

Virginia Woolf

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Virginia Woolf — *To the Lighthouse* (1927)

ENH 404: Twentieth Century Novel — Complete Exam Study Pack

Overview — the story in simple English

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is a modernist novel (আধুনিকতাবাদী উপন্যাস) with very little outward action — most of the "story" happens inside the characters' minds (মনের ভেতরে). It is set at the Ramsay family's summer house on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, and it is written in three parts. In Part I, "The Window," we spend a single day with Mr and Mrs Ramsay, their eight children, and several guests. Young James Ramsay longs to sail to the lighthouse the next day; his mother says maybe, if the weather is fine, but his father coldly insists it will not be fine. Mrs Ramsay is warm and loving and brings people together — she arranges a marriage between two young guests and hosts a harmonious (সুসংগত) dinner party built around a dish called the *Boeuf en Daube*. One guest, Lily Briscoe, is an unmarried painter (চিত্রশিল্পী) who tries to finish a painting but doubts herself, haunted by the taunt (টিটকারি) "Women can't paint, women can't write." In Part II, "Time Passes," ten years slip by; the empty house decays (ক্ষয়ে যায়), and — told briefly inside square brackets — Mrs Ramsay dies suddenly one night, the son Andrew is killed in the war, and the daughter Prue dies in childbirth. In Part III, "The Lighthouse," the survivors return to the house. Mr Ramsay at last sails to the lighthouse with James and Cam, and the long-delayed journey becomes a moment of reconciliation (পুনর্মিলন) between the grieving father and his children. On the shore, Lily finally completes her painting and feels a sudden flash of clarity (স্পষ্ট উপলব্ধি). The novel closes as she lays down her brush and thinks, "I have had my vision."

 **One-line meaning:** *To the Lighthouse* shows how art and love can make one lasting shape out of the flowing, changing stream of time, memory, and death.

Quick Facts	Detail
Published	1927, by the Hogarth Press (Woolf's own press)
Genre	Modernist novel; stream-of-consciousness (চেতনা-প্রবাহ) fiction; psychological novel; elegy (শোকগাথা)
Setting	The Ramsays' summer house, Isle of Skye, the Hebrides, Scotland; roughly the 1910s, spanning about ten years
Narration-Form	Third-person narration told through the shifting inner thoughts of many characters (free indirect discourse)
Author's remark	In her diary Woolf wondered whether to call the book an "elegy" rather than a "novel"

Themes & Technique

1. The passage of time and transience (ক্ষণস্থায়িত্ব). Time is the novel's deepest subject. Part I covers only one afternoon and evening, yet runs for many pages; Part II sweeps through ten whole years in a few pages. This uneven design shows that

felt time (inner experience) matters more than clock time. Everything human — beauty, dinners, families — is shown as fragile and passing, always slipping toward loss.

2. Death, loss, and grief (শোক). Woolf places the greatest events almost off-stage. The deaths of Mrs Ramsay, Andrew, and Prue are reported coldly inside brackets in "Time Passes," as if the indifferent universe barely notices. The whole third part is shadowed by absence, and the trip to the lighthouse becomes an act of mourning and of coming to terms with death.

3. Art and the artist (শিল্প ও শিল্পী). Lily Briscoe's struggle to finish her painting runs parallel to Woolf's own struggle to write. Art is presented as the one human power that can rescue a fleeting moment from time and give it permanence (স্থায়িত্ব). Lily's final "vision" and her single line drawn "in the centre" stand for the artist's victory of form over chaos.

4. Subjective reality and consciousness (চেতনা ও উপলব্ধি). There is no single, fixed truth in the novel; reality is built out of many private minds. The same person or event looks different inside each character's head. By moving in and out of many consciousnesses, Woolf suggests that truth is many-sided and personal, not one solid public fact.

