

Writing to a rhythm,
not a plot in woolf's
'the waves'



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In *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*, James Naremore discusses how one is struck, not only by a “certain ... diversity” among the six voices within Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, but simultaneously by the “sameness of things” where “the speeches often seem like one pervasive voice with six personalities” (1973: 151). Contributing to this “sameness” are the similarities in form and style of the six voices, which appear not only alike between characters, but also throughout their progression from childhood to adulthood. This rhythmic notion manifests throughout the text in complex and varying ways, and it is precisely this tension between the individuals, specifically Louis, Rhoda and Bernard, and their “underlying equivalence” which within this essay will look at these characters’ notion of self as a means for Woolf using the idea of writing to a rhythm, not a plot and showing how it alters her representation of narrative, time and character in *The Waves*. One can see in the beginning “series of dramatic” soliloquies the stark isolation of Louis and Rhoda in the novel’s structure. Louis is anxiously aware of his Australian accent and alien roots, while Rhoda is almost identity-less; she has “no face” (32), and finds herself outside the loop of conventional time and meaning where she alone is left “to find an answer” (15). Rhoda observes how those around her “know what to say if spoken to, [t]hey laugh really, they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it” (1998: 33). Similarly, Louis smooths his hair, conceals his accent, and claims that he performs these “antics” in the hopes of looking “like the rest of you” (104). Most notably, Louis aligns himself with a discourse of masculinity based on the tradition of the British Empire, within which “order” and “obedience” preside (36). The “boasting boys” who “play cricket” and whose “names

repeat themselves” are “ the volunteers ... the officers of the Natural History Society”. These are the men whom Louis envies and in order to assimilate himself with their community, he “ would sacrifice all [he] know[s]”. Yet as the six characters progress simultaneously and rhythmically through life, Louis realises that he can not truly be “ one of them”, despite his repetitions of “ I am an average Englishman; I am an average clerk” (75). He describes the activity and flux in a restaurant as containing “ the central rhythm” of life, the “ common mainspring” which he observes in its expansion and contraction, yet he is not included within it (76). His solution for his marginalisation is to “ reduce you to order”; to alert those around him to, what appears to him as their “ aimlessness” and their “ cheap and worthless” rhythm. Woolf’s characters not only tend to represent individual aspects of her personal subjectivity but by using a “ series of dramatic soliloquies”, one can observe how it alters her character representation. Louis’s quest for order in a society, similar to that of Woolf’s writing “ to a rhythm and not a plot,” within which he views himself as external, is later realised when, as “ a full-grown man” he is able to spread “ commerce where there was chaos” (139). It is from this position that he is able to sign his name, assert his identity, “ again I, and again I ... clear, firm, unequivocal”(138). Not only is Louis faced with an alien society with which he has to reconcile him, but within him exists a “ vast inheritance of experience”. Louis claims: But if I do not nail these impressions to the board and out of the many men in me make one; exist here and now and not in streaks and patches, like scattered snow wreaths on far mountains; and ask Miss Johnson as I pass through the office about the movies and take my cup of tea and accept my favourite biscuit, then I shall fall like snow and be

wasted. (141) Thus he “ expunges certain stains” and erases past “ defilements” such as “ my accent, beatings and other tortures”, associated with the greater society that surrounds him (139). It is Woolf’s structural merging of internal experience, as well as a devotion to habitual order and action where he can “ add” and calculate in what Patricia Waugh refers to as “ the imperial ego” and the “ ideal of masculine culture” which maintain Louis’s “ sanity”. Woolf uses a homogenous wave-like arrangement for her individual “ dramatic soliloquies” to focus on the main emotional outcomings of her characters such as Louis above. By mainly focusing on his sentiment, The Waves plot is altered to become more rhythmic than chronological. One can see this via looking at the characters’ individuality. While Louis asserts a remedy of sorts for his condition of exteriority, Rhoda is plagued by fear, for as Bernard observes, she “ loves to be alone ... she fears us because we shatter the sense of being which is so extreme in solitude” (109). Gillian Beer comments on Makiko Minow Pinkney’s observation that The Waves “ maintains for most of its length ‘ a precarious dialectic between identity and its loss, the symbolic and its unrepresentable Other – an unsettling and unseizable alternation’” (1998: xxv). This is indeed evident in the complexity of Rhoda’s character, as life stains and corrupts her (169), she is “ turned ... tumbled ... stretched, among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing” (20). Yet it is in solitude, where she finds her alleged “ sense of being”, where she is threatened by nothingness, forcing her to “ bang my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body” (33). Rhoda’s emotions are similar to that of the ebb and flow of the ocean, she becomes trapped in her own time and repeatedly compels herself to grasp for “ hardness”, an umbilical chord

