

**An Exploration of Water Imagery in Virginia Woolf's**

*To the Lighthouse and The Waves*



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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	05
Introduction.....	06
i)    Water imagery from Greek to Modern to Post-colonial Literature.....	09
ii)   Virginia Woolf and Impressionism.....	12
Chapter One: Water Imagery in Virginia Woolf's <i>To The Lighthouse</i> .....	15
Chapter Two: Water Imagery in Virginia Woolf's <i>The Waves</i> .....	24
Conclusion.....	34
Works Cited.....	36

### **Abstract**

Water imagery has been used in various texts from Greek times to modern times in literature and beyond. It has found significant space in the works of modernist artists ranging from writers to painters. One such modernist writer is Virginia Woolf who has repeatedly incorporated water imagery in her writings. Her personal and professional lives both contain special significance of water. It has been used in various works of Woolf to establish relationship between characters, nature and emotions. The fact that is noticeable in the texts is that with the passage of time everything in life changes but water remains constant bearing evidence to the changing phases of their lives. The changing phases of characters as well as the changing of time can be showcased with the help of water imagery. Thus, this dissertation seeks to observe the use of water imagery in Virginia Woolf's two novels namely *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. By doing a textual analysis, I will explore how water serves as physical presence, spiritual guidance and reflection of life for the characters in the novels.

**Keywords:** Water imagery, Virginia Woolf, characters, lives, time, change

## Introduction

Since the origin of the earth as a habitable place for human beings, water has played an important role to sustain life. Consequently, it has played significant role in literature from various periods of time. Water imagery has been used to symbolize various factors related to life in literature. The symbolic meaning of water can indicate purity and fertility. It is often viewed as the source of life itself as in different myths life originates from primordial water. It is an interesting fact that human body also contains a major quantity of water and hence sometimes the existence of humans can be associated with water. This can also make humans reflect on the myths and allegories that have pointed the origination of human from water. Furthermore, circulation, life, cohesion and birth can also be associated with the use of water imagery. The ancient Greeks have focused on water to understand the power of transition that water holds. From them, it has been believed that water is the symbol for metamorphosis and philosophical recycling. Thus, water as an essential element for our existence, has marked deep impact in the field of symbolism in literature.

Moreover, water has unseen influences, healing effects and it makes human life flexible. The unseen influences of water can be related with intuition, psychic perception and dreams. The incidents that occur under water are mysterious. Similarly, human emotions cannot be understood from outside clearly. Hence, water reminds human to dive under the surface of emotions and understand life in a better way. Throughout various times, different cultures all around the earth have considered water as a symbol of healing, purification and renewal. It washes away the stuff that clutter in people's hearts. In literature, water marks its presence bearing testimony to various incidents that have occurred in the lives of the characters.

Virginia Woolf in her novels has used water imagery frequently. Water has special meaning in her life as well and hence the incorporation of water in her novels is noteworthy. If the two texts, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* are closely observed it can be said that representation of water can be deeply associated with the characters. Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, William Bankes, Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville all are characters of the two selected novels who find the presence of water during their various phases of their lives. Sometimes, there are scars so deep that nothing can heal them but water bodies which were constant through all the incidents that have caused the scars have healed the pain among the characters and have given them an escape. For example, Lily Briscoe of *To the Lighthouse* found it difficult to accept the fact that Mrs. Ramsay's passed away. The sea has been present during Mrs. Ramsay's presence and absence as well. Lily looked at the sea to heal her scars of losing Mrs. Ramsay whom she admired. Water has made life flexible for the characters. One of the most beautiful lessons that water can teach a person is how to be flexible and embrace the change. In literature, the characters have reflected on water during the passing phase of their lives and have embraced the change or consequences. For example, in *The Waves* Bernard, Susan and Rhoda finds out that although they choose what they wanted in their lives but they no longer is happy about their choices. Looking at the water bodies, they realized they must go with the flow of life. Water reminds the characters to go with the flow no matter what the situation is.

The incidents occurring in the lives of the character can be observed to be continuous like the flow of water present around them. The fact that has been prominent throughout the two novels is with the passage of time, everything in life changes but water or sea remains constant bearing evidence to the changing phases of people's lives. In modern time, one of the severe problems of mankind is alienation. An alienated person remains isolated from the surroundings

and is seen to submerge himself/herself in a world of darkness. An alienated person cannot recognize his surrounding and act obedient toward the changes normally. The characters of Woolf's novel are often seen to suffer from alienation. Under such circumstances, the water imagery is used to reflect his/her thoughts. The alienation of the characters is reflected through water. The flow of water can carry a person towards construction as well as destruction. But, what it does mostly is give a purpose or a function to life. It teaches people to do something and move forward despite the situations and obstacles. It helps people to formulate ideas during the bad phases and it allows them to flow. The characters, Lily Briscoe, Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, Nancy of *To the Lighthouse* and Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Louis, Neville of *The Waves* are observed to go through alienation through the various phases of lives. They often face situations in their lives where they are alone and unable to find any meaning of their lives. Under such circumstances they are seen to look towards the water bodies and re-arrange their thoughts. Their emotions can be closely related to water bodies. However, the change of emotions and phases of life keeps occurring but water remains as the constant element.

