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“The Thing that Exists When We Aren’t There”
Narration and Mysticism in Virginia Woolf’s Novels

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Senior English Thesis
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May 3, 2019

Virginia Woolf's Novels as a Mystic Experiment

“Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end,” Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay “Modern Fiction” (159). Writing against literary convention and carefully plotted and contrived novels, she was searching for the way to write human experience without diminishing it with the structure of language. Woolf asks, “Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?” (“Modern Fiction” 161). Woolf focuses on this “spirit” in many of her essays. “Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality” (“Modern Fiction” 161), she finds this aspect missing from the novels of her contemporaries and hopes to revive it in her novels. She finds this spirit in the works of some of her literary predecessors: George Eliot, Jane Austen, and the Brontës in particular. Her contemporaries’ works, however, were missing “the delicious warmth and release of spirit which the great creative writers alone procure for us” (“George Eliot” 175). Woolf hopes to find that same mystical understanding of writers such as Eliot, but in a world where their frameworks for understanding life no longer seemed to work.

A comparison of just the opening lines of modernist novels will show a clear difference between the modernists and the older, Regency and Victorian-era novels to which Woolf looked for her “spirit.” The beginnings of the novels of high modernists such as Woolf lack the definitiveness of authors such as Austen and Eliot. “It is a truth universally acknowledged,” Jane Austen claims, “that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (3). The fiction begins in making general and definitive statements about society and the way the

world works. Later novelists show less confidence. “One may as well begin with Helen’s letter to her sister,” E. M. Forster sighs to begin *Howards End* (3). This is a far cry from that conclusive, expository opening to *Pride and Prejudice*. There is still a distinct third-person narrator, but a tepid one. Instead of “a truth universally acknowledged,” Forster’s narrator muses that they “may as well begin” with Helen’s letter. It is not a conclusive statement of where the story will begin, but instead one starting point among many that the narrator could have chosen.

In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf posits that a novel is a “magnificent apparatus for catching life.” In order to catch this sense of life, many of Woolf’s novels begin by dropping the reader directly into a scene without any preamble or exposition. “Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow,” says Mrs. Ramsay in the first sentence of *To the Lighthouse*. “But you’ll have to be up with the lark,” (3). The narrator gives no explanation or exposition about the context of the scene; it is as though the reader has happened into the room in the middle of a conversation. This has a much more natural feeling than “a truth universally acknowledged.” *To the Lighthouse* also introduces Mrs. Ramsay directly by name, creating even more the sense that the reader is not reading a carefully plotted piece of fiction, but instead encountering another fully formed person such as herself.

Woolf wrote also about Charlotte Brontë, whose *Jane Eyre* begins, “There was no possibility of taking a walk that day” (9). This opening has the same feeling as Woolf’s novels of dropping the reader directly into the scene. There is no preamble, no exposition about “truths.” The reader is put directly into the scene with narration that could be Jane’s own thoughts. Yet, *Jane Eyre*’s opening also lacks the ambiguity of *Howards End*’s beginning. It is not “there may not have been a possibility” but the definitive “there was no possibility.” While Brontë does start her novel in the middle of the scene, there is the sense that this moment of beginning was chosen

specifically by the narrator. It is not that one may as well begin with Jane's inability to take a walk, but that that must be the beginning of Jane's story.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, also crucial to Woolf, begins with a three-paragraph "Prelude" meant to set up and mirror her narrative. "Who that cares much to know the history of man," the text begins, "and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa, has not smiled with some gentleness at the thought of the little girl walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her still smaller brother, to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the Moors?" (3). Eliot, at a later date than Austen or Brontë, also partakes in universalizing. Though her opening⁵⁵ is phrased as a question, it implies that many people have done the same thing. Even asking these questions shows that Eliot was trying to delve into deeper themes of humanity. Eliot also invokes the life of this saint to structure her narrative; her story has not only a beginning, but an illustrious and important beginning. There is none of Forster's hesitation. Eliot begins her novel with St. Theresa, and this invites comparisons to her protagonist, parallels the novel sustains at the end. In the penultimate paragraph, the narrator calls Dorothea "a new Theresa" (838). The end is in the beginning.

There is a clear spiritual difference between Woolf's works and her predecessors'. George Eliot was writing a world believed to be governed by "the Supreme Power" (4), a world in which Dorothea was not merely a pious and moral woman, but a new Theresa of Avila. Eliot's world was structured by this power and order, and so her novels are structured around it too. Her last line muses on Dorothea's impact during her lifetime. It posits that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in

unvisited tombs” (837). Dorothea is one of these faithful and good yet hardly recognized. Yet by naming Dorothea a new Theresa of Avila and by showing the importance of average people to the very functioning of the universe, Eliot reveals the kind of world order in which she lives and which infuses her novels.

Middlemarch is a world that operates on God’s plan in a way that Woolf’s world is not. Woolf herself, after attending the Christian funeral of a friend, remarked, “The problem of not believing dulled and bothered me” (*Diary* 181). Mrs. Ramsay’s sudden death in the middle of a sentence follows no divine providence. Woolf’s life and works lack the definite religiosity, the confidence of writing within God’s plan, and this is evident even in her first lines. *To the Lighthouse* begins not by comparing Mrs. Ramsay to a saint, but with a random line of her dialogue. She does not offer the universal truths of Austen and Eliot or even Charlotte Brontë, but begins her narrative in the middle, not because that is necessarily the beginning but because that is where one may as well start. Stephen Kern finds this the root of this stylistic difference in the way life was changing in the modern period and the inability of accepted literary forms to accommodate this change. Modernist writers felt their lives lacked the definitive order of their Victorian predecessors. “There was only disagreement about the value of it all,” Kern says, “for there was no question that the old forms of life were cracking right down to their metaphysical foundations” (183). Eliot’s religious metaphysical outlook would not work in this modern world and if Woolf wanted to find value still, she would have to create it herself.

Without Eliot’s providential plan handed down from above, Woolf is left to find her own mysticism, defined by C. F. E. Spurgeon the “unity [that] underlies diversity” (3). Instead of finding it in the revealed knowledge of religion, Woolf looks to everyday people:

Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. I hasten, I follow. This, I fancy, must be the sea. Grey is the landscape; dim as

ashes; the water murmurs and moves. If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me—adorable world!" ("An Unwritten Novel" 22).

Using the language of religion, "ritual" and "adore," Woolf substitutes humanity for the God of someone like Eliot. This mysticism, this unifying "spirit" she wants to find is not in some religious tradition or in the story of Saint Theresa of Avila. It is in the people she passes everyday, the grey sea of mysterious figures that make up humanity. She retains Eliot's sense of the importance of everyday people. However, it is not a value derived from individuals' importance to a larger divine narrative such as Eliot's devout penitents buried in unvisited graves. Woolf's "spirit" comes from the individuals themselves.

This sea will then become the frame of *The Waves*. "An abstract mystical eyeless thing" (*Diary* 203), *The Waves* would be "a book of ideas about life," Woolf's "endeavor at something mystic, spiritual" (114). Woolf's endeavor to create something mystic and spiritual will differ greatly from the spiritual project of a novel such as *Middlemarch*. "I sometimes think of humanity as a vast wave, undulating," Woolf wrote in her diary (22). Waves in *The Waves* serve as a way to think about humanity, but also as a structuring force in a novel that lacks the providential, theological structure of many pre-modernist novels. *Middlemarch* has the framework of God and Divine Providence; Providence is mentioned twenty-three times in *Middlemarch* and God is mentioned one hundred and seven times. Conversely, God only appears seven times in *The Waves* and while fate comes up twice, Providence is not mentioned once. While the two novels are working on similar spiritual explorations, without the religious structure that Eliot has, Woolf must create a structure herself.

