

Virginia Woolf As/In/And Children's Literature: an Overview

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Abstract

This academic investigation scrutinizes a less-explored dimension of Virginia Woolf's literary legacy, examining her nuanced engagement with children's literature and culture. Focused on comprehending Woolf within the realm of children's literature, our study selects representative works to explore the author's radical and challenging modernist contributions to this genre. Primary sources for analysis include two short stories, "The Widow and the Parrot" (1988) and "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" (1991), originally penned for her nephews and posthumously adapted into widely accessible picturebooks for children globally. Extending beyond Woolf's direct creations for her family, our exploration delves into various artistic representations of her in works such as Kyo Maclear and Isabelle Arsenault's fictional picturebook *Virginia Wolf* (2012) and Michèle Gazier and Bernard Ciccolini's graphic novel *Virginia Woolf* (2011). Furthermore, her life is vividly portrayed in Zena Alkayat and Nina Cosford's illustrated biography, *Virginia Woolf: An Illustrated Biography* (2015).

Significantly, Woolf's bestselling novel and biographical experiment, *Flush* (1933), regains prominence through a recent illustrated edition. Our article does not seek exhaustive coverage of Woolf's entire foray into children's literature but rather aims to dissect specific facets represented by carefully chosen literary works.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Children's Literature, Modernism, Picturebooks, Literary Adaptation, Biographical Experimentation, Illustrated Editions, Cultural Representation.

Introduction

In the expansive annals of literary history, certain luminaries emanate a brilliance that transcends the confines of their written oeuvre. Virginia Woolf, an eminent figure in twentieth-century literature, stands as such a luminary, exerting an influence that extends well beyond the pages of her canonical novels. This inquiry embarks on an exploration of the intricate dimensions comprising Woolf's enduring legacy, delving into nuanced facets that contribute to her perennial fascination.

Woolf's profound impact, evident in seminal works such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, extends beyond solitary authorship to encompass collaborative endeavors. The symbiotic relationship between Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell, manifested in various forms from cover designs to shared forewords, unveils a synergistic interplay that enriches our comprehension of Woolf's creative process. This collaborative dynamic serves to interweave literature with the visual arts, expanding the narrative beyond the conventional boundaries of textual expression.

The exploration transcends into the realm of children's literature, where Woolf's influence assumes a whimsical manifestation. Kyo Maclear's *Virginia Woolf* extends an invitation to young readers, offering a perspective on Woolf's mental health struggles in an accessible and transformative manner. Isabelle Arsenault's illustrative prowess breathes vitality into Woolf's narrative, challenging normative conventions of storytelling. This

phenomenon of cross-reading not only adapts Woolf's thematic preoccupations for younger audiences but also underscores the enduring relevance of her ideas.

Venturing further into the domain of non-fiction, Woolf's life becomes a canvas for exploration. Works such as Zena Alkayat and Nina Cosford's *Virginia Woolf: An Illustrated Biography* and Michèle Gazier and Bernard Ciccolini's *Virginia Woolf*, both illustrated biographies and graphic novels, epitomize the multifaceted nature of Woolf's narrative. Grounded in historical reality, these works employ diverse narrative methodologies, ranging from intertextual playfulness to the dynamic conventions of graphic novels. This journey through Woolf's literary expanse thus unravels not merely the chronicle of an individual author but a constellation of narratives resonating with the timeless reverberations of Virginia Woolf's literary brilliance.

In our pursuit to explore the aesthetic and thematic potential of radical and challenging children's books, and to address certain gaps in modernist and children's literature studies, this discussion centers on Virginia Woolf's influence on children's literature. Woolf's connection to both children's literature and modernism is noteworthy; Juliet Dusinberre (1999) asserts that the roots of radical experiments in the arts during the early modern period can be traced back to books like those written for children by Lewis Carroll and his successors. Dusinberre contends that the works read during childhood by future authors, including Woolf, shaped their later creative endeavors for adults.

