a theme that becomes increasingly prevalent through the novel. In Woolf's opinion, time is what you make of it. She states at one point, "day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year", as if time is meaningless. This foreshadows later developments when Orlando's life moves through the fifteenth century to the twentieth century without any real reason. Woolf's motivation



behind time as a theme is again writing. Simply, she is saying that enforced isolation brought about through writing makes you forget about the world around you and the time you are living in is irrelevant to the process. It is only when you stop you that can start living in the real world. In this chapter, Orlando starts focusing on his present era firstly when he meets Nick Greene and then secondly when he concentrates on refurbishing his house.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Orlando adapts himself to the Turkish way of life, wearing the clothes and speaking the language fluently. Consequently, he becomes popular with everyone and Woolf claims both men and women desire him. He thinks of England and where he lived near London, but looking out on to the vast land on Constantinople, Orlando knows he prefers Turkey. He even wonders if his own dark skin comes from one of his ancestors in the crusades having an affair with a Circassian peasant woman.

Orlando does not neglect his duties and performs them admirably. However, Orlando follows any hard work by huge lunches of up to thirty courses. Nevertheless, his popularity stretches across all classes, from the rich to the gypsies. He even has an admirer from England who comes to Constantinople to win his hand. Orlando treats these relationships formally and he makes no close friends. Instead, he puts his concentration in to his work, earning him King Charles's respect.

The king sends over a nobleman to reward Orlando his dukedom. It is a huge occasion, and Orlando organizes a great banquet complete with fireworks. On the day, there are so many people no one can move. Woolf says that because of the crowds,, few people could record the event accurately. John Briggess writes a few lines in his diary, but when he climbs a tree to see the event better, the branch snaps and the writing stops. Thankfully, Penelope Hartopp recorded her view of events from inside the house. She heaps many superlatives on Orlando's beauty without really saying much else. When the clock strikes twelve, Orlando comes out onto his balcony and receives his reward.

As is his way, Orlando retires to bed early, but surprisingly, the next morning he does not get up. Rumors abound about what has happened. A washerwoman says she saw him lift a peasant girl up into his room from the balcony. No one can rouse Orlando, but while looking for something suspicious, the official find a marriage deed drawn up between Orlando and Rosins Pepita, a Gypsy dancer.

On the seventh day of Orlando's sleep, the Turks rise against the Sultan. They kill everybody they come across, but when they see the sleeping Orlando, they presume he is dead. After they leave, three figures dance around Orlando's body, Lady of Chastity, Lady of Modesty, and Lady of Purity. They want Orlando to sleep forever, but a trumpet blows and they know truth has come, so they leave. Orlando awakens to find he is a woman.

Now a woman, the author notes the reader must refer to her as her from here on in because Orlando's sex will not change again. In general, Orlando is still the same person. His face is virtually the same and his mind can remember the past clearly. With that said, it is surprising he shows little shock at the sudden change. When a gypsy appears underneath her window on a donkey, she rides with him into the mountains.



She lives with a tribe of Gypsies and they accept her as one of their own due to Orlando's looks, even thinking about allowing her to marry into their tribe. However, Orlando raises their suspicions when she does not adapt into their way of life, neglecting her duties by staring out on the countryside. Orlando raises further doubt in their minds by talking about her old house with its 365 bedrooms. This type of rich existence is against the Gypsy way of life, and though they say it does not matter what her past is, they cannot forget what she has said. When Orlando decides to leave for England, it comes at exactly right time as the Gypsies admit they were plotting to kill her. Orlando sells a pearl from her necklace and buys her way onto an English merchant ship.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Orlando is a popular figure throughout the book, and from Queen Elizabeth onwards everyone falls in love with him. When Orlando works in Turkey as an ambassador it is no different. From noblemen to Gypsies, Orlando is highly regarded as a person. One of the reasons initially highlighted in the first chapter, is that he is constantly looking for his identity, and as such does his best to adopt the lifestyle of wherever he goes. In this chapter, he takes to wearing the traditional Turkish clothes and speaking the language fluently. Yet Orlando obsesses at finding out who he really is, and he begins to study his dark skin and wonder if he and his family is from Turkey. This is much like in the first chapter when he thought his family had working class roots. In the first part of the third chapter he still knows there is something missing and cannot bring himself to fully integrate with the people. His adoption of the lifestyle is only on the surface. In reality, he spends most of the time by himself, either in his room or working.

Everything changes when Orlando becomes a woman. All through the novel, Woolf presents him as a man with a feminine beauty that both men and women appreciate. In retrospect, this could be the cause of his feeling of difference. When he does change to a woman, the feeling does not completely dissolve, but she does seem more comfortable with herself. For example, where as before in Turkey he only goes through the motions of fitting in, here he actually moves in with Gypsies and attempts to live their way of life. The difference is too much, but that she is happy enough to actually try to be part of the group probably moves her more forward as a person than at any other time. She discovers through befriending the Gypsies that she is not the person she thought she was at the beginning of the chapter, and that the only place for her is back home in London. No longer ashamed of her noble status, she catches a boat to England.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Orlando buys women's clothes with the few guineas she has left over and sets sail to England. Immediately her new female status proves beneficial, with the captain of the ship giving her her own awning to stretch out on. The captain takes a liking to her and invites her to join him at the captain's table. For the first time she discovers the delights of being a woman and she becomes emotional when the captain cuts her a slice of meat. Later, on deck, she almost sends a sailor hurtling overboard when she thoughtlessly displays a bit of ankle. She thinks the sailor's reaction absurd, but is beginning to understand the power women hold over men.

The captain further enhances her womanhood by inviting Orlando to come ashore with him to Italy. On her return, Woolf says something must have happened because she is now thinking more like a woman. Her new thoughts stretch to her old flame Sasha, who she now claims to understand.

When she arrives back at home in Blackfriars in London, she sees a note on the door. Firstly, it states she is dead, secondly, it states she is now a woman, and thirdly, that her three sons from her marriage with Rosa Palpita are claiming the property for their own. Considering the money she needs to alleviate herself of the charges, she heads down to her country estate. Her servants in the country show delight at her return and little surprise she has come back as a woman. Mrs. Grimditch even claims to Mr. Dupper that she thought that the change was always likely to happen.

