

# The Inner Tides: The Stream of Consciousness and Subjectivity in *The Waves*

Noor-A-Jannath Tania\*, Md. Mehedi Hasan, Shahnara Parvin, Snehangshu Shekhar Chanda

Sylhet Agricultural University, Patuakhali Science & Technology University,  
Sylhet Government College, Sylhet Agricultural University, Bangladesh

\*Corresponding Author

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## ABSTRACT

*The Waves* is Virginia Woolf's most experimental work and one of the most accessible novels written by any modernist novelist. Stated fully in soliloquies *The Waves* (1931) is well-known as one of the hardest novels of Virginia Woolf. Woolf's creations require a deep concentration as they are not plain narratives. The profoundness of her narrative and the keenness of her descriptions simply blow the minds of the readers. *The Waves* charts the psychology of the six narrators and present what is going on in the minds of these characters. Virginia Woolf uses the stream of consciousness technique and delves into the inner thoughts and sensory perceptions of her characters. Although Dorothy Richardson is the first British modernist novelist who used this technique in her novel but Virginia Woolf the one who excelled this technique to another level.

**Keywords:** Experimental, stream of consciousness, innermost, poetic prose

## INTRODUCTION

Stream of consciousness is a narrative mode or method that attempts "to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind" of a narrator. (Cuddon, 660). According to litcharts.com: "Stream of consciousness is a style or technique of writing that tries to capture the natural flow of a character's extended thought process, often by incorporating sensory impressions, incomplete ideas, unusual syntax, and rough grammar". According to Encyclopedia Britannica:

"The stream-of-consciousness novel commonly uses the narrative techniques of interior monologue. Probably the most famous example is James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), a complex evocation of the inner states of the characters Leopold and Molly Bloom and Stephen Dedalus. Other notable examples

include *Leutnant Gustl* (1901) by Arthur Schnitzler, an early use of stream of consciousness to re-create the atmosphere of pre-World War I Vienna; William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), which records the fragmentary and impressionistic responses in the minds of three members of the Compson family to events that are immediately being experienced or events that are being remembered; and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), a complex novel in which six characters recount their lives from childhood to old age".

"Though often associated with Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, "stream of consciousness" novels spilled first from the pen of British modernist Dorothy Richardson". (<https://daily.jstor.org/dorothy-richardson-and-the-stream-of-consciousness/>). *The Waves* is symphonic where we find six imagist poets, six individuals who struggle to define themselves. *The Waves* has six main characters. The novel is narrated by these six persons. The narration switches between these six characters' separate but interrelated interior monologues.

## METHODOLOGY

This current study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to explore Virginia Woolf's use of stream of consciousness technique in her famous novel, *The Waves*.

This method is suitable because the main focus is on interpretive analysis of textual features. The primary data source is the novel *The Waves*, which will be the major literary artifact from which passages that demonstrate traits of stream of consciousness technique, will be read closely to observe the inner thoughts of the major characters.

Secondary sources like critical essays, articles written by different scholars, other theoretical works on modernist narrative techniques will be consulted to interpret Virginia Woolf's stylistic innovations. Passages that contain characteristics of stream of consciousness technique will be thoroughly identified by close scrutiny. Woolf's conscientious use of interior monologues, Woolf's rhythmic usage of diction. Her shifts in narrative perspective, her meticulous blending of individual as well as collective voices will be analyzed to prove her as one of the foremost modernists of the twentieth century.

## DISCUSSION

Harold Bloom, professor of the Humanities Yale University declares boldly in The Introduction entitled The Work of a Writer of the book *Bloom's Biocritiques*:

**VIRGINIA WOOLF:** “Woolf has become the high priestess of feminist literary criticism, since she insists that the creative power of women “differs greatly from the creative power of a man” (Bloom,1). The book is known as a comprehensive biography and critical analysis of Virginia Woolf and her writings.