To comprehensively explore Virginia Woolf within the context of children's literature, this study selects books that exemplify her diversity in the children's literature market. Our focus is on unraveling their modernist potential, particularly their radical and challenging aspects, both aesthetically and in terms of the reading process. It is crucial to clarify that this article does not aspire to comprehensively cover all aspects of Virginia

Woolf's participation in children's literature but rather seeks to dissect several facets of her engagement in this domain.

Writing for Children

Virginia Woolf's literary exploration extended beyond her well-known works, as evidenced by "The Widow and the Parrot" and "Nurse Lugton's Curtain," which uniquely mark her intergenerational collaboration with her nephews, Quentin and Julian Bell. Originally created for private circulation within the family, these texts, now transformed into picture books, unveil a distinct facet of Woolf's engagement with the younger generation. In these tales, the imaginative interplay between the author and her nephews unfolds, offering a glimpse into the private world of Woolf's storytelling within her familial circles. The transition of these narratives into picture books not only preserves the intimacy of the original family context but also opens a window for a wider readership to appreciate Woolf's creative and playful interaction with the children in her life.

Kimberley Reynolds (2007) discusses Virginia Woolf's contributions to children's literature and her influence on the genre. Woolf is recognized for challenging traditional forms and expectations in literature, which aligns with Reynolds' broader argument about the transformative potential of children's literature to push aesthetic and conceptual boundaries. Woolf's work is considered radical in its time for the way it subtly critiques societal norms and portrays the complexities of identity and consciousness, themes that resonate with the evolving nature of children's literature as a space for creative and ideological experimentation.

"The Widow and the Parrot" unfolds in the Yorkshire village of Spilsby, introducing Mrs. Gage, a disabled and short-sighted widow with a profound love for animals. This narrative, unlike Woolf's typical modernist approach, employs a straightforward structure. Mrs. Gage's life takes an unexpected turn when she inherits a substantial fortune and property

in Rodmell. The story revolves around her bond with a large gray parrot, James, whom she believes saves her life and leads her to a hidden fortune. This piece, initially written for Woolf's nephews at their request, gained wider attention when published posthumously in the Redbook Magazine in 1982.

In contrast, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" showcases Woolf's dream-oriented storytelling. Composed for Ann Stephen, Woolf's niece, this story emerged from within the manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway and was later discovered by Wallace Hildick. Published in 1965, the narrative centers on Nurse Lugton, who, while creating a curtain, falls asleep, giving life to the animals printed on the fabric. The dream unfolds into a surreal landscape, blending reality and imagination until Nurse Lugton wakes to find everything frozen back into a curtain.

Woolf's engagement with children's literature, as evident in these stories, serves as a notable example of intergenerational collaboration. The act of creating "The Hyde Park Gate News" with her sister Vanessa Bell during her youth laid the foundation for Woolf's later collaboration with her nephews, Quentin and Julian Bell, demonstrating a dynamic partnership between an accomplished author and real children.

Moreover, the uncanny elements introduced by Woolf in "The Widow and the Parrot," particularly in its ghostly conclusion, challenge conventional narrative genres, inviting a heightened level of reader engagement. The sudden shift towards the supernatural disrupts the expected trajectory, emphasizing the interactive nature of literature and its potential to broaden readers' horizons.

Similarly, "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" navigates the dream realm, a familiar terrain in children's literature. Yet, Woolf subverts this convention, transforming the dream into an inactive category, a challenge to the reader's expectations. The story raises questions about imagination, creativity, and the limitations imposed by societal norms, echoing Woolf's broader feminist discourse explored in both her fiction and non-fiction works.

In her texts aimed at her nephews, Woolf's foray into children's literature proves to be a rich and multifaceted exploration, blending her modernist tendencies with intergenerational collaboration, challenging narrative norms, and contributing thought-provoking tales that transcend age boundaries. The profound impact of her imaginative storytelling on younger minds is evident, making these works a testament to the enduring power of literature across generations.

2. Adult Novels in Children's Bookshelves

Virginia Woolf's literary contributions extend beyond her solo endeavors, involving collaborations with family members such as her nephews and notably, her sister Vanessa Bell. This close association, marked by Vanessa's significant role in designing book covers for Woolf's novels, exemplifies a dynamic exchange of creative energies. In reciprocation, Woolf contributed forewords to Vanessa's catalogs. This artistic reciprocity, evidenced in the cover designs of many novels, exemplifies a unique interplay between literature and visual arts.

