

EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL

Vita & Virginia, by Eileen Atkins

Adapted from correspondence between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West



Teatret ved Sorte Hest

Playing dates: 28th October – 19th November 2016

Mon – Fri 20.00; Sat 17.00

Playing time: 2 hours including interval

Directed by: Barry McKenna

On stage: Sue Hansen-Styles and Nathalie Johnston

Lighting designer: Katja Andreassen

Tickets: Tel. 33 31 06 06 (Mon – Fri 12 – 16) or write to billet@sortehest.com
Groups of young people under 25: 45 kr per ticket

Why Not Theatre Company presents the revival of their highly acclaimed 2011 production of "Vita & Virginia", which chronicles the relationship between novelist Virginia Woolf and aristocratic socialite Vita Sackville-West; a relationship that spanned two decades and had a profound impact on both women's lives.

Why Not Theatre Company played to full houses and garnered superlative reviews from many of the country's reviewers with their first production of "Vita & Virginia" in 2011 at CaféTeatret. Now, 75 years after Virginia Woolf's death, the Company returns with a new cast and plays for the first time at Teatret ved Sorte Hest.

Director Barry McKenna again directs this production with Sue Hansen-Styles again playing Virginia Woolf and Nathalie Johnston playing Vita Sackville-West. Nathalie co-founded Why Not Theatre Company with Sue in 2007 and it will be the first time that the two share the stage again, after Nathalie's return to England in 2010.

Why Not Theatre Company started its professional productions in Denmark in 2007 and founded a formal theatre association in 2010. Today it is one of Denmark's leading, professional English-speaking theatres. Our vision is to produce small cast, professional theatre in English, to explore texts of high literary quality, to tell thought-provoking stories that hook our audiences, to create exceptional theatre that unlocks the emotions and inspires debate and to earn critical acclaim and attract a broad audience.

Introduction to VITA & VIRGINIA

A forbidden love affair

Virginia Woolf and the aristocratic Vita Sackville-West first met at a dinner party in 1922, when Virginia was 40 and Vita was 30. Both were married and Vita had two sons. Vita's husband, Harold Nicholson, had affairs with men while Vita had many affairs with women. Despite this, however, they remained happily married.

Virginia was married to Leonard Woolf and had no children.

Eileen Atkins (Dame Eileen June Atkins, DBE, born 16 June 1934, is an English actress and occasional screenwriter. She has worked in the theatre, film, and television consistently since 1953 and is known for her several portrayals of Virginia Woolf) has made a supremely skilful dramatization of the correspondence between Vita and Virginia, in which they speak of everyday life, friends, literature and, above all, themselves.

Revealing and unashamedly honest, VITA & VIRGINIA presents an intimate portrait of a lesbian relationship and sheds light on the inner lives of two remarkable women, at a time when one could not be open about sexuality and any deviation from marital norms was unthinkable.

Director Barry McKenna says:

"Back in 2011, when we first began work on this piece, we had no idea that the production would be so popular and attract so great an audience. This year, 2016, marks the 75th anniversary of Virginia Woolf's death, and we feel the time is right to put on our fascinating and moving story again, with fresh eyes, a new talent and in a different space. It is important to shed light on single sex relationships as a good and positive thing and give hope to those who still fear rejection and abuse for the simple reason of who they are"

1. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)



"No need to hurry.
No need to sparkle.
No need to be anybody
but oneself."
-Virginia Woolf



Virginia Woolf was born into an intellectually gifted family. Her sister Vanessa was a gifted painter, and her two brothers Thoby and Adrian were intelligent, dynamic University men. Virginia and her sister were not afforded the opportunity to attend school or university like their brothers. Although this wasn't unusual for the time, it was something Virginia was never able to forget.

Despite becoming perhaps one of the most intelligent and best of the Modernist writers of the Twentieth Century, Virginia Woolf always thought of herself as ill educated.

Troubled by mental instability (today she would have been diagnosed as bipolar) for most of her life, Virginia composed her great literary works in bursts of manic energy and with the support of her brilliant friends and family. However, upon completion of a book, she would fall into a dangerously dark depression in anticipation of the world's reaction to her work.

Despite her personal difficulties, Virginia Woolf's fiction represented a shift in both structure and style. The world was changing; literature needed to change too, if it was to properly and honestly convey the new realities.

In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf – “a penniless Jew”, as Virginia herself described him.

