When novel becomes a work of art: Virginia Woolf and The Waves

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INTRODUCTION

*The Waves* was first published in 1931. It is considered to be Virginia Woolf's most experimental novel. Its originality relies on the fact that it is made up of soliloquies spoken by the book's six characters: Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis. A seventh character named Percival is also present and relevant, though we never get to hear him speak through his own voice. The monologues that span the characters' lives are broken up by nine brief third-person interludes detailing a coastal scene at varying stages in a day from sunrise to sunset.

It is the boldness of Woolf as a novelist as well as her innovative technique that attracts the reader's imagination. This monographic work will attempt to place *The Waves* in the context of Virginia Woolf's career and of the 'modern' age in which it was written. Thus, we will mainly focus on how the authoress came to write the novel, what her concerns were at the time, and how it is linked both in style and theme with her earlier, more accessible works, mainly *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. 
WHAT IS REAL IN THE WAVES?

*In her diary Virginia Woolf described this novel as “an abstract, mystical and eyeless book”*

In this novel her main concern is not to show that nature is hostile and changing, nor she is concerned with the response to life of society, or even a particular group; but she has chosen six characters and the novel follows their development from childhood to old age and examines the particular response they give to life as individuals.

The main theme is the inward experience of the individuals and how they respond to love, death, growing old, or to life as a whole.

One of the most striking features of “The Waves” is its structure, composed of a series of monologues. This way of approaching the theme had the advantage of making it possible to present the inner thoughts of the characters in a more convincing way, but it presented a difficult problem with regard to the way in which characters could be made recognizable to the reader; as they all express themselves in the same subtle and imaginative idiom and can’t be recognized by an especial way of thought or by an specific language, Virginia Woolf had to produce a device, which was to allow each character a distinguishing quality, which being emphasized over and over, becomes a sort of symbol of the character. Each of them is attached to a

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1 “A Writer’s Diary”, pg. 137
particular phrase, or to a particular attitude, which is peculiar to him.

Bernard is attached to his curiosity, to his phrase making and to his stories:

“That is, I am a natural coiner of words, blower of bubbles through one thing and another” (pg. 82).

Susan is essentially herself in her need to possess, to give and be given:

“I shall be debased and hide-bound by the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity” (pg. 94)

She is elemental and sincere:

“she despises the futility of London” (pg. 85)

“she has the stealthy yet assured movements (even among tables and chairs) of a wild beast” (pg. 86).

Her characteristic phrase is:

“I love, I hate” (pgs. 11, 98, 162, 176)

We identify Rhoda by her fear of life, “an emerging monster” (pg. 47), and her dreams. She is described as “the nymph of the fountain always wet” (pgs 84, 183) and her characteristic phrase reveals her fear of life:

“the door opens and the tiger leaps” (pgs. 75, 93)
We know Jinny by her sensuousness and need for admiration; her symbol is her own body and her phrase:

“I dance. I ripple”

In Neville there is evident love of order and of intellectual clarity. He is:

“scissor cutting, exact” (pg. 4)

Louis has a sense of social insecurity, his complex coming from his Australian accent, and his father being a banker at Brisbane. His complex, and his desire to be free of it, is summed up in this phrase:

“I am also the tiger, and you the keepers with red-hot bars” (pg. 92)

Louis has his peculiar sense of identity with the past history of the race:

“I seem already to have lived many thousand years” (pgs. 48, 91, 119)

The phrase he often repeats is:

“the beast is stamping” (pgs. 42, 46, 49) The difference among the characters, as well as their difficulty to communicate their own feelings (inherent to every human being) are magistrally shown in the opening page of the novel, in which the characters describe the sun.

Bernard shows his imagination when he sees the sun as “a ring hanging above” that
“quivers and hangs in a loop of light”; the words quivering and hanging are also significant because, of the six, Bernard is the character more aware of the flux of life. It is significant that Susan is always elemental and solid, associated with ripeness and the seasons; she sees the sun as a “slab of pale yellow, spreading away until it meets a purple stripe”, the slab of yellow suggesting autumn and fecundity.

The timid Rhoda does not see, she just hears a sound; from the beginning she is out of touch with reality: “I hear a sound, cheep, chirp; cheep chirp; going up and down”:

And Jinny is concerned with the physical; her image is sensual and bright: “I see a crimson tassel, twisted with golden threads”.

Louis, as Rhoda, only hears; there is also a fear in his vision: “I hear something stamping. A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps and stamps”. This image is symbolic in a character who, feeling like “a caged tiger” wants to break free but is tied up by his complex and by his past.

Neville is inevitably cold and precise: “I see a globe hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill”. The enormous hill may represent his vision of the world as something enduring whereas the drop is his own short and untranscending life. It is significant the use of the word “drop” for he, failing to find some bound of union among facts, will live his life moment by moment as if they were drops.

The whole of the first chapter in fact, is loaded with information about the
characters so that they may become easily recognizable to the reader.

It is Susan here who sees the difference among them:

“I love, I hate, I desire one thing only. My eyes are hard. Jinny’s eyes break into a thousand lights. Rhoda’s are like those pale flowers to which moths come in the evening. I am tied down with single words. But you (Bernard) wander off; you slip away; you rise lighter with words, and words in phrases” (pg. 11).

Rhoda is now building a dream world, with flower petals in a basin full of water, and reveals herself as a dreamer, and at the same time gives a picture of the world as she sees it:

“all my ships are white, I do not want red petals of hollyhocks or geranium. I want white petals that float when I tip the basin up. I have a fleet now swimming from shore to shore. I will drop a twig in as a raft for a drowning sailor. I will drop a stone in and see bubbles rise from the depths of the sea ... and I will rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may ride the waves. Some will flounder. Some will dash themselves against the cliffs. One sails alone. That is my ship. It sails into icy caverns where the sea-bear barks and stalactites swing green chains. The waves rise; their crests curl; look at the lights at the mastheads. They have scattered, they have floundered, all except my ship, which mounts the wave and sweeps before the gale and reaches the islands where the parrots chatter and the creepers ...” (pg. 13).

Her view of the world is pessimistic: the ships sail in a hostile sea, the feeling
of loneliness is suggested, and it is also significant that she, the person who has “no face”, should have chosen only white petals for her fleet.

In the same first chapter Neville sums up the main characteristics of his personality when saying:

“I hate dangling things, I hate dampish things. I hate wandering and mixing things together” (pg. 14)

And there is also a certain symbolism in the fact that he is presented playing with a knife... In Virginia Woolf’s novels a knife is more than once associated with the sterile intellectual.

Mr Ramsay in “To the Lighthouse” was “lean as a knife, and narrow as the blade of one”.

