

ISSN: 0976-8165

Vol.8, Issue-V (October 2017)

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

8th Year of Open Access

The Criterion 

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Cyclical Narrative Structure in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

Dr. G. D. Ingale

Associate Professor,
Devchand College, Arjunnagar
Dist: Kolhapur, Maharashtra.

Article History: Submitted-27/08/2017, Revised-29/10/2017, Accepted-09/11/2017, Published-20/11/2017.

Abstract:

The *Waves* is Virginia Woolf's most daring departure from the traditional novel. She is concerned with the decay of the modern civilization. The sense of chaos and human insignificance acquire climactic aspect with flux and chaos becoming triumphant at the end. This is reflected in the narrative structure of the novel which is cyclical. The cyclical structure is without any center. The novel presents six characters revolving around death—their dead friend. The novelist links the cycle of life and death with the cycle of Nature viz. the waves. The nine segments of the novel contain interludes to each part which describe the changing phases of Nature. The interludes are followed by and connected to the changing lives of the six characters symbolically in the main body of the novel. The paradox of unity of form and content achieved by Woolf in the novel remains unparalleled in the history of the novel form.

Keywords: narrative structure, cyclical, linear, absent center and mechanical flux.

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1935) is a unique novel with no precedent in the tradition of European prose fiction. Woolf herself acknowledged its uniqueness: 'What a long toil to reach this beginning— if *The Waves* is my first work in my own style! To be noted as curiosities of my literary history' (Woolf, *Writer's Diary (hereafter WD)*, 176). *The Waves* represents the quintessential genius of Woolf in matters of narrative structure, point of view and style. It is, in many ways, the culmination of her vision of life and art. Woolf herself acknowledged it 'The most complex and difficult of all my books' (WD, 156). Woolf always tried to dismantle the conventional novel from her first novel, *The Voyage Out*. As to the novelty of the form of *The Waves*, Woolf (WD, 133) observes, 'Nor have I any notion of what it is to be like— a completely new attempt I think; - *The Moths* [later to become *The Waves*], that was to be an abstract mystical eyeless book: a play poem'. Further she (WD: 108) says, 'The play-poem idea; the idea of some continuing stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night, etc. all flowing together'. In *Ws*, Woolf has turned out an entirely new species of the novel form based on her individualistic vision which remains unparalleled in the history of European fiction. Woolf (WD, 176) observes, 'I have gone on along this very lonely path'.

The novel presents six characters— Bernard, Neville, Louis, Rhoda, Susan and Jinny. Bernard is the novelist; Neville, a poet; Louis, a businessman; Susan, a housewife; Rhoda, a drifter; and Jinny, a sensualist. The lives of these characters are traced from their shared childhood to

adulthood when they drift apart, and also their old age through the character of Bernard in the last section of the book.

In the novel, as in other novels, Woolf is concerned with the decay of the modern civilization. In *The Waves*, she explicitly mentions: 'Let me denounce this piffling, trifling, self-satisfied world; ... I could shriek aloud at the smug self-satisfaction, at the mediocrity of this world ... (52) (All references to the text of *The Waves* are from 1992 edition.); 'Now we draw near the centre of the civilized world. ... I will sit still one moment before I emerge into that chaos, that tumult' (53); 'I reflect now that the earth is only a pebble flicked off accidentally from the face of the sun and that there is *no life* anywhere in the abysses of space' (172); and 'this illimitable chaos', 'this formless imbecility' (173).

However, the presentation of the central theme is in stark contrast to the presentation of the same in earlier novels. In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the central characters try to arrest the eternal flux of time in the benign moments and impose unity and order on the chaotic world by their presence, postulating the possibility of mystical unity between man and man and man and nature: '... that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are ..., the unseen part of us which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow' (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 144); 'there is peace, rest, *eternity*' (*To the Lighthouse*, 60). In *The Waves*, this sense of mystical unity or transcendence is considered an illusion and a vision of the world, which is chaotic beyond human endurance, is presented. The reign of chaos is more potent and destructive in *The Waves* than in the earlier novels.

The Waves presents the spectre of the impossibility of man to become a complete human being with a unitary self: 'We saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be' (213) and signals the 'dissolution of soul' (156): 'Let me cast and throw away this *veil of being*, this cloud that changes with the least breath, night and day' (226); 'Little bits of ourselves are crumbling. There! Something very important fell then. I cannot keep myself together. ... We are only bodies jogging along side by side' (180). She also presents the absurdity of human existence: 'Who are you? Who am I?— that quivers again ... and all the insanity of personal existence ... being again' (178); 'Also I like to find the pageant of existence roaring, in a theatre for instance' (208). Further, *The Waves* attains further depth in the portrayal of alienation and suffering not only as the product of modern civilization, but as part of the existence and being: 'Forever alone, alone, alone, - hear silence falls and sweeps its rings to the farthest edges' (172). Thus, the novel, *The Waves*, records a further dip into abstraction and contemplation so dear to the modernists.

