

Virginia Woolf's Communist Manifesto for the Soul

By Johnny Woodnal

Prior to publishing *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf had already established herself as a writer of commercial and critical success. Yet with *The Waves*, she ventured beyond the limits of modern fiction – limits she herself had already extended with novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*. When she began *The Waves*, Robert Miltner believes she may have had a “desire to write books that were somehow different kinds of books from what she had been writing” (83). He describes the endeavor as “a blend of poetry and prose, play and poem, soliloquy and interlude, human and non-human, mask and character, all woven into the intricate texture of an experimental poetic novel” (98). This “experiment” embodied precisely what Woolf herself espoused modern fiction should be. In her essay on the subject, she criticized popular contemporary writers “because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (“Fiction” 2149). With *The Waves*, Woolf pushed the boundaries of writing yet again, this time concerning herself entirely with the spirit and leaving the body to manifest within the reader’s subconscious. As James Naremore states, the detachment of these characters from the body of the story “seem[s] to inhabit a kind of spirit realm from which, in a sad, rather world-weary tone, they comment on their time-bound selves below” (qtd. in Briggs 77). By giving readers only the internal monologues of Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis, Woolf offers six very different lenses through which a decaying society is clearly seen. At the heart of this hexagonal view is both Woolf’s diagnosis and cure for the plague that ails the human spirit, which renders it a pathetic and self-obsessed entity. Evidence from the novel supports the idea that society fractures the human spirit in the hopes of ensuring happiness for a few, while leaving the majority to suffer eternal misery. The novel portrays such a perverse society as viewed through six very different individuals, while simultaneously suggesting that these segmented pieces of the human soul should be allowed to combine for the collective good in order to ensure an equal distribution of enlightenment to all of society.

Essentially, Woolf is establishing a theory of human nature that can be loosely associated with the economic principles that govern the world. In her novel, she presents the world as it is: Capitalist. Defined by the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, capitalism is “an economic system in which the means of production and distribution are privately or corporately owned and development is proportionate to the accumulation and reinvestment of profits gained in a free market” (208). To fully understand how such a theory translates to Woolf’s depiction in *The*

Waves, the definition could be reworded to define “capitalism of the soul”: A cultural system in which the strongest aspects of the human spirit are individually hoarded and attainment of happiness is proportionate to the accumulation and reinvestment of emotions gained in an individual’s internal space. This modified theory takes the original idea of capitalism in which members of a society pursue economic wealth by individually bartering their personal assets and modifies it to become a presumption that human emotions operate under the same principles. Under this assumption, members of society will harbor their own individual strengths of spirit and market them in the hopes that they will succeed in garnering enough emotional maturity to attain mortal happiness.

Woolf presents a contrary viewpoint by issuing hints of what their society could be if the characters were not filled with such a devout capitalist soul. This theory is more closely associated with the principles of communism, which the American Heritage College Dictionary defines as “a theoretical economic system characterized by collective ownership of property and the organization of labor for the common advantage of all members” (282). Revising this definition to identify “communism of the soul,” it may read: A theoretical cultural system characterized by collective possession of the strongest aspects of the human spirit existing within individuals and the organization of these aspects for the common advantage of all members. This theory takes the original economic ideas of communism and applies them to the concepts governing the soul. Rather than suggesting all members of a society contribute their individual labor efforts to the greater good, Woolf suggests all members of a society contribute their individual spiritual strengths to the greater good.

