

## I've Never Read Her Reading Group

*A brief look at the short, the ambitious / ambiguous.*

*'Leves Amores' Katherine Mansfield*

*'Orlando' Virginia Woolf (extract)*

*'Artful' Ali Smith (extract)*

*'Recreation' Audre Lorde*

*'The Man-Moth' Elizabeth Bishop*

*'Earthseed' Octavia E. Butler*

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Reading:

### **1. Katherine Mansfield, Leves Amores (1907)**

I can never forget the Thistle hotel. I can never forget that strange winter night.

I had asked her to dine with me, and then go to the Opera. My room was opposite hers. She said she would come but – could I lace up her evening bodice, it was hooks at the back. Very well.

It was still daylight when I knocked at the door and entered. In her petticoat bodice and a full silk petticoat she was washing, sponging her face and neck. She said she was finished, and I might sit on the bed and wait for her. So I looked round at the dreary room. The one filthy window faced the street. She could see the choked, dust-grimed window of a wash-house opposite. For furniture the room contained a low bed, draped with revolting, yellow, vine-patterned curtains, a chair, a wardrobe with a piece of cracked mirror attached, a washstand. But the wallpaper hurt me physically. It hung in tattered strips from the wall. In its less discoloured and faded patches I could trace the pattern of roses – buds and flowers – and the frieze was a conventional design of birds, of what genus God alone knows.

And this was where she lived. I watched her curiously. She was pulling on long, thin stockings and saying 'damn' when she could not find her suspenders. And I felt within me a certainty that nothing beautiful could ever happen in that room, and for her I felt contempt, a little tolerance, a very little pity.

A dull grey light hovered over everything; it seemed to accentuate the thin tawdriness of her clothes, the squalor of her life, she, too, looked dull and grey and tired. And I sat on the bed, and thought: 'Come, this Old Age. I have forgotten passion, I have been left behind in the beautiful golden procession of youth. Now I am seeing life in the dressing-room of the theatre.'

So we dined somewhere and went to the Opera. It was late, when we came out into the crowded night street, late and cold. She gathered up her long skirts. Silently we walked back to the Thistle Hotel, down the white pathway fringed with beautiful golden lilies, up the amethyst-shadowed staircase.

*Was Youth dead? ... Was Youth dead?*

She told me as we walked along the corridor to her room that she was glad the night had come. I did not ask why. I was glad, too. It seemed a secret between us. So I went with her into her room to undo those troublesome hooks. She lit a candle on an enamel bracket. The light filled the room with darkness. Like a sleepy child she slipped out of her frock and then, suddenly, turned to me and flung her arms round my neck. Every bird upon the bulging frieze broke into song. Every rose rose upon the tattered paper budded and formed into blossom. Yes, even the green vine upon the bed curtains wreathed itself into strange chaplets and garlands, twined around us in a leafy embrace, held us with a thousand clinging tendrils.

And Youth was not dead.

## **2. Virginia Woolf, Orlando**

So far, we are on the firm, if rather narrow, ground of ascertained truth. But nobody has ever known exactly what took place later that night. The testimony of the sentries and others seems, however, to prove that the Embassy was empty of company, and shut up for the night in the usual way by two A.M. The Ambassador was seen to go to his room, still wearing the insignia of his rank, and shut the door. Some say he locked it, which was against his custom. Others maintain that they heard music of a rustic kind, such as shepherds play, later that night in the courtyard under the Ambassador's window. A washer-woman, who was kept awake by toothache, said that she saw a man's figure, wrapped in a cloak or dressing gown, come out upon the balcony. Then, she said, a woman, much muffled, but apparently of the peasant class, was drawn up by means of a rope which the man let down to her on to the balcony. There, the washer-woman said, they embraced passionately 'like lovers', and went into the room together, drawing the curtains so that no more could be seen.