In this paper, I will observe the use of water imagery in Virginia Woolf two novels namely *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. I will begin by looking briefly at the use of water imagery in Western literature from the Greek to modern times, then move on to the association of Virginia Woolf's personal life with water which will reveal the significance of water imagery in her writings. Finally, I will do a comparative textual analysis of the usage of water imagery and different themes related to water imagery in the two chosen texts, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*.



### i) **Water Imagery from Greek to Modern to Post-colonial Literature**

Water imagery has been used from the Greek to modern age in various ways. In Greek mythology, the story of the baby Achilles is found. He was told to be dead at a young age. To prevent his death his mother dipped his body into the water of river Styx and offered him with powers of invulnerability. Hence, water represents invulnerability and strength here. Achilles grew up and became a very strong warrior. Nothing could kill him until he was hurt at his heels. His mother caught him by heels and dipped him inside the water and hence that part remained untouched by water and became his weak spot. This represents how water has been represented in the myths as a source of power. In the archaic Greek poet Sappho's writings, use of water imagery can also be observed. Most of her poems are found in a fragmented form and without specific title. Some of her fragmented pieces are collected and named as *Ode to Aphrodite*. She has mentioned about Crete Island. She sought love from the Greek Goddess Cypris. In the process she has chosen an island. She mentioned about ice water talking among the branches which suggested their making of noise as they fall. She also viewed Cypris as a goblet of gold mixed nectar. Here, the island was considered as an ideal venue to seek love. It had the pleasant surroundings of water and nature. In her writings water acted as a component to facilitate her spiritual pleasure in the process of seeking love.

One of the major poets of twentieth century is the modernist poet T.S Eliot. In his poem *The Waste Land*, there are several parts that have deep association with water imagery. In the part "Death by Water" through water imagery, Eliot has focused on the ideas of renewal and regeneration. In the part "What the Thunder Said" Eliot has put forward the quest for Holy Grail in the form of water imagery. Other prominent poets of literature have also focused on water imagery in their writings. For example, Emily Dickenson in "Water is Taught by Thirst" and

W.B. Yeats in his poem “To an Isle in the Water” has incorporated water imagery. The French poet Charles Baudelaire has been given the title “modernity” for his works which expresses the fleeting and ephemeral experiences of life. Some of his poems also include water imagery. From the compilation, *Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil)*, the two poems “The Swan” and “Man and the Sea” contains descriptions of the water bodies. The poem “The Swan” began with the description of a little stream. Baudelaire mourned in the poem because Paris has turned out to be a different place. His sorrows are reflected by the mention of “The huge stone blocks stained green in puddles of water”. (Baudelaire 3) The poet also described his strong desire for rain in the poem. In the poem “Man and the Sea”, he mentioned the mighty waves and has expressed how man and the sea are similar to one another. The poem begins with:

Free man, you will always cherish the sea!

The sea is your mirror, you contemplate your soul. (Baudelaire 4)

The post-colonial literature also holds special significance in the usage of water imagery. Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* can be brought under consideration. In the novel the use of river Thames and the river Congo represents two very different parts of the world. River Congo can be considered as the Orient and river Thames as the Occident. The two river bodies indicate two different parts of the earth with major cultural differences. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* it is mentioned:

The sea- reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable water way. In the offering the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked with gleams of varnished spirts. (1)

Here, the beginning of the journey of a colonizer towards the Orient is represented by using the water way as a medium to travel. On the other hand, in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester travels from England by the Atlantic Ocean. The post-colonial literature has special relation to water imagery because most of the journeys made during those times were by the sea. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the ocean is a place that indicates openness and communication between people and between two very different parts of the world. The Voyages through the sea might seem desirable but it is filled with marine storms and shipwrecks. The title *Wide Sargasso Sea* is taken from the name of a part of the Atlantic Ocean. The title itself mentions a sea which indicates the association of water body. Antoinette was also very anxious to remember her last sea voyage which brought her to the cardboard world. She wanted to remember the sea through which she has travelled. The change in her mental state was very questioning to her. Hence, she tried to understand her existence by trying to figure out the whether the journey by sea brought her to the new place.

Another noteworthy text of the post-colonial literature is Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*. A part of the book is completely based on the Sundarbans. In that part the use of water imagery is noteworthy. The writer has portrayed how the jungle surrounded the characters with salt water and the cathedral arching trees. The usage of water imagery in this novel has showed how different elements present in the water can influence the role of water. The saline water at the Sundarbans made it difficult for the character to survive. Rushdie wrote about the jungle in a manner that showed the characters as victims in the hands of the mighty jungle. Along with the cruelty of salt water there was rain. It appeared as if the jungle grew in the rain. The characters were travelling by boat also. They were surrounded by saline water underneath the boat and rain water from above. This showcases how water was very close to them and water surrounded them

from all sides. As they were really close to nature, water became really dangerous for the characters. It is mentioned:

Rainwater poured off leaves all around them and they turned their mouths up to the roof of the jungle and drank; but perhaps because the water came to them by way of Sundri leaves and mangrove branches and nipa fronds, it acquired on it's journey something of the insanity. (Rushdie 505)

Water is essential for drinking purposes, but saline water is unworthy of drinking. Hence, they had to depend on the rain water. The rain water being so close to nature contained something that was unworthy of drinking. Too much presence of water suffocated them and they were becoming insane.

