

# **The Waves Study Guide**

## **The Waves by Virginia Woolf**

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Waves Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Section 1.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Section 2.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Section 3.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Section 4.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Section 5.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Section 6.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Section 7.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Section 8.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Section 9.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>



# Plot Summary

The Waves follows the lives of six friends, Jinny, Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan and Rhoda. Each of the nine sections begins with a description of the sea, its surroundings and the position of the sun in the sky. The description goes from very early morning in the first section, when the characters are children, to the end of the day when the characters are moving toward the end of their lives. With the use of monologue, stream of consciousness and structure, the book shows the friends as one entity, detailing how the individual struggles when they try to move away on their own.

The first section describes the sun rising and the day gradually coming to life. The story begins with a short monologue from each character that relates to an early morning scene. The section then explores the character's personalities during childhood and the time they spend together at day school.

The second section describes the sun still rising, but the waves are getting rougher. The story begins by describing the girls and boys leaving for separate boarding schools. As the section continues, the character's monologues detail their reactions to being at boarding school and their time back at home during the holidays. This section introduces the male character, Percival. Percival does not have a monologue, but he plays an important role in all the character lives. By the end of the section, the characters divide even further. Susan goes back home, Neville and Bernard go to university, Rhoda and Jinny go to London and Louis goes straight into a job.

At the beginning of the third section, the sun has risen and the birds are in full song. The characters are now trying to refine their personalities, whilst still struggling to come to terms with themselves. Bernard and Neville attend the same college. Bernard is trying to develop himself as a man of words, constantly observing others, while Neville studies literature and dreams about Percival. Louis is living in London and working as a clerk. Rhoda and Jinny socialize in the same circles in London. However, while Jinny loves the social scene, Rhoda dislikes it immensely and withdraws further into herself. Susan moves back home to the countryside, which she finds more to her preference than the places she had lived during her education.

The fourth section begins by describing the sun at its brightest. Bernard's monologue begins the section and he immediately announces his wedding engagement. Bernard is on his way to London to meet the others for a farewell dinner in honor of Percival moving away to India. It is the first time since childhood that they have met as one group and their monologues display their nervousness. Percival is the last character to get to the restaurant and upon his arrival, all the characters relax.

The beginning of the fifth section describes the sun at its full height and the waves breaking strongly onto the shore. It is a prelude to the first real tragedy of the story, the death of Percival. This section looks at how Neville, Bernard and Rhoda deal with his death. Neville is distraught. Bernard is upset but Percival's death coincides with the birth of his first child. To Rhoda, the death confirms the emptiness of her life.



The sixth section begins with sun starting to go down and the waves moving out, crashing against rocks and flowing into caves. This section looks at the six characters as mature adults who are moving along their chosen paths. Susan and Bernard seem the most content of the characters and are both married with children. The homosexual Neville and the sociable Jinny are closest to achieving their aims, both living life to the full. Louis is finding success at work, whilst embarking on an affair with the unhappy Rhoda. The death of Percival hangs over all of them, but particularly Neville, who compares all his conquests to his first love.

The seventh section starts with the sun lower in the sky and the waves falling back. Each character has now reached middle age and their monologues reflect back on their lives. Bernard reflects on a disappointing life and his recent break from his wife while wandering around Rome. Susan is content in the countryside, but remembers the past with longing. Jinny reflects on middle age in terms of her own looks and tries to convince herself that young men are still attracted to her. Louis continues to succeed at work, but strives to express his more soulful side. Rhoda's reflections take place in Spain. She has broken up with Louis, but she is no happier for doing so and contemplates suicide while standing on a cliff edge. Neville is a writer, but like Jinny feels the effects of middle age on his appearance.

The eighth section describes the sun sinking and birds of prey, such as an owl, replace the chirping birds from earlier descriptions. The six friends again meet for dinner at Hampton Court. Like the previous meeting, it begins uneasily before developing into something more comfortable. At the end of their meal, the characters put previous rifts to one side and go for a walk through Hampton Park. Most notably Louis and Rhoda discuss their break up.

In the ninth section, the sun has goes down and the day finishes. This part includes an only monologue by Bernard. Throughout the novel, he has always been the best storyteller and he now explains his life story to an unknown dinner companion. Bernard describes the others and his own life with a fighting spirit. At the end, he decides to leaves his phrase book behind in the restaurant in an attempt to return to the simple phrasing of his childhood.



# Section 1

## Section 1 Summary

The short piece of prose at the beginning describes a day yet to begin. The sun has not risen but it is getting lighter and the birds are beginning to sing. From this scene, we can presume it is around 6 am.

The story begins by introducing each character one by one, with a line of monologue. As the short monologues continue, we understand from such lines as '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,' that each character is muttering their observations of an early morning. The characters are still young and their monologues are simple and innocent observations.

It soon becomes apparent that the children are playing outside in the grounds of their day school. Louis's is the first monologue we follow in detail and he refers dreamily to a kiss he shared with Jinny. The character of Jinny continues the theme and her monologue shows that she was the instigator of the kiss. Susan noticed the kiss and her reaction is one of anger and confusion. Bernard notices Susan's unhappy and follows her as she runs away with the intention of comforting her. Rhoda is alone picking flowers. Neville thoughts follow Rhoda's dreamy monologue. His tone is neurotic and he refers to an obsession for order. Louis continues this reflective tone. Now in the classroom with the others, he talks about his insecurities of having an Australian accent and living in England. He hints at imitating the others to become more English.

The children are learning grammar from their teacher, Miss Hudson, and they all show a grasp for language. However, they are less comfortable with mathematics. This is particularly the case with Rhoda who is too fearful even to attempt the sums. The setting then moves to a walk in the countryside with their other teacher, Miss Curry. All the children go apart from Neville as he is thought too sickly to go on such jaunts. The other important adult in this section is Mrs. Constable. The children all seem to be in awe of her, so from this we can presume she is the head teacher. By the end of the section, the children are drinking milk and Mrs. Constable calls Rhoda to say her aunt is here to take her home.

## Section 1 Analysis

At the very beginning, Woolf describes the birds as singing their "blank melody outside." This symbolizes the birth of a new day where no one can quite guess what the future holds. Furthermore, Woolf points to a day that is potentially full of promise and hope, symbolized by an unnamed woman holding a lamp up to the sea, the color gold reflecting from the waters surface. This all suggests that the characters have a chance to prosper, but everything depends on the paths they choose to take.



From this opening paragraph of a world waking up, we can guess that the characters are waking up too. Each character has a short line of monologue that points to something that is happening in the nature of the morning. This works in three ways. Firstly, it characterizes them as young children, excited and in awe of the world around them. Secondly, with the individuality of each statement, Woolf is immediately introducing their personalities. For instance, while Louis talks of dark, insecure feelings, such as a beast trampling towards him, Jinny thinks about golden tassels. Thirdly, their interlinking thoughts foreshadow how closely the six character's lives will intertwine.

The remainder of the first section cements their characters. The way the story unfolds later on shows how events in your childhood can affect the rest of your life. The big event in this section is of course Louis and Jinny kissing. Susan's adverse reaction is not exactly jealousy, but more fear of the unknown and what the kiss means to them as friends. Her distrust of Jinny is obvious and Jinny emphasizes Susan's fears by showing far more appreciation to the sensation of the kiss than of Louis. Louis articulates the moment best with the simple line "All is shattered". The spell of their childhood innocence is now broken and Susan's later observation of two adults kissing, indicates they are about to enter a new world that perhaps they are not quite ready for.

