

# ?Reading? ↗ The Voyage Out

## Author Virginia Woolf –

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Posted on 10 January 2018 By Virginia Woolf

Woolf's first novel is a haunting book, full of light and shadow. It takes Mr and Mrs Ambrose and their niece, Rachel, on a sea voyage from London to a resort on the South American coast. It is a strange, tragic, inspired book whose scene is a South America not found on any map and reached by a boat which would not float on any sea, an America whose spiritual boundaries touch Xanadu and Atlantis. E. M. Forster self-consciously recalling the fiction of Jane Austen, *The Voyage Out* makes strange the conventions of the nineteenth-century British novel. Woolf's first novel, published in 1915 in the midst of the First World War, echoes so many features of the past century's most popular form of literature. Be it the story's creaky adherence to the marriage plot or the omniscient narrator's stilted interest in the female protagonist's moral education, most of the novel dutifully relies on conventions it knows to be outmoded. Then, at the moment when the narrative seems to be nearing its preordained conclusion, Woolf begins to unravel the genre: first gently, then aggressively. The book unexpectedly ends on a morbid note that signals the author's desire for a new type of novel in step with the modern world. How flimsy are the accoutrements of civilisation in the face of nature! It's like it took Virginia a third of this novel to get out of her Victorian stays, chemises, petticoats and corsets. Once she shakes off all the Victorian trappings though she moves with beautiful poise and clarity of purpose. So, it's quite heavy-footed to begin with, not as modern in tone and treatment as Forster who had already written a couple of his novels when she wrote this. It's as if Woolf has to free

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herself of tradition by first embracing it. She does this by creating a background cast of Victorian characters, elderly spinsters and erudite emotionally retarded elderly men and embarking on what seems a comedy of manners. Not perhaps Woolf's forte though, that said, it does have some fabulous comic moments and made me laugh out loud at least three times. It's clear Woolf couldn't help thinking of the older generation as enemies and her foremost inclination is to ridicule them. This inclination muddies the early part of the novel a bit. Forster was better at characterising elderly interfering women, mainly because he sympathised with them and was able to write about them with tenderness as well as mockery whereas Woolf seems to find it difficult to overcome a snobbishly scornful point of view. Also, in the name of realism we're in a busy hotel she duplicates characters which means it's hard to differentiate some of the women. There are probably too many. Woolf is much engaging in this novel when she's writing about people of her own generation. In fact the novel becomes infinitely compelling every time Rachel is its prevailing voice. There's nothing of the comedy of manners genre about Rachel. Woolf is on the hunt for what's fugitive about Rachel. Already there are signs of her ambition to write a new kind of biography which she was to achieve in such a brilliant and ground-breaking manner in *The Waves*. The tone of the novel becomes kinder, warmer, when love arrives, the spinsters and middle-aged married women are treated with tenderness, and the novel improves massively as a result. If the first half was a three-star read, the second half is a five-star read. It's poignant that the young lover uses the exact same words to describe a relationship as Woolf herself was to use in her suicide note to Leonard. It also provides an insight into what Woolf herself went through as a young woman. I suspect the descriptions of Rachel's illness were inspired by her own breakdowns. Thanks to Michael's comment below I've been thinking about what Woolf says about love in this novel. Rachel offers lots of insights into Woolf herself, a woman who seemed to live without sexual passion. For Rachel love is like a river that takes her deeper inside herself. It doesn't, as it does to most, bring her out of herself. It heralds a deeper silence rather than a louder singing. It's closer to death than it is to life. It's probably worth remembering Woolf had already attempted suicide.

