

SUBJECTIVITY AND ITS FORM OF REPRESENTATION IN *THE WAVES*

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Abstract: My interpretation will try to unfold the issue of subjectivity and the construction of authorial "I" and its position in the self-narrative. Moreover, I will also investigate the textual representation of subjectivity and how it influences Woolf's narrative strategies. In *The Waves* the characters clarify the vision of society that prevents a 'sustained self' when the character tries to seek for the self. Woolf's organization of the text into subjective passages by the six soliloquies suggests a concern both with subjectivity (individual and collective) and phenomenology. I will also focus on the question of identity that has intrigued intellectuals for a long time. I will identify the different kinds of "I" in the prose and describe how they function and affect the text. Furthermore, I will focus on identity as a temporary but relatively fixed mode of subjectivity.

Key words: subjectivity, identity, self, "I", Virginia Woolf, narrative strategy, *The Waves*

Derrida claims that "the question of the subject and the living who is at heart of the most pressing concerns of modern societies" (Cadava et. al, 1991: 115). As the poststructuralist theory in my initial quote implies, the critical concept of subjectivity has become one of the most popular discourses in the twentieth century since it has intrigued intellectuals for a long time. However, at the same time the self and subjectivity have become problematic concepts because some novelists and theorists declare that it is hard or even impossible to describe the nature or the character of the subject. The reason for the difficulty is, for some scholars, the rejection of existence of the "self" and the "author". For the radical theorist, as Fredric Jameson notes, the subject never existed in the first place and some authors, for example D. H. Lawrence, rejected in their fiction the idea of the "old stable ego" of character, and as E. M. Forster acknowledged psychology had "split and shattered the idea of the 'Person,'" while Woolf declared that human character had changed around December 1920 (Hall, 2004: 1). This change of concept from the Victorian view of stable ego to twentieth century rejection of its steadiness has caused the subjectivity to become understood as always partial, imperfect and therefore limited and unreliable view of self.

Woolf's own representation of subjectivity and focus on the consciousness of the individual have determined critical responses from the beginning of her career. However, as

mentioned above, the view of subjectivity as a critical concept varied, and so did concepts of Woolf's works. Early critics view Woolf's fiction through Henri Bergson's theories of temporal fluidity of consciousness and emphasize her explorations of the inner self and consciousness of the character. Later in the 1970s, during the revival of interest in Woolf's writing, a number of critics focus on the 'selfless character' and the world 'without a self' in her texts: the evacuation of subjectivity and the representation of the 'impersonal' world. Contemporary postmodern and feminist criticism has focused on Woolf's representation of the subject and the occurrence of the multiple selves she postulates and the absence of an essential reliable and trustworthy selfhood in her work. However, in my study I will also focus on another aspect of her writing and it is the model of 'what Marcus calls 'intersubjectivity' which is the term that describes the relationship between separate selves. According to Marcus 'intersubjectivity' "is revealed in Woolf's narrative techniques, through which she moves in and out of 'consciousness' and emphasizes the connections between them: in her emphases on the relationship between 'I' and 'we' and on the permeable boundaries between selves (2004: 2).

In my paper I will also analyse some terms related to the concept of subjectivity since they may either be used simultaneously or may have different meaning when used in different context. Firstly, I will focus on identity and I will understand it as a temporary but relatively fixed mode of subjectivity. The terms identity and self are used interchangeably by the speakers in *The Waves* and I have followed their practice since, as Marcus understands it, both terms "refer to a person's individuality or personality as it is known to him and to others" (2004: 2). Moreover, as Hall puts it, identity can be understood as "set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances, that, in short- or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and a mode of social being" (Hall, 2004: 3). However, the understanding of the term consciousness is more inclusive since it includes subject's inner thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, according to Marcus "person may be conscious, but unable to know who he is" (2004: 2). The self that Woolf presents in her fiction (and non-fiction) possesses fluid identity. According to Schulkind (in Woolf, 1985: 16):

Woolf believed the individual identity to be always in flux, every moment changing its shape in response to the forces surrounding it: forces which were invisible emerge, others sink silently below the surface, and the past on which the identity of the present moment rests, is never static,

never fixed like a fly in amber, but as object to alteration as the consciousness that recalls it.

