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**‘Now is the Moment’: Writing To Be in *The Waves***

“Everybody seems to be doing things for this moment only; and never again. Never again.

The urgency of it all is fearful” (Woolf, *The Waves*, 22)

Many of Virginia Woolf’s works deal with the passing of time and their titles reflect this, such as, *Night and Day*, *Monday or Tuesday*, *The Hours*, ‘A Sketch of the Past’, *The Years*, and *Between the Acts*. In her writing she is very much concerned with *moments of being* that are nearly impossible to articulate since they evaporate as quickly as they emerge. While her works explore innovative ways of expressing time and its relationship to consciousness, there is always an underlying current that any attempt to *write the moment* does not make it more concrete.

Woolf demonstrates this with “waves, flames, clocks ticking or feet stamping, [and] the pattern is always repetitive, rhythmic and wordless” (Jensen 112). *The Waves*, being one of Woolf’s most experimental novels, embraces the modernist mindset of an abrupt breakage from the past, emphasizing radical narrative styles which define the modernist moment. How then does a modern novelist portray fleeting moments in a boundless world where writers are expected to sever ties with the past? If we are occupying an eternal now, but our actions occur in a timed sequence, how can the present moment be ossified with words? Bernard habitually spends his entire life writing about moments, searching for the perfect phrase, in order to make existence more con-

clusive. However, I assert that Woolf utilizes Bernard's character as a way of manifesting that art is born out of momentary observations; the incomprehensible fluctuation of life that shocks and inspires the viewer. While some critics believe that Bernard's character is based off of Virginia Woolf's friend, E.M. Forster, instead I will draw attention to the parallelism between Woolf and Bernard as writers and observers of the present moment.

In her diary, Woolf writes about life's infinite nature in this way: "Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on for ever; will last for ever; goes down to the bottom of the world—this moment I stand on... is transitory, flying, diaphanous" (138). In *The Waves*, Woolf constructs an immortal story that wrestles with this contradictory notion of life as being both momentary and permanent. The story portrays the impressions of its six main characters' fight against imminent death which must be dueled in order to recover the fragility of life. Mainly hinging on Bernard's introspections, and Woolf's personal philosophies, I will challenge the assumption that Modernism was a movement that defied habitual behaviors, and unyoked its ties with the past, in order to gain a more materialized representation of consciousness. Additionally, I will demonstrate how *The Waves* relies on repetition in a time sensitive world, as a means to render that the unwritten 'Now' is the only vanishing moment that embodies truth.

According to John Whittier-Ferguson, "pure subjectivity is the most absolute state of novelty, with [an] awareness [of] making and remaking itself a new, from second to second," and "mov[ing] from immediate perception into reflection, making ourselves the objects of our own scrutiny, we see patterns: forms of repetition, the small circles and returns constructed by our memories and the enormous continuities of history" (247). In *The Waves*, we are presented with a

myriad of impressions and interpretations. Because of this, the reader is introduced to fresh awarenesses and perspectives, “from second to second.” The only constant and stable chronology — the only reliable pattern — is what transpires in the interludes. Seen as a metaphor for the characters, the waves come in, and they go out. Similar to how Bernard is faced with a dichotomy of selves, and the novel’s central paradox to “saturate every atom” and “eliminate all waste,” the structure of the novel itself is at war. The interludes make up what ensues over the course of a day, while the soliloquies are comprised of repetitive circles, constructed by the characters’ memories and fleeting observations. Reading the novel “is to experience a constant rise and fall, to be immersed in the sense of conflicting currents and endlessly appearing and disappearing patterns, all of which serve to obscure a sense of the whole” (Warren 107). Therefore, in order to achieve pure subjectivity, Bernard must embrace pattern, one wave at a time, in order to view himself as a wholly constructed being. Both Woolf and Bernard have difficulty providing a broad summarizing conclusion of life, since true art and stories, do not have any real shape. While he is often displeased with the way in which life mechanically drones on, it is this very repetition that makes his art valuable.

Bernard shares Woolf’s contradictory mindset — he too is haunted by a life that is both stable and varying. His character presents a dichotomy between his inner and outer self. There is one version of Bernard who observes and imagines the world around him, the other, acts in a society filled with obligations and expectations. At the end of the novel when he attempts to sum up his life, he explains:

There are many rooms — many Bernards. There was the charming, but weak; the strong, but supercilious; the brilliant, but remorseless; the very good fellow, but, I

make no doubt, the awful bore; the sympathetic, but cold; the shabby, but — go into the next room — the foppish, worldly, and too well dressed. What I was to myself was different; was none of these (195).