Explicating Devastating Reality Versus Blissful Utopia

When one examines the novel in its entirety, Woolf’s alternate visions of the world as it is versus the world as it should be become clear. Robin Hackett points out “degeneracy – as corruption, taint, intrusion and rot – is central to [The Waves]” (“Sapphism” 45). This corrosion of morality is seen most clearly when each of the six characters is viewed as a separate aspect of human nature that is unable to achieve contentment because of a societal mentality that champions the individual above all else, an idea easily associated with the above explanation of capitalism of the soul. All six voices within the novel strive for independence separate from all others, reaching toward a lofty and often unattainable goal predetermined by a society that cares little for community. As Lisa Marie Lucenti writes, “Each of the six characters creates a space for ‘being’

through the exclusion of or, alternately, the engulfment of the difference which threatens his or her space” (77). These characters are irrationally threatened by the intrusion of their closest friends upon their own individuality. They spend the entirety of the novel searching for a space where they can define themselves as whole and complete beings separate from the others. Lucenti further writes, “...each character can only get to a ‘self’ by taking a detour through some form of otherness...” (82). In seeking out this identity, each character attempts to define what they feel is unique in themselves by illuminating, and then wallowing in, their own otherness. This otherness can be read as the traits in each character that make them unique in a spiritual world based on capitalism; on the surface, these traits become their marketable qualities, but in reality they are the source for great suffering.

By analyzing each character’s “otherness,” the six fragments Woolf has presented of the human spirit become clearly defined. Only then can one explore the severed relationships between the six segments of that spirit that plunge each individual into a lifetime of internal torment. To illustrate, Julia Briggs claims:

The novel searches for the fundamental things in human existence: the nature of human love; our need for and fear of one another; our shared experience of our world, of death and of the implacable indifference of nature; our use of imaginative sympathy both to relate to one another and to tell stories about one another. (77)

These “fundamentals” are never out of reach for the six characters in *The Waves*; however, as long as each of the six pursues these qualities in independence, the search will be in vain. In this scenario, only a few can ever achieve a portion of what Briggs describes. Only in a society based on the previously described communism of the soul can an entire society discover the fundamentals outlined above. To fully understand how these characters isolate themselves from happiness, one must first identify the traits that each character uses as its method of detachment – traits that also serve as their individual commodities within the spiritual plane of society.

The characters’ otherness is apparent from the first internalized musings of the novel. As they watch the world unfold into a bright new day, each has a different point of view. Their first lines, spoken as children, denote their exclusive qualities, which will develop into the “form of otherness” that will cause such anxiety later in life. Rather than viewing these qualities as what they have to offer their society and their culture, they

see these characteristics as the compelling forces that set them apart and will allow them to push ahead of all others in their pursuit of fulfillment in a spiritual arena.

When these characters reach the pinnacle of their life, their character qualities reach fruition as well. The intervals of the novel depicting the sun's journey across the sky and the influences it has upon nature are easily juxtaposed with the life cycle of the six characters. In comparing the intervals with the internal soliloquies, Mary Ann Caws suggests, "The natural and human worlds are evolving through a psychological and physical parallelism containing the seasons of a year, the lapse of one day, and the life of six characters, separately and together" (56).

Consequently, when the sun reaches its near peak within the interludes, the characters are approaching their climax as well: "The sun, risen, no longer couched on a green mattress darting a fitful glance through watery jewels, bared its face and looked straight over the waves" (108). The sun has not yet reached its apex, but it has reached the point where it can look ahead with determination and conviction. The characters parallel this personification of the sun in the pages that follow, which entail the farewell dinner party for Percival. They have reached the point where they can either add their contributions to the collective soul of human nature, or they can hoard their offerings from the rest of society to benefit no one but themselves. For this reason, a connection can easily be drawn between the first lines of each character and their near maturity as adults with the result being a clearly defined and distinct commodity that each has to offer the spiritual embodiment of society.

Six Fractured Segments of the Human Spirit

Bernard, whose voice is the first and final presence in the novel, says, "I see a ring...hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light" (9). The imagery of Bernard's first utterances in the novel invokes that of a halo above his head, giving him an angelic quality. This status is not issued by Woolf, but rather by society. As Bernard is the most present voice in the book, one must understand that he is the most likely to be considered a success by a capitalist society's standards, both economically and spiritually. The characteristics that set him apart are his brawn and his charm – two items essential for success within the tightly patrolled edges of society's inner-circle. His success as a sort of angel of society is seen quite plainly during the dinner party. Bernard wonders to himself:

'It is, however, true that I cannot deny a sense that life for me is now mysteriously prolonged. Is it that I may have children, may cast a fling of

seed wider, beyond this generation, this doom-encircled population, shuffling each other in endless competition along the street?' (114) His life has been "prolonged" by beginning his journey down a well-worn societal path. He is engaged to be married; he has prospects for a family; and thus society has rewarded him with a feeling of long life and identity within its cultural construct. Bernard speaks of his betrothal, "I, who have been since Monday, when she accepted me, charged in every nerve with a sense of identity..." (112). However, he begins to question why he has been awarded such prestige and muses that it may be the ability to propagate the next generation which will inherit the "doom-encircled" one in which he lives. The entirety of his situation is "mysterious" to him for the attributes of his character only allow him to graze the surface of intellectual puzzles. Bernard is essentially a shell of a being, embodying only the superficial qualities of brawn and charm noted above.

Neville describes Bernard's entrance into the scene:

'That is Bernard. As he pulls off his coat he shows, of course, the blue shirt under his arm-pits. And then, unlike the rest of us, he comes in without pushing open a door, without knowing that he comes into a room full of strangers. He does not look in the glass. His hair is untidy, but he does not know it. He has no perception that we differ, or that this table is his goal. He hesitates on his way here. Who is that? he asks himself, for he half knows a woman in an opera cloak. He half knows everybody; he knows nobody...' (121)

The perception of Bernard here is that of a self-assured man who does not trouble himself with the deepest of thoughts, but who takes time out to briefly touch the lives of those he barely knows. He is not a vain man, simply a self-confident one. As the one of the six whom society views as a success, he has the ability to float from life to life briefly touching each as though he were an angel benefiting others with his mere presence. The effect of the touch is fleeting, however, for without the substance of an inner self or the ability to define himself outside the realm of what society expects, he exists only on the surface, much in the same manner as the society which he so deftly navigates. Bernard describes his situation later in the scene, "Different people draw different words from me. Thus there is not one person but fifty people whom I want to sit beside tonight...Veined as I am with iron, with silver, and streaks of common mud..." (134). He defines himself through what others inspire within him, just as he often refers to himself as great authors of the past. Without any qualities of substance, he is void of any real character. But his appeal to others of society is almost irresistible, and the iron and silver, which he

claims fill his body, are easily read as brawn and charm, respectively. The “common mud” is then the binding agent that holds him together and allows even the most common member of society to befriend him.

Similar to Bernard, Susan is the only female of the group to engage in the societal trapping of marriage. This is likely linked to her representation as the natural mother of the group. Her first lines read, “I see a slab of pale yellow...spreading away until it meets a purple stripe” (9). Describing the awakening world in terms of the colors of a sunrise, Susan immediately aligns herself with natural beauty. This love will evolve into the attributes of nature and motherhood, which set her apart from her friends, particularly the women. In relation to her adult sense of otherness, Lucenti writes, “Susan’s bodily speculations result in a sense of herself as internally divided, as a woman who carries her ‘other’ in her womb” (81). Her love for motherhood and nature continue to set her far apart from the others, as seen at the dinner party where the others view Susan as a creature not unlike an animal that may roam the countryside Susan loves so dearly. Louis describes her entrance: “[S]he does not see us. She has not dressed, because she despised the futility of London. She stands for a moment at the swing-door, looking about her like a creature dazed by the lights of a lamp” (119). In this description, Louis offers not only an image of Susan as a creature of a nature, but reveals her intense love for the natural as viewed through her disgust for the urban. Susan herself claims:

‘I peered about like an animal with its eyes near the ground. The smell of carpets and furniture and scent disgust me. I like to walk through wet fields alone, or to stop at a gate and watch my setter nose in a circle, and to ask, Where is the hare? I like to be with people who twist herbs, and spit into the fire and shuffle down long passages in slippers like my father...I shall never have anything but natural happiness. It will almost content me.’ (131)

She is threatened by the urban, or that which threatens the sanctity of the natural, and aligns herself with nature when she relates herself to an animal. Importantly, she notes that natural happiness will “almost” content her. This is due to the otherness within which she imbeds herself. Susan, like Bernard, epitomizes capitalism of the soul in that she devalues others spiritual commodities in order to raise the value of her own. She despises the urban because it cheapens her love for nature.

