
VINTAGE WOOLF
the
WAVES

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The Waves

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About the Book

The Waves is an astonishingly beautiful and poetic novel. It begins with six children playing in a garden by the sea and follows their lives as they grow up and experience friendship, love and grief at the death of their beloved friend Percival. Regarded by many as her greatest work, *The Waves* is also seen as Virginia Woolf's response to the loss of her brother Thoby, who died when he was twenty-six.

The Vintage Classics Virginia Woolf series has been curated by Jeanette Winterson, and the texts used are based on the original Hogarth Press editions published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf.

About the Author

Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, first editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*. After his death in 1904 Virginia and her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, moved to Bloomsbury and became the centre of 'The Bloomsbury Group'. This informal collective of artists and writers, which included Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry, exerted a powerful influence over early twentieth-century British culture.

In 1912 Virginia married Leonard Woolf, a writer and social reformer. Three years later, her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was published, followed by *Night and Day* (1919) and *Jacob's Room* (1922). These first novels show the development of Virginia Woolf's distinctive and innovative narrative style. It was during this time that she and Leonard Woolf founded The Hogarth Press with the publication of the co-authored *Two Stories* in 1917, hand-printed in the dining room of their house in Surrey.

Between 1925 and 1931 Virginia Woolf produced what are now regarded as her finest masterpieces, from *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) to the poetic and highly experimental novel *The Waves* (1931). She also maintained an astonishing output of literary criticism, short fiction, journalism and biography, including the playfully subversive *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a passionate feminist essay. This intense creative productivity was often matched by periods of mental illness, from which she had suffered since her mother's death in 1895. On 28 March 1941, a few months before the

publication of her final novel, *Between the Acts,* Virginia Woolf committed suicide.

Also by Virginia Woolf

Novels

The Voyage Out
Night and Day
Jacob's Room
Mrs Dalloway
To the Lighthouse
Orlando
The Years
Between the Acts

Shorter Fiction

The Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction

Non-Fiction and Other Works

Flush
Roger Fry
A Room of One's Own and *Three Guineas*
The Common Reader Vols 1 and 2
Selected Diaries (edited by Anne Olivier Bell)
Selected Letters (edited by Joanne Trautmann Banks)

VIRGINIA WOOLF

The Waves

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
Jeanette Winterson and
Gillian Beer

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

The text of this edition of *The Waves* is based on that of the original Hogarth Press edition, published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf on 8th October 1931.

Jeanette Winterson on *The Waves*

> ‘I burn, I shiver,’ said Jinny. ‘out of this sun, into this shadow.’

Sun and moon are usually paired together, but sun and shadow are the light-changes that affect our lives.

Virginia Woolf lived from intensity to intensity. There were lit-up days when she could see everything, days where nothing was hidden, where secrets became only a code that needed the light to fall on them to be read. There were other days when the shadows not only obscured the world but became a monstrous kingdom of their own. Woolf’s struggle with the shadow, her pleasure in the light, and her growing understanding of the strange balance of both, was a personal epic of the Gilgamesh kind, of the Job kind. The close details can be found in her letters and diaries. They are among the best letters and diaries written in English, but even so, frank as they are, revealing as they are, they cannot tell us what we need to know. Only her fiction can do that.

What do we need to know?

About sun. About shadow.

> *The sun fell in sharp wedges inside the room. Whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical existence. A plate was like a white lake. A knife looked like a dagger of ice. Suddenly tumblers revealed themselves upheld by streaks of light. Tables*

> *and chairs rose to the surface as if they had been sunk under water...The veins of the glaze of the china, the grain of wood, the fibres of the matting became more and more finely engraved. Everything was without shadow*.

This noonday madness, where everything assumes a 'fanatical existence', where there is no shadow, is the briefest point of the day. Where there is sun there must be shadow, but the king-moment, at the high pause of the wheel, the sun turns everything to light. It is brief but it is true, or, if you prefer, it is true but it is brief. We all know this moment, in reality and as symbol. For a very short time we know it in our own bodies. In *The Waves*, Percival represents this perfect risen sun. 'That is Percival, lounging on the cushions, monolithic, in giant repose. No, it is only one of his satellites, imitating his monolithic, his giant repose...' Percival's arrogance, his dynamic laziness, the simple fact of his presence, alters the landscape. Neville, the gay man, cannot bear to look at Percival at their farewell dinner before he goes to India. Percival is too bright. He is the hero, the sun-god.

