



# The London Scene: Six Essays on London Life

*Virginia Woolf*

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## **The London Scene: Six Essays on London Life** Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf was already an accomplished novelist and critic when she was commissioned by the British edition of *Good Housekeeping* to write a series entitled "Six Articles on London Life." Originally published bimonthly, beginning in December 1931, five of the essays were eventually collected and published in 1981. The sixth essay, "Portrait of a Londoner," had been missing from Woolf's oeuvre until it was rediscovered at the University of Sussex in 2004. Ecco is honored to publish the complete collection in the United States for the first time.

A walking tour of Woolf's beloved hometown, *The London Scene* begins at the London Docks and follows Woolf as she visits several iconic sites throughout the city, including the Oxford Street shopping strip, John Keats's house on Hampstead Heath, Thomas Carlyle's house in Chelsea, St. Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and the Houses of Parliament.

These six essential essays capture Woolf at her best, exploring modern consciousness through the prism of 1930s London while simultaneously painting an intimate, touching portrait of this sprawling metropolis and its fascinating inhabitants.

## **The London Scene: Six Essays on London Life Details**

Date : Published July 3rd 2006 by Ecco (first published 1975)

ISBN : 9780060881283

Author : Virginia Woolf

Format : Hardcover 96 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Classics, European Literature, British Literature

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### Kathleen says

"Dipping and rising, moving and settling, the Commons remind one of a flock of birds settling on a stretch of plowed land. They never alight for more than a few minutes; some are always flying off, others are always settling again. And from the flock rises the gabbling, the cawing, the croaking of a flock of birds, disputing merrily and with occasional vivacity over some seed, worm, or buried grain."

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### thehalcyondayssummer says

Opening lines: "Whither, O splendid ship' the poet asked as he lay on the shore and watched the great sailing ship pass away on the horizon."

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### Diana says

La edición es preciosa —contiene unas fotografías maravillosas—, pero todos sabemos que ese aspecto no debería ser tan... relevante. El contenido no me fascinó, lo encontré muy simple. Las palabras de Virginia Woolf que describieron los lugares de Londres no me transmitieron las emociones que debería haber sentido.

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### Yani says

#### Relectura febrero 2016

El encanto del Londres moderno consiste en que no ha sido construido para durar, ha sido construido para pasar.

Estos son seis poéticos ensayos sobre distintos aspectos de Londres, y con un estilo muy particular. Cuando lo leí pensé "esto es todo lo que necesité para entender por qué es difícil que Virginia Woolf le sea indiferente a alguien". Es, nada más ni nada menos, una pequeña muestra de la capacidad narrativa y observadora de la autora, dando como resultado una lectura muy amena y aguda. Transmite la sensación de estar viéndolo todo con sus ojos y de estar experimentando Londres (lo maravilloso y lo efímero de Londres, porque deja en claro que las ciudades como estas tienen vencimiento) en sus detalles mínimos, esos que seguramente la mirada del turista pasan por alto.

El ensayo que más me gustó es el que se llama "Casas de grandes hombres". Debo ser bastante chusma.

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## Olivia says

This is basically the most charming book about London - quite shallow but wonderful and witty - that I have ever read. And it is short, which is a plus. I feel very connected to Virginia Woolf, more through this book than through anything theoretical or intellectual she wrote - I guess because it now feels like we really could just hang out and think the same things about playgrounds on graveyards.

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## Hannah says

*The London Scene* is a little book of six, short essays about London written by Virginia Woolf in the 1930s. Though I enjoyed some of the descriptions of London that showcase its timelessness, I found that Woolf's "stream of consciousness" style went over my head at times. I felt the same way when I read her book, *Mrs. Dalloway*, back when I was an English student. Hmm :/

I loved these quotes though:

*"London perpetually attracts, stimulates, gives me a play and a story and a poem, without any trouble, save that of moving my legs through the streets...To walk alone through London is the greatest rest."*

*"As we come closer to the Tower Bridge the authority of the city begins to assert itself. The buildings thicken and heap themselves higher. The sky seems laden with heavier, purpler clouds. Domes swell; church spires, white with age, mingle with the tapering, pencil-shaped chimneys of factories. One hears the roar and the resonance of London itself."*

*"The delightful thing about London was that it was always giving one something new to look at, something fresh to talk about."*

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## Katherine says

Well each essay was a wonderful gem of prose poetry and caused me to think so many new thoughts, but I would expect nothing else. I recommend that if you're thinking about reading this, purchase the hard copy of the book; it's absolutely beautiful! They spent some time on it, you can tell, and here's why: These are 6 essays from a series on London that Woolf wrote for *Good Housekeeping* magazine in 1931-1932. The sixth essay had been missing for decades and was discovered in 2004 at the University of Sussex. Can you imagine how excited Ecco was to publish this?