In “Mrs. Dalloway” Peter Walsh, who is not perhaps an intellectual but whose life is sterile and uncreative, is repeatedly presented playing with a knife, symbol of the instinct for destruction aroused when the creative impulse is frustrated.

Louis makes his appearance alone in the garden, thinking... and he will always be found alone; dinning alone or in his attic which Rhoda will desert... At the same time his thoughts about the past are peculiar to him:

“the flowers swim like fish made of light upon the dark, green waters. I hold a stalk in my hand, I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world... up here I am a boy with grey flannels with a belt fastened by a brass snake, up here. Down there by eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile. I see women passing with
red pitchers to the river; I see camels swaying and men in turbans (pg. 8)

As a response to the transitoriness of life, he sees human history as a procession which began by the Nile and in which he is a figure ("I become a figure in the procession, a spoke in the huge wheel that turning, at last erects me here and now" (pg. 25).

Once the differences among the characters have been established, they are so consistent in their behaviour and attitude that even if Virginia Woolf had not said "this is Rhoda, or Jinny, speaking" we could have guessed which of them was every time.

The approach they have to facts is the consequence of their inner attitude to life, which is very different with each of them, and the whole book consists of a series of events such as a class of Latin, going to college, holidays, love, death, friendship and lastly their growing old, and the particular way in which each of the characters responds to every one of these incidents.

Taking, for instance, the moment in which, as very little children, they attend to their Latin class, we can see in Louis a certain attitude which makes him imitate what the others do, as the result of his sense of insecurity:

“I will not conjugate the verb until Bernard has said it. My father is a banker at Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent, I will wait and
copy Bernard... They laugh at my neatness, at my Australian accent, I will now try to imitate Bernard softly lipsing Latin... (pg. 14)

On other occasions he tries also to look like the others. When he is having dinner at a restaurant he reflects:

“I will prop my book against a bottle of Worcester sauce and try to look like the rest” (pg. 67)

And at the farewell to Percival:

“I came in trying to look like the rest of you. But I cannot for I am not single and entire as you are. I have lived a thousand lives already. Every day I unbury – I dig up. I find relics of myself in the sand that women made a thousand years ago, when I heard songs by the Nile and the chained beast stamping” (pg. 91)

This sense he has for the continuity of history and which he knows the others do not share, is what makes him feel different from them; and ultimately what makes him want to find something that can impose an order on this changing continuity which he sees in terms of persons and history whereas Bernard thinks in terms of things:
“they flick their tails right and left as I speak them, they wag their tails; they flick their tails; they move through the air in flocks, now this way, now that way, moving all together, now dividing, now coming together”. (14)

He is talking here about the Latin words of his composition, and when talking about life he observes:

“Tuesday follows Monday, then comes Wednesday, the mind grows rings... We are swept on by the torrent of things” (pg. 182)

In the same way that Bernard’s and Louis’s comments in the Latin class are significant, Jinny’s remark is very characteristic of her superficiality and her concern with the purely physical:

“those are yellow words, those are fiery words, I should like a fiery dress, a yellow dress to wear in the evening” (15)

Contrasted with Susan’s world, we see that it is more solid and less imaginative:

“those are white words like stones one picks up by the sea shore”.

Neville’s observation, on the other hand, is cold and intellectual:
“each tense means differently. There is an order in this world; there are distinctions, there are differences in this world, upon whose verge I step”. (15)

His attitude is that of one who tries to set the order in the world by reasoning, not by living or creating; it is the cold attitude of Virginia Woolf’s intellectuals. In fact, Neville looks at the world as if he were outside it, and tries to understand it as if it were a dead, dry thing (it is significant that the subject he likes best is Latin) upon which he looks with contempt (“illimitable chaos, formless imbecility” (160) ) and on which he tries to impose some order but in a cool and detached way:

“we must oppose the waste and deformity of the world, its crowds eddying round and round disgorged and trampling. One must slip paper knives, even, exactly through the pages of novels, and tie up packets of letters neatly with green silk, and brush up the cinders with a hearth broom. Everything must be done to rebuke the horror of deformity. Let us read writers of Roman severity and virtue; let us seek perfection through the sand” (pag. 128)

And Rhoda, the dreamer, the one outside the world, the one who cannot see the meaning of things, says:

“now Miss Hudson has shut the book. Now the terror is beginning. Now taking her lump of chalk she draws figures, six, seven, eight, and then a cross, and then a line on the blackboard. What is the answer? The
others look, they look with understanding... I am left alone to find an answer. The figures mean nothing now... look, the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it. I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop which now I join – so – and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, “oh, save me from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!” (pg. 15)

This feeling of being outside the “loop of time” will lead her, finally, to commit suicide.

There are other instances in which the essential differences between the characters are, symbolically, made clear. There is one moment, at the farewell to Percival, in which the six characters remember their childhood, and it is significant that Bernard, the one most aware of change, says:

“old Mrs. Constable lifted her sponge and warmth poured over us, we became clothed in this changing, this feeling garment of flesh” (pg. 89)

And that Jinny whose life is all movement, from one sensation to another, remembers a “leaf dancing in the hedge without anyone to blow it”.

Rhoda, as we have now come to expect, remembers a sound, associated with something dreary: “the breath of the wind was like a tiger panting”.

And Susan remembers something solid, human and domestic: how the “boot-boy made love to the sculay maid on the kitchen table among the blown-out
Louis, who wants to be like the others, ironically, points out how “we changed, we became unrecognizable. Exposed to all these different lights what we had in us (for we are all so different) came intermittently”.

Through the years the six personalities have become so different that they may react in very different ways to the death of their friend Percival and these reactions are crucial in any understanding of the characters and of Virginia Woolf’s intentions in the novel, for Percival, though an unseen presence, is nevertheless the focal point: it is only through Percival that they have been able to achieve any sort of communion, to break out of their essential isolation and reveal their inner selves.

From their attitudes there are three which are typical: There is the response, sterile and self-dramatizing of the intellectual, Neville:

“I will not lift my foot to climb the stair. I will stay for one moment beneath the immitigable tree, alone with the man whose throat is cut, while downstairs the cook shoves in and out the dampers. I will not climb the stair. We are doomed all of us. Women shuffle past with shopping bags. People keep on passing. Yet you shall not destroy me. For this moment, this one moment we are together. I press you to me. Come pain, feed on me. Bury your flangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob” (pg. 108)

It is significant that Virginia Woolf has a tendency to present intellectuals as self dramatizing persons, there is a parallel between this attitude of Neville´s and the
“someone has blundered” or “we perished each alone” that Mr. Ramsay of “To the Lighthouse” reiterates.