One such collaborative venture is the novel *Flush*, published by Hogarth, the publishing house founded by Virginia and Leonard Woolf. Released in 1933, *Flush* represents Woolf's experimentation with biographical writing as a literary genre. This narrative delves into the life of the cocker spaniel, Flush, a gift from Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West. Notably, the first edition of *Flush* featured illustrations by Vanessa Bell, demonstrating the seamless integration of visual and literary elements in Woolf's work.

Woolf's *Flush* challenges conventional genre boundaries, offering a mock-biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog. This cross-genre fiction, exhibiting elements of proto-historiographic metafiction, critiques historical contexts by manipulating truth and fiction. Despite its initial reception marked by a sense of embarrassment, *Flush* gained popularity as a bestseller, only to be somewhat overlooked in academic scholarship until recent years.

Modern interpretations have identified it as political satire, an allegory of Woolf's relationship with Sackville-West, and a feminist narrative foreshadowing *The Years*.

The intriguing aspect of *Flush* is its crossover into the realm of adolescent literature. although *Flush* does not have a solid and constant tradition in children's literature, it is gradually taking part in this addressee's shelves on bookstores. Lucy Smith compiled in 2010 the book *A Pack of Dogs: An Anthology*, a collection illustrated by Christopher Brown that contains excerpts of texts by Conan Doyle, J.M. Coetzee, and Virginia Woolf's *Flush*. Libraries categorize it as such, and recent illustrated editions by artists like Katyuli Lloyd and Iratxe López de Munáin contribute to this trend. Munáin, recognized in the field of children's books illustration, adds a unique perspective to Woolf's narrative. Her illustrations, appearing in editions across different countries, attract diverse audiences, transforming *Flush* into a crossover text. According to Falconer (2008), the concept of the crossover novel reflects the blurring of lines between children's literature and adult fiction, making these works accessible and engaging for a wider readership.

The illustrations by Munáin not only give a "picturebook air" to *Flush* but also offer nuanced critiques of the text. Through satirical depictions of *Flush*'s aristocratic origins and his interactions with Elizabeth Barrett, Munáin engages with themes of class representation. The illustrations play with the idea of aristocracy in *Flush*, juxtaposing him with Barrett in visually striking scenes that add layers to their relationship and personalities. Munáin's work aligns with the contemporary trend of cross-reading, where adults engage with children's fiction, reflecting the hybridization of child and adult perspectives. Publishers recognize the potential of attracting younger audiences to books initially intended for adults, thus expanding the reception of such texts.

Woolf's engagement with her readers, as seen in *Flush*, aligns with her status as a pioneer of reader-response theory. She believed in a reciprocal dialogue where books

influence readers, and readers, in turn, impact books. The cognitive engagement demanded by *Flush* parallels Woolf's intentions in works like *Mrs. Dalloway*, where readers are prompted to engage in sixth-level mindreading, a cognitive exercise in understanding complex character perspectives. So, Woolf's collaborations and experimental narratives, exemplified by *Flush*, extend beyond conventional literary boundaries. The inclusion of illustrations by contemporary artists like Munáin breathes new life into Woolf's work, transforming it into a dynamic and cross-generational exploration that resonates with diverse audiences.

3. A Children's Picturebook Character

Virginia Woolf, renowned as a fiction writer, transcends the realm of literature to become a fictional character in various contemporary works, such as Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2019), Stephanie Barron's *The White Garden: a Novel of Virginia Woolf* (2009), and Priya Parmar's *Vanessa and her Sister: a Novel* (2015). Additionally, Woolf is cast as a central character in a children's picturebook titled *Virginia Wolf* (2012) by Kyo Maclear and illustrated by Isabelle Arsenault.