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## Cristina says

Feia molt de temps que no llegia un llibre en català perquè em vaig cansar d'ensopegar amb traduccions que abusaven d'arcaïsmes i cultismes entorpint la lectura i convertint-la més en un suplici que no pas en un plaer. No obstant, amb la Virginia Woolf he fet una excepció i és que la Virginia ho mereix tot i més.

Londres recull sis articles publicats a la revista *Good Housekeeping* entre 1931 i 1932 que retraten la ciutat. Es tracta d'una autèntica delícia que es llegeix en una tarda.

Una selecció personal de fragments:

-sobre la intranscendència del comerç a “La marea d’ Oxford Street”: “cert, diu el gran mercader, jo no penso educar les masses perquè assoleixin un grau més alt de sensibilitat estètica. (...) No, fins que algun botiguer espavilat no se li acudeixi d’obrir cel·les per a pensadors solitaris, cel·les entapissades de vellut verd, amb cuques de llum artificials i un estol de papallones autèntiques per induir el pensament i la reflexió, és debades intentar arribar a alguna conclusió a Oxford Street.”

-sobre la bellesa i l’ amor a “Cases de grans homes”: “en la llunyania, hi ha turons als boscos dels quals els ocells canten, i un ermini o una llebre s’ aturen un instant, en silenci absolut, amb una pota alçada per escoltar amb atenció el frec de les fulles. Per contemplar Londres des de dalt, venien aquí Keats, i Coleridge, i Shakespeare, potser. I aquí, en aquest mateix instant, el noi de sempre seu en un banc de ferro estrenyent entre els braços la noia de sempre.”

-sobre el descans assolit amb la mort a “Abadies i catedrals”: “perquè aquí els morts dormen en pau, sense demostrar res, sense testificar res, sense reclamar res, si no és que gaudim de la pau que els seus ossos ens proporcionen. Gens a contracor han renunciat a la humana voluntat de tenir noms diferenciats o virtuts peculiars. Però no tenen motius per doldre’s. Quan el jardiner planta els bulbs o sembra l’ herba, tornen a florir i cobreixen el terra d’ herba verda i flexible. Aquí fan safareig mares i mainaderes; les criatures juguen, i el vell captaire, després de menjar-se el dinar d’ una bossa de paper, escampa les molles per als pardals. Aquests cementiris són els santuaris més pacífics de Londres, i els seus morts, els més reposats.”

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## Imyra De souza says

Livrinho curtinho, li em uma tarde! É o primeiro da Virginia Woolf que eu leio.

Não é um livro de histórias, mas sim, um livro com 6 peças bem curtas sobre Londres. Como se fosse um passeio que a autora está fazendo, andando por Londres e nos contando sua impressão sobre o que ela está vendo e o que está acontecendo. O último conto é diferente, ao invés de falar de Londres, fala de Mrs. Crowe, uma típica londrina.

Achei o livro bem interessante e Woolf é muito poética em suas descrições. Dá uma impressão de que você está lá com ela. Pensei que poderia ser cansativo e até mesmo meio chato por isso, mas realmente não é. Acho que o fato dela não estar descrevendo especificamente coisas, mas muito sensações e pensamentos que ela tem ao ver Londres e seus lugares deixa tudo ainda mais vivo.

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## Antonomasia says

A set of six essays Woolf wrote for *Good Housekeeping* in 1931-32; subjects are the docks, Oxford Street - tacky, yet charming and fascinating - 'Great Men's Houses' - the homes of Carlyle and Keats, museumised; would be interesting to read when visiting these as they are now - 'Abbeys and Cathedrals', the House of Commons, and an account of a older middle-class party hostess.

