

Berkeley OLLI. Fall 2026
Thursdays 10-12
Golden Bear Center, room 365

Professor: Stephanie Wells
swells@berkeley.edu

Reading Virginia Woolf's visionary novels

Arguably the most important literary force shaping the language and approaches of 20th-century literature in English, Virginia Woolf reshaped the way we understand the genre of the novel with her quietly radical narratives. We'll look at three of her most groundbreaking and lasting novels to explore what makes them so revolutionary, and learn ways of reading and contextualizing her language to appreciate it more fully.

Texts for you to purchase (or borrow):

Mrs. Dalloway (1925)

To the Lighthouse (1927)

The Waves (1931)

The course's primary focus will be on these three novels listed, along with two articles (also by Woolf) that will be posted on the OLLI course website. If at all possible, please bring a copy of the text to class each time as we will be examining the language of specific passages quite closely. An electronic reader is fine for the texts if you prefer not to print them out, but you'll be much more engaged and get more out of the discussion if you have access to the complex language of the text rather than trying to recall just the general gist of it from memory. I will be using and referring to the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (HBJ) editions of these novels, but you're welcome to use any version you have or would like to buy. Having multiple versions in play does make pagination less convenient when we refer to the text as a group (or when I'm trying to convey what we'll be covering each week), but with so many editions out there, it's inevitable that we won't all match up.

Please allow yourself ample time to do the course reading, which is quite extensive! Woolf requires the readerly leisure to follow her sentences; she is not an author who can be "crammed" or skimmed for plot all in one sitting, so you'll enjoy and engage with the texts much more fully if you reserve plenty of time to read them more slowly and in increments (delicious, mesmerizing increments).

Along those lines, some reading tips: Do not feel obligated to have any kind of handle on all of these (or indeed, any of them!) before you come to class. If you'd like to engage with the novels in the class at the maximum level, I'm recommending that you read with a pencil in your hand, and while doing so, jot down some notes that include your questions as well as your general observations about recurring imagery or potential connections you can make. Even underlining a word choice you find interesting or perplexing is a worthwhile way to engage with the text. Her sentences can be long and unwieldy. She is tracing thoughts as far as she can to find where their roots begin and

where their branches lead. If you find yourself reading and getting lost in the text, simply re-orient yourself, step back in, remind yourself of who is speaking (and it can be helpful to note in your margins when the point of view changes to a different character, as it often does). Note the patterns you see in her imagery or themes. There isn't a lot of plot to hang onto--it will mostly be characters' thoughts unfolding.

As a counterpoint to that, I do NOT recommend that, while reading or immediately upon finishing a novel, you rush straight to Google and look up the "right" interpretation or reduction of it via Sparknotes (or even more legit criticism than that). I would love for you to allow yourself to sit with the discomfort of not fully understanding what's going on, and instead, bring your questions and observations and connections into our class discussion and allow them to percolate and contribute to our group dynamic as we work through some interpretations together. Because of the somewhat unwieldy size of our group, I will of course be leading those discussions, giving you artistic or historical context and a variety of critical interpretations, but I'd also like us to tackle our questions together using only the ideas and impressions and connections you bring to your reading of the text, rather than whatever you can Google. Let that language wash over you like surf and see how your brain responds to it.

- Week 1 (9/17): *Mrs. Dalloway*, pages 3- 122 of the HBJ
 (near the bottom of the page, through the paragraph that begins "All the same, that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday;" and ends "how she had loved it all; how, every instant . . . ")
- Week 2 (9/24): "Modern Fiction" (essay posted to the website)

 Mrs. Dalloway, pp. 122-194 of the HBJ
 (from the next paragraph, "The door opened. Elizabeth knew . . . " to the end of the novel)
- Week 3 (10/1): *To the Lighthouse*, section one
 ("The Window," or pp. 3-124 of the HBJ)
- Week 4 (10/8): "Professions for Women" (essay posted to the website)

 To the Lighthouse, sections two and three
 ("Time Passes," "The Lighthouse," or pp. 125-209)
- Week 5 (10/15): *The Waves*, pp. 7-148 of the HBJ
 (through the chapter whose final paragraph starts with "'Now the agony begins; now the horror has seized me with its fangs,' said Neville")
- Week 6 (10/22): *The Waves*, pp. 148-297
 (from the chapter that begins "The sun had risen to its full height" to the end of the novel)