

# VIRGINIA WOOLF

## LIFE (1882 - 1941)

Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882. Her father was a critic and philosopher and she grew up and was educated in a highly cultivated atmosphere. After her father's death, she lived with her brothers and sisters in the Bloomsbury district where the family soon became the centre of a circle of artists and intellectuals known as the *Bloomsbury Group*, famous for its unconventional ideas and anti-conformist attitudes. For the rest of her life she would suffer from periods of depression and mental illness. In 1912 she married and completed her first novel, *The Voyage Out*. In *Mrs Dalloway* she moved away from realism. *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* consolidated her reputation as a leading experimental writer. Her greatest commercial success was *Orlando*, a work that combined fantasy with glimpses of Woolf's own bisexuality in the biography of a character who lived through four centuries and changes from a man into a woman. In March 1941, she drowned herself in a river near her home in Sussex.

## ACHIEVEMENT

Virginia Woolf embodied the **modernist experimental spirit**. After Joyce, she is considered the other great introspective novelist, because she focuses her novels on thought, memory and feeling. In attempting to render the inner life of characters, Woolf developed a series of literary devices that reproduce her character's **stream of consciousness**. One way of doing this is the **interior monologue**, where characters communicate directly with themselves. However Woolf excelled at another technique, called **free indirect style**. Here her character's thoughts are narrated in the third person, but the author omits reporting verbs and imitates the kind of language the character would use.

## TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

*To the Lighthouse* is regarded as the high-point of Virginia Woolf's achievement as novelist. In writing it, the author drew on memories of happy summer holidays in a large house which was a meeting place for relatives and friends. But this happiness was clouded by the death of her mother first, her father and her brother then. The external events of the novel closely resemble these biographical facts. The work has been seen as an elegy for her lost mother and seems written to resist mortality through the power of art and imagination.

In *To the Lighthouse* action is reduced to the essential and the novel draws its real life from her ability to render the subjective impressions of her characters thanks to her mastery of the **stream of consciousness** technique. In this novel Woolf explores the difficulty of communication between men and women and she also analyses the differences between the female and male personality in a way that undermines conventional ideas about male superiority.

**PLOT.** The Ramsays are passing their summer holidays at a large rented house in Scotland with some friends. The various members of the family and their guests pass the time in a variety of ways. The main drama and tension mounts around the question of a visit to the lighthouse in the bay. In the second section of the novel we learn that Mrs Ramsay has died, that her daughter has also died and that her eldest son has been killed in the First World War. In the final section Mr Ramsay takes a boat to the lighthouse and finally reaches it.