

Extended Essay English B Category

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To what extent, the descriptions in the beginning of each chapter of the novel 'The Waves' by Virginia WOOLF, and the lives of the characters, Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda connect to the vicious circle of life and nature.

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ABSTRACT

Before I read the biography of Virginia Woolf, written by Quentin Bell¹, I was not familiar with her yet I found her life very impressive. She feels every emotion with all of her heart. She suffered from great depressions which helped her acquire enormous impressions as a result of her intellectuality and extraordinary talent. I felt it an obligation to analyze and evaluate one of her novels. When I started reading the first chapter of 'The Waves' in the bookstore, before I decided to buy it, my very first impression was positive. I found the way she uses metaphors and vocabulary fascinating.

The novel is only 248 pages yet the content is much more than that as it reflects human nature and the vicious circle of life by demonstrating the motions of the sun and waves in a day from sunrise to sunset. Whereas the sun is used to state the time, in which the characters of the novel lived, the waves lapping, overlapping and hitting on the shore are used to denote that the reflection of human life can be found in nature. Another issue related to the novel is the indispensable bond between men and nature as human beings are a part of nature although they have the tendency of isolating themselves from it. In this essay I tried to evaluate the connections between the vicious circle of life and nature by relating the lives of the characters, Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda, to the descriptions, in the beginning of each chapter, of a landscape, which is formed of waves, the sun and a house with a garden.

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INTRODUCTION

The Waves, written by Virginia Woolf, reflects the life, its precession and continuity from the perspectives of six characters; Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda. As the stream of consciousness method throughout the novel helps the audience to examine each character. In every character, a special feature predominates; Bernard's desire to create a novel, Neville's intense bond to Percival, who is the crucial character that maintains the bond between characters intact, Louis' great endeavor to overcome his innate and supposed inferiority among others as he comes from Australia, Susan's passion for nature, Jinny's amusement of social life and Rhoda's shell that provides her invulnerability. As those characteristics are rather ordinary, the vicious circle of life comes into prominence. Whereas the occasions and notions differ, the emotions that lead or emerge from those occasions are similar. Furthermore, the novel is formed of nine chapters and before each chapter there are descriptions related to the chapters. The descriptions of a sea, a house with a garden, with trees, flowers, birds, that opens to the sea are used as an introduction to each chapter. Those figurations symbolize the changes and coming-up events in the lives of Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda.

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN HUMAN LIFE AND NATURE, INDICATED BY THE
LIVES OF THE CHARACTERS AND MOTIONS OF WAVES AND THE SUN

The first chapter starts with the description of the rising sun and that is reflected as; *'Then she raised her lamp higher (3)'* As the sun and its movements are used to create a sense of time throughout the novel, it is possible to clarify that the perception of life starts with the woman who raises the sun. This woman is Susan as she sees Jinny kissing Louis and feels overwhelmed with jealousy although she does not have feelings for Louis. This is the sign that their innocence and naivety as children are fading away and they are growing up to be adults who eventually lose their imagination and become ordinary, occupied and concerned. Moreover, it is possible to specify an example of that imagination in the first chapter as Bernard realizes Susan's sadness and takes her to an imaginary place called 'Elvedon' to give solace to her and they think the gardener and the woman, who is occupied with writing, are the guards of Elvedon. The only one who realizes Susan's distress is Bernard and that remarks his observation ability which influences him to write a novel and is also the reason behind his habit of creating stories for each and every person he sees. Furthermore, the vicious circle of life is reflected with the perpetual movements of the waves as *'one after another, following each other (3)'* phrases are used and the sunlight that glitters the leaves of the trees in the garden by saying *'making one leaf transparent and then another (3)'* In addition, the birds in the garden are used to define the characters' tendencies and lines that separate the characters from each other. By saying *'One bird chirped high up (...) another chirped lower down (3)'* it is presented that the differences between characters are becoming distinguishable as they grow up and their personalities set up.

The second chapter starts with the sentence *'The sun rose higher (21)'* which points out that time passed. The shallow pools of light that is left by sunlight can be considered as the