After given orders she does not want to see anyone for legal reasons, she spies the Archduchess Harriet Griselda walking around her grounds. She invites the Archduchess into the house, telling her she has now become a woman. In reply, the Archduchess shows Orlando proof she is really a man. She was in love with Orlando before when he was a male, but she did not know how to approach him. His love has not disappeared, however, and he shows interest in marrying her. Over a course of a few months, he constantly visits repeating his request for marriage. Orlando finds him rather boring, but they do find some sort of connection by betting on which sugar cube a fly will land on. After a while the game begins to bore Orlando and she decides to cheat in order to discourage the Archduke from visiting. The trick does not work, so she puts a toad down his clothes and the Archduke leaves her in disgust. A while later, she makes her way to London. Here some commoners recognize her as the woman who used to be a man. As they crowd around her, the Archduke swoops in and whisks her away. He has forgiven her for her outrageous behavior and he has had a diamond-studded frog made as a gift. Thankfully, when she gets home, she finds a letter from some society women inviting her into their company.

Orlando tastes London society for the first time. She meets and has relations with many men, but no one satisfies her until she meets the poet Mr. Pope at a gathering.



Everyone is trying desperately to be witty without truly succeeding. Mr. Pope, however, commands Orlando's respect by saying three or four witty lines in a row. His comments offend most people, but Orlando decides to invite him back to her house. In the carriage she realizes Mr. Pope is rather ugly, short and charmless, yet she decides to use his knowledge of the literary scene to meet other poets and writers of that time, including Swift and Addison. She becomes so close to them that she starts inviting them all to her estate for tea. However, once Orlando gets to know the poets well and can look beyond her romantic ideals, she sees they are all really quite normal. They are still very witty, but their thoughts are not too dissimilar to others in high society. The real difference is they are able to express their thoughts in writing. Nevertheless, Orlando takes advantage of their friendships and learns how to become a good writer. One of the most important element of writing she learns is how to write the way she talks.

Woman though, is a fickle creature, and soon Orlando tires even of their company, leaving in the middle of a meeting with Mr Pope to spend time on her own. She dresses up as a man and walks around London. During her walk, she meets a prostitute called Nell, who invites Orlando up to her house. Nell is undressing when Orlando tells her he is actually a woman. In reply, Nell laughs and says she is glad because she did not fancy the company of a man. They spend an enjoyable evening chatting about their life histories before parting ways.

After this incident, Orlando begin to dress up as a man more and more, walking the London streets in search of adventure. She goes to coffee houses and listens to the writers tell their witty tales. During this time, no one quite knows where Orlando is and rumors abound, but she is happy living her double life and satisfying both her male and female urges. One day she comes back to back to her house and looks out across London. The city is clouding over and there is a strange atmosphere. When the clouds disappear, the eighteenth century has become the nineteenth century.

Chapter 4 Analysis

As a woman, Orlando is discovering herself far more than she did as a man. On board the ship, she has a relationship with the captain and gets a lot of special treatment. Orlando no doubt got a lot of special treatment as a man as well, but it always lead to problems. For example, in the first chapter, he ruins both stays at the royal court with affairs with women. Now she has the men coming to her she does not have to make things happen all the time and anything that does go wrong she does not feel it is her fault. For example, a sailor almost hurtles to his death when she displays her ankle, and rather than feel guilty, she makes a note not to do it again. Compare this to earlier chapters when, as a man, Orlando forces and pushes thing so much he falls into a depression when thing do not work out. From this, the reader starts to see Orlando is more naturally inclined to femininity than to masculinity. Interestingly, when Orlando arrives home, her servants do not react to her sex change. The only comment is from Mrs. Grimsditch, who claims the change was always likely to happen.



Orlando still has her male mind and remembers everything from before. Again, this puts Orlando at an advantage. Now that he accepts himself as a person he feels freer to socialize and do things he wanted to do as a man without his male ego in the way. This is most prevalent when Orlando befriends a group of poets. Before, as Nick Greene showed, he could not do this as a man without the fearing someone would ridicule his work. In this chapter, Orlando uses her womanly form and what is expected of her as a female to first befriend the poet Mr. Pope and then making herself part of his writers group by serving them drinks. She quickly finds out poets are just normal people and leaves their company disappointed. However, this is an important discovery and a further step towards appreciating herself and finding happiness.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Orlando is still living a good life in Blackfriars in London. She has been working on her poem *Thye Oak Tree* for the past three hundred years. As she tries to finish it, an unknown force is controlling her hand, preventing her from writing. The force draws her attention to her finger and Queen Elizabeth's ring. She notices everyone is wearing a wedding ring, and the thought sends Orlando into a state of shock. For the first time she feels out of place and in an age she does not belong. At the same time, if she is going to make anything of herself, she knows she must get married. Yet, there is no one to marry. All her friends have disappeared or have gotten married themselves. She goes for a walk in the park and, deciding she is in love with nature, she collapses by a river. Moments later a man comes by on horseback. He asks if Orlando is okay and she says yes. Immediately they decide to get married.

The man's name is Maramaduke Bonthrop Shelverdine and he is a seaman. He entertains Orlando with stories about his travels and she grows to adore his company, exclaiming her love for him. Shelverdine also loves her, but thinks there is something different about her as a person. He asks Orlando if she is really a man and Orlando says yes. Orlando notices there is something strange about Shelverdine. She asks him if he used to be a woman and he says yes. The realization increases their love for each other and Orlando claims she has not felt more like a woman.

Orlando receives some good news. Queen Victoria has annulled her lawsuits and Orlando is now an official woman with all her property back in her possession. The only problem is that she spent a lot of money going through the courts and cannot rejoin high society. Instead, she spends all her time with Shelverdine. One day, the wind changes and Shelverdine realizes he has to set sail once again. Orlando's servant marries them quickly and Shelverdine leaves. Orlando goes back into her house, happy to finally have a wedding ring on her finger.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In this chapter, the setting changes from Elizabethan times to Victorian times. Woolf is highly critical of society and stresses that women did not have the freedom allowed them in previous eras. Consequently, Orlando finds her life as a woman restricted. Woolf paints everything as dull and repressive, and shows society held together by strict parochial morals. For example, women marry early, staying at home and bearing many children. In this world even, Orlando's house is dark and miserable. As an individual, this way of life does not appeal to Orlando and she falls into the same melancholic mood that afflicted her as a man. The one positive to come from is that she starts to write again.