Woolf feels compelled to explain this attitude and she says "I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me" (Woolf, 1985: 64). This fact demonstrates not only Woolf's view of her own personality but also the presentation of her characters that enhance the continuously changing identity in the context of her own life and personality. The identity is shaped by outer environment and modified by past experiences that are stored in one's mind.

Woolf's representation of subjectivity manifests itself primarily in the narrative style. *The Waves* is most likely to be referred to by critics as a novel, however, as Woolf wrote on the manuscripts of *The Waves* "the author would be glad if the following pages were not read as a novel" (in Woolf, 2000: v). She does not reject the idea of her work to belong to this genre; however, she implies that the narrative strategy will be slightly different from the conventional one. For example Woolf's interest in autobiography is uncovered in the final chapter of the novel where Bernard reveals the story of his life. Furthermore, the novel was conceived as "prose yet poetry" which signifies a shift from novel to poetry since Woolf was rereading Wordsworth's epic verse autobiography *The Prelude* in the early stages of planning of novel (in Marcus, 2004: 136). Furthermore, the novel is bound up to musical imagery as well as musical style since it is often referred to as "novel and a play" or as Woolf calls it in her diary a "playpoem" which is "unreadable" and yet also her "first work with [her] own style" (in Woolf, 2000: vi). It is part of Woolf's narrative strategy that the voices elide, though they are speaking about different issues, they share the same rhythm. "I am writing to a rhythm and not a plot" as Woolf explains in the letter to a composer Ethel Smyth (in Marcus, 2004: 136). This rhythm comes from Woolf's habit of listening to music on the gramophone since several of the breakthroughs and difficult passages came while listening to music with Woolf's husband Leonard. According to Harris "one of the strongest rhythms in the narrative is the wave-like movement of the characters' consciousness in time" (2004: 64).

Woolf's 'wave-like' strategy to depict character's inner self is usually characterized as her most difficult and experimental style because of the unusual portrayal of the characters. In the novel she articulates the voices of six characters – Susan, Jinny, Rhoda, Louis, Neville, and Bernard. Throughout the first eight chapters Woolf represents the evolution of the

consciousness of six speakers as they become individuals and grow self-aware as the novel develops. Even the characters themselves observe that people are hard to "sum up". Such experimental characters are hard to depict and describe, partly because they disclaim the idea of stable ego; they seem to "acknowledge, even indulge in, their nonexistence, their written and flexible quality" (Dick, 1983: 38). What Woolf has created in her fiction, especially in *The Waves*, can be called experimental self, since it rejects the previous understanding of identity and it is self that can be seen not only in the individual but also in others. "Each [character] develops an identity, or self, as he or she responds to the external world" (Dick, 1983: 38). Woolf's creation of experimental self lies in her original idea to create one character. Therefore, if the characters of *The Waves* are at some level all one it doesn't matter, as Harris points out, that sometimes the reader loses track of who is speaking (1983: 112).

Woolf's initial intention was to have only one character. The idea of connecting the characters comes in when she receives the letter from Vanessa where she sits writing to her sister with "moths flying madly in circles round me & the lamp" (in Harris, 2011: 112). The Moths even becomes the working title for Woolf's new novel gets and she imagines the evening when a huge moth comes in tapping on the window of Vanessa's house in Cassis. As she wrote to G. Lowes Dickinson after the novel's publication (in Harris, 2011: 113):

I did mean that in some vague way we are the same person, and not separate people. I'm getting old myself – I shall be fifty next year, and I come to feel more and more, how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia, even though the special Virginia in whose body I live for the moment is violently susceptible to all sorts of separate feelings. Therefore I wanted to give the sense of continuity, instead of which most people say, no you've given the sense of the flowing and passing away and that nothing matters.

