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# The democratic construction of gender in Virginia Woolf's The Waves

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## Dedicatoria

*To all people who believe in the force of human relations, who do not fear to admit that the essence of our souls resides partially in the ones we love. To Gabriel, for proving the veracity of this conviction.*

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# Introduction

A woman living in the midst of the era of telecommunication is still taught to play social roles that have direct relation with sex: the reason why women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century still believe that the female gender is associated with emotion and instinct, domesticity and care, is that culture has delineated sexual roles since the beginning of humanity. This fact can be observed in all the sexist ideas that have been carried out, for instance, in literary creations and folk tales, where women are most of the times being repressed by males showing their power in front of women in private and public life. Circumstances have always been in men's favour: women's inferior physical strength has subdued them to a lower hierarchical position, and the label of women as intuitive loving mothers has been set everlastingly. Vestiges of that will remain at least a couple of hundred years more. My concern, though, has to do with the way writers have deliberately explored the matter of gender as a cultural expression in literary works. Nicholas Marsh points this out in *Virginia Woolf: the Novels*, referring to Woolf's approach to gender as innovative in that: "*Woolf does not necessarily suggest that there is something innately different between the minds and hearts of men and women*"<sup>1</sup>

I will particularly examine the work of Virginia Woolf, the 20<sup>th</sup> century novelist and critic, principally because her work exposes a very rich and extensive evidence of her awareness of the dichotomy women/men, putting special emphasis on female psychology. Her conviction was that an artist should never pervade the writing with judgements based upon sex distinctions or opinions full of resentment. Hence, the author's inclination for the androgynous was used as a writing fashion, which in turn gave room to discussions on the topic of phallogentrism, taking subsequently the form of an embryonic feminist mode.

Just as one wave does not really reflect the completeness and beauty of the sea, neither a single person reflects the splendour of mankind. I focus my attention on *The Waves*, since this novel has plenty of data that encourages an autonomous way of looking at humans, their gender, and the relations between them.

The objective of this paper is to associate the author's considerations about human distinctiveness and gender in *The Waves*. For this purpose I shall determine the feminist features presented in the novel as well as I shall establish the importance of characterisation and symbolism; these aspects communicate strong ideas concerning the fragmentation of reality with no hierarchic allusions related to gender, which as a result, comes to be a ground-breaking conceptual reaction against phallogentrism.

Therefore, the way narration is displayed in *The Waves*, are the tools to explore the author's sympathy towards feminism. As the novel presents a series of diegetic characters with no hierarchic distinctions, the interior monologues produced by them illustrate no gender preferences and by extension there is not any conventional sexist interference.

Ultimately, I will focus my interest in the way Woolf resembles a modernist author, and determine to what extent the concept of feminism permeates this particular writing style.

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<sup>1</sup> Marsh, Nicholas: *Virginia Woolf: the Novels*, 1998, p.59.

Woolf's coming up with her ideas about feminism and the way she develops this topic during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not a random succession of facts. It is rather a woman's direct and frank opinion towards a matter that had been taken for granted for too many years. When reading *The Waves*, the reader finds out a woman's sensibility in relation to the everlasting male dominance in a post Victorian environment. It is important to mention the author's non-fiction to corroborate that her ideas concerning this respect had also been devotedly elaborated. There were aspects of Woolf's life as a woman, as a daughter, as a sister, and as a wife that made her realise about how unfair circumstances for women were, and that cooperated in Woolf's posture. Hence, I will be working on the basis of a New Historicist approach; this will enable appreciation of the factors that fostered the development of a pioneering writing style at the time *The Waves* was produced.

Literary works are a product of the social and historical context in which they are produced in the same manner that an individual is shaped by the tendencies of his or her time. The aim of a New Historicist approach is to return literary works to history and culture: *"It combines the urge to reconnect texts to their real-world referents and sources with the lessons of contemporary language-centred theories, which in various ways reinvigorate the notion of literature as a historically and culturally grounded form of expression."*<sup>2</sup>

The idea that writers use themes that have already been manipulated before, comes to be appealing in the sense that authors at all times have had to face the fundamental questions of humanity, including sexual relationships, which is one of the most relevant themes in Woolf's works. The subversive nature of the author's appreciation of this subject matter is the result of a person's absorption of worldly matters, transcendental issues whose value change according to the different interpretations along the time.

Stephen Greenblatt, the new historicist critic supports this idea in *Understanding Contemporary Literary Theory*, who perceived the author as a translator of reality. He sustained that *"[e]ach text is structured and informed by the culture at large, which each author treats in his unique way"*<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Terry Eagleton agrees on the fact that literary products are to be examined taking into account the wide context in which they were written. He argues that Rhetoric, the form of critical analysis utilised from ancient times, examined the way discourses are constructed to achieve certain purposes, and not just for the sake of discovering the linguistic beauty of the text. Consequently, it is fair to assert that the primary motivation for a piece of writing to be studied was that of placing discourse in society as a whole.

***"Rhetoric in its major phase was neither a "humanism", concerned in some intuitive way with people's experience of language, nor a "formalism", preoccupied simply with analysing linguistic devices".***<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, understanding literary theory undertakes a deep reflection upon the tie existing between formal devices and discourse itself, in order to understand the author's criticism on a given situation. On this basis, Eagleton suggests that the feminist critic, as a way of reading humans' history, is not studying representations of gender simply because she believes that this will further her political ends. She also believes that gender and sexuality

<sup>2</sup> Spikes, Michael: *Understanding Contemporary Literary Theory*: 2001, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79. <sup>4</sup> Eagleton, Terry: *Literary Theory an Introduction*: 2003, p. 206.

are central themes in literature and other sorts of discourse, and that any critical account which suppresses them is seriously defective.

In relation to the bibliographic sources of information I will take into account Woolf's non-fictional writing, which makes evident the author's position towards the female, such as Women and Writing and A Room of One's Own; additionally, I employ some texts which give insights to literary theories and criticism, such as Michel Spikes' Understanding Contemporary Literary Theory, Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory, and articles on the subject of Feminist theory and criticism. To better understand the position of women in our times it is imperative to look back and observe the social roles of male and female in the past. Hence, I will be revising Michel Foucault's History of sexuality and Merry Wiesner's Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe. Lastly, Nicholas Marsh's Virginia Woolf: the Novels and the recompilation of essays under the title of Modern British Fiction will grant an exhaustive overview about the modernist formal aspects Woolf works with.