## ii) **Virginia Woolf and Impressionism**

Born in 1882, Woolf's parents were free thinkers and she began writing novels at an earlier age. Both of her parents were married before marrying each other. The family had a Victorian Library where the girls were educated. She was born in a prosperous and well known family but the gradual deaths of her family members left her with much shocks. There were strong senses of desperate emotions in her life. She wanted to get back certain things which she lost unexpectedly. Her experiences in personal are also reflected in her writings. For example, she spent her summer at The Stephen's summer home, Thalland house and this experience was reflected in her modernist writing *To the Lighthouse*. In the novel as well she used a house situated near the sea as a setting. Woolf faced various problems in her personal life which lead to her mental breakdown. Her final mental breakdown was caused during the Second World War. At that time, Woolf's husband Leonard understood that she was sinking into depression. They

decided to suicide together if Germany attacked England because Leonard was Jewish. However, all the traumas in her life lead Woolf to end her life. She filled her pockets with stone and walked into River Ouse. The stream took her with it and she drowned herself. From this incident it can be asserted that her personal life also had special relationship with water. She decided to drown herself. Woolf's endings in the novels often include a situation nearby a water body. This reflects how her thoughts were generated by the fact that the failures and frustrations of the worldly things can be ended through a water body.

Virginia Woolf is one of the prominent modernist writers. She is renowned for using stream-of-consciousness narrative technique where a person's thoughts and reactions to events are portrayed as a continuous flow. Here, the flow can also be considered as a reflection of water flow. Just like water flows from one place to another despite of the obstacles and the natural phenomenon, the thoughts of people are also depicted in a continuous manner.

Modernism focuses on personal experiences and individuality. Subjectivity is the greatest focus of modernism. Modernists free themselves from cultural and social boundaries and experiment with different and new styles of writing, painting, etc. They become their own self and master their works. They put forward the writer's own speech. The tendency to put forward the writer's own self has given rise to a different form of language which can be random and impressive. This is how it is related to impressionism. Literary Impressionism is the attempt to make language an experimental activity. Impressionism deals with sensory perceptions like feeling, fleetingness etc. Woolf's *The Waves*, for example, is a novel which is filled with colorful and descriptive words. When someone reads the novel, he/she gets the perspective that he/she is observing the entire scenery. The light, the wave, the tides and everything could be felt. The description of the nature and the wave is so lyrical that it can be compared with modernist

paintings, such as, that of Monet and Van Gogh. For example, Monet's painting *Water Lilies and Japanese Bridge* is a beautiful expression of a natural scene where water lilies are floating on the water and there is a bridge above the water. It is capable of creating a deep impression in the observer's mind. It is one of the greatest works of impressionism and modern art. On the other hand, Van Gogh's *Starry Night over the Rhone*, is a creation where the presence of water is observed. The painting is a representation of a star filled sky reflecting on the water. Originally, this painting was a sketch in a letter that Vincent sent to his friend Eugene. Two friends are also observed at the painting near the water body. It represents the bond shared by the two friends near a beautiful water body.

The modernist writings do not fall under the strict boundary of fiction and non-fiction. In the novel *The Waves*, there are no specific plot, typical characters and designing of story. The story is like a flow of water, without any specific purpose but portrayed a lot of imageries. The language used to write the novel has been termed as musical language. There are total nine scenes of the sun and six characters which can be termed as the different voices in a piece of music. There are several themes in the novel that together contribute to become a central idea. The tone of the six characters indicates the different expressions but all their expressions are summed up into a moment of expression at the end. The musical style of the novel helps to generate the idea that the text is continuous and its core is fluid. Woolf's creation can be compared to the creation of an artwork. Her use of color, like the blue to express sea and her use of color in relation to the light can be compared with the actual usage of color in modernist paintings. Her shaping of characters as beings whose ideas can flow, accumulate and cease for moments are also noteworthy. Hence, the novel can be called a prose like fiction which has a fusion of many elements of modern art and literature.

## Chapter One: Water Imagery in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

*To the Lighthouse* is a novel written by Virginia Woolf which was published in 1927. The novel focuses on the Ramsay family and their visit to the Isle of Skye in Scotland. In this novel the life of the characters near a sea is portrayed in a fantastic way. This novel is often termed to resemble Woolf's own personal life. Along with the Ramsay family the other guests of the house are people from various professions. Water imagery is deeply related with Woolf's novels and the title itself portrays the fact. *To the Lighthouse* gives the readers an image of a lighthouse which is situated far from the sea shore. It gives the readers a feeling related to the sea and the waves of the sea. Furthermore, one can also engage oneself with the sounds of the waves crashing on the stones near the Lighthouse.

### Water as Physical Presence

The physical presence of water body is observed throughout the novel. The setting of the novel is near the sea. The sea existed in almost in every situation and every incident of the novel. The desirable place mentioned in the novel is the Lighthouse. The Lighthouse is also a place surrounded by water. Mrs. Ramsay thought how one could live at the lighthouse surrounded by water and stay without meeting dear ones. She also viewed the place as a place of horror because the people who resided there had the fear of getting wiped out or swept into the sea. The physical presence of water at the Lighthouse is more like a suffocating situation and the physical presence of water near the house soothed the souls of the people.