5. Gender roles and marriage (নারী-পুরুষের ভূমিকা ও বিবাহ). Mr Ramsay stands for the masculine mind — logical, factual, demanding sympathy; Mrs Ramsay stands for the feminine — intuitive (অন্তর্দৃষ্টিসম্পন্ন), nurturing, uniting people. Their marriage is both loving and unequal. Lily, who refuses marriage to pursue art, questions the whole idea that a woman's only role is to serve and soothe men.

6. Order out of chaos / moments of being (বিশৃঙ্খলার মধ্যে শৃঙ্খলা). Against the flux (অবিরাম পরিবর্তন) of time, characters try to create small islands of order and meaning. Mrs Ramsay does this through her dinner party; Lily does it through her painting. Woolf called such flashes of intense meaning "moments of being" — brief times when life suddenly feels whole and clear.

Narrative technique (technical terms to use in the exam):

- **Stream of consciousness (চেতনা-প্রবাহ)** — following the natural, unbroken flow of a character's thoughts and feelings.
- **Free indirect discourse** — the narrator blends into a character's mind, reporting inner thought in the third person without quotation marks.
- **Interior monologue** — long inward speech, e.g. Mr Ramsay's thoughts running like letters of the alphabet as he strains from "Q" toward "R."
- **Multiple / shifting point of view** — the same scene is refracted (প্রতিসৃত) through several different minds.
- **"Tunnelling" method** — Woolf's own term for digging out a character's past and memory behind the present moment.
- **Symbolism (প্রতীকবাদ)** — the lighthouse, the sea, the painting, the window, and the dinner all carry deeper meaning.
- **Psychological (subjective) time vs clock time** — inner time expands and contracts, unlike the steady ticking of real clocks.
- **Triptych / elegiac structure** — three panels ("The Window," "Time Passes," "The Lighthouse") shaped like a mourning-poem.

Key Quotations — memorize

- "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," said Mrs. Ramsay. "But you'll have to be up with the lark," she added. — *Mrs Ramsay, opening lines of Part I ("The Window"). Her gentle "maybe" sets the journey and the whole book in motion.*
- "it won't be fine." — *Mr Ramsay, Part I. His blunt, factual crushing of James's hope; it captures his cold rationalism.*
- "Women can't paint, women can't write." — *Charles Tansley's sneer, remembered again and again in Lily Briscoe's mind. It stands for the male doubt Lily must overcome.*
- "Someone had blundered." — *Mr Ramsay, striding about reciting Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade." It shows his theatrical self-pity and need for attention.*

- "The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark." — *Lily Briscoe's meditation*. Woolf's idea that meaning comes not in one big truth but in small, sudden "moments of being."
- "Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision." — *Lily Briscoe, the final lines of the novel*. Art completes what life leaves unfinished; the painter reaches her moment of wholeness.
- The section titled "Time Passes" reports the family's deaths briefly, inside square brackets — for example, Mrs Ramsay's sudden death one night, which leaves Mr Ramsay's outstretched arms empty in the dark passage. (*Remembered as a fact; quote the phrase "Time Passes" but paraphrase the bracketed deaths rather than risk wrong wording.*)
- In her essay "Modern Fiction," Woolf wrote that life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged but "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." — *Woolf's own manifesto of the modern novel; use it to explain her technique.*

🗨️ Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
Erich Auerbach (<i>Mimesis</i> , chapter "The Brown Stocking")	Analysing the passage where Mrs Ramsay measures a stocking, he shows Woolf builds reality out of random everyday moments and many minds, while big external events shrink into the background.	Stream of consciousness; representation of consciousness
David Daiches (<i>Virginia Woolf</i> , 1942)	Argues the novel's unity is poetic and symbolic rather than plot-based; its coherence comes from recurring images and the shape of time.	Symbolism; structure; the title
Hermione Lee (biographer of Woolf)	Reads the novel as a deeply personal elegy for Woolf's dead parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, turned into art.	Autobiography; elegy; Mrs & Mr Ramsay
Jean Guiguet (<i>Virginia Woolf and Her Works</i>)	Emphasises Woolf's philosophy of the "moment" and subjective vision as the true centre of her fiction.	Consciousness; "moments of being"
Toril Moi (<i>Sexual/Textual Politics</i>)	Defends Woolf's fluid, shifting writing as a genuinely feminist practice that breaks down fixed male/female oppositions (androgyny).	Gender; feminist reading; Lily
Woolf herself ("Modern Fiction")	The novelist's task is to record the "myriad impressions" of an ordinary mind on an ordinary day — "life is a luminous halo."	Technique; modernist aims

📖 Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

RTC 1 — 🔥 Very likely

"Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," said Mrs. Ramsay. "But you'll have to be up with the lark," she added.