The Structure of *The Waves*, therefore, reflects the thematic concerns of Woolf. She needed a narrative structure which would capture the pitiless mechanical flux of time and life. The nature of waves eternally breaking on the shore must have informed the narrative structure of the novel which is suggested in the title itself.

The Absent Center in the Cyclical Structure

Unlike in her earlier novels, whose narrative structures display aspects of linearity, *The Waves* follows the opposite principle of linearity denying even the notional structure for

the novel. The 'structure' is cyclical. The life of the six characters- Bernard, Neville, Louis, Rhoda, Susan and Jinny- is presented through their streams of consciousness which flow in the cyclical manner. However, the circle/cycle of life and experiences lacks the mandatory center thereby suggesting the emptiness of the lives of the characters. Hence, the narrative principle: *The lives of six characters revolve around an absent centre.*

The absent centre is Percival, a character who is first silent, then absent, and then dead. His death makes him centrally important. Metaphorically speaking, the lives of six characters are woven around 'death' embodied in Percival's death- the absent centre- which gives meaning or meaninglessness to the lives of the six characters. Bernard says, 'About him my feeling was: he sat there in the centre. Now I see to that spot no longer. The place is empty' (116); 'What does the central shadow hold? Something? Nothing? I do not know' (224). Percival is the central shadow, an embodiment of 'complete man' cast in the shape of 'some medieval commander' (26), 'the heroic man of the Empire who goes to India' (92) and he is like the lighthouse/the centre guiding the lives of others. But his centrality is negated by his death, by the arbitrary stroke of a mysterious force, the pitiless fatality, and thus, the absent centre. In Woolf's vision of life, the whole, the centre is the pivot of the universe which connects the parts/fragments together. Here, the very centre is empty and death occupies the central place. Around death, life is woven and in relation to death, life and its processes are analyzed and judged by the characters. Thus, the structure of *The Waves* is built on the symbolic pattern of life and death. Bernard Blackstone rightly observes, 'Life and death form the inexhaustible counterpoint of her work. Not death coming as the ending to a completed story, but death inexplicable, torturing, making life meaningless; yet also mysterious, fascinating, giving depth to life' (10).'

It is Percival/death/shadow who could be considered as the principle of unity holding the six characters together- Percival being an integral part of their consciousness. For them, he is an ideal, a symbol of order, a 'complete man'. After his death, that wholeness exists in the scattered form among the friends. Bernard sounds as much when he says, 'The 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' (95). This is an extremely complex kind of integration of divided selves- cyclical in nature - which Woolf realizes in *The Waves*.

The Nine Cycles of Nature and Human Life

The narrative of *The Waves* is presented in nine cycles of the lives of the characters in nine sections of the novel. Each section is an episode, nay, a scene or a moment in which their lives are presented from childhood to old age in the form of soliloquies. They are not events, the materials of a story, but their journey of life through school, university, profession, town life, country life, marriage or celibacy, and ageing woven as the general texture of life, immersed in the sea of life and time, and their struggle against change and separation. Each of the nine sections are arranged on the cyclical analogy of the waves: in them the characters, like the waves, either come together (sections 1, 4, 5, 8 and 9) or break apart (sections 2, 3, 6 and 7). Woolf (Dick, 62) notes, 'the rhythmic design should dominate the facts in *The Waves*'. Woolf (WD, 163) further notes, 'What it wants is presumably unity;

... suppose I could run all the scenes together more?— by rhythms chiefly ... so as to make the blood run like a torrent from end to end— I don't want the waste that breaks give; ... a saturated unchopped completeness; changes of scene, of mind, of person, done without spilling a drop'.

As a counterpoint to the lives of the six characters, each of the nine sections are prefaced by what Woolf called the 'interludes' (Woolf, *Diary*₃, 285): 'The interludes are very difficult, but I think essential; so as to bridge and also as a background- the sea- insensitive nature'. The bridge is set up by chronicling the progress of a day from pre-dawn to total darkness. These interludes are presented in italics and separated from the main narrative. They appear to provide an imaginary skyline, the breaking of the waves and the changing sun- a pristine cosmic setting- against which the chaotic and miserable lives of the human characters are presented. In style and content, they are distinguished from the rest of the text by exquisite poetic style and impersonal omniscient narration. The macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of the individual lives are thus clearly interwoven. The changes depicted in the interludes are mirrored in corresponding changes in the characters' lives. Dawn coincides with their early childhood, late morning with their adolescence, evening with the closing years of their lives. The most persistent images in the interludes are the images of the sun and the waves. The changing phases of the sun mirror the life-cycle of the human beings and the waves, constantly in motion, symbolize the rhythmic flow of life. Hence is the significance of the title-*The Waves*.