What happens to this hero? This sun-god?

> 'He is dead,' said Neville. 'He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown. The sails of the world have swung round and caught me on the head. All is over. The lights of the world have gone out.'

Reading this, I think of Siegfried, the hero who Percival most resembles. Siegfried, the only man in the world strong enough to row against the current of the Rhine, is stabbed in the back, drunk, at a hunting party. Bernard, remembering Percival, longs to hear his 'wild carol', the sound of a hunting song when the windows are thrown open. He remembers him as strong, unvanquished, but like

Siegfried, fate, not fight kills Percival. He does not die in battle, he dies in the dirt thrown from a flea-bitten mare. The sun is plunged out.

If the values that Percival represents are admirable – and he is never criticised in the novel – he is, like Siegfried, already an anachronism. The Empire Percival chooses to serve is at the end of its life. Valhalla, the home for heroes that is the proper resting place for Siegfried, is burning down before he gets there, destroyed not so much by Wotan's bad management as an inevitability in which they both collude. Time changes everything, even heroes, even gods.

> Time, which is a sunny pasture covered with a dancing light, time which is widespread as a field at midday, becomes pendant. Time tapers to a point. As a drop falls from a glass heavy with some sediment, time falls. These are the true cycles, these are the true events.

Trapped by their own certainties in worlds that are dying, Percival and Siegfried can only die. Time falls, the wheel turns.

For the others, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, Louis, Neville and Bernard, the shadow is closer than the sun. 'But without Percival there is no solidity. We are silhouettes…' None of the six enjoy Percival's magnificent confidence, but with the exception of Rhoda, all survive. *The Waves* is a book of constant re-orientation – to a changing world, to a changing self. Without this re-orientation, where the compass must be checked and new directions given, it is not possible to survive. Woolf keenly felt the unknown world opening around her. She knew that after the First World War a way of life had gone forever. The certainties had gone forever. The shelters of money, class, Church, tradition, could no longer be relied upon to protect. The long summer days of

childhood had vanished. Narrative itself was no longer a steady progress of character and action and resolution. The writing swerved and faltered, had to begin again. Virginia Woolf was one of the first to begin again. All her books are an effort towards a new chart. The chart is not always easy to read and sometimes there is little light to read it by. This is the condition of our lives. We are not easy to read and we read others badly, either blinded by sun or mislead by shadows. Since Einstein, science has warned us that even our simple certainties are uncertain. The difficulty of knowing is that we are both the instrument of knowing and what we seek to know.

In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf tried to walk on water. She did this so that her readers could do it too. She wanted to write about the vast unknown uncertain continent that is the world and us in it. This continent is not a land mass. It is not solid, it is not stable. It shifts, it storms, it drowns, it is both the simple surface of things and their depths. At noon it is calm and clear. When the shadows fall, even shallow water menaces. How to write this?

Her method was not the method of the nineteenth century, where a boat could be put out, and a course decided, and everyone on board securely taken to the Captain's destination. She wanted something riskier, more intimate, but she still needed to keep control. She chose to walk. She put language under the soles of her feet and she walked. She watched the way the sun affected the water and she walked. All the time she walked she wrote. It is a delicate exposed method. As readers we sometimes long for something hard and firm and unyielding, a Percival narrative, a hero text, that would dash through the water like a powerboat, controlling the waves. Which of us can say that our lives are like that – definite, purposed, fully controlled? Which of us can say that our emotions are solid things we can hold in our hands?

To try and tell the truth about life is to admit that truth is not found in any one place, but swarms plankton-like in any scoop of water we draw up. The sense is in the pattern and the pattern is always changing. The pattern looks different in different lights. We try to make an order but our order is always provisional and the trick is to know that and not get caught in the hero-certainties of too much sun.