Further, she places great worth in her qualities of motherhood, which results in a terrible relation to Jinny, the anti-mother of the group. The

two women are almost polar opposites, but Susan, like all the others, chooses to notice the differences and be weakened rather than taking strength from others' assets. During the dinner party, she says of Jinny, "I...feel her derision steal around me, feel her laughter curl its tongues of fire round me and light up unsparingly my shabby dress, my square-tipped finger-nails, which I at once hide under the table cloth" (121). She fortifies their opposition, retreating further and further away from a close friend simply because she does not share a love for nature and motherhood.

Rhoda acquires a similar pattern of flight when her qualities are not understood by the others in the group. In the first section of the novel, Rhoda first says, "I hear a sound...cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down" (9). Obviously describing a bird, she differs from Bernard and Susan in that she does not describe what she sees, but what she hears. She is essentially concerned with that which she cannot see and, therefore, is initially coupled with the spirit and soul of the world. As with the qualities of the others, Rhoda's sense of spirit and soul noticeably come to fruition during Percival's dinner. Bernard describes, "...Rhoda the nymph of the fountain..." (117). She is consistently described as this mythical creature, something not of this world. Louis remarks, "Rhoda comes now, from nowhere, having slipped in while we were not looking" (120), commenting on Rhoda's seemingly spectral qualities, as though she were without an earthly body.

Further promoting Rhoda's association with the spirit world and the soul are the novel's many references to Rhoda's lack of a face. She says as a child, "...for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world" (43). Here Rhoda suggests the world to which she belongs is not the reality in which she lives. Being entirely concerned with the spirit and soul, Rhoda aligns herself with the theory of communism of the soul in a reality that sees such positioning as a weakness. Her lack of a face shows her ability to be a part of a collective whole, but she finds only derision in a society that sees a lack of individuality, or a lack of a definable face, as a failure of achievement. During Percival's dinner, Neville notes, "Let Rhoda speak, whose face I see reflected mistily in the looking-glass opposite..." (138). Neville must look into a mirror to receive an image of her; she is consistently represented as a ghostly figure. Thus, her contribution to the human character is further revealed as the essence of soul and spirit. As Annette Oxindine believes, "Rhoda is unable to confirm her own existence in a looking-glass" (172), which creates Rhoda's sphere for otherness in which she will hide from her friends.

Being the closest to the utopian society that embraces communism of the soul, she is the least likely to survive in the decrepit reality of capitalism of the soul. Her society's condemnation of her desire to exist on a spiritual level results in her suicide – an act which forever releases her into the spirit realm.

Rhoda's futile attempts to find identity in a world that revolves around one's earthly body parallel Neville's unsuccessful endeavors to love one person so completely in a world that offers success only to those who can love many superficially, as Bernard does. Neville first speaks the lines "I see a globe...hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill" (9). The globe he sees is the love that he feels, while the enormous flanks of some hill are the masses of capitalistic spiritual conformity. Neville wishes to give his love to one person to whom he can devote all his passion, but to succeed in society, he senses the need to scale the "enormous flanks of some hill" and spread his love and passion among many. These two characteristics, love and passion, force Neville into his otherness and set him apart from the group. At dinner with the others, Bernard notices "Neville, scissor-cutting, exact" (117), linking his friend with the precision Neville exercises over passion. Lucenti sees this precision as Neville's bridge to isolation: "Neville's pattern is to isolate one specific other and to designate him as a beloved object through whom he can then center himself" (80). In effect, Neville searches for identity by dedicating himself to unrequited affection.