The other important event in this section is the children studying in the classroom. Susan has already cited Bernard as someone with a great turn of phrase, but in fact, all the characters display a genuine love for language, a theme that continues throughout the book. This is particularly the case with the boys who will all try their hand at writing. When the lesson changes to mathematics the excitable monologues finish and instead we move to Rhoda who has no gift for figures and while the others work quietly at their sums she sits at her desk scared and unwilling to face up to her problem. This fear continues throughout her life and eventually leads to her suicide.

Many of the things that happen in this section stay with the characters throughout the rest of the book. Susan never forgets the kiss between Jinny and Louis and her monologues often show her unease of Jinny as a person. Bernard in this section is the only person who notices Susan is upset and arguably, he is the person that keeps the group together throughout the book. Neville is a delicate child and he cannot join the others for walks. This symbolizes the feeling of difference he must feel as a homosexual in early twentieth century Britain. Louis's feeling of inadequacy because he has an Australian accent and a father who is merely a banker from Brisbane, manifests itself here and continues as he tries desperately to prove himself. Louis also states in this section that the only person he is not afraid of is Rhoda and these two characters end up sharing an intimate relationship.



## Section 2

### Section 2 Summary

The introduction to the next section describes the sun higher in the sky and casting its rays across the beach and surrounding houses. The atmosphere has a slightly foreboding feel with the birds chirping but not bursting into song. From this, we can guess it is around 7 am.

The story continues with the boys leaving for boarding school. Bernard's monologue describes more an excitement than nervousness. In fact, he displays a dislike for the ceremony that precedes him leaving his house. Neville also shows his excitement and he has romantic notions of showing off his intellectual ability. Of the three Louis is the most nervous. The girls are also starting afresh at a boarding school as well, but far away from the boys. Their monologues begin with Susan who pines for home. Rhoda's nervousness is more to do with the awkwardness she feels towards life and people in general. Jinny immediately takes to school and her monologue describes the admiration she feels for one of her teacher's dresses.

The boys all enjoy school in their own way. The monologues describe them in chapel and watching cricket. Both Neville and Bernard show a dislike for going to chapel. Neville distrusts religion, while Bernard is just bored. Louis on the other hand loves the ceremony of walking there in pairs and the Englishness of it all in general. Percival enters the story at this point. The boys all admire him and Neville is in love with him. Among the girls, nothing much changes. Susan longs to go to back to her father and the countryside. Rhoda is still indifferent and is suspicious even of enjoying herself. Jinny is thriving at the school and her monologue does not display the same deep feelings as the other two.

All the children go back home during the half term and each character's monologue continue with the same themes. Louis is enamored by the English poets, Bernard is happy about the ceremonies being over and Neville fantasizes about meeting Percival in the holidays, Susan is happy to be home, Jinny discovers her attractiveness to men and Rhoda is becoming increasingly lonely. The section finishes with the monologues from the three boys now 18 and going their separate ways. Louis's monologue describes how he is going straight into the real world to earn money, while Bernard and Neville are following their friend Percival to university. Bernard talks of his love of people and Neville reflects more on things around him. All of them seem excited at what lies ahead.

### Section 2 Analysis

The chapter begins describing the sun rising in the sky. What is interesting is how Woolf describes the light as sharp and the sun's beams as blades. Along with her line,



describing the birds straining for song this foreshadows the events of the character's adolescence. They are all striving to mark themselves out as individuals, but they are forcing the issue rather than letting themselves develop naturally.

At this point in the story, the boys and the girls leave for separate schools and Woolf examines the three male character's lives in a separate segment to the female character's lives. Within these segments the boys thoughts intertwine as do the girls thoughts, but as a whole they have they have been split in half. Bernard articulates this split by saying "This is our first night at school apart from our sisters."

Perhaps because of this split they are becoming more self-aware. This is different from the first section where Woolf often expressed their personalities either through their friends' thoughts or through fears that they did not quite understand. The boys show self-awareness through Bernard's statement that he dislikes ceremony, Louis's that he loves order and Neville that he hates religion. This is in comparison to the girls whose thoughts tend to more emotional. For instance, Susan states that she hates the superficiality of school and is desperate to go back home.

All of these monologues foreshadow how the character lives will turn out later. Susan goes back home to live the rest of her life. By doing this, Susan distances herself from the two other girls and here she shows little affection for either Rhoda or Jinny. Rhoda is certainly not comfortable at the school as she is not comfortable through out the novel, but her life is initially connected with Jinny's and interestingly Woolf symbolizes this by showing both characters enamored by a material object and its color. Rhoda cannot keep her eyes off a teachers purple ring, a color she gives amoral meaning as its reflection passes over her prayer book. In comparison to the guilt this expresses, Jinny describes how a woman's bright dress gives life to her dark face. Both characters eventually move to London and while Jinny embraces the city's social scene, Rhoda shuns it.

One of the most important parts of this section is the introduction of Percival. Neville is the first person to mention him and he does so in the church. Neville by this stage has come to terms with his homosexuality and his distrust of religion, which he puts down as a "menace to his liberty" is further emphasized by how he casually leans over and admires Percival, a man he goes onto love.

Percival is a character admired by everyone. Louis describes him as a leader of men and people like himself as his troops. In fact, though we do not enter Percival's thoughts we can guess the through the unanimous respect given to him by all the characters that he is a person of few pretensions and fears. Neville and Louis in particular want the confidence and ease in which he lives his life. His early death puts Percival on a pedestal for both Louis and Neville and the memory of him as a brave, young man inspire both of them to write. In this section, Louis foreshadows this occurrence by saying that Percival inspires him to write poetry.

Woolf continues to develop the one characteristic that defines each main character. Susan just wants to be at home, Rhoda repeats the line said in the first section about





having no face and Jinny continues her love of life and material items. Unlike her two friends, Jinny is popular among her schoolmates and teachers. These characteristics contribute to all of the characters next decision. For example Louis, though stating he is the schools best scholar, decides not to go to follow Bernard and Neville to university, but to go out in the world alone. This points to a need to prove himself and show the world that he is not just an Australian whose father is a banker from Brisbane.



## Section 3

### Section 3 Summary

The sun has now fully risen and it is mid to early morning. Everything is awake and alive. The section begins with Bernard. He talks of observing people and trying to understand who they are, whilst giving the impression it is himself he is trying to understand. Part of the problem is he is in love and he talks about writing a love letter to a girl. Unfortunately, Bernard is full of self-doubt and he finally has to put the letter aside to write the next morning.

Neville continues on a similar thread and like Bernard, he shows an interest in writing. However, he does not possess the same self-doubt and his monologue describes his surroundings by the riverside with a genuine appreciation of beauty. Towards the end of his monologue, he notices Bernard approaching. Their two monologues both intertwine, showing respect for each other's ability as writers. Neville is more condemning describing Bernard as attempting to be the next Tolstoy or Byron. Bernard wishes the two of them could share a room and write poetry together.

Louis takes up the next monologue. He is eating and reading in a cafe in London and describes himself as a normal English clerk. Despite his job, Louis holds ambitions to be a poet, but unlike the high-minded Neville and Bernard, he seems to relate more to the average man. He still is uneasy about being Australian and as usual, he thinks of what the others in comparison to his own life, and not without jealousy. However, he reflects on Susan's choices with respect.

Susan has moved back to the countryside. In her monologue, she describes taking her dog out for a walk and how glad she is at being back home. Unlike the others, she seems completely at ease with her surroundings and knows exactly where she wants to go in her life, which is to stay in the countryside, get married and have children. She reflects on the lives of Rhoda and Jinny and still she remembers the kiss between Jinny and Louis.

