

Morgan Dodds

### Moments with Virginia

“And I hear there is someone here who is perfect to play the part of Miranda...” the older gentleman announced to the group gathered on the neatly cut lawn under the gray sky. I knew he was talking about me before my classmates started saying my name. I was the only one present who knew a lot about Virginia Woolf and her family story. Who else would they pick to play the character based on her niece, Miranda? Not to mention the fact that I was the only one who could do a decent English accent (although I don’t know how ‘posh’ it actually was).

While sitting in the lawn chair, a passage from the book *Moments of Being* came to mind. “I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth.” The faded blue and pink striped chair was spread like this flower, ‘Miranda’ becoming a part of it in the moment. Many years later, I too had become part flower enclosed by a ring of people who had travelled to a house to experience such a moment.

My tiny part in this live reading of one of Virginia Woolf’s works made my experience all the more real, while unraveling the expectations that I had created in my mind. I had started the afternoon off in her house at Rodmell, wandering around the small rooms and talking to various guides. It feels very unreal to be standing in the same place as someone like her. I definitely didn’t expect to be walking away from the house with such a great experience to write about.

What is it about famous writers, and other historical figures, that draw us to their houses? Do we think that there might be some inspiration left over in the cupboard? Does breathing in the floral air of their gardens cure writer's block? Some definitely go for the spectacle and the souvenirs, while others could care less and sit outside the whole time.

Virginia Woolf is one of my favorite writers and her novel, *To The Lighthouse*, is one of my favorite books. It was a strange coincidence that I ended up taking a course that revolved around her life, her walks, and her work. The visit to Rodmell united all her works and her thoughts for me, so I anticipated it very much. I did not expect to walk away with inspiration or any sort of life changing experience, but I had a feeling that it was going to be memorable.

The night before and earlier that day, I had prepared a small speech to educate and inform my classmates about Virginia, her life, and her works. This little bit of research brought me closer to both her and her husband Leonard. The most striking and intimate moment was when I read her suicide note to the class while we were having lunch on the hike to her house. (Looking back on it now, the fact that I tried to read it in a British accent was most definitely foreshadowing for later on in the day). Something clicked for me in that moment and I felt I understood her more than I ever had before. I no longer saw her as a sad and melancholic person, but as a sensitive soul who had overcome a lot and loved those around her so fiercely. I felt the tragic love between the two sharply and suddenly like a sting from a nettle when I read the line “If anybody could have saved me it would have been you.”

The atmosphere about their home was different from the letter I had read aloud. I think that if the weather had been nicer and the sky had been blue, it could have felt like we were in the wrong place. But the gray skies fit the day and Virginia well; the gray outline made the house feel more like hers, like she was to walk through the wooden gate and in through the door at any moment.

I felt this way especially in her bedroom. The organization that takes care of the house has done a really good job of making the rooms that are open look authentic. I recognized the work on the fireplace at once and asked if Vanessa Bell had been the one to paint it. The tour

guide said that she had indeed and that there were other works of hers spread throughout the house. Her bedroom is a lot more colorful and cheery than what you would expect of a writer with Virginia's reputation. The blue walls and big windows made the space seem very bright, despite the dull cloud outside.

"One only remembers what is exceptional" she wrote in *Moments of Being*, which is true for my visit to her house. I don't remember too many specifics about her room and I would have liked to have spent a whole day investigating its contents if I could. I would love to pull down books from the shelves and see if she had left any notes in the margins. (Here I'm pretending that the room is exactly as she left it the day she walked down to the river.) I do remember the exceptional collection of Shakespeare where she copied every work in her own hand and in different colors of ink. "She liked writing in different colors," the guide informed me. "In fact, if you were to ever get a letter from her in black ink, you knew she was particularly mad." I like this little piece of trivia about her. Everyone assumes that she is so dark and moody, but that is the opposite of the feeling that I got as I walked around her house.

Even though I found her bedroom the most interesting, I followed my classmates to look at the other parts of the house. There were only a few rooms open, but more than enough to see in them. Again the walls were painted a surprisingly relaxing color, a green if I remember correctly. It echoed the plant life thriving outside but also reminded me of water and ocean waves. A chill runs up my spine now just thinking about this and how she ended up taking her life.

It is a weird thing to contemplate someone's suicide. Especially since it is one of the most well-known things about her, it is hard for me to separate certain aspects of her life and work from her death. I do recognize that there is a lot of fault in this thinking and that there was much

more to her than that, but it was really hard to stop it from cropping up in my mind. Especially after watching *Life in Squares*, I found myself really liking the relationship that Virginia and Leonard had. I found it much more loving and compassionate than the marriage her sister Vanessa had. This makes her suicide and note all the more heartbreaking.

Back inside Rodmell, I remembered a sort of suspended quietness all around. The living room and study felt especially relaxing. I hovered over Leonard's desk for quite some time as a guide told me various bits of trivia about it. Unfortunately, nothing stuck out to me so I cannot recall any of them. I do remember the dark wood and a pair of round glasses lying on top of a book.

The floors were made of stone so they didn't creak. The gardens outside acted like a sort of insulation from any chaotic noise wanting to creep in from outside. This veil of quietness and repose isn't exactly how I imagined the house would be, but the more I think about it the more that it makes sense for her (and the more I understand why the school that was so close to her house would have bothered her so much). I think I imagined something much darker and haunting, with squeaky floorboards and self closing doors.

What's more is that this quietness would have allowed her to observe and gather inspiration from the impressions around her. Back in the garden and sitting on the grass, sound did seem to pass over our heads and out into the Downs. For a quiet and quick second, the twenty or so of us who had gathered for the reading were the only people in the world.

I was cast as Miranda, and time was the interruption to my peaceful slumber. "Oh I shall be late for tea!" I remember saying, my hands clenched into nervous fists at my side. I wasn't really embarrassed to be sitting in the chair or to be saying the lines, but from people saying that I was the perfect one to play the part. Was it because I had spoken about Virginia earlier that

day? Was it because I was the only one (really, the only one) who could do a British accent? Or was it something else entirely, something unexplainable, but obvious enough to everyone?

While sitting in the cloth lawn chair was a little embarrassing, it is one of the experiences that influenced me the most and the one that I talk the most about. Knowing so much about the lives of the Bloomsbury group deeply enhanced my interpretation and experience of the English landscape. It also made me the go-to guidebook and information source for my classmates. Their questions also weirdly enhanced how I saw the rolling green world around me.

“Wait, what was her sister’s name again?”

“Where did they walk to?”

“How did she kill herself again?”

These questions often came on the easier parts of walks and not on the steep hills and climbs. In these questions about Virginia Woolf and her conspirators, I saw curiosity blooming in my classmates. Some of them weren’t even English majors and had never read a book of hers in their life, and they probably had no plans to. I think it was the landscape that connected their feet to her life and ways, which made her more relevant and interesting.

And with another chorus of “Oh I shall be late for tea!” my starring role as apple orchard slumberer came to an end. A quick bow and then I was back on the grass, pulling my fleece on over my shoulders. Rodmell seemed to hum around us, charmed and charming.