During their six-month courtship, Leonard proposed numerous times. Fearful of marriage and the emotional and sexual involvement it required, Virginia hesitated. In a letter to Leonard, she bluntly stated:

“As I told you brutally the other day, I feel no physical attraction in you. There are moments—when you kissed me the other day was one—when I feel no more than a rock. And yet your caring for me as you do almost overwhelms me. It is so real, and so strange.”

Virginia remained very much in love with Leonard for her entire life. He was her greatest supporter, half-nursemaid, half-cheerleader. They never had children – a cause of great sadness for Virginia – but their marriage was a happy one and together they founded the Hogarth Press – a publishing company which published not only most of Virginia’s works, but also those of T.S. Eliot, Katherine Mansfield and E.M. Forster.

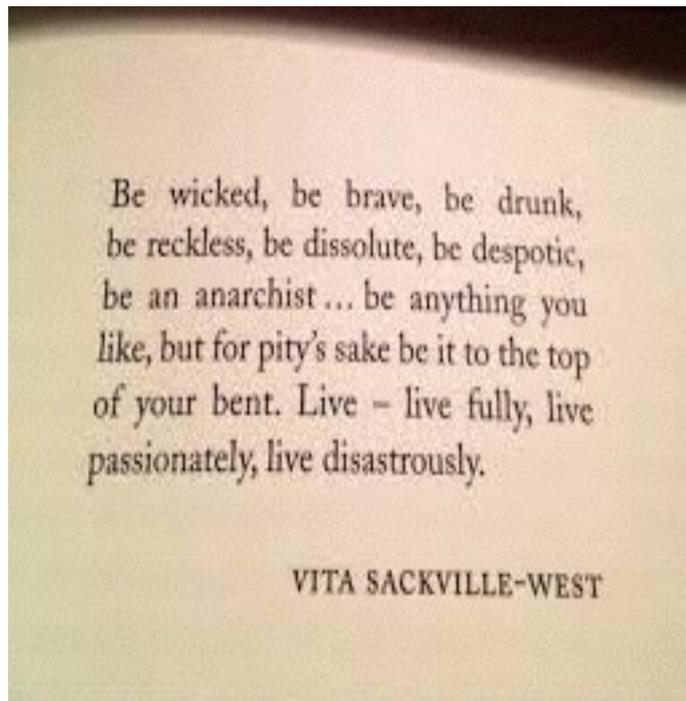
When Virginia published *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* in 1927 and 1931 respectively, she had turned a corner and could now be considered more than simply avant-garde; she was now, by most critics’ accounts, a literary genius. However, until the end, she remained insecure and fearful of the public’s reaction to her work.

Virginia battled against her inner demons all her life, on and off, and frequently heard voices. She almost certainly suffered from manic-depression, though doctors knew little about that disorder at the time. Leonard tried to monitor her activities, going so far as to limit the number of visitors she had and to prescribe different kinds of food for her to eat.

However, he couldn't ultimately save her from herself. On March 28th 1941, Virginia left Leonard two notes, both of which told him that if anyone could have saved her, it would have been him. However, she didn't feel she'd be able to come back from this latest episode of what was then called "madness" so she thought it best to end it all. On the banks of the River Ouse, near their

family home, she filled her pockets with stones, waded into the water, and drowned herself. She was fifty-nine years old.

2. Vita Sackville-West (1892 – 1962)



Vita Sackville-West was born into aristocracy at Knole House, Kent: said to be one of the largest mansions in England with 365 rooms, set in 1,000 acres of parkland. She was a writer and poet and actually sold more books than Virginia Woolf. Her style of writing was far more traditional and commercial.

Vita married her diplomat husband, Harold, and led a colourful life of socializing, travelling and having many affairs with women. She and Harold had two sons and what would today be considered as an open marriage. Harold also had affairs with men, but the couple remained happily married.

Sackville-West was a "Sapphist" and had several affairs with women throughout her life. Before falling for Virginia Woolf, she was deeply involved with Violet Trefusis, daughter of the Hon. George Keppel and his wife, Alice

Keppel, a mistress of King Edward VII. They first met when Vita was 12 and Violet was 10, and attended school together for a number of years.

The relationship began when they were both in their teens and strongly influenced them for years. Both later married and became writers. Vita and Trefusis eloped several times from 1918 on, mostly to France. While there

Vita dressed as a man when they went out together. The affair ended badly. Both families were concerned that the women were creating scandal. Trefusis continued to pursue Vita to great lengths until Vita's affairs with other women finally took their toll.