Jinny and Rhoda both attend a party in London. As Jinny walks to the party, she feels the center of attention. She knows she looks good and such confidence immediately brings her male attention when she arrives. On the other hand, Rhoda is fearful of being among so many people and she worries that people will laugh at her. At the end of the monologue, despite being 21, she refers to herself as just a girl.

### Section 3 Analysis

The initial description again prepares the reader for the preceding section. Here the sun is not yet at its full power and Woolf describes it as gilding and touching objects, foreshadowing that the character are becoming more refined. Yet, with her description of the birds fearful singing she is symbolizing that the age they are at, between



adolescence and adulthood, is still thwart with insecurities. The drumming of the waves on the shore is symbolic of the impatience they must feel to pull away from such a period in their life.

Bernard's monologue continues this theme of being in between doubt and striving for change. In this section, he is beginning to doubt his ability as a writer. He thinks he is merely an observer of life, lacking the concentration to sit down and read a book or for that matter even write. This attitude foreshadows the rest his life. He is the only character that understands what it takes to be an artist, but at the same time, he cannot give up his own happiness to achieve it. In this initial monologue, he wants to write a letter to a girl he loves, but he cannot just sit down and write without questioning his motives. This is not laziness as he only to aware that he capable of writing something brilliant off the top of his head, rather he is questioning the sincerity of that brilliance. As Bernard himself claims, the girl will think he is posing as a literary man rather than just being himself.

In comparison, Neville's unquestioning mind and self-confidence is far more disposed to literary thinking. His monologue rarely delves into himself and he is able project the difference he must feel as a homosexual into the unique descriptions of his surroundings. He actually states at one point that his words are insincere, but because of his difference and that he cannot relate to poets such as Byron, whom Bernard very much admires, he is free to cast his own personality on life. Such proclamations only symbolize the increasing distance between the main characters as they strive to move along their own path. The characters often display this distance through fear of what one of their friends maybe capable of in the future. Bernard articulates his fear of Louis's ability by mentioning that though Louis is not at university like himself and Neville, he was always the better scholar and one day he will prove it. He claims Louis will show this through the red ink of his pen. The red ink symbolizes and foreshadowing that Louis can only write in the aftermath of tragedy.

Louis is now working as a clerk and he articulates his difference to Neville and Bernard through his interest in society and the philosophical teachings of Plato, rather than the more individual poetry of Byron. In turn, Louis shows a respect and fear for Susan who is now back in the countryside and unlike the others at ease with her surroundings. Her monologue describes how she is back in a place she loves. Throughout the novel, Susan in fact is one of the few characters beyond any criticism, simply because she is the one character who doe not try to prove herself and rarely doubts her decision not to join the others in the city. Already in this section, she knows she wants to follow in her parent's example, get married, and have children in the place she was brought up.

The most important interaction here occurs between Jinny and Rhoda who are the last two characters going in a similar direction. In this section, they both go to the same party. Jinny describes a love for being around people, a characteristic that defines her for the rest of the story, and a need to continuously feel new sensations earlier hinted at when she kissed Louis. Jinny loves the way the thick carpet feels under her feet and the feeling of her clothes against her skin. Yet, while she continues in the same manner as she walks through the party, describing the thrill of people brushing past her, Rhoda is



her opposite. She avoids the touches Jinny encourages and while Jinny sees nothing, but happiness in people's faces, Rhoda sees nothing but cruelty. At the end, Rhoda pines for her childhood as her last line indicates when she states she is nothing but a girl. In this section, all the relationships begin to crumble as everyone makes their own way. This foreshadows the next chapter, which begins with everyone far apart and distant.



## Section 4

### Section 4 Summary

The Sun is now at it fullest and we can presume the time is between late morning and midday. The atmosphere around the beach is settled and the birds have stopped singing. The section begins with a Bernard monologue. Bernard has just arrived in Euston station in London and as he walks through the station and into the streets, he states that he is getting married. Strangely Bernard does not appear happy by the prospect and thinks he has lived his youth and lost his edge. Towards the end of the monologue, he states his reason of being in London is to meet the others and have a farewell dinner in honor of Percival moving away to India.

Neville has the next monologue. He has arrived at the restaurant early and he now waits impatiently for Percival to arrive. When Louis walk through the door Neville shows disappointment that it not the man he loves. Louis describes seeing Susan and Rhoda coming into the restaurant. He holds Susan with great respect and even hints and a want for more of a friendship with her. In general, though the characters are very negative towards each other and they display uneasiness in each other's company. Rhoda attributes the atmosphere to Neville's misery of having to wait for Percival. Neville also claims that there is no solidarity between them without Percival's presence.

The group's admiration of Percival is apparent the moment he walks through the door. Bernard remarks that he is a hero, while Neville states the oppression has risen from the group. In Percival's presence a quick sequence of good-hearted monologues, resemble the monologues Woolf used at the very beginning when they were still children. As the evening moves on the characters begin to feel more kindly to each other and their thoughts are fair more measured than before. They still think about their weaknesses and strengths, but in a more resigned way.

### Section 4 Analysis

The sun is now at it is fullest. In terms of the characters in the story, it symbolizes the focus they now have in their lives as finally they can move forward to achieve their goals. However, the sun also hits objects and exaggerates their shape. For example, Woolf states the sun makes a plate looks like a lake. In terms of this section, where all the characters meet up in the book for the first time since childhood, it symbolizes the characters have become so unknown to themselves they are finding it difficult to relate to each other.

It is noticeable that most sections usually begin with a Bernard monologue. This suggests it is Bernard holding the group together. As he travels to meet his friends in a restaurant, it is obvious that he needs the security and love of close relationships. He talks of his engagement to be married and shows his appreciation of his friends,



admitting he needs them and attributing to each person what he feels are their great traits. For example, he praises Neville's exactness.

In comparison Neville, though nervous about meeting Percival, is rather more down on his friends. He describes Louis for instance as difficult. Louis is no more positive when he sees Susan and shows fear at her need to capture a man's love and keep it at all costs. This comment foreshadows and adds texture to his later relationship with Rhoda. Louis is interested in all three of the girls at different points of the story, but here he shows he is scared of being held back by Susan. Rhoda's indifference towards everything allows him to be the dominating partner and move unimpeded towards his goal. Susan shows her negativity towards Jinny who she describes as creating an awkward atmosphere when she walks into the room. Rhoda directs her negativity towards Neville. She describes him as responsible for the bad atmosphere. Jinny criticizes the way Percival is dressed and it is typical of her superficial character that she directs her insult at the only character that is too good to put down, and not because of who he is, but how he looks.

As Percival comes towards the group, the atmosphere changes for the better. Like Louis a few sections before, Bernard describes him as a leader of men, whose presence immediately pulls his troops together. With Percival in attendance, the group regresses into a childlike manner thinking in short monologues reminiscent of how Woolf began the book when the characters were mere children. Woolf symbolizes how the group pulls together by interlinking the monologues, each one following from the next like one continuous thought. As the evening continues these monologues are not necessarily more positive than before, but more measured and honest and not dictated by nerves.

This section does not hint at Percival's demise in the next section, but foreshadows the further fracturing of the group through Bernard's announcement of his engagement. Both Rhoda and Louis describe it as their circle now destroyed, but it is questionable whether they would act this way with any of the other main characters and this just emphasizes Bernard's importance to the group. Later on while Neville struggle to get over Percival's death, even using the tragedy to create poems, Bernard copes far better. In this section, Bernard foreshadows the reliance the characters will continue to have on Percival and the danger of such reliance by stating that they are not sheep or slaves and that they have their own destinies to follow.



