

JRF SPECIAL PDF

Virginia Woolf



1 Woolf's Biography

1.1 Who She Was

Virginia Woolf was a leading **Modernist** novelist, essayist, and critic, and one of the most important **feminist** voices in English literature. She is remembered for a new way of writing fiction that follows the inner flow of a character's thoughts rather than outward events. Her own name for this aim: a novel is "**not form which you see but emotion which you feel.**"

CONCEPT

What is stream of consciousness? A narrative technique that follows the unbroken flow of a character's thoughts, memories, and feelings as they happen in the mind, often jumping about without ordinary order. The psychologist **William James** first used the phrase; Woolf, along with **James Joyce** and **William Faulkner**, made it central to Modernist fiction. Woolf's own term for the method was **interior monologue**.

1.2 Birth, Family, and Life

Detail	Information
Born	1882 , London
Died	1941 , age 59 — drowned herself in the River Ouse
Husband	Leonard Woolf
Press	Co-founded the Hogarth Press (1917) with Leonard
Group	The Bloomsbury Group
Period / mode	Modernist ; stream of consciousness

Woolf was born in **1882** — useful for chronology questions, she comes after Matthew Arnold (1822) and well before her own century's writers. She suffered great loss young: her **mother died in 1895**, which brought on her first mental breakdown, and within ten years she also lost a sister, a brother, and her father. She was **not allowed to attend college** as her brothers were, so she **educated herself in her father's library**.

She married **Leonard Woolf**, and together they founded the **Hogarth Press** in **1917**. The press printed work by **T. S. Eliot**

and **Sigmund Freud**, and translations of Russian and European writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. Woolf also worked as a **critic** and wrote for newspapers. She had a close relationship — an affair — with the writer **Vita Sackville-West**, who later inspired *Orlando*. Woolf battled **depression** all her life, and in **1941** she drowned herself in the River Ouse.

1.3 The Bloomsbury Group

CONCEPT **What was the Bloomsbury Group?** A circle of English writers, artists, and thinkers active in the early 20th century, named after the Bloomsbury district of London where they met. Woolf was a central member. The group valued art, friendship, and free thought, and helped shape the Modernist movement in Britain.

1.4 Why She Matters

Woolf broke with the plot-driven Victorian and Edwardian novel and put the **inner life** — perception, memory, the passing of time — at the centre of fiction. As a critic she defined Modernism's break from the older generation, and as a feminist she argued, in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, for women's **financial and creative independence**. Her influence runs through the rest of 20th-century fiction and feminist thought.

2 Important Works

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>The Voyage Out</i>	1915	Novel	Her debut novel ; first appearance of Clarissa Dalloway
<i>Jacob's Room</i>	1922	Novel	An indirect study of character ; Jacob known only through his room
<i>Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown</i>	1924	Essay	Reply to Arnold Bennett ; defends the new Modernist novel
<i>Mrs Dalloway</i>	1925	Novel	A single day in London; Clarissa and Septimus
<i>To the Lighthouse</i>	1927	Novel	Her magnum opus ; the Ramsays; tripartite structure
<i>Orlando: A Biography</i>	1928	Novel	A hero who lives centuries and changes sex; inspired by Vita Sackville-West
<i>A Room of One's Own</i>	1929	Essay	Foundational feminist text; "a room of her own"
<i>The Waves</i>	1931	Novel	Soliloquies of six characters
<i>Three Guineas</i>	1938	Essay	Book-length feminist essay against war and inequality
<i>Modern Fiction</i>	1925	Essay	"Look within"; materialists vs spiritualists
<i>Between the Acts</i>	1941	Novel	Her last novel ; a village pageant before WWII

CONCEPT

Chronology of the major works: *The Voyage Out* (1915) → *Jacob's Room* (1922) → *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) → *To the Lighthouse* (1927) → *Orlando* (1928) → *A Room of One's Own* (1929) → *The Waves* (1931). Among nearby Modernist works, *Sons and Lovers* (D. H. Lawrence) is **1913**, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Joyce) is **1916**, *The Waste Land* (Eliot) is **1922**, and *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce) is **1939**.

3 Important Works in Detail

To the Lighthouse, her masterpiece, is covered on its own in Section 4.

3.1 Mrs Dalloway (1925)

In one line: one June day in London, a society hostess prepares a party while, across the city, a shell-shocked veteran moves toward suicide.

Mrs Dalloway is a work of **modernist fiction** set in **London** in mid-June **1923**, told in Woolf's **stream-of-consciousness** style. It follows **Clarissa Dalloway**, a fifty-year-old upper-class wife of the Conservative politician **Richard Dalloway**, across a single day as she buys flowers and hosts an evening party. Through her wandering thoughts we meet her past: her girlhood at **Bourton**, her old suitor **Peter Walsh** (just back from India, whose proposal she once refused), and her early friend **Sally Seton**.