The beach house was not the only place surrounded by water. When Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Transly went to the town, they saw the view of the bay. Although they lived near the sea,

the sight of the bay at the town was another charming experience for them. Mrs. Ramsay exclaimed the sight as beautiful. It is mentioned in the text:

For the great plateful of blue water was before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men (11).

Lily and William Bankes' conversation always had the presence of the sea at the evening. They walked near the sea body and talked about life. The physical presence of the sea is directly found in the novel when Nancy, Minta, Andrew went near the sea shore. Nancy found the sea as her only companion as others became busy. She was attracted to the sight of the nature and she felt she was bound to experience the sea and her feelings. Her feelings can also be compared to the flow of the sea. The sea flows with great speed. Similarly the flow of feelings in human beings can also flow like the sea with great speed.

After the death of Mrs. Ramsay everything in the house was quite changed. The people who made the place lively were no longer there. The sea was still there encountering all the passing phases of the lives. From the beginning of the story the characters had a strong desire to go to the lighthouse. Mr. Ramsay finally took the initiative to take the children to the lighthouse. The journey towards the Lighthouse has a deep relationship with water as the journey is done through the sea. The physical presence of the water is even more strengthened by the description of water. Woolf mentioned:



The sail flapped over their heads. The water chuckled and slapped the sides of the boat, which drowsed motionless in the sub. Now and then sails rippled with a little breeze in them, but the ripple ran over them and ceased. The boat made no motion at all (155).

Here the difficulty of the journey is expressed. The journey may sometimes contain obstacles like the water chuckling and slapping the sides of the boat. During the journey Cam was observed to be particularly associated with the water body. Cam was looking down into the foam, into the sea with all its treasure in it and she was amazed by the speed of the water. The movement of the water sagged her bond with James.

The physical presence of the sea is strengthened by the description of the sea. Woolf has very clearly mentioned about each and every phenomenon happening at the sea. Lily observed the sea very carefully. It is mentioned in the text:

Distance had an extraordinary power; they had been swallowed up in it, she felt, they were gone forever they had become part of the nature of things. It was so calm, it was so quiet. The steamer itself had vanished, but the great scroll of smoke still hung in the air and dropped like a flag mournfully in valediction (180).

The presence of the sea expresses how with the passage of time everything changes. Sometimes humans also die but the sea remains constant and fresh. Human beings are quite helpless in front of nature because the nature has its way of engulfing everything. The sea has a physical presence that is felt throughout the novel. The sound of the wave, the smell of salty water on towels and sand from the beach have made the presence of sea water vibrant throughout the novel. Moreover, the sea water largely influences the minds of the characters. The sea has become something so powerful because the setting is an island surrounded by the sea.

## **Water as Spiritual Guidance**

There was often a huge gap between the characters. There were moments when they could not connect to one another clearly. The space between them is reflected through the sea. The sea acts as the connecting body between the two characters. Lily was always seen to run away from the interactions with William Bankes but Mr. Bankes dragged her to go with him. Under such circumstances the sea and other activities performed on the sea brought both of them under the same condition. Here, it can be considered as an instance of connecting the two characters but at the same time it may represent driving the characters away from real life interactions.

Mrs. Ramsay being an affectionate mother read stories to James. The story that was mentioned in this novel was about a fisherman. The fisherman was deeply connected to the sea, because he earned his livelihood by catching fishes from the water. Here water acts as a source of livelihood and economic progress. Furthermore, the fisherman prayed to the sea for his welfare and progress. The sea acts as a source of divine power to the fisherman because he prayed for his welfare and family's welfare at the sea.

In solitude, when there was complete silence and the characters needed a companion then there was the sound of the sea, the sound of the water crashing. It created great peace in the minds of the characters as they found something as their companion. About sea being a companion and guidance it is mentioned in the text:

Always, Mrs. Ramsay felt one helped oneself out of solitude, reluctantly by laying hold of some little odd or end, some sound, some sight, she listened, but it was all very still; cricket was over; the children were in their baths; there was only the sound of the sea (54).

In the third part of the novel, Lily returned to the house near the beach and was observing the changes that came to the house and the people. Everything about the house and the people were changed but the sea was still there. There were changes in the house.

It was not possible for Lily to meet Minta or Mrs. Ramsay anymore. However, she wanted to dive into the old times and hence the sea was her only scope. It was a constant in their lives.

Hence, she thought about diving into the sea and searching for a pearl brooch. Some thoughts of Lily suggest the sea to be a friendly place but some examples makes the sea a negative place.

Through a close observation it can be noticed that Lily avoided the contact with water. She refused to join the journey with Mr. Ramsay. However, her view about Mr. Ramsay changes as he leaves and the physical distance between them is increased. The sea inspires James and Lily to overcome their drawbacks. Because of the journey towards the Lighthouse, James was successful to come in terms with his father and Lily realized her different attitude towards Mr. Ramsay. Lily was also able to finish her novel at the end. The sea was seen to influence particular characters in particular ways. Mr. Ramsay and Lily were the two characters who were deeply associated with work. They wanted to create something that would sustain them beyond lifetime. Lily dived into the water of chaos to discover herself. On the other hand, Mr. Ramsay wanted to conquer the sea. Mr. Ramsay thought about the ignorance of human beings and how the sea was slowly eating away the land. He reflected on the sea to realize the limitations of his capability to provide knowledge to the world. He later consoled himself by realizing that he was the father of eight children and maybe his sons would be better than him. His realizations about his family are reflected through the sea.