**Neil Heims, in “Recomposing Reality: An Introduction to the Work of Virginia Woolf** enunciates with clarity: “The Waves is stripped entirely of all authorial scaffolding, and the reader must construct the novel from the six monologues issuing from the six characters, which chart their consciousness of their lives” (Bloom, 93). A single reading is not really enough for the readers to comprehend Woolf. Neil Heims says in this regard: “A second, even a third, reading is necessary in order for the pieces to become organized... for the whole to gain resonance and meaning for the melodies, harmonies, and tonal colorings to engage- for the figures to shape themselves in our minds” (Bloom, 93). Her shifts in narrative perspective, her meticulous blending of individual as well as collective voices will be analyzed to prove her as one of the foremost modernists of the twentieth century.

Virginia Woolf is known for her novels that contain stream of consciousness technique. These novels make her characters vividly expressive and appealing. She applies this technique to express the inner psychology of her characters. She wrote famous novels *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Voyage Out* etc. by using this technique.

While using this technique of exploring the inner psychological complexities of the characters, Virginia Woolf primarily focuses on her characters’ inner worlds. She tries to catch the delicate and illusive frame of thoughts and feelings, and fixes them in words, lays them bare in front of her readers.

Stream of consciousness technique basically highlights the inner thoughts of the major characters and tries to ignore logical arguments as well as cohesive narration. External events and development of the story through the plot are ignored by the author intentionally. The author actually aims to focus on the inner psychological tempest of her characters.

*The Waves* — the title itself is poetic. It is a play-poem that strives to explore the inner psychological turmoil of the six characters.

The inner lives of these six characters gradually unfold through soliloquies.

They grow up from childhood to adulthood together. Bernard is the storyteller who is fascinated by language, words, and patterns of human life. Rhoda is sensitive, introverted, and insecure; she is always haunted by a sense of isolation. Susan is closely connected with the Mother Nature. She is a motherly figure who loves domestic life. Jinny is physical and vibrant. She mainly focuses on her body, her beauty, and her social presence. Louis is ambitious; he is conscious that he is not an insider, rather an outsider in this community. He is Australian & he always strives for success and acceptance. Neville is scholarly, intellectual and analytical. He pursues order and love.

Percival, the seventh figure, never speaks in the novel. His absence and death affect the other six characters a lot.

Virginia Woolf is lyrical and poetic while exploring stream of consciousness.

She is not like Dorothy Richardson who presents consciousness as fragmented, mundane, and sometimes without dramatic peaks. Woolf uses multiple consciousness which is interwoven. She not only explores thoughts but also explores the texture of time and being. Richardson explores the inner life of a woman. She loves to explore consciousness of everyday activities, impressions, and reflections of Miriam Henderson, the female character of *Pilgrimage*. Woolf loved free indirect monologues. She uses symbolic imagery. Richardson has no explanatory narrator. Her fragmented thoughts have natural rhythm. Woolf wonderfully blends clock time and psychological time. Richardson's time is subjective. It gradually unfolds through Miriam's subjective awareness, Richardson's stream of consciousness has a female-centered perspective, while Woolf uses this to unveil the interconnectedness of individuals within society.

James Joyce, another prominent figure who used stream of consciousness in his famous novel *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is considered to be one of the masters of this technique. Joyce also dives deep into the minds of his characters to explore their memories, thoughts, and emotions while the sensations are raw and unfiltered. Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses* is the finest example of this technique. Eight sentences without punctuation captured the flow of unexpressed, unspoken thought of Molly: "Yes because he never did a thing like that before as ask to get his breakfast in bed with a couple of eggs since the *City Arms* hotel when he used to be ... his heart was going like mad and yes I said Yes I will Yes" (Joyce, 747-800).

Bernard is the character who is like a storyteller, obsessed with phrases and words.

The novel starts with Bernard saying, "I see a ring of light hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light" (Woolf, 640). Bernard immediately shapes the ring of light into a metaphor. Light means human truth is fleeting. It is not permanent. Bernard is always obsessed with words, obsessed with beginnings as well as endings. He always wants to frame life through his stories. He loves to turn experiences into language. He can be called the true "chronicler" of his group.