Me, Margaret

The Chronicles of Narnia

Hop On Pop

Stuart Little

Curious George

One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish

Where the Wild Things Are

The Little Engine That Could

The Hobbit, or There and Back Again

James and the Giant Peach

Where the Red Fern Grows

Because of Winn-Dixie

Island of the Blue Dolphins

Guess How Much I Love

before writing this This might mean she had a greater need than most to believe in the transformative powers of love but at the same time less faith in those powers I thought the last two chapters were incredibly powerful and haunting and perhaps a little depressing as an attempt to examine the testament of love Brings me back again to her suicide note to Leonard I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been And yet these were two people who had never made love All Woolf's romantic conflicts are encapsulated in that one line. It's been a long time since I read this I was surprised by how good it is Especially the second half, the depiction of young love and illness, which is inspired Lovely to renew my twenty year old love affair with Virginia Woolf. Rachel Vinrace sets out on a voyage from the confines of her home in England, where she is raised by her spinster aunts, to the exotic coast of South America in the early twentieth century But than just the physical journey from one shore to another, The Voyage Out is a story of the transformation of this essentially unworldly girl to a self possessed woman in love with the seemingly enlightened yet searching young writer, Terence Hewet Some of the most lovely and illuminating writing flowed from Virginia Woolf's hand as she wrote the words to describe the conversations as well as the innermost thoughts of her characters Rachel reflects on her feelings as she sits in the room where she attended her first dance as a yet inexperienced girl at the South American hotel She could hardly believe it was the same room It had looked so bare and so bright and formal on that night when they came into it out of the darkness now the room was dim and quiet, and beautiful silent people passed through it the methods by which she had reached her present position, seemed to her very strange, and the strangest thing about them was that she had not known where they were leading her That was the strange thing, that one did not know where one was going, or what one wanted, and followed blindly, suffering so much in secret but one thing led to another and by degrees something had formed itself out of nothing, and so one reached at last this calm, this quiet, this certainty, and it was this process that people called living When I first started reading The Voyage Out, I was not sure I would like it Initially, I had a bit of difficulty keeping the various characters and names straight in my head I wasn't sure about

You

The Mouse and the Motorcycle

Horton Hears a Who!

The Darkangel

The Secret Garden

Old Yeller

The Golden Compass

them I didn't know if I liked any of them. But, as the ship reached the shore and each character was drawn so meaningfully, I was hooked. Feminism and the constraints faced by women during this time, marriage, and the individuality of persons are all issues examined very thoroughly here. Each person, man or woman, has his or her own struggles to which we become privy. Evelyn, another tormented young woman, is distressed over multiple marriage proposals and the desire to remain independent. I thought the other day on that mountain how I'd have liked to be one of those colonists, to cut down trees and make laws and all that, instead of fooling about with all these people who think one's just a pretty young lady. Though I'm not, I really must do something. Surely, Evelyn was one of many women to suffer due to the barriers placed on her gender. Women are not the only ones here that agonize over life choices, self-examination, and the pursuit of happiness. As Hewet realizes he has fallen in love with Rachel, he frequently broods over his ideas surrounding the institution of marriage. He draws various pictures in his mind of married couples sitting together in a firelit room. These pictures were very unpleasant. He tried all sorts of pictures, taking them from the lives of friends of his, for he knew many different married couples. When, on the other hand, he began to think of unmarried people, he saw them active in an unlimited world above all, standing on the same ground as the rest, without shelter or advantage. All the most individual and humane of his friends were bachelors and spinsters. Complex characters, vivid and beautiful descriptions of the exotic surroundings, and very real human internal struggles all make for a brilliant novel that one should savor slowly and thoroughly. Ms. Woolf has left me wanting and wondering how and when we can truly achieve personal peace and happiness. I believe this is a question she could not quite answer herself. I plan to read of her work to see if she can shed any light on this human voyage. We may not always understand the pattern in front of us, Woolf seems to be saying, and we may spend the majority of our life isolated from others and trapped within our own experience, but only by reconnecting to the pattern through people and through art can we truly be alive, writes Pagan Harleman, the Woolf scholar who wrote this fascinating introduction to my Barnes and Noble Classics edition of *The Voyage Out*. This voyage out really