Woolf's decision to split the characters into six suggests the divided identity of individual characters and development of multiple selves. Even Bernard feels the need to explain his experience of identity while his self develops. "For this is not one life, nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny or Rhoda – so strange is the contact of one with another" (Woolf, 2000: 234). They are bound together by an obscure current passing through them. The novel's construction brings the characters together "by listening in to them at synchronous moments in their lives by and by regrouping them at

various stages (Marcus, 2004: 138). The central voiceless character, the light, becomes Percival, who, as Woolf's brother Thoby and Jacob – the protagonist of *Jacob's Room*, dies young. Percival unites the characters and the characters become “objects of desire [...] and he becomes, like Jacob, the absent centre around whom the presence arranges itself (Marcus, 2004: 138).

The exploration of the characters' selves is strongly connected to their perception of present and past and functions of memory. (Re)Writing the past lies in Woolf's long-term ambition was to write history like her father. Even though her encouraging aunt suggested a life of Henry VIII, Woolf chooses fiction, but all her books explore different ways of writing a past. Memory and the connection between present and past moment becomes essential aspect in creating the identity and self – both for Virginia and her characters. The experience Woolf describes her autobiographical writings “Sketch of the Past” as her „most important memory“ (Woolf , 1985: 78):

It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach, and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here, of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.

The reason for the memory being so important is that Woolf builds all her other future experiences on this recollection of the past. Moreover, this memory becomes in Woolf's hands the framework for her characters and can be understood as the beginning of the history of Woolf's character.

The same as in Woolf's case in “Sketch of the Past” the individual identity of her character is shaped by memories of the past and therefore past becomes increasingly important for the consciousness formation. The crucial aspect is how and what the individual remembers from his/her past and thus defines himself/herself. Susan and Jinny recollect the early experiences in the most open manner of all the characters. For them memories simply link the present to the past, giving it importance and (in middle age) intensifying the awareness each has that she is no longer young. “They are content for the most part to live the life of the body-Susan on her farm, Jinny in the shimmering city-and neither searches the past for evidence that life

holds meaning beyond what is already found" (Dick, 1983: 38). The emphasis in both their lives is on the present moment and its promise for the future.

The other four speakers express more complex and varied relationships with the past. Neville is the first speaker to recognize that a particular event will become a permanent part of his consciousness, a "spot of time" to be called up in the future by the memory" (Dick, 1983: 38). Near the close of the first chapter he uses an "hour of solitude" to recall a vivid memory from the previous night. (It is significant that this is narrated as a memory, not as an event occurring in the present.) Neville places himself in the spot where he experienced what he wants to recall and then recreates his experience. He has just heard that a man had been found with his throat cut (Woolf, 1931: 17):

The apple-tree leaves became fixed in the sky; the moon glared; I was unable to lift my foot up the stair. He was found in the gutter.... His jowl was white as a dead codfish. I shall call this stricture, this rigidity, "death among the apple trees" for ever. There were the floating, pale-grey clouds; and the immitigable tree; the implacable tree with its greaved silver bark. The ripple of my life was unavailing. I was unable to pass by.... And the others passed on. But we are doomed, all of us, by the apple trees, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass

Neville displays here what Virginia Woolf later called in herself the "scene-making" habit of mind. He did not see the man whose throat was cut, but he imagines the scene, merges it with his own experience, and makes the memory symbolic of what he felt when he heard of the event. The apple trees, like Bernard's later visions of the fin in the waste of water and the willow tree, become private symbols which lodge in the memory to be recalled at will (Dick, 1983 39). The apple tree stands as a symbol of absolute despair that resembles Woolf's own childhood memory from the garden at St. Ives where she overheard the conversation between her mother and father about the death of Mr. Valpy who killed himself. As she mentioned in "Sketch of the Past", where she remembers, "being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr. Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it" (Woolf, 2000: 71). Both Woolf and Bernard seemed paralysed by the feeling and unable to escape.

In the final chapter – Bernard's final soliloquy – Woolf changes her narrative strategy which the reader welcomes with a hope for an easier understanding and reception. What is

more Woolf presents in the final chapter the loss of the identity since her dramatization of the development of consciousness would not have been complete without an account of momentary destruction of identity experienced by the character who, as Dick points out, "has been most assiduous in defining his identity" (1983: 39). In her notes for the final chapter she wrote that "the novel changed when the perspective changed" (in Harris, 2011: 39). Bernard's perspective changed when he saw "the world without self" (2000: 204). The use of the present tense focuses our attention, like that of the speakers, on the present moment. Thus the reader begins to read his account with the comforting assumption that this will be a story of life – an autobiography of a familiar and already known character. Furthermore, one soon realizes that Bernard's final statement is far more than a review of the events of his life. It is, as Dick hopes, "a subtle and profound expansion of Virginia Woolf's exploration of consciousness, and in particular, of the functions of memory (1983: 1). The memory, as mentioned in Woolf's autobiographical writings, is crucial for the creation of self.