Bernard is obsessed with ephemerality. He finds it difficult to express his thoughts in words and phrases: "I am eternally engaged of finding some perfect phrase that fits this very moment exactly" (Woolf 669). He feels the inadequacy of phrases to capture reality. He diligently keeps on trying. He believes that best phrases are made in solitude. He keeps himself busy in finding his perfect phrase that fits the very moment exactly. During adolescence he plays the role of a storyteller and observer. His stories have beginnings but they do not have endings. He is restless: "for my room is always scattered with unfinished letters" (Woolf 677). He considers 'the self' as multiple. He believes 'self' is not fixed. Sometimes he asked himself: "Who am I?" (Woolf 775).

He sometimes believes that he is Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. He is all of them. Sometimes he considers himself one and distinct. He is confused and shifts between different personas. Woolf's theme of fluid identity reflects here in this matter. After Percival's death, he realizes that stories cannot stop time and they cannot preserve life. No story can fill the void of Percival: "None of those resonances and lovely echoes that break and chime from nerve to nerve in our longest making old music; no false phrases. I have done with phrases." (Woolf 778). Here, he realizes and shares with us that language sometimes fails. In his final soliloquy, in his old age, Bernard becomes the collective voice of all the major six characters. Old age unites all voices, narrates life as one collective story and tries to defy death. Bernard says: "How much better is silence; the coffee-cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake? Let me sit here forever with bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, 'myself being myself,'" (Woolf, 778). Here Bernard appreciates solitude. Being alone sometimes allows a human being to contemplate on life. Quiet solitude and the simplicity of being alone provide him solace. It means that silence offers someone a deeper, better state than the noise and distractions of the world. Even in the face of death Bernard at the end of his soliloquy says: "Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding! O Death!" (Woolf 779). Bernard is not afraid of death. He confronts death boldly and heroically; he defies death with courage.

While Bernard seeks identity through words, Rhoda represents negation. She is fragile, insecure and disconnected from life itself. She always struggles with identity. Rhoda feels she is an outsider. She is unable to connect herself with others. Waves' big spaces, even mirrors, terrify her. She tries to hide her face: "That is my face... in the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder – that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face." (Woolf 657). Mirrors frighten her. She is afraid of mirrors because they reveal her lack of identity. Rhoda fails to connect herself with others. She remains detached while Susan and Jinny try to connect with others. Her life is an endless struggle. Life never gives her amusement. She feels like an alien in this materialistic world. She thinks that human beings are corrupted and they make her corrupt. She thinks that she is a misfit. She is in dilemma. She is attached to the sea. She fails to sacrifice herself like Susan and Jinny. Susan sacrifices her individuality to her children, to her family. Jinny sacrifices herself to the society. C. Taylor says, in her essay "Kristevan Themes in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: "Rhoda grasps for words, the moon's hand, but is swept under by the sea's crushing waves, its whispered rhythms, and is driven mad." (Taylor 76). Rhoda fails to catch the moon's hand which stands for male, stands for patriarchy. Rhoda is afraid of embrace. She fails to maintain her relationship with Louis. Taylor adds: "Still caught between longings for the sea and for stability within the symbolic – Rhoda initially feels her existence on land or in society to be like of a fish on a hook – feels hatred and fear, humiliation, but words assuage her, she is drawn back to the world, desiring also that realm in which there is speech." (Taylor 72–73). Rhoda commits suicide. She fails to achieve a sense of belonging. We learn the news of Rhoda's suicide from Bernard that she has killed herself. She disappears silently, just like the waves that sink back into the vast sea.



While Rhoda fails to conform to her love life, Susan embodies motherhood who finds ultimate fulfillment in her children. Rhoda is afraid of embraces, afraid of becoming motherly figure like Susan. Susan is more resolute and less ambitious. She surrenders her youthful passion to adult responsibility. She asserts, “I am no longer January, May, or any other season, but am all spun to a fine thread round the cradle, wrapping in a cocoon made of my own blood the delicate limbs of my baby” (Woolf 719). Susan finally anchors her individual self in family and land. She embraces motherhood and permanence.

