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Are political radicalism and social critique necessarily more effective when expressed in experimental language and form? What, if anything, does Woolf the socially-committed writer gain from her narrative experiments?

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Escalating diplomatic tensions between the two world wars and the dwindling British empire were practically inescapable for Virginia Woolf as a socially-aware writer; this unstable climate was fuelled by the difficult transition from the patriotic, regimented and imperialist Victorian era, to an early 20th century Britain embittered by the human cost of the First World War. Woolf believed that war, oppression and the decline of the empire were a natural progression for a country so heavily dependent on tight, hierarchical institutions, as this system suppressed creativity, and alienated anyone exterior to its narrow criteria. Toril Moi views Woolf's utilization of experimental language and covert position within the debate as a successful deconstruction of the patriarchal, oppressive rules behind discourse, and in a larger context, society, but observes that occasionally Woolf's refusal to commit to a clear argumentative standpoint, and her inventive, descriptive writing style have been critically misinterpreted as detracting from the central messages.[1] Experimental techniques grasp an essence of the writer's or subject's consciousness, and enable better illustration of intangible concepts such as senses and emotions; the private impression of something is more valuable as a representation than a cold, realistic analysis. If experimental technique provides a subtle, intimate and internal view of an individual, it may have far more power than an overt political statement. As David Bradshaw highlights, 'Woolf's radical critique…is subtly persuasive, never bluntly didactic… we often feel the reach and intensity of Woolf's socio-political vision, but never the push of her hand.'[2] A misreading of Woolf as diverting and distracting only superficially glazes over the real weight behind Woolf's experimentation; close exploration of her use of certain inventive literary techniques in *The Waves*[3] and *Mrs Dalloway*[4] will illustrate the compelling and dynamic proclamation of Woolf's grievances with the early 20th century social system.

Woolf cultivates an experimental characterization in *The Waves* and *Mrs Dalloway* to integrate a veiled social and political critique, and to illuminate her perspectives on biography. Woolf believed the biographical practice of rigorously detailing and commentating every aspect of an individual's public life to be an ineffective method, because the subject's real essence could never be faithfully recreated, the reader having no concept of the private; a traditional biography was reductive because two spectators can produce entirely diverse interpretations of a life, depending on the multiple factors informing their judgment. In her novels, Woolf abandons the clinical illustration of character typical of the Victorian realist tradition, instead gravitating towards fluid, transient figures that appear to represent an internal consciousness. This is partially achieved through innovative experimentation with

[1] Toril Moi, *Sexual- Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. (London: Routledge, 1988)
[2] David Bradshaw, 'The Socio-Political Vision of the Novels' in *The Cambridge Companion toVirginia Woolf*, edited by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 191
[3] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves,* 1931
[4] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 1925

the narrative voice. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf eliminates any sense of an omniscient narrative voice by the constant ambiguity as to whether we are party to the narrator's commentary or the thoughts of the central character. Makiko Minow-Pinkney views the narrative ambiguity as creating both 'an intimate internalized tone and a certain indirectness'[5], moving away from realist novelistic practices. The opening introduction to Clarissa Dalloway contains numerous utterances that could be easily attributed to either Clarissa herself, her maid Lucy, or an external, omniscient narrator; 'Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning…What a lark! What a plunge!.'[6] The opening sentence indicates formality through the use of Clarissa's title, suggesting that this belongs to Lucy the servant, or even the narrator. However, Clarissa's own voice is implied in this opening by the direct reference to her thoughts, and the emotion conveyed by exclamatory sentences. Woolf continues this technique of ambiguity in narrative voice throughout the novel; this creates impossibility in ascribing statements to a certain character or narrator, and as a result the characters become indefinite, abstract figures.