The imaginative Bernard lives in a world of timeless, artistic contemplation; the obligatory version of himself exists in a monotonous, machinelike realm where “after Monday, Tuesday comes” (201). However, while it appears that he lived a fulfilling life, occupied with all that could possibly make it complete (i.e. a wife, children, a successful career), the one thing that gives his life true meaning is his literary artistry. He explains: “when I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke round me I am in darkness — I am nothing” (99). As he goes about his day, he considers habitual behaviors, such as talking to his wife at the breakfast table, as meaningless activities. These types of monotonous events are what cover up one’s creative spirit, and he eventually comes to comprehend the value of each moment, as opposed to the external organization of time. Like Woolf, Bernard struggles to transition between this inner and outer binary; “[I] have to cover the entrances and exits of several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard” (56). By tracking Bernard’s progression from youth to old age, it is evident that there is a fluctuation between his predominant exterior (the self that responds to society’s ready-made formula), and the self that seeks artistic creation and existential order.

An essential component of interpreting what Woolf was hoping to accomplish in *The Waves*, comes with an understanding that there is a paradoxical union between the text being categorized as a “novel” and as a radical, yet playful, experiment. It certainly has elements of both since it does contain an ordered shape and consists of having a beginning, middle, and end. The six major characters move from childhood to adulthood while Woolf presents the reader with a

recursive, digressive, and kaleidoscopic version of the bildungsroman. It is also very much a literary exemplar of the ideas that she touts in her 1919 essay 'Modern Fiction,' where she explains that the mind's "myriad of impressions" have an "accent [that] falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there," and in *The Waves*, she includes everything and nothing simultaneously (121). At the same time, the novel could easily be seen as a forerunner of postmodernism, destroying any sort of coherent paradigm of literary coherence. Woolf believed that "the traditional plot-led structure of 'the novel' was a source of frustration... [and] it did not reflect what it felt like to be alive" (Jensen 112). As with all modernist art forms, this *play-poem* was ahead of its time. The cogent nineteenth century Victorian novel was dismantled by the modern: a seemingly apocalyptic world that circulated manifestoes, proclamations, and little magazines in hopes to reassemble bewildered and fragmented consciousnesses. Similar to T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922), Woolf's experimental novel is a literary portrayal of a broken mosaic or stained glass window in need of repair. Both modern stories can be read as a lament for the loss of a shared culture, or death in general, left in shambles by the war. In this complex, new age, accepted art forms demanded new styles from artists and writers who exuded a character that changed *on or about, December 1910*. This is quite evident in *The Waves* since the novel lacks any true protagonist. The stream of life that Woolf hoped to illustrate in the story is grounded in her personal existential inquiries, and consistently expressed in her other works of fiction.

In order to truly give due justice to my analysis of *The Waves* it is appropriate to begin at the end. After the reader is transported on a mystical journey in a seemingly plotless novel, comprised of a seamless and continual undoing, and re-doing of thoughts, memories, and impres-

sions, “the waves [break] on the shore” (224). As the characters transition from birth, growth, development, and come to terms with adulthood and old age, they reach the end of life. The ending of the plot, as well as their existences, is the moment that Bernard has been avoiding, in hopes to *put it off* with words. He tells the reader, “my mind hums hither and thither with its veil of words for everything” (87). The only character who does not attempt to stall the passage of time is the voiceless seventh character, Percival, their childhood friend who passes away at the beginning of the central fifth section. After he dies from a cryptic accident which occurred in India, he remains a phantom, or a constant reminder to the other characters that death is real, and it must be contested. According to Eric Warner, Percival is a literary embodiment of Woolf’s brother Toby. While she was working on *The Waves* she thought of her brother alone and fighting *something*. This warrior mentality is what inspired her to continue living until her own death by suicide on March 28, 1941. She explains in her diary: “If I never felt these extraordinarily pervasive strains — of unrest or rest or happiness or discomfort — I should float down into acquiescence. Here is something to fight: and when I wake early I say to myself Fight, fight” (144). The *something* that Toby and Woolf fought for is an essential characteristic of Bernard, who makes warding off death with words his lifelong ambition. At the end of the novel, his final soliloquy mirrors Woolf’s diary entry about fighting, where he metaphorically becomes a horse going into battle with his rider. He retorts: “and in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back... I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (224).