Jinny is different. She anchors herself in the body. She exclaims, “My body lives a life of its own” (666). She loves her body, loves to get everyone’s attention. She is not like Susan who seeks permanence. Living in the present moment is her only motto. She desires to live through the rhythms of her body. Her love for dance, fleeting encounters or parties makes her different from others. While Rhoda embodies “nobody”, Jinny is the embodiment of “all body”. Between Jinny and Rhoda, stands Susan who is the embodiment of motherhood and the earth. Jinny loves to describe herself in mirrors. She loves the gaze of others. Possessing the power of seduction, she aims to seduce the opposite gender. She lives for the transient moments only. She loves long glass hangs because. Jinny says, “I see myself entire” (656). She hates small looking glasses that shows only body parts, when she starts getting old, she realizes, “...but look there is my body in that looking-glass. How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young” (729). While she remains obsessed in her bodily beauty, her beauty fades which is reflected in the mirror.

Compared to Jinny, Neville is the embodiment of permanence in this transient world. He has intellect. He is reflective and introspective. He is deeply moved by Percival’s death. He was in love with Percival. This love can be regarded spiritual. Percival represents perfection and beauty. He not only loves Percival but also worships the idea of him. Percival is a source of inspiration, a source of emotional fulfillment to him. He loves to send him “poems and he will perhaps reply with a picture postcard. But it is for that that I love him” (665). Neville actually struggles a lot while expressing his emotions. His love is thus internalized. His love is too much poetic. He never shared his love openly. Neville’s love is different from the love of Jinny, Susan, Rhoda or from the others; it is less physical. Louis is sentimental, Jinny is physical, Rhoda is emotionally fragmented, Bernard’s love is filtered through his consciousness. Bernard’s love is social; Neville’s love is inward. Susan’s love is practical and connected to the material world. It is totally opposite to Neville’s spiritual love. Louis’s love is personal and emotional; he deeply feels the joys and pains of life. He cannot control his emotions. He is vulnerable. His love is warm and more human.

From the soliloquy of Bernard, we get to know that each of these is possibly meant to mean something passionately: Louis was disgusted by the nature of human flesh, Rhoda by our cruelty, Susan could not share; Neville wanted order; Jinny love; and so on. “We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies” (752). Bernard considers that Neville is intellectual and idealistic in his pursuit of beauty and permanence. Louis,

according to him, is emotional and affectionate. Susan is to him, a practical and grounded personality who is connected deeply to the body and Mother Nature. Jinny is vibrant, expressive and sensual. Rhoda is fragile and sensitive. Bernard's soliloquies interpret the other characters in this way.

Thus, Woolf, through her lyrical monologues expressed inner life of the six characters. This technique allowed the readers to dive deep into the sanctuary of the minds of her characters. The reader could easily enter the character's inner world. They could easily comprehend their emotions, desires, and reflections.

## CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf adopts the "Stream of Consciousness" technique to explore the innermost sanctuary of the minds of her character. She is not busy with the external elements like description of a house, a garden etc. She is busy with the mind or the psychology of her characters. She never narrates stories, she charts the interior thoughts, and she is busy with what is going on the mind of her characters. Bernard also rejects the traditional of writing stories with a beginning, middle, and end. He believes that this style is untrue to the actual way of life. He denies fitting his life into any kind of overreaching plotline. He chooses the simple way; he will trace the incidents and will try to highlight the significant events. *The Waves* itself is Virginia Woolf's endless endeavour to address Bernard's struggles with language, Bernard's fight with plain narrative. Virginia Woolf tries to portrait a more realistic picture of psychology in *The Waves*. Through this poetic, profound, and intimate book, Virginia Woolf reaches the acme of excellence.

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## Authors

1. Associate Professor, Department of Basic science & Language, Sylhet Agricultural University, Sylhet
2. Professor, Department of Language & Communication, Patuakhali Science & Technology University
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Bangla, Sylhet Government College.
4. Professor, Department of Basic science & Language, Sylhet Agricultural University, Sylhet