Neville focuses this ardor on Percival and thrives on the misery this creates. Awaiting Percival's entrance to his own farewell dinner party, Neville says, "I have taken my place ten minutes before the time in order to taste every moment of anticipation; to see the door open and to say, 'Is it Percival? No; it is not Percival.' There is a morbid pleasure in saying, 'No, it is not Percival'" (118). When the object of his affection finally does arrive, Neville states, "Now...my tree flowers. My heart rises. All oppression is relieved. All impediment is removed. The reign of chaos is over. He has imposed order" (122). Neville makes these lofty claims in the hopes that the mere presence of Percival will keep the fires of his passion burning, but the reality is that the "morbid pleasure" he experiences in pining for Percival exists solely in misery. This misery results in his choosing to devote his strengths of love and passion to an individual who will never be aware of them, let alone acknowledge them. In this way, Neville's emotional properties of love and passion are trapped in an inescapable paradox; the theories of capitalism of the soul suggest he exploit those properties to attain fulfillment, but when he does so, the result is only lifelong misery with a few sparks of "morbid

pleasure.”

Unlike Neville, Jinny chooses to share herself with the masses of society. From her first words in the novel, Jinny makes it clear that she is destined to be a successful society woman: “‘I see a crimson tassle...twisted with gold threads’” (9). During the same rising sun that the others are experiencing, Jinny sees a “tassle,” denoting her future love for the ceremonies of society life. The crimson color evokes her future sexuality and beauty, the two qualities that compose her portion of the human spirit, while the gold threads symbolize the success she will experience with the two characteristics. As Urszula Terentowicz suggests, “In Jinny’s reality communication is not maintained through language but through bodies” (52). Jinny utilizes her beauty and her sexuality to succeed in a world based on spiritual marketability.

As Jinny enters the dinner party midway through the novel, Bernard remarks, “‘I see...Jinny dancing like a flame, febrile, hot, over dry earth’” (117). Fully grown now, Jinny has fulfilled the expectations created by her childhood words that open the novel. In concurrence, Lucenti writes, “Dancing through life, Jinny is the embodiment of the physical, material world that we can see and touch” (81). As stated previously, she opposes Susan’s rural life with her urban world, but she also contradicts Rhoda’s desire to exist outside of the physical world, a world within which Jinny thrives. Jinny is successful in an emotionally capitalist society because she has perfected the art of marketing her wares of beauty and sexuality to achieve social position and rank. As Susan notes during the dinner party, “‘There is Jinny...She seems to center everything’” (120). Whereas Bernard has used brawn and charm to glide easily from social circle to social circle, Jinny has used her beauty and sexuality to exist at the center of all social circles; she is the driving force of the emotional free market.

As the final member of the group, Louis completes the circle of the human spirit by offering intelligence and order. Louis is the person who falls in love with his education, paying homage to those who paved the way for him to educate himself when he says, “‘Blessings be on all traditions, on all safeguards and circumscriptions! I am most grateful to you men in black gowns, and you, dead, for your leading, for your guardianship; yet after all, the problem remains. The differences are not yet solved’” (58). Lucenti claims these differences “are disruptions which prevent any simple reckoning; they are the accents from which Louis will never escape” (79). Yet Louis is constantly attempting to eliminate these differences, and he chooses to do so by reducing things to “order.” While

studying his maps, he says, “[T]he grinding and the steam that runs in unequal drops down the window pane; and the stopping and the starting with a jerk of motor-omnibuses; and the hesitations at counters; and the words that trail drearily without human meaning; I will reduce you to order” (95). His desire to reduce the minutiae of daily life into discernible categories expresses his high level of intelligence and his love for order. His most secret desire is to use these two characteristics to reveal the injustices that he has suffered at the hands of society.

