A vision of human solitude: Rhetoric of isolation and ephemerality in two novels by Virginia Woolf

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A VISION OF HUMAN SOLITUDE: RHETORIC
OF ISOLATION AND EPHEMERALITY IN
TWO NOVELS BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Marsha Lee Schuh

September 2007
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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf created her works during a time of rapid change that produced a sense of doubt and conflict for many writers. Her novels' characters seem unable to connect, living instead in loneliness and separation, their lives narrated in fragments. Woolf often referred to the ephemerality of human life, and her characters seem cognizant of time's swift passage, especially in contrast to the great age of the universe.

Many critics have examined either the theme of isolation or human ephemerality in Woolf's works. Recent criticism, however, has not explored the extent to which the subjects relate to one another. This thesis investigates the interrelationship between these dominant themes through a close reading and rhetorical analysis of two of her most popular novels, To the Lighthouse and The Waves. It also analyzes stylistic devices like stream of consciousness, non-conventional narrators, unique plot structures, and Woolf's unorthodox version of dialogue.

The analysis results indicate that Woolf's treatment of isolation and ephemerality highlights her concern that human connection is imperative because life is so brief. These concepts also may have led to her conclusion that
global conflict is mindless and "there is another way of fighting for freedom without arms; we can fight with the mind" ("Thoughts on Peace" 244). The significance of her treatment of the two themes lies in their connection to one another. Woolf sought to convey the idea that because life is short, it is important and valuable for human beings to connect and to create "eternal" moments and shared revelations that will live on, perhaps even after we are gone.
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who kept me and our home going when life became
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frequently tell about Oliver Wendell Holmes, who began
studying Greek at the age of ninety-five. When someone
asked him why he was doing so at such an “advanced age,” he
replied, “My good man, it’s now or never”! This has been a
wonderful experience and proof to me that “It’s never too
late to be what you might have been.”
To my mother (Muth), Josephine Ericson Binnquist
February 14, 1917-October 3, 2006

Her children rise up and call her blessed.

Proverbs 31:28
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Virginia Woolf crafted her novels during the modernist age, a time of rapid social, cultural, and political changes. In her essay "The Narrow Bridge of Art," she writes about the effect of these changes on writers of her generation: "Nobody indeed can read much modern literature without being aware that some dissatisfaction, some difficulty, is lying in our way" (11). The reason for this difficulty and the fact that writers were "attempting what they cannot achieve" is that it was "an age clearly when we are not fast anchored where we are; things are moving round us; we are moving ourselves" (11) and the old modes and forms could not keep pace.

Indeed, sweeping technological innovations characterized the years before and after World War I. Telephone and wireless telegraph, cinema and gramophone brought people closer together yet deprived them of face to face contact, in a sense isolating them. New modes of transportation such as the bicycle, automobile, and airplane extended the world beyond people's own provincial borders while making it appear infinitely smaller as well.
Scientific and cultural developments like x-rays, Einstein's theory of relativity, Darwin's theory on the origin of species, and Freud's work in psychoanalysis expanded people's thinking but challenged the way they saw themselves in the world and created a sense of conflict and alienation for many. In his study The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918, Stephen Kern examines the effect of these changes that created a "transformation of life and thought" in those years (2). Specifically, he surveys "significant changes in the experience of time and space" caused by the myriad advances in technology and transportation at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (2). Kern reflects, "Individuals behave in distinctive ways when they feel cut off from the flow of time, excessively attached to the past, isolated in the present, without a future, or rushing toward one" (3). Woolf elaborates on this view of the age in which she lived in "The Narrow Bridge of Art":

The mind is full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions. That the age of the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a second; that the capacity of the human mind is nevertheless boundless;
that life is infinitely beautiful yet repulsive; that one’s fellow creatures are adorable but disgusting; that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union seem broken, yet some control must exist—it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have now to create. (12)

Such an “atmosphere of doubt and conflict” with its broken “bonds of union” and the sense that “human life lasts but a second” created in Woolf, as in many other writers of the day, feelings of impermanence and isolation. Some of her contemporaries expressed these feelings in works that dealt with the brevity of human life compared to the great age of the universe. James Joyce does this in *Ulysses* when he describes Bloom’s meditations of the “so-called fixed stars, in reality evermoving from immeasurably remote eons to infinitely remote futures in comparison with which the years, threescore and ten, of allotted human life formed a parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity” (698).

According to Kern, the invention of the telegraph and the subsequent standardization of time seemed to make people more aware of the brevity of human life. He quotes Samuel
Fleming, an early supporter of the use of standard time, who felt that wireless communication created chaos because it mixed up

... day and night as "noon, midnight, sunrise, sunset, are all observed at the same moment," and "Sunday actually commences in the middle of Saturday and lasts until the middle of Monday." A single event may take place in two different months or even in two different years. (qtd. in Kern 12)

This "chaos" caused a debate about "homogeneous versus heterogeneous time" and "public and private time" and led novelists like Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and others to examine "the way individuals create as many different times as there are life styles, reference systems, and social forms" (Kern 15). James Joyce found public time to be "arbitrary and ill-suited to order the diverse temporal experiences of life" and in Ulysses, he turned to "interior monologues and authorial comments about Bloom's unique experience of time and its relation to the infinite expanses of cosmic time" (Kern 17).

Woolf often used similar techniques to express what she considered a more realistic portrayal of the passage of
time than the linear movement of the “realistic” novels she critiqued. For example, in The Waves, Woolf uses the soliloquies of six individuals who appear to be speaking not to each other but to the world in general, and yet the similarities of their comments create a feeling of shared discourse. Julia Briggs says of this technique,

One result of the focus on what is shared, and what is fundamental, is a sense of the monolithic, the statuesque that is potentially at odds with the movement of the novel through time. ... It forms a sustained meditation, and the element of time, which had run so markedly through Woolf’s earlier fiction, is here strangely suspended. (77)

Woolf also used these discourse anomalies in her novels to comment on “our need for and fear of one another” (Briggs 77) and on the brevity of life—human ephemerality.

Others of Woolf’s contemporaries expressed the feelings of fragmentation in stories of human isolation versus the ideal of connection. Woolf, herself, was engaged significantly in these conversations; she was aware that books, like utterances, respond to one another, for she wrote, “Books continue each other, in spite of our
habit of judging them separately” (A Room of One’s Own 86). Concerning this idea of conversation among authors, Alex Zwerdling writes, “Her works were carrying on a kind of dialogue with other voices in her culture” (36). One of her longest-running and most influential dialogues was the one she maintained for almost 30 years with E. M. Forster, of whom she wrote, “I always feel that nobody except perhaps Morgan Forster lays hold of the thing I have done” (Letters III: 188). As Woolf became more experimental in her work, she and Forster often diverged in their ideas of what a novel ought to be, although their themes frequently converged. As novelists and critical reviewers of each other’s work, they nurtured and motivated one another despite their differences.

In his novel Howard’s End, Forster highlights the importance of love and hope. His emphasis is on connection. Margaret Schlegel, the character who increasingly becomes the novel’s central voice, is concerned about her husband-to-be, Mr. Wilcox. She fears he is unable to build “the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion” (158-59) and thus be a whole man, able to love. Without that rainbow bridge, she says, “We are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that
have never joined into a man” (159). Forster writes,

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die. (159)

Conversely, the characters in Woolf’s novels seem unable to connect, living instead in loneliness and separation. Their lives seem to be lived in fragments. For example, in To the Lighthouse, the character James expresses his feeling of isolation in relation to his father, who “looked as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both of their minds—that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things” (203).

These two novelists, writing to each other and producing their works during the same time period and in the same environment, appear to be engaged in an ongoing discourse on the idea of connection versus isolation. Michael J. Hoffman and Ann Ter Haar explore the relationship between E. M. Forster’s Howards End and Virginia Woolf’s The Waves “through significant parallels
in their thematics, narrative voice, and imagery" (46). They conclude that "both writers were trying to establish the narrative aesthetics of their time, and each resisted definitions developed by the other" (47). In a letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf described Forster’s books as "very good . . . though impeded, shriveled, & immature" (Letters IV: 218). Forster, writing about Woolf’s early novels, suggested that her problem would be “to retain her own wonderful new method and form, and yet allow her readers to inhabit each character with Victorian thoroughness” (“Early Novels” 114). He believed that her characters lived, “but not continuously” (113). In an interesting parallel to the words of his own character, Margaret Schlegel, he writes about the difficulty Woolf had in creating “real” characters:

If you work in a storm of atoms and seconds, if your highest joy is ‘life; London; this moment in June’ and your deepest mystery ‘here is one room; there another,’ then how can you construct your human beings so that each shall be not a movable monument but an abiding home, how can you build between them any permanent roads of love and hate?” (114 emphasis mine)
Regarding Woolf’s novel The Waves, Hoffman and Harr suggest, “In a strange response to Forster’s criticism that she did not give ‘life’ to her characters, Woolf denies the characters in The Waves almost all forms of ‘connection’” (53), and the novel “moves not on the flow of plot and story line but on accumulated fragments from the lives of a variety of characters” (51-52). What was Woolf’s purpose or rhetorical intent in telling her stories in this way? This is one of the questions my thesis seeks to address in an analysis focused largely on Woolf’s novels To the Lighthouse (1927) and The Waves (1931).

Roderick P. Hart defines rhetoric in his text Modern Rhetorical Criticism as “the art of using language to help people narrow their choices among specifiable, if not specified, policy options” (3). Hart maintains that rhetoric enlarges perspectives or ideas and moves hearers and readers to change their views. He says it operates “like a kind of intellectual algebra, asking us to equate things we had never before considered equitable” (15). Did Woolf use her novels to “narrow the choices of her readers” and relate these two modernist themes of human isolation and ephemerality to present a specific argument? If so,
what argument was she attempting to develop and how did she do it?

Hundreds of books and articles have examined every aspect of Woolf's work, including the idea of isolation that seems to pervade her novels. J. Oates Smith writes, "The secret lives of other people remain secret; one cannot penetrate into them, and the few flashes of rapport between people are perishable and cannot be trusted" (119). According to Smith, the metaphysics of both Woolf and Henry James suggest that human beings establish identity and experience life only "in terms of other people," and one's "'reality' as an individual is determined by these relationships, which are entirely temporal and, especially in Woolf, undependable" (120). She is, he says, interested in "the mystery of life--the tensions between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, order and chaos, intimacy and isolation" (125 emphasis mine). One person cannot really know another, and this fact makes true connection a deeply desired but illusive goal.

James Naremore addresses this issue similarly in his book The World without a Self and in an article of the same name written in 1972. Woolf's characters "'create' so they might 'embrace','" he says, and her novels imply a
“communion between the author and the world she has envisioned,” which is like “the communion desired by all of Mrs. Woolf’s major characters, who long for an ‘embrace,’ a merging of the self with someone or something outside” (123-24). This embrace, however, is “inevitably associated in her novels with the feeling of death or with the loss of any active life” (132). Naremore points out the apparent paradox between Woolf’s desire for connection and her assertion that the apprehension of reality occurs primarily in solitude. There is a self-preserving human habit she calls “screen-making,” which is “so universal that probably it preserves our sanity. If we had not this device for shutting people off from our sympathies we might perhaps dissolve utterly; separateness would be impossible” (Diary III: 104).