The cyclical structure symbolizes

- a) The cycle of day and night
- b) The cycle of light and darkness
- c) The cycle of life and death
- d) The cycle of joy and sorrow

Though (a) and (b) are realized in the interlude sections and (c) and (d) are realized in the main sections, there are innumerable points of intersections between them. One important thing to be noticed is that the movement is from the first element to the second element in each cycle with only a bare suggestion of the return to the first element- thus moving from Creation to dissolution. The following sentences in the text illustrate this feature:

1. It seems as if *the whole world were flowing and curving*— on the earth the trees, in the sky the clouds. I look up, through the trees, into the sky. The match seems to be played up there (27).
2. *Illusion returns* as they approach the avenue. Rippling and questioning begin, ... (178).
3. The *woods had vanished*; the *earth was a waste* of a shadow. No sound broke... No cock crowed; no smoke rose; ... A man without a self, I said. A dead man (219).
4. With dispassionate despair, with entire disillusionment, I surveyed the dust-dance; How can I proceed now, I said, without a self, weightless and visionless, through a world weightless, *without illusion?* (219). (Italics supplied.)

In examples (1) and (2), the earth is presented as alive with significance and meaning and examples (3) and (4) present a world without illusions- an absurd chaotic universe.

Life is projected in the image of sea or stream from which Woolf has picked up the six characters. Bernard says, ‘Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only *a string of six little fish* that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle ...’ (197). This explains the representative character of the six human beings who inhabit the vast universe of the novel. Woolf (*WD*, 157) notes, ‘and keep the elements of characters; and that there should be many characters and only one; and also an infinity, a background behind- well, I admit I was biting off too much’. The six characters are six essences and not well-cut characters and who share similar memories and consciousness along with their individualistic traits inscribed on them. Each character is similar, yet a variation on the other, like the individual waves rising from the sea and submerging once again. Bernard, the archetypal character, reveals their relationship to one another as embodying in his own person: ‘I am not one and simple, but complex and many’ (56); ‘For I am more selves than Neville thinks’ (66); ‘... here at this table, what I call “my life”, it is not one life...; 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’ (212); ‘For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville ...’ (216). Thus, Bernard makes Woolf’s ultimate statement on the unity of mankind. Woolf appears to have subscribed to Sigmund Freud’s (in Lodge, 40) view, ‘The psychological novel in general no doubt owes its special nature to the inclination of the modern writer to split up his ego, by self-observation, into many part-egos, and, in consequence, to personify the conflicting currents of his own mental life in several heroes.’ Woolf splits up the egos in an attempt to present not one, single personality but a combination of several personalities, which exist at different circumstances and at different psychological moments. This concept of a character having multiple selves is another challenge to traditional characterization with a unitary self with the will to effect changes in the world. It is this phenomenon of archetypal essence pervading all the six characters, along with shared life and experiences that explains the unchanging discourse in which the characters express themselves in their soliloquies.

Spatio-Temporal Scheme:

Woolf annihilates the spatio-temporal scheme in the novel. She does not fix the characters in a familiar chronological context at all. The concrete Isle of Skye and a particular evening and a morning of *To the Lighthouse* which set boundaries to the narrative have disappeared. Neville says, ‘They want a plot, ... They want a reason? It is not enough for them, this ordinary scene. ... to see the sentence lay its dab of clay precisely on the right place, making character; to perceive suddenly, some group in outline against the sky’ (151). It means that the characters are set against infinity and this is a measure of abstraction and universality Woolf achieves by obliterating time and place as clutches to the narrative. Time too is obliterated and a few hints as to the ages of the characters are dropped as if by accident, that too, when the character is emotionally connected with the information. For instance, ‘You see me, ... a rather heavy, elderly man, grey at the temples’ (183). Locations of the

boarding school, the sea shore, house, garden, the public school, the university are not named. These exist only in relation to the consciousness of the characters. However, the city of London is mentioned with its streets and landmarks, and even the sounds of the city are evoked, making London function as a verifiable realistic setting for a fictional world. Even then, Bernard observes, 'Nor do I know exactly where we are. What city does that stretch of sky look down upon? Is it Paris, is it London where we sit, or some southern city of pink-washed houses lying under cypresses?' (221). Woolf questions the material reality of time and place and the whole concept of historical determinism in order to enquire into aspects of human nature which lie beyond the specificity of time and place. From *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* to *The Waves*, we see Woolf distancing herself more and more from the 'appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner' (Woolf, *Diary*₃, 203).

Conclusion

To sum up, it is proved that Woolf achieves unity between form and content through artistic integration, and thus, the paradox between chaos and order has been resolved through art. W.B. Yeats (Tindall, 190) felt the paradoxes of form and formlessness in Joyce's *Ulysses* and *The Waves*, which seemed to him 'deluges of experiences breaking over us and within us, melting limits whether of line or tint', and their people swim or 'the waves themselves'.

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