# "Now to Sum Up": Old Age as the Privileged Vantage Point of Narration in the FinalChapter of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the issues of old age as they appear in the final chapter of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931). Woolf recorded her own mixed feelings about growingold in her diaries: her writing, both personal and fictional, shows a keen interest in life's different stages and their specificities. These concerns are reflected in *The Waves*, a novel composed of a series of soliloquies from six characters, tracing their lives from childhood into old age. The final chapter is dedicated to old age and only one character, Bernard, remains. This paper explores the role old age plays in narrative construction by investigating this chapter and showing how it offers a keener view of the general experience of old age by paying close attention to a well-characterised singular experience. The paper considers the literary representation of an individual experience of old age as it relates to broader cultural understandings of old age by looking at the symbolism of natural cycles, the impulse towards self-narration, and the mind/body duality as an issue for the ageing body. This leads to discussion of isolation and community in old age.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, narration, retrospective, old age, community

A keen observer of the human experience, Virginia Woolf does not let readers down when it comes to the representation of old age in fiction. Though she herself died relatively early at the age of fifty-nine, her fiction still attentively portrays characters in old age. Her diaries document some distaste for the ageing process, such as the following: "I detest the hardnessof old age – I feel it. I rasp. I'm tart" (Woolf 1985, 347). Such instances show a concern withthe physicality of the ageing process; it is conceived as a transformation that comes from exposure and friction. Woolf's view of old age is not limited to this consideration, however,as evidenced by an earlier diary entry:

> Now I'm 50 (I signed this boldly in the hotel book-the good Yak refrained – another proof of inferiority complex), now I'm grey haired & well through with life I suppose I like the vital, the flourish in the face of death (Woolf 1982, 91)

The approach of death does not inspire meekness but, on the contrary a vital boldness and a strength in self-expression. The hardness of old age also shows that the self has become more solid.

While Woolf engages with certain tropes of the coming-of-age narrative in *Jacob's Room* (1922), youth is not the central focus in her works. She conceives the construction of the self more holistically over longer periods of time. Her use of her "tunnelling process" with older characters shows their experiences of youth as just some of the many that defined them – this goes against the common positing of youth as the defining period of one's life. Indeed, Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz have considered old age in fiction in their study of the "various ways in which nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers have incorporated the bound and static nature of old age into literary fictions" in which they consider the limited roles of older characters (Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz 1976, 448). Woolf considers old age more complexly by subscribing to a prior turn in fiction that Liisa Steinby identifies thus: "Individuals are no longer considered as instances of general humanity or specimens of ahistorical character types, but an individual now appears as a unique personality" (Steinby 2017, 138). Modernism offers further exploration of this view, investing it in full. With *The Waves* (1931) Woolf establishes six characters with strongly established singular psyches. The narrative follows them in fragments from early childhood into old age. The characters' sensitivity to time passing has often been noted and has been used in discussion of narrative gerontology by Goyal and Charon (2010). Ageing has also been studied in *Mrs Dalloway* through the lens of Woolf's engagement with the symbols of Mother Nature: Katherine Sedon discusses the portrayal of Clarissa as dealing with her own experience of ageing – both in moments of realisation and in moments of anxiety (Sedon 2011, 178). The symbolism of natural cycles is also present in *The Waves* and serves the representation of ageing: the novel's italicised interludes use descriptions of the natural world to set the tone for each phase of life the chapter that follows is set in.

The connection between a general, universal symbol such as the natural world and the portrayal of singular character's emotions and experiences

lends narrative strength to *The Waves* as a novel. As the novel progresses, the characters each deal individually with

the universal experience of ageing, offering a multi-faceted view of the process for the reader. In the final chapter, however, only one character is still present – Bernard. Throughout the novel he has been distinguished from the others as being the "sentence- maker" or story-teller; he continuously seeks to contain life within language. His discursive dominance at the close of the novel offers an idiosyncratic view of ageing and one's position to the approach of death.

This article explores the role old age plays in narrative construction by investigating the final chapter of *The Waves* and showing how it offers a keener view of the general experience of old age by paying close attention to a well-characterised singular experience. The study begins by considering a vision of old age supported by natural cycles and the place of agency and individuality in relation to that vision. It then goes on to more deeply consider individuality via the question of point of view and the desire to "story" one's life once in old age. Finally, these questions lead to discussion of the duality between body and mind and how cultural views of ageing lead to investment of the mind at the expense of the body and physical presence.

**Old Age in the Natural Cycle**

As with each new chapter representing a different stage of life, the ninth and final chapter of *The Waves* is preceded by the description of a landscape that sets the tone for what is to follow:

> 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 and then rolled back sighing over the shingle. The tree shook its branches and a scattering of leaves fell to the ground. There they settled with perfect composure on the precise spot where they would await dissolution. (Woolf 1931, 181)

Previous sections described the sun progressively rising then declining. The end of narration is announced by the end of the day, light no longer

diminishing but having disappeared. The opening of this final section creates a symmetry to the first section: "*The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it*" (Woolf 1931, 3). The before and after of daylight, of the lifespan, have in common the quality of indifferentiation between individual objects. It is inlight, in life, that identity is possible.