However, though Woolf uses the wave metaphor to structure her novel and her view of humanity, she does not find transcendence in the natural element of the wave itself. Instead, her

“spirit” comes from the humanity, and the wave is instead a way for her to think of humanity. In *The Waves*, Jinny encapsulates this idea best:

Between us, you say, we could build cathedrals, dictate policies, condemn men to death, and administer the affairs of several public offices. The common fund of experience is very deep. We have between us scores of children of both sexes, whom we are educating, going to see at school with the measles, and bringing up to inherit our houses. In one way or another we make this day, this Friday, some by going to the Law Courts; others to the city; others to the nursery; others by marching and forming fours. A million hands stitch, raise hods with bricks. The activity is endless. And tomorrow it begins again; tomorrow we make Saturday. Some take trains for France; others ship for India. Some will never come into this room again. One may die tonight. Another will beget a child. From us every sort of building, policy, venture, picture, poem, child, factory, will spring. Life comes; life goes; we make life (128).

This is not a theology that was handed down from above. It is not God who created the world and dictated that today is Friday and tomorrow Saturday. Instead “we make life.” Woolf finds this spirit within that world. Not a spirit originating from a remote divine being, but a spirit that comes from the “common fund of experience”; a spirit that is generated from the people through which it runs. As Simon de Keukelaere says in his article “What Is Deviated Transcendancy? Woolf’s ‘The Waves’ as a Textbook Case,” unlike past mystics such as Theresa of Avila, “the mystic zeal of the protagonists in *The Waves* is not directed toward a divinity called God, but, oddly enough, toward humans” (211). He points out that this is a complete inversion of Theresa of Avila’s actual writings which warn to distance oneself from humans in order to access divinity, while Woolf’s attempts to access divinity stem from humans.

The exploration of this mystical experiment and an attempt to understand this “spirit” will guide this paper. It will focus most heavily on *The Waves* as the book Woolf herself marked as most mystical, but it will draw from her earlier novels as well, most prevalently *To the Lighthouse*, *The Voyage Out*, and *Jacob’s Room*, to show the continuity of this idea. The first two sections will concentrate on *The Waves*’ narration and the waves themselves. Then the paper

will explore the other prevalent metaphors in *The Waves* and how they create a continuity with some of Woolf's other novels. Next, the paper will explore how character and time work in *The Waves* and where waves appear in other novels. The next section will draw upon the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* to show a connection in the two novels' narration before shifting to a discussion of her changing writing techniques. The paper will then discuss how Woolf handles death in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Voyage Out* and how this connects to her spiritual project before finishing with an exploration of the importance of rooms to individuality. Woven throughout these sections will be a consideration of the mystical project that unites both Woolf's characters and her novels themselves.

Narration in *The Waves*

Virginia Woolf's seventh novel, *The Waves*, was published in 1931. It follows the lives of six characters from their childhoods through to their adulthoods. Often considered her most experimental novel, *The Waves* is told mostly through dialogue. The only narrative prose in the novel describes the setting, a seashore house and garden over the course of one day. As the day waxes and wanes—the sun rising, moving to full height, and setting, and the tides moving in and out—the characters' lives wax and wane too. The literal waves reflect the flow of life, as it moves in and out, always changing and yet always remaining the same.

There are six narrators. Bernard is the storyteller; he views the world as sequences of words and believes that everyone and everything has a story. Louis is Australian and self-conscious about how fitting in with the others (who are English), especially as his academic pursuits end and he becomes an accountant, a fate he views as shamefully commonplace. Neville is the academic, desperate to be a poet yet unsure of both his poetry and his social adeptness. Susan comes from the country and eventually returns to it to do what she has always wanted to

do: have lots of children. Jinny is a society girl; she is at home at a party and thrives on the London social scene. Rhoda is desperately unsure of herself and feels wildly out of step with the world, especially the upper-class social world she often inhabits with Jinny. There is also Percival, with whom the others are enamored but who never gets a chance to speak for himself and instead often serves to connect the other six.

Woolf wrote *The Waves* as “a series of dramatic soliloquies” and hoped “to keep them running homogenously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 312). The movement of the sea and sky structures this novel, which otherwise has very little narrative structure overall. The different sections focus on similar things within this beachfront scene: the waves themselves; a room of a house containing plates, knives, and couches; a girl within that house; the natural objects in the yard outside, including a snail shell and singing birds; and the light of the moving sun. In each section, the play of the light on the different objects signifies the parts of the day. At first, the world is colorless in the darkness before dawn. There is an emphasis on the way that everything in the scene blends together. The sea and sky are “indistinguishable,” the waves nothing more than “*thick strokes moving*” under a grey cloth (3). The sun brings color and definition. It is a lamp being lifted before the world, and its light causes “*the air... to become fibrous and to tear away from the green surface flickering and flaming in red and yellow fibres... [which became] fused into one haze, one incandescence which lifted the weight of the woollen grey sky on top of it and turned it into a million atoms of soft blue*” (3). A few sentences later, “*the sun sharpened the walls of the house... but all within was dim and unsubstantial*” (30). Here emerges for the first time the juxtaposition between the amorphous darkness and the definition of the light that runs through the novel. As the light reaches into the house, it “*sharpen[s] the edges of chairs and tables,*” but in the shadowy recesses of the room, “*everything became softly*

amorphous, as if the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid" (19). The sun continues to "[fall] *in sharp wedges inside the room*" as the day continues, and "*shapes took on mass and edge*" as the light reaches in farther and "*flocks of shadow were driven before it and conglomerated and hung in many-pleated folds in the background*" (79). As the sun sinks lower in the sky, the shadows return and with them, the amorphousness. The light becomes brown and "*all for a moment wavered and bent in uncertainty and ambiguity, as if a great moth sailing through the room had shadowed the immense solidity of chairs and tables with floating wings*" (133).

The movement of the light charts the continuation and change of time, but the description of the waves is similar in every chapter: a continuity in the face of change. The water may move in and out. At dawn, it "*broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand*" (3), but later it "*no longer visited the further pools or reached the dotted black line which lay irregularly marked upon the beach*" (132). However, the waves stay the same; the underlying rhythm of their sound never ceases. Many sections end with a description of this sound: "*meanwhile the concussion of the waves breaking fell with muffled thuds, like logs, falling on the shore*" (19), "*the waves drummed on the shore*" (53), "*they fell with a regular thud*" (78), "*the waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping*" (108), "*the waves... fell in one long concussion*" (152), and the final sentence of the book, "*the waves broke upon the shore*" (220). The metaphors and images used to describe the waves differ, but the sound of them crashing in the background is a constant that ties all of the sections together.

The two images that reappear the most throughout the frame narrative are the waves and the changing sunlight. Every section except the last begins with the position of the sun and the strength of the sunlight in the opening sentence. In the beginning, "*the sun had not yet risen*" (3).

Then, “*the sun rose higher*” (19) and “*the sun rose*” (52). The next section begins, “*the sun, risen, no longer couched on a green mattress darting a fitful glance through watery jewels*” (78). Then, “*the sun had risen to its full height*” (107), before “*the sun no longer stood in the middle of the sky*” (120). Then “*the sun had now sunk lower in the sky*” (132) and the following section begins: “*the sun was sinking*” (152). Finally, “*the sun had sunk*” (174). The sun gives the reader a reference point for the time of day and its movement constitutes a change, unlike the waves, which do not change. However, the words used to describe the position of the sun do not vary. The sun rises and then sinks. The words stay the same, mimicking the way that wave time moves forward and yet stays the same. The sun progresses through the sky, but the words describing that movement are the same every time.

The waves move in and out throughout the novel and will continue to do so; there is a cyclical nature to life. In the beginning, “*the sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it*” (3). By the end, in the second-to-last dip into the frame narrative, the narrator notes, “*Now the sun had sunk. Sky and sea were indistinguishable*” (174). Returning once again to the sea and sky, we have moved virtually not at all: from “indistinguishable” to “indistinguishable.” Ending with the narrators in late middle age, their lives will soon be coming to a close as their respective days are ending, but the cycle of time will continue, just as the waves continue to move away from and back to the shore and just as the sun rises and sets. As this day ends, and the lives of the characters draw to a close, the stage is set for the next day and time and life will go on without them.