The characters are often seen to suffer from alienated effects. They were isolated from their surroundings. Under such circumstances they were seen to rely on the sea as guidance.

Alienation is a concept that has been used in various texts of the literature. Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* can also be brought under discussion considering the effects of alienation on various characters. The use of water imagery and alienation can also be deeply associated. Characters are seen to reflect their alienated thoughts and isolation through the water bodies. William Bankes was a lonely man. He had no wife and children. Often he came to Lily to have a talk or spend some moments with her. He also did not approve Mr. Ramsay's decision of making a family and choosing philosophy as a subject. However, Lily found no interest in Mr. Bankes. They had walks together although they had different perceptions about their surroundings. Being two isolated souls, the sea soothed them and made them feel lively.

### **Water as Reflection of Life**

In the novel, it is observed that Mrs. Ramsay thought about life, marriage and the lessons that she has provided to her children. She questioned herself if she was correct. Mrs. Ramsay's life, marriage and lessons that she experienced are expressed in the form of a storm. Rock's rolling in the sea, the sky being black and the sea coming in with black waves in a height can be related with the sorrows of life.

Lily also observed a lot of phenomenon when James and others left for the Lighthouse. Every incident that occurred in the novel gave everyone a scope to view the sea as something different. Lily's perspectives convey a deep meaning. It has expressed how the vast sea can make a boat full of human seem like a spot. The sea's capability of engulfing the boat is also expressed here. Lily also considered the sea responsible for certain things. She held the sea responsible for Mrs. Ramsay's death and all the changes that came to the house. She thought the changes in Mr. Ramsay also came because of the sea.

The passing of time and different intervals of day is also shown in the novel to have connection with the sea. In the morning the sea had different phase and in the evening the sea had another phase. The sea reflected the clear morning sky so precisely that it appeared that they were covered by the same fabric and the cloud had dropped down on the sea.

The sea indicates the point of departure in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The sea can also be studied as something more than water. The sea became the element of study in the novel because the sea remained the common element throughout the novel. It functioned on several levels. According to Lisa Larson:

Lily is standing by the sea, remembering a moment by the sea, constructing her thoughts with sea imagery and the sea becomes the unifying element, to Lily as well as to the structure of the moment. The sea is worthy of close study, not only because it is the most common image in the novel but also because it is a fluid element (9).

The characters in the novel are related to the sea on a different level. The water of the sea has also provided the characters with shift of their perspectives. For example, when Nancy goes to the beach and plays with the tiny creatures, she develops a sense of superiority within herself. Secondly, when Cam goes towards the Lighthouse, she gets the opportunity to view the island from another perspective. This change in perspective makes Cam realize how small the island was and how the mighty sea body was compared to the land. Lily's looking at the picture and describing it as 'coming to the surface' indicates that painting is like submerging herself in water. The sea becomes a mirror for the characters in which people can see themselves. In some situations the sea became the source of answers to the characters. They did not realize that it was coming from them. To make it convincing they depended on the sea.

Just as the waves are unstable and it keeps moving on and on and sometimes washes away the things from the beach, life also has similar characteristics. It is unstable and ever changing. In life as well people lose a lot of things with the passage of time. They are washed away and nobody can get it back. The wave of life also moves like the wave of the sea. The feeling of transcendence is compared to the ocean because the ocean seems to be boundless, have distance and depth. It is a source of perspective and space for discovery. Most of the moments experienced by the characters are often inspired by the sea. Woolf has used the ocean to describe moments which heightened consciousness and the ocean acted as a source of perspective. The rhythmic nature of life and water represents the motions of existence. Throughout Woolf's writings the water element has been present to accompany the consciousness and thoughts of the characters. The characters' struggle to find meaning and connections in this world are also reflected by the sea and water images. However, the sea can have different phases as well. Sometimes, it is calm and sometimes it is very destructive.

The sea also reminded the characters about their vast insignificance in the nature. The nature is grand and mighty. Human beings hold little power in front of them. The sea can evoke the feeling of excitement and at the same time sadness. To some extent the sea balanced the emotions of the characters to attain their place in life. The sea in *To the Lighthouse* promoted the change in each character's perspective about life. Hence, it can be termed that water imagery is used to showcase the changes of consciousness among the characters. According to Shirley Panken:

The transition from one perspective to other is marked by water as "a symbol of surrender". The characters may undergo transition by hearing the sound of the waves, or the transition itself maybe illustrated by water imagery (38).

Mr. Ramsay thought about the ignorance of human beings and how the sea was slowly eating away the land. He reflected on the sea to realize the limitations of his capability to provide knowledge to the world. He later consoled himself that he was the father of eight children and maybe his sons would be better than him. His realizations about his family are also reflected through the sea. Mrs. Ramsay is the central character of the novel. Everyone surrounded Mrs. Ramsay for all sorts of activities. The people inside the house seemed to be composed whereas the environment outside the house was ruled by chaos and impermanence. The characters knew they were surrounded by fluid. Hence, the attitude towards life there was different.