Running in parallel is the story of **Septimus Warren Smith**, a **First World War** veteran suffering from **shell shock** (trauma-based mental illness). Haunted by hallucinations of his dead friend **Evans**, and pushed by the doctors **Holmes** and **Sir William Bradshaw** toward an institution, Septimus throws himself from a window and dies. News of his death reaches Clarissa's party; alone for a moment, she reflects on it, then returns to her guests.

The novel binds the two strangers by shared themes of **time, mortality, mental illness, and the pressure of social convention**. The passing hours are marked by the chimes of **Big Ben**.

CONCEPT

The repeated Shakespeare line: A line from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* — "**Fear no more the heat of the sun, / Nor the furious winter's rages**" — recurs through the novel. It is a comfort in the face of death: for Septimus it promises peace, and for Clarissa it is a reminder of life's fragility.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A **modernist** novel (1925), **stream of consciousness**, set across **one day** in **London**.
- Heroine = **Clarissa Dalloway**; her husband = **Richard**; her old suitor = **Peter Walsh**; girlhood home = **Bourton**.
- The parallel figure is **Septimus Warren Smith**, a WWI veteran with **shell shock**, who dies by suicide.
- The repeated Shakespeare line is "**Fear no more the heat of the sun, Nor the furious winter's rages.**"

- Other lines: **"What does the brain matter compared with the heart?"** and **"It might be possible that the world itself is without meaning."**

3.2 Orlando: A Biography (1928)

In one line: a young Elizabethan nobleman lives for three centuries and changes from man to woman, in a playful "biography" of English literary history.

Orlando carries the subtitle **A Biography**. It opens in **1588**, in the reign of **Queen Elizabeth I**, where **Orlando** is a sixteen-year-old boy who writes a poem called **"The Oak Tree."** He lives on for some **three hundred years**, meeting key figures of English literature, and partway through the story **changes sex from man to woman**. Late in the book Orlando marries a sea-captain, **Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine – "Shel"** – and at last sees the long-laboured poem "The Oak Tree" published.

The novel is at once a satire and a fantasy. It offers a **fictionalised survey of English literature from Elizabethan times to 1928**, and it challenges fixed ideas of **gender** and identity. Woolf based it on the family history of her lover **Vita Sackville-West**.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- Subtitle = **A Biography**; it opens in **1588** and runs to **1928**.
- As a sixteen-year-old boy, Orlando writes the poem **"The Oak Tree."**

- Orlando **changes sex** from man to woman and lives for centuries; the lover **Shel (Shelmerdine)** appears later.
- It offers a **fictionalised survey of English literature from Elizabethan times to 1928**.
- Inspired by **Vita Sackville-West**; themes of **gender fluidity** and identity.

3.3 A Room of One's Own (1929)

In one line: a landmark feminist essay arguing that a woman needs money and private space before she can write.

A Room of One's Own (1929) is a foundational **feminist** essay, built from two lectures Woolf gave to young women at **Newnham** and **Girton** colleges on the subject of "**women and fiction**." Its central claim is plain: "**a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction**."

Woolf argues the case through invented narrators (she calls them all variations of "Mary") and a fictional women's college she names "**Oxbridge**" — a blend of Oxford and Cambridge — where she notices that the men dine richly while the women's meals are plain, a small sign of how unequally money and learning are shared.

The essay's most famous invention is **Judith Shakespeare**, an imagined sister of William Shakespeare. Woolf supposes Judith was as gifted as her brother, but, denied schooling and freedom, she came to nothing and killed herself. The figure shows how talented women were silenced by their circumstances, not their ability.

CONCEPT Woolf's view of women in history:

Foregrounding how little women appear in the historical record, Woolf points to **Trevelyan's *History of England*** as an example of how the lives of ordinary women were left out. She argues that women have long served as a "mirror" reflecting men back at twice their size.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- An essay (1929) drawn from lectures at **Newnham** and **Girton** on "women and fiction."
- Thesis: "**a woman must have money and a room of her own.**"
- Invents **Judith Shakespeare**, Shakespeare's imagined gifted sister, who is destroyed by a society that gave her no chance.
- The fictional college is "**Oxbridge**" (Oxford + Cambridge).
- Woolf refers to **Trevelyan's *History of England*** when discussing women's marginal place in history.
- A famous line: "**A woman writing thinks back through her mothers.**"

3.4 The Voyage Out (1915)

In one line: a sheltered young woman sails to South America and awakens to life, only to die of fever.

