

# Ten Things You (Probably) Didn't Know About Virginia Woolf

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**Virginia Woolf** wrote in her diary, “I must be private, secret, as anonymous and submerged as possible in order to write.” Given the multiple volumes of her diary, letters and memoirs, the outward facts of her life are well-documented, but the priority she gives to the inward life, to what lies obscured in night and shadow, leaves much yet unknown.

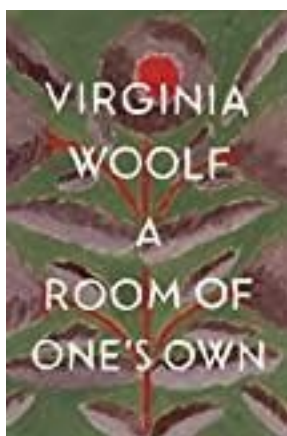
**1. “The Mysterious Case of Miss V.”** This is the title of a scrap of manuscript written in 1906 about a woman who passes unknown and silent through her lifetime. The challenge is “to track down the shadow, to see where she lived and if she lived, and talk to her...” Who was the unnamed Miss V? Might she bear some relation to Miss Virginia Stephen (Woolf’s maiden name)?



**2. The Unnoticed Influence of Woolf’s Aunt. Virginia**

Woolf's father **Leslie Stephen** put down his sister Miss **Caroline Emilia Stephen** as "Silly Milly" who wrote "little books." It was the way of Victorian men towards spinsters (like the fictional Miss V). Leslie Stephen's children took up his tone towards his sister, whom they called "the Nun." This dismissal has distracted attention from what was formative for 22-year-old Virginia during the last months of 1904 when she lived with her 72-year-old aunt Caroline at The Perch, her home in Cambridge. It was, Virginia said, "an ideal retreat for me," following a breakdown. A Quaker convert and theologian, her aunt's chief book, *Quaker Strongholds* (1890)—reprinted three times—and her papers in London's Metropolitan Museum reveal habits of mind that are precisely those of her niece: to switch off the clamor of public voices in favor of "the witness within" and demand more than votes for women: nothing less than "the disuse of power." She did not wish women to imitate the abuses of male power and called for women to exercise their vote collectively.

**3. The first published essay.** It was while Virginia Stephen lived with her aunt Caroline that she picked up her pen to write professionally for the first time in November 1904. It was for a women's supplement to a church magazine called *The Guardian*. The topic she chose was a pilgrimage to the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth. In the museum, above a bank on the steep village street, she's "thrilled" to find the little oak stool "which Emily carried with her on her solitary moorland tramps, and on which she sat, if not to write, as they say, to think."



**4. “Thinking back through our mothers.”** This famous phrase, which sparked a turn to women’s history, appeared in Woolf’s first feminist treatise, *A Room Of One’s Own* (1929).

The book originated in lectures to women students at Cambridge in 1928, the year of the Equal Franchise Act, granting the vote to all women. But back in 1906 Virginia Stephen was already exploring the possibility of women’s history in a neglected but wonderful story, “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn,” about 15th century women who maintain domestic order while thugs (recorded by traditional history as the Wars of the Roses) rampage outside their walls.

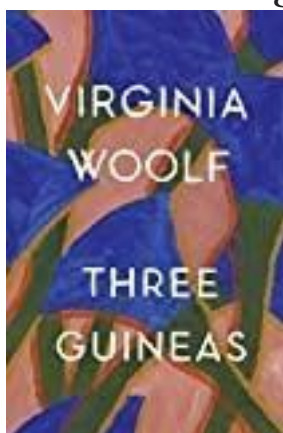
**5. A Question of “Madness.”** A nervous temperament was thought to unfit people, especially females, for public life. In fact, Virginia Woolf shared a predisposition for mental illness with forebears who were particularly able in public office. Her grandfather, Sir **James Stephen**, had “a severe nervous illness” after drawing up the Parliamentary bill against slavery in 1833. As Colonial Under-Secretary, his anxiety over the colonies (when slave-owners resisted his bill) was so overwrought as to be “a test of insanity.” He apologized to his wife for being “moonstruck.” His son, Leslie Stephen, a successful man of letters, had what he termed “Berserker fits.” Caroline Stephen, who established a women’s refuge in the 1870s, had a breakdown of sorts after her mother died.



**6. A “prelude” to marriage.** “To be 29 and unmarried—to

be a failure—childless—insane too, no writer,” Virginia Stephen groaned to her sister in June 1911. That very month **Leonard Woolf** turned up on leave from his Colonial Office post in Ceylon. Ten months later, when they announced their engagement, she wrote teasingly to two single friends, “I am marrying a penniless Jew.” It is impossible to document fully what happened when their union was put to the test early on, between 1913 and 1915 – a period Virginia Woolf later called the “prelude” to marriage. Following her breakdowns during those years, her second novel, *Night and Day* (1919), devises a positive reply to what is a critical and even adversarial stance in Leonard Woolf’s novel, *The Wise Virgins* (1914) with its ambiguous Virginia figure Camilla Lawrence, who is too classy, too non-Jewish for the hero, Harry. We can have some insight into this fraught time through the way their books talk to each other, and take in what Virginia did to heal what had been hurtful to Leonard.

**7. The Russian Ballet.** Dates in Leonard Woolf’s diary in 1911, 1912, and 1918, record visits to the Diaghilev Ballet when they performed to enraptured audiences. Among these was a performance of Act II of *Swan Lake* and it’s worth exploring a link between the revelation of the Swan Queen’s outsider existence in the dark woods (versus the routines of court) and the honeymoon-versus-marriage plot of Virginia Woolf’s greatest story, “Lappin and Lapinova.” Lopokova was the name of Diaghilev’s prima ballerina during the 1918 season in London at the time Virginia Woolf first conceived this story.



**8. The Outsiders’ Society.** Virginia Woolf is usually seen as

an insider among her Bloomsbury set, made up largely of privileged, upper-middle-class men who had been at top schools and Cambridge University. But in her treatise, *Three Guineas* (1938), she positions herself as an “Outsider” and member of an “Outsiders’ Society.” This is a secret and anonymous organization of women. In her diary, on February 7, 1938, Virginia Woolf considers putting out an illustrated sheet to be called *The Outsider*, as a way of popularizing and politicizing an Outsider party. Members work for the same aims as men who are brothers: “liberty, equality and peace.” But women do this separately, “by their own methods,” resisting militancy and the temptation to imitate men.

**9. Preparing for suicide.** It is a fact that Virginia Woolf committed suicide on March 28, 1941 by weighting her pockets with stones and wading into the fast-running River Ouse near her writing room in the village of Rodmell in Sussex. What is less well-known is that in 1940 Leonard proposed joint suicide to a reluctant Virginia. At that time German invasion of Britain seemed imminent after the rest of Europe had fallen to the Nazis. As a Jew, Leonard expected to be seized and his wife too. In fact, they were already on Himmler’s list for immediate arrest.

**10. Silencing and Voicing.** In the 19th century nice women were quiet. Virginia Woolf said that she and her sister were taught the “tea-table” manner. This was designed to keep polite, self-effacing conversation flowing. The most vital fact in her life was the contrast between this stifling of utterance, this concealment in “shadow”—epitomized by Miss V—and the ground shaking under her like an earthquake when she brought out her full-throated “Outsider” voice, protesting against military or domestic violence in favour of nurture, listening and sympathy, values which the civilized of both sexes already share. The voice of her Outsider prepares the way for the present voice of the #MeToo generation.