The Unifying Rhythm of the Waves

In the long passages of character monologue, Woolf explores this idea of an underlying rhythm to the world in the form of waves. The characters express this feeling of underlying rhythm to different extents. Bernard, the storyteller and aspiring author, expounds the most on the interconnectedness of life and the people in it. He feels this rhythm the most. In a moment of depression, he has perhaps the best description of life as a series of waves:

Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? a last ripple of the wave? A trick of water in some gutter where, burbling, it dies away? Let me touch the table—so—and thus recover my sense of the moment. A sideboard covered with cruets; a basket full of rolls; a plate of bananas—these are comfortable sights. But if there are no stories, what end can there be and what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it. Sitting up late at night it seems strange not to have more control. Pigeon-holes are not then very useful. It is strange how force ebbs away and away into some dry creek. Sitting alone, it seems we are spent; our waters can only just surround feebly that spike of sea-holly; we cannot reach that further pebble so as to wet it. It is over, we are ended. But wait—I sat all night waiting—an impulse again runs through us; we rise, we toss back a mane of white spray; we pound on the shore; we are not to be confined. That is, I shaved and washed; did not wake my wife, had breakfast; put on my hat, and went out to earn my living. After Monday, Tuesday comes (198).

Bernard likens his life and himself, as well as everyone else through his use of first-person plural, to a wave. Lonely and spent by life, he thinks it impossible that he could keep going. The pebble is out of reach for him and this inability to reach would mean the end of his life.

However, he finds a spurt of energy and is able to send up a spray of white foam allowing him to keep trundling on, to keep pounding at the shore. And just as the waves go out so far it seems there will never be enough water to fill the shore again before rushing back in with “a mane of white spray,” time continues and “after Monday, Tuesday comes.” This wave metaphor is also one Woolf used about her own life. In a section of her diary titled “A State of Mind” she likens her depression to a wave: “[I] feel the wave beginning & watch the light whitening & wonder how, this time, breakfast & daylight will overcome it” (110). She views her mental state as a fluctuating wave and, as Bernard does, uses mundane life such as breakfast, to ground herself.

This image of white sea foam is one used multiple times by Rhoda throughout *The Waves*. Uncomfortable at a party at which she does not particularly want to be, Rhoda sees herself as “a cork on a rough sea” made up of the others’ thoughts and judgments. “The wave breaks,” she muses, “I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room” (77). Later, Rhoda laments, “I have no face. I am like the foam that races over the beach or the moonlight that falls arrowlike here on a tin can, here on a spike of the mailed sea holly, or a bone or a half-eaten boat” (94). Like Louis, Rhoda sees all of humanity as a large wave. And also like Louis, she sees herself as somehow apart from this. She is not the wave, with its strength and depth, but instead identifies with the foam generated by the wave, white and colorless, without face or identity. And yet, the sea foam is still part of the wave; Rhoda is still part of this wave of humanity even if she feels apart from it. As Bernard also identifies with the sea foam, this recurring image again reinforces that the different characters are really one collective.

Susan also views the underlying order of her life as a series of waves. She wishes for a more domestic life than the others, envisaging her future husband and children living on a large estate outside the city. “I shall lie like a field bearing crops in rotation,” Susan says, “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” (95). Like Bernard, Susan imagines the passing of time as waves, but in a more concrete manner. Her children and the future generations will carry her forward in time; she too notes the repetitiveness of time, but in relation to her physical life and her future children. In this way, she connects herself with the future; the waves of her life blend into those of her children’s.

Waves, Doors, and Threads

Throughout *The Waves*, Woolf uses many different concrete metaphors to describe the passage of time and space, including the waves themselves, but also rhythm, doors opening and closing, and threads. Her search for something mystic and meaningful is reflected in her uses of concrete metaphors to try to understand abstract concepts. The easiest connection to make is between the waves and the rhythm with which Woolf hoped to draw together her novel.

Throughout *The Waves*, the actual waves themselves are sometimes described by color or reflection, but are most often characterized by sound. The waves are “sighing” at the beginning as they pull in and out along the shore (3), they are sighing at the end (174). Once they are a “concussion, breaking with muffled thuds” (19); later they are “one long concussion” (153). Twice, they are “thuds” (19) against the shoreline, or more particularly, the “thud of a great beast stamping” (108). Sometimes they “splashed” (52) and other times they “spattered” (120), and at the end of the day, the narrator reports that the waves were “breaking... into the recesses of sonorous caves” (174). This is metaphorical rhythm at its most sonic—its most literal. The monologues themselves may seem disjointed, but there is a drum. Sound acts as unifying element uniting the different elements of the story.

Second there is the door opening and closing. “Now slackness and indifference invade us,” laments Jinny at the party, “The door opens. The door goes on opening” (75). The next paragraph switches to Rhoda’s narration:

I shall twitch the curtain and look at the moon. Draughts of oblivion shall quench my agitation. The door opens; the tiger leaps. The door opens; the terror rushes in; terror upon terror, pursuing me. Let me visit furtively the treasures I have laid apart. Pools lie on the other side of the world reflecting marble columns. The swallow dips her wing in dark pools. But here the door opens and people come; they come towards me (75).

Later, Rhoda regrets that “every time the door opens I am interrupted” and she serves as the connector between this idea of the door and the waves. “Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far

every time the door opens. The wave breaks” (77). The door continually opening is another image of time. Things are perpetually changing; the door is always opening and ushering in new people and experiences.

Writing *The Waves*, Woolf herself “felt the spring beginning... & all the doors opening” (*Diary* 287). For Woolf too, the door opening meant new people and new beginnings. Yet the door does not only open, but also must close. Bernard notes the passing of time through “a child playing—a summer evening—doors will open and shut, will keep opening and shutting” (113). And the movement of the doors echoes the movement of the waves. Jinny muses upon “here, in this room, are the abraded and battered shells cast on the shore. The door goes on opening” (127). The waves of time wash in through the door and leave the discarded shells, beaten by the waves and left behind by the waves which must wash back out. The door will continue to open, but as “wave time” dictates, the waves themselves must wash out again as well.

Louis ties doors to waves to rhythm. “The door perpetually shuts and opens,” Louis says, “I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation and despair. If this is all, this is worthless. Yet I feel, too, the rhythm of the eating-house. It is like a waltz tune, eddying in and out, round and round” (67). The door echoes the same flux that is marked by the waves. The word “eddy” further ties the motion of the waves to this musical rhythm. As time passes, the waves keep returning and the door keeps opening and closing. Again, “wave time” both progresses and moves in cyclically. Throughout *The Waves* there are thirty-six references to a door opening and shutting, out of one hundred and eleven total references to a door. This continual repetition creates a rhythm in and of itself. The same images continue to appear. And this door imagery is associated with a sound as well. Waves crash and sigh. Doors click and tap.

The waves are a concrete metaphor trying to encapsulate the abstract concept of time. The doors do similar work. Then, the two are mixed. Woolf attempts to better understand time by making it concrete. She creates a relation between abstract metaphysical concepts and the physical world. This is not sacred time, but time grounded in the earthly world, time defined by natural elements and by human action. The waves offer a more objective, natural clock while the doors rely on humans to open and close them. Human action creates this metaphor for time, just as human experience creates the “spirit” underlying Woolf’s project.

Finally, there is thread. Unlike waves and doors, the thread shows connections between characters. The images do not oppose each other, however, but work in tandem. Thread is an old metaphor, going back to the idea of one’s life as fate’s thread. Just as with time, Woolf makes this image literal and concrete. A literal needle and thread appears in Susan’s monologues. The image of sewing is a domestic one and fits with Susan’s rural life. She is not an intellectual like Bernard or Neville. She is a farmer’s wife and a mother and has real experience with thread.