These are the opening lines of Virginia Woolf's modernist novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), spoken by Mrs Ramsay at the start of Part I, "The Window." Her little son James has asked to sail to the lighthouse the next day, and this gentle, hopeful reply is her answer to him. The words matter for several reasons. First, they instantly launch the novel's central image and its plot: the promised trip to the lighthouse, which will be delayed for ten years. Second, they reveal Mrs Ramsay's warm, nurturing nature — she protects her child's hope and joy. Third, her soft "if it's fine tomorrow" is immediately crushed by Mr Ramsay's cold "it

won't be fine," so these opening lines set up the book's deep contrast between feminine sympathy and masculine fact. Beginning mid-conversation, with no long introduction, they also show Woolf's modern method of dropping the reader straight into a living mind and moment.

RTC 2 — 🔥 Very likely

"Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision."

This is the closing sentence of *To the Lighthouse*, and the speaker (in thought) is the painter Lily Briscoe, in Part III, "The Lighthouse." At this exact moment Mr Ramsay has finally reached the lighthouse far out at sea, and Lily, standing on the lawn, at last draws a line in the centre of her long-unfinished picture. The line completes both her painting and the novel. Its significance is large. It shows the triumph of art: Lily has fought self-doubt and the taunt that "women can't paint," and now she achieves her own private "vision" (অন্তর্দৃষ্টি). It also links the two climaxes — the sea journey and the painting — suggesting that art can give lasting form to a world ruined by time and death. The "extreme fatigue" reminds us that such wholeness is hard-won. Ending on a completed vision rather than an event, Woolf makes inner achievement, not outward action, her true subject.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

The role of Mrs Ramsay — 🔥 Very likely

Mrs Ramsay is the emotional heart of *To the Lighthouse* and dominates Part I even though she dies in Part II. Beautiful, warm, and maternal (মাতৃসুলভ), she is the unifying force who draws people together and creates harmony out of everyday chaos. She comforts her son James, soothes her demanding husband's need for sympathy, arranges the engagement of Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, and, above all, hosts the famous *Boeuf en Daube* dinner, where she makes strangers feel like one community — a small work of art in itself. She represents the feminine, intuitive principle set against Mr Ramsay's cold masculine logic. Yet Woolf does not simply idealise her: Mrs Ramsay can be controlling in her matchmaking, and she partly accepts a limited "angel of the house" role. After her sudden death, her absence haunts the whole novel; both Lily and Mr Ramsay reach toward her memory. Critics such as Hermione Lee read her as a loving portrait of Woolf's own mother, Julia Stephen. She embodies the human wish to make order and meaning that time will finally sweep away.

Lily Briscoe — 🔥 Very likely

Lily Briscoe is the unmarried painter whose struggle to finish a picture forms one of the novel's two great story-lines. She stands for the modern artist and, in many ways, for Woolf herself. Throughout Part I she is tormented by self-doubt and by Charles Tansley's cruel refrain, "Women can't paint, women can't write," which challenges her right to create as a woman. Unlike Mrs Ramsay, Lily rejects marriage and devotes herself to her art, making her a quietly feminist figure. In Part III, ten years later, she returns to the same painting and the same spot on the lawn. As Mr Ramsay sails to the lighthouse, she works through her grief for the dead Mrs Ramsay and finally solves her composition, drawing one decisive line "in the centre." Her closing thought, "I have had my vision," ends the book on a note of artistic triumph. Lily shows that art can give permanent shape to fleeting life. Critics like Toril Moi read her as central to Woolf's feminist and modernist project.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

1. "Discuss the themes of the novel *To the Lighthouse*." — 🔥 Very likely (appears in both 2019 and 2020)

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is a novel almost without a plot in the ordinary sense; its true richness lies in its themes. Instead of dramatic events, Woolf gives us the inner life of her characters and, through them, explores the deepest questions of human existence — time, death, art, perception, and the roles of men and women. This essay argues that the novel is unified by one great concern: the human effort to make lasting meaning out of a world that is forever flowing away.