This desire is secret because of Louis’s racial otherness. This is evident in the first words Woolf attributes to Louis: “I hear something stamping...A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps” (9). He is immediately paired with Rhoda as the only two members of the group who hear something rather than see it; Louis and Rhoda are the most prominent “outsiders” of the group. But Louis’s first lines reveal more than his otherness, they reveal his fear of the past. The great beast refers to the intelligence and order that will reside within the adult Louis. These qualities will be chained by society’s view of Louis as inferior because of his Australian roots. These are ideas that Louis most clearly articulates during the dinner scene:

‘We differ it may be too profoundly,’ said Louis, ‘for explanation. But let us attempt it. I smoothed my hair when I came in, hoping to look like the rest of you. But I cannot, for I am not single and entire as you are. I have lived a thousand lives already. Every day I unbury—I dig up. I find relics of myself in the sand that women made thousands of years ago, when I heard songs by the Nile and the chained beast stamping. What you see beside you, this man, this Louis, is only cinders and refuse of something once splendid. I was an Arab prince; behold my free gestures.’ (127)

His references to the Nile and the chained beast here evoke images of slavery, an image that becomes clearer with his reference to being an Arab prince. Like the slaves of Africa, Louis has been colonized and the heroics of his past are inconsequential. The barriers of his life have been erected by a society that will always view him as an outsider and never allow him to succeed. The metaphor shifts as Louis continues: “I am the little ape who chatters over a nut, and you are the dowdy woman with shiny bags of stale buns; I am also the caged tiger, and you are the keepers with red-hot bars. That is, I am fiercer and stronger than you are...” (128). Here, he is blatantly assigning himself as the “chained beast” in his fantasy. He has been caged by people around him. However, his ferocity has not diminished; it is merely imprisoned and awaiting escape. In this scenario, Louis searches in vain for his identity as

a solitary creature separate from the others.

The Ludicrous Goal of Emotional Monopoly

As with the economic system of capitalism that holds the myth that everyone has an equal opportunity to garner monetary success, capitalism of the soul must hold an equally enticing goal for which to hoard one's spiritual wares. These six characters would not endure such suffering if they did not have some aspiration of fulfillment. Woolf provides this objective in the character of Percival. A silent character whom Woolf describes only through the thoughts of the six characters, Percival enters the novel with an immediate sense of leadership and heroism. However, the descriptions of Percival all lead to a quizzical assumption that he is an easily mocked leader with no real substance other than what others perceive in him. Regarding Percival, Hackett believes, "With this construction of a hero, Woolf parodies the archetypal hero" ("Supplanting" 269). This can be seen from the first mention of Percival, which occurs when Neville comments:

'Now I will lean sideways as if to scratch my thigh. So I shall see Percival. There he sits, upright among the smaller fry. He breathes through his straight nose rather heavily. His blue, and oddly inexpressive eyes are fixed with pagan indifference upon the pillar opposite. He would make an admirable churchwarden. He should have a birch and beat little boys for misdemeanours. He is allied with the Latin phrases on the memorial brasses. He sees nothing; he hears nothing. He is remote from us all in a pagan universe. But look—he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime. Dalton, Jones, Edgar and Bateman flick their hands to the backs of their necks likewise. But they do not succeed.' (35-36)

The absurdity enclosed within this first brief description of Percival is abundant. Immediately, Neville has fallen in love with him, but only for the way he "flicks his hand to the back of his neck." Other boys attempt to mimic this ridiculous gesture, but fail. Neville describes his eyes and "inexpressive," suggesting the whole of his substance lies not within, but without. He claims Percival "sees nothing" and "hears nothing." He is oblivious to the world around him. He is the epitome of the capitalistic soul for he exists completely independently from all others, and he is totally revered for doing so.

Louis also notices the conformity Percival inspires in others:

'Look now, how everybody follows Percival. He is heavy. He walks clumsily

down the field, through the long grass, to where the great elm trees stand. His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind him. Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle. My heart turns rough; it abrades my side like a file with two edges; one, that I adore his magnificence; the other I despise his slovenly accents—I who am so much his superior—and am jealous.’ (37)

Through Louis’s voice, Woolf presents Percival as a clumsy oaf of a leader, but she also fortifies the contempt Louis feels for the successes of society that will come to fruition within her character later in the novel. Louis’s jealousy for Percival’s popularity exists because of the lack of inner substance in Percival that Neville notices earlier. Even at this early age, Percival has succeeded in marketing his surface qualities and unwittingly attained a stature of emotional monopoly—Percival’s emotional qualities achieve a higher market price than any of the others’ qualities. Percival is forever shadowed, while the six characters in the novel either join the pursuit or are left to the wayside.

