Virginia Woolf and the Art of Biography

Student presenter: Isabel Westcott
Project advisor: Nigel Alderman

This project examines Virginia Woolf’s relationship to biography throughout her career. I trace the influences of biography that impact her development as a life-writer, as well as her own experimentations and mediations on the genre. From her father’s work as the editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, to her friend Lytton Strachey’s non-traditional biographies such as *Eminent Victorians*, Woolf’s exposure to both traditional and critical biographies produces an enduring, though ambivalent, commitment to the genre. She begins to reframe biography as a feminist and a modernist technique, centering the lives of women and of artists.

Virginia Woolf assigns the subtitle “A Biography” to three of her books, each combining fiction and nonfiction to varying degrees. *Roger Fry*, a nonfiction biography of her close friend, fails as a traditional biography in that Woolf’s style as a novelist conflicts with her ability to compose a structured work of life writing. *Flush* and *Orlando*, on the other hand, each blend the facts of the lives that inspired them with Woolf’s fictionalization. Fictional biographies, including these two works as well as various essays and short stories, allow Woolf to combine genres to develop a form conducive to her artistic and political objectives.

In approaching Woolf’s career through her work with biography, this project aims to trace her recurring interest in the form and its many possibilities. Ultimately, this focus is not distinct from her writings that do not overtly engage with biography. Both strands, which I term “high modernism” and “fictional biography,” use different techniques to work through similar concerns. I situate readings of Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* and two genre-blending novels, *Flush* and *Orlando*, within the larger context of her writings exploring the literary and historical ramifications of Victorianism, her increasing political feminism, and questions surrounding how the self can be constructed, defined, and represented in the world and in literature.