Here, Susan sits sewing at night with her husband:

I hold the scissors and snip off hollyhocks, who went to Elvedon and trod on rotten oak-apples, and saw the lady writing and the gardeners with their great brooms. We ran panting back lest we should be shot and nailed like stoats to the wall. Now I measure, I preserve. At night I sit in the arm-chair and stretch my arm for my sewing; and hear my husband snore; and look up when the light from a passing car dazzles the windows and feel the waves of my life tossed, broken, round me who am rooted and hear cries, and see others’ lives eddying like straws around the piers of a bridge while I push my needle in and out and draw my thread through the calico (140).

Susan weaves childhood remembrances together with the image of the sewing and strengthens the power of the thread metaphor. Waves are here too. Her life breaks and tosses around her, but her self, with her sewing, is fast and firm. The waves make to the shore; the friends remain friends.

Aside from its connection to the waves and rhythm, the thread also represents human connection. Thread runs through both *The Waves* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Lady Bruton invites Hugh Whitbread and Peter Walsh to dine with her. Once her guests depart, Lady Bruton muses, “[Hugh and Peter] went further and further from her, being attached to her by a thin thread (since they had lunched with her) which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one’s friends were attached to one’s body, after lunching with them, by a thin thread” (112). When she falls asleep after the lunch, the slumber “lets the thread snap” (112). The thread clearly comes from a genuine conversation and connection, a genuine relationship, between the people, attained via the lunch. The characters are connected to one another by their shared experiences. This same idea comes back in *The Waves*, but is drawn out further. After Percival’s death, Bernard imagines him still alive, walking away from him. “You have gone across the court, further and further,” he envisages, “drawing finer and finer the thread between us” (112). Neville too, imagines relationships as fine threads. Listening to a couple fighting in his apartment building, he surmises, “It is the end of their relationship. Thus we spin around us infinitely fine filaments and construct a system” (130). This is the system Woolf was exploring throughout her novels; the mystical system that grounds them in place of a religious system.

All of the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* are clearly distinct and separate. However, they are all connected by these social filaments. Each one’s life is tied intrinsically to the others’, to the point that in the end even Septimus’s story becomes entwined with Clarissa’s story, though he is dead and the two have never met. The difference in *The Waves* is that the characters’ threads and consciousnesses are all so intertwined that instead of many connected filaments, they become one skein. Bernard says it explicitly: “We are not single; we are one” (48). While the

thread imagery was there in Woolf's earlier novels, she brings it into the mystical project in *The Waves*. It is not God forming the threads of connection between people, or even Lady Bruton twitching the strings. Instead, as Neville says, the characters themselves create the system of threads that connect them and in this connection, Woolf sees the nebulous "spirit" for which she is looking.

Characters in *The Waves*

Woolf also creates a parallel between the waxing and waning light on the waves and the interconnectedness of the characters. Unlike many of Woolf's other novels, the characters in *The Waves* give the reader their narration directly. They all seem to be speaking to some entity—either Woolf herself as author, the third person narrator who mostly appears in the frame narrative, or sometimes each other—and the reader is told who is speaking with clear indications such as "Louis said" or "Rhoda said." As opposed to simply putting the characters' thoughts right onto the page, Woolf uses the word "said" to flag them. However, this denotation does not necessarily make it easier to recognize the speakers. The small "Bernard said" or "Rhoda said" is easily missed when switching between narrators and there is never any other third-person narration of actions or setting.

Also, the six characters speak in the same style and often repeat the same ideas or images. This is most evident in the first sections of the novel when the six narrators are children and are together at school. They tell various events multiple times from their different perspectives. Early on, Jinny kisses Louis behind a garden hedge. "She has found me," Louis says, "I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered" (7). "What moved the leaves?" Jinny says, "What moves my heart, my legs? And I dashed in here, seeing you green as a bush, like a branch, very still, Louis, with your eyes fixed. 'Is he dead?' I thought, and kissed

you, with my heart jumping under my pink frock like the leaves, which go on moving, though there is nothing to move them” (7). In the next paragraph, Susan notes, “through the chink in the hedge...I saw her kiss him. I raised my head from my flower-pot and looked through a chink in the hedge. I saw her kiss him. I saw them, Jinny and Louis, kissing. Now I will wrap my agony inside my pocket-handkerchief” (7). While all of their characters are together, the six of them repeat the same events from slightly differing points of view, blurring the boundaries between them.

However, even after their lives split them apart, they continue sound alike. “We melt into each other with phrases” Bernard says (9). Bernard and Neville are highly educated academics, Louis is a banker, Susan is a rural farmer’s wife, Jinny a society girl, and Rhoda an enigma entirely, yet the style of speaking stays consistent throughout the novel. Often the characters also repeat the same thoughts though they are no longer together. In a moment of self-consciousness, Louis laments, “I am the weakest, the youngest them all. I am a child looking at his feet and the little runnels that the stream has made in the gravel” (69). Later, uncomfortable at a party, Jinny remarks, “Hide me, I cry, protect me, for I am the youngest, the most naked of you all” (76). Despite their differing life and social circumstances, Louis and Jinny are still having the same thoughts across time and space. As Bernard says at the end of the novel, “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” (205). By creating this intense connection between the character, such as with the threads, Woolf again shows that “we are not single; we are one.”

Wave Time

There are multiple ways to structure time in a work of literature. In *Time in Literature*, Hans Meyerhoff explains how people usually view time in their own lives: in a linear fashion

that “seems to convey an immediate awareness that certain elements succeed each other, change, or endure” (1). In this view of time, one event follows the previous. Meyerhoff also explains the theory of cyclical time:

The theory is patterned after the cycle of birth, growth, decline, and death according to which we experience the direction of time in an organic world. It is thus a theoretical projection into history, or the universe, of certain elements believed to be directly given in human experience. The theory posits the changing cycle of births and deaths as the one unchanging, permanent, i.e., timeless, law of history (79).

Cyclical time is time that repeats itself. He adds that it is often linked to myths, a genre of literature that has a timeless quality (80) and therefore has a mystic element as well. The idea of cyclical time can offer a secular mysticism in the idea of a universal history as religion breaks down and its promises of an eternal space outside of time no longer seem true (104).

Instead of circular or linear time, *The Waves* runs on a combination of both in a kind of “wave time” that creates a rhythm running through the novel. In her diary from December 1930, just before the novel’s publication, Woolf describes it:

What [the novel] wants is presumably unity; but it is I think rather good (I am talking to myself over the fire about *The Waves*). Suppose I could run all the scenes together more?—by rhythm chiefly. So as to avoid those cuts; so as to make the blood run like a torrent from end to end—I don’t want the waste that the breaks give; I want to avoid chapters; that indeed is my achievement, if any here: a saturated, unchopped, completeness; changes of scene, of mood, of person, done without spilling a drop. Now if it cd. be worked over with heat & currency that’s all it wants. And I am getting my blood up. (temp. 99) (p. 343).

Woolf’s characters often invoke this rhythm as well throughout the novel. Neville thinks, “we must oppose the waste and deformity of the world, its crowds eddying round and round disgorged and trampling” (131). *The Waves* is like this, lacking any breaks between chapters and barely any breaks between characters; there is no “wasteful” narration but only characters and only dialogue. And with the word “eddy,” Woolf brings the water imagery back in, connecting this idea of waste with the idea again of society as an eddying body of water, as a

wave. Louis also continues this idea of unbroken continuity. “I too feel the rhythm of the eating-house,” he says. “It is like a waltz tune, eddying in and out, round and round...Where is the break in this continuity? What the fissure through which one sees disaster? The circle is unbroken; the harmony complete. Here is the central rhythm; here is the common mainspring” (67). Again, the word “eddying” is repeating, connecting this musical image of rhythm with the water and the waves. In her diary, Woolf also links with water imagery with blood, describing the blood of her book flowing together into one stream, without a drop missing. Bernard brings up this drop in *The Waves*, but instead it is a drop of time. “And time,” Bernard says, “lets fall its drop. The drop that has formed on the roof of my mind time, forming, lets fall its drop. Last week, as I stood shaving, the drop fell” (134). Time is conceptualized like a drop of water or a drop of blood.