I read a subscription ebook of this illustrated reissue by Daunt, which in paper form looks like it would be gift / stocking-filler material for those - less utilitarian than myself - who like small, pretty hardback books as clutter objects.

The introduction, by Hermione Lee, is somewhat over-generous and appears addressed to those who judge books on their adherence to present-day political values. (Contrast with an excellent introduction I read the other day, Maureen Duffy's to the Penguin Modern Classics *The Well of Loneliness* - a book of almost the same age - which looked at the work in its time and in the present with great balance.)

At first in reading these essays, I couldn't help noticing sentences which themselves contradicted the assertion that *The London Scene* "should contradict the notion that Woolf was an apolitical or rarefied writer". But is political toothcombing how I normally approach books? No! So I mentally threw away the introduction as best I could, but still noticed how normal Imperialism was, and a mixed or inconsistent attitude to class: many types of worker are considered at arm's length; on the other hand she writes in depth about the back-breaking labour of the Carlyles' servants, and about how the whole household could have benefited from comforts such as hot water and central heating, now available to their peers in the 1930s. Which only made me more curious than I already was about the microhistory *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* .

The essays became more interesting when I took them as historical documents with the bonus of lovely writing. There are some romantic descriptions of the city and its layers of history, and beautiful paragraphs about walking around it. (Whilst very lovely - and I would recommend this collection to people with a hearty appetite for books on London - these felt inessential to me as they are so similar to more recent accounts, and I don't think I'm a fan of Woolf *per se*, only of *Orlando*.) There were a few points of disappointing imaginative naivety, (did she *really* not tend to imagine what marble busts might look like if they were coloured in with the subject's complexion?) but on the other hand, these pieces were written for a magazine and she may have dashed them off very quickly.

A few interesting time capsules:

- [Woolf is imagining the experiences of passers-by on Oxford Street]

*I grant, says the middle class woman, that I linger and look and barter and cheapen and turn over basket after basket of remnants hour by hour. My eyes glisten unseemly I know, and I grab and pounce with disgusting greed. But my husband is a small clerk in a bank; I have only fifteen pounds a year to dress on; so here I come, to linger and loiter and look, if I can, as well dressed as my neighbours.*

This 1930s idea of 'middle-class' sounds very close to our present idea of the declining middle-class, the precariat, who can't afford many of the expensive gadgets and pastimes that have glibly been called 'middle-class' by the media in more recent decades.

- An ambivalence or apprehension about power passing further from the aristocracy to the masses, the feelings of a pre-war champagne socialist. It's throughout the piece on the Commons, which ends: *So let us hope that democracy will come, but only a hundred years hence, when we are beneath the grass; or that by some stupendous stroke of genius both will be combined, the vast hall and the small, the particular, the individual human being.*

The second part, after the semi-colon, may be quite wonderful, but the first doesn't sound too good now. On the other hand how different is it when we modern more-or-less middle-class lefties don't quite trust the electorate to make the 'right' decision in some referendum?

- *Hampstead has always remained not a suburb or a piece of antiquity engulfed in the modern world, but a place with a character peculiar to itself. It is not a place where one makes money, or goes when one has money to spend. The signs of discreet retirement are stamped on it... It has style and intention as if designed for people of modest income and some leisure who seek rest and recreation.*

When I was younger, I fell for the literary image of Hampstead as bohemian and friendly and all that guff; in my early twenties I went on a holiday to London and because of this idea of the place, spent a while hanging around in Hampstead. It is rather pretty, but largely I was disappointed: the main roads had high end chain stores other cities had branches of, and the people seemed colder and more insular than in pubs, shops etc in other - mostly central or studenty - parts of the city I visited that same week. I didn't even spot anyone

famous there to make up for it.

And it's obviously an awful lot more expensive now than it was in Woolf's time.

- The environment: a rubbish tip is merely an eyesore; and there is a bewildering absence of the notion that natural resources may be used up, even those that are logically finite, such as mammoth ivory. (Just a shoddy substance used for goods such as *the backs of the cheaper kind of hand-glass*. Archaeological artefacts from Poundstretcher, anyone? It's not as if the idea of resource depletion didn't exist in the culture at all, awaiting extrapolation: the RSPB had been founded 40 years earlier by ladies who objected to the killing of birds to decorate hats.)