Orlando takes the poem the Oak Tree out from inside her dress, intent on finally finishing it. Unfortunately, as she prepares herself, two servants walk into the room and begin tidying. Their presence startles Orlando and she spills a blot of ink on her work. While looking at the blot, she thinks she cannot work with people in the room and begins turning the blot into a monster. When she finishes her doodle, something takes hold of her and, despite the presence of others, she writes the best lines of her life.

Again, Woolf is showing the power of writing and how it can make you forget who and where you are. The two servants anger Orlando, but her drawing concentrates her mind, drawing her into her creative world where she can express her frustration in the only way she knows, inwardly and through writing. When she finishes her passage, she is again aware of her surroundings, noticing the ivy at the windows, an metaphor earlier in the chapter for the darkness and repression of Victorian times. The reintroduction of her reality sweeps her back into an unhappy state of mind. She looks at her bare wedding finger and realizes she must marry.

By using Victorian times as a setting, Woolf is able to make a comparison between men and women in society. Previously, she made a comparison between the differences of thinking and feeling. For example, Orlando discovers in chapter four she can cry openly without anyone thinking less of her, in fact, such emotions are expected. Furthermore, Orlando understood the society and was able to accept its problems as a part of life. The switch to Victorian times is sudden and the conflict between conformity and rebellion that afflicted her as a man is now twice as strong. When she was a man, she conformed by accepting an ambassador's position in Turkey, which still allowed her a certain freedom. However, in Victorian times, someone who believes fully in love faces the prospect of having to marry someone she does not like.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

After her marriage, she sits down and tries to work on her poem *The Oak Tree*. She dips her pen in the ink and immediately expects to feel the power she felt in the previous chapter, where a force seemed to take over her arm and help her write the best lines of her life. Unfortunately, nothing happens and she has to force herself to write a few lines. Eventually, she realizes marriage has stabilized her life and perhaps she no longer has the need to write. However, upon reflection, she thinks that is not the case. All her life she has struggled to fit into society, and has only written words that expressed her struggles. Orlando now claims her happiness means she does not have to prove anything to anybody and can sincerely write how and what she likes.

Orlando begins to write more than she has ever written in her life, and consequently the time flies by. When she finally finishes, Orlando drops her pen out of her window, remembers there is human life, and orders a carriage to take her to London.

In London, Orlando has a chance meeting with Nick Greene. He is almost unrecognizable from the rogue he was in the seventeenth century. He looks so smart Orlando immediately addresses him as sir. She is not wrong, as Sir Nick Greene is one of the foremost critics of the Victorian era. After a while, she realizes he has not changed much when he claims modern poets work only for money. He holds the likes of Shakespeare and Marlowe, who he endlessly criticized in their last meeting in the seventeenth century, in great esteem. Orlando restrains from pointing this out and instead shows him her *Old Oak Tree* poem. Nick Greene thinks the poem is marvelous and tells Orlando he will get it published at once, using his good reputation to get it good reviews.

Orlando does not quite trust Greene, but still happy at his enthusiasm for her work, she goes to a bookshop and buys all the books by Victorian authors. On her way home, she takes a walk through a park and sees a small boat floating in the water. It immediately reminds her of *Shelverine*, and she sends him a telegraph.

After reading all of her Victorian literature, she gives birth to a child. The narrator then says King Edward has taken over the throne and the year is 1928. All of a sudden everything becomes very surreal to her. She has a motorcar and drives dangerously around the streets of London, and the narrator refers to her hearing voices from America. These voices coincide with Orlando going shopping to buy new for a house and the new she is developing for herself. While out shopping, she thinks she sees her old girlfriend Sasha, and is initially horrified Sasha is no longer the same beautiful girl. However, the woman is not Sasha, but just someone whose scent reminded her of the Russian princess.



On her way home, Orlando begins to think about all her past lives and becomes fearful about who she is and what she means. The sight of the gardener's missing thumbnail scares her, and knowing her husband is coming back, she waits for him in the house. At the stroke of twelve, a plane lands and Shelverdine walks out to greet her.

Chapter 6 Analysis

As the book continues, the language becomes more poetic and emotional, suiting the mindset of the now female main character. This is particularly the case when Orlando writes. When this happens, Woolf takes us away from Orlando's working space as if to say writing is private and she cannot bring herself to impinge on the moment. Instead, Woolf writes flowing, poetic prose about the nature outside Orlando's window. Woolf's uses stream of consciousness to reflect the vibrancy of Orlando's mind while she writes. Interestingly, the writing also starts to resemble more of a Victorian melodrama, which, more than anything, indicates the comfort she now feels in her role as a woman. This type of writing is foreshadowed in the previous chapter when Orlando falls dramatically by the side of the lake. Shelverine finds her sprawled on the ground and immediately asks her to marry him, much like a scene in a Charlotte Bronte book. At the end of this chapter, a similar moment occurs when Orlando waits for Shelverine to return home. At home she becomes increasingly restless until finally and dramatically Shel's aeroplane lands near her house at exactly on the stroke of midnight.

Life in this chapter certainly gets better for Orlando. She again meets the poet Nick Greene, and this time her poetry impresses him. Her meeting with Greene has a satirical edge. In Victorian times, Nick Greene is a critic, and while he hated the likes of Shakespeare when he lived in the seventeenth century, he now loves him and thoroughly dislikes the Victorian writers. This conflicts with Woolf's earlier depictions of a writer needing to write what he wants to write. Here, the success of a writer all depends on whether an individual likes it. Fortunately for Orlando, Greene loves her poem *The Oak Tree* and promises to get it as much attention as possible. From this, Woolf is partly saying writing has become more money orientated since the Elizabethan times, and she is partly parodying the influence and fickle nature of critics.

Nick Greene tells Orlando literature has become more of a business in Victorian times and welcomes anyone who writes for pure enjoyment, yet it is the same writer he so cruelly derided in the seventeenth century.

