

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

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Abstract

This article examines a lesser-known aspect of Virginia Woolf's literary work: her engagement with children's literature and culture. Focusing on Woolf's modernist contributions to the genre, we introduce two short stories—*The Widow and the Parrot* (1988) and *Nurse Lugton's Curtain* (1991)—originally written for her nephews and later published as picturebooks for a broader audience. Beyond these works, we present artistic representations of Woolf in Kyo Maclear and Isabelle Arsenault's picturebook *Virginia Wolf* (2012), Michèle Gazier and Bernard Ciccolini's graphic novel *Virginia Woolf* (2011), and Zena Alkayat and Nina Cosford's *Virginia Woolf: An Illustrated Biography* (2015). We also consider the renewed relevance of Woolf's *Flush* (1933), a biographical narrative recently reissued in illustrated form. This article

offers an overview of selected works that highlight Woolf's complex relationship with children's literature.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Children's Literature, Modernism.

Introduction

In literary history, few figures have left as expansive and enduring a mark as Virginia Woolf. Her influence extends beyond her canonical novels to collaborative and experimental forms that challenge conventional notions of authorship and genre. This article explores a lesser-studied facet of Woolf's legacy: her engagement with children's literature and culture.

While Woolf's modernist innovations are evident in novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, her creative output also includes collaborative work with her sister, the artist Vanessa Bell. Their partnership, visible in book covers, illustrations, and prefaces, highlights a fusion of visual and verbal expression that expands the boundaries of narrative form. These collaborations point to a broader understanding of Woolf's aesthetic, one that intersects with the visual arts and disrupts the solitary figure of the author.

This investigation extends to children's literature, where Woolf's influence appears in both her own writings and in later artistic reinterpretations. The picturebook *Virginia Woolf* (2012), by Kyo Maclear and Isabelle Arsenault, reimagines Woolf's inner world through the lens of childhood, addressing mental health and creativity in a format accessible to younger readers. Arsenault's illustrations bring emotional nuance to the story, challenging conventional storytelling norms and opening space for cross-generational readership.

Biographical works such as *Virginia Woolf: An Illustrated Biography* (2015) by Zena Alkayat and Nina Cosford, and the graphic novel *Virginia Woolf* (2011) by Michèle Gazier and Bernard Ciccolini, further demonstrate the versatility of Woolf's image in contemporary nonfiction. These texts employ diverse narrative strategies, from intertextual references to graphic experimentation, to engage with Woolf's life and work.

Rather than offering a comprehensive survey of Woolf's role in children's literature, this article focuses on selected works that reveal her modernist potential in this domain. Following Juliet Dusinberre's (1999) assertion that modernist innovation in adult literature has roots in the experimental play of children's books by authors such as Lewis Carroll, we suggest that Woolf's childhood reading shaped her creative vision. Our aim is to examine how certain texts linked to Woolf—both those she authored and those inspired by her—reflect radical, challenging elements within children's literature, particularly through their aesthetics and demands on the reader.

Writing for Children

Virginia Woolf's engagement with children's literature is evident in two lesser-known works: *The Widow and the Parrot* and *Nurse Lugton's Curtain* (first published as *Nurse Lugton's Golden Thimble*), both originally written for her nephews Quentin and Julian Bell. Initially intended for private family circulation, these stories were later adapted into picturebooks, revealing a more intimate and playful dimension of Woolf's storytelling. Their publication offers insight into Woolf's creative exchanges with younger readers and reflects a blend of literary experimentation and intergenerational dialogue.

Kimberley Reynolds (2007) situates Woolf's contributions within the broader evolution of children's literature, highlighting her capacity to challenge literary norms. Woolf's writing, with its subtle critique of social conventions and exploration of identity and consciousness, aligns with Reynolds's argument that children's literature can serve as a space for formal and ideological innovation. These themes, central to modernism, emerge distinctly in Woolf's writing for children.

