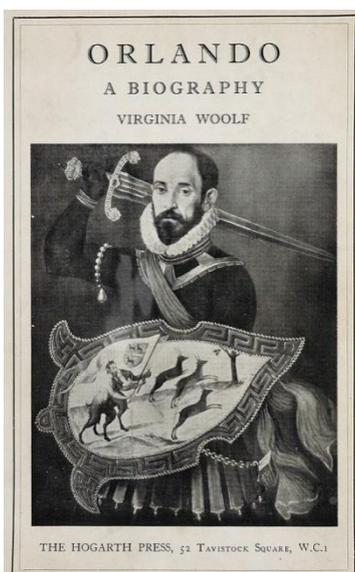


## Orlando: A Biography by Virginia Woolf

In our society, people are becoming less afraid to show their true selves. Women are allowed to have a masculine side and men can have feelings and express their emotions without being judged; however, gender has always been an issue for some people and probably always will be. In this essay, I will provide a brief biography of the author Virginia Woolf, followed by with my interpretation of the social critique regarding gender and difference in the story *Orlando*.

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882. She was the third child of four. She was surrounded by scholars and intellectuals at a young age, which motivated her to write. She started as a reviewer for the Times Literary Supplement. She married Leonard Woolf who also encouraged her to continue writing. She was a very prolific writer, but her bi-polar disorder was difficult to handle consequently she committed suicide. On March 28, 1941, she drowned herself in the River Ouse near her house. After her death, her husband decided to edit all her correspondence, journals and unpublished works, and wrote her autobiography.



*Orlando* is a social critique of an important theme regarding gender differences. At the beginning of the story Orlando is a young man; however he is described in such a way that the reader can feel he has a strong feminine side. "Orlando, to look at, was

cut out precisely for some such career. The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks. The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over the teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short, tense flight; the hair was dark, the ears small, and fitted closely to the head.” (Woolf, p. 8) This quote along with the description of Sasha foreshadow the future gender transformation of Orlando, because it allows the reader to see that a man can be seen as a woman and a woman can be confused with a man due to her physical attributes. “When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be- no woman could skate with such speed and vigour-.” “Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy’s but no boy had those eyes which looked as if they have been fished from the bottom of the sea.” (Woolf, p. 22-23) Of course these descriptions are only based on physical features, but the story is more elaborate than that. As a matter of fact, many characters have characteristics that are mainly attributed to the other gender. For instance, women have interests that resemble those of men and vice versa. When Orlando meets the Archduchess, for example, he finds she has knowledge about wine and firearms that only few women have. (Woolf, p. 74)

On another level, Orlando is different from what was expected of men at this period of time. Many times in the book, the reader has the feeling that it is not adequate for a nobleman such as Orlando to be interested in books and writing. However, it seems that writing allows Orlando to express himself without restriction. Also, Orlando thinks in a different manner than is usual for men. He does not find their subjects of discussion interesting. “The memory of what he and his courtier friends used to talk about- a dog, a horse, a woman, a game of cards- seem brutish in the extreme.” (Woolf, p. 54)

Another element that is major to the theme of gender difference is of course the fact that Orlando becomes a woman. What is unexpected is that this change does not seem to bother or even surprise Orlando. “Orlando had become a woman and there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same,” (Woolf, p. 90) On the other hand, the way people act around Orlando changes a lot when he becomes a woman. He is not sure whether it is more exciting to be a man or a woman because both have advantages and disadvantages. “The pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. From the probity of breeches she turned to the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally.” (Woolf, p. 144)



In conclusion, *Orlando* is a strong critique of society that is still applicable to our modern society. As a matter of fact, even today we have to be very careful because people are not always what they seem. “Different though the sexes are, they inter-mix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is very opposite of what it is above.” (Woolf, p. 123) Also, your gender has an influence on the way society treats you. Even if we think we are not in a society lead by men, men still have privileges that women do not. Things have changed through the years and centuries, but some things are still the same no matter how hard we have tried.

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