By the end of the chapter and the book, Virginia Woolf brings together the two themes, love and writing. Nick Greene publishes Orlando's work, but it is through true love that Woolf shows Orlando can be happy as a woman. The two represent both sides of Orlando's sexuality. Even as a woman, Woolf says she still has a male mind, so in that way the writing fulfills her sense of masculinity. Emotionally and sensually, Orlando is a woman and Shelverine's true love allows her to develop further as a female. By the end, Woolf is saying everyone has their masculine and feminine traits and no one can be happy until they fulfill both sides of their person.



Characters

Orlando

Orlando is born into a rich family. Both his father and grandfather fought against the Moors, and they have heads of the Moors they killed in their attic. At the beginning of the book, a fifteen-year-old Orlando plays among the heads, pretending he is also a soldier. However, war is not suitable for Orlando. His incredible looks and particularly his shapely legs greatly attract women to him. His first admirer, Queen Elizabeth, takes him into her court. She sees him more of a son than a lover, and cannot bear to send him to war, so she keeps him close to her side. Consequently, Orlando develops his main hobby of reading and writing. This hobby is hard to keep going because Elizabethan society does not see writing as a worthy pastime for nobleman. However, his melancholy and reflective moods, apparent throughout, means his personality lends itself to such a solitary past time. When his depression gets too much, he falls back into his childhood habit of reading and writing.

The first time one of his moods really hits him is when he falls in love with the Russian princess Sasha. Orlando had dated many girls before, but Sasha is the first one that appeals to his sense of difference. However, after the initial joy of finding someone he identifies with, he becomes depressed. Woolf describes such a characteristic as English, but it is perhaps as much part of his artistic temperament. After he breaks up from Sasha he falls to such depths that he becomes a recluse. It is during this period that Woolf plays with time. She suggests that being alone as much as Orlando is and doing nothing but to write means you lose all sense of time. In Orlando's case, he lives through three hundred years while never aging beyond forty.

The only change that occurs is that Orlando becomes a woman. This change is not the surprise to the reader as it perhaps sounds. Orlando, with his shapely legs and beautiful rather than handsome looks, always had feminine qualities. In fact, when the change comes about, apart from the obvious, his general appearance does not change and his memory of the past is still intact. For example, he can still recall his relationship with Sasha.

His memory allows Woolf the ability to compare the differences between the two sexes. To begin with, Orlando enjoys expressing her femininity and the power she has over men, but as the book moves into Victorian times, he increasingly finds being a woman restrictive. Orlando does not like how Victorian society holds him back, yet at the same time she is desperate to fit in. She decides to marry someone upon sight, showing her reliance upon her instincts. These instincts rarely let her down, as not only does she fall deeply in love with her husband, but finds out he used to be a woman. In retrospect, her instincts could both be a feminine quality and a strength developed through experience. As a man, she is continuously let down; firstly, when Sasha does not meet him to run away, and secondly, when Nick Greene publishes a book highly critical of Orlando's way of life. As the book goes on, Orlando, both as a man and a woman, increasingly



becomes wary of people in general. Despite Orlando's popularity, she keeps her distance until she finally finds someone she can feel close to. In fact, the reader gets the feeling that time will not stabilize until she develops the character to find happiness.

Sasha

Sasha is the Russian princess Orlando falls in love with. She is an exotic beauty who feels very patriotic towards her country, missing it terribly. In this respect, the reader may think Sasha uses Orlando as someone to keep her company while her Russian ship is stuck in England. When she has sex with a sailor while Sasha waits for her on the ship's deck, it proves just how one-sided their love is. On the flip side, she is perhaps too Russian to understand how Orlando thinks and feels as an Englishman. She finds his melancholy moods very difficult to cope with, and in the end causes the break in their closeness. Whatever the reason, though, her disappearance is a major factor in Orlando's later depression.

Her disappearance casts a deep gloom over Orlando for the entire book, and he often reflects on his time with her. In particular, he remembers the scent when she used to light candles. In the final chapter, Orlando even thinks he sees Sasha while out shopping, and shows shock that she has grown so fat. However, the figure is not Sasha at all and only someone lighting a candle which reminded her of her.

When Orlando becomes a woman, she begins to understand why Sasha treated him badly, and her depression lifts. It is not until this happens that she finds another love. The fact Orlando imagines he sees Sasha as an older, fatter woman shows she has stopped idealizing about her and is ready to move on.

Nick Greene

Nick Greene is an Elizabethan poet and critic. He becomes a major influence in Orlando's life when Orlando invites him to his country estate to discuss literary ideas. Greene is not the romantic figure Orlando expects, in either personality or looks. In fact, he deromanticizes every ideal Orlando has about writers.

Firstly, he talks detrimentally about the likes of Shakespeare and Marlowe, describing them as alcoholic snobs. In his opinion, none of them has neither the ability nor application of a Roman writer such as Cicero. He tells such outlandish tales of the literary elite that, despite himself, Orlando finds Greene very funny. Unfortunately, the poet shows his true colors when he writes a satirical and unkind piece using Orlando as the main character, and excerpts of the poetry Orlando asks him to look at. After spending so long writing and reading, Greene's act disillusioned Orlando and is the catalyst for him replacing his male friends with dogs.

Later on in Victorian times, Orlando meets Greene again. His appearance has much changed, but underneath the clean-cut look, nothing much has changed. Greene is still detrimental about modern-day writers; however, they are now Victorian writers and he



holds the likes of Shakespeare and Marlowe in high esteem. Greene complains about people writing for nothing but money, yet he shows his contradictory nature when he offers to help publish Orlando's work. The power he claims to hold over critics and publishing houses shows writing's change from an art to a business has benefited him greatly.

Greene is an important character in the book in that he greatly influences Orlando's decisions and way of thinking in general. Nick Greene's blunt nature forces Orlando to think, and in the end to change his approach towards writing, in the process discovering herself and life. When Orlando approaches Nick Greene for the second time, her writing and personality has developed enough to merit Greene publishing her work.

Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine

Shelmerdine is the man Orlando marries and finds happiness with. He is a seaman, and through most of the last chapter, Orlando has to cope with him being abroad. Shelmerdine's arrival at the end signals Orlando's discovery as a person.