The Widow and the Parrot, set in the village of Spilsby, follows Mrs. Gage, a disabled and near-sighted widow with a deep affection for animals. Departing from Woolf's characteristic formal complexity, the narrative adopts a linear structure. After inheriting

property in Rodmell, Mrs. Gage forms a bond with a gray parrot named James, who appears to save her life and guide her to hidden treasure. Written at the request of her nephews for their family magazine, *The Charleston Bulletin*, the story was published posthumously in *Redbook Magazine* in 1982.

By contrast, *Nurse Lugton's Curtain* exemplifies Woolf's more surreal and dream-oriented storytelling. Written for her niece Ann Stephen and later discovered by Wallace Hildick in a manuscript of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the story was published in 1965. It centers on a sleeping seamstress whose dreams animate the animals printed on a curtain. The narrative oscillates between fantasy and reality, offering a metaphor for the permeability of artistic creation and perception.

Woolf's early experiments with children's narratives, such as *The Hyde Park Gate News*, a family newspaper she created with her siblings, anticipated these later collaborations with younger relatives. These exchanges underscore Woolf's sustained interest in literary production as a dialogic and familial practice, rather than a solitary endeavor.

The uncanny tone in *The Widow and the Parrot*, particularly its ghostly ending, complicates the story's moral resolution and encourages interpretive ambiguity. The introduction of the supernatural disrupts narrative expectations and invites the reader to reconsider genre boundaries. Similarly, *Nurse Lugton's Curtain* subverts traditional dream narratives by suspending the action within the dream itself, calling attention to the imaginative constraints imposed by social norms, an undercurrent consistent with Woolf's feminist concerns across her oeuvre.

Through these works, Woolf brings together modernist aesthetics and intergenerational collaboration, challenging narrative conventions and offering children's stories that resonate beyond their intended audience. Far from being simple tales for young readers, these texts

exemplify the transformative potential of literature to bridge generations and stimulate critical reflection.

2. Adult Novels on Children's Bookshelves

Virginia Woolf's literary legacy includes not only her solo works but also meaningful collaborations with family members, particularly her sister, the artist Vanessa Bell. Bell's cover designs for Woolf's novels and Woolf's forewords for Bell's catalogs reflect a creative reciprocity that brought literature and visual art into close dialogue. This interplay is especially evident in *Flush* (1933), a hybrid text published by Hogarth Press, the private press run by Woolf and her husband Leonard.

Flush represents Woolf's experimental approach to biography, blending fiction and historiography in a satirical account of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel. Illustrated by Vanessa Bell in its first edition, the book blurs generic boundaries and engages with themes of authorship, class, and femininity. Though initially met with embarrassment by some readers and critics, *Flush* became a commercial success and has since been re-evaluated for its literary complexity. Critics now read it as political satire, a commentary on Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West, and a feminist precursor to *The Years*.

More recently, *Flush* has entered the realm of crossover literature. While it does not have a continuous tradition in children's publishing, its presence on children's bookshelves has grown through anthologies and illustrated editions. Lucy Smith's *A Pack of Dogs: An Anthology* (2010), illustrated by Christopher Brown, includes an excerpt from *Flush* alongside texts by Conan Doyle and J. M. Coetzee. Contemporary illustrated editions by Katyuli Lloyd and Iratxe López de Munáin further expand the book's reach. Munáin, an illustrator known for her work in children's literature, brings a stylized and ironic visual language that reframes Woolf's narrative for intergenerational audiences.

Munáin's illustrations contribute both accessibility and criticism. Her depiction of Flush's aristocratic airs and interactions with Barrett adds visual satire to Woolf's social commentary. By juxtaposing dog and owner in exaggerated, playful compositions, the illustrations highlight themes of class and performance. This approach reflects what Rachel Falconer (2008) identifies as the "crossover" phenomenon, texts that appeal simultaneously to children and adults by hybridizing audience expectations and aesthetic conventions.