The two women apparently made a bond to remain faithful to one another, meaning that although both were married, neither could engage in sexual relations with her own husband. Sackville-West, who already had two children by Nicholson, was prompted to end the affair when she heard allegations that Trefusis had been involved sexually with her own husband, indicating that she had broken their bond. Despite the rift, the two women were devoted to one another, and deeply in love. They continued to have occasional liaisons for a number of years afterwards, but never rekindled the affair.

The affair for which Vita was most remembered, however, was with Virginia Woolf in the early 1920s. While Virginia admired Vita's aristocratic roots and glamour, Vita admired Virginia's intellect and literary abilities.

2. Vita, Virginia and Communication

Vita and Virginia met at a dinner party in 1922. In the 20s & 30s there were no mobile telephones, no computers & no TVs. People took time to write letters to each other, which took days, sometimes weeks to arrive and so correspondence often crossed. In those days, people read more books. Above all people were more conversational, sociable and held dinner parties just in order to keep up with the times - and the gossip.

VITA & VIRGINIA is adapted from correspondence between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. Eileen Atkins has cleverly adapted the many hundreds of letters exchanged between the two women over a 20 year period into a manuscript, but we should remember that they are originally hand-written letters.

EXERCISE

Take a look at the first few pages of VITA & VIRGINIA.

ACT I

This piece should be played as one long conversation except where it is indicated that the characters speak to the audience

The Lights come up

Vita *(to the audience)* I simply adore Virginia Woolf and so would you, I met her last night at a party. She is utterly unaffected, nothing planned or self-conscious. She is both detached and human, silent till she wants to say something and then says it supremely well. She dresses quite atrociously. Last night she was wearing orange woolen stockings and had pinned together her silk rags with a gold brooch. She is quite old. I've rarely taken such a fancy to anyone and I think she likes me.

Virginia *(to the audience)* I'm too muzzy-headed to make out anything. This is partly the result of dining to meet Mr and Mrs Harold Nicolson last night at Clive Bell's. She the lovely, gifted, aristocratic Vita Sackville-West — not much to my severer taste — florid, moustached, parakeet-coloured, with all the supple ease of the aristocracy but not the wit of the artist. She has her hand on all the ropes, makes me feel virgin-shy and schoolgirlish. Yet after dinner I rapped out opinions. She is a grenadier; hard, handsome, manly, inclined to a double chin. She is a pronounced Sapphist and may, thinks Ethel Sands, have an eye on me, old though I am.

Vita Dear Mrs Woolf,

I write this tonight, because I think you said you were going to Spain on the twenty-seventh and I want it to reach you before you go. The PEN Club Committee are very anxious for you to join the club, and at their request I proposed you. There was a little shout of excitement from the Committee about you, and Galsworthy got up and made a curtsy, so to speak.

Virginia Dear Mrs Nicolson,

But I wish you could be induced to call me Virginia.

Vita My dear Virginia,

You see I don't take much inducing. Could you be induced likewise, do you think?

Virginia Dear Mrs Nicolson,

The secretary of the PEN Club has written to me to say that I have been elected a member. Very regretfully I have had to decline — since I see from the club papers that it is wholly a dining club, and my experience is that I can't belong to dining clubs. But I'm very sorry, as I should like to know the members, and see you also. But this last I hope can be managed in other ways. Could you be persuaded to write a story for the Hogarth Press?

Vita I hope that no-one has ever yet, or ever will, thrown down a glove I was not ready to pick up. On the peaks of Italian mountains, and beside green lakes, I am writing a story for you. I shut my eyes to the blue of gentians. I shut my ears to the brawling of rivers; I shut my nose to the scent of pines; I concentrate on my story, and to you alone, it shall be dedicated. Will you ever play truant to Bloomsbury and culture, I wonder, and come travelling with me? Will you come next year to the place where the Gypsies of all nations make an annual pilgrimage to some Madonna or other? I am going. I think you had much better come too. Look on it, if you like, as copy — as I believe you look upon everything, human relationships included. Oh yes, you like people better through the brain than through the heart. And then, I don't believe one ever knows people in their own surroundings; one only knows them away; divorced from all the little strings and cobwebs of habit. Either *I* am at home, and you are strange; or *you* are at home, and I am strange; so neither is the real essential person, and confusion results. But in the Basque provinces, among a horde of zingaros, we should both be equally strange and equally real and I think you had better make up your mind to take a holiday and come.

