



## Liquid Realities: Water Imagery in Virginia Woolf's Narrative World

- 1) Dharti Sharma, Research Scholar, Indian Institute of Information Technology, Vadodara
  - 2) Dr. Barnali Chetia, Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Information Technology, Vadodara
  - 3) Dr. Dharna Bhatt, Assistant Professor <sup>Parul</sup> University, Gujarat
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**Abstract:** Throughout literary history, water imagery has been a recurring motif, symbolizing a range of themes from life and renewal to destruction and fluidity. From ancient Greek texts to contemporary works, the representation of water has played a pivotal role in exploring human emotions, relationships, and existential concerns. Among modernist artists, Virginia Woolf stands out for her profound use of water imagery, which intertwines seamlessly with her personal experiences and narrative style. Water, in Woolf's works, serves as a metaphorical bridge, connecting characters to their inner emotions, relationships, and the broader ebb and flow of life. This paper delves into Woolf's intricate use of water imagery in three of her seminal works, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931). In these texts, water not only reflects the fluidity of time and consciousness but also embodies the complexities of identity, memory, and connection. By examining how Woolf integrates water imagery to enhance the emotional and psychological depth of her characters and settings, this study aims to illuminate the profound symbolic and thematic significance of water in her oeuvre, offering insights into its role as a narrative and philosophical device.

**Keywords:** Water imagery, Virginia Woolf, Modernist Literature, Symbolism, Emotional Fluidity

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### Introduction

Virginia Woolf's fascination with water began in childhood and permeated her writing and worldview. In her autobiographical essay *A Sketch of the Past* (1939), Woolf recalls a vivid early memory of lying in bed at her family's summer home in St. Ives and listening to the waves break. She describes this memory of the sea's rhythmic sound and gentle motion as her foundation. This childhood immersion in the sights and sounds of the ocean left an indelible mark on Woolf's imagination, and these impressions informed the conception of her artistic vision. Decades later, Woolf would famously end her life by walking into a river, a tragic bookend underscoring how water was a constant presence in her life and death.

Woolf's literary use of water imagery is deeply tied to her pioneering narrative techniques and thematic concerns. A leading figure of literary modernism, she sought new ways to represent subjective reality, particularly through the stream-of-consciousness method, a term coined by psychologist William James (1980), who likened the mind's continual flow of thoughts to a river or a stream. Woolf embraced this fluid narrative mode to delve into the recesses of ever-changing consciousness and to capture the flow of myriad impressions that constitute inner life. Notably, she found that the subtle processes of the mind are perfectly expressed by the



water element. Indeed, her diaries reveal that she deliberately employed symbols and images, especially water to convey her characters' psychological depths. Woolf's use of water imagery and stream-of-consciousness technique aligns with contemporary ideas of subjective time and self; it echoes Henri Bergson's concept of *durée* (time as continuous flow) and William James's description of consciousness as a flowing stream. Woolf also evokes what Freud called the "oceanic" feeling (1930), a sense of oneness with the world through moments when her characters' identities seem to dissolve into a larger whole.

In Woolf's novels, water imagery serves both as a symbolic device, carrying meanings of renewal, submersion, and flux and as a structural principle that shapes narrative form. Water recurs in her work as a source of connection and continuity and a force of disruption and loss. It mirrors the characters' inner tides of emotion and memory and often provides a measure for the passage of time outside of the clock or calendar. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931), Woolf uses oceans, seas, rivers, and other water forms not merely as background settings but as dynamic elements intertwined with the themes of time, identity, memory, and consciousness. This research examines each of these three novels, analyzing how water imagery operates within them, whether as a soothing cradle for memory, a threatening reminder of mortality, a metaphor for the mind's fluid nature, or a medium that unites and fragments identities.

## **To the Lighthouse: Water as Protector and Destroyer**

Early on, as Mrs. Ramsay listens to her boisterous family, Woolf notes how the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach lulls her mind. This rhythm is like a cradle song whispering to her, "*I am guarding you – I am your support*" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 3). The sea's pulse gives Mrs. Ramsay maternal comfort in this lullaby-like moment. The quote continues at other moments when her mind wanders, the same surf becomes "*no longer whispering a lullaby but remorselessly beating a ghostly roll of drums,*" making her imagine "*the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea*" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 3), and filling her with sudden terror. In one image, therefore, the sea is both protector (guards and supports) and destroyer (engulfs and terrifies). Critics have noted this tension: one writer observes that water in *Lighthouse* often evokes both comfort and death, dissolving boundaries yet erasing them (Igrutinović 112). The text's phrasing – waves as lullaby versus waves as drums – makes the point.