## Under a feminist scope

Virginia Woolf's response towards women's oppression took place a couple of decades before the feminist theory and criticism developed as such, with the Women's liberation movement in the sixties. Nevertheless, it is feasible to sketch some feminist traces in Woolf's 1925 *Mrs. Dalloway*, 1927 *To the Lighthouse*, and 1931 *The Waves*, novels that allegorically tackle the feminist main arguments: Clarissa Dalloway, the same as Mrs. Ramsay, are prototypical housewives whose task is that of supplying their families with love, care, and emotional stability. Their awareness of this fact makes them reflect on the role they were playing as females and what they were expected to do by everyone around them. In this way, a "feminist" thought is activated and the author can express what she thinks about men, women and the sense of life. In the case of *The Waves*, it presents a difference in relation to the format that conveyed the criticism against the status quo present in the other two novels, a difference that has to do with the tool that was used to expose the subject matter: it is not with symbolic, evidently emblematic characters that the author makes overt women's discontent in relation to their position in the social order, but with a fresh and modern variation of the typical story-tale. The denouncing voice could be described the same way Bernard describes himself when he is in the verge of adolescence, as "not (being) one and simple, but complex and many"<sup>5</sup>. That is how Rhoda, Bernard, Susan, Jinny, Neville, and Louis join the versions of a multi-sided tale and together give sense to their existence.

Fraya Katz-Stoker, a feminist critic, declares that her quest as a critic is to do away with the formalist illusion that literature is somehow divorced from reality: "*The grotesqueness of reality cannot be corrected until it is perceived.*"<sup>6</sup>

Within the tasks of a feminist critic, Annis Pratt identifies four: Rediscovering women's works, judging the formal aspects of texts, understanding what literature reveals about women and men in socioeconomic contexts, and describing the "psycho-mythological" development of the female individual in literature, which is the mental depiction of women by women on the basis of tradition.<sup>7</sup> There are other critics who dissent in some of these objectives. Such is the case of Lillian Robinson, who argues that feminist criticism should be radical, revolutionary and purely ideological. What is pivotal, though, concerning this analysis of *The Waves*, is the fact that a female author that has reflected on how women have been neglected all along history, and therefore has described men and women's psycho-mythological development in works such as *Women and Writing*, *Three Guineas*, and *A Room of One's Own*, has also put into practice her unrest recreating a piece of reality in which conceptual amendments were made. With conceptual amendments I mean that the characters in *The Waves* are part of a context which does not necessarily prefer one sex or the other; they are immersed in an egalitarian sub-culture which has been democratically settled in a fictional writing, both in formal and ideological terms. This lightens the thought that aesthetic, as well as conceptual purposes converge in the creation of this novel.

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<sup>5</sup> Woolf, Virginia: *The Waves*, 1992, p. 56

<sup>6</sup> Hopkins, Johns: *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 1994, p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.



Woolf's essays are mostly concerned about women and writing making clear reference to the way they have tried to equal men's position in society in order to improve themselves with the passing of the centuries. She ponders about the obstacles men do not have just for the sake of being men and her quest strives to discover the reasons why women have been less likely to take part in literary circles. One of the answers was stated in *A Room of One's Own*, where the conclusion was that women have to be economically independent from men, a capital that would suffice for all the material requirements of the author. As a feminist, she let readers see her discontent about all the unjust situations that women have to go through, including the miserable access to education, travelling, and all the experiences that help the mind see the world in a creative manner. Still, I have to acknowledge that all these aspects are used by her in a way that is meant to give special emphasis to the role of women only as writers; housewives, mothers and poor women are not exhaustively examined at all. Consequently, her feminist attempts are used in the development of the novel as mere strategies that offer tension and attractiveness to the plot, just as any other author would choose any secular matter that carves deep into human experience and consequently translate it into literary forms.

In order to revise the allusions to the feminist sensibility that is present in this novel, let us see what each of the female characters can reveal through their personalities, and evaluate to what extent they are submitted to the social rules that are meant to shape the feminine in them. On this pursue, the male voices are as important as the female ones, given that the opinions that Bernard, Louis, and Neville might have of their female contemporaries can give us the hint to contextualise the possible conduct they expect from women in general, which also help in the shaping of female personality. To begin with I consider it pertinent to take into account the situation of the one female character whose self-confidence threatened the others', I refer to Jinny. Since her early childhood, she was the kind of girl who enjoys to be admired by men. She wants to please them by the way she dresses and also by her lady-like manners.

It is interesting to see that Jinny's excessive concern about her physical appearance overtly reflects the narcissist trait most women have which has been enhanced by our elder relatives since our early childhood. This aspect of women that has marked our everlasting superficiality and that has prevented us from being independent (beautiful women as the sexual objects of men) was stoutly criticised by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. We can observe Jinny's desire to look beautiful since she was a little girl through the following lines:

***“I hate the small looking-glass on the stairs. It shows our heads only; it cuts off our heads. And my lips are too wide, and my eyes are too close together; I show my gums too much when I laugh. Susan's head, with its fell look, with its grass-green eyes which poets would love, Bernard said, because they fall upon close white stitching, put mine out; even Rhoda's face, mooning, vacant, is completed, like those white petals she used to swim in her bowl. So I skip up the stairs past them, to the next landing, where the long glass hangs and I see myself entire”***<sup>8</sup>

The way she describes herself as an uncompleted image expresses her need of possessing a perfect body, the need to be admired for it by others in order to be part of a group contributing with beauty and also to be at ease with her inner side, conforming an identity. Something that is very remarkable about Jinny is the way she describes the other girls as compared to her; it comes to be engaging because her judgments are based upon physicality

<sup>8</sup> Woolf, Virginia: *Op. Cit.*, p.30.

and standards of beauty. Jinny states that Susan's grass-green eyes are gorgeous because supposedly, other men would love them. In contrast, the way Jinny describes Rhoda when she refers to her saying "even her", she is taking for granted that Rhoda's beauty has always been clouded by her timid personality, and taking this into consideration Jinny still thinks that Rhoda looks better than herself through the looking-glass. Consequently, it seems that her appreciation towards the appearance of her female friends is made from the premise that their beauty is simpler than hers. They can be seen entire through that small looking-glass; but it cannot reflect the whole of Jinny's splendour, given that she might think her own beauty has a more intricate nature and reflects more of herself than any other virtue she might have, as intelligence, or a good temper, for instance.

At first glance, it is possible to recognize Jinny's attitudes as representatives of the conventional, the prototypical, and we could even think of her words as said by any woman in any time of history, showing the fruit of a patriarchal fashion shaped by the Victorian age. However, if this be the case, how could we explain the fact that, along the novel, she was totally identifiable by grace of her own traits? She is a woman who probably could have been identified as someone's daughter or someone's wife; for women were not allowed to be just her own, they have not been allowed to expose themselves without being shadowed by a male figure. Nevertheless, she was not given an inferior treatment by her male friends, the ones (together with her female friends) whose emotional world finally sustained hers.

The tone of this novel, which focuses on the emotional configuration of the human, has helped to make the difference between Jinny and any other girls like her in other literary contexts, such as the profile of female characters like the Bennett sisters described in Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance.

Another reason why Jinny was never subdued to men during the story is that she, as well as Susan and Rhoda, had the same hierarchical status as Luis, Neville, and Bernard. All of them, being raised almost in unison, being classmates all their infancy and adolescence, were put into this world within the same category of individuals in relation to one another. They were put together as friends from the very beginning and fortunately the situation never changed. It is fortunate as long as they were born within a similar range of life prospects and no one depended on the other in monetary terms, which is a fundamental factor in the development of a modern woman according to Woolf's considerations on this subject matter in *A Room of One's Own*. Their being friends is one of the most outstanding features that allows readers perceive the androgynous nature of a novel produced when the truth of human essence had been handled by men. This feature, as distinctive from *To the Lighthouse* or *Mrs. Dalloway*, is shown during the moments of narration in such a subtle manner that it makes the other two novels' way of criticism too explicit to fit the sophisticated fashion that Woolf claimed to be of an utmost importance in the composition of a literary work.