In relation to the death of Percival there is, on the other hand, the positive and human attitude of Bernard; the three pages in which Bernard describes his feelings at the death of his friend are an example of the “stream of consciousness” technique at its best, and are at the same time extremely real and convincing.

First, Bernard is not able to differentiate between pain and joy:

“such is the complexity of things that as I descend the staircase I do not know which is pain, which is joy. My son is born; Percival is dead”.

Then from the contemplation of the world and its mobility (“the butcher delivers meat next door. Two old men stumble along the pavement, sparrows alight”) his mind goes back to Percival, whom he sees as an imposer of order, a leader of mankind (“you have lost a leader whom you would have followed”). He recognizes the value of Percival’s influence, and as his friend has accomplished his role in life (“you have done your utmost”) he is not going “to lie down and weep away a life of care”.

Then, drawing him from his thoughts the world reclaims him and he submits (“one cannot live outside the machine for more than half an hour”). His curiosity is aroused for a short while before he comes back again to Percival (“you shall remain the arbiter”) ... but the visible world is acting upon him, and distracting him from his thoughts, till he begins to see Percival not as “you” but as “he”: (“I recover what he
was to me: my opposite. Being naturally truthful he did not see the point of these exaggerations, and was borne on by the natural sense of the fitting, was indeed a great master of the art of living, so that he seems to have lived long, to have spread calm round him”.

Then finally, he is restored to the world, the death of Percival has enriched him, the pain is absorbed and has become a part of him (“something is added to my interpretation, something lies deeply buried”) he feels tired for having remained twenty minutes “outside the machine” and goes to find life in Jinny’s room.

If Bernard’s attitude implies an acceptance of life and the pain enriches him, Rhoda’s outlook is pessimistic and the pain does not enrich her but increases her tendency to reject life. Percival was to her “the figure that was robbed in beauty ... the figure that stood in the grove”, someone who gave her a sense of solidity... but now that she sees that the figure has fallen, she is in despair:

“all palpable forms of life have failed me, ... I am alone in a hostile world”

“Percival, by his death, has made this present, has revealed this terror...”

Percival was to her the only being who could give a meaning to her life. She goes to the river and offers him violets. But her attitude is not entirely negative; she will try to find something that could give a meaning to life, although she is uncertain
how to find it:

“unless I can stretch and touch something hard I shall be blown down the eternal corridors for ever. What then can I touch? What brick? What stone? And so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely?” (pg. 113)

The whole novel is orientated to the last chapters, where the protagonists sum up and judge their lives so that the result of the different attitudes they have adopted is evident, and the reader can judge which of them has been more satisfactory.

Jinny has only seen the surface of reality and the changing aspect of it (“there is nothing said, nothing settled in the universe. All is rippling, all is dancing, all is quickness and triumph”), so she has adopted a changing and superficial attitude: “I dance, I ripple”, she does not want to be fixed “nor pinioned”.

As the result of her superficial attitude to life, she fails to understand what is beyond the body, (“my imagination is the bodies”) (pg. 92) so that she only lives the life of the body and of the senses to such an extent that when she discovers that she is getting old and that her body will no longer be attractive, her first reaction is of despair:

“How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young, I am no longer part of the procession. Millions descend those stairs in a terrible descent, great wheels churn inexorably urging them downwards.
Millions have died. Percival died. I still move, I still live, but who will come if I signal?"

Nevertheless she has the courage to maintain the attitude she has chosen, and it is this courage which redeems her.

“I will not be afraid, I will bring the whip down on my flanks. Now I swear, making deliberately in front of the glass those slight preparations that equip me, I will not be afraid. Think of the superb omnibuses, red and yellow, stopping and starting, punctually in order. Think of the powerful and beautiful cars that now slow to a foot’s pace and now shot forward; think of men; think of women, equipped, prepared, driving onwards. This is the triumphant procession... I too with my little patent-leather shoes, my handkerchief that is but a film of gauze, my reddened lips, my finely pencilled eyebrows, march to victory with the band” (pgs. 137, 8)

Susan longs for something simple, stable and solid, so she is attached to primary things such as her home, the country, her children:

“I cannot float gently, mixing with other people. I like best the stare of the shepherds meet in the road; the stare of the gypsy women beside a cart in a ditch, suckling their children as I shall suckle my children” (pg. 71), “the only sayings I understand are cries of love, hate, rage and pain” (pg. 94)
Her attitude has made her become “glutted with natural happiness” (pg. 123), the happiness coming from her children and her husband, in whom she has found a meaning to life and a sense of security, although sometimes she wonders if this is enough:

“I ask now, standing with my scissors among my flowers, where can the shadow enter? What shock can loosen my laboriously gathered, relentlessly pressed down life? Yet sometimes I am sick of natural happiness and fruit growing and children scattering the house ... Life stands round me like glass round the imprisoned reed ... uneasy cries wake me at dead of night, .. but for the most part I walk content with my sons” (pgs. 137, 138)

Neville´s case is different; his rationalism does not allow him to believe in the existence of something that he cannot see. He sees life rationally, without hope of something beyond, so Rhoda´s and Louis´s attitudes are not understood by him:

“they want a plot, do they? They want a reason? It is not enough for them this ordinary scene. It is not enough to wait for the thing to be said as if it were written; to see the sentence lay its dab of clay precisely in the right place, making character; to perceive suddenly some group in outline against the sky?” (pg. 140)

Neville´s attitude is precise and clear, he is “scissor cutting” and “neat as a cat in his habits” (pg. 120); he only accepts what he sees: “one must be sceptical but throw caution to the winds and when the door opens accept absolutely” (pg. 142).
So he is never attached to anything, or to any person in particular, he shifts from one love to another, and can be happy watching the spikes of wood burning in his fire and hearing its creaks. (pg. 142)

Nevertheless the “splendid clarity of his intelligence and the remorseless honesty of his intellect” (as Bernard says) allow him to see that he is not ultimately loved by his human fellows and that there is something that he fails to attain:

“nothing, not the pursuit of perfection through the sand, nor fame, nor money, has meaning to me. I shall have riches; I shall have fame. But I shall never have what I want, for I lack bodily grace and the courage that comes with it. The swiftness of my mind is too strong for my body. I fail before I reach the end and fall in a heap, damp, perhaps disgusting. I excite pity in the crisis of life, not love, therefore I suffer horribly”: (pg. 92)

But his integrity reconciles us to him; he shares with the other characters an extraordinary courage in pursuing the path he has chosen:

“I see everything – except one thing – with complete clarity. That is my saving. That is what gives my suffering an unceasing excitement. That is what makes me dictate when I am silent. And since I am in one respect deluded, since the person is always changing, though not the desire, and I do not know in the morning by whom I shall sit at night, I am never stagnant; I rise from my worst disasters, I turn, I change. Pebbles
bounce off the mail of my muscular, my extended body. In this pursuit I shall grow old”: (pg. 93)

Those three, Susan, Jinny and Neville are the characters who have not explored, or ventured “inside” reality; they have not got beyond the superficial level. But the other three, Louis, Rhoda and Bernard, have made an attempt to see beyond life.