Woolf also employs water images to track the passage of time across chapters. In "The Window," for example, Cam Ramsay's journey across a stream is described as waters that gave way and then closed over him. This brief river scene foreshadows the larger floods in the middle section. During "Time Passes," three characters (the Ramsays' elder daughter, Prue, Mrs. Ramsay herself, and Andrew Ramsay) die in a war that feels apocalyptic. Woolf depicts their deaths in terms of deluges and storms: a "*downpouring of immense darkness*" that "*flood[s]*" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 195) the summer house, consuming even the mansion itself. The language of water – darkness as flood, house sinking like a ship – suggests that nature's inexorable flow can wash away human achievement. However, even here, light and water interact: through the chaos, rays of light from the lighthouse continue to shine onto the ruins. Lily Briscoe later notes how the morning light, symbolically purified like the sea, finds its way back into the house. Thus, water in "Time Passes" embodies destruction and the hope of new life, paralleling the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.



When the novel returns to 1920 in “The Lighthouse,” the memory of water bridges past and present. Ten years after the deaths, the remaining family members (Cam and James Ramsay) finally make the delayed trip to the lighthouse. The act of rowing across the sea becomes a rite of passage. Danica Igrutinović notes that Cam’s boat trip is a symbolic crossing in which water dissolves, but then regenerates the hero (Igrutinović 115). Indeed, James’s successful passage and the view of the lighthouse reassure him of his place in the world, healing old insecurities. Water, here, washes away fear. As the characters finally gaze upon the lighthouse, the imagery of endless waves underscores how, despite loss, life continues.

Beyond these formal functions, Woolf uses water as a psychological mirror for characters. Lily’s final epiphany, with her painting, is linked to the sea again. Lily has struggled for years to complete her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay. In the last chapter, she falls asleep and dreams by the window. Even in her sleep, the sea’s presence is comforting: “*Messages of peace breathed from the sea to the shore... what else was it murmuring*” as she lays her head (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 129). In waking, Lily feels those messages in herself; she suddenly realizes how to finish the painting. The waves murmured to her the final touch she needed. Here, the ocean whispering symbolizes Lily’s acceptance of change and unity. All dissensions within the family are merged and flowing through Mrs. Ramsay, and Lily’s art unites time and relationships. Lily’s words, “*I have had my vision*” and “*Yes, I have had my vision,*” echo the long lines and shapes of the sea (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 209). In Lily’s mind, water represents the healing wholeness she has finally perceived.

*To the Lighthouse* (1927) uses water thematically to represent the flow of time (waves marking hours, floods marking the end of an era), memory and loss (echoing the childhood lullaby, recalling people long gone), and unity beyond individuality (merging of consciousness under the sea’s rhythm). The motif is unified by what Woolf hinted was her aim: to find the pattern behind the cotton wool of everyday life. Through the constant sound and sight of water, Woolf threads the characters’ isolated moments into a larger pattern of continuity.

## **Mrs. Dalloway: Fluid Consciousness and the Ebb of Memory**

*Mrs. Dalloway*’s (1925) setting shifts from coastal to urban, but water remains a living presence. London becomes a watery city. Woolf links her characters’ inner tides through the day’s rain and the fountains in Regent’s Park. The novel’s famous opening involves a fountain and Clarissa’s thoughts. The text begins not with Clarissa but with the sky and weather: “*the air...stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like a flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp*” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 3).

Meanwhile, Clarissa buys flowers for her party; her back turned to a fountain in the park: “*with the fountain between them, the spout (it was broken) dribbling water incessantly.*” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 96). This recurs twice (Clarissa’s first walk and later Peter’s arrival). Hassan Khalfih calls the fountain scene symbolic of a “*lack of fluid communication*” (Khalfih 17), as the broken spout dribbles impotently. The fragmented water mirrors Clarissa’s tenuous connection with others at that moment: she feels distant from Richard, while the steady dripping of the fountain suggests time ticking away toward the inevitable reunion with Peter.

Like *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Clarissa’s mind is matched with fluid images when memory surfaces. On her way to buy flowers, young Clarissa once played on a swing on Richmond Green. Woolf describes her childhood joy as “*like a flap of a wave; a kiss of a wave,*” with the air “*chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn*” (Woolf, *Mrs.*



Dalloway 3). This simile aligns Clarissa's exhilaration with the powerful motion of water: those childhood feelings are awful and exhilarating. The morning breeze is like the ocean's break on the shore, emphasizing that even London's urban morning is infused with Woolf's sea memory. Clarissa's security at age five is as enveloping as the ocean, which underlines how deep her sense of the world's continuity runs, even in the city.