The first and most pervasive theme is the passage of time and transience (ক্ষণস্থায়িত্ব). Woolf builds this into the very shape of the book. Part I, "The Window," lingers over a single afternoon and evening for well over a hundred pages, while Part II, "Time Passes," races through ten years in a handful. This deliberate imbalance tells us that felt, inner time matters more than clock

time, and that everything human — beauty, love, families — is fragile and passing. As the critic David Daiches noted, the novel's unity is poetic rather than plot-based, held together by such rhythms of time and recurring images.

Closely tied to time is the theme of death and loss (শোক). Woolf's boldest stroke is to place the greatest tragedies almost off-stage. The deaths of Mrs Ramsay, of Andrew in the war, and of Prue in childbirth are all reported briefly inside square brackets in "Time Passes," as though the indifferent universe hardly pauses to notice. This cold treatment makes the losses more, not less, shocking, and it casts a long shadow over the final part, where the survivors must learn to live with absence.

Against death stands the redeeming theme of art and the artist (শিল্প ও শিল্পী). Lily Briscoe's decade-long struggle to finish her painting runs parallel to Woolf's own art. Painting, and by extension all art, is shown as the one human power able to rescue a fleeting moment and give it permanence. This is why the novel ends not with the sea journey but with Lily laying down her brush and thinking, "I have had my vision." Her single line drawn "in the centre" is a small but complete victory of form over chaos.

The novel is equally concerned with subjective reality and consciousness (চেতনা ও উপলব্ধি). There is no single fixed truth; reality is assembled from many private minds, and the same person looks different inside each observer's head. Woolf herself, in "Modern Fiction," described life as "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end," and *To the Lighthouse* is her attempt to capture that halo. Erich Auerbach, in his famous essay "The Brown Stocking," praised exactly this: how Woolf builds reality out of random everyday moments and many overlapping consciousnesses.

Finally, the novel probes gender roles and the search for meaning. Mr Ramsay embodies masculine logic and a hunger for sympathy; Mrs Ramsay embodies feminine intuition and the gift of uniting people, as in her *Boeuf en Daube* dinner. Lily, refusing marriage for art, quietly questions the whole arrangement, and Tansley's jibe that "women can't paint, women can't write" becomes the very prejudice she overcomes. In these small acts of order — a dinner, a painting — characters create what Woolf called "moments of being," brief flashes when life feels whole.

In conclusion, the themes of *To the Lighthouse* are not separate but woven into one vision. Time destroys, death interrupts, and consciousness wanders — yet art and love can still shape "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark." Woolf's greatness lies in showing that meaning is found not in grand events but in the fleeting, luminous moment made permanent.

2. "Discuss the symbols of *To the Lighthouse*." — 🔥 Very likely (appears in both 2019 and 2020; the same material answers "the aptness of the title")

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is one of the great symbolic novels of English modernism. Because it has so little outward action, its meaning is carried largely by a network of recurring symbols. As the critic David Daiches observed, the book's unity is essentially poetic and symbolic rather than dependent on plot. This essay examines the novel's central symbols — the lighthouse, the sea, Lily's painting, the window, and the dinner — and shows how together they express Woolf's vision of time, art, and human connection. The same discussion also justifies the aptness of the title, since the lighthouse gives the book both its name and its guiding image.