The crossover appeal of *Flush* also resonates with Woolf's broader literary ethos. Her interest in the relationship between reader and text aligns with early forms of reader-response theory. Woolf's narratives, including *Flush*, invite cognitive engagement, requiring readers to interpret multiple layers of perspective—a quality akin to the "sixth-level mindreading" observed in works like *Mrs. Dalloway*. When paired with contemporary illustrations, *Flush* becomes not just a period piece or an experiment in genre, but a dynamic, cross-generational text that continues to evolve in meaning and reach.

3. A Children's Picturebook Character

Virginia Woolf, long celebrated as a modernist writer, has become a fictional character in several contemporary works, including 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* (2015). Notably, she is also reimaged in the children's picturebook *Virginia Wolf* (2012), written by Kyo Maclear and illustrated by Isabelle Arsenault.

In *Virginia Wolf*, Woolf is portrayed as a wolf-like figure, and the story unfolds through the perspective of her sister Vanessa, who tries to lift Virginia's spirits. While the book does not overtly reference Woolf's mental health struggles, it engages with themes of emotional withdrawal and creative recovery. Maclear has noted in interviews that the story is designed to open space for children to talk about difficult emotions without fear or stigma.

The fictional setting of Bloomsbury, imagined collaboratively by the characters, echoes the real-life artistic partnership between Woolf and Vanessa Bell. This setting, rendered through words and images, reinforces the narrative's emphasis on creativity, care, and the interdependence of the sisters, while evoking the intellectual ethos of the Bloomsbury Group.

Arsenault's illustrations contribute significantly to the story's affective and symbolic layers. Using a muted color palette, she conveys Virginia's inner world through somber tones, while Vanessa's bright yellow dress introduces contrast and emotional warmth. The depiction of Virginia as a wolf challenges the traditional fairy-tale trope of the predatory animal, inviting interpretations aligned with Debra Mitts-Smith's (2010) analysis of the wolf figure as a symbol of human complexity and emotional ambivalence. The illustrations use body language, facial expressions, and visual metaphor to articulate states of mind, calling for a multimodal reading of the narrative.

Virginia Wolf aligns with what Julia Mickenberg (2005) identifies as the radical potential of children's literature, that is, its ability to address serious themes, including mental health, within an accessible narrative framework. Virginia's path toward imaginative reawakening through artistic expression highlights the book's broader message about the restorative power of creativity. Even the book's typography, which morphs as Virginia's mood shifts, reinforces this central theme.

As a result, *Virginia Wolf* offers a layered representation of Woolf, bridging literary biography, visual storytelling, and emotional literacy. Maclear and Arsenault's collaboration yields a picturebook that resonates with children while offering interpretive richness for adult readers. This interdisciplinary work contributes to the ongoing conversation about Woolf's legacy and the evolving boundaries of genre and audience in contemporary literature.

4. Illustrated Biographies

In exploring the breadth of Virginia Woolf's literary legacy, this section turns to her depiction in illustrated non-fiction books, specifically *Virginia Woolf: An Illustrated Biography* (2016) by Zena Alkayat and Nina Cosford, and *Virginia Woolf* (2019) by Michèle Gazier and Bernard Ciccolini. While Alkayat and Cosford adopt an illustrated biography format, Gazier and Ciccolini present a graphic novel. Both texts reframe Woolf's life through popular forms of life writing for young or crossover audiences.

"Life writing," a subgenre of non-fiction described by Barbara Kiefer and Melissa I. Wilson (2010), aims to inform, instruct, and illuminate. According to Russell Freedman, effective nonfiction should also animate its subject, a principle that both Alkayat and Gazier employ through distinctive visual and narrative strategies. Alkayat's biography draws on Hermione Lee's seminal study of Woolf and integrates direct quotations from Woolf's writings, lending the text authenticity and historical grounding. In contrast, Gazier and Ciccolini prioritize narrative dynamism, using anecdote, continuity, and visual storytelling to build Woolf's character and contextualize her personal and professional life.