Archduchess Henrietta/Archduke Harry

The Archduke is from Romania. Orlando spies him wandering around the grounds of his house and invites him in. However, at this point the Archduke is so love with the male Orlando he decides the only way to entice him is to dress up as a woman. Orlando falls immediately in love with who he thinks is an Archduchess, but the thought of love terrifies him so much he flees to Turkey. When Orlando changes to a woman, the Archduke Harry approaches her again and says tells her he is really a man. He wants desperately to marry Orlando, but she refuses. Eventually, she can only get rid of him by treating him badly.

Queen Elizabeth I

The Queen appreciates Orlando's beauty so much she invites him into the royal court. She sees him more of a son than anything, but when she spies him kissing another girl, she throws him out of Whitehall. The Queen refuses to send him into war.

Mr. Pope

Mr. Pope is an Elizabethan poet who the female Orlando befriends at a social gathering. It is through Mr. Pope she meets some of the most important poets of the period. After a short while, Orlando realizes there is nothing particularly special about any of them.



Rustum

Rustum is the gypsy who takes Orlando from Constantinople to his gypsy tribe in the Turkish hills.

Rosina Pepita

Rosina marries Orlando in his room in Turkey the night before he falls asleep for seven days. When Orlando arrives back in England, he finds he has three sons by Rosina, each one laying claim to his property.

King James

King James takes over from Queen Elizabeth. One of his first tasks is to invite Sasha back into the royal court. To get popularity, the new king builds on the icy rivers, creating a carnival type atmosphere. Unfortunately, when the ice melts, many people die.



Objects/Places

Orlando's Estate

Orlando grows up on an estate in the countryside. He goes back to the estate many times throughout the book and usually to get away from people.

London

Orlando has a house in Blackfriars in London. Both as a man and a woman he joins the city's social scene.

Constantinople

Orlando works as an Ambassador in Constantinople in Turkey.

Broussa

Orlando lives with a Gypsy tribe in Broussa. It is a mountainous region of Turkey.

The Oak Tree Poem

The Oak Tree is a poem she writes over the 300 years she lives. It is finally published in the 19th century.

The Royal Court

Orlando is taken into the Royal Court by a succession of kings and queens. He meets Sasha at one of the royal banquets.

The Lake

Orlando meets Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine by a lake and immediately decides to marry him.

The Marie Rose

The Marie Rose is the ship Orlando takes to get from Turkey back to England.



Queen Elizabeth's Ring

Queen Elizabeth gives him a ring which he wears on his wedding ring finger.

The Moors Heads

At the beginning of the book Orlando is trying the heads of Moors hanging in his attic. Both his father and grandfather fought against the Moors.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Virginia Woolf dedicated this novel to her eccentric and charismatic friend, Vita Sackville-West, whose Sapphic tendencies intrigued Woolf throughout their friendship. Orlando is an historical fantasy and literary pastiche which parodies, among other texts, SackvilleWest's own *The Land* (1927).

As in all of Woolf's novels, she creates a radical use of time; some critics have pointed out that Woolf develops her concept from the contemporary writers Henri Bergson and Marcel Proust. Time is simply a measure of the duration of the individual, of the accretion of the past; duration is a function of the invisible progress of the past into the future. Amid this flux and variation which we call the present, one cannot help perceiving past and present as, in a sense, simultaneous or as part of a continuum. The present, even as we experience and perceive it, is part of the past, and *visa versa*; thus, memory becomes central to any conception of the subject and his/her subjectivity. In her masterful and unique narrative, *Orlando*, Woolf capitalizes on the subjective continuity of her subject, Orlando, throughout her/ his gender transitions in order to demonstrate that memory, subjectivity and personal perception are all interconnected.



Themes

Gender

This is the most important theme of the book. Halfway through the novel, Orlando switches from being a male to a female. The change is not the dramatic moment it sounds. From the beginning, Woolf describes Orlando as having a feminine form, with his rosy cheeks and shapely legs. In fact, it is his mind that Woolf describes as masculine. When Orlando changes into a woman, the expectation that he experienced as a man initially lifts. This is particularly the case in her writing. Before he was trying too hard to impress his peers, but as a woman, this is no longer the case and there is not so much pressure on Orlando to achieve. It is during this time she finds her voice as a writer. However, there are different pressures on Orlando as a woman. When her life moves into Victorian times, society suddenly expects her to marry and have children. At this point, writing becomes an enjoyable hobby and the quest for love, which at times as a man Orlando found easy to achieve, becomes the essential part of her life.

The whole book is about satisfying both of his identities, finding the right balance between the male and female self. As a man in Elizabethan England, he has difficulties with the attention lavished on his beauty by women. Because of his feminine streak, Orlando is highly sensitive, and when he falls in love with Sasha, he becomes depressed when she does not return his intense feelings. His melancholic mood lasts until he switches genders. When Orlando does change into a woman, her depression lifts. She becomes more sociable, as now she can articulate her feelings without destroying people's perceptions of how a male or female should act.

She has the added bonus of being able to think like a man and thus understand them. She uses this to befriend the poet Mr. Pope and find out more about the literary world. After she satisfies her curiosity about the literary world, it is interesting she then starts dressing up as a man and wandering around the streets of London seeking adventure. This signifies she is no longer happy as a woman. When the era changes to Victorian times and the woman's role is more difficult, it forces her once again to struggle in life and press on in her quest for happiness. As the book continues, Orlando achieves her masculine aim of making a name of herself when her poetry is published. After this, she seems to become more of a woman and Woolf focuses on her search for love, which she finds in the form of Shelvarine.

Time

The novel covers three hundred years, from Elizabethan times in the seventeenth century to 1928. During this time, Orlando only ages from fifteen to his mid thirties. In fact, from the age of thirty when he is still in the seventeenth century and up to Victorian times, he only ages a few years. In other words, Woolf is suggesting time is what you make of it and holds no importance until you need it to. Throughout the book, Orlando is



trying to make something of himself and find out exactly who he is and what he means. During this voyage of self-discovery, he has no need for time and therefore it rushes past.

One of the reason time moves forward so quickly is because of Orlando's writing. When he writes, Woolf presents time as meaningless. He is in his own world and nothing else matters but what he is writing down on the paper. In particular, Woolf shows this in the last chapter when Orlando writes so much and so fluently she expresses the passing of time in one short paragraph. During this period, Woolf shows his mind thinking about nothing but images of nature. Orlando has no contact with the outside. It is interesting then that when Orlando does move into a new era, she expresses no surprise. It almost as if she is waking from a trance and after so long in seclusion expects the unexpected.