The lighthouse itself is the richest and most flexible symbol, and its meaning deliberately shifts from mind to mind. To little James in Part I it is an object of longing and hope; the trip to it is promised in the novel's opening words, "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," and then denied by Mr Ramsay's flat "it won't be fine." The lighthouse can stand for a distant goal, for stability shining amid the flux of the sea, for Mrs Ramsay's enduring presence, and even for the unattainable meaning the characters reach toward. Woolf herself refused to fix its meaning, and this openness is the point: like life, the lighthouse means different things to different people. Its final attainment in Part III, when Mr Ramsay steps ashore, becomes an emblem of reconciliation and completion, making the title wholly apt.

The sea surrounds the whole novel and is its great symbol of time, change, and mortality (মৃত্যুশীলতা). Its constant sound is soothing yet threatening, a reminder that all human life is temporary and will be worn away, just as the empty house is nearly reclaimed in "Time Passes." The steady rhythm of the waves mirrors the novel's own rhythm and its meditation on impermanence (অস্থায়িত্ব). Against this vast, indifferent sea, the small human gestures of the story appear both fragile and precious.

Lily Briscoe's painting is the symbol of art itself. Throughout the novel Lily struggles to capture and give permanence to a fleeting scene, and her final success — drawing a decisive line "in the centre" — represents the artist's power to impose lasting form on the chaos of time. Her closing thought, "I have had my vision," makes the painting the emblem of the whole book's ambition: to turn the passing moment into something that endures. The painting thus answers the destroying sea; art holds still what time sweeps away.

Two further symbols organise human relationships. The window of Part I's title frames Mrs Ramsay as she sits knitting and watching, a symbol of perspective and of the boundary between the inner and outer worlds. And the *Boeuf en Daube* dinner is a symbol of communion and harmony: around the shared table Mrs Ramsay fuses quarrelsome guests into a single, glowing community, creating exactly the kind of momentary order that art also achieves. Its warmth is deepened by our knowledge, from "Time Passes," that death will soon scatter this circle.

Woven together, these symbols carry the novel's deepest ideas. As Erich Auerbach showed in his study of Woolf's method, meaning here rises out of small, ordinary things — a stocking, a dinner, a beam of light — rather than out of grand events. The lighthouse's beam, the sea's murmur, and the painter's line all speak of the same struggle: to find or make a point of stillness within endless movement.

In conclusion, the symbols of *To the Lighthouse* are not mere decoration but the very substance of the novel. The lighthouse embodies the human goal and gives the book its fitting title; the sea embodies devouring time; the painting embodies redeeming art; and the window and the dinner embody human vision and human union. Through them Woolf transforms a quiet family holiday into a profound poem about how we make meaning against the flow of time.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Revision item	Content
Story in 3 lines	A family and their guests spend a day at a Scottish summer house where a boy's wish to visit the lighthouse is denied. Ten years and three deaths (including Mrs Ramsay's) pass in an empty house. The survivors return; the father finally sails to the lighthouse while the painter Lily completes her picture.
Must-quote 1	"Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," said Mrs. Ramsay. (opening line)
Must-quote 2	"I have had my vision." (Lily Briscoe, final line)
Backup quote 1	"Women can't paint, women can't write." (Charles Tansley's sneer)
Backup quote 2	"little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (Lily, on meaning)
Critic 1	Erich Auerbach ("The Brown Stocking") — reality built from random moments and many minds
Critic 2	David Daiches — the novel's unity is poetic and symbolic, not plot-based
Technique words	Stream of consciousness; free indirect discourse; interior monologue; multiple point of view; "tunnelling"; psychological time; symbolism; triptych/elegy
Top 3 likely essays	1) Discuss the themes of <i>To the Lighthouse</i> . 2) Discuss the symbols of <i>To the Lighthouse</i> . 3) Discuss the aptness of the title <i>To the Lighthouse</i> . (All appeared in both 2019 and 2020.)

🕒 **Exam-timing tip:** In a 4-hour paper answering the 15-mark essay, spend about 5 minutes planning (thesis + 5 points + 2 quotes), then write for ~35 minutes; the symbols answer and the title answer share the same material, so prepare them

together and save time.