### **Water as Symbolic Presence**

The sea reflects as a worldview. It acts as a symbol of stability in the chaotic world. It acts as the body from which everything originates and everything returns. The sea as a symbol is constructed slowly through the characters and the incidents. The world around us is also constructed as a fluid in the novel. Water is something that cannot be separated into identical parts. It can only be poured. This symbolical representation of water is used to state the fact that in human life also it is important for one to pour oneself or swim in the stream keeping one's own identity intact. The idea of looking at the world as fluid conveys a deep meaning about dealing with the problems of life.

## Chapter Two: Water Imagery in Woolf's *The Waves*

*The Waves* was published in 1931. It is an experimental work of Virginia Woolf and at the same time it is a noteworthy work of Modernism. The production of such a novel created doubt on all the traditional forms of novels which are based on specific plots. Woolf claimed this novel as something different from her conventional work and termed it as a “play poem”. It is another example of Woolf’s usage of water imagery in her texts. Here, the title is also deeply associated with the water imagery. Wave is a natural phenomenon that occurs at the sea. Waves and sea water are closely related to one another. Waves provide imagination of water splashing at the beach. Waves are considered to be something that have travelled a long distance and have encountered a lot of changes through the journey. Like the title the story of six friends in *The Waves* is also associated with water imagery. Woolf has carefully associated the lives of everyone with water and showed how water has been a constant in everyone’s life.

### **Water as Physical Presence**

The physical presence of water is observed closely in all the parts of the novel. The novel began with the description of a water body and it marked the beginning of a particular phase in the lives of the characters. The water bodies stood constant observing the different phases that others have undergone in their lifetime. When the characters were young they went near water to play. They touched the water and put boats on the water. One of the characters, Rhoda was seen to spend huge amount of time alone where her only company was water. Water body was her companion when her playmates were busy doing something else. The water body was Rhoda’s companion and she created an entire world of her in presence of it. Water body marked its presence as Rhoda’s companion in the following way:



I have picked all the fallen petals and made them swim. I have put raindrops in some. will plant a lighthouse here, a head of sweet Alice. And I will rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may ride the waves. Some will founder. Some will dash themselves against the cliffs. One sails alone (Woolf 8).

Apart from the physical existence of water itself, everything else is also viewed to be present as fluid by Virginia Woolf. She represented everything in the novel was like a fluid substance that wanted to move. Rhoda after getting a bath from Mrs. Constable was viewing everything around her in way that she felt she was submerged under water. She thought she wanted to reach the drawers but the water was controlling her and she was tumbled. Her speculations show along with the actual physical presence of water, Woolf tried to mark the presence of water in everything. Just like air surrounds us, according to Woolf the water surrounded the characters in the novel. About her thoughts it is mentioned in the novel:

Everything became softly amorphous as if the China of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid. Meanwhile the concussion of the waves breaking fell with muffled thuds, like logs falling on the shore (Woolf 11).

In Susan's life, the presence of water was very remarkable. She grew up near a water body and all thoughts centered round there. The life at school didn't attract her much. It was the water that called her back home. Woolf has carefully portrayed how different mindsets of the characters can be. There were other characters, fascinated by the charm of city life but Susan was different from them and she wanted different things from life. As their school days come towards a pause and they start their journey towards home, the scenes from the train also constitute the

presence of water. Louis thought about his other friend's success and his literary practices. His envy and his observations start to flow together in his thoughts:

But now disembodied, passing over fields without lodgment (there is a river; a man fishes there is a spire, there is the village street with its bow\_ windowed inn)\_ all dreamlike and dream to me. These hard thoughts, this envy, this bitterness, make no lodgment in me (Woolf 26).

Due to the death of Percival, when Neville was walking, the river was present beside him. Neville wandered around the Oxford Street saw the things around him and kept recalling about Percival. The presence of the water body was felt necessary by Woolf to support the idea of Neville being in deep mourning. The sea was brought again and again during the various stages of lives of the characters. It represents that during the changing phases of lives, people's existence and emotions are temporary and the sea bears testimony to all those events. There may be different forms of the water body as well but it remains constant through the passing phases of life. Virginia Woolf through her narration has very clearly portrayed the presence of water body in the novel. With special association with Percival's death this was mentioned:

The waves massed themselves; curved their backs and crashed up spurted stone and shingle. They swept round the rocks and the spray, leaping high, splattered the walls of a cave that had been dry before and left pools inland, where some fish stranded lashed its tails as the wave drew back (Woolf 67).

When Bernard realized that his youth was gone he was worried that there could be many things that he would not be able to see during his lifetime. Although he was in Rome at that he started to think about Tahiti. He chose a sea side as a place that he wanted to see himself and

wanted to enjoy the view. After a certain time all the characters realize how much they despised life and how differently they would have wanted things to be. As they all realized they were conspirators of their own lives they realized how waves of darkness were always present around them. As Bernard reaches towards his final thoughts, waves break on the shore.