## Section 5

### Section 5 Summary

The descriptive passage at the beginning of this section shows little change since the description in section 4. The sun is still at its highest and the only difference is that the waves are rougher. The section opens with Neville proclaiming that Percival is dead. He died falling off his horse in India. The rest of the section examines the initial reactions of Neville, Bernard and Rhoda when they receive the telegraph with the news of Percival's death.

Neville has taken it hard and he wishes himself dead. While he is traveling on an omnibus, he scoffs at the public clinging onto the transport rails to prevent themselves from falling. The death coincides with the birth of Bernard's first child. As such, his feelings are mixed. Here he looks more into Percival's character more at any other time, but does not contradict the complete admiration that all the characters hold for him through the story. By the end of his monologue, Bernard decides take his mind off Percival's death by visiting Jinny. Rhoda reflects on Percival as she travels through Oxford Street. She too has taken Percival's death hard, but for her it just reinforces the worthless feeling she has of our self and life. Both Bernard and Rhoda declare that Percival was in love with Susan.

### Section 5 Analysis

In the opening description of this section, Woolf describes the sun burning at its brightest or, as she says, at its most uncompromising. This symbolizes and foreshadows the harsh reality the characters are about to face. The sun's beams show objects for what they are, their shapes and colors now truly defined. Such true definition is tempered by the shadow and darkness laying behind the objects and the waves beating into the shore, both symbolizing that though the characters should be living their life to the full there are still obstacles in their way.

Neville is depressed about Percival's death and goes as far as saying it is the end of his life. When he goes to climb his stairs, he decides not to lift his foot but instead, he refers to people around him, saving their lives by holding on to the stair rail, as the real victims. He refuses to move forward and join their masses. Bernard's monologue starts with him walking down stairs and unlike Neville, he is moving on. Percival's death has upset him, but he has mixed feelings because it coincides with the birth of his first child. Here for the first time he acknowledges his presence in the group as the strongest member. He states that Percival stood in the middle almost conducting their lives and now he is gone it is Bernard's turn. In the end, he decides he should leave the space empty in memory of his dead friend. This marks the point when they can no longer rely upon each other and the strongest will survive. Bernard even goes as far as saying he wants to feel life and instead of rushing to comfort his friend Neville, he catches a taxi to

Jinny's house. He seems to need someone to raise his spirits rather than to dampen them

It is interesting that for the first time Bernard's monologue does not start the section and instead Woolf positions his thoughts between Rhoda and Neville's monologues. This symbolizes his disconnection from these characters, and further highlights his ability to move on. Equally intriguing is that this section only includes monologues from Neville, Bernard and Rhoda. By visiting an absence character like Jinny, Bernard is moving towards the people with more control of their lives, leaving Neville and Rhoda behind to wallow in Percival's death.





## Section 6

### Section 6 Summary

The sun is starting to fall, a breeze is blowing and the weather is getting colder. The birds have stopped singing, but again the waves are the most distinct part of the description as they crash against the rocks and flow into the caves.

The section begins with a monologue from Louis. He is enjoying working in his office and signing papers. As he enjoyed the tradition of private school, Louis loves the English traditions of business. He further shows his contentment while reading poetry in a café among the lowly clerks from his workplace. By the end of the monologue, Louis mentions he is having an affair with Rhoda.

Susan's also appears content in her monologue. She talks of following in her dead mother's footsteps as a housewife in the house she has inherited. Susan now has a baby. Unlike Louis, she does not mention the others apart from at the end when she again speaks a disparaging line about Jinny.

Jinny is still living the fast life. In her monologue, she is becoming aware of age, but more in her acquaintances than in herself. She still is interested in many men and moves constantly from sensation to sensation and she never hints at either marriage or children. Her social life is so busy that, unlike the other characters, she finds no time to mention her close friends.

Neville is the final person to speak in this section. Of all the characters, he is becoming the most aware of old age and death and he is still in love with Percival. Despite this he talks of another boyfriend, but he admits he could easily find another man if he so desires. This suggests that the ghost of Percival hangs over every relationship he enters.

### Section 6 Analysis

Woolf now describes the sun as no longer in the middle of the sky. She uses words such as gluttoned and gorged to emphasize that the day is now winding down. In terms of the characters, this foreshadows the fact they are at the age where they are unlikely to change. The waves now coming right in, crashing into the rocks and flowing into caves, symbolize that the characters are at their peak.

Louis continues this theme while continuously signing his name to a pile of letters. With Louis, a man who likes order, this is not a boring chore, but rather symbolizes the contentment he has found in his life. His name checking of the likes of Plato and Socrates, William Pitt and Sir Robert Peel, suggests he feels his work is contributing to society and keeping it all in its correct order. While eating in a cafe with the lowly clerks he seems to see himself as a leader of men, a lowly man himself, but one who has



found success. Nevertheless, his concentration on the working classes is not through kindness, but rather Louis has a need to make himself feel more important. He still harbors insecurities about being from Australia and his contentment at work hides a great loneliness. Every night he sits alone in his attic and writes, distancing himself from the world. When he talks about the other characters, his statements are matter of fact, giving the impression he no longer knows them. He is having a relationship with Rhoda, but she is no threat to Louis and, like the clerks, she gives him the dominating position he needs.

This theme of self-knowledge and contentment continues with Jinny and Susan. Like Louis, neither of them commented on Percival's death in the previous section and similarly their lives are going well. In fact, all three characters ability to successfully detach themselves from the group in the aftermath of Percival's death means they do not suffer the misery of either Neville or Rhoda. Susan is still in the countryside and like Louis, she has found contentment through order and a life she understands. As she mentions in this monologue she has taken over the mantle of her mother and she speaks of the things happening around her as one entity. For example, she states the steam coming from boiling kettle breathes life into her veins and when she pours the water she states life is pouring through her veins. Susan emphasizes her difficult relationship with Jinny more here than anywhere, hinting Jinny is a bad influence. She claims in the countryside she is far enough away from her negative influence.

In contrast, Jinny lives life by the moment. Her monologue describes her with someone she has just met, but she is still willing to go anywhere with them. She is in fact highly critical of people that live a static life and the only connection that she has with Susan and Louis is that she is happy. Her monologue moves on quickly, from one thing to another, as unlike Susan who categorizes her environment as one incredible sensation, Jinny finds great delight in individual objects. While she walks through a park, she notices the different textures under her feet and the coldness of an iron railing on her palm. However, she foreshadows her later need for friends towards the end of this monologue. When she has sex with a man outside, she describes the moment as a thorn driven deep inside her, suggesting that her socialite life is becoming as routine as the life of Susan or Louis

Neville picks up the theme of a thorn embedded in flesh by continuing his obsession with Percival. He is seeing other people, but Percival hangs over him like a rain cloud. He is so scared about his feelings that in his current relationship he does not like to be left alone, otherwise his thoughts veer towards too often to death. Neville's failure to move on means he is feeling his age more than the others. This final monologue foreshadows the mid-life crisis they will all go through.



## Section 7

### Section 7 Summary

In this section, the characters are entering middle age and each one finds growing older difficult. Bernard, who always looked to construct the perfect sentence, now realizes his time is up and in an effort to rediscover himself goes to Rome for 10 days. Here he reflects on his intellectual ability and how he did not have the potential he once thought. The monologue centers entirely on him, which must have a lot to do with the break up of his marriage. Susan is walking through the country. She is still happy in her surrounding, but for the first time since school, she wonders if she found happiness too early in life. Jinny is living in the center of London and she is a socialite. As a socialite she is becoming aware of the effect age has on her looks and though she claims she still has the attention of men, she needs to apply an increasing amount of make up to make herself feel attractive. For the first time in a while, her monologue refers to the past and her friends. Neville's monologue does not directly mention the aging process, but he seems indifferent to a lot of things and jealous that Louis is still living in an atmosphere that allows him to be creative. He himself feels his creativity has been stifled. Louis talks about his success in business and how he bought a new house in Surrey. Nonetheless, he wants to keep the attic space where he writes his poetry. It is while he reads and writes that he talks of his a destiny as a poet but at the same time, he admits he would have been happier without a destiny, like for example Susan. He also discloses his break up from Rhoda. Rhoda is climbing through Spanish mountains. She talks about how much she hates people and life. She puts responsibility of the break on herself and claims she cannot cope with love and affection.