Woolf represents a consciousness in her characterization rather than a realistic persona, and in *The Waves* and *Mrs Dalloway* she expands this to create a sense of a mass consciousness in opposition to the individual. A hierarchical society that venerates certain individual figures will perpetually make the same mistakes within its rigid structures, and 'other' figures on the margins will continue to be oppressed; Woolf is calling for radical change in her representation of a mass consciousness that cannot alienate certain figures. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf rejects the idea of the individual through the shared consciousness of Clarissa and the lesser character Septimus; both Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway have been psychologically damaged by their position in society. Masama Usui emphasizes the reasoning behind this shared consciousness as the two characters' '…common sense of victimization by the war and by patriarchal values.'[7] Clarissa's isolation from 'civilised' society is the result of her status as an older female; she experiences a period of convalescence caused by the menopause, and Woolf introduces images of time passing to signify the aging process. Clarissa imagines '…a match burning in a crocus'[8], expressing the diminishing of her sexual potency, and the slow but certain '…dwindling of life…'[9] which conveys the sterility not only of her white, silent bedroom, but also of her approaching old age. Clarissa's fertility is the sole dynamic providing her with a function in this patriarchal society, and as this dwindles she experiences a psychological crisis as to her future role. Septimus suffers a similar crisis of identity as a victim of the society that is meant to protect and accommodate him; he is embroiled in fighting a war sparked by bureaucratic tensions out of his control, yet as the sacrificial male of unimportant class, he truly experiences the human cost and psychological impact of higher actions. The very elements thrust upon him by war, such as male camaraderie and promoted rank, no longer empower him as he reintegrates back into the hierarchies of peacetime, and these rapid changes in status and identity eventually claim his sanity. This alternative mode of characterization in Woolf's creation of an interlinked consciousness between Septimus and Clarissa calls for a move away from society's emphasis upon the individual; as Septimus kills himself, rejecting his earthly body, their now fully-formed dual consciousness gives Clarissa an increased strength to withstand social pressures.

[5] Makiko Minow- Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject,* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1987), p.58
[6] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 1925, in *The Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*, (Herfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2005) p.129
[7] Masama Usui, 'The Female Victims of the War in Mrs. Dalloway' in *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*. (New York: Syracuse UP, 1991), p.151
[8] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.148
[9] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.146

Minow-Pinkney establishes that 'The invention of Septimus is thus a defensive 'splitting', whereby Clarissa's most dangerous impulses are projected into another figure who can die for her'[10], but additionally, Septimus is sacrificed for the ideal of being part of an all-inclusive crowd, a mass consciousness that breaks the boundaries of social labels and subtexts; as Woolf describes in her essay 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', she longs for '…the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the body and minds of others.'[11]

The Waves also experiments with characterization through the function of narrative voice, but Woolf develops the ambiguity of *Mrs Dalloway* to perpetuate the focus on human consciousness. Whereas Woolf utilized descriptive passages to generate much of the narrative ambiguity in *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Waves* is constructed almost entirely of direct speech, reported by the central six characters; however, Woolf continues this ambiguity by employing certain symbolic motifs that run through the discourse, abandoning the idea of individual, fully-formed and separate characters. Percival's supposed heroism, Hampton Court and illustrations of history, nature, pools and water, veils and food are interlaced throughout each character's discourse to complicate any notion of separate characterization, and create symbolic images that represent the visual, internal nature of the human mind and memory. A descriptive narrative voice is present within the italic fragments of descriptive prose that divide the dialogue sections of *The Waves*; sentences like 'Now the sun had sunk. Sky and sea were indistinguishable. The waves breaking spread their white fans far out over the shore, sent white shadows into the recesses of sonorous caves'[12], with the alliterative 's' sounds imitating the sea, seem reminiscent of Woolf's short story, 'Monday and Tuesday'[13], which considers artistic interpretations of a scene similarly to *The Waves*' exploration of representations of human consciousness.

As the measurement of time is a human construct like the rigid social institutions that perpetuate patriarchy, Woolf utilises her technical creativity to explore different modes and patterns of time alongside a typical linear progression of the plot. Julia finds that, in her exploration of time and history, Woolf '…questions the whole concept of historical determination by enquiring what aspects of human nature might lie beyond it, what might be permanent in human experience beyond the succession of Mondays and Tuesdays, beyond daily events, both personal and historical.'[14] In both *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*, Woolf's creativity extends to an exploration of a kind of pre-time or pre-history, fashioned through images of a primeval world devoid of the institutions and structures of the present day. While *Mrs Dalloway* uses a predominantly linear form, sections representing this pre-history emerge throughout the novel. The key passage in *Mrs Dalloway* is the sequence where Peter Walsh hears a disembodied singing voice that seems to transgress all notions of time and space; '…a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning into… ee um fah um so/ foo swee too eem oo-'[15] The voice itself rejects all the associations and allusions evoked by the human construct of language, as it utilises a nonsensical, rhythmic range of syllables that could be described as an anti-language. Woolf eliminates further constructs of humanity from this voice in '…the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth; which issued, just opposite Regent's Park Tube Station, from a tall quivering shape, like a