### **Water as Spiritual Guidance**

Sometimes the sea soothed the soul of the characters and at other times it reminded them about the sorrows that they have undergone in their lives. In the novel, Susan's memory about home was connected with water. She recalled home and thought about the people there. The idea of the waves of the river near her home kept her going. Those waves were her inspiration for moving on and her life at school was her crippled days. Throughout her life at school, she imagined the things that she would do after returning. The thought of the river back at home gave her a thought of freedom of thought of relaxation. Rhoda wanted a male companion in her life and she was unable to find him. Under such situations in her imaginations she imagined sailors. Her idealization of her dream man to be a sailor and related to sea also shows how water was something that she expected her man's profession to be related to. Rhoda's expectations are reflected in the words, "Sailors loiter on the parade and amorous couples; the omnibuses rattle along the sea front to the town. I will give; I will enrich; I will return to the world its beauty" (22).

In the text, Woolf also has used scenarios where the character observed the river from the window. In this case, they relied on the river when everything else was failing to work out for them. When Louis was returning back home he was consumed with the thought that how his friends will be excelling in their higher studies at some famous Universities and how they will be

living their luxurious lives. On the other hand he was traumatized about his literary practices. He thought he won't be as good as his friends. Under such circumstances he had nothing to do hence he decided to look around and saw the river body. The scene was healing for a moment because he wanted to get rid of his envy and bitterness.

Jinny was one of the characters filled with life and enthusiasm. She liked to live in London. She and water had a deep relationship as she considered she herself like water. The flow of water was her ideal in her life because she liked to flow and she liked to move. She mentioned, "I feel like a thousand capacities spring up in me. I am arch, gay, languid, melancholy by turns. I am rooted, but I flow" (Woolf 40).

The six characters wanted different things from their lives. They got what they wanted but after getting it they realized that those things could not make them happy. They no longer wanted it. Human mind is unstable. At some time it wants something and at other times it wants another thing. Woolf has portrayed this thought through the characters. Furthermore, she has used water imagery to strengthen the relationship between their lives and nature. When the thoughts of their failure and limitations crossed their minds they wanted to go to some place near the sea and observe the scenario and heal their souls. For example, Bernard imagined Tahiti as his ideal escape. The sorrows of the characters were reflected on the water bodies and they expected a way out. The image of the waves in *The Waves* had been reflected in the form of a symbol indicating life and wave.

Waves have several deep meanings throughout the novel. The wave reflect pattern of life because both have the similar characteristics. Wave indicates flux and changing all the time. Life is full of ups and downs. Nothing is stable in life. Sometimes, there are good phases and

sometimes there are bad phases. Everything is unstable and ever changing. The wave of life keeps moving like a flow. The six characters in the novel also kept moving forward in their lives whose pattern was like the waves. It indicates the unstable process of life. As the waves do not have a definite shape or pattern but flows, it can be compared with human life which does not have any definite shape or pattern but keeps moving forward. Hence as a guide it suggests human beings to keep moving on with their lives. The characters also realized that death was the ultimate destination of life and its death that they were all fighting against. Under such moments when they realized they could do nothing in front of death they looked at the water body to sooth their soul and momentarily drop the idea of their perishing. They acknowledged death and the water body was their only support.

### **Water as Reflection of Life**

When Susan was a little girl, she felt inferior to Jinny. Her sadness and desire to die was reflected by her thought that she should eat grass and die in a ditch in the brown water. Here, death is associated with water. It expresses the might of water, that water was capable of taking lives. Susan's perspectives expresses water as a substance to die, on the other hand, Rhoda observed water as something that she could play with. It is an element of pleasure and experimentation to Rhoda. Rhoda played with petals and made them ships floating on the water. Human emotions are also reflected through water imagery in the novel. The reunion of the six characters has been described by using images related to water. In the reunion the characters spoke how they have grown up into completely different personalities. When their meeting was going to be over, Rhoda mentioned about water and nature. Neville's distress regarding Percival is also expressed through the odds in the sea and the nature. Hence, water imagery has been constantly used by Woolf to represent the various perspectives of the characters.

The different conditions of the weather, the day and night time are also expressed by the changes in the sea. The sea took different forms at different periods of time. About the change of daily condition it is mentioned:

The sun had now sunk lower in the sky. The islands of cloud had gained in density and drew themselves across the sun so that the rocks went suddenly black and the trembling sea lost its blue and turned silver and shadows were blown like grey clothes over the sea (Woolf 73).

Woolf's *The Waves* appears to be an experiment with time for the first sight. Woolf views single day equivalent to human life in this novel. Her thoughts portray the interesting fact that how the time span of human lives is so short compared to the lifetime of the nature and the Universe. Woolf's representation of day and night in the novel with relation to water imagery also introduces us with the concept that the cycle of day and night is similar to the cycle of human life. In the morning we usually have a lot of hopes and energy. We think we will be capable to do anything we want to do. Similarly, at the early stage of human life people are more energetic and hopeful. At that stage people are not limited to anything. They know they can become anything that they want to become. After that, at the noon, human beings come to the point where they know that they have done few things and few things are still left undone. They realize there is still time to complete the task. Similarly, when people are middle aged, they have done some things, like studied, found jobs, got married etc. but there are still many other things to do in their lives. After all these the days end in darkness. Similarly human lives also end in darkness. Woolf has adorned the entire idea with the changes that water reflects through the passing phases of day, night, childhood and adulthood.