Virginia My dear *Vita*,

I enjoyed your intimate letter from the Dolomites. It gave me a great deal of pain — which is I've no doubt the first stage of intimacy. You say I've "no friends, no heart, only an indifferent head". Never mind: I enjoyed your abuse very much. But I will not go on else I should

write you a really intimate letter, and then you would dislike me, more, even more, than you do.

Vita Aren't you a pig, to make me feel one? I have searched my brain to remember what on earth in my letter could have given you "a great deal of pain". Or was it just one of your phrases, poked at me? Anyhow, that wasn't my intention, as you probably know. Do you ever mean what you say, or say what you mean? Or do you just enjoy baffling the people who try to creep a little nearer? "Dislike you more, even more." Dear Virginia, said she putting her cards on the table, you know very well that I like you a fabulous lot.

Virginia But really and truly you did say — I can't remember exactly what, but to the effect that I made copy out of all my friends, and cared with head, not with the heart. As I say, I forget; and so we'll consider it cancelled! ... I like the story very very much — in fact, I began reading it after you left, went out for a walk, thinking of it all the time, and came back and finished it, being full of a particular kind of interest which I daresay has something to do with its being the sort of thing I should like to write myself.

Vita I have walked on air all day since getting your letter. I am more pleased than I can tell you at your approval. Altogether after reading it I felt like a stroked cat.

Virginia "Look on it, if you like, as copy, as I believe you look upon everything, human relationships included". Oh yes, you like people better "through the brain than through the heart", etc: So there. Come and be forgiven.

Vita I came to Tavistock Square today. I went upstairs and rang your bell — I went downstairs and rang your bell. Nothing but dark inhospitable stairs confronted me. So I went away disconsolate. I wanted (a) to see you; (b) to ask you to sign two of your books which my mother had; (c) to be forgiven.

Virginia You have added to your sins by coming here without telephoning — I was only rambling the streets to get a breath of air — could easily have stayed in, wanted very much to see you. I will sign as many books as Lady Sackville wants. No: I will not forgive

you. Your book, *Seducers in Ecuador* looks very pretty, rather like a ladybird. The title however slightly alarms the old gentlemen in Bumpuses Bookshop.

Vita I have been horribly remiss in writing to thank you for *Mrs Dalloway*, but as I didn't want to write you the how-charming-of-you-to-send-me-your-book-I-am-looking-forward-to-reading-it-so-much sort of letter, I thought I would wait until I had read both it and *The Common Reader*, which I am sorry to say I have now done. Sorry, because although I shall read them again, the first excitement of following you along an unknown road is over. There are passages of *The Common Reader* that I should like to know by heart; it is superb; there is no more to be said. I can't think of any book I like better or will reread more often. *Mrs Dalloway* is different; its beauty is in its brilliance chiefly; it bewilders, illuminates, and reveals; *The Common Reader* grows into a guide, philosopher and friend, while *Mrs Dalloway* remains a will-of-the-wisp, a dazzling and lovely acquaintance.

Virginia Hah ha! I thought you wouldn't like *Mrs Dalloway*. On the other hand, I thought you might like *The Common Reader*, and I'm very glad that you do — all the more that it's just been conveyed to me that Logan Pearsall Smith thinks it's "very disappointing". But oh, how one's friends bewilder one! — partly, I suppose, the result of bringing out two books at the same time. I'm trying to bury my head in the sand, or play a game of racing my novel against my criticism according to the opinions of my friends. Sometimes *Mrs Dalloway* wins, sometimes *The Common Reader*. And I have one of my wretched headaches.

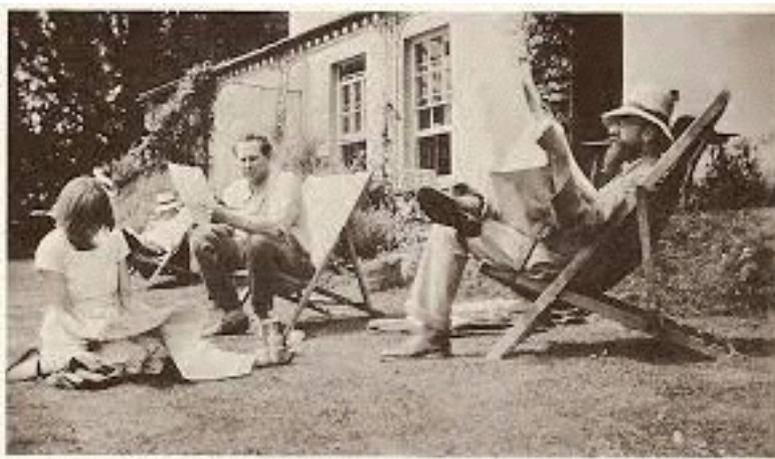
Vita Last Friday at midnight I stood on the top of your Downs, and, looking down over various lumps of blackness, tried to guess which valley contained Rodmell and you asleep therein. And now comes your letter, making me think that on the contrary you were probably awake and in pain. But knowing nothing of that at the time, I reluctantly recovered my dogs who had been galloping madly across the Downs, climbed into the motor, and drove through the sleeping villages of Sussex and Kent, with the secret knowledge in my own mind that I had paid you a visit of which you knew nothing, — more romantic than the cup of tea to which your husband, Leonard, had