One character who goes against Woolf’s ideal of an unbroken continuity is Rhoda. She often feels her life is interrupted, broken, and shattered. “I hate all details of the individual life,” Rhoda moans, “I am broken into separate pieces; I am no longer one” (76). Rhoda serves as the opposite for Louis, the character who most keenly inhabits this ideal of an uninterrupted continuity. “I have lived thousands of years,” Louis says. “But now I am compact; now I am gathered together this fine morning...I have fused my many lives into one” (121). As *The Waves* is a composite of the lives of its six protagonists, Louis is a composite of past lives. His view of time, as opposed to Rhoda’s, is also closest to the view of time throughout the novel itself. We hear in his voice:

Whisper of leaves, water running down the gutters, green depths flecked with dahlias or zinnias; I, now a duke, now Plato, companion of Socrates; the tramp of dark men and yellow men migrating east, west, north and south; the eternal procession, women going with attaché cases down the Strand as they went once with pitchers to the Nile; all the furled and close-packed leaves of my many-folded life are now summed in my name; now a full-grown man; now upright standing in sun or rain, I must drop heavy

as a hatchet and cut the oak with my sheer weight, for if I deviate, glancing this way, or that way, I shall fall like snow and be wasted” (121).

Louis conceives of his life as “wave time.” There is progression, as in a linear story. Life moves on, people die, and civilization grows from the Nile to the busy urban Strand. Yet, a cyclical nature is preserved as well. Though the women have moved from the Nile to the Strand, attaché cases call to mind pitchers. A clear continuity is drawn. And again, the word “waste” appears. Just as the rhythm of the waves reduces wasted space on the page in *The Waves*, Louis worries that he will be “wasted” if he is to fall out of the continuity of his life that has brought him to this point.

Henri Bergson makes the distinction between different conceptions of time in his essay *Time and Free Will*. He outlines his concept of *la durée* or duration, a pure consciousness and conception of self without outside influences. This pure duration would be “when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states... [It] forms the past and the present states into an organic whole” (100). Bergson says that too often time is clouded with ideas about space, resulting in people viewing different moments in their lives as all separate and distinct dots on a line. This physical conception of time as objects in space is not the way a consciousness truly experiences time. There is a Bergsonian movement of time in *The Waves*. The moments all flow together without chapter breaks or division. The movement of time is both linear and cyclical. Again, Woolf’s project is to get close to the true experience of consciousness and time and to find meaning in human experience and *The Waves* mirrors Bergson’s idea of the true human experience.

Waves in Other Novels

While the waves were specifically meant to structure the narration of *The Waves*, wave imagery appears all Woolf’s novels. It is most potent in *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, *To the*

Lighthouse and *Jacob's Room*, which use waves to bind the story together. Waves strike the ship in *The Voyage Out* as it journeys to South America: “instead of cleaving new waves perpetually, the same waves kept returning” (30). Even in this linear narrative, in other words, far from the experiments in time that will come with *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, the beginnings of wave time are already there. In *Jacob's Room*, waves also measure time. As Jacob and his friends debate about the Ancient Greeks with “ages lap[ping] at their feet like waves fit for sailing” (473). The narrator observes, “the waves tumble and lollop much the same hour after hour” (451), and later “the suck and sighing of the waves sounded gently, persistently, forever” (547).

The narrator of *To the Lighthouse* mentions “the same dreary waves breaking week after week” (5). Just as in *The Voyage Out*, the emphasis is not only on the repetitiveness of the waves' motion, but on the fact that they are the same waves themselves. These waves come back “night after night, summer and winter” (134), again showing both the progression of “wave time” and the way it repeats itself, again and again. The rhythm of the waves lends constancy to all three novels. Waves also appear in *Night and Day*, which describes society as “some elemental force, such as the waves upon the ocean of humanity” (280). Rhoda and Jinny would recognize this view.

Emptiness in *The Waves* and “Time Passes”

“Why, look...at the clock ticking on the mantelpiece? Time passes, yes,” (129) says Neville in *The Waves*, echoing a connection between the objective, third-person narrated frame narrative of *The Waves* and the objective, third-person narrated “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse*. In *To the Lighthouse*, which is saturated with the consciousnesses of its characters, “Time Passes” comprises ten pages of objective narration. The frame story of *The Waves*,

narrated objectively in ten sections, offers a similar break from the intense subjectivity of the dialogic structure of the rest of the novel. Otherwise, *The Waves* allows the reader to hear only directly from the characters themselves. Details of setting and time appear only when germane to the characters who are speaking. The frame narrative is almost jarring in its objectivity and lack of first-person narrator.

The frame narrative and the main narrative in *The Waves* look different. The objective third-person narration is italicized, and the words themselves look like waves. This adds to the difference in feeling and tone between those sections and the sections of the novel spoken by the characters. Often, the narration just before a section of the frame story ends on an image that is reflected in the frame story. Here, Rhoda thinks about life and her place within it:

Beneath us lie the lights of the herring fleet. The cliffs vanish. 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. The white petals will be darkened with sea water. They will float for a moment and then sink. Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me. Yet that tree has bristling branches; that is the hard line of a cottage roof. Those bladder shapes painted red and yellow are faces. Putting my foot to the ground I step gingerly and press my foot against the hard door of a Spanish inn” (151).

Everything she describes is put in relation with how it makes her feel or how it relates to her life.

The next page shifts into the impersonal register, while using some of the same images. The narrator describes how “*the waves, as they neared the shore, were robbed of light, and fell in one long concussion, like a wall falling, a wall of grey stone, unpierced by any chink of light*” (152).

These waves are just as tumultuous as the ones Rhoda sees, and both passages note their greyness, but there is no personal pronoun or feeling in the second account. Rhoda sees the waves and wonders if she will sink under them; the narrator offers a cold description. After pages and pages of narration tied so closely to one character or another, the sections of more objective narration feel almost empty in their lack of personal feelings or descriptions.

The “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse* feels similarly empty. There is also a marked difference in punctuation between that section and the rest of the novel as the most important parts of “Time Passes” are enclosed in brackets, a punctuation mark not found anywhere else in the novel. Though *To the Lighthouse* does not use the same first-person, monologue-style narration as *The Waves*, its extensive use of indirect free speech causes it to feel intensely personal. “Time Passes” similarly evacuates the text of heart. The first section of *To the Lighthouse*, “The Window,” does include some description of setting and landscape here but almost always written through the perspective of one of the characters. Lily Briscoe, after watching Mrs. Ramsay head upstairs, looks outside and contemplates:

So she righted herself after the shock of the event, and quite unconsciously and incongruously, used the branches of the elm trees outside to help her stabilise her position. Her world was changing; they were still. The event had given her a sense of movement. All must be in order. She must get that right and that right, she thought, insensibly approving of the dignity of the trees’ stillness, and now again of the superb upward rise (like the beak of a ship up a wave) of the elm branches as the wind raised them. For it was windy (she stood a moment to look out). It was windy, so that the leaves now and then brushed open a star, and the stars themselves seemed to be shaking and darting light and trying to flash out between the edges of the leaves” (113).

Here, the narrator is not only describing the stillness of the trees but that stillness is intrinsically tied to Lily’s outlook. The elm trees are not left to stand alone but judged and approved by Lily. Her experience and her opinions saturate the description. This contrasts with “Time Passes,” whose “autumn trees gleam in the yellow moonlight, in the light of harvest moons, the light which mellows the energy of labour, and smooths the stubble, and brings the wave lapping blue to shore” (127). Now there is no one left in the house to judge the trees. The house is so empty “there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say ‘this is he’ or ‘this is he’” (126) and the narration is also devoid of the personal perspectives and opinions of the characters’ voices simply in the description alone.