Orlando is lucky in that he is a nobleman and therefore does not need to do normal things like work, and can set his own hours or not even think about hours. When Orlando finds herself and understands what she is looking for, time suddenly becomes important. By the end of the book, she has a child and husband and the book finishes with the date reading October 11th 1928. Finally, Orlando can start living life.

Writing

Orlando's main ambition is to become a writer, and Woolf uses this to study and satirize the craft. Initially she paints him as a character that can do nothing but write. He wants to follow in his father's footsteps and fight against the Moors, but Queen Elizabeth says he is too beautiful. Furthermore, from a small child he has spent his time reading. When the reader meets Orlando at the age of fifteen, he has already written a great number of plays and sonnets. The one thing against him is during Elizabethan times, society thought it wrong for nobleman like Orlando to write. His servants are the first people to note this, questioning the reason why he would to partake in such a lonely pastime when he has all the time and money to do as he pleases.

Nick Greene further emphasizes this point when he laughs at Orlando's attempt at poetry and parodies Orlando's life in a book. At this point, Woolf looks at the effect of criticism on writers. Orlando is so upset about the way Greene deals with his work he sinks further into depression and stops believing he can achieve his goal to become a writer. However, in the long term, Woolf's criticism is not necessarily a bad thing. Because of what Greene tells him, he decides to write for himself, and as a result, his writing style improves. However, Woolf also exposes the fickle nature of critics and writing as a business. In Victorian times, Orlando again meets Nick Greene, but this time he decides immediately to publish her work because it reminds him of Shakespeare and Marlowe, writers he had hated during their lifetime. Interesting Elizabethan writers were popular in Victorian times, so no doubt Greene's view was business orientated.

Woolf does not present writing as an easy task. When Orlando is writing as a man in his country house, she describes the amount of editing, rewriting, and reading needed to

achieve good work. When Greene publishes Orlando's the Oak Tree, Woolf presents it as his life work, something taking Orlando three hundred years to complete.

Themes/Characters

Written as a witty and parodic biography of its protagonist, Orlando, Orlando charts the life and times of its central character from a masculine identity within an Elizabethan Court to a feminine identity in 1928.

This novel provides an analysis of the historically constituted subject, and a critique of gender essentialism while it also explores the important issue of gender and creativity. Subjectivity is presented by Woolf as multifaceted and as a multiplicity of conflicting elements. Orlando further reiterates what Woolf sees as the key problematic of sexual politics: the tension between androgyny and the articulation of sexual difference.

Woolf observes that after her male protagonist becomes a woman, "in every other respect, she remained precisely as he had been" implying that sexually defined selves or roles are merely costumes we wear and that they are readily interchangeable. Further, "it was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of woman's dress and of a woman's sex." Woolf's conception of androgyny remembers that although the sexes are different, they intermix, perhaps more freely than narratives often imply. Indeed, not only is Orlando her/himself a multiple-sexed being who happily transcends gender but her/his form combines in one subjectivity the strength of man and the grace of woman. Orlando becomes the narrative history of the transformed and transforming self which criticizes standard histories and biographies at the same time that it proposes the possibility of an alternative life.



Style

Point of View

Woolf tells the story of Orlando in the third person and from Orlando's perspective. Occasionally Woolf will talk to the reader directly as the author. Woolf does this to draw the reader away from the narrative and show how much the writer knows about her subject. As a result, when reading about Orlando's life, it is difficult for the reader not to draw comparisons with the author's own personality. Woolf is writing about a person finding her voice as an author and a woman but in what she presents as a man's world. In that way, Virginia Woolf uses Orlando to directly communicate her own thoughts about writing and life. In particular, she articulates that men and women are both and share attributes. She suggests to be truly happy you have to find the right balance.

Orlando changes sex halfway through the book, so Woolf has to write from both a male and female perspective. When Orlando is a male the plot moves on relatively quickly at the beginning and the language, though poetic, is not hard to read. In these sections, Woolf focuses more on the external world such as nature, rather than how Orlando thinks. Orlando's repression lifts when he becomes a woman and he is able to access his feeling and his internal world.

Setting

The setting is one of the most important elements of Orlando. The book covers three hundred years from the Elizabethan era to 1928, the year Woolf wrote the novel. In these periods, Woolf talks about factual figures such as Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Queen Elizabeth during the seventeenth century, Queen Victoria in the nineteenth century, and modern innovations such as the car and airplane in the twentieth century. More than anything, though, Woolf uses these settings to further disorient the protagonist Orlando, who is struggling to come to terms from changing from man to woman. Initially, in Elizabethan times, she copes well. There is no pressure to marry and have children and Orlando can be promiscuous without drawing negative attention. Virginia Woolf describes Victorian times as dark and repressive, with clouds hanging over London that rarely lift. Society expects women to marry young and have as many children as they are capable. By the time Orlando moves into the twentieth century, marriage and family has become a natural inclination.

Woolf also uses Constantinople in Turkey as a location. Orlando works as a British ambassador for King James, working so hard the king rewards him with his highest honor. Orlando lives a life of luxury in a palace. His house has a courtyard where everyone gathers to watch him receive the king's reward on his balcony. It is in his bedroom Orlando changes from a woman to a man. When he wakes up, a Gypsy takes him to Broussa, where she lives with a gypsy tribe. Initially, Orlando loves Turkey, but by the end, she pines again for England and catches a boat home.



Orlando has a house in Blackfriars in London. He stays there when he is feeling sociable and everything is well with his world. When Orlando is in more of a melancholic mood, he lives in his 365-bedroom house in the country where the majority of his servants also reside. When Nick Greene stays at the house, he describes it as too comfortable for a writer. Nevertheless, Orlando does most of his writing and reading in the country.

Language and Meaning

Woolf uses poetic language throughout, suiting Orlando's poetic mindset. Woolf tends to use this style more during Orlando's melancholic moods as a man and increases the poetic language even more when she becomes a woman. The poetic language gives the novel a sense of melodrama. While he is a man, secluding himself from society, it shows he is happily living in his own world. As a woman, it gives her character more of a feminine identity. For example, at the end of the book, when she moves into twentieth century, the book loses its narrative and becomes virtually plot free, every line communicating a feeling. This works to show her acceptance of herself as a woman and the high emotions she feels while waiting for her husband to return.