We might remember that in both novels the criticism against male dominance is carried out by the voices of Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, women who complain about their lives as a result of being influenced by the tradition of recognising themselves as not being fundamental elements for life. Their testimonies are coloured by bitterness and distress, elements that were not believed to be suitable in the composition of a modernist novel in accord to Woolf's opinion as a literary critic, as she emphatically explains in her essay *Women and Writing*.

In an attempt to recapitulate the focus on Jinny, that has to do with the concept of female power developed in the novel, I would like to discuss a decisive moment which will lead us in the understanding of her nature: the moment in which she kissed Luis. This

instance was striking in that she left a mark in the ones who witnessed this situation. On one hand, the initiative of having contact with someone of the opposite sex was hers and not his, which makes evident an acquaintance with her desire of being a dominant character; dominant in that she began a situation that was meant to be performed by a man. The opinion she has of herself comprises a strong sense of power, as in the moment she uttered

*"I am your empress, people. My attitude is one of defiance. I am fearless. I conquer."*<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the dominance she represents to Susan's eyes is remarkable because Jinny kissing Louis made Susan so vulnerable that we could say she was emotionally defeated by it. On the other hand, we could also affirm that dominance is shown in her instinct, making her sensibility and impulse act quicker than her thinking, and therefore her intellectual part can be seen as suppressed by her own feelings which in sum took over her self. It is pertinent to conclude that Jinny's moment of rebellion against what she stands for can be seen mostly as a contrary-to-fact deed in the scene just mentioned. In the subsequent stages of her life, as during her adolescence, Jinny is not able to disobey the social rule telling her how to behave as a dame. She was a model for the other girls, given that she was the only character who knew all the feminine codes that allowed for a good position in school and the outer life as well.

Susan's motherly instinct is perhaps one of her most outstanding traits concerning the development of gender in the novel. She utterly believes she was born to be a care-taker so that she would become responsible of the continuity of her lineage. This attribute of hers strongly empowers the idea that the role of women is exclusively for reproductive functions and nothing else. Of course it would be useless to deny that human beings, as every living organism, are naturally adapted to preserve the species, and, the same as primates, are organised in such a way that females look after the young and males go out in the search for provisions. Nevertheless, language has made the difference between humans and apes. Language has stood for a highly developed social net which has in turn allowed people to play many roles during the time they live, and therefore, the roles for women to play in society must have expanded and varied systematically as the human race was evolving.

Thus, it is necessary to emphasise that, at some extent and due to some biological reasons, women actually do have the desire to protect and preserve things more than men do, and this exactly what Susan stands for: typicality and tradition. Again we face the same critical point as in Jinny's case: tradition is wrought by men. Therefore, the fact that Susan follows the regular pattern of female conduct immediately enhances the phallogocentric society in which she lives, leaving her an intellectual disadvantage. Remember that she decided to be a mother and only a mother, taking care of her children and also of the land that provided her with the food for her children, something which gives her a lot of experience but that does not broaden the whole of her intelligence. She had a call, that is how instinct works, and it came from her unconsciousness. But if Susan has proved to be highly adaptive in this respect, she also has proved to be unable to recall her own identity - which caused in her a strong sentiment of loathing towards the world especially when she was a girl attending school. She definitely despised order there: for her, being at school was the same as being in prison, and as she thought school would destroy her, she once had the idea of fighting it back: *"I will make images of the things I hate most and bury them in the ground [...] I would bury the whole school: the gymnasium; the classroom; the dining-room; that always smells of meat; and the chapel."*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p 41.

<sup>10</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 32.

Her habit of releasing feelings of distress by means of a fetishist behaviour was a frequent activity during her life. As long as she felt enraged by some situation, she felt the need of tearing apart an object which represented what she most hated so she could be able to squeeze it and thus liberate repressions. It also happened when she was a little child and saw Susan kissing Louis. For her, being a witness of the audacious character Jinny possessed was something she would not tolerate given that she would never have Susan's courage to do such things. Her bitter attitude clearly illustrates this fact, as she said "[n]ow I will wrap my agony inside my pocket-handkerchief"<sup>11</sup>. Despite of her tender age at the time this event took place, one part of her as a woman was defeated and from then on she adopted the habit of not facing what she disliked about others, which is a clear sign of repression caused by her incapability of sorting problems out in a direct way. This moment was vital in Susan's delineation of psychological traits, as well as Jinny's, as it probably constitutes the milestones for what was going to be their behaviour as females in the future.

Every context that induced Susan to play different roles in society was so utterly rejected by her that she even lost a profound feeling of love she did not dare experience. In sum, Susan's obsession for using all her strength in being a mother was an obstacle that prevented her from being an integral individual. Evidently, her beliefs were influenced by social parameters and establishments; however, she found sense to her life and Woolf finally gave her the opportunity of being a woman with convictions, a very important factor that gave sense to her life.

The case of Rhoda is different from the other two in that practically she never could fit anywhere; neither as a mother nor as a sexy doll; and it seems that this world has been used to classify women merely into these two categories. She was a real misfit, subjected to all kinds of prejudices against woman essence, something that was hers but never could handle because she was unable to enter the game of social life and interpret its rules. Thus, her lack of empathy (or maybe the lack of empathy of others) did not let her continue living a life of loneliness and grief; hence she decided to end it up in a most sagacious modernist fashion, which is suicide. Since very little, Rhoda was rather shy. Her eyes were always fulfilled with all kinds of emotions, but these never went out to be expressed in a wholesome way, given that she wanted to protect what she had (and what she was) in a pact of secrecy with herself. She, the same as Susan, never could feel safe or confident with others, but her case was extreme in the sense that, unlike Susan, she could not be sheltered by any other motivation, something that might be the source of her excessive timidity. As a little girl, during the second moment of the novel, she acknowledges how difficult it was for her to become accustomed in school, and the tremendous psychological consequences that this would carry on afterwards were already patent: "*But here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity*"<sup>12</sup>

As a result, she emotionally disconnected herself from the world. She suffered from a total alienation and that made her feel lonely from the beginning of her life because she could not find the reason of her existence, causing a depersonalisation effect so typical of the twentieth century panorama, where machinery had already started to replace human beings, diminishing their importance. As she could not understand the general feminine code she did not get along with the other girls, not even with Susan and Jinny, who despite being

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<sup>11</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p.23.

closer than all the others were not close enough to make her feel safe: “*They [Susan and Jinny] have friends to sit by. They have things to say privately in corners*”<sup>13</sup>

As we could notice there are three kinds of women depicted in the novel: First, we have the one who willingly accepts the parameters society has given her. For it is Jinny who never got frightened by the requirements society had for her. Besides, she really enjoyed the fact of being acknowledged as a feminine figure, at least more than her other female friends. Secondly, we have Susan portraying a woman who, despite of feeling hostility towards society in general, found in maternity (among the few roles a woman might have) a good means to develop her personality. Finally we are likely to find a kind of woman who is not suitable for playing any roles at all in this world: Rhoda. Her force resided in the privacy of her mind, thus, she was powerless to express herself in any way to the milieu.