This emptiness permeates every mention of the characters themselves in “Time Passes.” Four times the narrator gives updates about the Ramsay family and their friends. These interruptions appear in square brackets, a form of punctuation unique to this section. The first comes after a short scene with the Ramsays and an initial description of the empty house. The narrator posits how futile it would be for a confused sleepwalker to ask questions of the sea. Without preamble, “[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]” (128). The sentence is jarring. Mrs. Ramsay’s death comes as just as much a surprise to the reader as it had to the other characters. It is equally as jarring that after spending so much time inside Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts, the reader learns of her death impersonally and in a sentence. Sally Minogue says this sudden shift in narration is an unexpected shift and is “abrupt in its effect on the reader, deliberately breaking with what has gone before” (286). She finds the success of “Time Passes” to be in the descent into impersonality, in its “strengthening its grip as the section progresses” (286). The last scene the reader gets of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew seems offhand and a long section with Mr. Ramsay comes before the section that relates their deaths. Then the brackets serve to separate people from this intense impersonality (287). Objects are personified in “Time Passes,” but the “ordinary mortals of the novel” are relegated to the brackets, tangential to the main story (Minogue 287). Part of what makes “Time Passes” so unsettling is the shift from the “The Window,” which offers some “view of the experienced world” to “Time Passes,” which makes the reader feel that these inanimate objects may be realer than she is (288-9). Nothing like this happens in the frame story of *The Waves*, yet there is a sense of impersonality throughout, a sense that the waves will continue going in and out and the sun continue rising and sinking

regardless of what humans populate the scene. This impersonality relates to Woolf's mystical project too. Drawing her spirituality from humans and human connection, the beginning of "Time Passes" and the *The Waves* offer a glimpse of a world devoid of human consciousness, of "the things that exist when we aren't there" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 114). Her chapters of emptiness only reinforce that her spirituality stems from human experience.

"Time Passes" and the frame story of *The Waves* both move through time differently from the surrounding text. The first section of *To the Lighthouse* is told in a more traditional way than "Time Passes." Though the narration and tone may not be commonplace, the reader can easily follow the pacing of events. In "Time Passes," time suddenly moves much differently. It speeds up dramatically, covering ten years in ten pages. Inversely, in *The Waves*, it is the sections of frame narrative that move through the course of a single day and the rest of the novel covers the characters' entire lives. There is a precedent for this experiment in time in *To the Lighthouse*, but there, the three sections are all following the same characters and the same plotline. The reader may be surprised by time speeding up dramatically in "Time Passes," but the house it describes and the characters who are mentioned are familiar from "The Window." There is not this same delineation in *The Waves*. The two timelines are intertwined and the narration switches fluidly from one to the other, despite the fact they do not necessarily even seem to be describing the same things. The passage of the single day throughout the wave sections then becomes a metaphor for the passage of time in the characters' lives, but there is no timeline that seems to be the main one or the one that came first. The reader receives the stories simultaneously, despite the fact that they progress at different speeds and in different ways. *The Waves* itself runs on wave time, one story can be progressing linearly, and one cyclically, and they can be at the same time simultaneous.

Meyerhoff articulates this difference in narration of time by describing the difference between objective and subjective time. Subjective time can function differently depending on the circumstances (12). Sometimes hours seem to pass as easily as minutes and sometimes each tick of the second hand on the clock feels painfully slow. Contrasting this subjective view of time, “we are constantly a part of an objective time order measured quantitatively and uniformly according to the behavior of objects in nature” (13).¹ This objective time stems from the measurement of time by the movement of celestial bodies and natural phenomena. Time similarly passes differently in these sections of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. Without a subjective consciousness, time itself moves more objectively and according to nature instead of human beings.

Changing Writing Style and Semicolons

Woolf’s writing also mimics waves. She wrote that she did not want any “breaks” between the flow of her thoughts, and so there is not even in her style, both throughout *The Waves* and her other novels. Woolf is well-known for semicolons, commas, and single-sentence paragraphs. There are over twelve hundred semicolons in *The Waves* and this structure of linking phrases by semicolon rather than full stop mimics the motion of the waves throughout the novel. Here is Susan after she has returned from school to her home in the country:

But already these are not school fields; these are not school hedge; the men in those fields are doing real things; they fill carts with real hay; and those are real cows, not school cows. But the carbolic smell of corridors and the chalky smell of schoolrooms is still in my nostrils. The glazed, shiny look of matchboard is still in my eyes. I must wait for the fields and hedges, and woods and fields, and steep railway cuttings, sprinkled with gorse

¹ Madeleine B. Stern also compares *The Waves* with “Time Passes” in her article “Counterclockwise: Flux of Time in Literature.” She similarly notes that outside the brackets and in the frame story of *The Waves* passes the objective “clock time” (358). This time flows together. The other parts of the novels that relate the lives of its characters represent a break in this flow of time, though she connects this more to Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness style and relates it to other stream-of-consciousness writers (359).

bushes, and trucks in sidings, and tunnels and suburban gardens with women hanging out washing, and then fields again and children swinging on gates to cover it, to bury it deep, this school that I have hated” (43).

The first sentence of the paragraph could easily have been five separate sentences, yet Woolf instead keeps it as one and uses the semicolon rather than the full stop. It creates a sense of connection among her words and thoughts similar to the connection between the images and characters in the novel. The last sentence in that paragraph, instead of using semicolons, uses commas to separate many different ideas and yet combine them into one drawn-out sentence. This is a technique Woolf uses many times throughout *The Waves* and by creating these long lists, she creates a rhythm that is drawn along like a wave. Her sentences flow together like waves. This paragraph also shows the repetition that is throughout the waves. Here, Susan continues to use the word “fields,” “fields and hedges, woods and fields,” which also creates a rhythm. Her narration is like a wave, continuing to return back to the same words and the same ideas and creating prose music.

Bernard, the storyteller and the one the most often aligned with Woolf herself, thinks through a style very similar to Woolf’s when reading one of his poems:

Certainly, one cannot read this poem without effort... One must have patience and infinite care and let the light sound, whether of spiders’ delicate feet on a leaf or the chuckle of water in some irrelevant drainpipe, unfold too. Nothing is to be rejected in fear or horror. The poet who has written the page (what I read with people talking) has withdrawn. There are no commas or semicolons. The lines do not run in convenient lengths. Much is sheer nonsense. One must be sceptical, but throw caution to the winds and when the door opens accept absolutely. Also sometimes weep; also cut away ruthlessly with a slice of the blade soot, bark, hard accretions of all sorts. And so (while they talk) let down one’s net deeper and deeper and gently draw in and bring to the surface what he said and she said and make it poetry (145).

Bernard is describing an unknown poem, but what he says applies to *The Waves*. It does take effort to read *The Waves*, with the multiple perspectives all woven together with little differentiation and the frame narrative that does not, at first, seem connected to the story at all.

While there are plenty of semicolons and commas in Woolf's novel, they often take the place of a full stop, creating narration that flows together but is often difficult to decipher. Because of this punctuation, Woolf's sentences hardly ever "run in convenient lengths" and, especially on a first read, much of *The Waves* also appears to be sheer nonsense. One of Woolf's characters himself voices potential criticisms of her work, of which he himself is a part, which in turn offers a defense of her style and also asserts the value in reading it. Bernard's monologue also gives insight into Woolf's personal project. She hopes to take things from the world around her—spiders' feet and whatever he and she say—and make it art, make it poetry.