The one who penetrates least deeply in his search is Louis, but not because he lacks the sensibility to see it, in fact he has the feeling of continuity (through race and history), a curiosity to see the meaning of things and a desire to set order in the changing things:

“how can I reduce these dazzling, these dancing apparitions to one line capable of linking all in one?” (155)

(And eventually he does find some sort of meaning to his work with an export firm:

“spreading commerce where there was chaos in the far parts of the world .. from chaos making order” (pg. 119 )

But with Louis the problem is that he felt too strongly tied up by his inferiority complex, so before turning to anything more profound he tried to eradicate that weakness, by attempting to look “like the others” and by acquiring money, position
and his “mahogany table”.

When in old age he has got rid of part of his complex, he comes to realize that he has been wasting his time, and that there is something, the most important thing of all, that he has missed:

“I am immensely respectable, all the young ladies in the office acknowledge my entrance …” (pg. 142)

But an unidentified fragment of English poetry comes to his mind with disturbing insistence:

“o western wind …”

Here again is an example of the subtlety of Virginia Woolf’s technique; this west wind of the old poem represents to Louis what he has failed to attain in life. When he thinks over the course that his life has taken, the poem comes into his mind and he acknowledges that:

“o western wind, you are at enmity with my mahogany table and spats, and also, alas, with the vulgarity of my mistress..”

He tries to justify himself:
“my task, my burden has always been greater that other people’s. A pyramid has been set on my shoulders, I have tried to do a colossal labour, I have driven a violent, an unruly, a vicious team ...”

“Life has been a terrible affair for me ... I have tried to draw from the living flesh the stone lodged at the centre ... I am not a single and passing being. My life is not a moment’s bright spark like that on the surface of a diamond. I go beneath ground tortuously, as if a warder carried a lamp from cell to cell. My destiny has been that I remember and must weave together, must plait into one cable the many threads, the thin, the broken, the enduring of our long history ...”

But the poem repeatedly forces itself into his consciousness, as if recalling that something is missing; that he, in the depths of his mind, is not entirely reconciled to his own life. He admits that he may never attain endurance and permanence:

“let us suppose that I make reason of it all. One poem on a page and then die. I can assure you it will not be unwillingly. Percival died, Rhoda left me ...Perhaps I shall never die, shall never attain even that continuity and permanence...”

The poem comes again, now fully, into his mind:

“o western wind when wilt thou blow, that the small rain down can rain? Christ, that my love were in my arms, and I on my bed again”
But, even then, courage does not fail him:

“\(I \text{ return now to my book; I return now to my attempt}\)” (pgs. 142-3-4)

He shares a common quality of Virginia Woolf’s characters: when they have chosen a path in life, whether it is right or wrong, they pursue it to the end.

Another character who sees beneath things is Rhoda. She goes deeper in her understanding of the world, but only to see the negative aspect of life (which she calls “an emerging monster”) to the extent that she cannot make anything positive of it and she has eventually nothing left but to die.

She sees the changes; for her nothing is real, nothing is solid: “I will assure myself, touching the rail of something hard” (pg. 19) so she cannot find any meaning in life:

“I cannot make one moment merge into the next. To me they are all violent, all separate... I do not know how to run minute to minute an hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life. Because you have an end in view – one person, is it? to sit beside, an idea, is it?, your beauty, is it? ...but there is no single scent, no single body for me to follow. I have no face, I am like the foam” (pg. 93)

And confined as she feels to the hostility of things (“I am no longer upright to be knocked against and damaged – pg. 19) and of people (“I am stretched, among
these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing...”- pg. 20) she is not able to find any help, and the older she grows the greatest is her anguish:

“each time the door opens I am interrupted, I am not yet twenty one, I am to be broken, I am to be derided all my life, I am to be cast up and down among these men and women, with their twitching faces, with their lying tongues, like a cork on a rough sea...” (pg. 77)

Rhoda´s despair, together with the awareness of her sufferings lead her to an escapist posture:

“so terrible was life that I held up shade after shade” (pg. 145); “I implore day to break into night ...I desired always to stretch the night and fill it fuller and fuller with dreams” (pg. 146)

But even though she has such a pessimistic view of life, courage does no fail her. She feels alone (“I will gather my flowers and present them – o, to whom? – pg. 41) but courageous:

“I came to the puddle, I could not cross it, identity failed me, we are nothing, I said, and fell ... Then very gingerly I pushed my foot across, I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into the body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed” (pg. 46)
At last this feeling she has of the dreariness of life, together with the certainty of her fighting alone, leads her to the understanding of the futility of her life, and so is driven to the conclusion that death is the only answer, believing moreover, that “pools lie on the other side of the world reflecting marble columns” (pg. 76 – the marble pools representing the stability and solidity that she longs for but cannot find in this world).

However, it is not before a struggle to accept reality, that she decides that death is the only answer. The attitude she has had towards reality during her life is put in images in the episode when she, alone in Spain, on the top of a mountain almost foretells her suicide because she “touches nothing, sees nothing” but, coming back to the inn she puts her feet “to the ground” and presses her hand “against the hard door” (pg. 147); somehow we are made to feel that this is one of her last attempts, that if she does not find something solid and fixed to adhere to, she will give up all hope and die ... as she does; Bernard refers to her death in his last monologue.

A negative point in her is that perhaps she is too aware of her suffering, to the point of self-dramatization:

“I see the wild thorn tree shake its shadow in the desert” (pg. 77)

“Oh, this is pain, this is anguish! I faint, I fail! (pg. 76)
This self-dramatizing and self-pitying attitude is reminiscent of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” where the poet says: “I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed”. The vocabulary is too similar for the parallel to be accidental: Virginia Woolf was, of course, intensely critical of Rhoda, no less than of Mrs. Dalloway, a fact not all critics have realized.

There remains Bernard, the most positive character of the novel. It is worth noticing, with regard to him, that while the other characters remain unchanged from maturity onwards, he is the only one who, true to his vision of mutability, develops throughout the course of the novel and, later, reaches a further stage in the understanding of reality.