Penny Colman defines nonfiction as "writing about reality," but both works incorporate creative elements to sustain engagement, particularly for younger readers. Marcus Martins (2020), building on Jacqueline Held's notion of the "phantasmagorical function," argues that fictional devices can enhance young readers' cognitive and imaginative engagement with real-life figures. In this sense, the graphic novel's blend of fact and invention does not distort but rather animates history.

Gazier and Ciccolini's narrative includes episodes such as the Dreadnought hoax, showcasing the performative and subversive spirit of the Bloomsbury Group. Ciccolini's illustrations are rich in symbolic detail, using shifting color palettes and expressive body language to convey Woolf's inner struggles, including her experiences with mental illness and

emotional instability. Cosford, by contrast, employs a more stylized, playful tone, illustrating objects like Woolf's writing desk, her family tree, and the Bloomsbury house. One notable intertextual moment describes Woolf's move to Gordon Square as "gaining a room of her own," directly referencing her iconic feminist essay.

These illustrated biographies combine factual narrative with interpretive illustration, contributing to the ongoing construction of Woolf's public image. By mediating between history and visual culture, they invite both younger and adult readers into a layered understanding of Woolf's life and work. Their use of multimodal strategies, such as visual symbolism, spatial storytelling, and textual-visual interplay, reflects a broader trend in life writing that emphasizes affective engagement over strict historicism.

A further example of Woolf's representation appears in Delphine Panique's *Les Classiques de Patrique: Chroniques littéraires décalées pour petits et grands adolescents* (2019). Though not a biography, the graphic novel humorously reimagines canonical authors, including Woolf, through caricature and satire. Here, Woolf becomes part of a broader effort to make literary icons accessible to adolescent readers while offering intertextual humor for more informed audiences. Her inclusion highlights her continued resonance as a cultural figure whose legacy bridges generations and genres.

Conclusion

This study has explored multiple dimensions of Virginia Woolf's literary legacy, highlighting her creative collaborations, her engagement with children's literature, and her evolving representation in illustrated non-fiction. Her partnership with Vanessa Bell—reflected in cover designs, illustrations, and shared publications—illustrates a model of authorship rooted in artistic reciprocity and intermedial dialogue. These exchanges deepen our understanding of Woolf's creative process and the intersections between visual and verbal forms.

Woolf's presence in children's literature, particularly through works like Kyo Maclear and Isabelle Arsenault's *Virginia Woolf*, reveals the adaptability of her themes for younger audiences. The picturebook reframes Woolf's emotional world in an accessible format, employing multimodal storytelling to engage readers across age groups. Such adaptations exemplify the crossover potential of Woolf's legacy, demonstrating how her work continues to resonate beyond its original adult readership.

In the realm of non-fiction, illustrated texts such as *Virginia Woolf: An Illustrated Biography* by Alkayat and Cosford and the graphic novel *Virginia Woolf* by Gazier and Ciccolini show how her life can be reimagined through diverse narrative and visual strategies. While the biography offers a stylized, intertextual portrayal grounded in Woolf's own words, the graphic novel employs symbolic illustration and anecdotal narrative to engage with complex aspects of her biography, including mental illness and gender politics.

Together, these works confirm that Woolf's legacy extends well beyond the boundaries of traditional fiction. Her influence persists through reinterpretations that bridge literature, visual art, biography, and children's media. Woolf's willingness to experiment with form and content has inspired a wide range of responses, suggesting that her work is not fixed but continually reimagined by new generations of readers, artists, and scholars.

Although this article has addressed several representative works, much remains to be explored. Graphic adaptations of Woolf's novels, for example, offer rich opportunities for further analysis, particularly within the context of crossover literature and visual culture. This study merely sketches the contours of an expanding field of research. We invite future researchers to examine these evolving representations of Woolf, and to consider how her work continues to shape, and be shaped by, the cultural forms through which it circulates.

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