

The Quest for Identity and Stability in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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Abstract: One of the first names that scholars tend to associate with British Modernism is that of Virginia Woolf. Her pieces of work have proven to be highly experimental and innovative, shifting away from the traditional, Victorian way of depicting reality. Among her most famous novels one can mention *The Waves*. Published in 1931, this piece of modern literature continues to stir debate, due to the issues it raises even nowadays. One of these issues is the quest for identity, a favourite theme of the modern writers. This study looks at the way in which Louis and Rhoda, two characters from the novel, desire to find themselves and a sense of stability in nature. By doing so, this paper aims to determine whether the two characters manage to be successful in their quests.



Key words: Modernism, identity, stability, quest

Modernist writing is known for its experimentation, its complexity, its formalism, and for its attempt to create a “tradition of the new” (Childs 14). Childs (4) notices that the first feature to catch the readers’ attention and break their expectations is the way in which Modernist writing makes the readers get involved with a new world. Victorian authors used to employ an omniscient narrator who had access to every single intimate thought of the characters. However, modern authors stepped away from this type of narrator. Instead, they aimed for active, involved readers, who were thrown in the text in medias res. No guidance was provided for that new, modern world and readers had to decode it on their own, to find the meaning of it using their own resources. Moreover, in order to get to the core of the book, one needed to ask questions, to seek for help, but also to accept that a novel will have a different meaning for each of its readers. The meaning cannot and should not be similar to all of us for this is what makes a book pass the test of time. It is up to

the readers to contribute to the story, to connect the puzzle pieces that are given by the author, and to engage themselves in building the story further on.

One of the concepts that stir debate even nowadays is identity and how people choose to define their identities. Identity can be defined as “a set of persistent personal, behavioural and mental characteristics and qualities by which an individual is recognisable or distinguishable” (Montashery 1). For the Victorian writers, identity was a stable concept. Victorian characters had few struggles with their identities, most of them being labelled in a binary way, either “good” or “bad”. Modernist pieces of writing took the concept of identity and played with it, experimented with it. After the First World War and the Spanish Flu, nothing was certain anymore, everything was constantly changing. A general feeling of uncertainty and chaos dominated the already shell-shocked atmosphere. Therefore, it is only obvious that one’s identity would cease to be stable and would be twisted and turned upside down. Identity became fluid and especially identity in Modernist writings reflected the changes in society. Modernist characters are usually struggling to define their identity, they go through all sorts of changes regarding who they are.

The Waves by Virginia Woolf is a Modernist novel which explores the issue of identity, among other topics. The novel features a cast of six characters, Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda, who seem to be united by one character in absentia, Percival. “The chorus of six voices charting the passage from childhood to adulthood was to be in part a way of exploring the interrelated lives of a group of friends” (Marcus 115). Even though the reader assumes that the six of them are friends, these characters do not talk to each other over the course of the novel. Instead, the technique of soliloquy is used to present their thoughts. This allows the reader to see just how experimental the novel is, hence even the author herself called this writing a play-poem.

Out of these six characters, the focus of this paper will be on Rhoda and Louis, the outsiders, the most alienated of the six. Their isolation from the others is visible within the very first lines of the novel. Bernard, Susan, Jinny, and Neville “see” things in the garden, while Rhoda and Louis are the ones who are able “hear” things. The two have an acute sense of their alterity, having various ways of responding to it or managing it. Rhoda and Louis see themselves as being a part of nature and they seem to be doing this because they both need stability in their lives. Rhoda and Louis have a deep, strong connection with nature. Therefore, one could assume that, by identifying with nature, they would find their place, they would find balance and strength.

Louis is one of the three male characters present in this novel. He has felt like a stranger ever since he was a child. Because of his Australian origins he is always aware of his accent: “‘I will not conjugate the verb,’ said Louis, ‘until Bernard has said it. My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent’” (Woolf 12). The reader can see that Louis himself notices how the others are amused by the way he speaks: “‘They laugh at my neatness, at my Australian accent. I will now try to imitate Bernard softly lisping Latin’” (Woolf 13). Therefore, Louis waits for his other friends to speak first so that he can copy the way they speak. It is very likely that he is conscious of his speech and of his origins, which only contributes to his anxiety and his alienation. His origins may be a cause for his struggle with identity as well if we take into consideration the fact that Louis points out the English identity of his friends, while his identity is an Australian one. Consequently, his separation from the other characters is amplified due to the fact that Louis comes from a distinctive geographical territory.

In another scene of the novel, the children are shouting Louis’ name, clearly looking for him. However, he does not wish to be found and he chooses to hide behind a hedge. Louis mentions that there are eye-holes among the leaves. On the one hand, this could indicate that Louis has managed to hide so well that one could only see his eyes. On the other hand, this scene could be interpreted as Louis simply blending in so well with nature that only his eyes could be seen from afar. The bond between Louis and nature is so deep that the latter sort of encapsulates the very being of the former. The only thing left of Louis are his eyes, the rest of him has merged with the leaves, with Mother Nature itself. Louis is once again searching for comfort in his relationship with the earth, with all that is natural. Nature becomes like a mother for Louis, nurturing and protecting him from anyone who could harm him.

Leahy (2007:41) points out that higher anxiety is linked to the belief that a person is not in control over a situation. Therefore, as a result of his anxiety, Louis is looking for order, for a sense of control in his life. One can argue that he has been longing for sequence even as a child. The scene in the chapel is the perfect example to illustrate just how much he likes things to be linear: “‘Now we march, two by two,’ said Louis, ‘orderly, processional, into chapel. I like the dimness that falls as we enter the sacred building. I like the orderly progress’” (Woolf 23). Louis is said to have respect for discipline and that surely emerges from the time he was a child. This child’s anxiety can be the source of his search for stability. Louis needs to follow a pre-established pattern,

one that would assure him that everything will be all right in the end, that things are still in control and that he is the one in charge of his own life.