The view Bernard has of life is close to Virginia Woolf’s conception of the “myriad things” but with Bernard the concept is even more intensely felt. Of all of Virginia Woolf’s characters he is the most aware of the “flux of life” and of the mutability of things; perhaps that is the reason why, in consequence, he is the one who tries hardest to find a meaning and to impose an order. The vision of the attitude he has to life is as follows:

“It is however true that my dreaming, my tentative advance like one carried beneath the surface of the stream, is interrupted, torn, pricked and plucked by sensations, spontaneous and irrelevant, of curiosity, greed, desire, irresponsible as in sleep. No; but I wish to go under; to visit the profound depths.” (pg. 81)
His wish to go under and visit “the profound depths” is so far the same as the desire Rhoda and Louis have, but where they are deeply pessimistic about their own capacity, and negative in their concept of human beings, Bernard likes people, needs them, can feel unified with them and is confident in his strength:

“We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either following a master. We are creators. We too stride not into chaos but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illuminated and everlasting road” (pg. 104)

Bernard has also solved the problem of the transitoriness of life, he has been able to see some meaning in his life, to find some permanence in all this: somehow, through his children, he will continue to exist:

“I am aware of our ephemeral passage. It is however true that I cannot deny a sense, that life for me is now mysteriously prolonged. It is that I may have children, may cast a fling of seed wider, beyond this generation, this doom encircled population, shuffling each other in endless competition along the streets. My daughters shall come here in other summers; my sons shall turn new fields. Hence we are not raindrops soon dried by the wind; we made gardens blow and forests roar; we come up differently, for ever and ever”. (pg. 82)

Yet he is vague, he acknowledges the difficulty of living and tries to find a sort
of escape in his stories. Through his attitude with regard to the stories, we can follow
his development in his progressive acceptance of reality. As a young man, he still
fears reality so he:

“Must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard
between myself and the stare of the housemaids, the stare of clocks,
staring faces, indifferent faces...” (pg. 21)

The next stage is when he realizes his stories are escapist and that he, by
selecting pieces of life for his stories, is missing the whole of life and at the same
time has failed to find the true story:

“I have made up a thousand stories; I have filled innumerable
notebooks with phrases to be used when I have found the true story.
The one story to which all these phrases refer. But I have never found
that story and I begin to ask, are there stories? ... Why impose an
arbitrary design? Why stress that and shape that and twist up little
figures like the toys men sell up in the street? Why select this out of all
that? – one detail?” (pg. 133)

“I carrying a notebook, making phrases, had recorded more changes; a
shadow, I have been sedulous to take note of shadows” (pg. 202)

And lastly he drops his notebook, “stuffed with phrases” to the floor.
At the end of his life Bernard reaches a stage of oneness with things; he is free
of care, and his attitude is very similar to that of Mrs. Ramsay in “To the Lighthouse”:

“Immeasurably receptive, holding everything, trembling with fullness yet clear, contained – so my being seems” (pg. 206)

The difference between him and Mrs. Ramsay is that while she seems to have reached this state of peace without effort and naturally, Bernard comes to it through real suffering and struggle – so that as a whole he is a far more convincing character than Mrs. Ramsay.

As a consequence of his understanding and acceptance of the world, he, as Mrs. Ramsay, is very preoccupied with human beings and their relationships; in fact his stories about them are an unconscious way of trying to unite them, to invent relationships in people that he sees alone, and also a way to contain the endless flux:

“I netted them under a sudden phrase, I retrieved them from formlessness with words” (pg. 191)

Apart from his stories, his creative impulse has another more positive realization; he succeeds in creating an order amongst the other people as Mrs. Ramsay did at her dinner, ... he feels a sense of communion at the farewell to Percival:
“But here and now we are together, we have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot. We are drawn into this communion. We have come together to make one thing not enduring – for what endures? - but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase, a single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven sided flower, many petalled, red, puce, purple shaded, stiff, with silver tinted leaves, a whole flower to which everyone brings its own contribution” (pgs. 90-91)

And at the last dinner at Hampton Court Bernard, as he sees them together, remembers the trouble it cost him to group all of them together (“how many telephone calls, how many post cards”) but his effort has been worthwhile because, as they are dinning there, they start to compare their lives and to justify their own attitudes, and they even catch a fleeting feeling of unit. Louis calls it a “moment of reconciliation” in which they have “met together united” (pg. 155). They all allow their preoccupations to subside (as it happened at Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party) and “Louis doesn’t care what people think. Neville’s tortures are at rest ... Susan hears the breathing of all her children safe asleep ... Rhoda has rocked her ships to shore” (pg. 159), and Bernard can see again how they have all merged in one being, in one “six-sided flower” as it was when they dinned with Percival” (pg. 163).

Percival, the other character who succeeded in creating unity has a doble mission: he is on the one hand the creator of order, and on the other a device of the authoress to expose the characters in the light of their relationships to him. He is
also a device to unify their experiences (in fact almost every part of the novel is somehow related to him, the impression he produces to the boys at college, the feelings he arouses in his farewell and in his death, and finally the memory of him that remains in them).

Percival has an immense influence upon them: to Rhoda he is the symbol of solidity, to Bernard is “a master in the art of living”; to Louis the one who makes him aware of the futility of his mundane concerns (pg.98); to Neville he represents order, “knives cutting and the reign of chaos over” (pg. 88). And it is Percival who has made them feel unified to achieve a moment of almost mystical joy at the dinner; they have felt together in “the globe whose walls are made of Percival”, and have had a “swelling and splendid moment” (pg. 104).

The admiration the six characters feel for Percival may be based on the fact that they see him as a man of action, a man who “rides a flea-bitten mare”, a young man who plays cricket, a man who will be able to solve the oriental problem, and whom, as he rides, the multitude regards as a god.

Percival’s activity is contrasted with the attitude of Neville and Louis, who are not men of action. Rhoda is essentially passive, and so are Susan and Jinny to some extent. Although Bernard cannot be described as a man of action, he is the character nearest to Percival in this respect:

“Once in a while to exercise my prerogative not always to act, but to explore; to hear vague, ancestral sounds of boughs creaking,
mammoths; to indulge impossible desires to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding - impossible to those who act” (pgs. 81-82)

As if the six characters were not only merely individuals but representatives of human nature, they are all considered by Bernard in his last long speech, in which the whole novel is summed up; Virginia Woolf had her reasons for this:

“It occurred to me last night while listening to a Beethoven quartet that I should merge all the interjected passages into Bernard’s final speech and end with the words “o, solitude”; thus making him absorb all those scenes and having no further break. This is also to signify that the theme effort, effort, dominates: not the waves: and personality: and defiance: but I am not sure of the effect artistically; because the proportions may need the intervention of the waves finally so as to make a conclusion” (pg. 8)

During the course of his final speech, Bernard, who was the first to set the differences among them, comes to see that in reality there are no differences that mattered and that they form a single being:

“I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt “I am you”. This difference we have made so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherished was overcome” (pg. 205)
He also recalls the process he has followed to reach self knowledge, and to see reality, and comes to the conclusion that the only way in which we can make something of life is by fighting and having courage. That is what Virginia Woolf wanted to communicate; so Bernard’s last words are addressed to death, his immediate adversary, and not to solitude as Virginia Woolf first intended:

“Death is the enemy, it is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back as a young’s man... I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, o, Death”
To understand Virginia Woolf´s technique it is helpful to have in mind the time at which she was writing and the ideas of that time.