Woolf speaks about this separateness in “The Narrow Bridge of Art” as she predicts the kind of book that would be written in the future. She says this new kind of book would “give not only or mainly people’s relations to each other and their activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude” (“Narrow Bridge” 18-19). Zwerdling comments that her desire to
reveal this "apparent chaos of individual mental life" finds its "most complete embodiment" in _The Waves_, which seems

. . . not only an attempt to record 'the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall' but also a vision of human solitude. It is based on the feeling that even our most intimate relationships are flawed by our limited access to other minds. (10-11)

Martha Nussbaum agrees that Woolf was concerned with the impossibility of truly knowing other individuals and the resultant difficulty to "only connect." She comments on a metaphor used by Lily Briscoe in _To the Lighthouse_. Lily thinks about how little she knows of anyone. As she sits on the floor close to Mrs. Ramsay, she desires intimacy--connection--but:

Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! . . . And yet she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay’s heart. How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the
air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people. (51)

Later, Lily remembers the scene and muses, “Who knows what we are, what we feel: Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, 'This is knowledge'” (171). Nussbaum explains the reference to the beehive: “The hives are sealed. Their sweetness or sharpness lures us—and then all we can do is to hover round the outside, haunting the hive, listening to the murmurs and stirrings that are the signs of vibrant life within” (730-31). The ephemeral life of a worker bee—28 to 35 days in summer—is likened to the transitory life of a human, making the fact that the hives lure and yet remain sealed even more significant. The basic human desire to connect with others during the short span of a lifetime that Woolf addresses is at odds with the universal sense of isolation that pervades her novels. It is caused, Nussbaum says, by our inability to know what others are really thinking.
In more recent criticism, the fiftieth anniversary (2004) edition of Modern Fiction Studies began its fourth special issue on Virginia Woolf with an introduction called "What’s Between Us?" by Laura Doyle. The volume is dedicated to answering this question because, according to Doyle, "Woolf lingered . . . in a tingling, Brownian zone of encounter between self and other; she sought to register the force fields of this 'between' where we meet" (1). Doyle observes that for Woolf, our "histories and encounters . . . hold us captive together and yet they hold us apart" (1-2). Here again, the author addresses Woolf’s theme of isolation versus connection, wondering, "How much is simply a space between us, as between two chairs in a room?" (1). In other words, how well do we really connect?

Several other authors have addressed the idea of tension between connection and isolation in Woolf’s work. Some have even alluded to her concern for the brevity of human life. What has not been explored in recent criticism is the extent to which Woolf's recurrent theme of human isolation relates to another of her dominant themes, human ephemerality. My thesis addresses the interrelationship of these two themes in Woolf’s novels and the way they work rhetorically. I examine the ways in which her novels are
both a reaction to Forster’s eminently quotable aphorism and a response to the new discoveries and rapid innovations of the Modernist period. Woolf’s themes of isolation and ephemerality were central to the stance of modernist literature and seem directly related to the cultural changes swirling around her.

The theme of human isolation and the difficulty of connection is played out in several of Woolf’s novels and other texts. Katharine Hilbery, in the novel *Night and Day*, tries to understand her fiancé and “the conviction that he was thus strange to her filled her with despondency, and illustrated quite beyond doubt the infinite loneliness of human beings” (278). In his dissertation, James Haule also considers *Jacob’s Room* to be remarkably important because it is “a novelist’s first attempt to portray the inner consciousness of her characters and her personal comment on its significance,” and it is through the commentary that “we are allowed a glimpse of the interrelatedness of isolation and the portrayal of the human consciousness” (77-8). These “very authorial interventions that would seem so out of place in the later novels,” he says, “offer a decisive commentary on the isolation that plagues the mind of every character and
is the sum total of Jacob’s ‘life’” (77). As an example, Haule refers to a scene from chapter five of the novel when two omnibuses stop side by side for a few moments. Woolf’s narrative commentary gives brief hints of the interior minds of the characters:

The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other’s faces. Yet few took advantage of it. Each had his own business to think of. Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title, James Spalding or Charles Budgeon, and the passengers going the opposite way could read nothing at all—save “a man with a red moustache,” “a young man in grey smoking a pipe” (Jacob’s Room 64-5 qtd. in Haule 80).

Haule says, “Woolf limits the depiction of [the characters’] consciousnesses to just those impressions that leave them the most isolated and alone” (84), but in the novels that follow Jacob’s Room, “these hints expand with the increasingly thorough use of the stream-of-consciousness convention” (86). Her “conventions,” however, actually extend beyond the use of stream of
consciousness. Woolf created her own individual narrative and discourse techniques as an attempt to “examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” and “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall” (“Modern Fiction” 155).

Through a close reading and rhetorical analysis of Woolf’s two most popular novels, To the Lighthouse and The Waves, this thesis examines the stylistic innovations that she developed, honed throughout her career, and used to “combat” rhetorically the brevity of life that she protested in a diary entry concerning her nephew’s premature death. As an example, The Waves is written in soliloquies that record the thoughts and impressions of personae rather than in conventional dialogue between characters, thus emphasizing a sense of human solitude. Louis experiences this feeling of isolation from childhood. He thinks, “Now they have all gone. . . . I am alone. They have gone into the house for breakfast, and I am left standing by the wall among the flowers” (11). I propose that Woolf used this and other strategies like stream of consciousness or interior monologue, non-conventional narrators, unique plot structures, and an unorthodox version of dialogue to argue the need for human connection
in light of the brevity of human life. This theme seems to run as a thread through her novels, stories, and essays as well as through more personal texts like her diaries and letters.

The dichotomy that Woolf addresses between the human yearning to connect within the short space of a single lifetime and the dilemma of isolation was also symptomatic of her society. Because human ephemerality and isolation are concerns we face in our own fast-paced, fragmented culture, her attention to them warrants further investigation. The focus of the next chapter is Woolf’s treatment of the two themes in To the Lighthouse.
CHAPTER TWO

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE: LIVES TOLD IN BRACKETS

We spend our years as a tale that is told.

Psalms 90:9

To the Lighthouse, according to Mark Hussey’s recent introduction to the novel, was once termed a book in which “Nothing happens, and everything happens” (Introduction lxiii). In other words, its subject is life. The novel, which stands “chronologically and thematically . . . at the center of Virginia Woolf’s works” (xxxiv), draws on “Woolf’s own family history to model the recent history of her culture” (xiv). In an early reference to the novel, Woolf wrote,

This is going to be fairly short: to have father’s character done complete in it; & mother’s; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in—life, death &c. But the centre is father’s character, sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel. . . (Diary III: 18-19)

Among the “usual things” Woolf included in her story were two themes—the brevity of human life and the basic desire
for connection with another person in the short space of a single lifetime—a need at odds with the sense of isolation symptomatic of her society. To the Lighthouse is, in fact, one of her clearest articulations of these two strands, and they interweave through the novel.

The brevity of human existence contrasted to the great age of the universe is clearly one of the novel’s major themes. Stephen Bernstein emphasizes the temporal nature of life in his discussion of the novel’s setting. It is a summer home rather than a “permanent home,” and “the very ephemerality that this house’s nomenclature implies is writ large elsewhere in the novel” (43). Mrs. Ramsay herself laments its impermanence, observing that “things got shabbier and got shabbier summer after summer,” and “at a certain moment . . . the house would become so shabby that something must be done” (Lighthouse 27). Woolf builds this theme of ephemerality in a variety of ways: 1) through her characters’ internal ruminations about the way the moments seem to slip away along with the common human, almost futile, desire to fix them permanently; 2) through her depiction, in the second section, of the impersonal march of time as human lives pass matter-of-factly from existence; 3) through the changes that occur abruptly in
the lives of the characters; and 4) through the rhythm of non-human life beating through the ebb and flow of waves on the shore, the sweeping arc of the beam from the lighthouse, the movement of the stars, and the stirring of "little airs." Even the words that Woolf chooses so carefully to describe each scene and record every dialogue—or monologue—emphasize the fleeting nature of human lives on this little planet in the midst of an immense, seemingly infinite universe that has existed longer than finite minds can comprehend. The theme of ephemerality is pervasive in the novel, and although it would be difficult to list all of its occurrences, narrowing the focus to a few specific passages may serve as illustration.

Bernstein, echoing many critics before and after him, claims that "Woolf suggests an alternative through art" to the modernist sense of being loosed from the stability of time and place (43). In her painting, Lily attempts to create something that endures, a moment that will last despite the impermanence of human life, "a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and . . . could not dislodge with a team of horses" (Lighthouse 171). This moment, according to Bernstein, is itself transitory. Pamela Caughie agrees because although Lily has her vision, by the end of the
novel “even those moments when all seems to come together into a unified whole . . . even those moments disintegrate as we grasp them,” and they become part of the past (Caughie 38). Woolf attempted to do the same thing—to combine the fragments into “a unified whole”-through her writing. Beyond that, however, I believe she also longed to create eternal moments through human connection despite or perhaps because of the brevity of life.

Woolf establishes the idea of fixing or capturing a moment at the very beginning of To the Lighthouse. Mrs. Ramsay promises that “if it’s fine tomorrow,” her son may actually realize his dream of sailing to the lighthouse (3). As the very young are apt to do, James expands and contracts time like a telescoping wand. He is only six, and yet, to him it seems that he has looked forward “for years and years” and now the wonder is “within touch” (3). The narrator moves from the boy’s immediate thoughts to comment upon them, indicating that James is one of those people who “must let future prospects . . . cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallize and transfix the moment” (3). Strangely, although others, notably Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe,
attempt to capture and hold a single moment in time, none is as successful as James. After her husband has dashed his son’s spirit by insisting that it will not be fine, Mrs. Ramsay thinks, “He will remember that all his life” (62). Then, musing about finding rest in the midst of her busy, others-centered life, she gazes at the sweeping stroke of the lighthouse marking time, and the phrase repeats itself in her mind, “‘Children don’t forget, children don’t forget’—which she would repeat and begin adding to it, It will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come” (63). Life is short. Death will come. But, children do not forget, and James does not forget either the disappointment of that day or his resulting bitterness, even ten years later. Mrs. Ramsay thought that he and her other children “were happier now than they would ever be again;” she reflects, “Life—and a little strip of time presented itself to her eyes—her fifty years” (59). Life appears as her adversary, and so, knowing what her children must go through, she wonders, “Why must they grow up and lose it all?” (59). A moment perhaps may be fixed, but human life is fleeting.