memories of the past because they are shallow. Moreover, as the second chapter tells about the school years, probably high school, many phrases in the description like ‘The rocks *which had been misty and soft hardened (21)*’ ‘*It sharpened the edges (21)*’ can be interpreted as the development of the characters’ personalities. For example, the Latin language and Greek Literature become of interest for Neville and that has a crucial effect in his life as he becomes a poet. Moreover as Susan feels isolated from the city for she wants to stay as nature created her and to act in the direction where her instincts lead her, she hates school and the artificial attitude school imposes on the students. That results with Susan’s definite isolation from urban life. Furthermore, Rhoda’s lack of individuality becomes evident after her school years. Being obliged to be a part of a social group results in as a catastrophe for Rhoda because she becomes even more overawed and miserable unlike Jinny who is into social life and does not have any troubles. Whereas Louis gets more ambitious about proving himself and being successful, Bernard keeps telling stories to his friends and their interests encourage him. Not only do the personalities of the characters fit but also the most important outer character that holds them together appears in this chapter. Although Percival is not a perfect person, as he walks clumsily and cannot be tolerated in case of living together, he is deeply loved by each character in the novel and he affects each of them. Percival is the one who keeps the bond between the characters, which is actually breakable, intact. Neville’s attraction for men is verified as he sees Percival and watches him in the cricket court. Moreover, the inevitable disconnection they are compelled to live is represented by the usage of birds. ‘*The birds (...) now sang a strain or two together, wildly, (...) and were suddenly silent, breaking asunder (21)*’ which foreshadows the separation of them. Birds’ singing a few songs together reflects the very little time they spent together. In addition, the statement ‘*Everything became softly amorphous, as if the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid (21)*’ expresses that inevitable parting. The forces between the molecules of a solid substance are

very strong and thus the molecules are very close. However, when it changes phase and turns into a liquid like the china of the plate and the steel of the knife, the force between the molecules decreases and molecules move away from each other. In that case, the molecules are Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda.

The third chapter starts with the sentence '*The sun rose (58)*' which shows the time that has passed. In this chapter characters' young adulthood times are manifested. Whereas Bernard, Neville and Susan go to a university, Louis does not have that chance as he has to work and there is not any clear information about Jinny and Rhoda. Whether they go to a university or not, the influence of rivalry starts to settle in their lives. This rivalry is reflected metaphorically with the motion of waves and the sunlight's *piercing the thin swift waves as they raced over the beach (58)*, and the birds' *swerving high over the elm tree, singing together as they chased each other, escaping, pursuing, pecking each other as they turned high in the air (58-59)*. Especially the birds and their movements reveal the competitive sides of the characters as they try to be attuned to life. However, after the birds reach the top branches of the trees they fly down to the garden and that's described as; *tiring of pursuit and flight, lovelily they came descending (58)*, so despite the rough climb, each and every memory of it will seem joyful and delightful when one thinks of it years later. Moreover, the characters' concerns for their futures are symbolized as the fear in the birds' song. The characters' identity seeks and the formations of their personalities also add to the importance of this chapter. For example, Bernard practises writing as he tries to write a remarkable and lasting letter to a girl whom he is passionately infatuated to. Neville also tries to improve himself in poetry and asks Bernard to read his poem and criticise it. Moreover, a man takes interest in Jinny, which increases the importance of being desired and affects her motto towards life, which is to seize the moment and make the men love her but never fall in love

with anyone. Susan's university experiences are similar to the ones in her school years as she feels outlandish to urban life and more attached to the country life. Furthermore, Louis' desire to be a noble Englishman increases just like Rhoda's fear of life. She cannot cope with the life and the continuous change. Her fear and frustration is reflected in her own words as she says '*Hide me, I cry, protect me, for I am the youngest, the most naked of you all.* (86)'

The fourth chapter's description, similar to the previous ones, starts with the sun rising higher which shows that time has passed. Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda are all now about 24 years old. Whereas life is associated with a turf and the people with horses, the beginning of business life for the characters are expressed with the usage of waves as it says '*they fell with a regular thud* (88)'. The courage they show, as a result of their youth, is reflected by birds which are *dry-beaked, ruthless, abrupt* and attacking *the damp-spotted and the curled with wetness* (89). Furthermore, they are involved in different domains of areas. This difference is reflected through the movements of the birds as Woolf says '*the birds sang in the hot sunshine, all alone* (88)'. For example, Bernard is engaged, Neville is now a poet, Louis is advancing in his career, Susan is living in harmony with nature in his father's farm, Jinny is enjoying the social life of London, Rhoda is miserable, afraid of sociability and inharmonious with her surroundings and Percival is going to India. Moreover, this chapter comprises the dinner to say goodbye to Percival. The admiration of all the characters to Percival comes forward throughout the chapter. Their connection to Percival is described as '*love of Percival* (104)' and Bernard deifies Percival by saying '*He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were- what indeed he is- a God* (111)' and sees him as a solution to the Oriental problem. The last sentence of the description which is '*as the light increased, flocks of shadow were driven before it and conglomerated and hung in many-*

pleated folds in the background (90)' indicates that they will be taking a stroll down memory lane in Percival's farewell dinner.