In this way we are able to appreciate that Woolf’s choosing of these three different samples of women mirror an evident preoccupation about the female, and the variety of facades she displayed in her novel account for a woman’s uneasiness about the question of gender roles, in addition to a proposal of a change of perspective to this matter.

It is pertinent to point out at this stage of the discussion, that the author of *The Waves* was one of the few women who could reflect upon matters like male-chauvinism during the period she lived, given that in general, women were not at all socially prepared to face issues like this, besides, they were systematically (but not consciously) taught to worry about how they could improve beauty and satisfy men’s needs better. Just as Woolf declares it in *A Room of One’s Own*, Shakespeare’s sister would not have survived even if she possessed her brother’s genius. Men always rejected the idea of women being serious and solemn. The development of their intellectual skills was utterly denied. In fact, during the Renaissance, women were even forbidden to attend university, for, as the historicist Merry Wiesner points out in her book *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*,

***“For middle- and upper-class boys, training in Latin began at seven or eight, preparing them for latter attendance at a university and an eventual professional career as a physician, lawyer, university professor, or government or church official. The suggestion that women would share these advances was viewed as at best impractical and at worst dangerous”***<sup>14</sup>

But this fact comes to develop out of tradition. Since ancient times, in both western and eastern cultures, the question of gender roles has been discussed and the conclusions have been the same. Kelley L. Ross, in her essay *Gender Stereotypes and Sexual Archetypes*, gives an account of the way the biggest societies have organised themselves around patriarchies. In ancient Greece, for instance, it was believed that the concept of maleness was associated to the straight, light, and good, whereas the female was associated with the curved, the dark, and evil, as explained in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Shakespeare himself conceives woman in an Aristotelian way: the descriptions of female characters in his plays are often made in relation to these concepts associated to women, having the figure of the moon a connotation charged with negative features, relating it, in turn, to the female figure.

<sup>13</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p.31

<sup>14</sup> Wiesner, Merry: *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 2000, p. 145.

<sup>15</sup> Ross, Kelley: *Gender Stereotypes and Sexual Archetypes*, 2006, p. 2.

In *Midsummer Night's dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, Shakespeare makes use of this standardised figurative connotation of the moon to refer to women. Let us remember one of the most well-known passages of the latter play; that of the two unfortunate lovers, to give account for this fact. The scene takes place in the balcony, where Romeo and Juliet exchange vows: "O, swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon, that monthly changes in her circled orb."<sup>16</sup> From a grammatical point of view, we can observe that the pronoun used to refer to the moon is a feminine one. This leads to associate the traits of the moon to those of a woman.

It is interesting to realise that it is Juliet who actually uttered these words. She, an adolescent from the Renaissance, an educated person who has learned to appreciate tradition, acknowledges the fact that women, including herself, are inconstant, variable creatures who shall not be trusted by any means. Juliet distrusts her own sex, and, paradoxically, by doing it, she rejects her own self in order to keep her love safe and guarantee the veracity of Romeo's vows.

Similar to what happens in the Western culture, in the Chinese doctrine of Yin and Yang, the associations of Ying are even, female, and darkness, while those of Yang are odd, male, and light. In the case of India, the male side of the god Shiva is detached, remote, and unmoving, while the female side is active and creative. However, in Indian culture detachment is much more praised than participation.<sup>17</sup> As we can observe, there has been a global tendency to give importance to features related to men rather than the ones related to women. It is important to notice that, although the cultures mentioned above represent a high percentage of the world's population, there actually have been cultures whose course have been led by a matriarchal mode.

Consequently, we can imply that the patriarchal societies were settled on a cultural basis and not as a result of natural order. As I pointed out in the introductory lines of this paper, Woolf perceived that there were not innate differences between the minds and hearts of men and women; the differences are somehow taught during the first stages of our lives and the sexual archetypes are established in our minds. It would be futile to deny the fact that our behaviour in general is totally shaped by these archetypes, archetypes that demand our developing of certain characteristics depending, evidently, on the sex of the person. People are expected to do certain things according to the sex they belong to and that is what Woolf detected and criticised since she saw the strong influence the Victorian society had on her everyday and cultural environment.

The times of Queen Victoria are said to be, ironically, rather critical for women, taking into account that it was a woman who carried on the throne. At those times, women who did not count on the wealth of their families did not have any chance to earn their living by their own, except for the one occupation suitable for lower-class females: working as governesses. In fact, if a woman wished to become a governess she had to comply with certain requirements that were associated to all women in general. All women were asked to be accomplished: they had to know about languages, arts, and music, so that they would amuse their husbands when they got married. And governesses, in turn, had the duty to preserve this tradition to little girls for the same purpose. As we can see, the subjects they were asked to learn were very motivating, but they did not have a practical purpose, making the spectrum of work for women diminishing. And this was what England had for women;

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<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare, William: *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Ross, Kelley: *Op. Cit.*, pp. 2-3.

there was no more, not to mention the situation of women belonging to the lowest classes, working almost as slaves due to the strong impact the Industrial Revolution had on them.

This was the heritage that the 19<sup>th</sup> century England left to 20<sup>th</sup> century England. Scenario which was used for Woolf for the composition of a literary work characterised by exceptionally enthralling avant-garde techniques that in turn carry the ideas I have been discussing about along this essay.

As I already mentioned, the male characters of the novel do express their views towards their female contemporaries, which is very motivating considering the fact that females do not have this tendency of having opinions about their male friends. This could be seen both to exemplify that women take for granted the world as originally belonging to men therefore they do not question their rules and conduct overtly. In contrast, and most noticeable, it could be seen as a way of how aware are men of the movements of women, and how conscious they are about the differences between them, being their comments a good chance to stress the huge dissimilarity existing between two members of the same species. In any case, Virginia Woolf found out that there was something that was not right in society and made several attempts to illustrate this truth, which was certainly most strongly felt at the splendour of her time.

Now let us see how the English cultural heritage can be reflected through the opinions Bernard, Neville, and Luis exposed throughout their (interior) monologues.