There is a great sense of loss in *The Waves*, for those certainties, that sun. It is a sense of loss that is not nostalgia. Loss is pain but pain can be a navigational aid. *The Waves* steers us out into the water into the shadows. We have to go because soon only the desert will be left behind.

Jeanette Winterson
January, 2000

Gillian Beer on *The Waves*

When in 1926 Virginia Woolf first glimpsed the book that became *The Waves* it was to be about ‘the thing that exists when we aren’t there’ (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, Vol. 3 (1925–1930), p. 114). That was a thought that had already entered *To the Lighthouse* published in 1927: ‘Think of a table when you’re not there’, Andrew tells the painter Lily, in an attempt to explain his father’ s philosophy. What survives, in absence? – do tables, houses, people, friends, the dead? In *To the Lighthouse* the death of Mrs Ramsay gives poignant intensity to the question as she comes back in memory, both there and not there. In its first inklings, as Woolf finished writing *To the Lighthouse, The Waves* was imagined as the story of a single woman, ‘a mind thinking’, but as the work grew it burgeoned out as a group of friends who meet from time to time across a life-time. The work muses on presence and absence and on the massing of experience, shared and isolated. Are our friends there when we are not? Are they our continuity? Do they ensure our being? Near the end of the book the writer, Bernard, muses on identity:

> And now I ask, ‘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. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead; we are divided; we are not here. Yet 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 make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome.

How we merge and separate and merge again becomes the rhythm of the book. Its presence is expressed through the hidden voices of the individual friends, sustained together in the reader’s mind.

In silent reading, sounds are at once heard and unheard. As we read fiction, its people are both present and absent. Woolf explores how deeply these paradoxes correspond to the reality of extended life, in which friends matter across time but are only intermittently present in consciousness, in which our bodies change through youth to age and yet seem constant. From near the start of Woolf’s imagining of it, the book was to be peopled by sounds and voices: ‘voices of cock & nightingale; & then all the children at a long table’. She continued:

> The unreal world must be round all this – the phantom waves…Could one not get the waves to be heard all through. Or the farmyard noises? Some odd irrelevant noises. (*Diary*, 3, (1925–1930), p. 236).

There must be, she thought, ‘the beautiful single moth’ and ‘a flower growing’. Moth and flower and farmyard noises drop away, or appear only momentarily in the finished work. But the desire for ‘farmyard noises’ and ‘odd, irrelevant noises’ is revealing. The idea brings to the surface a vein of satire on human utterance, a longing to reach down past it to primal sounds, that haunts the completed (and exhaustively verbal) work. Grunts, purrs, footsteps, hoofs, street sounds, ‘the voices of cock and nightingale’, the little language that lovers use, the poker rattling cinders, the gardeners sweeping, and the founding

sounds of pain form the ground of the book's harmonies, its cacophonies.

> Here again there should be music. Not that wild hunting-song, Percival's music; but a painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like, pealing song to replace these flagging foolish, transcripts.

Bernard, the phrase-maker, seeks to escape from phrases to

> a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they come into the room and find their mother sewing and pick up some scrap of bright wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz. I need a howl, a cry.

Woolf knows herself as phrase maker too as she works on the book, though she allies the activity with waves rather than fragments:

> I say to myself instinctively 'Whats the phrase for that?' & try to make more & more vivid the roughness of the air current & the tremor of the rooks wings <deep breasting it> slicing-as if the air were full of ridges & ripples & roughnesses; they rise & sink, up & down, as if the exercise <pleased them> rubbed & braced them like swimmers in rough water. (*Diary*, 3, (1925–1930), p. 191).