When Orlando is being more sociable or conducting a love affair, such as the one he has with Sasha, Woolf uses prose that is more conventional. This allows the reader to follow important passages of the story and gives the chance for Woolf to show her wit. Sometimes within the more conventional passage, she adds lines that seem to satirize her own poetic leanings. For example, when Orlando admires Mr. Pope's eyebrow, she suddenly realizes it is not his eyebrow but a cushion above his head.

Structure

Orlando is comprised of six chapters, each about thirty pages long. In total, the book is 165 pages. Orlando is a man for the first part of the book and then halfway through the third chapter he changes into a woman. When the change occurs, the plot does not move along so quickly and delves more deeply into Orlando's character. While he is a man, Woolf often describes his adventures with Sasha, but when Orlando becomes a woman, the book becomes more about feelings. For example, Orlando goes ashore with the sea captain, yet the reader knows nothing about what happens apart from Orlando returns feeling more like a woman. In comparison, when Orlando is a man, Woolf describes Sasha and Orlando having sex on the ice.

In some ways, the plot of the book reflects Orlando's happiness. The plot is much stronger when Orlando is a man. It sticks to the same era and in general moves along conventionally. However, within this conventional structure, Orlando is not happy and seems to be going through the motions, much like a dull, plot-driven book. When he becomes a woman, the shackles come off, the plot loses its structure, and its tone becomes more poetic. By the end of the book, there is little plot structure. As a woman, Orlando has moved through three eras, and in the twentieth century, emotions rather

than plot become important. The freer structure gives the feeling Orlando is finally living the unreserved life he needs to succeed. Orlando's happiness is confirmed when her husband returns from the sea.



Quotes

"And the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty Eight." p. 162

"It is certain indeed that many ladies were ready to show him their favours. The names of three at least were freely coupled with him in marriage—Clorinda, Favilla, Euphrsyne—so he called them his three sonnets." p. 14

"So he waited in the darkness. Suddenly he was struck in the face by a blow, soft, yet heavy on the side of his cheek. So strong with expectation was he, that he started and put his hand to his sword. The blow was repeated a dozen times on forehead and cheek. The dry frost has lasted so long that it took him a minute to realise that these were raindrops falling, the blows were the blows of rain." p. 28

"She burst into a passion of tears and striding back to the gipsies camp, told them she must set sail for England the very next day. It was for her that she did so. Already the young men had plotted her death. Honour, they said, demanded it for she did not think as they did." p. 74

"'A little of the the fat, Ma'am?' he asked. 'Let me cut you just the tiniest slice the size of your finger nail.' At those words a delicious tremor ran through her frame." p. 76

"Here she tossed her foot impatiently, and showed an inch or two of calf. A sailor on the mast, who happened to look down at the moment, started so violently that he missed his footing and only saved himself by the skin of his teeth." p. 77

"She turned to present the Archduchess with the salver, and behold, in her place stood a tall gentlemen in black. A heap of clothes lay in the fendor. She was alone with a man." p. 87

"The damp struck within. Men felt the chill in their hearts; the damp in their minds. In a desperate effort to snuggle their feelings into some sort of warmth one subterfuge was tried after another. Love, birth and death were all swaddled in a variety of fine phrases. The sexes drew further and further apart." p. 113

"The life of an average woman was a succession of childbirths. She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty." p. 113

"'Are you positive you aren't a man?' he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, 'Can it be possible you're not a woman?'" p. 127

"It was now November. After November comes December. Then January, February, March and April. After April comes May. June, July and August follow. Next September. Then October, and so, behold, here we are back at November again, with a whole year accomplished." p. 131



"And when we are writing a life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love the poet has said, is woman's whole existence. And if we look for a moment at Orlando writing at her table we must admit that never was there a woman more fitted for that calling." p. 132



Adaptations

In 1993, Sally Potter created a motion picture adaptation of *Orlando*, starring Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth I and Tilda Swinton as Orlando, which won critical acclaim. There is much about the film that miraculously transforms the phantasmagoric work of twentieth-century fiction onto film while staying true to the book's fantastic premise. Potter follows the hero/ine through the various centuries, but Orlando remains unchanged by passing time except in the case of his/her wisdom which involves, in this case, a change of sex. The film can be read, like the book, as a meditation on the implications of gender relations, cultural inheritance, historical consciousness, and sexual identity.

Various compressions occur in Potter's translation of the book into the medium of film: Virginia Woolf depicts gender as a quality that is subject to sudden change or reversal, not only in Orlando but mirrored in every character with which Orlando is involved.

Potter mutes the bisexual or pan-sexual ambiance of the story to instead evoke androgyny through certain caring choices. Of major significance in the film is the change of Orlando's child from male in the novel to female in the film; Potter attaches great importance to the child's birth, while Woolf sees it as merely a biological event that has little significance when compared to the book which Orlando has been trying to write for centuries. One could possibly argue that the film reinforces a more conventional view of posterity as genetic whereas for Woolf the important thing is the making of one's life work. Conversely, it could be said that Potter's Orlando becomes emancipated from the rituals of the class system via the disinheritance that does not take place in Woolf's original tale.

Potter herself recognizes that she had to "strengthen some of the narrative muscle for cinematic purposes — to supply little bits of motivation for the story's premise, to make it psychologically convincing on film," which includes powerful music co-written by Potter and David Motion to impel the narrative, as well as changes to characterization. One such change involves the issue of the change of sex. In the film, Potter creates a motivation for Orlando to change sex: that he was pushed to the limits of what was expected of him in his masculine role — to kill or be killed in war. It is this crisis that pushes him into the female experience, an experience which eventually leads her to experience a crisis at the limit of femininity. In the book, the change of sex is arbitrary, while in the film, its impetus is war.

The final major change from text to film surrounds the issue of inheritance: in the film, Orlando is to be dispossessed unless she marries — and she does not marry. In the book, Orlando is relieved of the onus of a marriage she made when she was a man; she is allowed her inheritance and does marry.