Neville was not an ordinary man. His physical strength was not great and his manners were rather delicate. He was very perceptible and sensitive. Despite his qualities resembled a woman's, he was of the opinion that women were quite silly, and for no apparent reason he once said:

***“I can not endure that there should be shop-girls. Their titter, their gossip, offends me; breaks into my stillness, and nudges me, in moments of purest exultation, to remember our degradation”***<sup>18</sup>

Despite these words were uttered at an early stage of his adulthood and maybe he could have changed his mind afterwards, his appreciation of women is striking, to say the least. To begin with, he states that he cannot tolerate the existence of shop-girls because all in all they show the stupidity of women. Nevertheless, this stupidity not only offends him but also takes him away from his state of excitement and happiness, given that it reminds him of “our degradation”. By saying “our” he can mean both men and shop-girls or both shop-girls and just himself. As a conclusion, he has a bad opinion of women in general and it seems that their behaviour takes him into a condition of degradation. Hence, he had the conviction that it was women who distort human nature and their contribution was to make it worse than it actually was. And then he goes on: *“Here we are masters of tranquillity and order; inheritors of proud tradition”*<sup>19</sup>

It is possible to detect some traces of male-chauvinism in his speech given that with “we” he refers to men only. And the cause of his feeling disturbed is that women do not follow the order and tradition associated to and established by males. However, we have to consider the fact that his sexual orientation represents a breakthrough of this argumentation. How can it be that a homosexual man is so stick to tradition if he himself was denying one of the most important traits that can be attributed to a man?

<sup>18</sup> Woolf, Virginia: *Op. Cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> Woolf, Virginia: *Op. Cit.*, p. 64.

But his love for Percival, a character without voice but with a strong symbolic power, of whom I will refer in subsequent pages, has been isolated from tradition and convention. For Neville, Percival belonged to the ethereal world; therefore, he did not even consider having a time of self-questioning about what was his place in society. In any case it would have been impossible for him to express his sentiments explicitly in the 20th century London. There is another male character, Bernard, whose view about women is rather similar to the one of Neville in a way but the difference resides in that at other moment of the novel he acknowledges he himself has preference for some of the feminine traits described by him: *"The thing I aim at shopgirls, women, the vulgarity of life (because I love it) shots at you as I throw-catch it-my poem."*<sup>20</sup>

He, as well as Neville, relates women with the ordinary, the quotidian. The difference resides in the fact that he can nourish himself from such a trivial situation (shop-girls) and make it useful to write poetry. Anyways, he admits that women lack sophistication and his central observation is that women are mere objects from which he can get inspiration and start imagining. Women, in this sense, represent chaos and simplicity. Just as shown in the example of sexual archetypes, women represent movement, and the criticism that has been made to them is their lack of detachment, as the Indian faith proposes. Their apparent incapability to reflect upon the transcendental matters of this world is what irritates Neville. Nevertheless, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda are shown to oppose this general rule as we can appreciate in their monologues. In his respect, the nature of women happens to be contradictory at times, but it has to do with the necessity of the author to stress how rooted the archetypes are set into both men's and women's minds.

From the opinions of Neville and Bernard we are able to observe and depict the articulation of a subject matter so very appealing to Woolf, which was the ability of writing a woman has that has been impeded by men. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women were not thought to be good at writing. We know the exceptional cases of some famous English and other European writers but in general women writers were extremely few and as the author observed the conditions for them to write literary works were insufferable. At this point we could take the examples of Neville and Bernard as the tool Woolf used to pass judgment on this fact. As both show sympathy towards writing and poetry, their words reflect their opinion concerning women and writing, which is: women are unlikely to write.

By letting male characters do what women and men should do indistinctively, she mocks at her society in an ironic way as well as she acknowledges and presents the general image men had of women at that time.

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<sup>20</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 65.



# Androgyny and the modern subject

Within the major traits the novel in question has, we have to consider the role of the subject and what it stands for in the development of the narrative, since the sense of extreme subjectivity this novel reveals is awkwardly captivating and worthy to study. As we already know, *The Waves* is not written from a single angle. The spreading out of six intermingling voices emphasises the importance of the self, not of one self but of each self, which altogether conform a unit, a reality that is shared but also unique, for if any of the members of this “shared reality” comes to die, nothing will possibly be the way it was before.

The moment of Percival’s death is ideal to illustrate this notion: it is a milestone in the growth of the characters’ interest about their own existences given that it allows for a further awareness of what they are but mostly of what they are not. They realise they are no longer strong and the ties that have brought them together ever since are going to weaken irrevocably. Let us behold the impressions of some of the characters about this respect.

Bernard for instance, felt the need of reconsidering what his priorities in life were, given that at the moment of the disease he was experiencing a very positive feeling which was one of renewal. He was getting married and all his enthusiasm was focused on the future rather than the past. However, this event forced him to re-evaluate his state of mind in order to reinforce his identity, because its conformation was influenced by Percival, -among other people as well, but at present it is Percival the one who induces Bernard’s thinking-. Thus, he decided to devote some time to figure out the importance of death in his life: “[...] *to save an hour to consider what has happened to my world, what death has done to my world.*”<sup>21</sup>

Louis in turn, is able to perceive that the union is about to be broken and sees no problem in admitting it even though he knows time has to take its course and definitely things will not be always as he wants them to be, and, in a desperate but useless attempt he asks destiny (or God, or any other name the inexorable forces of nature may have): “*Do not move, do not let the swing door cut to pieces the thing that we have made.*”<sup>22</sup> What “they have made”, that is to say, every acquaintance they have got in common, every event they have lived together, every place they all have visited is soon going to fade since someone will no longer be part of them. As a result, if one perspective fails to be present, together with the others, the overall perspective fails too. Besides, it is proper to consider that they are inevitably falling apart because the process of formal education they had gone through was finished soon before the death of Percival took place and it can also be seen as the death of a circumstance which played such an important role in the characters’ process of amalgamation.

Another character whose opinion was very similar to that of Louis’ is Jinny’s. She, as well as Louis thought about this matter of what was it that sustained their relation as a group, stating the following:

***“Let us hold it for a moment, love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep***

<sup>21</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 109.

*sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man  
again”*<sup>23</sup>

She has the feeling that what they know about the world is what keeps them close. And here we are in the presence of a very powerful metaphor: they are segregated from the rest of the world by walls that are made of knowledge and feelings, whatever they might be. However, as these walls are an abstraction, they need the constant care of the ones who built them. Therefore, if the creators of these walls are not present they cannot be sustained and everything that was inside this exclusive “globe” will be lost. As she sees it, the moments they lived together cannot be raised out of one single person; even if this person was actually part of the group the account he or she gives about it will always be incomplete.

As we have seen, death as a factor is critic in the development of this fragile tie between people. It signifies that, as long as someone stops living, he or she stops contributing to the enrichment of new experiences to the group; the reality will be reduced and will gradually vanish, proving the vulnerability of humans and the ephemeral nature we all possess. This fact is key in the development of the modernist mind, in contrast with the transcendental ideas promoted a few centuries before, the one Blake and his Romantic contemporaries thought about, celebrating the never-ending capacities of the individual, or Whitman, who claimed human nature to be everlasting and at one with Nature. Reality in the novel is not seen as something related to a geographical space and time only, or a conventionalised society that already established the parameters of what life is or should be like; it rather is the construction and the fusion of human relations that are characterised to be short-lived experiences which finally constitute the core of human life.