Nor, it seems, can there be any objection other than from some aesthetic quarters to almost Futurist-minded, fast, disposable buildings: *Our [age] seems to delight in proving that we can make stone and brick as transitory as our own desires. We do not build for our descendants, who may live up in the clouds or down in the earth, but for ourselves and our own needs. We knock down and rebuild as we expect to be knocked down and rebuilt. It is an impulse that makes for creation and fertility. Discovery is stimulated and invention on the alert.*

The first four essays were the best, a nice mixture of Of Their Time / history and good writing.

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## Magrat Ajostiernos says

Seis relatos sencillitos pero geniales.

Perfecto si eres un amante de Londres o para empezar con la autora... me encantaron las seis historias, me descubrieron una Virginia Woolf que no conocía. Mis preferidos 'Los muelles de Londres' y 'Casas de grandes hombres'

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## Readings says

["Nos encontramos en lo alto de la colina, y más allá veremos todo Londres extendiéndose abajo, ante nosotros. Es un panorama siempre fascinante, a todas horas y en todas las estaciones del año. Se ve Londres como un todo, un Londres atestado, compacto y con costillares, con sus cúpulas dominantes, sus catedrales guardianas, sus chimeneas y sus agujas, sus grúas y sus depósitos de gas, y con el humo perpetuo que no hay primavera ni otoño que despeje."]

?

'Londres' es una recopilación de seis relatos breves. Seis relatos en los que Virginia Woolf hace un retrato de lo que es para ella la ciudad de Londres. Plasma su percepción con unas maravillosas descripciones y cuida hasta el mínimo detalle. Se centra en pequeños detalles que a priori pensarías que son irrelevantes pero que en realidad marcan la diferencia.

A través de estos relatos, la autora nos transporta a esta maravillosa ciudad y también a la época en la que transcurren. Es como si estuvieras por las calles que ella describe, es como si estuvieras viendo todo con tus propios ojos. Virginia Woolf te regala su visión de Londres, te hace viajar.

Como en todas las recopilaciones de relatos hay algunos que te enamoran y otros que se quedan por el camino sin conseguirlo. En este caso he disfrutado de todos los relatos pero como siempre tengo mis preferencias. Entre todos ellos destacaría 'Retrato de una londinense' y 'Casas de hombres grandes'. No quiero poner el punto final sin destacar la bonita edición que ha publicado Lumen. Cada relato empieza con

una bonita fotografía que complementa perfectamente su lectura.

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## **Marsha says**

Virginia Woolf's fondness for London shone through every crevice as these six short essays take you through its winding streets. Here was ardent attention to detail as she extolled the virtues of her beloved while not shying away from some of its worse faults. There was a certain irreverence as she revealed that London has its seamy side, smelly and unpleasant, but she understood as any true lover does that the rough cannot exist without the smooth. Hers was the love of the faithful spouse who adores her husband, whether he's dressed in his evening best or shuffling to the table in his bathrobe, unshaven, unwashed and reeking of halitosis.

For any American who believes there is nothing new in the British Empire, these essays will surprise. London struts forward in all its glory, revealing the tawdry and sordid as well as the glory still sparkling from its grand old avenues. The transient has as much importance as the permanent, perhaps more so. Shabby halls with peeling wallpaper and worn carpets are revealed as hotbeds of activity, the people compared to fowl that are always flying off and perching down, never settling for very long but always haring off on some new mission.

But it's from Woolf's final essay in this slim book that we come to see what she did: it is the people that make London, as they do any town, village, city or country of note. When she wrote about the gossipy Mrs. Crowe, you feel the thrill of having made the acquaintance of someone truly worth knowing—only to feel the deep pang of realizing that such a person is gone forever.

Woolf manages to make her reader as fascinated with this city as she was. No wonder she was born and chose to die here.

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## **Zi says**

Bought this book while I was in London from Daunt Books where the book is published.

I started reading it after came back to New York. And even though the book was written in a different age, it still reminded me my time spent in London.

I especially like "Great Men's House" and "Abbeys and Cathedrals".

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## **Emma says**

Delightful! I love her (her writing, that is)! A perfect little glimpse into the character of this mesmerizing city.

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