Waves sound throughout Virginia Woolf's writing, sometimes evoking a past fulfilled, as in her early novel *Night and Day* (1919): 'Once more Katherine felt the serene air all around her, and seemed far off to hear the solemn beating of the sea upon the shore. But she knew that she must join the present on to this past.' In *To the Lighthouse* waves thud like logs on the shore of the holiday

island, marking the verge of the human and human meaning. In her Diary in the years leading up to the writing of *The Waves* the wave sometimes means the intensification of life: ‘I note the strength & vividness of feelings which suddenly break & foam away.’ At other times the wave is an intrusive energy, annihilating identity. On the last day of writing *To the Lighthouse* (15 September 1926) Woolf observed her own depression with a mixture of self-immersion and caustic distance:

> Woke up perhaps at 3. Oh its beginning its coming – the horror – physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart – tossing me up. I’m unhappy unhappy! Down – God, I wish I were dead. Pause. But why am I feeling like this? Let me watch the wave rise. I watch. Vanessa. Children. Failure. Yes; I detect that. Failure failure. (The wave rises.) Oh they laughed at my taste in green paint! Wave crashes. I wish I were dead.

Green paint and failure, her sister and childlessness, overwhelm her as she yet stands watching, seeking a language that will fulfil and resist the wave: ‘I brace myself to shove to throw to batter down. I begin to march blindly forward.’ (That fierce language of combat will enter Bernard’s vocabulary in *The Waves*.) In this diary passage, morning comes: ‘I feel the wave beginning & watch the light whitening & wonder how, this time, breakfast and daylight will overcome it.’

The mercy of routine and return is fundamental to the rhythm of *The Waves*. The work shows also that horror springs out of the humdrum, quite as much as from the exotic. Often it displays that movement as comedy. The constrained passion of Neville, the gay man, declares itself as tidiness even while he longs vehemently for liberty:

> 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.

Louis thinks:

> To be loved by Susan would be to be impaled by a bird's sharp beak, to be nailed to a barnyard door. Yet there are moments when I could wish to be speared by a beak, to be nailed to a barnyard door, positively, once and for all.

Things will not keep their habitual scale; the strain produces disquiet and the stirrings of absurdity: Bernard, thinking great thoughts finds his nose in the way, Rhoda hesitating at the door, feels the tiger leap. The passionate declarative life within finds no answering medium in action: the imbalances make the reader smile and wince.

Humdrum life is the medium of experience at its most profound. Its quality of repetition and recurrence aligns it with the wave-motion that is the nature of the universe, as James Jeans had recently affirmed in *The Universe Around Us*, which Woolf read as she wrote *The Waves*. For Jinny, the urbanite, 'Lifts rise and fall; trains stop, trains start as regularly as the waves of the sea'. For Susan, the country-dweller, recurrence is expressed as weekdays and seasons:

> Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday; the horses going up to the fields, and the horses returning; the rooks rising and falling, and catching the elm-trees in their net, whether it is April, whether it is November.

The turn of night and day, the procession of the week, holds experience within bounds and allays that other knowledge that swells through consciousness: of time irreversible, self without limits, age coming on. But the humdrum also wastes experience:

> This is human life: this is the infinitely precious stuff issued in a narrow roll to us now, & then withdrawn for ever; and we spend it thus.
> (*Diary*, 3, (1925–1930), p. 95).

The Waves releases the intensity of response always lying at a level just beneath utterance. The hidden voices of six people moving through childhood to late life are the medium of the reader's discovery in this book. What is that discovery? – Something permeable, something intimate, closer to our own silent experience than fiction usually permits. And something that seeks through language to reach the habitual states of being where language hardly counts, as Bernard, the professional writer among the characters, at last perceives: 'Blue, red-even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through.'

Seeking ways out of language sounds like a self-annihilating project for a novelist, but in the event Woolf uses sturdy description of everyday happening, oddly disproportioned, rather than an abstract distance from experience. Everything that happens in *The Waves* happens through someone. Their senses are the medium as much as their opinions.

> 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 every eye brings its own contribution.

Event is retrieved through each particular consciousness, and each consciousness is also part of a loose grouping of friends who we meet only in the periods where they first knew each other or on the formal separate occasions when they gather in adulthood: they are present in infancy, at school, in youth and young adulthood (at university for the men but not the women), at a restaurant to say farewell to Percival, in their reactions to Percival's death far away in India, in middle age for a rare expedition, to Hampton Court. And last, implicit but absent in Bernard's long evening alone in a restaurant in age, brooding on the others and on his own being. The effect is curious: many readers who have difficulty telling the characters apart while they are reading find that in retrospect the six people spring vividly to separate life. They are held in the memory like people one has known, in recollected scenes, in momentary intimacies, in fixed tableaux.

