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FUNCTION OF STORYTELLING ACTS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *THE WAVES*

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Abstract

This paper explores the politics of storytelling in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* to show how stories and acts of storytelling push back against the characters' absurd and receding sense of annihilation. Storytelling in *The Waves* is presented as a unifying narrative element as well as a meaning-giving tool. Despite their vanishing sense of identity and disintegrating relationships, the six narrator-characters in *The Waves* desire to maintain their connection to their environment through the narrativization act of their experiences. Storytelling, in particular, helps Bernard to battle the annihilating force of death. His acts of storytelling not only foster a sense of connection among individuals and with their environment but also safeguard the preservation of their identities. By narrating everyday moments early on and recalling memories later, Bernard attempts to impose a cohesive structure on his identity, despite its inherent fragmentation and instability.

Key words

Storytelling; modernism; identity; language; Bernard; The Waves; Virginia Woolf

“Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind, in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.”

(Woolf 1924/1966: 107)

“[I]f I were writing as a critic, instead of what they call a ‘fan’, I should be inclined to say that *The Waves* and perhaps *To the Lighthouse* were the only perfect masterpieces she [Woolf] ever produced. To me *The Waves* seems perfect.”

(Bell 1995: 105)

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) was a central figure in literary modernism, recognized as an “innovative novelist” (Hacht and Hayes 2009: 1701) and a perceptive critic of both her predecessors and contemporaries. Woolf, in Linda Nicole Blair's words, “was not just a writer of fiction, but a master craftsman of the art

of storytelling” (1990: 13). In her seventh novel *The Waves* (1931), Woolf follows the lives of six characters from childhood to adulthood, primarily through the lens of their individual consciousness and its interplay with the consciousnesses of the others. In Ira Nadel’s words, *The Waves* “is a novel about things people do not say but feel and think” (1990: 151–152). The novel unfolds in nine distinct sections, each one opening with a specific time of day that symbolically mirrors a corresponding life stage for the characters.

The Waves epitomizes a biographical narrative, meticulously tracing the trajectories of six distinct characters from their formative adolescent years to the later stages of life. As Hermione Lee observes, “Fiction [...] is Woolf’s version of biography,” and the “desperate efforts of the six characters in *The Waves* to dispense with a biographer and to speak their own autobiographies collapse into the voice of the writer, who struggles to tell his own story, let alone theirs” (1997, part I). Woolf’s narrative encapsulates a profound exploration of time and individual growth. Mirroring the unfolding of dawn to dusk, the novel’s nine sections, each resonant with a distinct temporal signature, map the evolving landscapes of the characters’ inner and outer worlds. Through her employment of modernist introspection and the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, Woolf navigates the porous boundaries between self and world in *The Waves*. These techniques enable her to capture the fluid and multifaceted nature of her characters’ perception and identity. As intricately portrayed in *The Waves*, Woolf’s novels represent subjective experience and individual consciousness, revealing the complexities of thought and emotion through fragmented narratives and ambiguous boundaries.

Stream of consciousness and interior monologue are not just tools for character exploration, but agents in uncovering the profound interplay between external forces and the evolving identities of her six protagonists. Hence, *The Waves* is a poetic novel which represents the characters’ fractured sense of identity. However, more than dealing with personal concerns, the six characters are continuously concerned about the shared and universal questions. In other words, in Stella McNichol’s words, “In *The Waves* there is less emphasis on individual human perception and more on the universal and mysterious nature of human existence” (1992: 4).

Together with *To the Light House* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waves* is a novel from Woolf’s middle period. As highlighted by Pam Morris (2017), *The Waves* “is widely acknowledged as Woolf’s most ambitious and achieved modernist work” (107), or, in Hans Walter Gabler’s words, it is “the pinnacle of Woolf’s modernist novel writing” (2018: 270). At the same time, as Eric Warner (1987) states, it is Woolf’s “the most formidable and challenging work of art” (xiv). Warner’s assertion underscores the intricate narrative techniques employed by Woolf in this seminal novel, as well as the profound thematic underpinnings that permeate its narrative fabric. Indeed, *The Waves* presents a formidable challenge in its attempt to coalesce disparate narrative threads into a coherent whole. Woolf’s daring departure from traditional linear storytelling is evident as she weaves together the inner monologues of six characters, creating a mosaic of perspectives that ebbs and flows like the titular waves themselves. Each character’s voice rises and falls in a symphony of consciousness, challenging readers to navigate the currents of

their interconnected lives. Moreover, Woolf's experimental use of language and structure further complicates the task of reconciling these diverse elements, inviting readers to engage in a complex dance of interpretation and introspection. Thus, Warner's recognition of the novel's complexity highlights not only its narrative ingenuity but also the profound intellectual and emotional depths waiting to be plumbed by attentive readers.