Later, at dinner, Mrs. Ramsay attempts to capture a memory that will last for her family and guests. She
wonders what she has done with her life and has "a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, . . . as if there was an eddy--there--and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it" (83). Though everyone remains separate at the table, she tries to bring them together and create a memorable time for them because "the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her" (83). This is Mrs. Ramsay's gift, her art--to create a lasting moment and make life stand still just as Lily attempts to do in her painting. She knows they would "however long they lived come back to this night; this moon; this wind; this house: and to her too" (113). "It [the dinner party] partook, she felt, of eternity" (105), and yet, "it could not last" (106). As she leaves the room, everything begins to change. The dinner "had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past" (111).

The moment that seemed eternal was not, and the relationships were ephemeral as well. Mrs. Ramsay is flattered to think that her guests will remember her and the night as long as they live because she senses a "community of feeling with other people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin that
practically . . . it was all one stream” (113-14). Though she believes “all that would be revived again in the lives of Paul and Minta” (113) and they “would carry it on when she was dead” (114), they do not. After Mrs. Ramsay “has faded and gone” (174), Lily recalls that “things had worked loose after the first year or so; the marriage had turned out rather badly” (173). Lily even muses that “she would feel a little triumphant, telling Mrs. Ramsay that the marriage had not been a success” (174). “Life,” she thinks, “has changed completely. At that all [Mrs. Ramsay’s] being, even her beauty, became for a moment, dusty and out of date” (175). Analyzing Woolf’s work through the lens of postmodernism, which allows for both “continuity and change,” Caughie comments,

With the last stroke of the brush, with the last words of the novel, the vision is past, receding as the harmony of the dinner scene recedes, as the wave recedes, for the vision must be perpetually remade, the relations must be forever reestablished. (39)

Benjamin Carson agrees—to a point. He writes, “The intimation here is that this vision, though it captures the eternal and the immovable, ‘would be destroyed’ (208)”
Thus, even the "eternal moment," the seemingly lasting relationships, and life itself are ephemeral. Carson does not see this as hopeless, however, because "meaning, for modernists, is found in the search. . . . It is found in the precarious balance between the fleeting and the eternal" (28). He concludes that Lily Briscoe's vision and Mrs. Ramsay's moment were "ultimately Woolf's search for something eternal and immutable in the transient, the fleeting, and the contingent" (28).

Woolf deploys the inner thoughts of most of the other characters to reiterate the swift passage of time and the changes it brings. Mr. Ramsay, for example, laments the brevity of life in grand terms. He attempts to proceed through the "whole alphabet" of human philosophy, but realizes that he will never even move from Q to R. He likens his struggle to a heroic expedition, thinking that a "dying hero" should be able to wonder how men will speak of him after he's gone. "How long would his fame last—two thousand years? "And what are two thousand years?" he frets, "What, indeed, if you look from a mountain top down the long wastes of the ages? The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare" (35). His language then becomes cosmic:
His own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still. . . . Who then could blame the leader of that forlorn party which after all has climbed high enough to see the waste of the years and the perishing of stars . . . (35)

He mourns the "waste of ages" and the "perishing of stars"—and his own little star, swallowed up in them. And so, he stands on "his little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance, how we know nothing and the sea eats away the ground we stand on" (44). Sandra Donaldson calls this his "most unguarded self-description" as well as "Woolf's most generous and affectionate image for him" (333). She describes it as "his conflict between mortality and immortality" in which he "both justifies and questions himself" (333). His dilemma is the brevity of his own life in contrast to the vastness of the universe of which he knows so little. All human life is impermanence that, as the Biblical writer James says, "Appears for a little while and then vanishes away."

Nowhere is this "waste of the years and the perishing of stars" more vividly revealed than in the middle section
of the novel, titled "Time Passes," which begins and ends with human action but concentrates on the inexorable march of time. As "One by one the lamps were all extinguished" on the night of the dinner party, "the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began" (Lighthouse 125), and we see the impersonal forces of darkness, breezes, random light "from some uncovered star, or wandering ship, or the Lighthouse" (126) move in to take over the house that humans had filled with light. Woolf writes, "But what after all is one night? A short space, especially when the darkness dims so soon. ... Night, however, succeeds to night" (127). The seasons give way to seasons, and "the nights now are full of wind and destruction" (128). Woolf's descriptions are vivid and the scene is alive, though not with human voices. What makes this section so powerful, according to Sally Minogue, is "the sense which we have of impersonality strengthening its grip as the section progresses, to the point that it is difficult to remember that there is a living author behind it" (287). Minogue continues, "We have universe pure and simple, its 'clear planets' unencumbered by human promise or superstition" (288).
Woolf created in this section a perfect picture of life devoid of human existence. As she describes nature and the passage of time, the language is full of passion; then, in one short, straight-forward, and unemotional sentence contained in brackets, we learn about the death of Mrs. Ramsay, who "died rather suddenly the night before" (128). Mrs. McNab, who comes to clean, recalls that "she had a pleasant way with her," but "many things had changed since then," (136) and in the end, what troubles Mrs. McNab most is that her work is "too much for one woman" (137). Life is brief, but the universe continues unencumbered.

The house sits silent and locked, inhabited only by wind and decay, light following dark, as the life of the earth goes on and on. Roger Lund describes the decay and the ephemerality it represents:

To the Lighthouse reveals a persistent tension between the struggle to find permanence and form and a kind of malign entropy, most clearly imaged, perhaps, in the gradual deterioration of the summer house itself. (87)

The descriptions are vivid and poignant. Then, once again we hear of death—the passings of Prue and Andrew—in short, almost generic phrases that "they said," whoever they are.
Prue dies in childbirth, "which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well" (132). Again, expressed in language that is trite and emotionless, we learn that one of twenty or thirty young men blown up in battle was "Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous" (133). Great changes occur in other peoples' lives in the same way—Woolf places the information in brackets and as part of gossip, almost like afterthoughts. The language is devoid of emotion or individuality. The only thing that matters is the movement of nature and of time. The humans seem to be nothing but little bits of flotsam and jetsam floating on the endless sea of life. Woolf describes the house as being "left like a shell on a sandhill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it" (137). Human life, little remembered or only as so much gossip, is as ephemeral as that of a sea animal.

Minogue expresses the same idea, citing Woolf’s treatment of life in the first section as being in stark contrast to death in the second section. She writes, "It is the experience of life (of which "The Window" is just one representation) which is made to seem retrospectively, illusory, by the experience of death represented in "Time
Passes” (289). As the section closes and visitors return once more to the house, human lives have changed drastically, but nature and time have continued inexorably. Ten years have passed, and we see Lily Briscoe who "clutched at her blankets as a faller clutches at the turf on the edge of a cliff" (143). The language is reminiscent of Mr. Ramsay's "little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance . . . and the sea eats away the ground we stand on" (44). Woolf seems to emphasize the precariousness of all human life; we stand on the ledge of life as the eternal sea eats away the ground of our existence.

The rhythm of time is also marked by the movement of the wind or "little airs," the sweep of the lighthouse beam, and the appearance of the stars, which humans see in time delay since their light has been traveling for years before it reaches earth, and which will continue to shine long after we are gone. Mrs. McNab remembers Mrs. Ramsay in the same way—as if seeing her through "the circle at the end of a telescope"—the ephemeral viewing the eternal (136).

The most vivid symbol of the long ages of the earth, however, is the sea and especially, the waves. Several characters refer to the waves, always in relationship to
the measure of human life against the universe. Mrs. Ramsay thinks about the "monotonous fall of the waves on the beach" (15) and how they usually seem "consolingly to repeat over and over again . . . 'I am guarding you—I am your support!'" (16). At other times, however, she imagines them as if they

. . . like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, ma[king] one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warn[ing] her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow. (16)

For Mrs. Ramsay this very reminder of life's ephemerality occurs when the men "had ceased to talk," and "she was soothed once more, assured again that all was well" (16) only after hearing her husband as he recites lines from "The Charge of the Light Brigade." The comfort she feels seems strange, considering the poem's vivid picture of life's impermanency. Mr. Ramsay's presence, however, is like the waves to her and their family—the source of soothing support and guardianship but also of "an impulse of terror" (16).
Although she seemed closed, shut off to others, Mrs. Ramsay wishes to prolong a "community of feeling with other people" (113) just as Margaret Schlegal desires "the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion" (Forster Howard's End 278). Woolf's "ephemeral as a rainbow," "granite and rainbow," "a bridge of art" and Forster's "rainbow bridge" and "permanent roads of love and hate" seem to indicate that the works of these contemporaries were engaged in dialogue and that each of them desired something solid in the brief span of a single lifetime. Andrew McNeille provides an interesting insight in his article on the Bloomsbury group: "His [Forster's] Schlegel sisters in that novel [Howard's End] are based to some degree on Vanessa and Virginia Stephen" (16). Whether or not that is true, the characters finally do connect in Forster's work, but for the Ramsays and their guests, the goal remains elusive—fleeting as life itself.

As William Bankes and Lily stand on the beach, they feel "a common hilarity, excited by the moving waves," and yet soon "both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness—because the thing was completed partly, and partly because distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily
thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest” (Lighthouse 20). Later, as she sees Mrs. Ramsay and James at the window, the tree bending, and clouds moving, Lily thinks “how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach” (47). In each case, the characters begin by thinking joyfully about the waves, but in delving deeper into their significance, they realize how quickly their own lives will be over.

To the Lighthouse, as a work of art, wrestles with the question of human ephemerality, and the characters ponder the question over and over. Jane Duran suggests that Woolf used “depictions of inner turmoil to give us a sense of the fleeting and transitory nature of the real” (300). Lily Briscoe's inner turmoil is evident toward the end of the novel when she asks Mr. Carmichael, “What was it then? What did it mean?” (180). Her questions increase in intensity: “Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air” (180).
Again, we hear echoes of the "little ledge" and the sea eating away the ground beneath us. She asks, "Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life?—startling, unexpected, unknown?" She wonders, "Why was it so short, why so inexplicable" (180). She cries out for Mrs. Ramsay, and "tears run down her face" (180). Lily wants answers. All of us want answers. Woolf does not give them, cannot give them. In Minogue's estimation, "To the Lighthouse remains a truly modernist novel: no closure, only a looming vacancy" (294). Woolf simply records that her novel intended to capture "life itself going on" as it always has and always will. For Mrs. Ramsay, that is enough.

While human ephemerality contrasted to the age of the universe is one of the novel's major themes, another theme that many have addressed since the novel was first published is the modernist concern with connection versus isolation. Even the setting creates a sense of solitude and isolation. Referring to the novel's treatment of this theme, Lund writes,

It is significant that Woolf shifts the location of the novel from the safe and protective St. Ives of her childhood to the Hebrides, to an island which is literally 'cut off' from the
mainland by the sea and whose metaphoric insularity communicated to the characters in a variety of ways. (87)

James Haule sees the same theme expressed in Woolf’s unique style and dialogue, citing Woolf’s “use of interior monologue and sensory impression” to create a snapshot so that the “final picture of any character is a composite” (107). The result he says “is a collection of multiply exposed still pictures that elude photographic realism” (107). Just as photos in a box are disconnected from real life, time, and each other, so, too, Woolf’s individual characters lack connection and rarely know how to relate to one another.