In the majority of Woolf’s novels and her diaries, mortality, aging, and the passage of time are themes that are deeply embedded in her, oftentimes, ambivalent and dualistic work. On

May 5, 1924 she alludes in her diary entry that this is the day that her childhood ended; the day her mother died from rheumatic fever when Woolf was just thirteen years old. In her diaries she attempts to capture or *pin down the moment*, often annotating specific dates. In her diary she explains: "... I don't think of the future or the past, I feast on the present moment. This is the secret of happiness, only reached now in middle age" (5). Those dates that align with the death of loved ones, such as her mother, half-sister Stella, and twenty-six-year-old brother Toby, appear to be what drive her incessant desire to sum up certain instances, in hopes to halt the passage of time. In a diary entry at the close of the year, Woolf reflects on her life in this way: "if one does not lie back and sum up and say to the moment, this very moment, stay you are so fair, what would one gain? Dying. No, stay this moment. No one ever says that enough" (59). In alignment with this summarization, the characters in *The Waves* flow through the passage of time, with impending death always looming overhead. With this insistence to hold onto every moment, in order to halt the process of death, comes an incongruous urge to celebrate life. Bernard also becomes very aware of death as he starts to age. Despite the fact that he feels as though humanity is caught in a web of time that eventually disintegrates, "we insist, it seems, on living" (84). This sentiment mirrors Woolf's statement in her diary: "its life that matters" (71). After *To the Lighthouse* was published in 1927, Woolf expressed in her diary an "... insatiable desire to write something before [she dies], this ravaging sense of shortness & feverish of life" (117). For her and the characters in *The Waves*, death is always eerily close — Bernard tells the reader at the end of the story that death is an enemy, and it must be defied.

With Percival being the *seventh* character, yet also invisible, it alludes to a loose biblical interpretation of his function in the novel. If he is the embodiment of death, or the characters'

constant reminder of it, Bernard mimics 1 Corinthians 15:26 at the end of the novel: “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” He states: “It is death. Death is the enemy” (224). In alignment with Woolf’s continued ambiguities which are woven through the soliloquies and interludes, along with death, Percival is *also* attributed to God by Bernard and the other characters; “the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were — what indeed he is — a God” (102). It is Percival’s elusiveness that continually haunts the other characters; he is that *something* that they try to repel, especially when they begin to age, and the end of their lives start to become more tangible. Jinny explains:

‘Let us hold it for one 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 sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again’ (109).

When placing all of the characters in chronological time, each of them inexorably move toward nonbeing. It is “that sense that life is a battle against nothingness, that all actions and efforts are merely necessary but futile attempts to disguise life’s empty center... Clock time carries forward a vegetative life controlled by forces that have nothing to do with identity” (Hussey 127). It is death that breaks the monotonous flow of time, and Woolf shows us how Bernard psychologically deceives himself into believing that the end of his life can be impeded by writing. It is Percival’s (death’s) enigmatic quality that hinders Bernard’s desire to *sum up* a broad conclusion of life, like Victorian novels often do. He is unable to definitively conclude any of his stories, since reality does not allow an ultimate resolution after one passes away. It is “individual life [that] must be rescued from [the] forces” of death (Hussey 127). Therefore, Bernard spends most of the



novel struggling with the circuitous nature of language to provide stability, perpetually seeking something (phrases and words) that endures in the midst of life's ebb and flow.

Similar to the way in which Woolf desired to sum up the present moment with language, Bernard aspires to fill innumerable pages in his pocket notebook. It *delights* him. His gift for language started in his youth, while Woolf explains that she came to this realization during middle age: "... I do not think of the future or the past, I feast on the present moment. This is the secret of happiness, only reached now in middle age" (6). This desire to feast on the present moment is shared by both writers, and their ability to capture the moment in words, is constantly being interrupted by the world in flux. Bernard explains:

my charm and flow of language, unexpected and spontaneous as it is, delights me too. I am astonished, as I draw the veil off things with words, how much, how infinitely more than I can say, I have observed. More and more bubbles into my mind as I talk, images and images... For my room is always scattered with unfinished letters. I begin to suspect, when I am with you, that I am among the most gifted of men. I am filled with the delight of youth, with potency, with the sense of what is to come (62-63).