Next morning, the Duke, as we must now call him, was found by his secretaries sunk in profound slumber amid bed clothes that were much tumbled. The room was in some disorder, his coronet having rolled on the floor, and his cloak and garter being flung all of a heap on a chair. The table was littered with papers. No suspicion was felt at first, as the fatigues of the night had been great. But when afternoon came and he still slept, a doctor was summoned. He applied remedies which had been used on the previous occasion, plasters, nettles, emetics, etc., but without success. Orlando slept on. His secretaries then thought it their duty to examine the papers on the table. Many were scribbled over with poetry, in which frequent mention was made of an oak tree. There were also various

state papers and others of a private nature concerning the management of his estates in England. But at length they came upon a document of far greater significance. It was nothing less, indeed, than a deed of marriage, drawn up, signed, and witnessed between his Lordship, Orlando, Knight of the Garter, etc., etc., etc., and Rosina Pepita, a dancer, father unknown, but reputed a gipsy, mother also unknown but reputed a seller of old iron in the market-place over against the Galata Bridge. The secretaries looked at each other in dismay. And still Orlando slept. Morning and evening they watched him, but, save that his breathing was regular and his cheeks still flushed their habitual deep rose, he gave no sign of life. Whatever science or ingenuity could do to waken him they did. But still he slept.

On the seventh day of his trance (Thursday, May the 10th) the first shot was fired of that terrible and bloody insurrection of which Lieutenant Brigge had detected the first symptoms. The Turks rose against the Sultan, set fire to the town, and put every foreigner they could find, either to the sword or to the bastinado. A few English managed to escape; but, as might have been expected, the gentlemen of the British Embassy preferred to die in defence of their red boxes, or, in extreme cases, to swallow bunches of keys rather than let them fall into the hands of the Infidel. The rioters broke into Orlando's room, but seeing him stretched to all appearances dead they left him untouched, and only robbed him of his coronet and the robes of the Garter.

And now again obscurity descends, and would indeed that it were deeper! Would, we almost have it in our hearts to exclaim, that it were so deep that we could see nothing whatever through its opacity! Would that we might here take the pen and write *Finis* to our work! Would that we might spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, Orlando died and was buried. But here, alas, Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! Putting their silver trumpets to their lips they demand in one blast, Truth! And again they cry Truth! and sounding yet a third time in concert they peal forth, The Truth and nothing but the Truth!

At which — Heaven be praised! for it affords us a breathing space — the doors gently open, as if a breath of the gentlest and holiest zephyr had wafted them apart, and three figures enter. First, comes our Lady of Purity; whose brows are bound with fillets of the whitest lamb's wool; whose hair is as an avalanche of the driven snow; and in whose hand reposes the white quill of a virgin goose. Following her, but with a statelier step, comes our Lady of Chastity; on whose brow is set like a turret of burning but unwasting fire a diadem of icicles; her eyes are pure stars, and her fingers, if they touch you, freeze you to the bone. Close behind her, sheltering indeed in the shadow of her more stately sisters, comes our Lady of Modesty, frailest and fairest of the three; whose face is only shown as the young moon shows when it is thin and sickle shaped and half hidden among clouds. Each advances towards the centre of the room where Orlando still lies sleeping; and with gestures at once appealing and commanding, OUR LADY OF PURITY speaks first:

'I am the guardian of the sleeping fawn; the snow is dear to me; and the moon rising; and the silver sea. With my robes I cover the speckled hen's eggs and the brindled sea shell; I cover vice and poverty. On all things frail or dark or doubtful, my veil descends. Wherefore, speak not, reveal not. Spare, O spare!'

Here the trumpets peal forth.

'Purity Avaunt! Begone Purity!'

Then OUR LADY OF CHASTITY speaks:

'I am she whose touch freezes and whose glance turns to stone. I have stayed the star in its dancing, and the wave as it falls. The highest Alps are my dwelling place; and when I walk, the lightnings flash in my hair; where my eyes fall, they kill. Rather than let Orlando wake, I will freeze him to the bone. Spare, O spare!'

Here the trumpets peal forth.