The lack of connection occurs primarily because no one is really able to know another person. Erich Auerbach addresses Woolf’s treatment of time or time strata and the contrast between interior and exterior time, the fragmentation of events, and the shifting of the narrative viewpoint, all of which help to create a feeling of human isolation in the novel. In his classic discussion of her techniques, he says that she

... at times achieves the intended effect by representing herself to be someone who doubts,
wonders, hesitates, as though the truth about her characters were not better known to her than it is to them or to the reader. (78)

Woolf’s use of multiple consciousnesses and shifting time frames and points of view, which she uses to render the feeling of “life itself going on” create what Auerbach terms “the flow and the play of consciousness adrift in the current of changing impressions” (78). This is especially evident, he says, in chapter five where Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts shift from present to past to future and the narrative commentary seems difficult to separate from her reflections and even those of Mr. Bankes. Auerbach says, “The writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished” (77), or as Haule writes, “There is not one narrator now, but a carefully orchestrated medley whose chant approaches choral proportions” (109). The result is that the feeling of isolation experienced by the characters is extended to the reader who is left to wonder with Lily Briscoe how a person knows “one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were?” (Lighthouse 51).

The lack of communication or connection is established in the very first scene as Mrs. Ramsay plants in her son the seeds of hope that he will go to the lighthouse “if
it's fine tomorrow" (3), and Mr. Ramsay crushes that hope in his absolute, "But . . . it won't be fine" (4). Mr. Ramsay is described in this scene as

... lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, . . . but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgment. (4)

This image of Mr. Ramsay, presumably through the eyes of his son, is of a weapon that destroys the unity of his family, yet he is "incapable of untruth" and desires that all his children possess "courage, truth, and the power to endure" on the "passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks flounder in darkness" (4). Mr. Ramsay's hopes for his children seem to indicate a man of integrity who wants his family to be prepared for the harshness of life even while he is unable to connect with them.

Chapter 6 begins with questions that expose an underlying current in the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay: "But what had happened? Some one had blundered" (30). As Woolf describes the interchange between them, the
reader is left with the impression that someone had indeed blundered—but who? And what had happened? Mrs. Ramsay attempts to shield her son James from her husband's harsh pronouncement that "there wasn't the slightest possible chance that they could go to the Lighthouse tomorrow" (31) and remarks that the wind often changed. Mr. Ramsay is enraged at "the extraordinary irrationality of her remark" and "the folly of women's minds" (31). He stamps his foot and curses her. To this she can only react in silence. Woolf writes, "To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency" that Mrs. Ramsay has nothing to say (32). Though she "reverenced him," and felt "she was not good enough to tie his shoe strings" (32), Mrs. Ramsay does not really understand him any more than he understands her. Her joy is diminished because she is not "able to tell him the truth, being afraid" (39). Though he is fortified by gazing upon his wife and son, and though he comes to her for sympathy, Mr. Ramsay remains alone in the world of his "splendid mind" because she is "lovely and unfamiliar from the intensity of his isolation and the waste of ages and the perishing of
the stars” (36). Even in marriage, the most intimate of unions, the Ramsays live in isolation, unable to build Forster’s "rainbow bridge" of connection.

Mrs. Ramsay herself laments “the inadequacy of human relationships" after her encounter with her husband (40). Later when she feels snubbed by Mr. Carmichael as he "shrinks" from her, she becomes aware once more “of human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking, at their best" (42). Life to Mrs. Ramsay is “something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband” (59). This fact troubles Mr. Ramsay. "He could not speak to her" for "she was aloof from him" and "though it hurt him that she should look so distant, and he could not reach her, he could do nothing to help her" (65).

Lily Briscoe likes to be alone, but she also desires intimacy and unity, especially with Mrs. Ramsay. She realizes, however, that people are unknowable. She recalls how she had “laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand” (50). It is through her art that Lily connects briefly with another human, Mr. Bankes. He
“had shared with her something profoundly intimate” as he examined her canvas and listened to her concerns about “how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left,” knowing the danger “that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken” (53).

According to Haule, a “shared revelation” is “the source of communion” for Woolf’s characters (106). Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Carmichael share such a connection when both look at the same plate of fruit on the dinner table for “it brought them into sympathy momentarily” and “looking together united them” (97). Lily and Mr. Bankes share several such moments, such as the time they had stood watching the waves together thinking about the brevity of life and in this scene as they discuss her art and its lasting significance. As she shares this moment of intimacy with Mr. Bankes, Lily spots the Ramsays and thinks, “So that is marriage, . . . a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball” (72). Is this a communion born of a shared revelation? Fleetingly, the Ramsays become for Lily “symbols of marriage,” but soon “the symbolical outline which transcended the real figures sank down again, and they became . . . Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay watching the children throwing catches” (72). Then, “in the
failing light they all looked sharp-edged and ethereal and divided by great distances" (73).

Sadly, it is difficult for the Ramsays to share such communion. They see things so differently that connection seems impossible, as if they too are "divided by great distances." Mrs. Ramsay looks up at a star in the heavens, a star whose light reaches her eyes thousands or millions of years after it first sent out its rays, and wishes to share it with her husband simply because of its beauty and the pleasure it gives her. She stops herself because she knows that "he never looked at things" and if he did he would say, "Poor little world" (71). Though at that moment he pretends to admire the flowers, she knows he is only trying to please her. His is the poignant gesture of one attempting to reach across the "great distance" between them but not knowing exactly how. She has gazed on eternity in the star; he has barely realized the temporal beauty of the flower, but he has tried in that brief moment to connect.

After leaving the dinner party at which she had attempted to create something that would last and that would build a bridge of communion among her guests, Mrs. Ramsay bids goodnight reluctantly to her guests and enters
the room where her husband is reading. Referring to this final scene in the first section, Haule says, "The only ‘union’ of any kind that is achieved . . . is the fragile communication that takes place between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay at the end of ‘the Window’," but "the glass through which each views the other is darkened by their own apprehension of their separateness" (118).

Mrs. Ramsay wants something more though she does not know what it is, and she sees that her husband does not want to be disturbed. She recalls the moment during her dinner party when Mr. Ramsay had repeated lines from "Luriana Luriilee," and the rest of the guests joined him, united briefly by "the same relief and pleasure that she had . . . as if it were their own voice speaking" (111). The lines of the poem Woolf quotes here are significant, for they hint at the theme of isolation versus connection, and also relate to the idea of human ephemerality: "Come out and climb the garden path, Luriana Luriilee / The China rose is all abloom and buzzing with the yellow bee" (110). "And all the lives we ever lived / and all the lives to be, / are full of trees and changing leaves . . . (119). In the poem, Luriana Luriilee is urged to connect with Life, and with other lives (or hives). The bee evokes Lily
Briscoe's lament that people were like bees, drawn by the sweetness of the hives, unable to connect, but able only to range "the wastes of the air over countries of the world alone" (51). The line "All the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be" speaks of the brevity of human life in the eternal wave of "life itself." The trees and changing leaves once again emphasize the transitory, fleeting nature of all living things. We all fade as a leaf.

As Mrs. Ramsay hears the words replay in her mind, she opens a book and reads hypnotically until her husband's movement rouses her and "their eyes [meet] for a second; but they did not want to speak to each other. They had nothing to say, but something seemed, nevertheless, to go from him to her" (119). As she closes the book, she repeats the last line of the sonnet she has just read: "As with your shadow I with these did play" (122). Mr. Ramsay wants something—for his wife to tell him that she loves him—but she cannot give it. Mrs. Ramsay wants something—she knows not what—yet neither can fully give what the other needs, for each plays with the other's shadow. Even in their moment of intimacy they cannot connect. They remain shadows, sealed hives. Mrs. Ramsay thinks, "Nothing on earth can equal this happiness," yet she seems isolated
from her husband, as if they inhabit far distant worlds, viewing one another through a telescope.

This sense of human isolation becomes an almost complete absence of human life in the "Time Passes" section of the novel. Louise Westling suggests that Woolf "sought to portray the non-human . . . world within which we are tiny and only momentary presences" (856). She describes Woolf's focus on "the energies of earth's life without human beings, in a radical rejection of Victorian humanism with its heroic ideals and progressive ideology" (858). Instead, Westling says, Woolf

. . . celebrates human community and its continuity with all the world which sustains it. "Time Passes" plunges her narrative into the very energies flowing through the sea of being—the more-than-human Lebenswelt [World love]—in which people are no more consequential than brief flashes of light. (862)

After ten years of absence, the Ramsays and their guests arrive at the house, and "the voice of the beauty of the world came murmuring, too softly to hear exactly what it said" (Lighthouse 142). It entreats the sleepers to gather at the beach for "the house was full again" and "it
all looked . . . much as it used to look" (142). Westling argues that Woolf seems to "call for humanity to abandon its fictions of separateness and embrace the whole of nature" (855). In the third section of the novel, however, she returns to the life of her characters—human life as opposed to the earth’s life or nature—and their individual need for connection.

Everything looks the same, and despite the loss of Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew, and Prue, much remains the same in relationships. There still remains “a painful yearning by people to connect, though barred from such connection by a spatial divide” (Engelberg 76). Edward Engelberg describes the novel as structuring a space that “envelops characters and inhibits true communication with others, creating impenetrable solitude” (76). “Solitaries remain solitary,” he says, and “the unattainable remains unattainable despite the belated arrival at the lighthouse and the apparently triumphant completion of the painting” (77-8). Lily Briscoe continues to struggle with the meaning of life, death, and her painting. She feels “cut off from other people. . . . as if the link that usually bound things together had been cut” (Lighthouse 146).
When Mr. Ramsay intrudes upon her as she attempts to finish her painting, Lily knows he wants, even demands, sympathy from her, but she can only "stand there dumb"; they remain "isolated from the rest of the world" (152). She simply exclaims, "What beautiful boots!" expecting to receive in return "one of his sudden roars of ill-temper, complete annihilation" (153). Instead, he drops his melancholy mood momentarily, and she feels as if they had reached "a sunny island where peace dwelt, sanity reigned and the sun for ever shone, the blessed island of good boots" (154). Though Lily finally feels sympathy for him, she realizes that "there was no helping Mr. Ramsay on the journey he was going" (154). They remain isolated. Mr. Ramsay leaves for the lighthouse, and Lily turns once again to her painting, feeling as if she is fighting an impossible battle against an "ancient enemy," a battle in which she seems "like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt" as she tries to complete her own journey (158).