Maclear's *Virginia Wolf* presents an imaginative narrative where Woolf is depicted as a wolfish character. The story unfolds through the lens of Vanessa, Woolf's sister, who attempts to uplift Virginia's spirits. Although the book does not explicitly reference Woolf's historical struggles with mental health, it resonates with deeper themes related to depression. Maclear, in an interview, emphasizes the book's ability to engage children in open discussions about complex emotions without bringing them down.

The tale navigates the fictional world of Bloomsbury, a collaborative creation between the sisters, mirroring the real-life artistic collaboration between Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell. This setting, grounded in their shared creativity, becomes a thematic core,

connecting with the Bloomsbury circle's intellectual freedom and the sisters' contributions to each other's artistic development.

Arsenault's illustrations in *Virginia Woolf* merit a closer examination, showcasing a muted color palette that symbolically represents Virginia and her surroundings. The wolfish portrayal of Woolf introduces a fairy-tale-like atmosphere, challenging traditional perceptions of wolves as villains. Debra Mitts-Smith's insights on the wolf as a symbol highlight its multifaceted nature, portraying Virginia's wolfish behavior as an exploration of human relationships with the natural world. The embodiment of emotions in Arsenault's illustrations, through gestures, body postures, and facial expressions, invites a multimodal discourse analysis. The juxtaposition of Virginia's wolfish demeanor and Vanessa's vibrant yellow dress, as well as the representation of Bloomsbury, contributes to the nuanced meaning of the book. The visual elements demand challenging readings that enhance the narrative's depth.

Virginia Woolf can be considered a radical children's book, aligning with Julia Mickelberg's perspective, as it addresses mental health issues and underscores the healing power of the arts. Virginia's journey to regain her imaginative abilities through artistic expression resonates with the broader theme of the transformative potential of art in our lives. The book's design, including the evolving typography of the wolf, reinforces the idea that art can shape and redefine personal narratives.

Therefore, *Virginia Woolf* emerges as a unique exploration of Woolf's multifaceted representation, bridging literature and visual arts. Maclear and Arsenault's collaboration not only provides an engaging story for children but also offers a rich and layered narrative that appeals to literary-minded adults. This interdisciplinary approach expands the discourse on Woolf's legacy and her enduring influence across diverse genres and audiences.

4. Illustrated Biographies

In examining Virginia Woolf's diverse literary legacy, we turn our attention to her portrayal in non-fiction illustrated books, specifically Zena Alkayat and Nina Cosford's *Virginia Woolf: An Illustrated Biography* (2016) and Michèle Gazier and Bernard Ciccolini's *Virginia Woolf* (2019). Alkayat's work, as evident from its title, adopts an illustrated biography format, while Gazier and Ciccolini present a graphic novel, showcasing Woolf's life in distinctive ways within the popular genre of children's fiction known as "life writing."

"Life-writing" emerges as a subgenre under non-fiction, as defined by Barbara Kiefer and Melissa I. Wilson (2010), acknowledging its purpose to inform, instruct, and enlighten. Russell Freedman's assertion that effective nonfiction should animate its subject aligns with the intent of both illustrated genres. Alkayat's biography draws inspiration from Hermione Lee's authoritative biography of Woolf, incorporating original quotes from Woolf's various works to lend authenticity and direct recognition to the narrative. Conversely, Gazier and Ciccolini's graphic novel adopts a dynamic narrative approach, emphasizing actions and consequences while maintaining plot continuity and exploring character personalities.

Penny Colman's definition of nonfiction as writing about reality sets the stage for discussing the creative elements introduced in the graphic novel. Authors must craft dialogues and navigate the complexities of narrative flow to sustain reader engagement. Marcus Martins (2020), drawing on Jacqueline Held's concept of the "phantasmagorical function," acknowledges the role of fictional elements in enriching a child reader's learning experience and imagination.

Gazier and Ciccolini's graphic novel delves into anecdotes, such as the Dreadnought hoax, to sustain reader interest. The inclusion of Woolf in this historical prank showcases the Bloomsbury Group's eccentricities. In contrast, Cosford's illustrations in the biography offer a

playful representation of Woolf's desk, family tree, and Bloomsbury house. Both illustrated works intertwine historical accuracy with creative elements to captivate readers.