Woolf has cultivated this style since her earlier works. While the semicolons are few and far between in *The Voyage Out*, in her next novel, *Night and Day*, there are one or more sentences with at least one semicolon every page and a half, sometimes with multiple semicolons linking multiple thoughts. However, unlike Woolf's later novels that use semicolons to link disparate thoughts together, the excessive punctuation in *Night and Day* mostly connects similar ideas and thoughts. For example: "Something about the truth was in it; how to see the truth is our great chance in the world" (196). This semicolon bridges between two ideas about truth as opposed to linking multiple ideas or points of view, as in other Woolf novels. Yet the wavelike elements of Woolf's sentences are already starting to emerge.

Jacob's Room is the novel wherein Woolf's signature syntactical style is first truly displayed. The novel is peppered with semi-colons, which complement experiments in point of view. Anticipating the fluid way switches between points of view in later novels, the narrator occasionally changes point of view within a single sentence. Chapter five relates the thoughts of an old woman sitting inside St. Paul's:

A magnificent place for an old woman to rest in, by the very side of the great Duke's bones, whose victories mean nothing to her, whose name she knows not, though she

never fails to greet the little angels opposite, as she passes out, wishing the like on her own tomb, for the leathern curtain of the heart has flapped wide, and out steal on tiptoe the thoughts of rest, sweet melodies... Old Spicer, jute merchant, thought nothing of the kind though (465).

The thoughts of Mrs. Lidgett flow into the mind of Old Spicer, a minor character who receives scant introduction and is not mentioned again. The ellipsis itself is a grammatical construction not present in the novels before *Jacob's Room* and which Woolf uses every other page throughout the novel. The ellipses sometimes fade into a new point of view, as above, sometimes they are used at the end of a sentence of dialogue to show the character's voice fading away (470), and sometimes they are just added into the middle of paragraphs throughout the novel (498). The ellipses evoke uncertainty throughout *Jacob's Room* as neither the narrator nor the punctuation itself can be definitive.

Death in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Voyage Out*

Without a religious understanding of death, the death scenes in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Voyage Out* are places where Woolf can further explore her own spiritual ideas. In "Time Passes," Mrs. Ramsay's death in brackets subverts expectations of what will and will not be deemed important by the narrator. Similar subversions appear *The Voyage Out*. That novel's protagonist also dies in one sentence. The difference between the two death scenes however, measures artistic evolution.

Mrs. Ramsay is the principle lens character at the beginning of *To the Lighthouse* and her death in "Time Passes" shocks both her family and the reader. After a long description of the Ramsays' empty home, Woolf imagines a sleepwalker wandering down to the beach and "bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul" (128). But asking metaphysical questions would be futile, Woolf posits, too futile to "tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer" (128). The next sentence, enclosed in square brackets, states, "[Mr.

Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arm out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.]” (128). This abrupt and offhand death catches the reader by surprise. It hits the reader much like the sudden death of a person in real life.

“Time Passes” not only lacks any feeling of Mrs. Ramsay, it also lacks the richness of the different consciousnesses of the first part. The first chapter includes six lines of dialogue without any free indirect discourse (125). The second chapter follows an objective description of the house by the narrator: “so with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began” (125). There was hardly any uninflected description in “The Window” as almost all of the descriptions of the setting, the house, and the ocean are from a specific character’s point of view and in their words. Here, there is no lens character. The narrative emptiness mimics the emptiness of the house, before the reader is even aware of Mrs. Ramsay’s death. There is no overt emotion in this narration; there are no descriptions of mourning right after Mrs. Ramsay’s death is revealed. This creates a sense that Mrs. Ramsay’s death is overall unimportant to the larger narrative. The reader blunders into Mrs. Ramsay’s death just as Mr. Ramsay did, according to Sally Minogue, and the construction with the square brackets rather than round serves as a break in the flow of the narration. This minimizes the importance of the brackets’ content and “deliberately robs the reader of what would seem the natural, sympathetic, response” (290). Randall Stevenson and Jane Goldman also note the use of the brackets to minimize the importance of Mrs. Ramsay’s death and to remind the reader of “the inconsequentiality of even the richest life” (174). The house will continue to decay and time will continue to pass without her. However, this lack of explicit emotion following her death also makes that one sentence much more emotionally impactful for

the reader. With no one to mourn for Mrs. Ramsay, that task falls to the reader, the only one to feel the shock and grief of this moment within a narrative that appears indifferent.

Rachel Vinrace's death in *The Voyage Out* appears to differ greatly from Mrs. Ramsay's. It follows many pages of describing her prolonged illness. By the time her death arrives it is clearly marked as something important. However, death itself hints at the experimental techniques Woolf will use later. Unlike in *To the Lighthouse*, in which the reader leaves Mrs. Ramsay perfectly well at the end of the first section, *The Voyage Out* allows the reader into Rachel's feverish mind in her last days. The narrator describes how Rachel feels herself coming to consciousness at "the surface of the dark, sticky pool" of illness, "on top of the wave conscious of some pain, but chiefly of weakness" (327). Her thoughts are "something of an effort" as she tries to recall her mind, which is "driven to some remote corner of her body, or escaped and gone flitting about the room" (328). In a novel dominated by Rachel and her circle of family and friends, her illness represents an important event and something on which the narrator focuses—abiding, thereby, by novelistic convention.

However, it is the actual moment of Rachel's death that foreshadows what is to come. The last the reader hears directly from Rachel's point of view is five pages before her actual death. She worries about her fleeting mind and wishes to be alone; "she wished for nothing else in the world" (328). Five pages later and she is dead. Those intervening pages enter the other characters' minds, chiefly Rachel's fiancé Terrence's consciousness. Rachel's last days are not narrated by herself, creating a similar sense of distance as that between Mrs. Ramsay's death and the narrative of *To the Lighthouse*.

Knowledge of Rachel's actual death also comes not through her own experience, but through Terrence's narration as he sits in vigil by her bed. The room is dark and "it was

impossible to see any change in her face,” but Terrence listens to Rachel’s breathing, “conscious of the peace invading every corner of his soul” (333). Then, in the course of one sentence, Rachel dies. “Once [Terrence] held his breath and listened acutely; she was still breathing; he went on thinking for some time; they seemed to be thinking together; he seemed to be Rachel as well as himself; and then he listened again; no, she had ceased to breathe” (334) and with that, Rachel is dead. This moment has the same feeling of abruptness as the death of Mrs. Ramsay. There is no drama, no overtly expressed emotion even.

Neither Rachel nor Mrs. Ramsay utter any last words, think final thoughts, or perform final actions themselves. Their deaths are marked by the emptiness created by the absences of their narration. Both are narrated and felt by someone else. Woolf is making a statement about death itself. As Terrence muses, “this was death. It was nothing; it was to cease to breathe” (335). Mrs. Ramsay dies and time continues to pass. Rachel dies and Terrence’s narration is uninterrupted. The simplicity and conciseness with which both deaths are communicated show the simplicity and conciseness of death itself. A more Christian worldview may require a longer rumination on the subject, but Woolf’s unconventional narration portrays death as it is for the dying: simply living one moment and not living the next. This heightens the reader’s emotional response, but also taps into Woolf’s mystical project. Neither Rachel nor Mrs. Ramsay die overtly Christian or religious deaths. There is no clear indication of something better beyond their earthly lives. Death is only a bracketed sentence in the passage of time or five words spoken by someone else. Woolf finds something spiritual and meaningful in people and human interactions; once those have ceased, there is nothing left.

Rachel and Mrs. Ramsay’s deaths also differ in how their respective narratives move forward afterward. Terrence thinks, “it was happiness, it was perfect happiness. They had now

what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they lived” (334). It is a spiritual reaction to Rachel’s death. While it is unclear whether *The Voyage Out* has a god, it does have some sense of an afterlife, at least in spirit. In death, Terrence and Rachel have “something which can never be taken from them” (334). That chapter then closes with the hard reality of Rachel’s death finally hitting Terrence as he screams out her name and is held back forcibly by the other characters. There is an immediate reaction to Rachel’s death and immediate mourning.