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of sorts from the physical realm where illogically, she does not exist, as it is here that identity fails her (50). Referring back to the notion that the individual characters main ideologies may be representative of Woolf's own identifying personality traits, we can see her lack of identification with the real world in the character Rhoda. Rhoda's only fixing point seems to be her death much like that of Woolf. Rhoda states that it is "[w]ith intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, [that] life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea, [i]t is to this we are attached, it is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses" (51). Later, Rhoda perceives the interconnectedness of the lives of the others as " embedded in a substance made of repeated moments run together; are committed, have an attitude with children, authority, fame, love, society; where I have nothing" (186). It is from within this paradoxical space that Rhoda is able to remark on the habitual, 'unnatural' activities of those around her, who only appear to masquerade as life. She can only remain within the dialectical, a space that ultimately leads to her suicide which, in itself, seemingly occurs outside of the loop of time (15), as the reader's only access to the specifics of Rhoda's death is through Bernard's statement of the fact and nothing more.

Throughout the text, the reader is subject to Bernard's " unquenchable thirst" for " stories" and " phrases" (53), which only ever exist as " smoke rings" or " bubbles", possibly connoting their fleeting nature as well as an eventual dissipation or evaporation. Each character in the novel seems to have their own crutch, which evidently acts as main pinnacles. By the characters constantly going back to their ideal, the plot's time and character once again becomes less structured. An example of this would be Bernard who claims that his words draw the veil off things (68), yet he is incapable of

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finishing both his phrases and his stories, suggesting perhaps that “ the veil” may never be entirely lifted. His primary urge on the train is to “ assimilate” the elderly traveler into a community, to “ thaw” him with his human voice and its “ disarming quality” for “ we are not single, we are one”. By his own admission, Bernard requires “ the stimulus of other people” (64). He is inseparable from those around him, and is “ not one and simple, but complex and many” (61). Bernard becomes increasingly disillusioned by his own words and their inadequacies in representing life as evident in his summing up – which becomes an accumulation of meaning – where he admits that none of these stories are true, “[y]et like children we tell each other stories, and to decorate them we make up these ridiculous, flamboyant, beautiful phrases” (199). He then admits to a distrust of “ neat designs of life” and yearns for “ some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement”. Naremore states how *The Waves* “ manifests an intense desire to express a timeless unity of all things” (1970: 175), hence there exists an interrogation within the novel of “ whether language can serve such an end”, leaving Bernard seeking “ some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably” (1998: 200). If once Bernard convinced himself that, he “ must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and ... indifferent faces” (22), now he is delighted by “ confusion, the height, the indifference ... of story, of design, I do not see a trace then” (200). Bernard’s language seems to mirror Woolf’s writing as her unusual rhythmic style is also filled with confusion and indifference. An perhaps, Like Bernard who with the surfacing of its inadequacies he is left with only distrust, doomed to complete his final

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“ story” to the reader in the medium in which he is trapped, as is the author. Bernard’s first significant grapple with emotion and language is after Percival’s death and the simultaneous birth of his son, when he is incapable of telling joy from sorrow (125). Death in the novel becomes the ultimate climax within the characters. It seems to serve as the most unavoidable unifying factor of all, alerting the characters to their common mortality. Rhoda then states that “ the guests seem to dance in a circle around a campfire, [t]hus Percival has become the flame, the light around which their thoughts and emotions flicker like moths” (1970: 96). Percival is indeed a separate unifying entity for the six characters, but it is in death that he evokes the true extent of their vulnerability, just as moths are surely obliterated by the very flame that draws them together for as Bernard states earlier “ our bodies are in truth naked. We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence” (93). Woolf’s “ writing to a rhythm and not a plot” becomes a metaphor to the waves of the ocean. The tide of the sea is the “ rhythm of the waves” and Louis’s consciousness of “ a chained beast stamping” appears to be his vision of the waves. They do not flow freely as the tides confine them and the ebb and flow of the ocean only serves as a restriction. Yet while Rhoda is “ turned ... tumbled ... stretched” by her waves and surrenders to her death drive, by committing suicide, Bernard’s waves “ are not to be confined”. Rhoda, seemingly addressing Louis in a rare moment of interaction, states how they are both “ aware of downfalling, we forebode decay” (115) yet it is with Bernard’s sentiment that the novel ends. He concludes his summing up by addressing “ Death” itself he claims “[a]gainst you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding” (248). The representation of narrative, time,

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and character is therefore altered by Woolf's rhythm; like music that needs a conclusion, it ends with death. Gillian Beer examines Virginia Woolf's intentions, as evident in her diary, of writing the novel "to follow a rhythm, not a plot" (1998: xv). The characters do indeed appear to experience varying momentums between, amongst others, individual identities and notions of unity, which may never be truly reconciled. The rhythm and movement of the ocean provides an apt symbol for the complexity of interaction between characters, allowing them to return to a symbolic arena of fundamental "sameness" and "underlying equivalence" which, as Jean Guiguet points out, to define that notion is to solve the whole problem of *The Waves*" (Guiguet in Naremore 1973: 152), altering Woolf's depiction of narrative, time and character.