This spontaneous overflow of feelings; "draw[ing] the veil off things with the words," being "filled with the delight of youth," and creating what you observe in the moment is a very Wordsworthian attribute. To use Coleridge's terms, Bernard is affected by 'the charm of novelty to things of every day,' 'awakening the mind' to the "Romantic preoccupation with wonder — the surprise, the revelation which puts the tarnished familiar world in a new light" (Brooks 7). Again, both Woolf and Bernard struggle with unleashing one's creative side, and conforming to

conventional standards. This contradictory mindset extends to their writing practices as well. Within the novel "... Lies a deep tension between art and life... which is at the heart of *The Waves*, and which springs from [Woolf's] paradoxical wish to 'eliminate' yet 'put everything in' (Warren 61). Both writers wrestle with the aspiration to record instantaneous, unadulterated observations, and the refrain of transcribing the urgent, potent bubbles as they are formed.

As earlier mentioned, many of Woolf's novels, as well as her private writing, express great concern for the fleeting and transitory nature of time. Her work is dedicated to the attempt to fashion permanence among fading moments of being. In her diary she writes:

The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional (136).

The stream of life cannot be packaged or contained into measured designs, and tracing a distinct pattern among the lives of the characters in *The Waves*, is merely an illusion. Woolf hoped to "concentrate', [and] to 'saturate' ... so she lifts her characters above the fluid texture of experience" (Warren 53). What appears to be the central paradox of the novel is the tension to "saturate every atom," and to "eliminate all waste." This contradictory ideal adheres firmly to both sides of the equation. Bernard mirrors Woolf's beliefs when he states "how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper," yet he continues to fill "innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when [he has] found a true story, the one story to which all these

phrases refer” (140). One of the goals of Bernard’s writing, perhaps without him realizing it, is to fight the inevitability of aging and death. At the same time, he still tries to give an unabridged account of life, despite his awareness of its disjunction. However, moments mean the most when they stand alone, notwithstanding the purpose they serve. What Woolf is trying to demonstrate in *The Waves* is that we do not live in a type of quantifiable time. There is a disorientation of momentary observations, which are spoken in words, that occurs throughout the novel. To illustrate this, Bernard explains: “... when we sit together, close... we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist” (11). Similar to other main Woolfian characters, like Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, Bernard is cognizant of the incalculable value of life.

Four years before she published *The Waves*, Woolf explored similar themes on the inclusivity of time in *To The Lighthouse*. After Mrs. Ramsay leaves her guests at the dining room table, the narrator states:

It was necessary now to carry everything a step further. With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta’s arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past (1477).

Mrs. Ramsay is notorious for creating moments of permanence by bringing other characters together. Like Bernard, she avoids the assurance of death by embracing short-lived visions of truth. Nonetheless, Mrs. Ramsay does not wish to capture or isolate certain moments but rather, she hopes that the fabric of her family life will string together, and carry on forever. The way that they view and interpret moments is the closest that both characters can come to an unerring

meaning of life. Much the same as Mrs. Ramsay's experience of leaving her dining room table, Bernard has a fleeting realization while shaving at the end of the novel. With razor in hand he states: "and time... lets fall its drop," and that he "became suddenly aware of the merely habitual nature of [his] action... The drop fell." In *The Waves*, moments are sometimes compared to water droplets that hang onto experiences, only for an instant, until they fall into life's great abyss. As Bernard shaves, the moment is 'over and done with' as quickly as it emerges and, just like that, his words, the moment, and his youth have passed. However, Bernard's monotonous activity of shaving; an action done with "mechanical precision," is one that must occur in order reveal what is true (137-38). This then refutes the modernist assumption that habitual behaviors must be eradicated in order for art, literature, and characters to achieve a necessary upheaval.

Another notable example of identifying the self through repetition is found at the end of another groundbreaking text by Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. The narrator describes a woman close to eighty years old, walking arm in arm with her daughter. She describes their ritualistic behavior of putting their winter clothes away during the summer months. When thinking about what takes precedence at the end of one's life, the following passage informs the argument that the unwritten moment is the only actual expression of truth.

...if one asked her what her life has meant to her... [or] if one asked her, longing to pin down the moment with date and season, but what were you doing on the fifth of April 1868, or the second of November 1875, she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing... Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie (87-88).

Bernard's great desire to "pin down the moment" is nearly impossible since they are transient and fleeting. His sentiments align with the women's when he states: "Too soon the moment of ravenous identity is over, and the appetite for happiness, and happiness, and still more happiness is glutted. The stone is sunk; the moment is over" (107). Because art is born out of sudden realizations of shock and awe, one needs repetition in order for artistic forms to break through the shroud of habit. It is the artist's job to defamiliarize the familiar, so that the reader or viewer can view art for art's sake. These necessary jolts are what pull the viewer away from automizing effects, and it is what Bernard comes to realize when he states: "I could make up a dozen stories of what he said, of what she said — I can see a dozen pictures. But what are stories?" (108). Similar to the women in *A Room of One's Own*, he comes to the realization that filling innumerable pages in his notebooks, with all encompassing phrases, is futile. It is not the way that one answers the age-old inquiry of the meaning of life.