seems to be a voyage in, into the conscious choices of several people of different backgrounds and ideologies who find their lives entangled. The question is whether the voyage is good for all, as life is faced with interminable problems and dismal consequences, as Rachel experiences, once she leaves her sheltered life. We learn Newton's Law of Motion, in school, but we never truly process it. He had never realized before that underneath every action, underneath the life of every day, pain lies, quiescent, but ready to devour. He seemed to be able to see suffering, as if it were a fire, curling up over the edges of all action, eating away the lives of men and women. You don't get climatic thought or action here except for the vital scene towards the end and even that is arguably climatic and I think this bothered me at first, for I was seeking some of the audacious consciousness of *Night and Day*. I wasn't too thrilled with Rachel, the main character, or with Helen Ambrose, her aunt, although Clarissa Dalloway's frankness and Evelyn's feministic views piqued my interest. Rachel is a woman on a quest to understand the world of male-female relationships that has been hidden from her by her protective father. Helen Ambrose is on some inward journey herself alongside her scholar husband, a journey seemingly projected onto her young niece although you never truly get to understand Helen, or her fascination and flirtation with the young scholars Hirst and Hewett. With Hewett and Rachel's interaction, there is a hint of Lawrence's technique in *Women in Love*, that useful and entertaining technique of having male characters with feministic meanderings. These characters may be easily forgotten but their stances on life are not, particularly when female characters stand in for subserviency. They prod, they question, they discover, and this obsession with meaning is appealing. That was the strange thing, that one did not know where one was going, or what one wanted, and followed blindly, suffering so much in secret, always unprepared and amazed and knowing nothing but one thing led to another and by degrees something had formed itself out of nothing, and so one reached at last this calm, this quiet, this certainty, and it was this process that people called living. I read this novel once before, over a decade ago, but when I read it again, I applauded something I hadn't paid attention to before: Woolf's encapsulation of the smallness of one life, as relates to the

vastness of the general concept of life We are but specks on this great blanket called the universe, or patches of light, as Rachel puts it, and ever so often we re faced with the painful reality of our somewhat insignificant existence And yet there is much to live for, and so much to live through. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged life is a luminous halo, a semi transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end Virginia Woolf, *Modern Fiction* If we look at her works, what we evidently notice is that the idea which most engages Virginia Woolf is that of life itself Life as it is witnessed every day, the transition from one moment to the other and everything that comes in between A life not symmetrically arranged in a destined pattern but lived in the consciousness enfolding it A life gleaming in the perception of fleeting flashes A life resonating with ripples of thoughts, dispersing and then converging with other thoughts, forming a current creating eddies one moment and in other letting the stream run swiftly along the way A life pounding with emotions a relentless cascade from one end to the other In her first novel Virginia sets on a voyage to discover this idea, to understand her own relation with the notions lying concealed underneath mind and constituting life, her relation with people in her life, with a world largely unfamiliar till her twenties or with the notions like relation between men and women, a woman s position in society, happiness, beauty, time, space and delirium And though one misses her masterful strokes visible much clearly in her later works, one cannot help but admire the efforts undertaken during her first excursion. When she speaks of the room to be provided to Rachel during her stay with the Ambroses at the island, we perceive the outline for a need of having a room for oneself Among the promises which Mrs Ambrose had made her niece should she stay was a room cut off from the rest of the house, large, private a room in which she could play, read, think, defy the world, a fortress as well as a sanctuary Rooms, she knew, became like worlds than rooms at the age of twenty four Her judgment was correct, and when she shut the door Rachel entered an enchanted place, where the poets sang and things fell into their right proportions Hewet s conversation with Rachel about women brings forth Woolf s deliberation on the discrimination that women were subjected to in the society There it was going on in the background, for all