In the aftermath of the First World War came a period of social upheaval, and with the incipient breakdown of the British Empire, on which Englishmen had believed the sun would never set, nothing seemed to be fixed.

In philosophy and in medicine the ideas of Sigmund Freud were beginning to have extraordinary importance, with the emphasis laid on the inner life of the individual.

In art the post-impressionists were, for the first time, exhibited in London; their minute and detached way of painting had no doubt some influence on the literary technique of the time.

In fact life seemed so different from what it had been before that Virginia Woolf said “on or about December 1910 human nature changed“. All the external changes and the new way of looking at life had an extraordinary influence not only on Virginia Woolf´s view of life but on that of her generation. As nothing seemed to endure, the first problem they had to face was to find something static, unchanging, meaningful; this they called reality, and all of them were aware of the extreme difficulty in discovering it, involved as they were in
the flux of things. Virginia Woolf is aware of this difficulty when she wonders:

“What is meant by reality? It would seem to be something very erratic; very undependable” (lecture 1928)

In literature this new way of looking at life gave birth to a new form of writing; at the time writers saw life as ever-changing and meaningless. Therefore, they had to transcribe it in a particular way because the old, ordered forms of the novel were no longer suitable as a vehicle of expression. So there followed a revolution against all the established conventions in novel writing such as plot and characterization.

In the “Common Reader” Virginia Woolf pronounces herself against conventions:

“If he (the writer) could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style...
Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged, life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this unknown, this varying, this uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display?”

And in her essay “On Modern Fiction” Virginia Woolf says that:
“For the moderns “that”, the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology”.

As she and her generation felt the traditional forms of writing inadequate, they had to procure themselves a new form which would allow them to express the particular vision of life they had.

They were particularly against the “time obsession”:

“We are all like Scheherazade’s husband, in that we want to know what happens next. That is universal, and that is why the backbone of a novel has to be a story. Some of us want to know nothing else – there is nothing in us but primeval curiosity and consequently, our other literary judgements are ludicrous. And now the story can be defined. It is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence – dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death, and so on. “Qua story”, it can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next. These are the only two criticisms that can be made on the story that is a story. It is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms. Yet it is the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels.”

Bernard in “The waves” says:

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2 E. M. Foster “Aspects of a novel”, pg.35
“But what are the stories? Toys I twist, bubbles I blow, one ring passes through another...”

Virginia Woolf believed in the break away from the conventional:

“The story may wobble; the plot may crumble; ruin might seize upon the characters. The novel in short might become a work of art “

The effect of this kind of technique is that the reader forgets the “what” to learn about the “how” and “why”; in other words, what really matters is not the story but the psychology and the record of experience.

The new way of thinking produced then a special “genre” of novel writing that has been called the “stream of consciousness technique”, but in fact the stream of consciousness is not a particular technique but “a type of fiction in which the basic emphasis is placed in exploration of pre-speech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of the characters”³ and which embodies several techniques; being its main failure that even if it tries to depict life very accurately, it merely focuses on the individual psychic life.

Three outstanding “stream of consciousness” writers have had different approaches to reality.

W. Faulkner, in “The Sound of the Fury” and in “As I Lay dying” saw it as a

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³ Robert Humphrey, “Stream of consciousness in the modern novel”, pg. 6
tragedy of the blood.

In “Ulysses” J. Joyce saw life as a conflict between what man wants and what he really achieves; that is a conflict between the inside and the outside, and he saw it as a comedy. His work was first printed in England by Virginia Woolf and her husband in the “Hogarth Press”. There is no doubt that Joyce had profound influence on her. In one of her essays in the “Common Reader” (The Art of Fiction) she asserts that the task of the novelist is “to convey this varying, this unknown, this uncircumscribed spirit (life) ... with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible”. She recognized that some of her contemporaries were attempting such records of consciousness:

“It is, at any rate, in some such fashion as this that we seek to define the quality which distinguishes the work of several young writers, among whom Mr. James Joyce is the most notable, from that of their predecessors”.

And in the same essay she says that “if we want life in itself, here surely we have it” referring to “Ulysses”.

Virginia Woolf, differing from Faulkner or Joyce, saw life as a drama in the mind of human beings.

A common problem of the “stream of consciousness” writers was to give form to the pre-speech thoughts and abstractions. Virginia Woolf, conscious of this
problem, solved it by means of images and symbols. In “Mrs. Dalloway” for instance she uses Big Ben to suggest the consciousness of the transitoriness of life in her characters; in “To the Lighthouse” the light suggests Mrs. Ramsay’s illuminating and positive attitude; and in “The Waves”, the waves represent the different and apparently disconnected moments of which life is compounded. The symbol therefore is not a direct or literal representation but:

“I am sure this is the right way of using them - not in set pieces, as I had tried first, coherently, but simply as images, never making them work out: only suggest”

Another common problem for these writers, an even more difficult one, was to impose order on their work.

First of all, they had to impose order at the mind level (the flowing of the mind that they tried to suggest by being disordered and simultaneous); they could select from the mind what best suited their purposes (as Virginia Woolf does) or use free association (as J. Joyce does).

In “Mrs. Dalloway”, the first novel in which Virginia Woolf set out on a different path from that of the traditional novel writing, she relies mostly in the use of parentheses to express changes of thoughts:

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4 “A Writer’s Diary”, pg. 101
“... that was only her dear Peter at his worst; and he could be intolerable; he could be impossible; but adorable to walk with on a morning like this. (June had drown out every leaf on the trees. The mothers of Pimplico gave suck to their young. Messages were passing from the Fleet to the Admiralty. Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the Park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved. To dance, to ride, she had adored all that). For they might be parted for hundreds of years, she and Peter” (pg 89)

And in certain instances in “Mrs. Dalloway” her prose resembles to that of Joyce:

“That girl, thought Mrs. Dempster (who saved crusts for the squirrels and often ate her lunch in Regent’s Park), don’t know a thing yet; and really it seemed to her better to be a little stout, a little slack, a little moderate in one’s expectations,. Percy drank. Well, better to have a son, thought Mrs. Dempster. She had had a hard time of it, and couldn’t help smiling at a girl like that. You’ll get married, for you are pretty enough, thought Mrs. Dempster. Get married, she thought, and then you’ll know. Oh, the cooks, and so on. Every man has his ways ...” (pg.31)

This paragraph intends to capture all the thoughts that pass through the old woman’s mind but this is not a characteristic paragraph of this authoress; she generally prefers to select from the mind what she believes is more relevant, which
give a sense of order to her work.