This is Woolf's **debut novel**; its original title was **Melymbrosia**. Its protagonist, **Rachel Vinrace**, travels by ship toward **South America**, where the voyage and its mixed company open her to self-discovery before she dies

of a **fever**. The novel marks the **first appearance of Clarissa Dalloway**, who would later have her own book.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- Woolf's **first novel**; original title **Melymbrosia**.
- Protagonist = **Rachel Vinrace**; the ship is bound for **South America**.
- Contains the **first appearance of Clarissa Dalloway**.

3.5 Jacob's Room (1922)

In one line: a young man's life told sidelong, through the rooms and objects he leaves behind.

Jacob's Room is an **indirect study of character**: we never see **Jacob** directly but learn of him through his surroundings and the impressions of others. The novel turns on **absence and loss**, especially the loss of young men in the **First World War**.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- An **indirect study of character** — Jacob is known only through **his room** and others' views.
- Themes of **absence, loss, and the First World War**.

3.6 The Waves (1931)

In one line: an experimental novel made entirely of the inner voices of six friends across their lives.

The Waves is among Woolf's most experimental novels. It is built from the **soliloquies** (interior speeches) of **six** characters — **Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis** — whose voices trace their lives from childhood onward.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- Consists of **soliloquies** by **six** characters: **Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, Louis**.

3.7 The Essays: Modern Fiction, Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown, Three Guineas

In one line: the critical writings where Woolf defines the Modernist novel and presses her feminist case.

In "**Modern Fiction**" (originally titled "**Modern Novels**") Woolf criticises the older Edwardian novelists — **H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy** — as "**materialists**" who fix on outward, unimportant things. Against them she praises writers like **James Joyce** and **Anton Chekhov** as "**spiritualists**" who reach the inner life. Her instruction to the novelist is to "**look within**" and record the mind's true impressions.

"**Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown**" (1924) answers **Arnold Bennett**, who had attacked *Jacob's Room* for not making lasting characters. Woolf imagines an ordinary woman, "**Mrs Brown**," seen on a train, and asks how the old novelists would fail to capture her real inner self. It is here she makes her famous claim that "**on or about December 1910 human character changed**."

Three Guineas (1938) is a **book-length feminist essay** in the form of letters, answering three questions: how to **prevent war**, why women's **education** is so poorly funded, and why women are kept from the **professions**.

CONCEPT Woolf's other much-cited essays: "**The Death of the Moth**" (1942) is a short reflective essay using a dying moth as an image of life's fragility. Her **autobiographical essays** include "**A Sketch of the Past**" and "**Am I a Snob.**"

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- In "**Modern Fiction**" (orig. "**Modern Novels**") Woolf calls **Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy** "**materialists**" and praises **Joyce** and **Chekhov** as "**spiritualists.**"
- "**Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown**" replies to **Arnold Bennett**; it contains "**on or about December 1910 human character changed.**"
- **Three Guineas** (1938) is a **book-length essay** in **letter form** on war, women's education, and the professions.
- "**The Death of the Moth**" (1942) is Woolf's; her autobiographical essays include "**A Sketch of the Past**" and "**Am I a Snob.**"

4 To the Lighthouse

This is Woolf's most important and most important work, so we will study it carefully.

4.1 The Big Idea

In one line: across ten years, a family promises a child a trip to a lighthouse — and only after loss and war is the journey finally made.

To the Lighthouse (1927) is Woolf's **magnum opus**, written in the period of **Literary Modernism** and told through **stream of consciousness**. It follows the **Ramsay** family and their guests at a summer house in the **Hebrides**, Scotland, between about **1910 and 1920**. There is little plot in the ordinary sense; the novel lives in its characters' shifting thoughts and perceptions. The plot is often said to mirror **Woolf's own life**, and the *Modern Library* ranked it **15th** among the top 100 novels of the twentieth century.

CONCEPT

Auerbach on the novel: Erich Auerbach's great study of realism, **Mimesis** (1946), **ends with a chapter on *To the Lighthouse*** — using Woolf's handling of time and consciousness as the final example of how modern literature represents reality.

4.2 Structure and the Lighthouse

The novel has a **tripartite (three-part) structure**: "**The Window**," "**Time Passes**," and "**The Lighthouse**." ("The Sky" is **not** one of its parts.)

- **The Window** introduces the Ramsays and their guests; Mrs Ramsay promises young James a trip to the lighthouse if the weather holds.

- **Time Passes** leaps across roughly a decade: the **First World War** comes, several Ramsays die, and the empty house falls into decay.
- **The Lighthouse** brings the survivors back, and the long-delayed voyage to the lighthouse is finally made.

CONCEPT

What does the lighthouse symbolise? Three things: **permanence at the heart of change**, **the celebration of life in the heart of death**, and **the celebration of order in the heart of chaos**. It is a fixed, guiding point against which the change all around it is measured.