Three women and three men – Jinny, Rhoda, Susan, Bernard, Louis, Neville – are living recognisably middle-class lives mainly in 1930s London. Louis, for example, is the businessman and also the poet of mean and battered images who draws on the language and dilemmas of T.S. Eliot (who was born in St Louis): Louis is the outsider, the man from a colony who is also the future of language and of commerce: 'his words issue pressed, condensed, enduring'.

> I have read my poet in an eating-house, and, stirring my coffee, listened to the clerks making bets at the little tables, watched the women hesitating at the counter. I said that nothing should be irrelevant, like a piece of brown paper dropped casually on the floor.

But all the characters are also wave-clusters of experience mentally traversing time and space, back to ancient Egypt, across the world to India. India is the

downfall of the seventh figure of the book, a figure both dull and magical: Percival, whose consciousness we never enter, who is worshipped but aloof, unaware. Percival's death in a fall from his horse makes him a figure of the imperial past, trying to bring order to a world whose nature and value is to be unruly. Rhoda, the most vehement and the most isolated of them all, has died as well, but when we never know. She kills herself outside narrative time and re-appears in the episode at Hampton Court.

As she wrote, Woolf read Jeans on 'time bending backwards' in quantum physics and was fascinated by his ideas. She holds the book together with italicised interludes that draw time and space together as arc and as repetition, describing the passage of the day from dawn to night, lives from the nursery to old age. 'I am convinced' she wrote in the diary in 1929 'that I am right to seek for a station whence I can set my people against time and the sea.' This suggests perspective ('set against') but also resistance: 'against time and the sea'. Moreover, 'against' is an arrested image; that arrest has dissolved into wave-motion by the time the book was finished. Beneath the onward passages of day and life is a welter of being that has no set trajectory and so is not subject to time. The form of the waves moves on; the molecules that compose them simply rise and fall.

> *The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and fell; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their fall. The waves were steeped deep-blue save for a pattern of diamond-pointed light on their backs which rippled as the backs of great horses ripple with muscles as they move. The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping*.

What appears as description of the sea half way through the world becomes Bernard's resistance to death, heroic and absurd in its high language, its low setting. The 'stretch of pavement' undermines the gallant self-projection as rider:

> And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back...What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death.

Gillian Beer
January, 2000

The Waves

THE SUN HAD not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.

As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously. Gradually the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk and left the glass green. Behind it, too, the sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. Then she raised her lamp higher and the air seemed to become fibrous and to tear away from the green surface flickering and flaming in red and yellow fibres like the smoky fire that roars from a bonfire. Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire were fused into one haze, one incandescence which lifted the weight of the woollen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue. The surface of the sea slowly became transparent and lay rippling and sparkling until the dark stripes were almost rubbed out. Slowly the arm that held the lamp raised it higher and then higher until a broad

flame became visible; an arc of fire burnt on the rim of the horizon, and all round it the sea blazed gold.

The light struck upon the trees in the garden, making one leaf transparent and then another. One bird chirped high up; there was a pause; another chirped lower down. The sun sharpened the walls of the house, and rested like the tip of a fan upon a white blind and made a blue finger-print of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom window. The blind stirred slightly, but all within was dim and unsubstantial. The birds sang their blank melody outside.

"I SEE a ring," said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light."

"I see a slab of pale yellow," said Susan, "spreading away until it meets a purple stripe."

"I hear a sound," said Rhoda, "cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down."

"I see a globe," said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill."

"I see a crimson tassel," said Jinny, "twisted with gold threads."

"I hear something stamping," said Louis. "A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps."

"Look at the spider's web on the corner of the balcony," said Bernard. "It has beads of water on it, drops of white light."

"The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears," said Susan.

"A shadow falls on the path," said Louis, "like an elbow bent."

"Islands of light are swimming on the grass," said Rhoda. "They have fallen through the trees."