those thousands of years, this curious silent unrepresented life  
Of course we're always writing about women abusing them, or  
jeering at them, or worshipping them but it's never come from  
women themselves I believe we still don't know in the least  
how they live, or what they feel, or what they do precisely One  
of her inescapable relations with time, whether exterior or interior  
time, which figures so prominently in her later works is also  
dealt with here As midday drew on, and the sun beat straight  
upon the roof, an eddy of great flies droned in a circle iced  
drinks were served under the palms the long blinds were pulled  
down with a shriek, turning all the light yellow The clock now  
had a silent hall to tick in, and an audience of four or five  
somnolent merchants By degrees white figures with shady hats  
came in at the door, admitting a wedge of the hot summer day,  
and shutting it out again After resting in the dimness for a  
minute, they went upstairs Simultaneously, the clock wheezed  
one, and the gong sounded, beginning softly, working itself into  
a frenzy, and ceasing There was a pause Then all those who  
had gone upstairs came down cripples came, planting both feet  
on the same step lest they should slip prim little girls came,  
holding the nurse's finger fat old men came still buttoning  
waistcoats The gong had been sounded in the garden, and by  
degrees recumbent figures rose and strolled in to eat, since the  
time had come for them to feed again Her love for circles and  
eddies is quite clearly manifested as there are not only direct  
references in some scenes e.g in dance scene at the party in  
the hotel but also where we are made to go round and round in  
the mind of one character or swirled from the mind of one  
character to the other, though it lacks her signature deftness  
since this shifting is mostly aided through a third person  
narrative using a direct style Regardless, it doesn't impede the  
narration The only hitch in the novel, as far as her writing is  
concerned I believe, is the part where Rachel and Hewet's  
relation post engagement is portrayed because here Woolf  
seems to be struggling, almost dragging her words. There is  
also a passing reference to the group of Bloomsbury and to  
Mrs Dalloway's love of flowers And while reader is smitten,  
wondering how Virginia gives a little of herself to each of her  
characters, there comes the final convergence death of Rachel  
The depiction of Rachel's state of delirium towards the end is  
so vivid as to be suggestive of Virginia's own scuffle but what

is absorbing is Virginia's attempt at bringing the characters together, through their thoughts, after Rachel's death. Here too she seems to be engaging, with the process of tunneling which she exercised comprehensively in *Mrs Dalloway*. It is worthwhile going through the journey of reading her first novel because it does, in so many ways, make one feel closer to the wonderful writer while providing insight into her person and into the ideas that defined her life and her works.