Time can be measured in many different ways. Clock or hourglass is usually used to measure time. However, Woolf uses the waves to measure time in her novel. The Waves approaching at the shore is used to measure time in her novel. The Waves are a calmer and natural way of measuring time. The approach of new moments is expressed through the lines:

As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of water across the sand. The Waves paused and drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously (Woolf 159).

From the overall perspective of the novel, the personal wave of a single person is diachronic whereas the wave formed by several characters is synchronic. The accumulation of the waves of life of six characters together forms the basic space and time of the novel. The characters and their emotions are individually observed throughout the novel. During the reunion when the six friends are together then the new phase and the larger picture of them is observed, where multiple voices and personalities respond to a single sight.

According to Neville, the state that they have reached was a state from where change was no longer possible. They became committed to the situation that they were in. Years back when they met at London they had the scope to be at different places but things were changed drastically. Bernard also felt the same. Their condition in their lives had been mentioned through the metaphor "fish". Woolf had expressed how human life can be compared with fish in water. Like a fish in water faces the stream, humans also don't have any escape from the situations taking place around them. Humans are bound to face the situations and they do not have any escape. Characters often got tormented by the situations that they face in their lives.

The characters often felt isolated and alienated. During their isolation it was observed that a water body was present along with them. Neville was isolated and he thought, “Should I walk under beach trees, or saunter along the river bank, where the trees meet united like lovers in the water?”(20) The state of being isolated from the one’s environment and companions can be termed as alienation. Whenever, the characters felt isolated or detached from their current situations it was the water bodies that they wanted as their companion.

Bernard analyzed the types and nature of people at school. According to him people can be of two types. One kind of people is there who can only make single impression and another kind who keeps their equilibrium at the mid stream. He compares the environment of the later kind of people as mid stream. Moreover, he also terms such people as fishes in the mid the mid stream. He mentions his reaction to meeting such people, “I instantly see fish with their noses one way, the stream rushing past another” (30). Here Bernard’s perspectives and characteristics of certain kind of people are expressed through water imagery.

Among all the characters Jinny was the one with was more acquainted with the feeling of love. She was so addicted to feeling the pleasures of love that her heart leaped with joy when she found a companion. Her excitement and involvement in love has been carefully described by Virginia Woolf through water imagery. Jinny mentioned, “I am carried off. We yield to this slow flood. We go in and out of this hesitating music. Rocks break the current of the dance” (41).

Waves in the novel can be observed as a cultural symbol. The new fresh wind blows the waves and the old traditions are buried in the sea. Louis’s perspectives on London and water bodies reflect such notions. According to Zhang, “The poetic language and experimental structure in *The Waves* are vehicles for a radical politics that is both anti-imperialist and anti



canonical” (9). The reaction that Bernard had when he heard Percival was leaving for India indicates the wave of cultural inheritance that tries to drown other cultures. His reaction conveys the fact of cultural inferiority. Woolf also tried to reflect the fall of England’s heroic history through this particular incident.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Virginia Woolf has represented water imagery in both her texts *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* in a manner that the concept water has represented something more than water as an element. Water has special significance in Woolf's own life and hence she has portrayed water to be a significant element in the lives of her character as well. Water has been present throughout the novels as a physical element. The description of the water bodies has made it evident how water bodies were very important in the texts. The settings are chosen keeping water bodies in consideration. The characters went near the water body very frequently during different situations of their lives. It became an important entity in their lives. Water was an element to heal their soul as well. It functioned as something that soothed their souls and helped them to move on in their lives. They relied on the water body when they found no meaning of their life. The water bodies kept them going. For Mrs. Ramsay, the sea was the symbol of hope and desire. She looked at the sea and the sea functioned as her strength during the various hard times of her life. For Mr. Ramsay, sea was something that he wanted to conquer. He counted the sea as an obstacle to reach the lighthouse. For little James, sea was filled with excitement and he desired to sail on the sea to reach the lighthouse. Lily relied on the sea for inspiration and dedication. She needed the sea as an element of her painting. She also needed the sea to rely on when she wanted to avoid the situations around her. For Lily, sea was also a medium to recall Mrs. Ramsay after her death. In *The Waves* also, the characters were highly dependent on the sea. They reflected on the sea on a different level. The novel itself is an entire image on water where the characters flowed, dispersed and accumulated. For, Rhoda water was something that reminded her of death. From the very early age, the frustrations of her life made her want to drown herself. The six characters viewed water as an element to play with during their early lives. In the later period,

they viewed water as something to rely on during their sorrows and realizations. During their last stage, they depended on water to project their failures. They realized that life is nothing but an attempt to escape from death.

Although water imagery can be viewed as just presence of water body in novel, Woolf has reflected how it can consume characters and events completely. She has allowed water to function on a different level. The two selected novels show how Jinny and Lily wanted to flow into the water when they were missing something in life. The novels also show how the characters thought water had what they wanted in their lives. These thoughts are the reflection of her own thoughts because she also drowned herself when she was unable to attain the things that she wanted from her life. Both the novels end with a vision where the characters realize about the true meaning of life and waves break on the shore.

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