According to Parrish and Radomsky (2009:3), there is anecdotal and empirical evidence to suggest that excessive reassurance seeking is a common problem for people who suffer from anxiety. Luckily for him, Louis finds reassurance in his bond with nature. Bernard is the one to emphasize that “Louis can contemplate nature, unwinking, by the hour” (Woolf 25), meaning that Louis enjoys this world, that this world can comfort him. This world of nature consoles him, it makes him feel a little less worried. In this place, Louis feels like he can grow roots that reach the depths of the world, roots that would allow him to find some stability. Louis himself explains that his roots go down and down until they find something hard, a centre to wrap themselves around it. Therefore, he is always seeking reassurance, he is trying to look for a centre to wrap himself around so that he can achieve consistency, which has been missing from his life.

Rhoda is one of the three female characters in *The Waves*. Just like Louis, she is an outsider too. She is more sensitive than the other characters and she is painfully aware of the fact that she is different. The scene with Miss Hudson is one that certainly proves how she is not similar to any of her friends: “The others look; they look with understanding. Louis writes; Susan writes; Neville writes; Jinny writes; even Bernard has now begun to write. But I cannot write. I see only figures. The others are handing in their answers, one by one. Now it is my turn. But I have no answer. The others are allowed to go. They slam the door. Miss Hudson goes. I am left alone to find an answer.” (Woolf 13). During this scene, Rhoda experiences time passing slowly. Those agonizing seconds are giving her the impression that they last forever, which is the reason why she compares them to a march in the desert. One interesting feature that Rhoda has is her ability to dissociate herself from the time that she is living in. It is her own way of stating that she is not pleased with her current situation. Rhoda is hoping to find a place where she could be comfortable. Therefore, the image of the desert could represent not just the slow passage of time, but also her attempt at escaping, at running away from this upsetting reality.

Rhoda’s identity could be called “fragmented” if one takes into consideration the States of Self-Organization table by Horowitz (5). This sort of identity is characterized by massive chaos of selfhood, being very painful, and rising suicidal urges. In this case, the person might feel that parts of the bodily self may be disowned. This can be seen when Rhoda explains that she has no face,

while other people such as Susan and Jinny have faces. Rhoda even says that she has been robbed of her identity. Having such a fragmented and fragile identity accentuates how difficult it is for one to live with this condition. Being aware that your self could break at any moment only contributes to one's perception of one's self. Rhoda too is self-conscious, she is aware of how the others perceive her. That is the reason why she is alienated, why she chooses not to sing "in chorus" (Myk 8) while the others "share the feeling of belonging to the common interworld of selves" (Myk 8).

This female character is searching for stability too and it comes as no surprise that she discovers it in her unique relationship with nature. Among the scenes that illustrate the connection between the two is the scene with the brown basin. Susan is the one to notice that Rhoda is rocking petals in a brown basin, making them go back and forth. This particular scene could be interpreted in two ways. First of all, one might notice that Rhoda sees herself in those petals. She is fragile, she is falling apart and she is being moved back and forth, twisted in a whirlpool motion by a force that is bigger than she is. This emphasizes her bond with nature and how she feels like she belongs in the same world as nature does. Second of all, by having Rhoda herself play with the petals, it is clear that she wants to be the one in control of her life. "She creates her own imagined reality in which she nominates herself the captain of her little fleet of white petals in a brown basin" (Myk 8). It could be argued that she is looking for something to hold on to, for something to remind her that she is the owner of her life and that she is not dominated by someone else.

Another scene showcasing a bond between Rhoda and nature takes place after Percival's death is announced. The six characters mourn their lost friend, each in their own way. Rhoda is said to throw violets for him on the water at Greenwich. The violets are "her offering to Percival" (Woolf 109), thus indicating that what Rhoda has to give others is a piece of the universe. Everything Rhoda submits is part of the earth itself, for she is fond of nature and all it provides. Rhoda feels sorrow over the loss of Percival and she chooses to display it in the manner which suits her the best, by letting the violets float on the surface of the water. This female character could be imagining that, by allowing the flowers to drift away, her grief could also go away. Rhoda projects her feelings upon the violets, which now have the task of taking away her agony and heartbreak. This may be Rhoda's way of saying that, since she cannot cope with grief in another way, she shall allow nature to remove some of her suffering.

It is clear that both Rhoda and Louis are on a quest for identity and stability. Nevertheless, all quests must come to end and so does theirs. By the end of the novel, Louis seems to find some comfort in nature, for he goes on with his life. However, Rhoda cannot fulfill her quest and she chooses suicide as the ultimate means of escape. It could be argued that, although she tried, Rhoda could not break away from the troubled sense of identity. Ultimately, Louis can continue his life, while Rhoda finds refuge in ending her own life. It should be mentioned that Rhoda's suicide is briefly mentioned by Bernard, again suggesting that she might be a forgettable character with a forgettable identity.

In summary, this paper argued that, out of all the characters in *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf, Rhoda and Louis are the ones who have a deep relationship with nature. They search for stability in a world that is different from the one they live in. Their struggle to define themselves combined with this one-of-a-kind relationship with nature is one of the many innovative features that this Modernist novel presents.

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Biodata

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