The Waves is an experimental novel which, according to Ira Nadel (2016), "enacts the Woolfian dictum that thought is more important than speech" (151). *The Waves* represents six characters' inner lives or private perspectives. The use of multiple perspectives allows Woolf to portray the way the six unique characters relate differently to the same events. In their own ways, they are meticulously represented as dealing with the situations and events. Mainly representing the characters' psychological experiences, they are the novels on which, as Stella McNichol (1992) argues, "Virginia Woolf's reputation as an important modernist writer stands" (1).

The unavoidable continuity of storytelling in *The Waves* is presented in a parallel way to the receding pattern of the waves – they repeat unendingly by following a repeating pattern. The nine parts begin with the narrator's poetic description of the different parts of the day. The first part is tantamount with the rising of the sun. The narrator's lyrical comment on a natural event has close associations with the energetic nature of the represented characters in their childhood. Standing on a balcony, the six characters are commenting on some natural scenes early in the morning before their breakfast and lessons. The centrality of storytelling within Woolf's narrative immediately draws attention from the opening scene.

2. Bernard's Hopeful but Haunted Pursuit of Storytelling

The Waves is a mosaic of the central characters' unfinished stories and unaccomplished inquiries. "Death and time," in T. E. Apter's words, "become part of [the six characters'] consciousness, and the external world is reciprocally endowed with consciousness-yet there is not the stasis of a mystic consummation, nor does the individual self ever relinquish its identity" (1979: 3). Similarly, at the core of Bernard's discourse in *The Waves* resides an acute exploration of communication and identity, foregrounding their significance above all other themes.

The Waves begins and ends with Bernard's words and stories. He is the most pivotal character in the novel. Through adept manipulation of language, Bernard constructs alternative realities not only for himself but also for the other characters within the narrative framework of *The Waves*. As a proficient storyteller, he utilizes semiotic cues to craft intricate narrative landscapes, as theorized by David Herman (2009). Bernard's narrative endeavors, characterized by what Herman describes as "narrative ways of worldmaking" (100), facilitate the attainment of a meaningful existence for both himself and his companions. In Beverley Southgate's words, he tries "to provide meaningful (and conventional) order for lives that must nonetheless remain essentially messy and disordered" (2014: 19). In Linda Nicole Blair's words, he is one of the factors connecting the different characters

and times together: “Images such as a globe, the sound of birds chirping, a beast stamping, and the loose thread of storytelling associated with Bernard connect the characters’ journeys from childhood to adulthood” (2017: 163). He consciously uses his acts of storytelling as a unifying tool: “Only Bernard, through his storytelling, seems to understand that a sense of unity with those around him exists as a potential solution to isolation” (Blair 2017: 166). Bernard thinks that he can make a whole out of the separate parts. While reading Neville’s response to his letter in which Neville states that she is “one person” (Woolf 1931/1990: 56), Bernard contends that his sense of self is plural: “I am more selves than Neville thinks” (Woolf 1931/1990: 55). He also finds Neville incapable of understanding his sense of self: “My scope embraces what Neville never reaches” (Woolf 1931/1990: 58). For Bernard, they are all parts of a single narrative: “I do not believe in separation. We are not single” (Woolf 1931/1990: 43).

In Jane Garrity’s words, Bernard is “the self-defined wordsmith of *The Waves*” who “rejects the idea of a unitary self and abandons his desire to construct a totalizing narrative” (2016: 121, 133). Bernard’s primary concern are phrases which allow him to narrativize and put in sequence the events and situations. It allows him to make the past and present experiences discernible for himself and for the other five characters. By doing so he constructs meanings through the plots he fabricates. As Aytül Özüm (2003) contends, Bernard “yearns to bring an order to the psychic chaos elaborated in the monologues of each character” (152). To maintain the flow of the narrative and preserve the individual stories he has gathered, Bernard grapples with the jumbled thoughts and emotions expressed by each character in their introspective monologues.