In the same way, as if he, too, is fighting an impossible battle, Mr. Ramsay begins his trip to the Lighthouse. It is a crossing ten years too late, taken in
an effort to please his wife who can no longer appreciate it, and taken with his children who no longer care. In fact, they resent the trip. He sees himself alone and acts the part of a “desolate man, widowed, bereft” (166). He continues his refrain from Cowper’s poem, how “we perished each alone,” and the isolation he feels and that his children sense resonates of that “immense vacancy, & our short little run into inanity” that Woolf, herself described in her diary (Diary V: 105).

In the end, the Ramsays reach the lighthouse, the father praises his son, the children think they would give him anything, though he asks nothing, and Mr. Ramsay springs like a young man, “as if he were leaping into space” (207). It is a victory of sorts, and yet, they still do not seem to understand what is inside one another; they remain alone. Lily, too, has her vision, affirming her choices. She knows her painting will probably “be hung in the attics . . . ; it would be destroyed” (208). Her vision will fade, and the victory will be short-lived, for they are ephemeral. She remains alone.

Alex Zwerdling asserts that the “final pages of the novel . . . strive to create the effect of harmony and reconciliation and try to echo the last moments of the
dinner party scene" (208). Wondering if the feelings of the characters will change in time and their victories will have to be rewon, he questions whether the ending is not "more willed and formulaic than emotionally convincing" (209). Engelberg declares, "The ending . . . indicates one of "Woolf's conclusions is that we must accept that the only insight we are granted is that the grander vision and unity we may seek are beyond us" (76). Engelberg further argues that "Woolf's conviction that absolute endings, whether in life or fiction, may be impossible in part because the solitude to which we are assigned to play out our roles is impregnable" (78).

Such a view seems too pessimistic, however; Woolf herself thought To the Lighthouse was "a cheerful enough book" (Letters III: 379). There are moments, though brief, during which real connections are made between people. Art often makes those moments possible and transcends the isolation that only seems impregnable. Mrs. Ramsay creates a moment that partakes of eternity though she knows it cannot last. The art of her dinner party is important because connections are made around the table, and they will always be remembered. As she watches the beam of the lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay thinks about her life: "She had
known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and . . . she felt, It is enough! It is enough!"

(Lighthouse 65).

Lily’s art is not simply a painting that will hang in attics and be forgotten. It is her art, made possible in one of the “moments when one can neither think nor feel” (193), that allows her to unite with Mrs. Ramsay even after her death. Lily cries out her name and feels once more what it means “to want and want and not to have” (202). Then, it seemed to Lily that “Mrs. Ramsay . . . sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat” (202). Lily draws a line in the center of her painting and thinks, “It [i]s done; it [i]s finished” for she has had her vision. She has connected with Mrs. Ramsay, and that moment has partaken “of eternity” as well.

Woolf’s art accomplished the same thing; it allowed her to connect with her parents and lay them to rest. On her father’s birthday, she wrote:

I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing The Lighthouse, laid them in my mind. (I believe this to be true—that I was obsessed by
them both, unhealthily; & writing of them was a necessary act.) (Diary III: 208)

After her first reading of To the Lighthouse, Vanessa Bell wrote to her sister:

... you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character which must be the most difficult thing in the world to do. It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up and on equal terms and it seems to me the most astonishing feat of creation to have been able to see her in such a way. (Letters III: 572)

It is true that the connections that Woolf’s characters make are ephemeral, but they are valuable, especially in light of the brevity of life.

Chapter three examines the themes of human isolation and ephemerality in The Waves. In that novel, published four years after To the Lighthouse, Woolf expands her art of recording “the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall” (Common Reader 150). She records
the interior dialogue of her characters, emphasizing the isolation they feel, as if they are islands in the sea of life.
CHAPTER THREE

THE WAVES: INCESSANT RISE AND FALL

If I could catch the feeling, I would:
the feeling of the singing of the real
world, as one is driven by loneliness
and silence from the habitable world.
Virginia Woolf Diary III: 260

In addition to living in an age of rapid social,
cultural, political, and technological changes, Virginia
Woolf also lived, according to Mark Hussey, "at a time of
great upheaval in art, and was herself influenced by and a
major force in the shift in the way we perceive the world
that became apparent in Europe from about the 1880s onward"
(Singing 60). Some modernist writers expressed the doubts
and conflicts of their time in terms of the ephemeral
nature of human life compared to the great age of the Earth
and universe; others addressed them in stories of human
isolation versus the romantic ideal of connection. In the
Rede Lecture, which he delivered in the Senate House,
Cambridge, on May 29, 1941—two months after Woolf's death—
E. M. Forster said, "She belonged to an age which
distinguished sharply between the impermanency of man and
the durability of his monuments" (Virginia Woolf 21). In
Woolf's novel The Waves, as in To the Lighthouse, the two
themes of solitude and ephemerality, which pervade much of her work, form an inter-relationship that has not been explored in recent criticism. What did the term solitude mean to Woolf; how does it relate to the theme of ephemerality that she addresses in this novel? How do these two issues affect one another?

As a way of introducing an examination of these questions, it is helpful to consider a commencement address delivered by Carl Sagan in 1996, the year he died. He spoke about an incredible picture taken by Voyager I at a distance of 4 billion miles from Earth. Describing what scientists termed the "pale blue dot," a pinpoint the size of .12 of a pixel, he said,

On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives... every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam. (6)

Recalling the absurd posturing of little men, Sagan says, “Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become momentary masters of a fraction of a dot” (6). He
reminds his audience of all Earth’s inhabitants and “how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds” (7), or as Bernard says in The Waves, how “strange that we who are capable of so much suffering, should inflict so much suffering” (293). Sagan calls Earth a “lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark” and draws a lesson from the Voyager I photo: we are responsible “to deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot” (7). In his address and in his book Pale Blue Dot, which expands on these ideas, Sagan articulates a two-edged theme that runs through Woolf’s work: isolation or solitude and the need for connection, especially considering the brevity of human existence.

Though Sagan was but eight years old when Woolf died, both were concerned about how we should live in the face of life’s fragile, solitary, ephemeral span. The “mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam” that he described could not have been seen in her lifetime since there was no way to leave the Earth’s atmosphere, let alone the solar system, but Woolf did ponder the great cosmic dark and humanity’s place in it. In one of her early diary entries, she cited the inability of human beings to know one another as the
reason for their isolation and aggression: "The reason why it is easy to kill another person must be that one's imagination is too sluggish to conceive what his life means to him" (Diary I: 186). Perhaps this is one reason that Woolf wrote the type of inner monologue that she did—to reveal what life means to another person. According to Julia Briggs, "The rise of fascist politics in the 1930s gave new urgency to questions about the meaning and outcomes of history, and in Woolf's last two novels these take centre-stage" (78). The two novels Briggs mentions are The Years (1937) and Between the Acts (1941), and in them Woolf's question becomes, "Is there anything fixed or constant in human nature, anything that might stop a nation becoming a war-machine or a machine dedicated to mass murder?" (Briggs 79). The same question is present, though more subtly, in her earlier novels, To the Lighthouse, written in 1927, and The Waves, which was completed in 1931.

An entry in Woolf's diary gives a clue as to her possible purposes. She makes a definite rhetorical choice when she describes the death of her nephew Julian Bell, who was killed in the Spanish Civil War in 1937. She notes, "If Julian had not died—still an incredible sentence to
write—our happiness might have been profound. . . . but his death—that extraordinary extinction—drains it of substance” (Diary V: 111). She finds his death difficult to write about even “with all [her] verbosity” and describes her reaction as "a complete break; almost a blank; like a blow on the head: a shriveling up” (104). She continues:

That's [sic] one of the specific qualities of this death - how it brings close the immense vacancy, & our short little run into inanity. Now this is what I intend to combat. How? how make good what I protest, that I will not yield an inch or a fraction of an inch to nothingness, so long as something remains? (105)

In Woolf's words, Julian did not die, nor was he killed. He became extinct. Holly Henry discusses Woolf's concerns, providing an insightful connection when she asserts, "Julian’s loss seemed to substantiate Woolf’s concerns about the very real possibility of human extinction" and suggests, "the ‘immense vacancy’ Woolf hoped to resist is nothing other than future eons of time, and the great abyss of interstellar space, devoid of human existence” (133). Woolf’s diary entry regarding “our short little run into
inanity" also connects this idea of human extinction, the ultimate solitude or isolation for her, with another of her recurrent themes, human ephemerality.

This extinction is the formidable death against which Bernard fights at the end of The Waves, and it is in the face of this kind of solitude that the characters attempt to make human connections and to create something of lasting value. Yet even this attempt is thwarted, as in "the appalling moment" when "Bernard’s power fails him and there is no longer any sequence and he sags and twiddles a bit of string and falls silent, gaping as if about to burst into tears" (39). Neville comments, "Among the tortures and devastations of life is this then—our friends are not able to finish their stories" (39). Bernard, himself, echoes this sentiment at the end of the novel when he says, "I said life had been imperfect, an unfinished phrase" (283). It is because of the ephemeral nature of human life that the characters must connect. Yet, they seem unable to do so, living instead in loneliness and separation. Their lives are lived in fragments. Michael Hoffman and Ann Ter Haar claim that Woolf’s characters are denied "almost all forms of ‘connection’" (53). The Waves, they suggest is
... the quintessential 'impressionist' novel, meant to be read with the care one brings to a lyric poem full of images, tropes, and archetypes; it moves not on the flow of plot and story line but on accumulated fragments from the lives of a variety of characters, all of whom speak but not all of whom control the discourse (51-52).

Alex Zwerdling extends this idea. "This sense of human isolation," he says, "is given its definitive treatment in The Waves. If people are permanent strangers to one another, why should their conversation matter?" (11). Not only are Woolf's characters not connected; they often live in human solitude and alienation. Zwerdling writes, "What matters is the interior monologue of the isolated character. It is a novel about Silence—the things people don't say but think and feel" (10). To him, The Waves seems to be "a vision of human solitude. . . . based on the feeling that even our most intimate relationships are flawed by our limited access to other minds" (10-11).

Anne Banfield does not write specifically about the sense of human isolation, but she quotes Woolf: "Ever since I was a child . . . I've had the habit of getting full of
some biography, & wanting to build up my imaginary figure of the person" (qtd. in Banfield; Diary I: 180). She asserts that the novel’s language allowed Woolf the possibility of

... getting beyond the impasse her father, who spoke of ‘the hopeless attempt of getting outside ourselves’ (HET, 55) and ‘had no idea what other people felt’ (MB, 126), had posed, both as personality and intellectual. (312)

Banfield further suggests that Woolf’s “method of multiple perspectives is the novelist’s route to wider knowledge (312). This route to wider knowledge of other lives also seems to be Woolf’s attempt to envision connection in a world of isolation.

After wrestling with the novel for four years, Woolf wrote in her diary on August 20, 1930, "The Waves is I think resolving itself (I am at page 100) into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves" (Diary III: 312). She was “not trying to tell a story" in The Waves but to show “a mind thinking”; she imagined her personae as “islands of light—islands in the stream that I
am trying to convey: life itself going on" (Diary III: 229).

