A Fortnight in Oxford 2017
Seminar

Virginia Woolf’s Modernism

Course Description

The course focuses on four novels written by Virginia Woolf in the 1920s, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To The Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928) and *The Waves* (1931). As well as marking the high watermark of Woolf’s novel-writing, these novels are famous for the challenge they pose to readers through their shifts in perspective and chronology. Over two weeks, this course will unravel the complexities of these novels, by putting them back into the context of Woolf’s own life.

As one of four children, raised by her biographer-father Leslie Stephen and artistic mother Julia Stephen, Virginia Woolf’s character was heavily shaped by her extended family life and the bohemian social set of which they were a part. The long Victorian era had established the idea of great men of history and championed imperialism, Christianity and nationhood. Woolf and her generation however came to challenge this cultural consensus. The political, social and technological change of the early 20th century led to a new artistic sensibility, later called ‘modernism’, which sought a new language and new literary form in which a new sensibility could be expressed.

Initially inspired by Henry James, Woolf was encouraged to experiment with new novelistic forms in order to give expression to the phenomenal and impressionistic experiences of life. In her series of novels, created through the 1920s, she attempted to combine analyses of herself and her extended family with studies of the Bloomsbury Group, and to frame both in the context of the political, social and technological change of the period. The shell-shocked Septimus Smith of *Mrs Dalloway* reveals the tragic fate of Woolf’s older brother Thoby, whose death affected her profoundly. The marriage in *To The Lighthouse* shows Woolf’s painfully honest vision of the inadequacies of her own parents’ married life and her mother’s death. *Orlando* was a response to Woolf’s love affair with Vita Sackville-West and as a testament to Vita’s adventurous family heritage. And *The Waves* is an account of a group of friends that is inspired by some of the friendships that Woolf had in the Bloomsbury Group.

Set Texts

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford World Classics)
Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Oxford World Classics)
Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* (Oxford World Classics)
Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford World Classics)

Tutor Bio:

Dr Angus McFadzean is from Aberdeen, Scotland. He studied literature at Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, obtaining a DPhil in the novels of James Joyce at Wadham College, University of Oxford. He currently teaches undergraduates as a sessional tutor at various Oxford colleges and summer schools with OUDCE.