For Bernard, storytelling has the capacity to unfold the hidden phenomenological and ontological layers. Storytelling for him is a means of exploration of the possibilities: “To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure” (Woolf 1931/1990: 76). At the beginning part of the narrative, he tries to catch his peers’, and our, attention towards such a quintessential function of stories: “Let us now crawl,” said Bernard, “under the canopy of the currant leaves, and tell stories. Let us inhabit the underworld. Let us take possession of our secret territory” (Woolf 1931/1990:11). His skill in storytelling and the effect it has on them is also recognized by the other five characters. It is a universal fact within the storyworld that through storytelling Bernard can help them to deal with their difficult situation. In other words, as it is highlighted by Susan Dick (1983), “the others share Bernard’s assumption that he will make sense of their lives by shaping them into a story” (41). Neville presents a somewhat condescending view of Bernard’s storytelling. He suggests Bernard enjoys the act of talking at length: “Let him burble on” while the others passively listen: “telling us stories, while we lie recumbent”. Neville implies that Bernard imposes a narrative structure onto their experiences, creating a linear sequence: “describing what we have all seen so that it becomes a sequence”. This aligns with their shared understanding of Bernard’s belief that everything can be reduced to a story: “Bernard says there is always a story”. Neville’s use of the word “story” in reference to himself and Louis is ironic, suggesting he acknowledges Bernard’s perspective but does not necessarily subscribe to it entirely: “I am a story. Louis is a story”. He further trivializes

Bernard's storytelling by mentioning unrelated, everyday narratives: "the story of the boot-boy, the story of the man with one eye, the story of the woman who sells winkles". The final image of Neville observing cricketers through grass, "lie back and regard the stiff-legged figures of the padded batsmen through the trembling grasses", reinforces his detached and somewhat bored attitude towards Bernard's monologue (Woolf 1931/1990: 22).

Bernard is a staunch observer of the outside world. Comparing himself to Louis and Neville who, according to him, "both sit silent. Both are absorbed. Both feel the presence of other people as a separating wall", he blooms in such situations: "But if I find myself in company with other people, words at once make smoke rings-see how phrases at once begin to wreathe off my lips. It seems that a match is set to a fire; something burns" (Woolf 1931/1990: 42). Bernard is seen by the other characters as the most skilled storyteller among them. In Özüm's words, he "exemplifies the attempt to establish a harmony to diminish the chaotic psychological situation of the characters" (2003: 152) For example Susan tells him: "I am tied down with single words. But you wander off; you slip away; you rise up higher, with words and words in phrases" (Woolf 1931/1990: 7). Neville also highlights Bernard's natural attachment to the storyworld: "He is like a dangling wire, a broken bell-pull, always twangling. He is like the seaweed hung outside the window, damp now, now dry. He leaves me in the lurch; he follows Susan; and if Susan cries he will take my knife and tell her stories. The big blade is an emperor; the broken blade a Negro" (Woolf 1931/1990: 9). Neville also comments on Bernard's character by finding a relationship between his popularity and his storytelling skill: "He [Bernard] is always too late [...] He is shaded with innumerable perplexities, [...] But they would forgive him; for he would tell them a story" (Woolf 1931/1990: 29-30).

More than the other characters, Neville feels connected to Bernard's attachment to stories. His intellectualism and love of aesthetics help him comment on the power and potential of Bernard's act of storytelling: "We are all phrases in Bernard's story, things he writes down in his notebook under A or under B. He tells our story with extraordinary understanding, except of what we most feel. For he does not need us. He is never at our mercy" (Woolf 1931/1990: 44). As an artist himself, he understands the scope of Bernard's imagination. He highlights the fact that more than translating their feelings in his stories, Bernard creates and ascribes new feelings to them too.