Notice the games initiated by Virginia at the beginning of their correspondence. She allows Vita to call her by her first name while on return of post she maintains the formality of calling Vita Mrs. Nicolson. Vita seems to be equal to Virginia and gives as good as she gets “*Aren't you a pig for making me feel one!*” There is a good deal of verbal ping – pong going on and teasing.

Discuss in groups:

- How much letter-writing do you do?
- How does it feel when you receive a hand-written letter?
- How does letter-writing differ from emailing, texting and snap-chatting?
- How different would your life be if you only had the resources of the 1920s and 302 available to you? Do you think you would like it?
- Already in the first few pages of VITA & VIRGINIA we learn quite a lot about the two women. Describe the two women in your own words.
- There is a lot of name-dropping already in the first few pages. List the names and find out who they are.
- We know that Virginia was somewhat sickly and prone to bouts of depression and even seizures. Can you find any evidence of this in her writing in these first few pages?

3. Sexual freedom and the Bloomsbury Group



In 1904 the Bloomsbury Group was formed; a group of up and coming young artists and writers who all shared the same ideas and values. Virginia's sister, Vanessa, was an artist as was her husband, Clive Bell, and they were the founding members of the group. Although they were conventionally, some would say happily, married they sought to go outside of their marriage and have affairs with other artists within the group.

Many of the group were homosexual or bi-sexual. This lifestyle, which advocated free-love, was extremely unusual in Edwardian England. They were seeking to overthrow the stifling morals of the 19th century and in a sense considered themselves above conventional behaviour. However their conduct was kept secret from those outside their circle. Remember homosexual acts between men were in fact illegal during the first half of the 20th century. Members of the Bloomsbury Group were committed to ideas of liberalism and pacifism at a time when these views were unpopular.

EXERCISE

Discuss in groups:

- How was the Bloomsbury world different from the world in which Virginia had grown up?
- How does the gay/lesbian culture express itself today as compared with the 1920s and 30s?
- Should one's lifestyle be dictated by society?
- Vita, Virginia and the entire Bloomsbury Group lived their lives exactly as they wished to live them, with little respect for the social norms of the day. How important is it to conform?
- In 2016, how accepting are we generally of people who are different from accepted norms?
- Think of people you know or you may have heard of in the news, who disregard accepted behaviour – for whatever reason – and insist on doing their own thing. How does society treat them?
- Dorothy Parker, American poet, short story writer, critic and satirist, once said that the Bloomsbury group “lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles”. What do you think she meant?

1922 - Lesbianism



In 1922 Virginia Woolf met Vita Sackville-West and over the space of three years their relationship progressed from a close friendship to a love affair. It wasn't until the 1920s that lesbians were regarded as a group in their own right.

Lesbianism was never a crime in Britain as Queen Victoria refused to sign the bill to outlaw it.

The 1920s was a time of great decadence. Recreational drugs became popular and in Post War Berlin Lesbian and Gay clubs began to spring up. Even in London the gay world flourished although its clubs were more of a private thing. Sex between men was illegal in Britain at the time. The middle and lower classes however still adhered to the morals of the Victorian age.

EXERCISE

Look at the following text. This letter from Vita to Virginia was written after their first night together spent at Vita's country home, Long Barn:

Vita: I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia. I composed a beautiful letter to you in the sleepless nightmare hours of the night, and it has all gone: I miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way. You would never write so

elementary a phrase as that; you'd clothe it in so exquisite a phrase that it would lose a little of its reality. Whereas with me it is quite stark: I miss you even more than I could have believed; and I was prepared to miss you a good deal. So this is just really a squeal of pain.