In the novel, there are instances where the characters reunite during their adulthood and we can find two occasions which are vital in the development of this reality they all share, and which are fundamental in the readers’ understanding of what the subject is composed of. It is interesting to point out, however, that it is just Bernard the one person who shows a more acute awareness of what these meetings mean for the construction of their world and identities. The first time they get together is in a restaurant at Hampton Court soon before Percival travels to India, and no one could even suspect he was going to die.

It is unavoidable not to relate the first meeting at Hampton Court with a passage from the Bible: the dinner the characters have resembles the Last Supper of Jesus and his apostles. In both cases, death is surrounding one of the members of the group and it will subsequently change relationships and beliefs among them. Percival stands for a modern version of a messiah whose fame as a respected individual (who mastered the social code) was prized by the others: everyone knew that his departure was going to mean a braking down of the continuity of their lives. Thus, they all were conscious about how important he was in the setting up of their reality. This analogy gives as hints about the inevitability of an author’s awareness of her history, and of how a cultural background can foster a confirmation of the importance of the influences of the Judeo-Christian perspective in literature. This image represents Woolf’s acceptance of the force conventionality has got over the human mind and its relevance in the understanding of topics as death and friendship, topics whose basics have been handled and monopolised by institutions over the centuries and that constitute a starting point in the development of whatever new ways of understanding them. It is interesting to notice that Woolf’s allusions to the religious system are done in other ways too. For instance, she openly criticises the way in which religion perceives humans as non-thinking beings with no will, incapables of discerning good from evil. That is how she uses

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<sup>23</sup> Woolf, Virginia: *Op. Cit.*, p. 109.

Bernard to claim *"We are not slaves (...) [w]e are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators."*<sup>24</sup> These words were uttered by the end of the dinner, to suggest that all his friends had met there in order to see Percival off deliberately. In this way, the role of Percival as a messiah is effective in the sense described previously, and by no means can be seen as the shepherd who led the others do things. Their congregation is an instance they wanted to create in order to be together again. They did it and therefore they are the creators of that magic occasion where the seven friends became one.

We have to take into account that, as Percival has not died yet at this moment, the belief of integration has not been damaged. They are still very young, they all are in their early twenties and everyone feels, in their own way, very excited and anxious about this event. Bernard, in turn, is able to convey more than excitement in his speech showing a great preoccupation about how the others affect him: *"I think of people to whom I could say things: Louis, Neville, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda. With them I am many-sided"*<sup>25</sup>

It is amazing to notice that Bernard's preoccupation of this matter goes beyond the limits of age. Since the very beginning of their lives together, their early childhood, Bernard showed a vivid interest on highlighting this fact and we can find reminiscences of this in one of his first philosophical-oriented speeches: *"But when we sit together, close, we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory"*<sup>26</sup>

His insistence of the transcendental influence on each other's personality is remarkable since it is incessant in nature and power. Even against the characters' opinions about having changed both physically and psychologically since the last time they saw each other, and the strength with which they all stress the differences existing among them does not weaken Bernard's motivation to continue thinking the way he has always used to. He considers that a reinforcement of the self by means of the influence of others is fundamental. And he might have changed his mind about the duration of the effect their joining together had, but the essence could still be there, their looking at each other's eyes, or their looking all at the same direction is invaluable for him and he is the one who appreciates it the most. Why do I state that he changed his mind? Because of the contradictory feelings he expressed both before his friends arrived to the restaurant and afterwards. As he was wondering about how his friends would look like after such long time without seeing them he still had the opinion of the unbroken tie led by the innocence of childhood. He said: *"-sitting together here we love*

*each other and believe in our endurance"*<sup>27</sup> But this remark was made before he actually sees them again. And once they are there he knows that despite all the memories that were constructed as a group and despite his strong belief of a transcendental self, he knows that the ties will eventually evaporate:

***"We have come together (from the North, from the South, from Susan's farm, from Louis' house of business) to make one thing, not enduring- for what endures? - but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower,***

<sup>24</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 110.

<sup>25</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 92.

***many petalled, red puce, purple shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves- a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution***<sup>28</sup>

The idea of humans as transitory beings and their vulnerable nature –of which Bernard realises about at the Hampton Court meeting-, comes to be negative in the sense that it was an idea that marked a totally alternative way of looking at human beings that underlies an immense lack of hope and faith. This modernist view which Woolf adopts has challenged the traditional and global beliefs about God and his mercy, the life after death and all possible Judeo Christian conventions; even the Transcendentalist and Romantic ideas followed more or less the same established and widely spread principles, as mentioned short before. That is why the modern author needs to find out a way to get confident enough to believe that his work of art is not going to be manufactured in vain. That is the reason why the modern artist needs to believe in something that will last: it will not be God, it will not be himself, and it will not be society. What will last is their art, the almost inaccessible expression of themselves made in paper.

As Stephen Spender points out in his essay that gives account on the Modern sensibility: "Art which will transform reality into shared inner life, is the converse of which would transform inner vision into outer social changes"<sup>29</sup>

Like the first time they met at Hampton Court, the second meeting also conveys the sense of completion that only can be conformed in the presence of each one of the friends. They were reaching their fifties by then, and, as all middle-aged people, they had worries that had to do with family, economic and emotional stability, and their welfare. We can see them as mature people, having a more rested way of looking at the others as well as themselves. Everyone knew that, by then, the ties that have kept them united all these years were even weaker than last time. As responsible adult people they were unable to come and go with the freedom of the young, though they accepted this fact in a wise way, not getting desperate about it. They all (but not Rhoda, as usual) feel in touch with the life they have created and seem to understand the process they are undertaking at the moment when dawn is approaching to their lives. Bernard, as good at making conjectures, reformulates the metaphor of the flower in the table, making evident his constant worry about the meaning of his friends in relation to the reality they have composed and giving emphasis in the past that has helped to build the present: "[T]he flower, the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives"<sup>30</sup>

Unlike last time they met, this time they left the restaurant in the company of a friend. Their age allows them to flavour friendship, which with all remembrances has a new taste. After all, memories are the only thing able to attach their minds now. As the six of them go in pairs and each pair consists of a male and a female, it symbolises the equilibrium of forces and essences, a walk in the form of conclusion is a way of being at ease with their reminiscences and Woolf's way of re-establishing androgyny so that integration could

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<sup>28</sup> Woolf, Virginia: *Op. Cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> Howe, Irving (ed.): *Literary Modernism*, 1967, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Woolf, Virginia: *Op. Cit.*, p. 175.

remain. It is Louis who describes this moment as he reflects: *“Now they vanish. Susan with Bernard. Neville with Jinny. You and I, Rhoda, stop for a moment by this stone urn.”*<sup>31</sup>

As we were able to identify the importance of these two dinners that were vital in the configuration of the wholeness these characters provide, we can establish some similarities between them and other dinners that have also been propitious for the communion of characters in other novels by Woolf. In *To the Lighthouse*, for example, Mrs. Ramsay offered a dinner which she thought to be decisive in her relationship with Mr. Bankes. She was very anxious because Paul and Minta had not arrived home by the time the meal was due to be served, and it would spoil if they waited too much. She had the belief that dinners were a good instance to foster family relations and companionship, which is the reason she thought Bankes was a *“poor man! Who has no wife, and no children and dined alone in lodgings except for tonight”*<sup>32</sup>

That is why Mrs. Ramsay felt real pity for Mr. Bankes, since, for her, dinners were an indispensable element of a person’s integrity and therefore he was considered to be an incomplete individual.