Neville's comments on Bernard's skill of storytelling also represents the other four characters shared perspective. Being a poet and artist himself, he sympathizes with Bernard's feelings and art. In criticizing Bernard's self-absorption, Neville unveils the limitations of subjective narratives in capturing the complexities of human connection. He argues that Bernard constructs a personal story, categorizing people and experiences into simplistic labels (phrases in Bernard's story). Despite Bernard's seemingly insightful observations, Neville contends that Bernard's self-sufficiency blinds him to the subjective experiences of others, "he does not need us, he is never at our mercy". Neville highlights the tension between self-constructed narratives and genuine understanding, suggesting that prioritizing self-interpretation over authentic connection, as he thinks Bernard

does, can lead to a superficial grasp of human relationships (Woolf 1931/1990: 44). Neville's artistic sensibility enables him to discern the delineations within Bernard's narrative and identify instances where imagination supersedes reality. Nevertheless, Neville encounters certain reservations. He perceives Bernard's storytelling as divorced from genuine experience. Bernard's inability to comprehend the emotional nuances of their shared reality, as Neville perceives, reveals the fictionalized and non-biographical nature of his own narrative. This observation illustrates Bernard's tendency to substitute authentic situations with fantastical constructs, thereby enabling his evasion of the harsh realities of existence.

However, despite the fact that "Bernard's stories amuse" Neville, he finds some limitations in his storytelling. He perceives Bernard as incapable of grasping the intricacies of human connection, believing "He sees everyone with blurred edges." This reinforces the doubt surrounding Bernard's ability to understand Neville's intense emotions. Ultimately, Neville hesitates to share their true feelings: "Hence I cannot talk to him of Percival... I cannot expose my absurd and violent passion to his sympathetic understanding." While acknowledging a potential for understanding, Neville doubts its authenticity. He fears Bernard would reduce his "absurd and violent passion" to another mere "story" through his superficial lens. Therefore, Neville's initial amusement gives way to a mix of frustration and resignation as he recognizes Bernard's limitations in fostering a genuine and profound connection (Woolf 1931/1990: 31).

All characters in *The Waves* are struggling with speculating their own distinct identities. In doing so they have their own unique ways. Storytelling and the phrases by which he is telling stories are Bernard's tools to distinguish his identity and make his connection with his environment meaningful. Storytelling allows Bernard to contemplate on his own identity which is a shared concern among the six characters. At the start of part three, Bernard grapples with his multifaceted identity by questioning his own existence: "What am I?" He acknowledges the inconsistency between his public and private personas, suggesting a complex inner life hidden from others. Bernard feels misunderstood by his friends, who perceive his evasiveness as a deliberate act: "saying I escape them, am evasive". However, he argues that his shifting behavior reflects the internal negotiation between various aspects of his personality: "several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard". As revealed through such passages, Bernard explores the concept of a divided self and the challenges of reconciling multiple identities. His heightened awareness of social context, "abnormally aware of circumstances", further complicates his self-perception, as he constantly navigates the expectations of others (Woolf 1931/1990: 48).

Compared to the other characters, Bernard is uniquely equipped with storytelling as a tool to explore his identity, a resource the others largely lack. Through storytelling, he attempts to weave together the disparate aspects of his character to achieve a sense of integrity. However, Bernard's realization that his friends fail to recognize this unified identity causes him distress: "Underneath, [...] I am also integrated. I sympathise effusively" (Woolf 1931/1990: 49). His narratives give him a sense of coherence, but this coherence is fragile, reliant on the presence of his audience. Bernard perceives himself as possess-

ing a depth and duality that his self-absorbed friends lack: “Very few of you who are now discussing me have the double capacity to feel, to reason” (Woolf 1931/1990: 49). In comparing himself to his friends, he highlights his complexity: “You are all engaged, involved, drawn in, and absolutely energised to the top of your bent – all save Neville, whose mind is far too complex to be roused by any single activity. I also am too complex. In my case something remains floating, unattached” (Woolf 1931/1990: 49). While Bernard embraces this complexity, it becomes a source of existential struggle. His multifaceted identity, though celebrated in the presence of others, leaves him feeling unanchored when alone. Storytelling, his primary tool for constructing meaning, loses its potency without an audience. Bernard’s awareness of this dependence troubles him deeply, as he grapples with the fear that his identity is not intrinsic but rather shaped by the responses of those around him. This internal conflict surfaces in his self-reflections: “I am that dashing yet reflective man, that bold and deleterious figure” (Woolf 1931/1990: 49). Bernard’s self-perception fluctuates between confidence and doubt. While he proclaims, “I am a poet, yes. Surely I am a great poet” (Woolf 1931/1990: 52), and compares himself to Byron – “I am, in some ways, like Byron. Perhaps a sip of Byron will help to put me in the vein” (Woolf 1931/1990: 50) – these declarations often mask deeper insecurities. Bernard’s reliance on others to lend an ear to his stories highlights his struggle with solitude and the fear that, without an audience, his multifaceted identity may dissolve into meaninglessness.