The fifth chapter starts with the sentence '*The sun had risen to its full height* (121)' which shows that this chapter is the climax of the novel as Percival dies after he falls off a horse. Percival's death is considered as a turning point in each character's life. All of them react differently to the incident. Bernard wants to shout to the people on the street that they have lost '*something that would have been very valuable to them*' and '*a leader, whom they would have followed*' (121). Whereas he goes to Jinny's house and bursts into tears, Jinny reacts superficially and thinks of who Percival loved the most; Susan or herself. Susan and Louis also feel sad. Moreover, Rhoda metaphorically throws a bunch of violets *into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth* (135) as an offering to Percival and trying to ease her pain. Among all the characters, Neville's pain is the strongest. He is dragged into depression. He feels as if life for him has ended and there is nothing he can do to add meaning to his life to make it worth living. He says '*All is over. The lights of the world have gone out.* (124) '. In spite of their differences, not only their attitudes towards Percival's death but also their personalities, they live the same pain and share the same sorrow. This is reflected by the birds' singing a song which is *addressed to one ear*. Furthermore, the permanent wound that is caused by Percival's death is expressed with the motions of the waves as it says '*The waves fell; withdrew and fell again like the thud of a great beast stamping* (123)'. However, the position of the sun can also be metaphorically interpreted as the half of the lives of the characters which has now ended because the sun motive is used to state the time. In that sense that time of their lives can be considered as an appropriate time to start a family. It is possible to express that the birds' carrying little bits of straw and twig to the top branches of the trees to make nests is related to setting up homes and getting married.

However, it is remarkable that Bernard is the only one who settles down and has a family. In the meantime with his son's birth, he learns about the death of Percival. This coincidence functions as a high point which shows the natural balance and the vicious circle of life on the world.

The sixth chapter consists of the middle ages of the characters as the sun, which is used to indicate the time in the characters' lives, is no longer in the middle of the sky. The most affected one from that maturity is obviously Jinny as she owes all of her happiness to her appearance. She has all of the features that a woman is supposed to have. Her only aim in her life is to be admired by men and she enjoys seeing them rambling around her with passion and intense desire. It is her victory when men cannot resist her attractiveness. According to that, she is reflected as rather a superficial character. Since her childhood in the house where the characters lived together, she is fascinated with the mysterious interaction between women and men. Moreover, her repetition of the phrase 'Come' as an invitation to men several times in the novel also shows her attraction to men. This notion is the reason why she is affected the most by the ticking away time as she is getting old. For example, when she passes by a mirror, she shivers as she sees herself and realizes that time did not have magical effects on her. Furthermore, the end of the youth for characters is symbolized with not only the birds' pausing in their song *as if glutted with sound* but also the tap's stopping to drip *as if the bucket were full*. Glutting with sound and the fullness of the bucket is associated with a phase that has ended for the characters. However, this can also be related to the satisfaction of the achievements made in the lives of the characters as they managed to fill a bucket up to its top. For instance, Louis gains almost everything he wants, he is now a rich, successful businessman and does not feel the humiliation of being the son of an Australian banker. However, he is still unhappy as he wants to be an artist like Bernard. Moreover, his desire to

be a poet makes him keep his loft even though he has a luxurious and well-furnished house. This apartment symbolizes his restrained emotions and desires.

The seventh chapter consists of the phase of the characters' lives in which they start to get old. In this chapter's description, the word 'sink' is used in contrast with the previous chapters' in which the word 'rise' is used. This difference points out that time has a negative effect for the characters as it provides not maturity and courage but regrets and question marks now. Moreover, the vigour youth gives, which the characters have lost, is expressed with the waves' '*no longer visiting the further pools (151)*'. Furthermore, the descriptions of death start to take place in not only the descriptions but also the novel. The figuration of death is reflected as '*The dead leaf no longer stood upon its edge (151)*' which relates to the chapter in the sense of questioning their lives and how much their lives satisfied them. For example, even Susan who seemed to be contented with her life in the previous chapters is in two minds about her life as she thinks about Percival who was in love with her. Bernard also feels dissatisfied about his life and travels to Rome in order to accomplish at least one of his goals and the bird that is taking '*its way alone*' can be considered as Bernard. He wants to visit Tahiti and learn Russian as well but he is conscious of the fact that it is too late now. Furthermore, the description of the '*round headed clouds which never dwindled and kept every atom of their rotundity after they bowled along*' shows that people with the strong personalities protect themselves from the abrasive sides and obstacles of the life. For example, Jinny, Rhoda and Neville can be considered apart from those strong people. Jinny starts to feel depressed as her beauty fades away because of getting aged and Rhoda leaves Louis as she '*feared embraces (170)*' because she is afraid of commitment and feels insignificant. Neville also seems to be the weak link in the chain as he drags himself into depression and misery because he cannot get over Percival's death and move on with his life.