'Chastity Avaunt! Begone Chastity!'

Then OUR LADY OF MODESTY speaks, so low that one can hardly hear:

'I am she that men call Modesty. Virgin I am and ever shall be. Not for me the fruitful fields and the fertile vineyard. Increase is odious to me; and when the apples burgeon or the flocks breed, I run, I run; I let my mantle fall. My hair covers my eyes. I do not see. Spare, O spare!'

Again the trumpets peal forth:

'Modesty Avaunt! Begone Modesty!'

With gestures of grief and lamentation the three sisters now join hands and dance slowly, tossing their veils and singing as they go:

'Truth come not out from your horrid den. Hide deeper, fearful Truth. For you flaunt in the brutal gaze of the sun things that were better unknown and undone; you unveil the shameful; the dark you make clear, Hide! Hide! Hide!'

Here they make as if to cover Orlando with their draperies. The trumpets, meanwhile, still blare forth,

'The Truth and nothing but the Truth.'

At this the Sisters try to cast their veils over the mouths of the trumpets so as to muffle them, but in vain, for now all the trumpets blare forth together,  
'Horrid Sisters, go!'

The sisters become distracted and wail in unison, still circling and flinging their veils up and down.

'It has not always been so! But men want us no longer; the women detest us. We go; we go. I (PURITY SAYS THIS) to the hen roost. I (CHASTITY SAYS THIS) to the still unravished heights of Surrey. I (MODESTY SAYS THIS) to any cosy nook where there are ivy and curtains in plenty.'

'For there, not here (all speak together joining hands and making gestures of farewell and despair towards the bed where Orlando lies sleeping) dwell still in nest and boudoir, office and lawcourt those who love us; those who honour us, virgins and city men; lawyers and doctors; those who prohibit; those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why;

those who praise without understanding; the still very numerous (Heaven be praised) tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness; those still worship us, and with reason; for we have given them Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, Ease. To them we go, you we leave. Come, Sisters, come! This is no place for us here.' They retire in haste, waving their draperies over their heads, as if to shut out something that they dare not look upon and close the door behind them.

We are, therefore, now left entirely alone in the room with the sleeping Orlando and the trumpeters. The trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrific blast:—

‘THE TRUTH!

at which Orlando woke.

He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess — he was a woman.

The sound of the trumpets died away and Orlando stood stark naked. No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace. As he stood there, the silver trumpets prolonged their note, as if reluctant to leave the lovely sight which their blast had called forth; and Chastity, Purity, and Modesty, inspired, no doubt, by Curiosity, peeped in at the door and threw a garment like a towel at the naked form which, unfortunately, fell short by several inches. Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath.

We may take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements. Orlando had become a woman — 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. His memory — but in future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his,' and 'she' for 'he' — her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. Some slight haziness there may have been, as if a few dark drops had fallen into the clear pool of memory; certain things had become a little dimmed; but that was all. The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.

But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can. Orlando had now washed, and dressed herself in those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex; and was forced to consider her position. That it was precarious and embarrassing in the extreme must be the first thought of every reader who has followed her story with sympathy. Young, noble, beautiful, she had woken to find herself in a position than which we can conceive none more delicate for a young lady of rank. We should not have blamed her had she rung the bell, screamed, or fainted. But Orlando showed no such signs of perturbation. All her actions were deliberate in the extreme, and might indeed have been thought to show tokens of premeditation. First, she carefully examined the papers on the table; took such as seemed to be written in poetry, and secreted them in her bosom; next she called her Seleuchi hound, which had never

left her bed all these days, though half famished with hunger, fed and combed him; then stuck a pair of pistols in her belt; finally wound about her person several strings of emeralds and pearls of the finest orient which had formed part of her Ambassadorial wardrobe. This done, she leant out of the window, gave one low whistle, and descended the shattered and bloodstained staircase, now strewn with the litter of waste-paper baskets, treaties, despatches, seals, sealing wax, etc., and so entered the courtyard. There, in the shadow of a giant fig tree, waited an old gipsy on a donkey. He led another by the bridle. Orlando swung her leg over it; and thus, attended by a lean dog, riding a donkey, in company of a gipsy, the Ambassador of Great Britain at the Court of the Sultan left Constantinople.