Storytelling and/or storying the events he lives is a way to overcome his confused mind. He intentionally fills his mind with “imaginary pictures” (Woolf 1931/1990: 50) so that he can forget about the reality of the real situation which is beyond the processing capacity of his mind. Bernard attempts to reveal his character by comparing himself to Byron. He also contrasts himself with realist novelists to highlight his differences. Through these comparisons, he emphasizes the fragmented nature of his subjectivity, his need and desire for connection, and his internal struggles. Bernard expresses dependence on external stimulation for his creativity: “The truth is that I need the stimulus of other people”. He contrasts his own struggle with a romanticized image of the “real novelist”—a figure of boundless imagination: “the perfectly simple human being, could go on, indefinitely, imagining”. Bernard believes this ideal novelist lacks the need to “integrate” experiences or confront the limitations of his creative wellspring: “He would not integrate [...] devastating sense of grey ashes in a burnt-out grate”. This self-doubt manifests as a creative block, “blind flaps in my eyes”, where everything becomes impervious and he can not invent. Bernard feels insecure as a writer, “I cease to invent.” While he admires a fictionalized version of the creative process, he overlooks the potential benefits of his own introspective nature (Woolf 1931/1990: 51). Bernard acknowledges his personal challenges, recognizing that language is the primary component of storytelling. Consequently, akin to his introspection on personal identity, he delves into his relationship with language, grappling with the endeavor to convey his authentic self.

Storytelling plays a central role in the function of language in *The Waves*. For the characters, language is not just a tool for communication – it is the primary

means through which they make sense of themselves and their world. Words in *The Waves* do more than describe reality; they actively shape it, blurring the line between language and lived experience. As Derek Ryan notes, Woolf explores “how words become worlds but also how worlds become words” (2015: 153). This transformation occurs as the six narrators use storytelling to construct meaning and understand their environment. By narrating their experiences, they do not just recount events – they create a shared, albeit subjective, reality. Bernard illustrates this process when he says to Louis: “But when we sit together, close,” said Bernard, “we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory” (Woolf 1931/1990: 7). Here, words dissolve boundaries between individuals, forging a collective space that exists only through language. This “unsubstantial territory” exemplifies how words create worlds – realms of connection and understanding that transcend physical reality. Conversely, the characters’ worlds – their memories, perceptions, and emotions – are constantly being translated into words as they strive to articulate their experiences. Even though the six characters in *The Waves* are often trapped in nostalgic misperceptions, their narrative acts give structure and meaning to their lives. Bernard, in particular, uses language as a means of control and self-definition. As Emily Dalgarno puts it, Bernard “illustrates an ideology of conquest in language” (2012: 135). Through his storytelling, he imposes order on the chaos of his inner life, demonstrating how language is both a tool for self-expression and a medium for shaping reality.

Bernard describes words as powerful horses, “galloping” and brimming with potential, yet he feels an internal barrier, a “fatal hesitancy,” that prevents him from fully harnessing their power. This hesitancy, if disregarded, leads to “foam and falsity,” suggesting a fear of inauthenticity or superficiality. Bernard yearns to achieve the status of a “great poet”, questioning his efforts as he wonders if his previous writing was truly poetry. He grapples with self-doubt, unsure if his writing is “too fast, too facile,” lacking depth or complexity. The final lines highlight his existential struggle for self-understanding. He admits to not always knowing himself, unable to “measure and name and count” the elements that constitute his being. This passage portrays Bernard’s artistic ambition, coupled with the anxieties and uncertainties that impede his creative journey (Woolf 1931/1990: 53).

While other characters, such as Susan, exhibit divergent perspectives on language, as evidenced by her assertion “I do not understand phrases” (Woolf 1931/1990: 86), Bernard’s engagement with language is characterized by a distinct aim: to imbue the world with comprehensibility. Bernard views language as an essential tool for creating meaning in a chaotic world. He suggests that without the structure provided by language, “Had I been born [...] not knowing that one word follows another”, his very identity would be undefined: “I might have been, who knows, perhaps anything”. This dependence on language manifests as a fear of solitude: “cannot bear the pressure of solitude”. Bernard feels lost and nonexistent when deprived of the continuous flow of words: “When I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke round me I am in darkness – I am nothing.” Bernard highlights his reliance on external structures, in this case language, to

define himself and navigate the world. This dependence raises questions about the authenticity of his self-constructed identity and the potential limitations of relying solely on language for meaning-making (Woolf 1931/1990: 86). Bernard uses his skill of language to ward off the social pressure: “If I lie open to the pressure of society I often succeed with the dexterity of my tongue in putting something difficult into the currency” (Woolf 1931/1990: 87).