### Section 7 Analysis

The clouds are now obscuring the sun and the day has moved into the afternoon, much like the characters that have now moved into midlife. In this description, Woolf shows how some things have coped well during the hottest part of the day and other things not so well. For example, most of the bird circle in the sky, but there is also a solitary bird that is perched on a branch. In terms of the characters, this symbolizes how Louis, Susan, Jinny and Bernard, despite problems, still have an element of contentment in their lives, but Neville and Rhoda are broken individuals. This does not mean that Bernard, Jinny, Louis and Susan are completely happy, but there level of unhappiness does not fall to the depths of Rhoda and Neville.

In this section, they all discuss middle age and question what more they could of done with their lives. Bernard repeats the line shave three times, much like how Louis used the word I in the previous section and Susan the word sleep. In Bernard's case, he uses the word negatively as he does not share his two friends love for procedure. In fact, he feels he has become someone he never wanted to become. Nevertheless, he realizes he cannot live like that and he now has divorced his wife. His monologue describes



Bernard in Rome and as he walks through the city his old way with phrases return to him. At one point, he sees someone he knows and he says that he is confident that he will see him for lunch. However, before he can talk to him, he feels that he has to complete an unfinished story. This foreshadows the last section where he finally tells an acquaintance his life story over a meal. With Bernard not beginning the previous two sections, it is like Woolf has brought back the stories narrator and with it the thoughts between the characters are now more cohesive, leading up to the next section where they all get together again.

Susan like Bernard is reflecting on her life and thinks far more about the other characters than she has done for a while. It seems she pines to see them again, though at the same time states she is still content with her life. Jinny is really feeling the age process, but she is as she states marching on. The interesting aspect of her monologue is that she mentions the three boys. She has half hopes that someone she doesn't know will come and refresh her, but really, she is resigned to the fact that her life is no longer moving forward, and such a state makes her pine for people she knows and understands. Neville also talks about the others and he even travels to Jinny's house where he sees a young man at her doorstep and decides to leave it for another time. He gives the impression that at another time he would of approached the man and that he does not indicates that he is coming to terms with himself and with it his own unhappiness. In fact, for the first time he does not mention Percival, but goes on to talk about Louis.

The section finishes with Louis and Rhoda. Both of them are coming to terms with breaking up from each other. Louis uses Rhoda, and for the first time Percival's death, as an inspiration for writing poetry. He has now proved himself to society and feels ready to fulfill his earlier achievement as the best scholar in his old school. His insecurities are still apparent however by the fact that he prefers his attic space that looks down onto the working life of the streets to his new house in Surrey. Rhoda walks through the Spain countryside, coming to terms with the fact that she cannot change. Unfortunately, for Rhoda, her hatred for life has left her an emotional cripple. While she looks down at the sea from a cliff, she contemplates suicide, foreshadowing the actual event later on.

This section is important, as it is the first time since the groups meeting earlier in the restaurant that they all have a monologue. Everything it seems is back in order and the circle, broken after Bernard's engagement, has come back together. Bernard has left his wife, Susan's feelings for her friends have returned, Neville has let go of Percival and Louis and Rhoda have broken up and assumed their position as the outsiders. Everything is prepared for their next and last group meeting in section 8.



## Section 8

### Section 8 Summary

Bernard's monologue begins the section. He is traveling to Hampton court to meet the others in a restaurant. When he arrives, everyone is already there and the monologues that follow all display unease at each other's presence, much like the dinner meeting earlier in honor of Percival. This time there is no Percival to ease the atmosphere and it takes a few drinks and a hearty meal before they relax. At this point, the monologue changes back to Bernard. He notes he feels content and from there is a brief interplay between the characters with short monologues like at the beginning of the book.

After the meal, they decide to go for a walk. Neville notes that there is no Percival, but things between the friends are going along well. Bernard notes that Susan is holding Louis's hand with Jinny walks alongside them. A little later Rhoda and Louis wander off on their own and sort out their differences from their earlier break up. The section finishes with a positive monologue from Bernard, very different from his monologue at the beginning of the section.

### Section 8 Analysis

In the opening of the eighth section, Woolf concentrates less on the sun and more on the waves, which are now taking over the scene and though peppered with light, they are black when they reach the shore. Along with the owl and the hawk, two birds of prey, replacing the birds from the previous introductions, this description is foreshadowing if not death then the thought of death and getting old that preoccupied the characters in section 7.

Bernard's monologue begins the section and as he arrives at their meeting place in Hampton court he sees the others waiting. This further emphasizes his role as a Percival type. At the last meeting, Percival arrived last. However, unlike Percival, Bernard's arrival does not ease the group, but rather as Bernard claims, it adds tension. The characters articulate this tension either by comparing their failures to another character's success or by bringing back negative thoughts that earlier they had put away. Bernard becomes more tongue-tied, Neville comments on Percival's death, Louis talks of the boasting boys a phrase he has used many times earlier in the novel to describe the boys at his school that made him feel small, Jinny becomes aloof and Rhoda fearful, claiming once again she has no face.

Rhoda articulates the group's difficulties in communicating best by claiming the problems they have built up in their lives block their route back to their childhood. However, after the meal, Bernard announces things are back to normal and like previously in Percival's presence in the restaurant the monologues become shorter, jumping from one character to another, reminiscent of their time as children.



Not only does their dialogue become childlike, but their actions as well. All of them go out into the London night for a walk and Louis even states that they have become children again. This extends to the characters rebuilding relationships that were more solid in childhood. Bernard and Neville who have hardly mentioned each other since the early sections walk down the street arm in arm, best friends again and Louis walks in between Jinny and Susan, holding both of them. The kiss that caused a rift between the three of them now is apparently forgotten.

## Section 9

### Section 9 Summary

This section contains only a monologue from Bernard as he tells his life story, over dinner. Interestingly the person he is speaking to is someone he has met only once before. Bernard is now an old man, but he talks of his childhood and the others in vivid detail. As the story moves into adulthood, he claims they suffered because they were no longer one entity. However, Bernard is now more at ease with himself and does not try to be the all-conquering storyteller. As a result, his observations are acute and some things he mentions things about the characters that were actually thought by the characters in their own monologues. Bernard goes into each character deeply and we find more about them here than elsewhere. It soon becomes apparent that Bernard was the glue that held the group together and he witnessed many of important moments. For example, Jinny and Louis's kiss, Neville's love for Percival, Susan's family life and Jinny's social life in the city. He imparts the information about Rhoda committing suicide as just part of life.

### Section 9 Analysis

The description details the sun going down, night moving in and the waves covering the shore. While the hint of death hung over the scene in the previous section, here Woolf symbolizes it as something that has already happened with a song Thrush no longer singing, a worm moving into a black hole and an adders skin hanging from a nail.

Appropriately, the only monologue in this section is from Bernard, summing up all that has happened in the character's lives. It is interesting that, apart from Rhoda, he states all the characters have achieved what they wanted. Bernard is having lunch with an old friend, showing he finally has an audience for his stories. Yet, unlike a younger Bernard, he does not push for the perfect phrase, but scoffs at the very idea. In fact, he returns to the childhood theme of the previous section and states he will tell his story in a simple manner like one reads in a child's picture book.