Thus, waves became a very complex metaphor for life, a metaphor that conveys far more than the routine daily lives of six characters. As she was working on the novel, Woolf also commented on the transitory nature of life in her diary entry of January 4, 1929, likening human beings to the waves:

Now is life very solid, or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on for ever: will last forever; goes down to the bottom of the world—this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change; one flying after another, so quick so quick, yet we are somehow successive, & continuous—we human beings; & show the light through. But what is the light? I am impressed by the transitory nature of human life to such an extent that I am often saying a farewell—after dining with Roger for instance; or reckoning how many more times I shall see Nessa. (Diary III: 218)
Throughout the novel, Woolf uses the ebb and flow of waves and the action of the sea to point up this contrast between the ephemerality of human life and the eternal rolling on of the Earth's ages. Is life solid or shifting? This is the larger vision of the novel, a vision that is significant for human relationships. If life passes so quickly in the eternal cosmic scheme of things, human connection and the creation of something that may outlast one's life is of vital importance.

By August of 1930, trying to pull all of her fragments together, Woolf had begun to think that The Waves was becoming "a series of dramatic soliloquies" and wrote, "The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves" (Diary III: 312). Susan Dick notes that one of the strongest rhythms in the novel is the wave-like movement of the characters' consciousness in time. The forward surge of the wave is the time present of the speakers, the undertwo [sic] beneath the surface is time past. One notices this undertow growing stronger as the six speakers grow older and the past assumes an increasingly important place in the consciousness of each. (38)
In the "forward surge" of time, Bernard enjoys the dinner with everyone before Percival leaves for India but looks into the future when the present moment will be past, part of the undertow. He says, "We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time" (Waves 146). In creating their moments together, the friends are creators like the characters in To the Lighthouse--Lily Briscoe, the artist, and Mrs. Ramsay, the creator of the "eternal moment" at her dinner party.

The fact that The Waves is written in soliloquies recording the thoughts and impressions of the personae, rather than in dialogue between characters, however, also emphasizes the sense of human solitude. According to James Haule, by attempting to remove conventional restrictions on the novel, Woolf "did much to develop and establish the techniques of interior monologue, interior analysis, and sensory impression," and "these very techniques seem to have had a profound impact on her presentation of the soul of man as inherently, unavoidably isolated" (73-4). Louis experiences this feeling of isolation from the very beginning. As a young child he thinks, "Now they have all gone. . . . I am alone. They have gone into the house for
breakfast, and I am left standing by the wall among the flowers” (11). Even greater than this physical aloneness is the emotional solitude that he feels as a result of his imagining what others think of him. He has limited access to their minds. Because he speaks with an Australian accent, he decides to wait and copy Bernard so he will not be laughed at, although he knows his lessons by heart. He thinks, “Jinny and Susan, Bernard and Neville bind themselves into a thong with which to lash me. They laugh at my neatness, at my Australian accent” (20).

From the beginning, Rhoda also feels this isolation. She is afraid of numbers and sits alone after the others have gone. She looks at the numbers and thinks:

I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join—so—and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, ‘Oh, save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!’ (21-22)

And yet, for a moment as Louis watches her at the blackboard, he is able to access a tiny fragment of her mind and her feelings. He thinks, “She stares at the chalk figures, her mind lodges in those white circles; it steps
through those white loops into emptiness, alone. They have no meaning for her. She has no answer for them. She has no body as the others have. And I . . . do not fear her as I fear the others" (22). He senses a commonality between them. Even at a young age, Louis expresses the common effort of the friends against the ultimate solitude when he describes the children singing together:

When we are sad and trembling with apprehension it is sweet to sing together, leaning slightly, I towards Susan, Susan towards Bernard, clasping hands, afraid of much, I of my accent, Rhoda of figures; yet resolute to conquer. (26)

Louis speaks Bernard's "little language," the language of connection. Banfield, describing it as "the demonstrative language of sense-data," calls it "the language of Impressionism" and explains, "It's smallness first consists in a return to a prior state . . . childhood; the language a nursery language registering the child's pure looking" (298). It is the kind of language that Nora Eisenberg discusses in her essay on Woolf's last word on words. She says Woolf feared that language was "rigid. . . dividing a world that was, or should be, unified" and that "in The Waves most emphatically, she
suggests that language emerges to mark and serve our individual as opposed to our communal and united selves” (254). Eisenberg asserts, however, that Woolf

... believed there was another language—‘the little language’. Composed of small or broken words, brief or unfinished sentences, cries, calls, songs, silences, and even sights and gestures, ‘the little language’ marks and fosters our common life, not the single life, the single self that wars with others. ‘The little language’, we learn in The Waves encourages the union of separate selves. (254)

It is the kind of language for which Bernard longs in the end as his book, “stuffed with phrases” (294) that he’s written all his life, drops to the floor and he is left silent and alone.

When the boys leave for school, the contrast between what Bernard feels and what others perceive illustrates the limited access to each other’s minds that ultimately separates or isolates the characters. Bernard “must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard” (30) between himself and others or he will cry. He looks at Louis and Neville and thinks, “They are composed. But they
look different” (30). Louis, however, sees Bernard and thinks, “He is composed; he is easy. He swings his bag as he walks. I will follow Bernard, because he is not afraid” (30). Bernard, more than any of the other characters, tries to connect. He says that Louis and Neville “feel the presence of other people as a separating wall,” but when he is with other people, “words at once make smoke rings—see how phrases at once begin to wreathe off my lips. . . . I do not believe in separation. We are not single” (67). In the interlude that follows this section, the birds in the garden echo the experience of connection versus isolation that the characters feel:

In the garden the birds that had sung erratically and spasmodically in the dawn on that tree, on that bush, now sang together in chorus, shrill and sharp; now together, as if conscious of companionship, now alone as if to the pale blue sky. (73)

Like the people, they come together, then separate, but ultimately sing alone in the universe.

Writing about time and spatial form in the novel, Jack Stewart says, “Memories, which reach back in time, take on spatial form” (86), and “space and time are paradoxically
merged. In the soliloquies, present tenses create a flowing continuity between timebound selves, while past tenses quicken the interludes with a sense of finite time” (89). Stewart’s language describes the ebb and flow of the novel’s structure, which emulates the action of the waves. His linking of time and the waves also echoes the thoughts of the six friends in the novel. Each of the characters sees the waves in a different way, but each associates them with the years of his or her own life and how quickly the years begin to roll on as all of them age. In the first scene, the child Louis describes the dichotomy of ephemerality and permanence: “‘I hear something stamping,’ said Louis. ‘A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps’” (9). The beast is chained, an image that depicts an object or animal that is solid and fixed, but also an image that simultaneously describes the waves in motion as they pound on the beach. The waves are eternal yet transitory like the “two contradictions” that haunted Woolf. They haunt Louis as well. As the time nears for the final ceremony at school, Louis is troubled again by the waves and the isolation as life falls away and divides the friends. “The differences are not yet solved,” he says, and “the bird flies; the flower dances; but I hear
always the sullen thud of the waves; and the chained beast stamps on the beach. It stamps and stamps” (58). The waves, eternal yet ephemeral, continue to stamp out their transitory lives. Later, during “the first day of a new life,” Louis feels “transient as the shadow on the meadow, soon fading, soon darkening and dying” as he thinks of his little moment in time, his “inch in the long, long history that began in Egypt” (66). “I am the ghost of Louis,” he thinks, “an ephemeral passer-by, in whose mind dreams have power,” and he sprinkles himself “with the bright waters of childhood. Its thin veil quivers. But the chained beast stamps and stamps on the shore” (67). Once again, the brevity of life is linked to the ephemerality of the waves beating time upon the shore.

The swift passing of the years seems to Neville more like the sound of a bee buzzing near him, “‘Suddenly a bee booms in my ear,’ said Neville. ‘It is here; it is past’” (11). His observation about the ephemerality of that moment recalls Lily Briscoe’s comment about the “hives” of other people and the impossibility of knowing them, “sealed as they were” (Lighthouse 51). Human life is here and it is past just as quickly, and we no more understand one another than we do the bee that booms in our ear. Although
he does not refer to the waves as a young child, Neville alludes to the metaphor when he and Bernard are making boats in the tool shed. Bernard leaves him to join Susan, and their connection is broken. Neville then says he hates "dampish things. . . . wandering and mixing things together" (19). This wandering and mixing together recalls the churning action of the waves as they break upon the shore, mixing sand and rock and flotsam.

Rhoda has a different interpretation of the waves. She plays alone in her "short space of freedom" as she pretends fallen petals are ships that ride the waves. She says:

One sails alone. That is my ship. . . . The waves rise; their crests curl; look at the lights on the mastheads. They have scattered, they have foundered, all except my ship which mounts the wave and sweeps before the gale and reaches the islands where the parrots chatter and the creepers. (19)

For her, the waves carry a ship—her ship—that sails alone to exotic places uninhabited by the humans who terrify her. Yet, in another sense, the waves tumble her, stretching her among "these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing" (28).
The waves are like the universe where nothing is settled for Jinny. After her part in a childhood game is ended, she throws herself on the ground. Her blood, she says, "must be whipped up, slapping against my ribs" (46). Her pulse drums its rhythm in her head:

All is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph. Only, when I have lain alone on the hard ground, watching you play your game, I begin to feel the wish to be singled out; to be summoned, to be called away by one person who comes to find me, who is attracted towards me, who cannot keep himself from me. (46)

In a solitary moment, Jinny feels isolated from the others as they play and longs for the one person who will be attracted to her: "Now the tide sinks. Now the trees come to earth; the brisk waves that slap my ribs rock more gently, and my heart rides at anchor, like a sailing-boat whose sails slide slowly down on to the white deck. The game is over" (46). She awaits the next adventure, the excitement, the someone who will come.

"Aware of our ephemeral passage" (114), Bernard describes a moment of non-identity, a "sunless territory," where he hears "in my moment of appeasement, in my moment
of obliterating satisfaction, the sigh, as it goes in, comes out, of the tide that draws beyond this circle of bright light, this drumming of insensate fury,” and in that territory he has “one moment of enormous peace” in solitude (116). Yet, Bernard cannot be himself without others. He says, “I need the illumination of other people’s eyes” unlike “the authentics, like Louis, like Rhoda, [who] exist most completely in solitude” (116). In the tide of life that ebbs and flows for Bernard, he must have connection— with fellow passengers on trains, with “beautiful human beings once so united” (113) who go off in separate directions at the door of the lift, and with friends, whom he imagines in their absence—and grows “impatient of solitude” (117).