The novel does not only propose a one-dimensional symbolic correspondence,however. As Goyal and Charon point out in their study, "The novel's underlying structural division, its juxtaposition of the cyclical rhythm of the natural order (poetic form) against alinear and irreversible pattern in human (individual, historical, cultural) time" (Goyal andCharon 2010, 72). While the natural world and its order contribute to our vision of the ageing process, they do not completely cover it. Instead, there is a tension created between the different cycles of time and the novel investigates the knots created in the timeline when individual expression does not align with the larger movement.

Such tension has been studied by Katherine Sedon:

> In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf revises the Mother Nature archetype to better fit her perceptions and experiences of aging. In doing so, she employs nature imagery as vantages into particular moments of being that portend the social retrogressions and psychological devaluations of aging women—instances we might call moments of aging. (Sedon 2011, 163)

These issues are also present in the monologues of the female characters in *The Waves,* as they apprehend the social linking of femininity with youth. Beyond gender, the novel also represents moments of ageing in which the character understands the phenomenon as inevitable because supported by the natural order. This is paired with the feeling of being pushed out of the main flow of society. As Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz explain: "Certainly old age itself no longer inspires veneration in a society where economic productivity is a supreme value" (Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz 1976, 449). In the final chapter, Bernard expresses a sensitivity to an injunction that seeks to push him out of life:

> Curse you then. However beat and done with it all I am, I must haul myself up, and find the particular coat that belongs

> to me; must push my arms into the sleeves; must muffle myself up against the night air and be off. I, I, I, tired as I am, spent as I am, and almost worn out with all this rubbing of my nose along the surfaces of things, even I, an elderly man who is getting rather heavy and dislikes exertion, must take myself off and catch some last train. (Woolf 1931, 227)

There is an absence of any agent from which this order might originate but the repetition of "must" communicates the imperative to the reader, especially contrasted with Bernard's tiredness and reluctance. The image of catching a train also casts him as a mere passenger in a larger pre-determined movement that cannot be stopped nor modified on account of his opinion or sentiment.

Beyond the six main characters, Percival, the seventh, voiceless character upsets the natural cycle. His lifespan does not follow the progression of a day, his sun instead dropping from its peak. Bernard describes his reception of the news:

> Into this crashed death – Percival's. 'Which is happiness?' I said (our child had been born), 'which pain?' referring to the two sides of my body, as I came downstairs, making a purely physical statement. … But for pain words are lacking. ... So I went out. I saw the first morning he would never see. (Woolf 1931, 202)

The shock of death in youth brings a pain for which Bernard struggles to find words. Even as his own life progresses, he continues to struggle with the loss of his friend:

> I saw the first leaf fall on his grave. I saw us push beyond this moment, and leave it behind us for ever. And then sitting side by side on the sofa we remembered inevitably what had been said by others; "the lily of the day is fairer far in May"; we compared Percival to a lily – Percival whom I wanted to lose his hair, to shock the authorities, to grow old with me; he was already covered with lilies. (Woolf 1931, 203)

Part of the upset over Percival's untimely passing comes from an interruption of the expected natural cycle: seeing those we have known in youth

grow old alongside of us. Ageing is seen as an expected and natural progression for all. Losing one's hair is generally a negative experience, but within the framework of natural ageing, it is a symbol that we have held to the most desired path – a long life. Percival loses his own natural cycle and instead his body is absorbed into a larger natural cycle: that of the earth and the seasons. Leaves falling on his grave show that whatever pain his untimely death may have caused, the world will go on without him. Upon learning of his death, Bernard is also torn between pain from the news and happiness from the birth of his son ("(our child had been born)"). Despite the initial conflict, the arrival of the new generation aids in moving forwards, indeed, "generational time serves to naturalise ideas about temporality" (Falcus and Sako 2019, 27).

Despite its proximity to death, old age has its own existence and definition as a period of life. The cultural presence of death in the collective imagination of a society does however depend on its circumstances. Woolf's generation had an intimate knowledge of death – theBritish having lost male friends and relatives in the First World War. As Beer writes:

> [A]ll of Virginia Woolf's novels brood on death, and death, indeed is essential to their organization as well as their meaning…. Death was her special knowledge… but death was also the special knowledge of her entire generation, through the obliterative experience of the First World War. (Beer 1989, 185)

The question is less whether old age is defined by a strong consciousness of death but whether life in general is defined by it within a given time period. Representations of old age are determined by the ideas a culture has regarding the end of life stories – if so many people's stories end in death then death becomes a more strongly present theme. Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz indicate that "We expect fiction and drama, on the other hand, to unfold towards some sort of *telos*" (Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz 1976, 448). If death has a high cultural presence, it will be projected as *telos*.