As the story unfolds, Clarissa's consciousness flows around her party preparations, punctuated by episodes of rain and fountains. Woolf repeatedly notes reservoirs of water as contexts for consciousness shifts. One key moment: when Peter Walsh re-enters Clarissa's life, old emotions seem to roll back in waves (implicitly) at his presence. (Woolf does not use that exact metaphor here, but critics often note the implicit wave imagery.) Another: Clarissa's friend Rezia speaks to Septimus in mental time, asking him to stop crying "*like a contented tap left running, to no purpose*" – a simile that likens the tragic waste of Septimus's life to a leaking faucet (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 159). Woolf offers Rezia's image of water to capture Cephalus-like guilt – the feeling that life's joy has leaked away. Khalfih comments that Woolf's water imagery "*shapes the inner state of her characters' minds*" (Khalfih 20). For instance, the novel closes with Clarissa's epiphany at her party, in which she feels the splashing laughter and the flow of life around her. The reader sees that, as Clarissa stands on the porch, her identity dissolves into the crowd's vitality – "*a life which had no end*" and "*a sense of being... bound up with all these friends*" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 351). The party, full of flowing champagne and a fountain in the square, enacts human communion like a pool where every drop matters.

At a structural level, rain and cloud imagery punctuate Dalloway's sections. Each time the narrative moves from Clarissa to Septimus or back, Woolf notes a shift in weather: a shower passes, puddles catch the light, or the heat intensifies like a tide. (In fact, in Part 5, "Interim," a sudden thunderstorm breaks just as Septimus reaches a point of suicide, as if nature's wave subsides.) These patterns make the day seem not linear but cyclical, like cycles of evaporation and rain. Through water, Woolf also suggests an underlying unity between Clarissa and Septimus: Clarissa thinks about the "river of life," connecting all people moments after hearing of Septimus's death. Through that unseen medium, she senses a link to him, as if both were drops in the same stream. This coincides with Freud's idea of the "oceanic feeling" – a boundaryless ocean of consciousness. While Freud found that feeling troubling as a regression, Woolf embraces it: her fluid narration literally moves from one mind to another, like water mixing streams. *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) uses water imagery thematically to illustrate the characters' emotional ebbs and flows and the blending of past and present, and structurally to smooth transitions between inner monologues as if on a river. Thus, Woolf turns London into a metaphorical ocean, where taxis and crowds mimic tides, and the private stream of thought is as inexhaustible as a sea.

### ***The Waves: Unity and Fragmentation in Aqueous Form***

In *The Waves* (1931), Woolf's most experimental novel, water imagery reaches its apogee. *The Waves* is structured around the sea from the title to the final line. Six characters speak in lyrical soliloquies, bookended by seven poetic interludes describing the sun's path over the ocean. The ocean is ever-present: as children, each had played together on a seashore; as adults, each finds water images in their consciousness. Woolf makes water not just a motif but the very form of the narrative. Nicole Rizzuto notes the novel has an aqueous form, with chapters orchestrated like waves. Images of waves rising, breaking, and merging underscore the interplay of individuality and unity.



One central theme in *The Waves* is the fluidity of identity. The characters often feel part of a whole rather than distinct individuals. Woolf directly compares them to waves: Bernard muses that *like the waves which come and go continuously*, the waves of thoughts in their minds *“flow nonstop.”* Jinny succinctly formulates it: *“I am rooted, but I flow.”* This famous line (Woolf, *The Waves* 62) captures Woolf’s paradox – humans have a core self (“rooted”) yet are constantly changed by experience (“flowing”). Jinny’s speech continues, *“All gold, flowing,”* highlighting change as energy. Similarly, Susan, who worships nature, laments her school loneliness with the line: *“I shall eat grass and die in a ditch in the brown water where dead leaves have rotted”* (Woolf, *The Waves* 7). Here, water is connected to dissolution and return to earth; Rhoda’s line, for example, is in first person and tragic. Each character often speaks of dissolving or merging with water.

The ocean interludes measure time between these voices: day breaks in the first interlude as Bernard describes dawn, reflecting youth and new beginnings. The midday interlude is full of light, paralleling the energy of their youthful speeches. By the final interlude, it is nighttime: the waves *“paused...sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously”* (Woolf, *The Waves* 2). This single simile (*“like a sleeper”*) intensifies the cyclical rest and renewal motif, akin to old age’s slowing pace. Indeed, in the novel’s ending, as Bernard contemplates death, he hears the waves continuing – *“breaking on the shore.”* The lines *“Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!”* / *“The waves broke on the shore.”* (Woolf, *The Waves* 183) link human defiance to the ocean’s eternal rhythm. The sea’s continual breaking serves as a reminder that life persists; the characters’ lives are but fleeting particles within the ocean’s perpetual motion, as Bernard ultimately comes to realize.