The eighth chapter is formed of the second and the last meeting of the characters in the novel. The description of this chapter, similar to the seventh one, includes symbols about time. For instance, *the sinking sun and the waves* 'robbed light and falling in one long concussion (173)' are used to show time that has passed. Moreover, the meeting at the Hampton Court is symbolized with the rays of sunlight that are wandering around like 'shameless, laughing boys'(173). This meeting differs from the first one, which was a farewell to Percival, in the sense of the characters' positions in life. In the first one, they were very young and had the chance to lead their lives in any direction yet in the second one they had already chosen their paths and set their lives up. Their lives now are in different directions than they were in their youth. Even Louis does not care anymore about what people think about him. The dilemmas they have about their lives are also notions in this chapter. For example, Susan, while she is walking with Bernard, says to him that she is fed up with living in the country, growing fruits, raising children and she loathes the skills and cunningness of mothers. She also admits that she thought about what the direction her life would be if she had been with somebody else. Furthermore, the usage of the phrase '*sudden bruise of the rainstorm*(174)' and the word '*obelisks*' show that death is an important notion in their lives now. Moreover, as time passes and they think of their lives, they are fascinated with the vicious circle of life. For instance Neville says '*as they walk, time comes back*'(189). This sentence is important because he is aware of the fact that his time is running out and now it is time for others to live, experience, love, hate and share. Last but not the least, the description of the mirror, which is keeping the vision immobile as if it is everlasting, highlights the strong and lasting bondage among the characters. It seems that somehow Percival is the one who keeps that bond unscathed.

The ninth and the last chapter is different from the previous ones as it only consists of the summary of the characters' lives through Bernard's monologs and these monologs are not

soliloquys but speeches aimed to a listener. The description starts with the sentence '*the sun had sunk* (197)' showing death is imminent. In fact Rhoda, who jumped off a cliff and committed suicide, and Percival are already dead. Similarly as is in the chapter, there are many descriptive remarks about death in the depictions prior to the chapter. For example, *the silence of the thrush, the worm's sucking itself back into its hole, the fading light, the adder's empty skin, the substance's going from the solidity of the hills and the preponderant darkness* (197) are all symbols of death. Moreover, in the last chapter the sea and the sky are again undistinguishable like they were in the first chapter. This similarity points out the vicious circle of life because even though the lives of the characters are ending, life for others will start again, the sun and sky will be distinguishable again with the sun rise. However, Bernard still challenges death by saying that *he will fling himself against it, unvanquished and unyielding* (248). Furthermore, Bernard says in the first chapter that they felt as if they were only one person during their childhood and when they realized that was not true and they had separate bodies, they suffered terribly. He also says, in the last chapter, that he is neither one person nor does he know whether he is a man or woman, whether he is Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny or Rhoda (202). Those statements bring about the question if all of those characters are just one particular person. This question is indeed substantiated as they all have extremely different characteristics from each other and that they complete each other. Bernard's description of himself as if he is a shadow can be considered a proof to that statement as he feels like a shadow because of loss of Percival and Rhoda.

CONCLUSION

Life covers all living and non-living things. They are all indispensable to each other, and so are men. For example, the ecological cycle would be interrupted in case of even the extinction of a unicellular organism. Although men have the tendency of alienating themselves from nature, it is a fact that they are an essential part of it. Human nature can be considered as a reflection of nature. As human nature remains still and results in the same reactions or emotions after the similar stages, it is possible to relate it to the actions of nature. 'The Waves' is an indication of the vicious circle which will exist as long as humans do. That vicious circle is reflected by the passing time, from the sunrise to the sunset. Furthermore, the motions of waves reflect the phases of human life. Waves lap and overlap... Sometimes chaotic, assailant and severe, sometimes tranquil, quiescent and serene... This is an irrepressible and unstoppable circle just like the vicious circle of life. Each and every person born, grows up and dies. No matter how different a person is, the end for him/her is the same as every other person in the world. Furthermore, in the novel gradual speeding of the waves can be considered to be the foreshadowing of following events. The movements of waves denote that the reflection of each notion in men's life is possible in nature. Moreover, those unpredictable and inevitable motions emphasize that life can change when the change is least expected. Coincidental and fortuitous death of Percival is an example to the unpredictability of life. Even Sarah, who was determinant about what she wanted in her life since the moment she stepped into the school, is now troubled with the question 'what if'. This is also an indication of the unpredictability of life. However, the most appropriate behaviour should be to string along with life itself and to accept the fact that we are just temporary figures in the incessant circle of life. As the world constantly turns and has not changed it for millions of years and maintains its stationary position in the solar system, it is possible to depict that

nature and human nature are very alike; both inalterable and uncontrollable. That notion forms the bases of Virginia Woolf's 'Waves' and the novel demonstrates the issue of continuity as it begins the same as it ends with the sounds of waves crashing on the shore...

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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2. Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*, edited with an introduction and notes by Gillian Beer. New York Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008
 - All the quotes are from the above mentioned edition of the book.