In the case of *Mrs. Dalloway*, we can appreciate the presence of another kind of social instance around which the whole plot has been constructed: the party. It seems that Woolf saw in social activities a key to develop the characters’ personality since they provide them with a chance to interchange words, so that they could face each other and express their inner selves.

Before I continue with the discussion of the modern in Woolf’s *The Waves*, I truly consider the need to stress the urge Woolf had in exposing such a fragmented reality that at times seemed to become a single and complex one and that constitutes a central role as regards characterisation. As culture no longer represents the modernist authors, they fight against it as Woolf did, depicting it as a source of decadence and all forms of alienation appear. All characters of the novel, except Jinny and Percival, seem to reject society, not to mention the case of Rhoda, which it is even worse; she rejects herself because of society.

This can be interpreted as a way of protesting against the society the author lived in, with all those rules influenced by the male-chauvinistic standpoint of the epoch, and this is precisely the point I do not mean to mislead along the development of the essay, which is Woolf’s thought-provoking and feminist-oriented proposal that has to do with equality between man and woman by means of what she herself calls “the androgynous”.

Spender suggests that the fact that the modern sensibilities are looking for new forms of expression is a perfectly justifiable act, in that the new inputs the globalised world has to offer are causing so radical an impact that the emergence of a new creative movement was inexorable, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century where the force of a new economic paradigm was commencing to be forged:

***“[T]he changed vision of a world of machines and speed: the rhythms of an altered contemporary tempo, the new voice of humanity at times when the old social hierarchies are braking down”***<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 176.

<sup>32</sup> Woolf, Virginia: *To the Lighthouse*, 1955, p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> *Howe, Irving (ed.): Op. Cit., p. 50.*

At this point it is necessary recall the central subject-matter related to the modern and that has much to do with the topic of subjectivity: I refer to the androgynous mind of the author reflected in the novel. The one character who, at all stages of his life reflects upon the subjectivity of himself and his friends is Bernard. He plays the role of a conciliator. He himself symbolises the androgynous in all aspects of his life. With his words, his storytelling, he is even able to reformulate the transcendentalist sensibility popular in the 19th century, something that goes against the basics of the modernist fashion but that he made it possible anyways, stating once that he believed in the endurance of people, reinvigorating the strengths of everyone who helped in the conformation of their own reality, in contrast with the other reality traditionally established by governmental periods and art stages.

They sing in unison their own song in a way that they still are able to remain united, organised, a whole. He is capable of filling the others' hearts with hope and faith because he does not make every problem a matter of sex. He is a man and as we have seen he has his reservations about women, as any woman could have his reservations about men. However, he is an artist, the poet of the group who has no sex preferences when it comes to give account of his immediate environment: in fact, he represents both feminine and masculine traits, and this fact has a very logic reason: it is because Virginia Woolf herself thought the artist as an androgynous being able to detach him or herself from the restrictions a cultural archetype may have in order to be boundless and limitless, so that his or her creative mind would run free.

It is Bernard who overtly assumes Woolf's participation showing herself willing to explore within the complexities of Bernard in the form of a fictional character that takes the shape of Bernard's potential biographer: "*But "joined to the sensibility of a woman (I am here quoting my own biographer) Bernard possessed the logical sobriety of a man"*"<sup>34</sup>

The concept of androgyny has also been studied by critics like Herbert Marder, who is able to detect traces of the "manly-womanly" traits of the Ramsay daughters in *To the Lighthouse*, referring to them as "the manliness in their girlish hearts"<sup>35</sup>

It is in Bernard's recognition of himself as a psychologically bisexual character when she reveals to us readers about her intentions as a writer-shaper; she feels confident enough to recall her 1929 *A Room of One's Own* essay because it is of a great significance that in her narrative composition of such lyric nature a character like Bernard resembles the ideal author she described there. All the qualities an unbiased author should have are embedded within the concept of androgyny which she coined from Coleridge, who once contended that a great mind is androgynous. In this light, at one point in her essay, she concludes that "*[t]he androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided*"<sup>36</sup>

Maybe this is exactly what Spender had in mind when he wrote about the braking down of the old social hierarchies by the hands of a modern sensibility. This situation reflects the case of Woolf, who foresaw the necessity of enabling people to build a discourse whose basics are composed by the unified vision of woman and man. She is absolutely concerned about how to improve the quality of female writing, so that people of future generations will not feel the way she felt when she was looking for information about women in the past. For her, having the feeling that something unjust happened is a grave obstacle that impedes

<sup>34</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> Hussey, Mark: *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, 1995, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, p. 98.

the clarity of mind an author must have in order to transcribe his or her emotions into paper. For a visionary novelist like Woolf, having an equal society is the cornerstone that is needed in the development of future excellent writers, who feel at ease with their history and, most importantly, with themselves.

So far we have discussed Bernard's position in the novel as the androgynous character per excellence. Since it is him who worries about the others and gives quite an extraordinary sense of integration and completion to whatever he says, we are able to consider him as such. Another factor that enhances his force as an influencing character is the fact that his voice is most strongly heard than any other's voice. Let us remember that Bernard's voice is the one who, with an incomparable monologue finalises the novel; he takes over the last moment giving shape to the end of a cycle. Nevertheless, as the novel is looking for the balance of gender power, it would be unfair not to find any female androgynous character.

As I already referred to in the preceding chapter, Rhoda assumes no specific feminine role throughout her life, with the exception of the one moment she sustained a love relation with Louis. This relation can be relevant in the sense that she experienced a sentiment which for once, made her feel accompanied by other human being. The narration of this affair does not describe how come that they fell apart, but, after this, it seems as if she had fallen apart with the rest of the people as well. For this reason, her exceedingly apathy towards everything made her unusual and undefined in terms of what she stands for. Gender boundaries get diffused; therefore it is difficult to tell whether she belongs to the feminine or the masculine. Within this bewilderment there is a character whose goals in life are not certain. She does not seem to get engaged in any particular activity which could possibly enhance a positive sense of life. At this point we could say that Rhoda's values are completely the opposite as those of Bernard, her androgynous counterpart.