With this descent back into his childhood, Bernard talks with great perception, a mark surely of his old age. We can compare this to Percival's death when Neville and Louis in particular held him up as something special. An inspiration for their literary endeavors, he died before he could contradict the ideal they had formed of him. Bernard never quite shared that ideal and instead he has found his creative self in old age.

When his friend leaves, Bernard revels in the solitude. He begins to speak of making phrases even simpler and again uses the theme of communicating in the simplistic manner of a child. He explains the group as an entity and how it is difficult to describe each friend individually. From this monologue, it is apparent that the group felt ripped apart and left alone they all suffered their own miseries. At the end, he finally puts down

his book of phrases and proclaims himself tired of such pretensions, suggesting that the way back to happiness is a return to the simple life.





# Characters

## Bernard

Bernard is an observer of people who loves to make phrases and stories, often at the annoyance of friend. His curiosity of people is in evidence from the beginning when he follows Susan. The problem that he has as a character is in evidence when he claims he is not following Susan for any deeper reason than he wants to see her cry. The lack of deeper meaning in his observations and phrases prevent him later on becoming a writer.

Bernard comes from an upper middle class family headed by a strong father figure. This stability from an early age means he is one of the more rounded individuals and emotionally he is very secure. The one dislike he picks up from his time as a child is the traditions of an upper class up bringing and particularly ceremonies. At school, he sits in the chapel waiting impatiently for the service to end so he can tell his stories to all his friends and make up more phrases. However, this hate of traditional ceremony is also one of Bernard's conflicts. He is the first person to get married, first to have children and the first to leave behind all his childhood dreams to become the normal person that ceremonies aim to mold. It is no surprise he later leaves his wife in an attempt catch up with what he feels he has missed.

Bernard's marriage actually disconnects him from his friends and arguably breaks up the entire group. Before his marriage, his monologues open and set the tone for each section, his interest in people and his genuinely extroverted character keeping the friends close. It is only after his marriage that things fall apart and particularly for Neville, who at school and University is Bernard's best friend.

In the end, Bernard cannot become the person to his friends he wants and needs to be, which is the stabling influence that Percival brings. After Percival's death, Bernard chooses not to take over Percival's mantle and for a section, his presence is gone from the story. It is only when he comes back divorced from his wife, that the group comes together again. However, Bernard's dream that he could be the groups new Percival is a fallacy and he himself admits that the friends are one entity and their problems only surface whenever they move away from each other. That Bernard recognizes this shows he is the one character willing to learn about life and by end the only character that seems to have a grasp on what it means.

## Louis

Louis is an outsider. He feels insecure about his Australian background, hating his accent and constantly referencing the fact his father was merely a banker from Brisbane. His insecurity appeals to the girls and both Jinny and Susan show an interest in him. One of the biggest events at the beginning of the book is Jinny kissing Lois,



which Susan witnesses and through the rest of the novel causes her great conflict. Interestingly though it is the other outsider, Rhoda, whom Louis has an affair. This affair does not last, but shows a lot about Louis who as Neville states has a need to dominate.

Louis is the best scholar of the private school all three boys attend. However, instead of joining Neville and Bernard at university he chooses to go straight to work as a lowly clerk. This decision shows Louis as the most complex and enigmatic member of the group. In some ways, it further points to Louis's lack of confidence, but it also shows that he was uncomfortable with his friends and their way of life. In fact, Louis was bullied at school and refers constantly to disliking what he names as the boasting boys. It is only as a clerk, working among people he sees more on his level, that he shows signs of contentment and by starting from this low position, among his less educated contemporaries, Louis can rise to the domineering position he needs to succeed.

His understanding of the lower echelons of society does not extend to him developing relationships with them. When Louis is in the presence of other clerks, he sits by himself and uses his observations to create and become a spokesman for society. Louis writes from his attic, a place that looks down on the world he writes for.

## Neville

Neville begins the novel as a sickly and neurotic child who cannot participate with others in outdoor activities. This can be seen as a stereotypical depiction of homosexuality, but it is also the only time in the book that symbolizes the difference he must of felt as a person and the conflict it would cause him in early 20th century Britain.

As the novel progresses, Neville comes across as the most confident of the boys. However, this reflects more on his upper class up bringing where it seems in many ways his life has already been mapped out. When Neville first goes to boarding school, he displays no nerves and knows exactly what it is all about. His later transition into as a big name poet comes naturally and with little doubt that he will become anything else.

Unfortunately for Neville's character, he cannot deal anything that threatens the order of life. We see this firstly at boarding school where he claims to hate Christianity, a way of life that obviously conflicts with sexual orientation. However, this need for order causes problems for Neville when the man he loves, Percival, dies. Through the rest of the book, Neville has countless other relationships, but the memory of Percival is always in the background. At one point, Neville even admits to having hallucinations of his dead friend.

The combination of Neville's confidence in his identity and his inability to adjust to change means that he lives his life too soon. He is the first of the boys to find success as a writer, but towards the end of the novel, as his feelings towards Percival become less raw, his creative spark diminishes. At this stage, he shows jealousy towards Louis who he thinks has found the creative environment he no longer possesses. In addition,



he knows that Louis has more to say simply because Louis has had to make his life and build up the confidence that was lacking in the beginning.

## Jinny

Jinny is an upper-class woman. Like Neville, she is very confident of her identity and never questions anything she does. While the other characters display a lot of depth in their thoughts, she is unapologetically superficial, moving from one sensation to the other. When she kisses Louis as a child, Jinny does not show any affection towards him as a person, but rather comments on the feeling of the kiss and how it made her feel good.

This theme does not change throughout the novel. Her love of color and clothes and other material items make her popular through out her life This is a popularity that she does not strive for, but seems to expect and one of the occurring motifs in the book is Jinny only having to raise her arm to attract a man. This expectancy to be cherished by everyone leaves her with little time for others in the group. In fact, in the middle part of the novel, her monologues rarely mention the others or any other important person in her life. She thrives in moving from person to person, a characteristic that a reader cannot connect with conflict within herself because she simply does not think that deeply.

As she gets older and realizes that her beauty will fade, her thoughts turn back to the others. However, it is significant she thinks only of the boys and how she can entertain them when they come to her house. In fact, other than losing her beauty, she appears to relish old age. When she spies an old lady with diamond earrings sitting in a pony carriage by her estate, it brings more admiration than pity. Her intention is to continue her wild social life right up to her death.

## Susan

Susan is the strong, mother like character. Early on, she decides that unlike the others, city life is not for her and she prefers a more natural existence in the countryside where she was brought up. In many ways she is the antithesis of Jinny with whom she has a begrudging friendship. As a child, she witnesses Jinny kissing Louis and this frightens her in way she does not understand, but becomes apparent as she relives her parents' lives that it was fear of the unknown. She unlike Jinny is not superficial, but feels life too much to let herself become a major part of it. Her strength is that she realizes this quickly and, unlike Rhoda, goes back to her comfort zone before the world destroys her.

In the country, she is mostly content and quickly makes a family for herself, marrying and bearing children. Her monologues talk of walking outside in the fresh air with life growing around her, which she can selflessly give herself to. Often she talks of how the seasons roll into one, similar to how Woolf presents the group of friends are as one entity, and her later life is merely a recreation of her childhood. Bernard tells us that



Susan admitted that she felt a failure and did not achieve what she could have done, yet it is obvious that more than anyone she made the right choice for herself.