Bernard, a man defined by solitude, finds solace in stories, a bridge that connects him to the external world and the experiences of others. Through narrative, he seeks to transcend the existential quandary that plagues him. Embodying the anxieties of the modern individual, Bernard grapples with fragmentation and a sense of purposelessness, wielding language as a tool to forge meaning and escape his solitary confinement: “Who and what are these unknown people? I ask. I could make a dozen stories of what he said, of what she said – I can see a dozen pictures. But what are stories? Toys I twist, bubbles I blow, one ring passing through another. And sometimes I begin to doubt if there are stories. What is my story? What is Rhoda’s? What is Neville’s?” (Woolf 1931/1990: 94) In this passage, Bernard reveals his ambivalence toward storytelling. On one hand, he views stories as playful constructs – “toys” and “bubbles” – implying their fragility and artificiality. This metaphor suggests that while narratives offer temporary comfort, they might lack the substance needed to provide lasting meaning. On the other hand, his persistent questioning (“What is my story?”) underscores his deep yearning for coherence and self-understanding. Bernard’s struggle is not just about telling stories, but about finding authenticity within them. His doubt reflects the broader modernist preoccupation with the instability of identity and the limitations of language. The mention of Rhoda and Neville highlights his attempt to situate his narrative within the collective experiences of his friends, yet even this communal effort fails to provide certainty. Such passages in *The Waves* encapsulate Bernard’s existential struggle: he oscillates between using stories as a means of connection and questioning their very existence as reliable foundations for understanding himself and others.

Bernard’s creativity and self-expression place him a step ahead of the other characters in *The Waves*. More than the others, he is acutely aware of the existential and ontological challenges he faces. He attempts to overcome these struggles by using storytelling to create new possibilities and meanings: “We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time” (Woolf 1931/1990: 96). For Bernard, language is more real than people: “The truth is that I am not one of those who find their satisfaction in one person, or in infinity” (Woolf 1931/1990: 123). Through his obsession with words and phrases, he tries to find truth by his stories: “I have made up thousands of stories; I have filled innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when I have found the true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer. But I have never yet found that story. And I begin to ask, Are there stories?” (Woolf 1931/1990: 124)

Language is the source of identity for Bernard. It is an aquarium in which Bernard breathes. His perception of the outside world takes place within language.

He compares life to an “imperfect, an unfinished phrase” (Woolf 1931/1990: 190). He does not recognize any authority and authenticity in himself: “I am not an authority on law, or medicine, or finance. I am wrapped round with phrases, like damp straw; I glow, phosphorescent” (Woolf 1931/1990: 144). However, as much as language makes identity possible, without people it does not have any value. When there is nobody around, Bernard feels worn-out and empty: “But I pine in solitude. Solitude is my undoing” (Woolf 1931/1990: 144). Language reaches its constructing potential when it is attached to someone. Bernard struggles with the elusiveness of truth within narratives. He observes everyday human actions as potential stories: “A girl sits at a cottage door... But which is the true story?”. However, he struggles to identify the single, definitive narrative behind these observations: “That I do not know”. This uncertainty leads him to create a vast collection of potential interpretations, storing them like unused clothes: “Hence I keep my phrases hung like clothes in a cupboard”. Bernard’s creative process involves constant speculation and note-taking: “making this note and then another”. This approach suggests a lack of commitment to any one narrative, reflecting his fear of clinging to a single interpretation of life: “I do not cling to life”. He compares his philosophy to quicksilver, a fluid metal that readily changes shape: “My philosophy [...] runs like quicksilver a dozen ways at once”. By this metaphor, Bernard reinforces his fluid and unfixed perspective on the world (Woolf 1931/1990: 145).