This is not the case for Mrs. Ramsay as her death is communicated in “Time Passes.” After the one sentence alerting the reader of Mrs. Ramsay’s death, the narrative immediately moves on to “the house empty and the doors locked and the mattresses rolled round, those stray airs... met nothing in bedroom or drawing room that wholly resisted them but only hangings that flapped, wood that creaked, the bare legs of tables, saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, and cracked” (129). We do not see the Ramsays mourning, as we saw Terrence. The narrator instead describes all of the abandoned items in a house that does not care that she died. There is no human presence. These items are unfeeling. And this makes the scene even more powerful than Rachel’s death scene. It is tragic that a girl as young and lively as Rachel should die, but the other characters in *The Voyage Out* recognize and acknowledge it. There is no one recognizing the tragedy or sadness of Mrs. Ramsay’s death and that makes it all the more tragic.

While the third section of *To the Lighthouse* underscores the ways that the other characters are still mourning Mrs. Ramsay’s death, “Time Passes” never acknowledges this and therefore lacks the spirituality of *The Voyage Out*. There is no union or perfect happiness for Mrs. Ramsay, or for her children Prue or Andrew who also die each in a sentence enclosed in brackets. There is only the passing of the time. “Time Passes” moves from “autumn trees” (127)

to “the spring without a leaf to toss” to “the heat of summer” with nothing but the abandoned and unfeeling objects and the occasional presence of the housekeeper Mrs. McNab, whose only thought of Mrs. Ramsay is a passing “she was dead, they said; years ago” (135). The narrator describes how “loveliness reigned and stillness” at the house where “the clammy sea airs, rubbing, sniffing, iterating, and reiterating their questions—“Will you fade? Will you perish?”—scarcely disturb the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity” (129). Compare Terrence’s screaming “Rachel! Rachel!” While the other characters in *To the Lighthouse* do miss and mourn Mrs. Ramsay once the third section begins, that sense is conveyed directly only when the narrator picks up their consciousnesses again. The narrative’s seeming indifference to Mrs. Ramsay’s death in “Time Passes” mimics Woolf’s vision of life and time’s indifference to individuals’ deaths. There is no tragedy, there is no even overt sadness as there is almost immediately in the more conventionally structured *The Voyage Out*. Time simply continues to pass.

Rachel’s death scene in *The Voyage Out* begins a project that Virginia Woolf will continue through Mrs. Ramsay’s death in *To the Lighthouse*. The description and context of Rachel’s death give it a simplicity that hints at the wider indifference of the universe. This however is tempered by the reactions of the other characters within the novel, whose sadness and mourning give the scene more of the gravity of a conventionally plot-driven novel. It is in *To the Lighthouse* that Woolf really creates this sense of indifference. Mrs. Ramsay’s death, abrupt and encapsulated in one single sentence, Woolf makes more powerful for the reader and yet seem less important to the indifferent world of the novel. It is only when the other characters return to the house and are brought back into the narrative that Mrs. Ramsay’s death seems to mean

anything. It is only through other people, the “great wave of humanity,” that the world is given meaning and emotion at all.

Rooms and Individuality

In her exploration of humanity, Woolf often emphasizes the unity of humanity. However, in deriving her mysticism from people, she also emphasizes their individuality. She does this through rooms. *Jacob's Room* emphasizes rooms in its very title. In it, rooms define characters. Jacob's rooms are spare, though include “incredibly shabby” slippers and “photographs from the Greeks, and a mezzotint from Sir Joshua—very English. The works of Jane Austen, too, in deference, perhaps, to someone else's standard. Carlyle was a prize” (445). Jacob is poor and reads a lot of books, though seemingly not books he likes but thinks he should own and read. Fanny Elmer shares a room with a schoolteacher (507), Mrs. Pascoe's “white Cornish cottage” features a “cheap clock on the mantelpiece” (455), and Florinda lives in a “cheap, mustard-coloured, half-attic, half-studio, curiously ornamented with silver-paper stars, Welshwomen's hats, and rosaries pendent from the gas brackets” (474). Even the prostitute that Jacob visits for one brief scene has a “respectable room” (494). Rooms shape life beyond them. When Jacob leaves his room carrying a book under one arm, he distinguishes himself from the hordes of Londoners on the street with him. They “have no houses. The streets belong to them; the shops; the churches; their the innumerable desks; the stretched office lights; the vans are theirs; and the railway slung high above the street... A homeless people, circling beneath the sky whose blue or white is held off by a ceiling cloth of steel filings and horse dung shredded to dust” (466). Rooms individualize.

They do so in *The Voyage Out* too. When first describing the hotel guests by methodically describing each of their rooms (93). When the hotel guests are first introduced in

chapter nine, the narrator starts with “the little boxlike squares” of the rooms and jumps from point of view to point of view. Miss Allan is reading Wordsworth and finds it “very difficult to keep her attention focused upon the ‘Prelude.’ Was it Susan Warrington tapping?” (93). The question is Miss Allan’s, related with no flagging words. From Miss Allan, the narrator moves on: “very different was the room through the wall, though as like in shape as one egg-box is like another. As Miss Allan read her book, Susan Warrington was brushing her hair” (93), shifting rooms and shifting perspectives too as the narrator then relates what Susan Warrington is doing and thinking. On the next page, the narrator says, “a glance into the next room revealed little more than a nose,” and continues to peep for the next six pages to introduce the majority of the hotel guests. This technique is intriguing, but the rigidity of the structure contrasts with the more free-flowing narration Woolf uses in later novels. However, there is already the emphasis on rooms that will come later with *Jacob’s Room*.

A Room of One’s Own also emphasizes this importance of space and rooms. The men’s college of the fictional Oxbridge is well-funded and possesses such massive libraries from which they are able to lock women out. The women’s college, however, had barely enough money to get started and still “cannot have sofas and separate rooms” like the men’s college (22). Again, the emphasis is on the separate rooms, the necessity of as well as lack of space for education and writing. *A Room of One’s Own* also relates to Woolf’s philosophical musings throughout her novels. This narrator describes a current that:

was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxi-cab; and it brought all three together at a point directly beneath my window; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere (100).

This current seems to be what drives many of Woolf's other novels. It links to the narrator from *Jacob's Room* and her musings about the nature of her storytelling. She admits she often dips into the consciousnesses of other characters, yet her story still, "all the while [has] for centre, for magnet, a young man alone in his room" (487). This is much like the way that the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* sees a current bringing many different people by her yet they all connect, in some way, underneath her window. Woolf sees a current of which all people are a part and part of her project in writing is to explore and better understand those individuals apart from the current. Both Woolf and her narrator use the space that they can find and from the rooms of their own, examine small pieces of humanity, individualizing them and giving them a voice on paper and humanizing them with the ink flowing from their pens.

Woolf was searching for a way to narrate human experience. The use of rooms to individualize characters continues her sense of spirituality drawn from life. Jacob and Miss Allan are not defined by abstract concepts but by the physical manifestations of their living. They are defined by the physical space they occupy on earth, emphasizing that this spirituality is drawn from humans' lived experience not from something handed down from above. Just as she creates physical metaphors for the abstract concept of time, Woolf grounds her characters by tying them to their physical spaces.

Jacob's death at the end of *Jacob's Room* also combines the individualizing power of rooms with Woolf's mystic project. Jacob dies at the end of *Jacob's Room*, but his death is never explicitly stated. Instead, the novel ends with the characters standing in his empty room and his friend Bonamy commenting, "He left everything just as it was" (548). There is a deep sense of emptiness in this short chapter: "Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there"

(548). Like Mrs. Ramsay's death, Jacob's is surrounded by emptiness. But instead of narrative emptiness, it is the emptiness of his unoccupied room. Woolf says in her diary she is interested in exploring "the thing that exists when we aren't there" (114). In *Jacob's Room* and in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, she finds that nothing exists without people there. There is no providential spirit that exists even without humans. When people die, there is nothing but an empty room. The "spirit" is not in nature or objects, but in humans and the human experience.

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