## Rhoda

Rhoda is a genuine loner and constantly seeks her own company. Unfortunately, this loneliness stems from a complete lack of self-confidence and throughout the novel she murmurs the line that she has no face. In other words she feels she is unimportant, a feeling that surfaces even when she is within the group. This feeling never lets up and eventually leads to her suicide.

The big problem Rhoda has is that while her personality needs to have Susan's secure life, it seems she has never experienced this existence. She was brought up by her Aunt and there is never any mention of parents. Such an upbringing has led her to become an emotional cripple and even in intimate relationships, such as the one she develops with Louis, she is afraid to get too close.

## Percival

Every one of the six friends greatly admires Percival and his early death affects everybody. Percival enters the story when the three boys meet him at boarding school. Louis describes him as a leader of men and with few of the pretensions held by the others. This lack of pretension allows him to move smoothly through life. Percival is also in love with Susan.

## Dr. Crane

Dr. Crane is the headmaster at the boy's boarding school. He is an important figure in that he represents different things to each of the three boys. Neville immediately sees him as a hate figure, Louis sees him as the embodiment of Englishness, and Bernard uses him to make up stories.

## Mrs. Constable

Mrs. Constable is the children's first real authority figure and the headmistress of their first school. The group also mentions her when they go out together for dinner.

## Larpent

Bernard mentions Larpent during a ten-day spell in Rome and states they need to have lunch and talk. Woolf hints that this is the person that Bernard tells his life story to in the final monologue over lunch. Bernard says that he knows him vaguely from school and

his anonymity is essential for finally freeing Bernard from the expectations of making the perfect phrase.



## Objects/Places

### Elvedon

Elvedon is the name an estate near to the area where the characters grow up and where Susan eventually goes back to.

### Hampton Court

Hampton Court is an area of Surrey where the characters meet for the last time.

### Rome

After he has left his wife, Bernard travels to Rome for ten days.

### London

Neville, Jinny, Louis and Rhoda reside in London, and all the characters meet at a restaurant in London in section 4.

### India

Percival dies in India when he falls from his horse.

### The Attic

Louis goes to his attic for solitude and to write his poetry.

### Spain

Rhoda travels to the Spanish countryside after her break up from Louis and contemplates suicide when she stands at a cliff edge.

### The Opera

Rhoda visits the opera when she hears of Percival's death.



## **The National Gallery**

Bernard visits the national gallery when he hears of Percival's death.

## **The Eating House**

Louis reads and observes his fellow clerks at the Eating House.

## **The Chapel**

All three boys have to attend chapel while they at boarding school, and the three of them possess different feelings about the venue and what it means.

## **Neville's Room**

Neville has a room where he works, reads and meets his lovers.

## **The Playing Fields**

At school, the boys often talk and watch Percival play cricket at the playing fields.

## **The Garden**

The Garden is where the children are playing at the beginning and where Susan witnesses Jinny kiss Louis.

## **Suffolk**

Susan lives in the Suffolk countryside near Elvedon estate.

## **The Classroom**

In the first section, the children gather in a classroom to learn mathematics and language.

## **Bernard's Phrasebook**

Bernard possesses a book in which he writes his best phrases. At the end, he leaves it behind in the restaurant.



# Themes

## Death

As soon as the characters hit adulthood death becomes a major theme in the novel. Firstly Percival dies. All the characters are close to Percival in their own way and his death brings major changes. The biggest change is that the group begins to drift apart, because not only did his influence have a solidifying effect on their friendships, but also their reactions to the tragedy are all very different. For example, Bernard rushes straight into parenthood and Neville who loves Percival is distraught. Through the rest of the book, Neville cannot stop thinking of Percival.

The difference that Percival's death has on all of them is that from being young and alive they suddenly become aware of their mortality. From this point, the characters go their own way, striving to achieve no doubt before their own inevitable deaths. Neville becomes a famous poet, Bernard and Susan seek happiness in family life and Jinny becomes increasingly sociable. The only character that does not try to strive for more is Rhoda, and for her, Percival's death just confirms the pointlessness of life.

When later on Bernard relays the information of Rhoda's death, we do not see the same depth of feeling as with Percival's passing. In many ways, Woolf prepares us for such a death, not only because of Rhoda's personality, but also as the story goes on death becomes more prevalent. For example, the introduction to section eight replaces the normal birds with birds of prey. In Bernard's final monologue he talks of looking again for the simplicity of his childhood, suggesting he has now lived his life and death no longer worries him.

## Childhood

Though we follow the characters from childhood to their old age, their childhood makes the biggest impression on the characters. Woolf shows how events in childhood can shape person and cement their character for the rest of their life. In fact, few of their characteristics change from the first section. Bernard continues to make phrases, Susan's sensitivity and feeling for life means she has to move to the country to cope with life, Jinny continues looking for new sensations, Rhoda's loneliness apparent from the beginning continues and leads to her suicide, Neville strives for order and Louis is constantly trying to prove himself.

The biggest event from their childhood is Jinny kissing Louis and Susan never forgets that moment. It symbolizes the end of their innocence and, for Susan, Jinny's act ruins simpler times. Susan goes to the countryside to relive and recreate these moments, but more telling is Bernard's monologue at the end of the book. Here he realizes that the only way he can be happy is to go back to the simple expressions of children when he did not have to pretend to be something.





## Friendship and the Struggle of the Individual

The most important theme in the book is the friendship between the characters. Woolf shows how deeply characters can connect with each other when they spend the most important parts of their lives together. She shows this closeness by firstly having the characters share very similar experiences during childhood and adolescence and then secondly by using the technique of interlinking the monologues. As they get older the characters drift apart, but all of them struggle to go alone. They are only their true selves on the rare occasions they meet up and while their meetings always begin slowly, they always manage to come together by the end.

Each character copes with the break up of the group in their own way, but in general all of them very lonely. Even the socialite Jinny moves from person to person and does not seem to have any stable relationships outside the group. Bernard's missing presence after Percival's death shows how important the friendships are. In the restaurant, Susan and Louis accuse Bernard's engagement of breaking the circle. When Bernard's monologue is actually missing the characters become more defined as people, but they suddenly lack soul. For instance, before this moment, the monologues had reflected on life and their friends and now they just talk about themselves and their own success. It is only when Bernard reappears and the circle is complete that they start thinking about each other again.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view switches between the six main characters in a series of monologues. This point of view is not necessarily reliable for two reasons. Firstly, Woolf's use of stream of consciousness tries to capture the fluidity and randomness of a person's thought processes. As such, we rarely get to see how a character reacts to the outside world. In terms of a character like Rhoda, we only hear of how unhappy she is, but despite being a main character, Woolf chooses to say nothing about her job or her home life. Woolf articulates such detail about characters through another's eyes, but this information is usually too abstract or a view formed from their time together in childhood. For instance, Susan bases her opinion of Jinny on her anger at Jinny kissing Louis.

Each character's monologue displays their individual obsessions. For instance, Neville constantly mentions Percival, and Bernard spends his life trying to make the perfect phrase. The absence of one of their obsessions in a monologue often says the most about a character. We can only understand that Neville is getting over Percival's death and moving on with life when he stops mentioning him so much. Similarly, the absence of a person's monologue in a section says a lot about that character's current situation. One reason it works like this is that Woolf presents the characters from the beginning as one entity. Problems only arise as they get older and move away from the circle and then sometimes move back as they look for security. After Percival's death, Woolf shows only the viewpoints of Bernard, Neville and Rhoda. In the same section, Bernard detaches himself from Percival's death as it coincides with the birth of his first child. His absence in the next chapter shows he also disconnects himself from the group.