*The Waves* (1931), Woolf literalizes the dialectic of fragmentation and wholeness. Individual consciousness is fluid throughout: the six voices often borrow each other’s images and metaphors, blurring lines between them. There is no singular narrator or straightforward plot, only waves of prose that crest and recede, inviting the reader to feel the ebb and flow rather than follow a conventional story.

Beyond form, each voice explicitly ties to water imagery. Jinny’s motto, *“I am rooted, but I flow,”* (Woolf, *The Waves* 62). Susan’s earlier line about wanting to *“eat grass and die...in the brown water”* (Woolf, *The Waves* 7) links water with a desire for dissolution. Rhoda is obsessed with water’s nurturing sweetness (she fills imaginary pockets with water and petals). Neville, a poet, often compares love and self-awareness to waves. One image from Neville he feels peace breathed from the sea to the shore, just as Lily did in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), when he contemplates the loss of his friend Percival (who dies abroad). Indeed, when the friends learn of Percival’s death in India, the narrative’s landscape turns violent: *“The waves massed themselves, curved their backs and crashed... left pools inland where fish thrashed.”* (Woolf, *The Waves* 101). This vivid, almost cinematic picture of the sea during their mourning shows the ocean enacting their grief. These lines read like natural phenomena but function as collective consciousness: all characters feel that turbulent sea inside themselves.

Water in *The Waves* (1931) embodies the tension between continuity and finality. Each sunrise in the interludes serves as a quiet reminder of renewal and the cyclical nature of existence. Bernard observes that the waves break on the shore again and again, even as each character’s individual voice fades. In the closing pages, Bernard appears to merge almost physically with the dawn, embracing the falling wave of the sun as a symbol of ongoing cycles. He declares



that he will fling himself at Death, unvanquished, sustained by the belief that as long as the waves continue to break upon the shore, life itself endures.

*The Waves* (1931) makes water a metaphor for consciousness and community. The imagery runs deeper than mere allusions – it is embedded in the text’s structure. As one scholar puts it, the oscillatory breaking and merging of waves becomes the “structuring metaphor for the entire novel.” Without a traditional plot, Woolf’s “liquid reality” emerges: boundaries between character, thought, and time dissolve and reform like tides. The result is a cosmic, almost mystical vision of life – individual drops of water in one vast sea.

## Conclusion

Across *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931) Virginia Woolf’s use of water imagery reveals a central modernist concern: representing reality as fluid and interconnected. In each text, water operates on multiple levels. Thematically, it symbolizes the flow of time, memory, and consciousness. Waves and rivers represent the stream of consciousness itself; fountains and rainfall embody the emergence of recollection; the sea’s duality (turbulent vs. calm) mirrors the characters’ inner turmoil and peace. Woolf also shows water as a unifying element. Individual lives and moments are seen as drops in a continuous sea. As Clarissa muses about her party, she feels part of “something going on” in everyone’s mind – a metaphorical ocean that carries “drops of rain” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 290).

Psychologically, water images externalize feelings: waves rock babies and paint lullabies for adults; storms threaten and purify; rivers and fountains carry messages of past loves and losses. Woolf often uses the sea to express what words cannot: Septimus’s fractured mind is portrayed through overflowing taps, while Lily’s unity with art is shown through a calm, breathing sea. As Hassan Khalifah observes, Woolf transcends the cliché of watery symbols to make water itself “a power to shape the inner state” of her characters (Khalifah 20).

Structurally, water molds Woolf’s narrative technique. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), water’s rhythms align with London’s clockwork, smoothing transitions between subjective scenes. In *The Waves* (1931), the novel’s very form is water: cyclical, recursive, and wave-like. Through interludes of sunrise and sunset, Woolf measures human life in the same terms as oceanic time. As literary scholars note, *The Waves* (1931) has an inherently aqueous form, with repetition and variation mimicking the sea’s motion. This formal fluidity reflects Woolf’s statement that her novels attempt to capture the pattern behind the cotton wool of experience.

Woolf invites readers to experience her liquid realities. She believed, in the words of one critic, that literature could induce an oceanic feeling, a sensation of boundlessness and unity. Indeed, engaging with her prose often feels like drifting with currents – sometimes disorienting, sometimes exhilarating, but always uniting mind and world. Woolf’s consistent imagery of waves breaking and seas embracing thus gives shape to the inexpressible: the continuity of life amidst loss, the interplay of isolation and communion, and the mysterious depths of the self.

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