On the artistic level the “stream of consciousness” writers have to face another difficulty; as they did not accept the plot and character devices used by traditional novel writers, they had to find certain patterns to give a certain unity to their novels.

The “stream of consciousness” writers use a variety of devices and “Ulysses” may provide a basis for examining some of them. The author in this novel works upon a previously established literary pattern, to which he adds further unifying devices: the time and place unity, the use of leitmotiv (recurrent thoughts in the minds of the protagonists) and the use of formal scenic arrangements.

If I have mentioned “Ulysses” it is because in Virginia Woolf´s work, which in the main is post-Joyce (she came in contact with the “Ulysses” manuscript in 1918 and “Mrs. Dalloway” was written between 1920 and 1922), some of the devices that Joyce used are to be found.

In “Mrs. Dalloway” the structure relies on the artificial “unity” pattern: unity of time (one day), and unity of place (London); nevertheless, at the same time, through the memories of the protagonists, the action covers eighteen years and is set in London, in the country and in India.

The pattern is very rigid; every detail has its function so that the book forms a whole unity and corresponds to Virginia Woolf´s own idea of the unity of the novel, expressed in the second series of “The Common Reader”: 
“when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both”.

The means by which Virginia Woolf passes from one thing to another are diverse. The aeroplane scene may be taken as a model:

There is a small crowd waiting at Buckingham Palace gates in order to see the king; the car he is coming in approaches. But “suddenly Mrs. Coates looked into the sky”: there is an aeroplane writing something in the sky and the women in the crowd try to guess the word. Virginia Woolf goes from their minds to the people in the Mall who are also “looking up into the sky”. Meanwhile the unnoticed car goes in at the gates, then the aeroplane continues its way above Green Park, Piccadilly, Regent Street and Regent’s Park where Lucrezia Warren Smith is sitting by her husband’s side: “Look, look, Septimus!, she cried”; and so we come into contact with him: “so, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me”. And as the couple are standing in the park, Maisie Jonhson comes to ask them the way to the tube station. Mrs. Dempser sees Maisie and that reminds her of her youth and her marriage; she also sees the aeroplane and remembers how she had “always longed to see foreign parts”; then she remembers her nephew, a missionary shot in a foreign country, while she she sees the aeroplane disappear towards Greenwhich. In Greenwhich the
aeroplane flies above Mr. Bentley, “vigorously rolling his strip of turf”, who thinks that the aeroplane is a symbol of man’s soul, “of his determination to get outside the body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory ...”; and following its course the aeroplane distracts the “seedy-looking nondescript man” from going into St. Paul’s cathedral. Finally, when Clarissa arrives home she asks her maid: “what are they looking at?”. This piece of the novel not only sets an example of the “stream of consciousness” as technique but it also accomplishes another purpose apart from the aesthetic one; Virginia Woolf’s main targets are religion, science (in the sense that it prevents the understanding of invisible values) and that attitude towards authority which is represented in this novel by Hugh Whitebread who “loved doing homage”.

In this particular scene the aeroplane has destroyed the three things:
People who were waiting to see the king looked at the aeroplane instead - “and the car went in at the gates and nobody looked at it; the aeroplane reminds the man in Greenwhich of science, mathematics but suddenly “away the aeroplane shot”; and finally, the man who was going to church to find refuge there is prevented to do so by the aeroplane -”“while he hesitated out flew the aeroplane over Ludgate Circus”.

On other occasions the device used by Virginia Woolf to pass from one thing to another may be a motor car which, passing in front of the shop where Clarissa is buying, distracts our attention from her to Septimus, who is also in the street; or it may be a cloud obscuring the sun watched by Elizabeth and Septimus at the same
time. Nevertheless the device of which Virginia Woolf makes most use of is the clocks striking the hour, and here, as in “The Waves”, we see that the structure pattern chosen by the authoress helps emphasize the main theme, which is the passing of time. Each half an hour London’s clocks striking give a sense of time passing while life is empty and meaningless.

On the other hand, the unity of the novel is not so satisfactory; Clarissa and Septimus are too different and their only link in common is Sir W. Bradshaw, who brings the news of Septimus’ death to the party. That is the moment when the unity of the novel is achieved but up to that point we have the feeling that we are reading two different novels. In other words, the artificial devices of Big Ben, the aeroplane, etc. are inadequate.

But if in “Mrs. Dalloway” Virginia Woolf’s technique was not yet fully developed, there is a notable improvement by the time she writes “To the Lighthouse”.

In “To the Lighthouse” unity is achieved mainly through the theme. Mrs. Ramsay, whose attitude to life is symbolised by the giving out light by the lighthouse, is the main character and all the other characters are revealed in the light of their relationships with her.

On the structure level, the novel is divided in three parts. In the first part, called “The Window”, we see Mrs. Ramsay’s attitude to life and the result of her efforts to create something out of human relations. And she stays in an illuminated
room while the world outside is dark; the fact that she is in possession of the truth is symbolically suggested.

In the second part, “Time Passes”, there is a long description in poetic prose of the events that take place during the ten years that follow Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party. In this part, and through the symbolism of the forces of nature working destructively on the house, Virginia Woolf wanted to make us aware of the hostility of nature, and at the same time of the shortness of our lives compared to life’s eternal forces. These forces are ordered in the natural cyclic schemes of spring, summer, autumn, winter, each of them related, symbolically to a particular event.

“The spring without a leaf to toss, bare and bright like a virgin fierce in her chastity, scornful in her purity, was laid out on fields wide-eyed and watchful and entirely careless of what was done or thought by the beholders.
(Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father’s arm, was given in marriage that May. What, people said, could have been more fitting? And, they added, how beautiful she looked!)” (pg.150)

“But slumber and sleep though it might come late in the summer ominous sounds like the measured blows of hammers dulled on felt, which, with their repeated shocks still further loosened the shawl and cracked the tea cups. Now and again some glass tinkled in the cupboard as if a giant voice had shrieked so loud in its agony that the tumblers stood inside a cupboard vibrated too. Then again silence fell; and then, night after night, and sometimes in plain mid-day when the roses were
bright and light turned on the wall its shape clearly there seemed to drop into this silence, this indifference, this integrity, the thud of something falling.