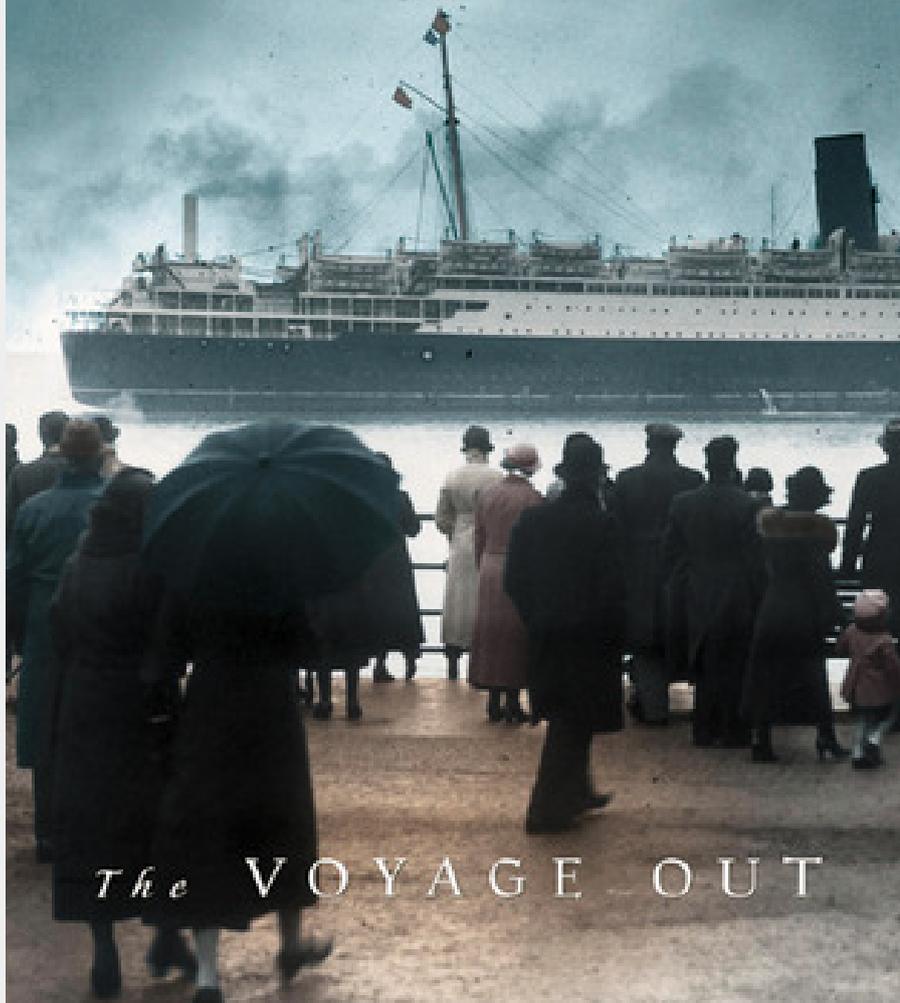
3.5 Hard for me to define my feelings on this novel, a stream of consciousness novel that has a great many characters. Woolf herself was an observer of people, of society and that is certainly apparent in her characters, their thoughts and the situations in which they find themselves. This is not an easy read, though it is a thought provoking one. On the one hand I am not sure that it needed as many characters as there were, made this confusing than it needed to be. Some of the thoughts and conversations may not have had huge impact had they been deleted. My favorite parts were when they were still on the ship, felt I received a better feel for those characters, which was smaller, than I did with the larger cast later on. So I loved this first part and also found the party at the hotel very amusing. The appearance of the *Dalloway* on the ship was like a breath of fresh air. Yet, there are many moments of brilliance, when a phrase or a description was just so perfect that one could recognize Woolf's genius. Women's roles, society expectations are all fodder for her ironic sense of humor. The unreal expectations of men and women relationships, their romantic viewpoints of love and a young girl just trying to figure out whom she is and her place in the world. So all in all, not easy but glad I read it, it is certainly memorable, especially the ending which was a surprise I wasn't expecting. It's been three years since I read *The Voyage Out*, but a recent read and review of Winifred Holtby's 1932 biography of Virginia Woolf and her work piqued my interest. Holtby's discussion of characters, developed and one dimensional, symbolism, and method of story telling made re-reading *The Voyage Out* a much easier project. Interesting in the story was a quote about the main character, Rachel, who at twenty four has no real education except for playing the piano. At one point, her guardian mentions, without exaggeration, that Rachel had no idea how children are conceived. The quote: "She became less desirable as her brain began to work." Not quite

what is expected from a feminist writer Over the next several months, I am going to reread the rest of Woolf's work keeping in mind what I learned from Holtby. Three things happened to me while voyaging on the underground because of this book 1 As I admire Virginia Woolf immensely and identify with her issues and topics, I tried very hard to concentrate deeply enough to be able to read in a very distracting environment squished into a full train I fought against all odds to read the following paragraph She was deep in the fifth book, stopping indeed to pencil a note, when a pair of boots dropped, one after another, on the floor above her She looked up and speculated Whose boots were they, she wondered view spoiler This leading me to check the shoes around me before continuing hide spoiler Overall I found the novel on second reading to be very good The fully developed Woolfian sense of humor is here In the early going the book doesn't seem at all inferior to later experimental works Though those later works are leaner, engaged with how to represent cognition in a text In the later works, too, there is a somewhat greater ability to condense events to the numinous moment That's here, too, but I think such moments get a little lost in the somewhat larger, expansive authorial voice There are some interesting lacunae throughout In the opening shipboard section the author shows absolutely no activity on the part of what must be a vast ship's crew For a lover of Melville this seems to me a conspicuous deficit Our upper class travelers are often on deck, too, but they do not so much as even look up into the rigging Yes, very odd It's the same later when they board a steamboat to go up river into Heart of Darkness country It's almost as if the boat were supernaturally piloted We see virtually none of the crew An interesting feature of the English abroad at this time was their intense clubbiness and unwillingness to mix with locals As we were given nothing of what must have been a vibrant sailors' life onboard, now we are given nothing of the Spanish and Indian populations that surround them in South America When they decide to go see a native village it's in the manner of an entertainment than a genuine reaching out for cross cultural exchange It's a pass time I don't believe these parallels are merely fanciful on my part Moreover, the voyage out here becomes the voyage inward There can be no question that Woolf is using the