In the final section of the novel, Bernard turns to storytelling as the most effective means of shaping and understanding his life: “Now to sum up [...] Now to explain to you the meaning of my life” (Woolf 1931/1990: 158). Bernard’s main purpose in the final section is to make a whole out of the disconnected stories. In other words, in his storytelling he pursues the construction process of a plot which is fabricated by the chain of events coming from different stories. Bernard expresses a deep ambivalence towards storytelling. He acknowledges the desire to share his life through narrative: “in order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story”. Yet, he feels overwhelmed by the sheer number and variety of potential narratives: “and there are so many, and so many - stories of childhood, stories of school [...]”. Further, he doubts the absolute truth of any one story: “none of them are true”. Bernard compares this act of storytelling to a childish activity: “like children we tell each other stories”. The colorful language used to embellish these stories is seen as artificial and excessive: “decorate them we make up these ridiculous, flamboyant, beautiful phrases”. This leads to a profound weariness with the entire concept of stories and their polished language: “How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground!” (Woolf 1931/1990: 159).

Toward the end of his long monologue at the last part of *The Waves*, Bernard is still looking for his desired language: “I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement” (Woolf 1931/1990: 159). By mocking the realistic tradition of story ending, he refuses to tell a unified story of his life which is disseminated. Therefore, his life story is comprised of multiple stories: “what I call ‘my life,’ it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people;

I do not altogether know who I am -Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs” (Woolf 1931/1990: 185).

The identity problem, which had been pushed aside by his engagement with storytelling throughout the earlier stages of his life, dominates Bernard’s mental state in his later years, when, separated from his old friends and companions, he reflects on himself. For Bernard, language and self are interconnected. When his certainty of self is shattered, or he feels like “a man without a self,” he cannot write too: “How can I proceed now, I said, without a self, weightless and visionless, through a world weightless, without illusion? [...] But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. [...] How describe or say anything in articulate words again?” (Woolf 1931/1990: 191–192) Bernard’s self is connected to language, to phrases. In the absence of his established self, which he calls “the faithful man” when “Life has destroyed” him (Woolf 1931/1990: 190), he loses his power of imagination too.

In the final part of the narrative, Bernard seeks to articulate his own story by distinguishing himself from the others, yet he remains troubled by the blurred boundaries between self and other: “And now I ask, ‘Who am I?’ I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. [...] we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them” (Woolf 1931/1990: 193–194). This passage reveals the central paradox of Bernard’s identity construction: while he seeks individuality, his sense of self remains inextricably tied to his friends. The dissolution of these boundaries underscores the fluid and collective nature of identity in *The Waves*, where storytelling becomes a means to navigate and reconcile this fragmentation. Bernard’s ability to imagine their lives blurs the lines between his own experiences and theirs, reflecting how narrative functions as both a unifying and meaning-giving tool. Through the act of storytelling, Bernard attempts to impose coherence on his fractured identity. Even as he acknowledges the impossibility of clear divisions between himself and his companions, storytelling allows him to maintain a sense of connection and stave off the existential threat of annihilation. By narrating both shared and individual experiences, Bernard not only affirms his existence but also preserves the identities of his friends, binding them together through memory and narrative. This passage illustrates how storytelling serves as Bernard’s strategy to confront the absurdity of existence, fostering both personal and communal continuity despite the inevitable disintegration of relationships and identity over time.

Bernard’s narration in the final chapter, Chapter Nine, centres primarily on himself. He tries to tell us the story of his own life in an autobiographical manner. Having recognized their inefficiency in helping him to tell his own distinct story, Bernard tries to go out of the impact of language, consciousness, and self: “I try to escape – shadows of people one might have been; unborn selves” (Woolf 1931/1990: 194). He decanters himself and refutes his domination over his own identity and language too. Looking into the mirror he addresses himself: “I, who had been thinking myself so vast, a temple, a church, a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being everywhere on the verge of things and here

too, am now nothing but what you see – an elderly man, rather heavy, grey above the ears, who (I see myself in the glass)” (196). The elderly Bernard in the last part comes out of the illusion for a long he has fabricated by his storytelling skill. His narration unveils significant insights: “Like most autobiographers, Bernard engages in a process of discovery as he tells the story of his life” (Dick 1983: 42). He becomes a realist who finds storytelling, phrases, and language devoid of any potential to deliver truth. In his “solitude” which “has removed the pressure of the eye, the solicitation of the body, and all need of lies and phrase,” (Woolf 1931/1990: 197-198), when, “stuffed with phrases,” he finds it difficult to express his feelings and emotion, he feels in “need of a little language such as lovers use.” He continues exploring the potentials of language despite the fact that he concludes that he has “done with phrases” (Woolf 1931/1990: 198).