Potter justifies this change to the original through an understanding of Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West. Potter's reading of the gift which Woolf gives to Sackville-West in the writing of the novel involves a metaphoric re-inheritance for SackvilleWest as she had been disinherited in real life, a metaphor which Potter does



not find convincing; rather, in the film, there is greater concern with the dismantling of the ideology of inheritance which is not done in the novel because Orlando keeps the house and somehow the message becomes that everything is eternally the same in the repetition of history. By the end of the film, Orlando loses everything in order to find something undefinable and transcendent.

Potter has defended her changes as being true to the spirit of Virginia Woolf's attitude as it comes through in her essays.

One more point of interest: In the film, each of the passing centuries has a distinct climate as well as important differences in manners and culture.

This interpretation Potter claims is purely poetic license on the principle that the whole aesthetic of the film is based on place, simplification, economy, and condensation into 35mm film and ninety-two minutes; therefore, to take some essence of each historical period and exaggerate it would make the film more intense. Potter successfully delineates the changes between centuries with using light, dark, and gold extensively for the Elizabethan period, while the Victorian period is seen in terms of mist and green fertility. The twentieth century represents a leap into artificiality with electricity, whiteness, plastic, flat lighting, and even a scene where Orlando roars into the century upon a motorcycle.



Key Questions

Woolf kept a diary spanning a time period of twenty-six years. In *Orlando*, Orlando is allowed to exist over four hundred years, returning to visit her/ his beloved oak tree in the many stages of her/his life. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Clarissa is visited with many figures and memories from her past; in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the Ramsay summer house is visited by the same people at two different time periods.

1. How does Virginia Woolf conceive of time? What are some of the major themes she associates with time? How does "home" play an important role in relation to time in these novels?
2. Given Woolf's own privileged status as one of the English elite and her strict avoidance of writing politically for the feminist movement, there is much critical debate over how and why Virginia Woolf can be read as a feminist writer; however, she repeatedly advocates that women's peculiar relationship to patriarchal order determines their experience and perceptions.

Drawing on Woolf's biography, as well as some of her novels and critical essays including *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas* (1938), and "Professions for Women," discuss this idea. What narrative strategies does Woolf use to help us to interpret her work as explicitly feminist?

3. How does Woolf develop a feminist perspective that is materialistic, humanistic, interdisciplinary, and universal?
4. Woolf envisions an "androgyny" theory which reminds us that our relation is to the "world of reality and not only to the world of men and women."

Her works characteristically reject a masculine emphasis on polar thinking by supporting the validity and viability of a female aesthetic. Using some of her novels, discuss how Woolf deconstructs gender stereotypes to show that all modes of perceiving reality are viable, no matter which gender they originate in.

5. Woolf frequently spoke of characterization as a cluster of "caves" connected by "tunnels." Discuss how some of Woolf's other writing techniques, such as omniscience (chain of perception), interpolation (connection of disparate events through imagery) shifting perspective, irony and mixing of genres show her ability to connect characters and scenes through time and space. Discuss how and why these techniques serve to undermine the sense that there is only one centralized, moral standpoint.
6. In *The Waves* and *Orlando*, telling is an essential part of the story; it is a way of creating a life. As human beings, why do we make stories? Discuss themes associated with pleasure, escape and connection, using two or three of Virginia Woolf's novels.



Topics for Discussion

How does Woolf's writing change when Orlando becomes a woman?

Do you think Orlando is a feminist novel or a discourse on gender in general?

In what ways does Woolf satirize writing and the culture surrounding it?

Why did Woolf write Orlando as a biographical account? What meaning does it give the book?

In what way does Woolf connect writing and the passing of time?

The tone of the novel is not referred to as light hearted. Does the novel have deeper meaning or is such a search for meaning what Woolf is trying to parody?

Why is it important to Orlando's happiness that she became a woman?

Does Woolf's style of writing change to fit in with the era she is writing about?

What elements of Orlando's character are female and what elements are male? How does Orlando combine these elements to find happiness?

Related Titles

In Woolf's writing, there is a continuing concern with the Woman Question and issues surrounding women's subjugation and the need for women's independence. To understand fully what Woolf intends to accomplish in her fiction, it is crucial to consider *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the feminist polemic where Woolf outlines her strategy for women's emancipation in writing. Woolf discusses at great length the question of women and writing; she argues that literature should explore feminine experience and not form a comparative assessment of women's experience in relation to men's. She is primarily concerned with the problem of mimicry, and suggests that the majority of women's writing in the nineteenth century by women is not yet "women's writing." Woolf believes that women writers should "think back through their mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men for help, however much we go to them for pleasure." Woolf carefully presents a materialist analysis of women's marginalization in society and puts forward a sustained analysis of British society as a patriarchy where women are merely used by men to reflect back their own image at twice the size like a mirror.

In addition, Woolf describes the educational, social and financial disadvantages and prejudices against which women have been forced to struggle since the beginning of history; she forcefully depicts the hypothetical fate of a sister of Shakespeare whose literary aspirations can only end in suicide because unless women are given the privacy and independence implied by "a room of one's own," she will not be able to write well and freely. Woolf also pays tribute to the women writers of the past such as Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, and the Bronte Sisters whose achievements in the novel form while it was still young. Woolf projects a future in which increasing equality would enable women to become not only novelists but poets.

Woolf's vision of a new women's writing includes the need to revise language, syntax, style, sentence and literary conventions, narrative and value systems in the novel that have been created by men. Her argument for the feminine narrative proposes a definite connection between sexual difference and language, while the final section of her polemic introduces the complex notion of androgyny which endorses a harmony or unity of sexual differences as the ideal writing identity because "Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine."

This idea of the androgynous is carried further in *Three Guineas* (1938).

Her second polemic is a socialist, feminist and pacifist argument on the relation between art and propaganda which picks up the themes of the earlier *A Room of One's Own*. Again, Woolf looks at the enforced development of a society of outsiders which she considers enabling as a strategic formation which could be resistant to dominant social institutions and which could develop its own methods for liberty, equality and peace. The notion of woman is assessed here as the scapegoat of history and Woolf argues for the necessity for women and other marginalized groups, particularly the working classes, to claim and create their own history and literature. Noteworthy of the original text is that it was accompanied by photographs of war-torn Spain which were

juxtaposed with men in patriarchal clothing; her critique of nationalism, jingoism and fascism is explicit in the representation of the patriarchal dress of authority and power, and the accepted guise of the patriarchal value system.



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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994