

"Kew Gardens" is a literary short story by Virginia Woolf. The story covers an average day in the iconic Kew Gardens in London. It was first published by Woolf and her husband in 1919. The earliest edition included handmade woodcut designs, and very few copies remain. Woolf is considered one of the most important English novelists of the 20th century. She was among the first authors to use stream of consciousness as a narrative tool. She also frequently wrote feminist pieces. "Kew Gardens" is her most popular short story. The story is set in the Kew Gardens on a hot July day in southwest London. In the 1900s, Kew Gardens hosts thousands of plants, and it's very popular with Londoners looking for a safe place to stroll around. It's also popular with artists and poets looking for creative inspiration because the flower collection is so vibrant and colourful. "Kew Gardens" centers around a series of small but significant moments in the garden. Four families meander around the garden and stop to admire a flowerbed. Aside from the flowerbed, there is no unifying narrative within the story. It is a collection of snapshots and insights into other people's lives. Because the flowerbed is so central to the story, Woolf describes it in detail. It is an oval-shaped flowerbed with red, blue, and yellow petals. The petals move in the gentle breeze, and some petals fall onto the soil below. There are pebbles and snails nearby, but they don't distract the eye from the beautiful flowers. No one can pass by this flowerbed without stopping to admire it. The first family arrives at the flowerbed. After zigzagging between plants, they finally walk in a straight line towards the blooming flowers. The family seems disjointed, because the man walks far ahead of his wife and children. He wants to be alone with his thoughts because he's reminiscing on the past. The man proposed to another woman in these gardens 15 years ago. She didn't accept his proposal. Her rejection reminds him of a flower rustling in the breeze, the petals remaining out of reach. He compares himself to a dragonfly trying to find a stable place to land. Although he remembers this woman fondly, he loves his present wife, Eleanor, more. The family fades into the distance. Meanwhile, a snail travels between the petals. It stops moving when it senses the vibrations from heavy feet. This time, two men wander past the flowerbed. One is old, and one is much younger. The young man listens respectfully while the older man talks. They don't look at each other. The old man contemplates the meaning of life and what Heaven looks like. He's distracted by a widow walking past and he pays his respects to her. He then diverts his attention back to the flowerbed. It reminds him of exotic plants he saw in Uruguay during the war. In his old age, he struggles to separate the past from the present. Everything blurs together. Two elderly women arrive at the flowerbed. They are lower middle-class women, meaning they rank lower than most people in the garden. They're always looking for excuses to gossip about the gentry. When they see the elderly man raving at the flowerbed, they smile at each other and eavesdrop. Once the men walk away, the women start piecing together fragments of their conversation. They're convinced that the men are delusional, which makes them feel better about themselves. Wealth, it seems, doesn't buy happiness. One woman is so distracted by the conversation that she ignores the flowers. The other woman finds the flowerbed hypnotic. In the meantime, the snail confronts a fragile leaf. The leaf stands between him and the other side of the flowerbed. He braves the leaf but stops again when more people appear. He somehow knows to stay out of sight so that they don't step on him. He knows that his shell can only protect him from so much damage. The final observers are a young man and woman. They are in their late teens and new to romantic courtship. The

boy complains because he doesn't think the gardens are worth the entry fee. The girl wonders if we can put a price on anything. They hold hands and exchange affectionate glances. They both forget all about the flowerbed and hop between the other beds like butterflies. The butterflies symbolize their youthful exuberance.