Towards the end of his autobiographical narration, Bernard, as Susan Dick (1983) points out, “shift[s] frequently from the perspective of one who is committed to action and to telling the story of his life, to the perspective of one who has seen the futility of action and the falsity of stories” (45). This oscillation reflects Bernard’s awareness of the limitations of language and narrative in fully capturing the self and life’s meaning. However, even as he recognizes this futility, Bernard continues to engage with storytelling, demonstrating his refusal to succumb to nihilism. By harnessing the potential of language to bind his subjective experiences with a broader, shared reality, Bernard, now a “worn out” elderly man, experiences what he calls “another general awakening” (Woolf 1931/1990: 199). This awakening does not necessarily signify naive optimism, but rather a renewed awareness of life’s fleeting nature and an acknowledgment of the power of narrative to momentarily stave off existential despair.

Bernard’s defiance against death is evident in his climactic declaration: “It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched [...] Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (Woolf 1931/1990: 199). His words suggest a stance of resistance rather than resignation. His optimism is complex – it lies not in denying death’s inevitability but in his determination to confront it through the act of storytelling. The illusion constructed from phrases and memory-based narratives allows Bernard to impose a temporary structure on the chaos of existence. This narrative act sustains his pursuit of meaning in life, offering a fragile but significant sense of continuity and connection. Therefore, Bernard’s closing soliloquy in *The Waves* reflects not unambiguous hope but a profound, existential defiance – a testament to the enduring human need to find meaning, even in the face of life’s impermanence.

3. Conclusion

The pursuit of meaning through storytelling acts permeates the narrative in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. It drives the characters in their quest for understanding amidst the ambiguity of existence. As a modernist text, *The Waves* presents a world where universal meaning is elusive, and individuals must construct their own interpretations of reality. The six central characters navigate this existential landscape,

each grappling with their unique journey towards meaning. At the heart of the novel lies the theme of language and identity, particularly embodied in the character of Bernard. For Bernard, language is not merely a tool for communication but the essence of selfhood, a means of combating the fragmentation inherent in their world. His fascination with phrases reflects his belief in the power of narrative to shape identity and create coherence in the face of chaos. As it is illustrated in his autobiographical narrative in the last part of the novel, in Bernard's worldview, man precedes language, and identity emerges through the sequencing of events within a narrative framework. *The Waves* eschews traditional narrative structure in favor of a series of interconnected stories, emphasizing the role of storytelling in shaping individual identity. Each character becomes a storyteller, weaving their own unique narrative thread within the fabric of the novel. However, it is Bernard who truly grasps the notion that meaning is not inherent but constructed, as he strives to imbue his life and the lives of others with purpose through storytelling. Bernard's disillusionment in the latter part of the narrative is not simply a result of the limitations of language or the ephemeral nature of stories but a consequence of his solitude in old age. Despite his efforts to create meaning, he finds himself confronted by the stark reality of mortality and the futility of his efforts. His long monologue serves as a poignant reflection on the human condition, highlighting the inherent loneliness of existence and the transient nature of our attempts to find meaning in an indifferent universe. *The Waves*, is a testament to the human capacity for meaning-making in the face of existential uncertainty. Through the character of Bernard, Woolf explores the intricate relationship between language, identity, and storytelling, ultimately revealing the defining role of the storytelling as an effective way to understand the world and maintain our relationship with the outside world. In Woolf's *The Waves*, storytelling emerges as a potent mechanism facilitating the characters' navigation of existential and ontological dilemmas. Recognizing its inherent efficacy, Bernard harnesses storytelling as a means of sustaining coherence throughout his life. Nonetheless, the narrative demonstrates a nuanced portrayal of storytelling's limitations, particularly evident in Bernard's soliloquy in the final part of narrative when he is grappling with advancing age. In the latter portion of Woolf's narrative, Bernard's attempt to articulate his personal narrative represents a pivotal moment wherein the efficacy of storytelling wanes, resulting in partial narrative failure. However, while the pursuit of meaning is rife with disappointments, disillusionments and the looming sense of death, Bernard finds hope, solace, connection, and a semblance of meaning through his storytelling pursuits.

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