Bernard and Rhoda represent differing feelings towards human relations: while one nourishes from conversation and the company of others, the other feels devastated by it. Bernard cannot live in solitude; Rhoda in solitude finds consolation. The following lines represent the contrast between the beliefs embodied by these two characters: If Rhoda states "*I trust only in solitude and the violence of death*"<sup>37</sup>), Bernard would say: "*Life is pleasant. Life is good.*"<sup>38</sup> While Bernard perceives hope in their meetings and encourages a sense of closeness completion, Rhoda sees no more than an uncomfortable moment which she cannot escape from, leaving her no alternative than tolerate it: *[t]hus I must undergo the penance of Hampton Court at seven thirty precisely*"<sup>39</sup>

Her sense of detachment deprives her from hope and is responsible for maintaining one of the modernist traits this novel has, which is the individual's denial of the benefits of society. She keeps us alert about how cruel life is and gives us the message that, in the end, we have to endure life by ourselves and company will eventually vanish anyhow. The sense of humans as private individuals that will die alone is depicted by means of Rhoda, a character whose nature is more symbolic and abstract than practical, since she does not really take part in the incidental aspect of the plot. She never stops thinking that life is nonsensical and therefore she maintains a gloomy view always, even during the final moments of her life: "*I perceived (...) how you stand embedded in a substance made of repeated moments*

<sup>37</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 177

<sup>38</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 179

<sup>39</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 171

*run together; are committed, have an attitude, with children, authority, fame, love, society; where I have nothing. I have no face.*"<sup>40</sup>

Rhoda's acknowledgment of not having face is transcendental in our understanding of her as an androgynous figure. We have to keep in mind that this statement was made by her several times in her life almost as a fetish, alluding perhaps to the ambiguity of her being.

Finally, there is another factor that makes evident Bernard's and Rhoda's similar nature: both end up thinking the same way. They found in death an ally and the most fascinating aspect of it is that both believe in death because of the same reason. In the end, Bernard is captivated by Rhoda's principles; his view is conquered by pessimism and his philosophy becomes unsustainable. Bernard acknowledges that solitude is the one element humans cannot prescind from as a way of recycling Rhoda's view to take it as his own. With this idea in mind, he finally reaffirms Rhoda's beliefs when saying: "*Heaven be praised for solitude that has removed the pressure of the eye, the solicitation of the body, all need of lies and phrases.*"<sup>41</sup>

It is as if he was finally converted to Rhoda's philosophy, as if words (that have always accompanied him in his endeavour to define a personality) lost their sacredness and at the final stage of his life he was able to perceive the world with Rhoda's eyes. Their connection as figures who decipher a standpoint can be seen in that both conform a cycle. This connection begins in the first moment of the novel where Rhoda plays a game. Rhoda's rocking petals of flowers in a basin can be seen as analogous to what Woolf does as a creator of the reality she describes in her novel. Rhoda is in charge of a "meta-world", a world inside Woolf's, with all the power a creator might have, and responsible for the destinies of the individuals who, subtly represented by the petals of a flower, inhabit it.

In this light, Rhoda foresees the destinies of the petals, and her assertive words convey the veracity of human nature: "I will now rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships would ride the waves. Some will founder. Some will dash themselves against the cliffs. One sails alone."<sup>42</sup> She succeeded in understand the vulnerability of people, who, despite their virtues and beauty cannot endure, for they are too weak and powerless to handle the course of their lives. In this way, this far-sighted character minimizes the role human life in comparison to the greatness of time, aging, and death: forces that inexorably have an influence over us. Ultimately, it is substantial to notice that this metaphor is cunningly introduced at the beginning of the novel within an apparent ingenuous tone, but in the end, Bernard, who closes the narration, is able to conclude that life itself is just as Rhoda's innocent game of imitating the excitement of the ocean. The initial image of Rhoda playing God with those flowers and Bernard's final monologue are indispensable for the comprehension of the connection between these two characters that finally are the main tools the author has to convey her sensibilities about the sense of life.

As we can observe, Woolf's ideas are democratically embedded by a female and a male character, whose fusion makes possible to understand them as a technique that enhances the androgynous spirit of *The Waves*.

Another instance in which we can see the author's amazement about human endurance is in the interludes, those introductory and poetic lines that precede each of the chapters of

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<sup>40</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 171

<sup>41</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 226.

<sup>42</sup> Woolf, Virginia: Op. Cit., p. 12.



the novel. Through them, Woolf presents the waves of the sea as compared to these eternal forces recently mentioned, such as time and death. They have governed human life from the beginning of times and thereby we have no other alternative than being subjected to them, given that, after all, they do enrich human experience. Woolf, as a modernist writer, did not want to be euphemistic when referring to this fact; she overtly declared how important it is to admit that we are not enduring beings. In fact, the title of the novel is a conceit that evokes the rough and unpredictable circumstances we must go through during different stages of our existence, because no matter our age, the waves will always be there, stirring the human soul.

## Conclusion

In this attempt to reveal the feminist traits existing in *The Waves* I could discover the different codes Virginia Woolf employed in order to insinuate her own way of perceiving it. That is, Woolf's way to fight against male dominance in the world, especially in the literary realm, was made by the creation of a literary context in which the construction of gender was democratically settled. The display of a varied range of subjectivities presented in the novel gave room to the reader's interaction in the comprehension of the plot. In this way, the reading process comes to be dynamic and also innovative, since we are able to understand that the complexity of reality is in part due to its multifaceted nature, where both female and male participants have the power to influence one another in their actions, thoughts or whatever emotions they might experience.

Despite of witnessing the solitary consciousness of the characters, all of them are finally perceived as one by the reader. Woolf's orchestral move epitomise the androgynous value of this particular reality, given that Jinny, Neville, Susan, Bernard, Rhoda, and Louis have a diverse set of qualities that makes no hierarchical differences amongst them. Equally devised, they stand for an unorthodox way of criticising the establishment, encouraging the reader to think ahead, giving the chance to observe a particular spot of reality from two different angles: in perspective, and at the same time, from within the privacy of the mind.

The significance of this literary project resides in its shrewdness to undergo the query of a subject matter that has principally been dealt with in areas such as history and politics, in order to support the feminist movement and apply its principles to the non-fictional world to stop abuse against women. In the case of *The Waves*, however, Woolf's feminism is employed to carry out an experimental writing style, since her main concern was to make a difference, to propagate a female writing distinct from those of males.

The writing process of this project has been reinforced by the freshness of a topic that, in spite of being brought about with an ascending frequency in time, it is worthwhile to question the veracity of Woolf's predictions about female writing seventy eight years after the production of this novel. The lyric content of *The Waves*, as well as its allusions to all sorts of human worries that trespass time and geographical boundaries, were other reasons that encouraged the initiation of this study.

The descriptive orientation of this essay is an endeavour to account for Woolf exclusive manner of looking at feminism and the way she depicts it by means of characterisation and narration, elements that suggest there is a budding ideology behind the mere fiction, with the ultimate purpose of enhancing fictional writing.

For further development in posterior literary projects, it would be most enlightening to detect the use ideological postures for aesthetic purposes in other fictional writings. In that way we could not only determine to what extent this technique satisfies the author's need to convey his or her viewpoint about a particular subject, but also to appreciate it as a literary tool.

Woolf considered it important to give female writing a turning point in history: the value of nouns, verbs, and sentences uttered by a woman change the sense if uttered by a man. However, if we adjust to the androgynous attitude she encouraged in her novel, we should

be able to find out a manly-womanly way of writing whose main objective would not be a quest for the separation of gender styles, but rather would be a challenge which could sort out the way the gender communion may be achieved.

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