Neville must sit a moment before he enters the future, which is to him, “that chaos, that tumult . . . the huge uproar” that “sounds and resounds under this glass roof like the surge of a sea. We are cast down on the platform with our handbags. We are whirled asunder. My sense of self almost perishes” (72). He describes his feelings as if he has been cast into the waves: “I become drawn in, tossed down, thrown sky-high. I step out on to the
platform, grasping tightly all that I possess—one bag” (72), like a life preserver. Later, in the tumult of the future, Neville imagines himself as a poet—a great poet. He says, “Now begins to rise in me the familiar rhythm; words that have lain dormant now lift, now toss their crests, and fall and rise, and fall and rise again” (82). His waves of creativity carry him on, and yet he is unsure of himself and how to measure his life and his poetry.

For Susan, the waves represent life going on through her children:

My children will carry me on; their teething, their crying, their going to school and coming back will be like the waves of the sea under me. No day will be without its movement. I shall be lifted higher than any of you on the backs of the seasons. (132)

She sees herself as possessing more than the others, but “debased and hide-bound by the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity” (132). Susan’s children, like waves of the sea, energize her and perpetuate her life yet isolate her from others. Susan must invest so much time and care in her family that she says, “I shall let them wall me away from you, from you and from you” (132).
All of the characters continue to become more thoughtful or philosophical as the years pass; they begin to see how transitory life is, often likening its passing to the eternal procession of the waves. According to Mary Steussy Shanahan, Woolf “defines and emphasizes the gap between man and nature” (57). The “change in nature exposes a meticulous if relentless pattern, while for her characters this very continuity is destructive” (57). The result, she says is that “though in the interchapters the movement of the sun in the diurnal round and rhythm of the waves are perfectly regular,” they nevertheless create in the characters and readers alike a sense of life’s swift passing (57). The six friends begin to sense the importance of human connection, yet they often feel alone like the birds that come together to sing, “now together, as if conscious of companionship, now alone as if to the pale blue sky” (Waves 73). Even Jinny says, “I am going to be buffeted; to be flung up, and flung down, among men, like a ship on the sea” (176). Bernard laments, “The world is beginning to move past me . . . like the waves of the sea when a steamer moves” (188). Susan feels “the waves of my life tossed, broken, round me who am rooted” (192). For Rhoda, the years simply bring more of the old torture:
“Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears” (206).

Describing this sense of disenchantment, Shanahan writes:

As they move toward age, Woolf’s characters are touched by a vague disillusionment, provoked in part by Percival’s death, in part by a realization of what price the single, limited gaze has exacted. Nevertheless, trapped in their own personalities, the six remain unable to make meaningful contact with one another even as the ‘shadows’ . . . lengthen on the waves. (59)

Bernard attempts to sum up his life in the six lives of his friends, and he is obsessed with the waves, with the years that keep rolling on. He thinks about his loneliness, the coming of old age, and of death. He says, “Should this be the end of the story? A kind of sigh? A last ripple of the wave? A trickle of water to some gutter where, burbling, it dies away?” (Waves 267). Yet he continues, “But wait . . . we rise, we toss back a mane of white spray; we pound on the shore; we are not to be confined” (267). He thinks about “what is unescapable in our lot; death; the knowledge
of limitations; how life is more obdurate than one had thought it," and yet he jumps up to proclaim, "Fight. . . . It is the effort and the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare . . . this is the daily battle" (269-70).

At the end of his life, the phrases and words fail Bernard and he thinks, "We exist not only separately but in undifferentiated blobs of matter" (246). He recalls going to see Jinny after Percival had died and how they tried to share the experience of grief, but "she, remembering other things, to me trifles but torturing to her, showed me how life withers when there are things we cannot share" (264-65). The desire for connection is intense, but so is the feeling that it is impossible to achieve. Bernard laments both human isolation and human ephemerality:

Our friends—how distant, how mute, how seldom visited and little known. And I, too, am dim to my friends and unknown; a phantom, sometimes seen, often not. Life is a dream surely. Our flame, the will-o’-the wisp that dances in a few eyes is soon to be blown out and all will fade. (275)

Isolated and alone, he realizes how ephemeral life is, and yet he realizes the importance of connection:
Our friends, how seldom visited, how little known—it is true; and yet, when I meet an unknown person, and try to break off, here at this table, what I call 'my life,' it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs. (276)

According to Shanahan, this "movement toward union with others" completes "a design set out in the early chapters of the novel" that is initiated "in the two banquets at Hampton Court which frame Percival's death" (62). As the friends gather to say goodbye to Percival who is leaving for India, Bernard describes a connection from a shared revelation:

But here and now we are together . . . to make one thing, not enduring—for what endures?—but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower . . . a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution. (Waves 126-27)
“For a moment the flower draws together separate individuals,” Shanahan says, “and it gains its essence through the contributions of each of these people” (63). She adds that “the second gathering at Hampton complements the earlier dinner” and “by the end of the evening the characters are drawn from isolation into harmony, just as they were at the first banquet. Early asserting their views of life, the six uncompromisingly cling to their particular patterns. But this very defense of self creates a vacuum; infinite loneliness overwhelms each” (64). By the end of his days Bernard realizes, if fleetingly, a oneness with others and the universe, that knowing of another human life for which he—and Woolf—longed.

In September, 1929, when she was still thinking of the novel as The Moths, Woolf imagined using a device that she called “The Lonely Mind” and putting it “separately in The Moths, as if it were a person” (Diary III: 251). This device was her attempt to create an anonymous narrator who could comment on the lives of the characters in the rest of the novel. By January, 1930, Woolf felt that she could “now say something quite straight out,” but she wondered “how to pull it together, how to compost it—press it into one” (Diary III: 285). She puzzled over how to end it:
“It might be a gigantic conversation,” and considered the interludes very difficult, “yet . . . essential; so as to bridge & also give a background—the sea; insensitive nature—I don’t [sic] know. But I think . . . that it must be right” (Diary III: 285). In her final draft of the novel, Woolf uses the anonymous narrator of the interludes—unpeopled as they are—to illustrate the contrast between the eternal and inescapable universals and ephemeral human life.

This contrastive imagery is accomplished through the movement of the waves as they continue their eternal pounding on the shores of Earth during one representative day. Julie Vandivere writes, “The Waves takes its name from descriptions of the ocean in the vignettes that open each chapter” (221). She notes that Woolf begins each chapter with a lyrical interlude, “each containing four key images: the sun, birds, waves, and a garden” (222). The waves, according to Vandivere:

. . . recur within the structure of Woolf’s prose. There, linguistic flux and instability often coincide with moments when characters work to define themselves in language. In other words, ‘wavering’ configurations of language
betoken 'wavering' ontological constructions, especially constructions of the self. (222)

Beyond constructions of the self, I believe the waves also represent Woolf's ideas about solitude and ephemerality. Although they typify the "solidity" of the eternal moment, they also point up the "transitoriness of human life" (Diary III: 218) because they proceed in the same manner as the passing lives of the characters. "The sun moves from sunup to sunset and follows the trajectory of the narrative as it moves from childhood to old age" (Vandivere 222). The waves, as they move in synchronization with the sun's travel through that day, point up the ephemerality of one short life or all of life as it is lived under that sun. At break of day when "the sun had not yet risen . . . the sea was indistinguishable from the sky" (7). This vagueness, the way that sea and sky are indistinguishable from one another, is reminiscent of a painting such as Monet's Impression: Sunrise, which creates a feeling of mystical beauty and misty solitude.

Mark Hussey also compares this technique of Woolf to "Monet's Venice where the all-pervasive light seems to have eaten away the form" (Singing 63). It is interesting that in the ninth interlude at the end of the day, "Sky and sea
were indistinguishable” (Waves 236) as well. Perhaps Woolf used the feeling of vague solitude created by her image of sky and sea merging into a dim haziness because both at the beginning and the end of life, there is the greatest sense of being solitary, adrift in a fog. At the beginning of their lives, the characters live in their own little worlds, and by the end they stand alone once more, facing death.

At the beginning of the day, the waves sigh “like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously” (7). In the same way, a baby breathes softly as it sleeps; human life begins like a sleeper awakening from unconsciousness, becoming more and more aware of the rest of the world. In the second interlude, as “the sun rose higher,” the waves move more quickly and sweep “a quick fan over the beach,” and finally, “the concussion of the waves breaking fell with muffled thuds, like logs falling, on the shore” (29). The action and sound of the waves grow more intense as the day progresses, just as the lives of the characters become more noisy and active (or full of sound and fury) as they go from childhood to college or marriage and beyond. In the third interlude, the sun is high enough so that light begins to pierce “the thin swift waves as they raced fan-
shaped over the beach," and they leave "a black rim of twigs and cork on the shore and sticks of wood" (73). In the same way, the characters gather things and experiences to themselves and begin to leave debris behind as they live. Bernard says, "The complexity of things becomes more close . . . here at college, where the stir and pressure of life are so extreme, where the excitement of mere living becomes daily more urgent" (76). By this time the characters begin to ask questions like Bernard's "What am I?" (76) and Neville's "Who am I?" (83). Life's battles become more real as "the waves drummed on the shore, like turbaned warriors" (73). In the fourth interlude, the waves draw "in and out with the energy, the muscularity of an engine which sweeps its force out and in again" (108). They beat "like a drum that raises a regiment of plumed and turbaned soldiers" (109).

By the time the sun rises to its full height, "the waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping" (150). In the soliloquies following the fifth interlude, when the sun is at its full height, the characters, in their full growth, learn of Percival's death. The specter of death, the end of human life becomes more real to them. The thought of human extinction seems
like the sound of the great beast stamping, as the years, like the waves, "one after another . . . massed themselves" and fell (148). The sun then no longer stands "in the middle of the sky," and the waves, gaining momentum, crash and "up spurted stones and shingle" (165). They sweep around rocks and strand a fish that "lashed its tail as the wave drew back" (165). So the years roll on, and the characters remember (spurt up) "certain stains . . . old defilements" (168) and worry about falling like snow and being wasted in death. Susan thinks about the passing of the seasons and sometimes feels "like an old shell murmuring on the beach" (171). Even Jinny, though the "door goes on opening," sees people as "the abraded and battered shells cast on the shore" (175). Neville thinks "Time passes, yes. And we grow old" (177). Each wants to leave something in "the perfection through the sand" (180), but they know as the years pass, they will be left like the "fish, stranded" when the eternal waves roll on, each indistinguishable from each other.

As the sun sinks lower, the waves gradually become less frenetic and "no longer visit the further pools" (182). The seventh interlude is interesting in that the waves begin to recede, but two of Woolf's other recurrent
images appear: a wave of light passes as if “a fin cut the green glass of a lake,” and there is a moment of uncertainty or ambiguity “as if a great moth sailing through the room had shadowed the immense solidity of chairs and tables with floating wings” (183). The ambiguity of the moment seems to be expressed by the contrasting ideas of life going on—the movement of the fin in the water—and the shadowing of death—the image of the great moth sailing through the room. In the soliloquy that follows, Bernard says, “Time, which is a sunny pasture covered with a dancing light, time, which is widespread as a field at midday, becomes pendent. Time tapers to a point” (184). He ponders the stages of life and wonders, “Why should there be an end of stages? And where do they lead? To what conclusion?” (186-187). In Bernard’s questions the moment of uncertainty and ambiguity looms, cut by the fin, but shadowed by the moth.