Ciccolini's approach involves portraying entire settings and utilizing varying color palettes to convey Virginia's inner struggles, mental illness, and emotional states. This multimodal strategy, incorporating body language and color symbolism, adds layers to the narrative, particularly regarding taboo topics like mental health issues and affairs. In contrast, Cosford's biography playfully engages with intertextuality, referencing Woolf's iconic feminist essay when describing her move to Gordon Square as gaining "a room of her own."

As we can see, the examination of these illustrated genres provides insights into the multifaceted representations of Virginia Woolf. Alkayat and Cosford's biography and Gazier and Ciccolini's graphic novel offer distinctive lenses through which readers can explore Woolf's life. The juxtaposition of creative elements with factual information enhances the reader's engagement, contributing to the evolving narrative surrounding this literary icon.

Another book that brings Woolf as a character is Delphine Panique's *Les Classiques de Patrique: Chroniques littéraires décalées pour petits et grands adolescents* (2019). Although it's not a biography per se, Virginia Woolf is humorously depicted as part of a series of playful and irreverent takes on classic literary figures. Panique's graphic novel reimagines and caricatures various iconic authors, including Woolf, making them accessible and engaging for a younger audience while also appealing to those familiar with literary history. Woolf's presence in the book showcases her as a cultural icon in a way that resonates with both adolescents and adults.

Final Remarks

In the rich tapestry of Virginia Woolf's literary legacy, our exploration has navigated diverse facets, unveiling a nuanced understanding of the author's impact beyond the confines of her fiction. Woolf's collaborations and partnerships, notably with her sister Vanessa Bell

and her sons - Woolf's nephews transcend the boundaries of conventional authorship, revealing a symbiotic relationship that extends from cover designs to shared forewords. The intricate dance between Woolf and Bell adds depth to our comprehension of Woolf's creative process and the interplay between literature and visual arts.

Venturing into the realm of children's literature, Woolf's presence is not confined to adult readers. Kyo Maclear's *Virginia Woolf* transforms the complexities of Woolf's mental health into an accessible narrative for young audiences. Isabelle Arsenault's illustrations offer a multimodal experience, challenging traditional storytelling and embracing a cross-reading phenomenon. This intersection of Woolf's narrative with the realm of childhood literature underscores the adaptability of her themes and their resonance across age groups.

The trajectory of Woolf's influence extends beyond the boundaries of traditional fiction into the realm of non-fiction illustrated books. Zena Alkayat and Nina Cosford's *Virginia Woolf: An Illustrated Biography* and Michèle Gazier and Bernard Ciccolini's *Virginia Woolf* exemplify the malleability of Woolf's life story. The former intertextually weaves Woolf's quotes with playful visual representations, while the latter takes a graphic novel approach, engaging readers through dynamic storytelling and exploring taboo topics with the advantage of multimodal expression.

As we traverse Woolf's diverse representations, it becomes apparent that her legacy is not confined to the pages of her novels. The enduring allure of Woolf lies in her ability to transcend conventional genres and invite readers into a dynamic engagement with her life and ideas. Just as Woolf herself embraced experimentation in literature, the varied representations discussed here underscore her lasting impact on the literary landscape. Woolf's legacy is not static; it evolves through collaborations, adaptations, and reinterpretations, inviting readers to continually rediscover the brilliance of her mind and the complexity of her narrative universe.

In conclusion, our exploration delves beyond the surface of Virginia Woolf's fiction, illuminating the interconnected web of her life, collaborations, and representations across diverse genres. The enduring mystery and allure of Woolf's legacy persist, ensuring that her voice resonates across generations, continuously beckoning readers to explore the ever-expanding dimensions of her literary universe.

Our work, though it has explored various aspects of Virginia Woolf's production, is far from exhausting the topic. There are graphic novels based on Woolf's novels that still need to be studied, offering new perspectives on the adaptability and continued impact of her work. This analysis only skims the surface of Woolf's output and her potential in crossover culture, suggesting that there is much more to be discovered and understood about how her work can transcend literary genres and formats, continuing to resonate culturally in multiple contexts. We extend an invitation to researchers to explore these themes further.

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