[10] Minow- Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject,* p. 80
[11] Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays.* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942) from http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/
[12] Woolf, *The Waves*, in *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2005), p. 750
[13] Woolf, 'Monday and Tuesday' in *Monday or Tuesday*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1921)
[14] Julia Briggs, 'The Novels of the 1930s and the Impact of History' in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf,* p. 74
[15] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.179

funnel, like a rusty pump, like a wind-beaten tree for ever barren of leaves…..and rocks and creaks and moans in the eternal breeze.'[16] The theme of time is again recalled in the vocabulary, with words such as 'ancient' and 'eternal' juxtaposed almost humorously with the modern construct of Regent's Park Tube Station; the idea of a pre-historic spring erupting in central London is at once a ridiculous image, and also a subversive deconstruction of modern humanity, as the ephemeral, transient and natural break through the rigid boundaries of hierarchy that tie them into place. Natural imagery resisting boundaries of time is abundant throughout this passage and creates a distinct contrast with the urban location within which it situated; 'Through all ages- when pavement was grass, when it was swamp…through the age of silent sunrise…'[17] transposes the original, natural state of the earth on to the human construct of the city, suggesting an atmosphere of nostalgia for the simplicity of pre-historic society, where complex gender and class subtexts were absent.

The Waves expands on this experimentation with time in its exploration of the cyclical nature of life and death, organising the novel's events in a linear progression but making constant allusions to repetition, pre-time and cycles. Whereas pre-time in *Mrs Dalloway* was evoked by the singer's disembodied anti-language, the representation in *The Waves* is one of a 'savage'[18] human who breaches the expected behavioural patterns imposed by 'civilised' society. Woolf gives Bernard's voice an air of disgust at '"…the hairy man who dabbles his fingers in ropes of entrails; and gobbles and belches; whose speech is guttural and visceral…"'[19], as this figure is a social 'other', whose primitive behaviour and anti-language cannot conform to civilised society's norms, because his natural environment is devoid of subtexts. 'He squats in me'[20] reveals that this primeval man is actually situated within Bernard, illustrating Woolf's fundamental argument that modern day human beings are not far removed from this 'base' individual; in this sense, boundaries of time in terms of the refinement and 'civilisation' of human behaviour are transgressed, as these prehistoric instincts are still inherent in everyone. Transgression of time boundaries is also suggested in the novel by images of repetition and cycles. Minow- Pinkney highlights a cyclical temporal 'structure' as preferable to linerarity in abandoning typical biographical representations, and moving towards a sensation of the figure.[21] Obviously, the primary example of cyclical time in the novels is the constant sea imagery, and the waves of the title; 'As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously.'[22] The waves stand as an allegory for the lifespan of the characters and of human beings in general, but there is no sense within the novel of a beginning and an end; the waves are not 'born' and do not 'die', but are swept back into the sea to repeat the process infinitely, therefore rejecting the boundaries of beginning and end, of life and death, in the same way that Woolf refuses the confinement of realist novel-writing. Woolf's technical experimentation with formations of time in *The Waves* and *Mrs Dalloway* serves as a theoretical deconstruction of the confines of social hierarchies and subtexts, exhibiting a desire for the simplistic, all-inclusive existence attainable within a pre-historic, pre-social environment.