Discuss

- What is Vita really saying here?
- Try rewriting the paragraph in modern language

Now look at Virginia's response:

Virginia: *"But why do you think I don't feel, or that I make phrases? Lovely phrases, you say, which rob things of reality. Just the opposite. Always, always, always I try to say what I feel. Will you then believe that after you went last Tuesday – exactly a week ago – out I went into the slums of Bloomsbury, to find a barrel organ? But it didn't make me cheerful and ever since, nothing important has happened – somehow it's dull and damp. I have been dull; I have missed you. I do miss you. I shall miss you. And if you don't believe it, you're a long-eared owl and ass. Yes, I miss you, I miss you. I dare not expatiate, because you will say I am not stark, and cannot feel the things dumb people feel. You know that is rather rotten rot, my dear Vita..."*

- How would you describe Virginia's mood in this letter?
- Try rewriting the paragraph in modern language
- Vita and Virginia were both happily married when they met. Do you think it is possible to love two people at the same time?
- Vita and Virginia were two very different women from very different backgrounds. What do you think attracted Vita to Virginia and vice versa?

3. The Second World War

As the 1930s progressed there was increasing unrest in Europe and Asia. The Fascists took over Italy under Mussolini. The Nazis seized power in Germany under Adolf Hitler.

In 1936 Civil War had ravaged Spain and youth from around the globe had travelled to Spain to side with the warring factions some supporting the Carlists (monarchists) and other the Falange Espanola (fascists). It was in

this conflict that Virginia's nephew Julian Bell lost his life fighting against fascism.

Hitler with his Luftwaffe invented the Blitzkrieg (Lightning War) in Spain as a rehearsal for the atrocities across Europe during World War 2. He crushed all resistance by bombing innocent civilian populations.

By 1940 Britain had declared war on Germany, seen their troupes decimated at Dunkirk, Paris fall into enemy hands and was experiencing the brutality of the Blitzkrieg on the civilian populations of London, Liverpool and many other large urban centres.

All through this time Britons were encouraged to develop a "stiff upper lip" and the slogans "Britain can take it!" and "Keep calm and carry on!" were coined. Against this bleak backdrop of desperate circumstance Vita lived in fear for her sons' future and Virginia was still struggling with mental illness.

4. The 1960s

In 1962 Vita died and already within a few years her affairs with Violet Trefusis and Virginia Woolf became common knowledge. Her son Nigel Nicolson saw to it that the story was published in his book "The Portrait of a Marriage". It was a matter of pride to him that his parents had lived their lives true to their own sexual identity.

The 1960s was a watershed for free thinking. Germaine Greer was a latter day Virginia Woolf writing about and fighting for the equality of women. Free love and peace was the message propagated by the 'Hippie' movement. The codes of morals were turned upside down and as never before the lower classes were included in these revolutionary changes. Censorship was relaxed and finally eradicated and slowly the alternative lifestyles first championed by the Bloomsbury Group were becoming accepted.

Study questions – after seeing the play VITA & VIRGINIA

- Virginia and her sister were not allowed to go to school or university, although their brothers did. How would you feel if you were not allowed to do things that because of your gender?
- Describe Virginia's pattern of behaviours, i.e. what kind of mental cycles did she go through before, during and after writing a novel?
- Describe the dynamics of Virginia's relationship with Vita Sackville-West. What kinds of rivalry, what kinds of love?

- Virginia was deemed “mad” by her friends and family. How would she be treated today?
- Trace the development of Vita and Virginia’s relationship. Despite absence, jealousy and general turbulence, the love and friendship lasts 20 years. To what can this be attributed? Why?
- Do Virginia and Vita come across as likeable characters? Discuss both womens’ strengths and weaknesses.
- Vita describes a typical day to Virginia:

“Now here am I, alone at midnight, and I survey my day, and I ask myself what I have done with it. I finished the hop-picking article for Leonard, found an envelope and a stamp, and sent it off. I planted perhaps a hundred bulbs. I played tennis with my son, I endeavoured to amuse my other son, who has whooping-cough, and tries to crack jokes between the bouts. I read a detective story in my bath. I talked to a carpenter. I wrote five lines of poetry. Now what does all that amount to? Nothing. Just fritter...”

 - How does this compare with a typical day you might have? How many hours a day do you spend on your computer, Facebook, mobile phone, watching television? If you didn’t spend time on these “modern” gadgets, how do you think you would spend it?



- This is Knole House, where Vita was born and brought up. Try to imagine being brought up in a place like this. How easy/difficult do you think it would be to relate to “ordinary” people?