As previously stated, the dinner party at which the six characters bid this paragon of capitalistic emotional maturity farewell is the climactic moment at which the character can choose to further pursue their individual otherness or to contribute themselves to a collective soul. This is highlighted by Percival’s impending departure. He is the object of affection for their dismal lives; when he leaves, they must decide whether they will continue to desire and pursue him in spirit or to create a new path through life. This decision is further illuminated when Percival perishes abroad because they must decide whether his memory is enough to push them further and further in the world to attain what they believe he was. However, even Percival’s death exposes the fraud of idealism that he was. Neville describes, “His horse stumbled; he was thrown. The flashing trees and white rails went up in a shower. There was a surge; a drumming in his ears. Then the blow; the world crashed; he breathed heavily. He died where he fell” (151). Percival does not die a valiant death by any means; he is killed when he falls off his horse. But the perception is that he died a noble and heroic death merely because of the person he was and because of the false perceptions others held of him.

Briggs notes how “Percival’s life and death, exemplary as it is, serves to locate the book at a particular moment in world history, that moment when the British Empire and the ideals that glorified and disguised the nature its economic basis were beginning to crumble” (78). This serves to

further associate Percival with an economic status. Beyond being the quintessence a cultural system based on capitalism of the soul, he represents the hope of many to prevent the fall of the British Empire, an empire with tight economic threads. Just as the perpetuation of the British Empire depended on men like Percival to secure its economic ties, the cultural theory presented here of capitalism of the soul depended entirely on individuals such as Percival to raise the value of individuality and quash the threat of nonconformity. In this sense, Percival is merely a symbol as Lucenti points out:

Percival is not simply an 'absent center' but the blank mirror through which each character tries to erase his or her own absence. His death is, then, so completely alien because it starkly fails to represent or mean anything. The loss of Percival is the complete dislocation of the sequence. (92)

Because Percival is merely a manifestation of what others make him out to be, he is an unattainable goal. He is an apparition of ambition that will never materialize as substance, making the others crusade to reach his societal status a never-ending one. Percival's death is an opportunity to destroy the constructs of capitalism of the soul, but the characters choose to maintain the cultural concepts on which they have built their lives. Thus, they continue to pursue his artificial greatness, as Rhoda foresees:

'This is Oxford Street. Here are hate, jealousy, hurry, and indifference frothed into the wild semblance of life. These are our companions. Consider the friends with whom we sit and eat. I think of Louis, reading the sporting column of an evening newspaper, afraid of ridicule; a snob. He says, looking at the people passing, he will shepherd us if we will follow. If we submit he will reduce us to order. Thus he will smooth out the death of Percival to his satisfaction, looking fixedly over the cruet, past the houses at the sky. Bernard, meanwhile, flops red-eyed into some arm-chair. He will have out his notebook; under D, he will enter 'Phrases to be used on the deaths of friends.' Jinny, pirouetting across the room, will perch on the arm of his chair and ask, 'Did he love me?' 'More than he loved Susan?' Susan, engaged to her farmer in the country, will stand for a second with the telegram before her, holding a plate; and then, with a kick of her heel, slam to the oven door. Neville, after staring at the window through his tears will see through his tears, and ask, 'Who passes the window?'—'What lovely boy?' This is my tribute to Percival; withered violets, blackened violets.' (161)

As the member of the group most closely associated with spiritual world,

Rhoda is able to see how the others will react to the news of Percival's death. She knows that Louis will attempt to replace him; Bernard will use the experience to promote his writing; Jinny will wonder eternally if she ever surpassed her rival in Percival's affections; Susan will carry on with her pastoral life a little more jaded; and Neville wallow further in the "morbid pleasure" that is his love for Percival. Each of them is unable to allow Percival's death to reveal the reality of society and continues to plunder through life waiting for the arrival of an emotional enlightenment that will never occur.