In fact it is arguable Bernard is the main narrator. For most of the novel, he opens the section and sets the tone. In the final section, he has the only monologue and uses it to describe each character in turn. It is surprising how well his ideas about the other characters compare to their own previous thoughts. More than anything, this shows that the group's point of view is inseparable from the individuals.

## Setting

The novel starts in early 20th century England, but it follows the character's right through their lives so it is difficult to pinpoint an exact period, however Bernard mentions they are subjects of King George whose reign ran from 1911 to 1952. In the beginning of the book, the characters play in the countryside near an estate called Elevedon, which is in Suffolk. Later on, Susan moves back to live there and bring up a family. The countryside she explores during the book is an important element of her character, but all the characters grow up in Suffolk.



When the characters move off to private school, it is not clear which schools they go to. Woolf uses the setting of a chapel at the boy's school to show the boys love or hate of religion or order and the informal setting of playing fields to show how they interact with others. Woolf does not use any particular setting for the girl's schools and the monologues are generally more about emotions. During the school holidays, Woolf places the girls back in the Suffolk countryside, comparing their individual reactions to being back home. During this period, another important setting is the train. This is how they travel in between their homes and school and later the transport the boys use to travel to university. Woolf uses the train to highlight changes in their growth, most apparent when Jinny realizes her attractiveness to men.

It is not clear what University Bernard and Neville go to, but Louis suggests it is either Oxford or Cambridge. The settings at University are a bed-sit in which Bernard struggles to write a letter to a girl and a river by which Neville sits and admires the beauty of life. Neville also talks of dragging Percival out of bed in student accommodation.

The main setting of the book is London. All the characters apart from Susan live there. Louis works in an office and frequents an Eating House where he observes his fellow clerks and reads poetry. He has an attic where he writes and again observes life. It is at this setting his lover Rhoda visits him. Jinny and Rhoda go to a party in London after they have finished school. Jinny loves such social scenes and for her the whole of London is her setting and she loves meeting new people and doing new things. Invariably this happens in the busiest or more expensive parts such as Piccadilly. Rhoda visits Louis, and goes to an opera after hearing of Percival's death, but she increasingly withdraws into herself and the main setting she inhabits is her own mind. Neville spends a lot of time in a room in his house in London. In this room, he writes, receives his guests and lovers and has hallucinations of the dead Percival. The characters, including Percival, meet up for dinner in London. Though it is not clear exactly where they meet, Bernard takes a train to Euston and we can presume they meet nearby. They have the second meeting in Hampton Court in Surrey. After dinner, they go for a walk in what one presumes is Hampton Court Park.

Three foreign places become significant settings. Firstly, Percival dies in India when he falls off his horse. Louis imagines Percival all wrapped up in bandages in a hot Indian hospital. Bernard goes to Rome for 10 days after he leaves his wife and we hear his monologue as he walk through some ruins. Similarly, Rhoda travel to the Spain countryside after she breaks up with Louis. It is somewhere on the border because as she stand on a cliff she has a view of Africa. As she stands on the cliff, she contemplates suicide and later on, Bernard suggests that she did actually kill herself here.

## Language and Meaning

The Waves is a modernist text and explores ways to push forward language and the conveyance of meaning. Woolf attempts this with a style popularized by her and James



Joyce called stream of consciousness. This technique involves writing ideas down quickly to recreate the stream of a character's thought processes. Woolf uses this method for all six characters' monologues and as a result, the language is highly poetic and symbolic. Often passages have to be reread, and thought about before the reader understands them and sometimes it is easy to misinterpret the meaning. One example is when Jinny is running through a park in London and she talks of antlers, wild animals and thorns. On closer inspection, it becomes apparent she has had sex. However, Woolf sets and keeps to the traits of the characters from the very beginning. For example, Jinny and Louis's kiss immediately sets Jinny up as the superficial socialite. This theme continues as she gets older and claims she only has to lift her arm and a man comes running. Towards the end of the book, she only has to mention lifting her arm and we know what she means.

This style and the highly symbolic language it creates, reads like poetry. Like poetry, each line conveys a meaning or sensation and often each sentence jumps from one sensation to the other to convey one idea about the character. For example, Susan shows her hate of school and her love of the countryside by comparing the smell of the fields to the smell of the classroom and the dull sight of the match board to the inspirational and more real sight of working men and women. These comparisons continue for half a page and then continue on to Jinny who again uses poetic language, but in a way that reflects her own character.

## Structure

Woolf splits the novel into nine sections. Before each section, Woolf includes a short descriptive passage of a scene by the sea. This scene goes from early morning in the first section until the end of the day in the final section. Within each section, we hear the character's thoughts through a series of monologues. *The Waves* is an experimental novel and as such, Woolf plays with the structure and uses it to convey meaning as much as the language.

In particular, the structure conveys the group as one entity and the struggles of the individual when it moves away from the group. In the beginning, they are together playing and everyone has a monologue that is usually short and flows into the next one as if their thoughts are linked. When the boys and girls go to different schools, the monologues are split into two groups. As the story moves on the monologues get longer and become more independent from each other. Woolf shows only Neville, Bernard and Rhoda's monologues when Percival dies. This is the first time we do not hear from all the characters, showing how the death of Percival has split the group. In the next section, Bernard is missing and the other characters appear very alone with their thoughts. When Bernard's monologue returns in the next section, the group again is complete and their thoughts reflect this. Woolf also repeats structure to convey similar moods. The obvious example of this is when the characters meet up in the restaurant and revert to the quick observational monologues that start the first section when they are children.



## Quotes

"I need 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" p.253

"But it is only that I have taught my body to do a certain trick. Inwardly I am not taught; I fear, I hate, I love, I envy and despise you, but I never join you happily." p.190

"We were together at school. We shall undoubtedly meet. We shall certainly lunch together. We shall talk. But wait, one moment wait." p.161

"The lamp kindles a fire in the dark pane. A fire burns in the heart of the ivy. I see a lit-up street in the evergreens. I hear traffic in the brush of the wind down the lane, and broken voices, and laughter, and Jinny who cries as the door opens, "Come! Come!" p.147

"I am no longer January, May or any other season, but am all spun to a fine thread round the cradle, wrapping in a cocoon made of my own blood the delicate limbs of my baby." p.146

"Now then is my chance to find out what is of great importance, and I must be careful, and tell no lies. About him my feeling was: he sat there in the centre. Now I go to that spot no longer. The place is empty." p.130

"He is a hero. Oh yes, that is not to be denied, and when he takes his seat by Susan, whom he loves, the occasion is crowned." p.68

"It is hate, such as Susan feels for me because I kissed Louis once in the garden; because equipped as I am, I make her think when I come in, "My hands are red," and hide them. But our hatred is almost indistinguishable from our love" p.76

"Bernard is engaged. Something irrevocable has happened. A circle has been cast on the waters; a chain is imposed. We shall never flow freely again." p.120

"Yet it falls flat. It peters out. I cannot get up steam enough to carry me over the transition. My true self breaks off from my assumed. And if I begin to re-write it, she will feel "Bernard is posing as a literary man; Bernard is thinking of his biographer" p.64

"This is our first night at school, apart from our sisters." p.27

"All is shattered" p.10

# Topics for Discussion

How realistically does Woolf's use of stream of consciousness reflect human thought?

The Waves is known as Woolf's most experimental novel, but is it a case of style over substance?

Why is Percival such an important character in the book?

Does the use of monologue hinder the story and keep the characters static?

Why is The Waves described as a modernist text?

Do you think you get to understand the characters better through the use of monologue and stream of consciousness?

Why are the descriptions at the beginning of each section important to the story?