Another significant recollection described in *The Waves* indicates the past feeling of „being safe and still, while acutely aware of the greater world beyond" (Woolf, 2000: 20). The rhythm here is the rhythm that sounds through *The Waves* when Bernard and Susan are "the discoverers of an unknown land" as they peer over a wall to see the white house between the trees (2000: 12). They feel the desire to go out from the comfort zone and uncover the possibilities and experience life as present moment. Furthermore, according to Dick, „the speakers respond to the present as part of a continuum. In various ways and with varying degrees of success, they relate one moment to another" and thus develop an identity which is shaped in part by memories of the past (Dick, 1983: 38).

Woolf's presence in the novel is not only significant in the choice of narrative style but also she presents her own voice in all characters. As Harris explains in her biography on Woolf (2011: 113)

They [characters] are community of her friends, but they are also the whole community of different people whom she felt herself to be. Each of the characters says things that Woolf had said to herself in her diary, and each, for a moment here or there, sounds like her.

This is the issue explained by Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the word in language is "half someone else's"; all living language has an 'organic double-voicedness' and a

'fundamental heteroglossia'" (1981: 293, 326-27). In the complex heteroglossia of a good novelist's prose, Bakhtin finds a mix of ideologies as the languages of different generations, professions, and classes merge or conflict, often within the speech of one character (1981: 270-72, 311). Bakhtin describes how a character may begin to borrow the phrasing and ideology of another (or of the narrator). Susan and Neville 'borrow Woolf's ideology' in the garden at Monk's House she could be Susan and though Neville, the academic classicist lives the kind of establishment life Woolf did not want for herself, he makes the same nervous assessments of his worth, feeling in his pocket for the sheet on which his 'credentials' are written (Woolf, 2000: 176). Secondly, according to Harris, has the flexibility to turn "these unconventional voices into a dense complex of discourses, a mingling of several languages" – their language as well as Woolf's (Harris, 2011: 156). After writing the novel she was in a very intense state of mind (in Sellers, 2010: 33):

I wrote the words O Death fifteen minutes ago, having reeled across the last ten pages with some moments of such intensity & intoxication that I seemed only to stumble after my own voice, or almost, after some sort of speaker (as when I was mad). I was almost afraid remembering the voices that used to fly ahead.

Woolf compares her writing and technique to her illness. The illness, usually so feared by Woolf but not in this case. It was as she used the same method as she lived during the times of madness – several voices overlapping in her head. Moreover, Woolf was also trying to find her position in the novel, either outside or inside. When creating *The Waves* she begins thinking and can't decide where she stands in relation to her characters: "Am I outside the thinker?" (in Little, 1996: 1). This statement signifies Woolf's inability to detach from her characters and writing as well as her need to illustrate nature of life through them.

Woolf as a modernist and a woman writer was preoccupied with a question of subject construction. The question is most visibly addressed in her autobiographical writings; however, occur in her novels as well, most significantly in *The Waves*. In order to fully express the character's response to the multiplicity of experience Woolf had to change conventional narrative structure and the novel form. The incapacity of the traditional narrative style explains her impulse to invent entirely new kind of book. Woolf's novel *The Waves* can be, therefore, considered and read as self-portraiture which, in turn, exists only as textual

construction of the subject. The monologues of six characters offer a picture of fluid boundaries of selfhood and the connection with the environment that forms their personality. Characters do not possess the stable ego, however, become united by the appearance of silent figure – Percival. As Parsons explains the characters' identity is "not developed [...] in sequence, but in relation to fundamental connections and memories that exist across the individual and those around him" (in Woolf, 2000: x). Therefore, Woolf's characters are constituted partly by the others and partly by their memories of the past.

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