### 3. Ali Smith, Artful

*The wind doth blow today, my love,  
And a few small drops of rain;  
I never had but one true-love,  
In cold grave she was lain.  
I'll do as much for my true-love  
As any young man may;  
I'll sit and mourn all at her grave  
For a twelvemonth and a day.*

The twelvemonth and a day being up, I was still at a loss. If anything I was more at a loss. So I went and stood in our study and looked at your desk, where the unfinished stuff, what you'd been working on last, was still neatly piled. I looked at your books, I took one of your books off a shelf at random—my study, my desk, my books, now.

The book I took down today happened actually to have been one of mine originally. It was a Dickens novel, *Oliver Twist*, the old Penguin edition I'd had at university, with a spine whose orange had almost completely faded and a jolly engraving of drunks and children in a pub on the cover, which was beginning to peel away from the spine. It would probably stand one more read. I'd not read *Oliver Twist* since, oh God, when? Way before we even first knew each other, I'd had to, for university, so that made it thirty years.

That gave me a shake. A twelvemonth and a day can arguably be called short, but thirty years? How could thirty years be the blink of the eye it felt? It was the difference between black and white footage of the Second World War and David Bowie on *Top of the Pops* singing "Life on Mars."

Maybe I might try to read *Oliver Twist*, the whole thing, from start to finish. I hadn't read anything, I hadn't been able to, for well over a twelvemonth and a day. I opened the book at Chapter 1, page 45, which "Treats of the Place where Oliver Twist was Born, and of the Circumstances attending his Birth" (that's quite a lot of pages before he was even born, forty-four). I sat down in the armchair by the window.

There was a draught by this window. There'd always been a draught by this window because one year when we painted it, then left it a little open to dry we couldn't get it to close completely again without cracking the paint, and you never wanted to crack it because you'd painted it so carefully, so we never did.

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#### 4. AUDRE LORDE, Recreation

Coming together  
it is easier to work  
after our bodies  
meet  
paper and pen  
neither care nor profit  
whether we write or not  
but as your body moves  
under my hands  
charged and waiting  
we cut the leash  
you create me against your thighs  
hilly with images  
moving through our word countries  
my body  
writes into your flesh  
the poem  
you make of me.

Touching you I catch midnight  
as moon fires set in my throat  
I love you flesh into blossom  
I made you  
and take you made  
into me.

#### 5. ELIZABETH BISHOP, The Man-Moth

*Man-Moth: Newspaper misprint for "mammoth."*

Here, above,  
cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight.  
The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.  
It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,  
and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.  
He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,  
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,  
of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.

But when the Man-Moth  
pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,  
the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges  
from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks  
and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.  
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,  
proving the sky quite useless for protection.  
He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.

Up the façades,  
his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him  
he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage  
to push his small head through that round clean opening  
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.  
(Man, standing below him, has no such illusions.)  
But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although  
he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt.

Then he returns  
to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He flits,  
he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains  
fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.  
The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way  
and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed,  
without a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort.  
He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards.

Each night he must  
be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams.  
Just as the ties recur beneath his train, these underlie  
his rushing brain. He does not dare look out the window,  
for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison,  
runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease  
he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep  
his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers.

If you catch him,  
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,  
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens  
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids  
one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.  
Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention  
he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,  
cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

## **6. Octavia E. Butler, Earthseed**

Here we are –  
Energy,  
Mass,  
Life,  
Shaping life,  
Mind,  
Shaping Mind  
God,  
Shaping God.  
Consider—  
We are born

Not with purpose,  
But with potential.

All that you touch  
You Change.

All that you Change  
Changes you.

The only lasting truth  
Is Change.

God  
Is Change.