(A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.)” (pg. 152)

This paragraph not only succeeds in both conveying through its images a vivid description of the summer and suggesting some destructive forces associated with war, but it also contains one of Virginia Woolf’s characteristic qualities: sometimes she makes the rhythm of her prose mimetic of the theme. Here, for instance, note the sounds and the punctuation of the first phrase.

The second part of the novel has been object of much discussion; although it is a technically satisfactory creation, the fact is that it breaks the illusion of the reader, that “willing suspension of disbelief”, and appears artificial in relation to the other parts of the novel.

“The Lighthouse” is the third part; in it we see the remaining members of the Ramsay family back at their old summer house. And the action is set on the day in which they finally visit the lighthouse. The aim of the third part is to show that Mrs. Ramsay’s influence continues even after her death and that she is still able to create something out of the lives of the other characters, notably Lily Briscoe. In this sense she has defeated time.

The pattern used in this novel is symbolic; the alternation of light and shadow
suggests not only the beams of light that the lighthouse sends out, but also the joy and sorrow that human beings feel.
Virginia Woolf saw life as composed of a million things following one after the other without any apparent connection; the mind receiving “a myriad impressions” and no meaning, no permanence, but flux and disorder in the world:

“Tuesday follows Monday, and then comes Wednesday. The mind grows rings... opening and shutting, shutting and opening. We are all swept on by the torrent of things”. (The Waves)

True to her vision of life, she presented it like that in her novels, so that what first strikes the reader is that she feels immersed in a chaotic, fragmentary and meaningless world, and that the action does not occur on the “surface” as in the traditional novel but in the minds of the protagonists who have to maintain a struggle to reconcile two contradictory experiences: on the one hand what they see: the changing surface of the world; and on the other hand what they desire: a truth capable of imposing order and meaning on the flux of life. The attitude they take is, as we have seen, what Virginia Woolf is concerned with in her novels. But finally it is not the horror of life (in spite of the authoress’s own tragic death) that matters but the hope that something meaningful exists beyond these disconnected facts, and the fact that there are persons like Bernard and Mrs. Ramsay who are able to take a positive attitude and that through them and persons like them something can be done to revoke the chaos of human existence.
There is also the further intuitive belief that something exists beyond life, that death is not an end. Virginia Woolf believed that as the waves rise, break on the shore and then become again part of the sea, so it is with human life; in death we become again part of the eternal. The emphasis finally falls on the positive part of her hypothesis:

“Perhaps it may be that though we change, one flying after another, so quick, so quick, yet we are somehow successive and continuous, we human beings.”

To sum up, this novel differs from “Mrs. Dalloway” in that Virginia Woolf has achieved greater interpenetration between theme and structure and the vision of Mrs. Ramsay, sending out rays of light to her fellow humans in the same way that the lighthouse stands among the waves, is convincing.

“The Waves” is as far as technique is concerned the most elaborate or Virginia Woolf’s novels. Here again the theme is symbolic not only in the title but also in the structure. The series of soliloquies in the novel are alike the waves in their movement:

“The Waves” is resolving itself into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogenously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves”\(^5\)

\(^5\) “A Writer’s Diary”, pg. 159
There is a further motive when Virginia Woolf calls her novel “The Waves”; for her, the waves represent both the fragmentary experience of living and the continuity. In all the three novels she compares life to the waves:

“as if all this fever of living were simplicity itself; and myriads of things merged in one thing; and this figure, made of sky and branches as it is, had risen from the troubled sea as a shape might be sucked up out of the waves to shower down from her magnificent hands, compassion, comprehension, absolution” (Mrs. Dalloway, pgs. 64, 65)

“but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow” (“To the Lighthouse”, pgs. 19.20)

These last reflections that the sound of waves suggests to Mrs. Ramsay have as well the mimetic rhythm of the waves breaking upon shore.

In “The Waves” each group of soliloquies has some unifying element; sometimes it is a scenic arrangement, and all the characters are presented in the same place as, for instance, in the nursery, in the farewell to Percival, or in their last dinner at Hampton Court. At other times unity is achieved by placing each character
in the same situation as, for instance, in their common reaction to the death of Percival or the fact of the six characters growing old.

Moreover, each character has a “leitmotif” which is repeated so that the reader may become acquainted with his particular mood or even his particular approach to life. (“the beast is stamping” of Louis; “the door opens and the tiger leaps” of Rhoda; “I dance, I ripple” of Jinny; “I love, I hate” of Susan, are the most expressive of the leitmotifs).

But as if these unifying devices were not enough to convey an order to the novel, Virginia Woolf uses another unity pattern: descriptive passages in poetic prose. She had made use of the poetic prose in “To the Lighthouse” to describe the passing of time, but in this particular novel she introduces each section of the book with a short passage in which she describes the course of one day upon a house, upon a garden and upon the sea in a poetic way.

These passages have a double function; on the one hand, by describing the progress of the sun over the sky during one day, they form a unity pattern and on the other hand, they have a symbolic meaning and act as a chorus. Each passage anticipates symbolically the events to which that part of the novel refers.

First of all, time in the solar day is compared to the age of the protagonists, and birds, waves and the interior of the house are also symbolic of the development the characters experience during the course of their lives.

In the first section of the novel the opening phrase is “the sun had not yet risen”,
then follows the description of the dawn, “the light struck upon the trees in the
garden, making one leaf transparent and then another”; the interior of the house is
“dim and unsubstantial” while “the birds sang their blank melody outside”; this
passage is adequate to the childhood of the characters when their personalities are
not defined yet. But as they grow old and the sun “rose higher” and the waves
“drummed on the shore like turbaned warriors”, they become different. The
description of the behaviour of the birds is especially significant. When the
characters are young

“the birds that had sang erratically and spasmodically in the dawn on
that tree, on that bush, now sang together in chorus, shrill and sharp...
fear was in their song, and apprehension of pain, and joy to be
snatched quickly now at that instant” (pg. 53).

And as they are becoming different: “the birds sang in the hot sunshine, each
alone”, and “the birds sang passionate songs addressed to one ear only”. At the end
of the novel, when the characters are old, “there was no sound but the cry of a bird
seeking some lonelier tree”

The interior of the house changes from “dim and unsubstantial” to a
progressive enlightenment till the moment in which the sun “sharpened the edges of
tables and chairs” and then again suffers a process back to darkness when the chairs
melt “their brown masses into one huge obscurity”. All these changes recall the
theme of the novel, how the characters become different progressively and how, at
the end, Bernard is uncertain about individual personalities:

“Who am I? I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know” (pg. 205)

This is symbolised by the darkness that progressively falls upon the scene:

“As if there were waves of darkness in the air, darkness moved on, covering houses, hills, trees, as waves of water wash round the sides of some sunken ship. Darkness washed down streets, eddying round single figures, engulfing them ...”
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