untamed wild here as a metaphor for a journey into the unknown reaches of psyche just as Conrad did. In class based Britain of the day 1913-15 I think there may have been a desire on Woolf's part to write for a specific type of reader I live in the U.S where we don't have this particular kind of class system, and even in England it's now greatly diminished. Moreover, Woolf, at 33, her age when *The Voyage Out* was published, probably knew little about such people or practices and would have thus exposed a weakness of knowledge by writing about it. As the young and insecure pedant Hirst puts it: "Why do the lower orders do any of the things they do? Nobody knows." p. 356. Also, I wonder if Woolf viewed her characters as occupying a higher realm of existence. As if she thought that by banishing the trivial she was elevating her story. If so, I think that such a blinkered view has worked against verisimilitude and gave the novel a cloistered feel. There's a full scale descriptive level here unmatched in her later novels which I found very satisfying. Also, it struck me that there's something of E.M. Forster's novels here, too. I was particularly struck by the pseudo philosophical exchanges between Hewet and Hirst. They reminded me very much of certain discussions in *Howard's End* 1910 between the Schlegel sisters of course. Forster was a member of the Bloomsbury Group. In addition, the group excursion to the mountaintop undertaken by Hewet reminds me enormously of the trip to the Malabar Caves in *A Passage to India* 1924. I should reread Forster on these points. The social consciousness aspect of the novel is limited to women and their changing place in society. At the time of this novel's publication women did not have the vote in Britain. The author is particularly interested in women who break out of the mold traditional society has created for them. She is almost always quietly ironic on this point, rarely strident. Rachel and her aunt, Helen, are on the side of enlightenment here though far from liberated. They are highly aware of their disadvantages no college since their only purpose in life is to marry and these limitations shape their worldview. They are both readers, both articulate, although Rachel is sometimes at a loss for words due to her inexperience. As we get further into the book she changes. She begins to find the words she needs. She begins to live for the first time in her life. But at 24 she doesn't know the facts of life. Another character, Evelyn Murgatroyd, is perhaps

of the usual case Since association with men is women's only perceived means of power Evelyn has become a bit imperious about what she sees as her advantages She is a flirt and a tease who strings along two marriage proposals during the period of this story There have been others before She is not abhorred, however I think Woolf sees the limitations of her upbringing and understands she is coping in the only way she can That this way of coping plays into all the old stereotypes about stupid women and coquettes that the pseudo intellectual and, one suspects, unknowingly closeted Hirst gives voice to, seems plausible. I found the narrative on second reading to have less interest for me The love story between Hewet and Rachel gets to be a slog One understands why Woolf felt she had to include it, especially in a first novel, but even though she's able to bring much liveliness to the subject it is in the end familiar and much trodden ground I find the general interactions among the English at the hotel to be far entertaining than this love story, since it is in those situations that Woolf is her funniest The exchanges between the old people at the hotel are often hysterically funny The parts about Rachel's intellectual awakening, too, are far interesting than the love story We see what she's reading, Edward Gibbon, William Cowper, Honor Balzac, what she's playing lots of Bach, Beethoven, for she is an accomplished pianist, etc. I've come across a few mini howlers An untoward adverb here, in one instance, and a ridiculous, seemingly unconsidered sentence there Though these are small flaws I can recall nothing like them in Woolf's later novels So the book is traditional in structure, less innovative and self-conscious than later works The title essentially refers to life's journey but especially to the new world of adulthood for Rachel and the younger characters, principally Hewet, Hirst, and the ever dissatisfied and indecisive Evelyn. Lastly, let it be noted that there is no sex Some guarded lust but even this is minimal I like that No pneumatics No humping No thrusting or mounting No entering him or her Entering What is he or she, the Mall of America Enough with such conventions A must read for fans of Virginia Woolf, but if you don't intend to read all ten novels start with either *To The Lighthouse* or *Orlando* or *Mrs Dalloway*.

# VIRGINIA WOOLF



*The* VOYAGE OUT