Woolf's rejection of the literary and linguistic conventions of novel-writing led to her manipulation of traditional sentence structures to complement her social and political critique, again in terms of her desire to dismantle the ordered, boundary-led nature of early

[16] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.179-180
[17] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.180
[18] Woolf, *The Waves,* p.775
[19] Woolf, *The Waves,* p.775
[20] Woolf, *The Waves,* p.775
[21] Minow- Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject,* p. 167
[22] Woolf, *The Waves*, p.639

20th century society. Woolf toys with sentence structure throughout her writing career, and *The Waves* provides some of the most distinct evidence of this. The dialogue-led, 'playpoem'[23] form of the novel would suggest the abrupt sentence structure of conversation, but Woolf creates a complex rhythm to her writing in accordance with her desire for originality and experimentation. At the beginning, the characters are babies, so while sentences are eloquently descriptive, they are also sharp and abbreviated, illustrating fragments of images; '"I see a ring," said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light"'[24] This passage is expressive in terms of the intensely visual, almost painterly imagery evoked, alongside use of alliteration, but the short sentences create a static rhythm, suggesting Bernard is observing his first images in a fragmented, snap-shot like way, unable to connect them with meaning in his babyhood. As the characters grow older, Woolf introduces lengthier passages incorporating multiple, repetitive clauses; '"Now we are safe. Now we can stand upright again. Now we can stretch our arms in this high canopy, in this vast wood. I hear nothing"[25]' As Judith Lee indicates, Woolf creates a biography of the characters as they age which is '…embedded in a mosaic of recurring images and phrases.'[26] Determining the narrating character becomes complex as the reader is entangled within these numerous, prolonged paragraphs of abrupt description; here, Woolf is attempting to create a sense of group consciousness through ambiguous character, whilst also removing the reader from their comfort zone, offloading them into an abstract environment where they assume an active role.

As a less abstract novel, *Mrs Dalloway* may not exhibit the same experimentation in sentence structure as *The Waves*, but when considered alongside the ambiguous narrative employed within the novel, the technique illuminates Woolf's rejection of blatant authorial control and the 'damned egotistical self'. Woolf's use of sentence structure is notable in sequences where the characters are contemplative and internal, as the alternation in rhythm alongside abundant description emphasises difficulty in determining the narrative voice, and evokes the sense of interior consciousness Woolf wished to highlight. As Peter Walsh walks down Victoria Street following his reunion with Clarissa, representation of his inevitable mental turmoil lends itself well to experimentation with sentence structure; 'As a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London; and falls on the mind. Effort ceases. Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand. Rigid, the skeleton of habit alone upholds the human frame'[27] Like *The Waves*, Woolf creates multiple clauses through abrupt punctuation and pause, creating a rapid but static pace whilst also employing descriptive imagery; this passage evokes the fragmented, fleeting nature of thought through the tempo of the sentences, reflecting Peter's disordered state of mind as he recalls his past relationship with Clarissa. Minow- Pinkney find that '…clearly she seeks a state of human being prior to its consolidation into personality'[28], and alongside the difficulty of ascertaining the narrative voice in this passage, toying with sentence structure allows Woolf to relinquish control of the text, creating an internalised perspective that represents this pre- personality consciousness.

Virginia Woolf's use of experimental technique in *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves* breaks the conventions of novel-writing formed by the realist tradition, and allows her to explode issues of representation by creating her own interpretation of consciousness rather than a sterile, realistic depiction. Through this aversion to established literary practices, Woolf incorporates a powerful social statement subtly proposing that the traditional rituals and structures of society need to be radically altered if its inherent problems are to be

[23] Woolf, extract from her diary, 7th November 1928
[24] Woolf, *The Waves*, p.640
[25] Woolf, *The Waves*, p.644
[26] Judith Lee, 'This Hideous Shaping and Moulding: War and *The Waves'* in *Virginia Woolf and War,* p.195
[27] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.158
[28] Minow- Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, p.60

rectified. However, Woolf is never overtly or brazenly radical in her condemnation, refusing to adhere to one particular viewpoint. While some may choose to rail openly about their grievances, Woolf's social critique and political radicalism are more subtly formed within her use of experimental technique; in effect, this element *is* her social critique. The experimentalism expressing Woolf's condemnation of her society is motivated by her belief that '…we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life.'[29]

[29] Woolf, *Three Guineas*, in *The Selected Works of Virginia Woolf,* p.885

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