4.3**What Happens**

In "**The Window**," **Mr and Mrs Ramsay** bring their eight children and several guests to the summer house. Six-year-old **James** longs to visit the lighthouse across the bay; **Mrs Ramsay** says they may go tomorrow if it is fine, but **Mr Ramsay** coldly insists the weather will be foul, and James resents him. Among the guests are **Charles Tansley**, Mr Ramsay's prickly student who declares that women can neither paint nor write, and **Lily Briscoe**, a young painter working on a portrait of Mrs Ramsay. Mrs Ramsay hopes to make matches — Lily with **William Bankes** (Lily prefers to stay single), and **Paul Rayley** with **Minta Doyle**, who do become engaged.

In "**Time Passes**," the war sweeps over Europe and the years rush by. **Mrs Ramsay dies** suddenly; her son **Andrew** is killed in the war; her daughter **Prue** dies in childbirth.

The house, left empty, decays until the housekeeper **Mrs McNab** and her helpers restore it for the family's return.

In "**The Lighthouse**," Mr Ramsay finally takes **James** and his daughter **Cam** on the voyage to the lighthouse. On the way he praises James's rowing, and father and son share a rare moment of connection. Across the bay, **Lily Briscoe** at last completes the painting she had long abandoned. As she lays down her brush, the novel closes.

CONCEPT

The opening and closing lines: The novel opens with Mrs Ramsay speaking to her son James: "**Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow,**" she says, "**But you'll have to be up with the lark.**" It ends with Lily Briscoe finishing her picture: "**It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.**"

4.4 The Characters

Mrs Ramsay

- The warm, nurturing centre of the household; she promises James the lighthouse trip and tries to bring people together
- **Dies suddenly** during the "Time Passes" section; her presence haunts the rest of the novel

Mr Ramsay

- A **metaphysical philosopher**, demanding and insecure, who craves reassurance from his wife

- Coldly predicts bad weather at the start; finally makes the lighthouse voyage with his children at the end

James Ramsay

- The Ramsays' youngest son, **six** years old in Part One, who desperately wants to go to the lighthouse
- He is the listener Mrs Ramsay addresses in the novel's opening line; on the final voyage he shares a moment of connection with his father

Lily Briscoe

- A young **painter** — the woman who is an artist by profession and the figure shown **in the act of painting** throughout the novel
- Her struggle to finish her picture mirrors the artist's search for vision; she speaks the **final lines** of the book

Charles Tansley

- Mr Ramsay's student and admirer; disliked for his manner, he insists that **women can neither paint nor write**

Other Ramsays and guests

- **Andrew** (killed in the war) and **Prue** (dies in childbirth) — children lost in "Time Passes"
- **Cam** — the daughter who joins the final voyage
- **William Bankes**, **Paul Rayley**, and **Minta Doyle** — the family friends Mrs Ramsay tries to match
- **Mrs McNab** — the housekeeper who restores the decayed house

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A **Modernist** novel (1927), **stream of consciousness**, set in the **Hebrides / Scotland**, c. 1910–1920.
- **Tripartite structure**: "**The Window**," "**Time Passes**," "**The Lighthouse**" — **not** "The Sky."
- The lighthouse symbolises **permanence at the heart of change, life in the heart of death**, and **order in the heart of chaos** (not "change in the unchanging world").
- The **painter shown in the act of painting** is **Lily Briscoe**, the novel's woman artist.
- Opening dialogue is spoken by **Mrs Ramsay to her son James**: "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow..."
- Last line: "**It was done; it was finished... I have had my vision.**"
- Auerbach's **Mimesis** (1946) ends with a chapter on this novel.

5 Criticism

Critic / Source	What they said
Erich Auerbach (<i>Mimesis</i> , 1946)	Ended his study of literary realism with a chapter on <i>To the Lighthouse</i> , treating it as the modern example of representing reality.
Arnold Bennett	Attacked <i>Jacob's Room</i> for failing to create lasting characters; Woolf answered him in " Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown ."
Woolf on the Edwardians (<i>Modern Fiction</i>)	Called Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy " materialists " and praised Joyce and Chekhov as " spiritualists ."

Critic / Source	What they said
Coventry Patmore	His poem gave the phrase " the Angel in the House ," the Victorian feminine ideal that Woolf said a woman writer must "kill."
Edward Albee	Titled his 1962 play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? — a pun on the song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" — using Woolf's name.

CONCEPT

"Killing the Angel in the House": In her essay *Professions for Women*, Woolf borrows **Coventry Patmore's** phrase "**the Angel in the House**" for the selfless, self-denying ideal of the Victorian wife. To write honestly, she says, the woman author must metaphorically "**kill the Angel**" — free herself from the pressure to please.