

The waves and the self



' Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousnesses'

Above is an extract taken from Virginia Woolf's influential essay ' Modern Fiction', in which she argues for a new way of presenting experience and reality in the novel. Simultaneously a defence of her unique style, the essay works to develop a theory of realism, and establishes the relationship between art and the real world in the new conditions of the 1920s. Woolf, as one of the most prominent figures in literary modernism, created works which became renowned for their distinctive narrative method, particularly characterised by her use of the stream-of-consciousness mode. *The Waves*, published in 1931, arguably Woolf's most poetical work, particularly adopts this device. Described by Woolf as a ' playpoem', throughout the work the sense of genre seems almost to dissolve, and the border between prose and poetry to blur. It is this fluidity of language which enables Woolf to present and detail ' the self' in such an extraordinary way, as the present thoughts of consciousness are captured and evocatively conveyed.

The novel centres around the streams-of-consciousness of six different characters: Bernard, Louis, Neville, Jinny, Rhoda and Susan. Woolf follows these six narrative foci from their shared childhood, to middle ages, across nine episodes or sections. There is however a seventh character, Percival, spoken of by the other characters, though himself not possessing a voice. Although the lives of the characters are distinct, at instances throughout the novel they seem to synchronise; their minds, or individual voices appear to blur together, conveying a united voice, a group identity.

During the composition of the novel, Woolf wrote in her diary: 'The Waves I think is resolving itself... into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogenously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves.' Each voice can be seen as the interior monologue of the character, which Woolf attempts to weave into the 'rhythm' of the novel, characterised by the nine interludes framing each section. As Woolf famously wrote, 'I am writing to a rhythm, not to a plot'. It is this lesser focus on the plot, which allows for a more effective and natural flow of the character's voices, and consequently, a more vivid and impressionistic portrayal of their identities. Certainly, Woolf's fluid style aids to convey the blurring, mutable boundaries of the self: a critique against the conventional, solidified confinements of a character's identity, seen in traditional literature. However, despite this fluidity, the poetical 'rhythmic' aspect seems to convey human experience and identity as being a part of a pattern; there is an undertone of permanence, suggesting that the interior monologues are representative of the universal rhythm of being. Certain shared images and emotions voiced by the soliloquies seem to further indicate a unity and patterning to human selfhood or existence.

These inner monologues, expressions of the self, begin in a somewhat mystical garden overlooking the sea, as described in the interludes between each section of the text. We are first introduced to the various characters when they are young children, and are immersed in their inner thoughts of the world around them:

"All my ships are white," said Rhoda. "I do not want red petals of hollyhocks of geranium. I want white petals that float when I tip the basin up.

I have a fleet now swimming from shore to shore. I will drop a twig in as a raft for a drowning soldier. (...) And I will now rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may ride the waves. Some will founder. Some will dash themselves against the cliffs. One sails alone. That is my ship.”

The reader witnesses the development of each character's identity, in relation to themselves and others, as they begin to experience the world and form their individual perceptions. A fragment of Rhoda's inner monologue can be read above, as she sits dreamily floating petals in a basin. Here, although seemingly involved in her imagination just as the other children are, glimpses of her individual identity can be seen. As the characters grow older throughout the novel, their voices become more distinct, and Woolf develops their impressions of the world. Gradually, their individual temperaments and ambitions are revealed. As a child, Rhoda can be seen as envisaging her own private ocean- forming her world out of metaphors, in an attempt to escape the external world of judgment, which she so fears. This element of her identity continues on, and develops as time passes in the novel. As a teenager, Rhoda seems to become frequently alienated from the other characters, and Woolf focuses on her essential confusion, or loss of identity, as she states ' I have no face'. This can be further seen as Rhoda recounts her dissociation from her self and her inner consciousness, during her time at school: ' I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather. I was wafted down tunnels.' Often feeling entrapped by her own mind and body, Rhoda attempts to move beyond it, resulting in this diffusion, or loss of a clear personal identity. It could be said that Rhoda is characterised by her

particularly fragile sense of self, significantly more so than the other characters. This isolation of Rhoda, her detachment from others and her self, confirms her to be the ship that 'sails alone', an element of her character associated with her from childhood.

Rhoda's statement, 'I have no face' is to become a recurring motif throughout the novel, acting as a signpost for her distinctive habits of mind. Likewise, the other characters develop repeating terms that are expressed as 'leitmotifs', which both convey the presentation of the character's identities, and contribute to the rhythm of Woolf's work. For example, Bernard's 'Tuesday follows Monday', Louis's 'My father is a banker in Brisbane', and images of leaves or growing vegetation, which often accompany the voice of Susan. These motifs aid in differentiating the particular selfhood's of the characters, and symbolically capture aspects of their identity. During the writing of the novel, Woolf recorded this in her diary: 'What I now think (about The Waves) is that I can give in very few strokes the essentials of a person's character. It should be done boldly, almost as caricature'. This experimentation with caricature once again undertones the text with a stability- despite the flowing impressions, memories and sensory perceptions of the individual voices, the leitmotifs provide an essential sense of permanence and pattern.

From childhood, the character Bernard is associated with the motif of, 'making phrases'. He develops an obsession with language and words, perpetually 'making notes in the margin of (his) mind for some final statement'. Essentially, his voice becomes that of the novelist, with his deep desire to convey life and reality through perfect phrasing. As the novel

progresses, the reader can see that Bernard possesses the most fluid of identities- it is through Bernard's voice, that Woolf conveys the symphonic sense of self. Bernard requires the influence of other people, their impressions and perceptions, to compose his own identity; he sees himself as a collective being, yet for this reason is unable to define himself in any way: ' To be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is myself.' He views the self as something with permeable boundaries- something which is composed of the flow of consciousness of those around one, not just singularly the individual perception. In the final section of the novel, the structure shifts, and is replaced by the single soliloquy of Bernard. Here, the unity of the six voices is reconciled, as Bernard states:

' 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'

He sees that identities and personalities are multiple, and that, following the rhythmic pattern of life, we are all following a universal passage of time to the same end. Woolf's aim is captured in Bernard's final speech: to convey the fluidity of identity and to deconstruct the immovable boundaries of self, as seen in conventional character. The six mutable, flowing identities seem to make up a singular, complex self, as Woolf wrote: ' I did mean that in some way we are the same person, and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one.' Bernard, in his attempts to somewhat

biographically describe the identities of his friends, comes to this conclusion of their unity. The self, in Woolf's rhythmical novel, is symphonic.

The characterising idea of the transient boundaries of the self in *The Waves*, captures Woolf's thoughts of consciousness as a whole. Human experience is not something solid and concrete, which simply follows a linear passage through time; it is amorphous, fluid and deeply influenced by the impressions of all things and people surrounding us. Bernard, more so than any of the other characters, recognises that the nature of reality is mutability, which he calls, 'our eternal flux'. Woolf attempts to immerse the reader, more realistically than ever before in fiction, in the flowing, present thoughts, sensory perceptions, and sometimes formless impressions of the inner mind. At times, external reality is indistinguishable from the internal perceptions of the characters, but this nebulous aspect of consciousness was undoubtedly intended by Woolf. 'The Waves' offers the reader an enthrallingly realistic presentation of the self, consistent with Woolf's belief that: 'Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.'