Finally, as the waves near the shore, they are “robbed of light” (207). This darkness is reflected in the soliloquies of the characters who ponder “how swift life runs from January to December” (216). Bernard thinks of the earth as “only a pebble flicked off accidentally from the face of the sun” and that “there is no life anywhere in
the abysses of space” (225). They each envision the silence and try to stop time in its flight, as if, Jinny says, “life were stayed here and now,” and, Rhoda adds, “we had no more to live” (225). Louis says the “world moving through abysses of infinite space . . . roars,” and “we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness” (225). Their talk, once “spirited stones and shingle,” falls together like the waves that collapse “in one long concussion, like a wall falling, a wall of grey stone, unpierced by any chink of light” (207).

Interestingly, the waves that are pictured in the last interlude before Bernard’s final summation of their lives are “waves of darkness in the air” (237). The darkness covers all—houses, hills, trees—and washes down streets and over grass, turf, trees, and blows along bare hills and mountains until it reaches “girls, sitting on verandahs” who “look up at the snow, shading their faces with their fans. Them, too, darkness covered” (237). Death, the darkness seems to say, comes to all, and “all deaths are one death” (170). Commenting on the “sustained anthropomorphism of the interludes,” Hermione Lee writes, “Obviously a consistent analogy is being made between non-
human growth and decay and the human lifespan" (Novels 167).

Even at the end of Bernard’s life, however, “the bars deepen themselves between the waves,” and he feels the “sense of the break of day” (The Waves 296). He says, “Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again” (297). The wave rises in him as well, and he is “aware once more of a new desire” and faces the enemy riding against him. “Death is the enemy” he says, and he rides against it “with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man’s” (297). He utters the final human cry in the book: “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (297).

Woolf wrote about this final scene in her diary as she finished the novel. She had intended to “end with the words O solitude,” (Diary III: 339), by which she meant the solitude of human extinction, a universe devoid of all life. It is against this solitude, this death that Bernard flings himself, like Cyrano de Bergerac in his white plume with sword outstretched. His stance also anticipates the words (1952) of Dylan Thomas: “Do not go gentle into that good night, but rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Woolf wrote:
This is also to show that the theme effort, effort, dominates: not the waves: & personality: & defiance: but I am not sure of the effect artistically; because the proportions may need the intervention of the waves finally so as to make a conclusion. (Diary III: 339)

And so she concludes with the eternal roll of the ages, "The waves broke on the shore" (297). As Lee says, "The Waves, more devoted to abstraction than any of the other novels, uses human beings as case histories to illustrate the nature of life" (Novels 159). Though human life is ephemeral, it is also eternal, for the waves of life, human or otherwise, continue to rise and fall.

In the end, Bernard regrets so many things in his life: "so much litter, so much unaccomplishment and separation," and he thinks, "How can I go on lifting my foot perpetually to climb the stair?" (283). He expresses a feeling that most people have felt or will feel at some point in their lives:

This self now as I leant over the gate looking down over fields rolling in waves of colour beneath me made no answer. He threw up no opposition. He attempted. His fist did not
form. I waited. I listened. Nothing came, nothing. I cried then with a sudden conviction of complete desertion, Now there is nothing. No fin breaks the waste of this immeasurable sea. Life has destroyed me. (284)

Bernard says the scene before him "was like the eclipse when the sun went out and left the earth, flourishing in full summer foliage, withered, brittle, false" (284). Bernard feels hopeless and wonders who he is. Bernard's language is reminiscent of Woolf's description of the total eclipse in 1927:

Then one looked back again at the blue: & rapidly, very very quickly, all the colours faded; it became darker & darker as at the beginning of a violent storm; the light sank & sank: we kept saying this is the shadow; & we thought now it is over—this is the shadow when suddenly the light went out. We had fallen. It was extinct. There was no colour. The earth was dead. (Diary III: 143)

And then, "when as if a ball had rebounded, the cloud took colour on itself again, only a sparky aetherial colour & so the light came back" (143), for Woolf, "it was like
recovery. We had been much worse than we had expected. We had seen the world dead" (144).

In the same way, the light comes back for Bernard, though he has seen the world dead. Finally he realizes that though alone, he can find no division, no obstacle between himself and his friends:

I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? 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. (288-89)

Paradoxically, it is when Bernard experiences being "a man without a self" (285) that he feels a part of all life. Human life passes quickly, and people are alone in a vast universe, often isolated from each other, but they need one another. Yes, Bernard, "It is strange that we who are capable of so much suffering, should inflict so much suffering" (293). In the light of the threat of
extinction, in the light of the 'immense vacancy' and the extraordinary solitude of the pale blue dot in the infinite abyss of the cosmos, human connection becomes all
important. As Sagan said, "It underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another" (7) and to connect, creating moments together, and finally, to fling ourselves like Bernard, "unvanquished and unyielding" (Waves 297) against the solitude, as the waves break ceaselessly on the shore.

How then, are the themes of human isolation and solitude related to human ephemerality? What was Woolf's rhetorical purpose in her treatment of them and why do they figure so prominently in many of her works? The final chapter examines the literary and rhetorical significance of these two ideas—what Woolf called "solitude" or "extinction" and "transitoriness"—and draws conclusions from this study.
CHAPTER FOUR
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I have done with phrases.
Virginia Woolf The Waves 295

The previous chapters have examined Virginia Woolf’s novels To the Lighthouse and The Waves in light of her two dominant themes, isolation and ephemerality, which she termed “solitude” or “extinction” and “transitoriness.” The same ideas and arguments are present in some form throughout most of her other novels, but these two texts were chosen because they have long been considered, with Mrs. Dalloway, her most popular and innovative works and because they fall chronologically at the middle of her writing career. This short chapter presents a discussion of the major points of the analysis and a conclusion drawn from the study. Did Woolf use her novels to “narrow the choices” of her readers, in an effort to present a specific argument about human isolation and ephemerality? What was that argument and how did she develop it?

Woolf was indeed attempting to “help people narrow their choices among specifiable, if not specified, policy options,” as Roderick Hart defined rhetoric (3). She used
her extraordinary gift of language to influence her readers' views about the way life should be lived not only in a time of cultural change and upheaval such as her own but also, considering the brevity of all human life, for all times. As I have endeavored to demonstrate, she did so by using her own unique style, language, and rhetorical choices.

Woolf argued the need for human connection in light of the brevity of human life and the prospect of "that extraordinary extinction" of which she wrote in her diary. She did not state her argument as explicitly as Forster did in his exhortation to "Only connect," but she developed her case by exposing the inner workings and external consequences of lives lived in solitude and isolation. Her characters experience moments of connection that bring them "into sympathy momentarily" (Lighthouse 97), and "of such moments . . . the thing is made that endures" (105). The choice Woolf hoped her readers would make was to accept the responsibility to "deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish" the earth, as Carl Sagan wrote in more explicit terms (7). In a letter to Ethel Smyth she wrote, "Do I believe in the future of the human race? Do I care if it survives?" (Letters IV: 384). Yes, she most emphatically did. When she considered the brevity of human
existence, she saw the importance of human connection, the need to create moments together because they are valuable, no matter how ephemeral they might seem. She, like Bernard, wanted human beings to fling themselves "unvanquished and unyielding" (Waves 297) against the solitude, to create something "fixed or constant" that might even stop nations from "becoming a war-machine or a machine dedicated to mass murder" (Briggs 79).

The two novels discussed in this study reveal Woolf's concern about the lack of human connection on a personal level and, ultimately, the resultant sort of isolation that can easily lead nations to war. In her essay "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid," written in 1940, Woolf states her convictions: "Unless we can think peace into existence we—not this one body in this one bed but millions of bodies yet to be born—will lie in the same darkness and hear the same death rattle overhead" (243). We must make connections before it is too late and the entire human race faces that "extraordinary extinction." I believe that at least part of the reason Woolf wrote the type of interior monologue she did was her belief that people so easily killed one another because "one's imagination is too sluggish to conceive what his life means to him" (Diary I: 93).
186). She wanted to help her readers imagine or conceive what the lives of others meant to them and thus encourage them to connect.

Woolf was, as Julia Briggs writes, "by instinct a pacifist" (82), and her later novels and essays especially indicate that she was increasingly concerned about the mass extinction of war. In a discussion of Woolf's last years, Herbert Marder describes the reaction to The Waves of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, whom Woolf called Goldie. He praised it as a "great poem" and said it "belongs to here and now though it is dealing also with a theme that is perpetual and universal" (qtd. in Woolf Diary III: 199n). Marder says, "He saw the idealized Percival, who died far from his friends, as a reminder of lost generations," who were the victims of deceptive politics (68). The fact that so many young men had been killed in the First World War and so many would follow was "a thought that could unhinge the world", but The Waves "had shown him [Goldie] the underlying element in which we all move, waves in the sea, sharing the knowledge 'that the other waves have their life too and . . . . we are somehow they'" (Marder 68). Woolf was pleased with his reaction to the novel and that he
understood “we are the same person and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one” (68).

Woolf, through her character Bernard, in *The Waves*, expresses the idea of unity among the friends, the connection that, though sometimes brief, is what is important in life. Recapturing a moment when they felt united as one, he says, “We saw . . . the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget” (277). In their connection, they become more than any of them were separately. “We six,” he says, “out of how many million millions, for one moment out of what measureless abundance of past time and time to come, burnt there triumphant. The moment was all; the moment was enough” (278). Life is enough. Connection is enough. Bernard’s description resonates with the “eternal” moment Mrs. Ramsay creates around her dinner table. Both are examples of Woolf’s fusion of the two themes of isolation versus connection and the ephemerality of human life compared to the everlasting wave of the ages.

Virgina Woolf knew how brief human life was, “ephemeral as a rainbow,” (*Lighthouse* 16). She, like Louis, was “aware of our ephemeral passage” (*The Waves* 114). She also knew the importance of connection in light
of that ephemerality. She wrote of her own need at a time between the publications of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*:

I woke up in the night and said 'But I am the most passionate of women. Take away my affections and I should be like sea weed out of water; like the shell of a crab, like a husk. All my entrails, light, marrow, juice, pulp would be gone. I should be blown into the first puddle and drown. Take away my love for my friends and my burning and pressing sense of the importance and lovability and curiosity of human life and I should be nothing but a membrane, a fibre, uncoloured, lifeless to be thrown way like any other excreta.' (Letters III: 202-3)

All of us, at the close of our brief lives, become nothing more than "abraded and battered shells cast on the shore" ([The Waves] 175). We are as ephemeral as the waves, and unless we connect during the short span allotted to us, as Woolf so eloquently wrote, "Our lives too stream away, down the unlighted avenues, past the strip of time, unidentified" ([The Waves] 227).
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