Woolf describes this movement away from automizing reactions to life by describing how moments of non-being have molded her philosophy of art. In her memoir "Sketch of the Past," she explains:

... I[t] is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden in a pattern; that we — I mean all human beings — are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; but we are the words; we are the music; we are the things itself. And I see this when I have a shock (72-3).

This passage demonstrates that all human beings are one with the art world, and it is Bernard's quest to pull the veil off of language in order to ignite that shocking sensation. It is not only death that expands his consciousness, but art as well. His writing inspires him to be heroic and the sublimity of art helps him realize how fragile life is. Percival died young, but life is long when you live in the moment. Bernard describes the paintings of Venus and the blue madonnas as simply being there; "they do not nudge; they do not point. Thus they expand my consciousness of him and bring him back to me" (116). In other words, art, death, and immediate observations are all connected. These awe-inspiring reactions can only be born out of a break from the repetitious and incomprehensible nature of life. Once Bernard enters the art gallery he is temporarily reminded of how it feels to be young, free, and immune to the mechanized aspects of life; a movement towards aging and death. Once he reenters the world outside, full of responsibility and mortality, he is reminded of what it means to move about "traversing the sunless territory of non— identity" (86). One moment he is jarred by the authenticity of the artwork, and in the next he is drawn back to commonplace sensations. However, these shocking moments are nearly impossible without the remembrance of the past (Percival's death), and habitual behaviors.

Bernard's bravery points to an epic reading of the novel; he takes a stand against death, and returns back home as a hero, reinforcing Woolf's mantra to celebrate life and the human mind. Instead of living at the mercy of clock time and schedules, Bernard eventually chooses to just *be*. His maturation as a writer, and coming into his own as an artist, is dependent upon his acceptance of habit and repetition — what he initially sees as an obstacle. What he first saw as thwarting his desire to express his creativity, was what provided him with the key to exhibit his

clearest and most unadulterated expression of artistry. He eventually comes to accept that life is comprised of an ungraspable flow of inexpressible, transient moments; “Every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it” (Lurz 136-37). As he sits at the table — an elderly man who is graying around the ears — he is much more aware of life’s trickery where “one moment free; the next, this.” The insistence on having to go and do things — “Must, must, must” — becomes meaningless at the end stages of his life (220). Instead of writing in an organized dimension of conventional time, Bernard learns to find value in a state of suspension, where moments are only comprehensible for an instant, and then they are gone. Once he becomes an elderly man, and is distanced from his childhood, he is able to see things for what they truly are.

It is interesting to note that Bernard’s childhood observations are related to his adult musings. Since I began my analysis of *The Waves* with what occurs at the end of the novel, I will end with what takes place at the beginning. One of Bernard’s first moments of surveillance is when he views a “spider’s web on the corner of the balcony... It has beads of water on it, drops of white light” (6). This image is very similar to the earlier mentioned notion of time letting its fall drop. Again, moments are sometimes compared to water droplets that hang onto experiences, only for an instant, until they fall into life’s great void. I argue that, like Woolf, Bernard was very aware of how cursory life is. Although they were both in tune with the idea of life having a contradictory solid or shifting nature, they both strove towards writing to simply *be in* the moment. Despite the fact that Bernard has a family and a successful career, what genuinely informs his

identity is how he differs from the other characters who are not as attuned to the vanishing moment. He explains:

I am a natural coiner of words, a blower of bubbles through one thing and another.  
And, striking off these observations spontaneously, I elaborate myself;  
differentiate myself and, listening to the voice that says as I stroll past, 'Look!  
Take note of that! (86).

It is also appropriate to note that the younger Bernard planned to carry "a fat book with many pages, methodically lettered" (27). He was always a writer, a coiner of words, a blower of bubbles, and an artistic observer who viewed the world from *second to second*. When thinking about the impressionists who would often paint the same scene, over and over again, at different times of the day, those creations lack shock value. In contrast, by the end of the *The Waves*, Bernard grows into the artist that Woolf defined as someone who can look at contrasting moments and transcribe "a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea" He can safely conclude that he has become an ultimate, fearless spectator, and that the waves are both in him and surrounding him. With his awareness of death he has attained new insights on life. For the first time he is utterly distinguished as simply himself. At the outset there were many different Bernards. *Now* there is just one.



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