Restoring the Fragments

Woolf allows the reader the opportunity to piece the fragmented human spirit back together within his or her own mind. Bernard claims in the final section of the book, "Louis was disgusted by the nature of human flesh; Rhoda by our cruelty; Susan could not share; Neville wanted order; Jinny love; and so on. We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies" (241). This suffering is the result of a soul embroiled in a lifelong attempt to market its strengths. However, when each character's "suffering" is coupled with another's representative traits, the result would be a cure for the malady, not the terminal suffering of which Bernard speaks: Jinny can help Louis love human flesh as she is the embodiment of beauty; Susan can show Rhoda the goodness of the human spirit as it occurs in nature and motherhood; Bernard can assist Susan to share as he shares himself with innumerable people; Louis has devoted his life to reducing things to "order" and can share this passion with Neville; and Neville's undying love for one person can bring Jinny into an understanding of how to love. Finally, Bernard's lack of inner substance can be treated by Rhoda, who is entirely entrenched in the center of that human spirit. Each of these characters can find solace in the spirit of another, a realization that would be inherent if they had contributed their spiritual strengths to a collective human soul rather than attempting to enter an emotional free market in which only a few can excel.

This is a realization Bernard is on the brink of discovering as he utilizes the clarity of hindsight in the novel's final chapter:

'Was there no sword, nothing with which to batter down these walls, this protection, this beginning of children and living behind curtains and becoming daily more involved and committed, with pictures? Better burn one's life out like Louis, desiring perfection; or like Rhoda leave us, flying past us, to the desert; or choose one out of millions and one only like Neville; better be like Susan and love and hate the heat of the sun or the frost-bitten grass; or be like Jinny, honest, an animal.' (266)

He sees the desolation in his own past and the paths he chosen along the way, but where he errs is in assuming that because the others' lives resulted in an equal state of deprivation there is no other outcome. Bernard is so close to the truth of the matter, but is unable to reach enlightenment due to the dismal result of his life's endeavors. Also in the final section of the novel, he says:

'The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst. 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, making the cauldron bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers. Faces recur, faces and faces—they press their beauty to the walls of my bubble—Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others.' (256)

He recognizes the frailty of the walls surrounding his identity, but fails to take the final step and allow the bubble to "burst." Such an action would allow the others to freely flow in and out of his identity, which would result in a loss of his individuality. The reason he is unable to take that final step toward enlightenment is due to the "million others" leaping and sizzling in his cauldron of life. Those others are striving to get ahead and become their own person as their society dictates they should, just as Bernard and his five friends have. Allowing the walls of individuality to breakdown within that environment would lead to a societal death from which none could recover. However, he does not comprehend that when the walls of the bubble burst, the soul of capitalism is destroyed and spiritual communism is set free. This is precisely why Woolf structured the narrative of *The Waves* such as she did. By offering the reader nothing more than the internal monologues of these six characters, she accentuates their isolation and lack of communication. The complete absence of interaction between these characters only accentuates their desperation for an individual soul void of any contribution from outside sources. Because of the culture and society in which they live, they are unable to look to others to fulfill their inadequacies of character, nor are they able to offer their spiritual strengths where others need them most.

Therefore, the characters are incapable of fulfilling the vision of harmony that each pursues throughout a lifetime. *The Waves* suggests a dismal portrait of the way life is rather than an optimistic painting of how life should be. As Woolf wrote in "A Room of One's Own," "Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (2188). This sentiment

comes to fruition within the pages of *The Waves*, where the masterpiece is not created. The masterpiece Woolf describes correlates directly with the theories of a "communism of the soul." In *The Waves*, the fragmentation of the human spirit leads to despair and anguish. Were the characters able to combine these fragments of brawn and charm, nature and motherhood, spirit and soul, passion and love, beauty and sexuality, and intelligence and order, they would have found a human spirit that far surpassed the individualized and superficial identity that society had procured for them and would emerge into a world filled with the fundamental happiness each pursues.

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