While the final chapter of *The Waves* does engage with the specificities of old age beyond a mere awaiting of death (as we shall see in the following section), it also shows Bernard's advance into death. In her work on temporality, Liisa Steinby notes an interesting aspect to the end of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*:

> At the end of the novel another time perspective comes to the fore: that of eternity. In the last sentence of the novel Moll writes that she and her husband have now returned to England, 'where we resolve to spend the remainder of our years in sincere penitence for the wicked lives we have lived' (MF, p. 295). Thus old Moll and her aged husband turn their faces from time to eternity (cf. Mäkikalli, 2006, pp. 95-113). The reader, however, cannot avoid the impression that Moll has not abandoned her previous life strategy in the first place: what she is now doing, in deciding to repent for the rest of her life, is securing comfort in her life hereafter. (Steinby 2017, 144)

Despite Moll's claims, the reader understands the end of the novel within the framework of prior characterisation. Moll has been built up as artfully conniving thus far and the reader should not be willing to put aside an entire novel's characterisation in the name of a clean ending. A similar process operates in the final sentences of *The Waves* – the final sentences represent Bernard's mental state as he confronts death. This death is then indirectly confirmed by one final italicised passage, only one sentence long: "*The waves broke on the shore*" (Woolf 1931, 228). While death brings ideas of conformity and loss of self, Woolf offersa vision of an idiosyncratic death. Bernard enters into death with the same character he used to navigate through life – and whose construction has been observed by the reader in the preceding pages.

> And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancingagainst us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!' (Woolf 1931, 228)

Bernard shows himself as confident and expressive when faced with a challenge – even if itis the greatest challenge of all. Bernard has aged as himself and

now dies as himself. The novel does not represent "death" but *Bernard's* death, just as the final chapter does not represent old age but *Bernard's* old age.

Woolf's character-focused technique allows for the affirmation of the individual in old age. She puts forth unique older characters who are to be understood as more than mere parts of a broader natural cycle. They live out their own character-lives rather than simply occupying a conceptual step in our understanding of being.

**"Storying" – Old Age and Perspective**

Another way Woolf creates strong characters is by embracing points of view. In *The Waves*, studying old age within the framework of narrative shows the importance of character perspective in narrative construction.

Culturally, we associate old age with story-telling, either because the elderly are seen as a source of knowledge (Lefcowitz and Lefcowitz 1976, 450) or because of the impulse to frame life within narrative as the end approaches. As Goyal and Charon indicate:

> The impression is growing among those who care for the elderly that a life review, in search of meaning, brings not a cushion of consolation to the dying process but, more radically, a discovery of the point of having lived at all. (Goyal and Charon 2010, 80)

There is a desire to invest events with meaning. Events must thus be structured and reorganised into a cohesive whole for meaning to then shine through. This allows a better coming to terms with the process of ageing: "There has been a growing interest in narrative in studies of ageing, with narrative recognised as an important mode of expression of and way of understanding the experience of ageing" (Falcus and Sako 2019, 14).

This general understanding of narrative can also be noted in narratological studies of literary examples of the life review. A narratological perspective considers further interest in the functioning of the mind: "Most novelists have taken for granted the transparency of the fictional mind" (Cohn 1978, 7). Properly understanding old age in literature requires not just studying its representation but also its narration. As an old man, Bernard situates his point of view: "When I look down from this transcendency" (Woolf 1931,

223), which showshis position in later life as a privileged vantage point from which to consider current and prior events.

Bernard is the only character present in the final chapter, the time of more advancedold age. The other voices are extinguished after the penultimate chapter, leaving the thus-far six-sided narrative chorus behind and putting forth only Bernard's singular voice. The chapter opens thus:

> 'Now to sum up,' said Bernard. 'Now to explain to you the meaning of my life. Since we do not know each other (though I met you once, I think, on board a ship going to Africa), we can talk freely. The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed. This, for themoment, seems to be my life. If it were possible, I would hand it to you entire. I would break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes. I would say, 'Take it. Thisis my life.' (Woolf 1931, 183)

The immediate concern is one of summing up, holding the connotations of quantification. In his retrospective, Bernard desires to circumscribe his experience of life in a way that can be communicated to another. Since the first chapter, in his childhood, Bernard has been the character interested in language and "phrase-making" – a term that designates his desire toencapsulate life into language. It is fitting therefore that he should be tasked with the final retrospective. While the process of summing up echoes broader cultural associations for old age, Woolf is not merely conforming to these but also affirming her character.

From his privileged vantage point of old age, Bernard is able to retrospectively consider the definition of his identity across time (and space):

> I became, I mean, a certain kind of man, scoring my path across life as one treads a path across the fields. My boots became worn a little on the left side. When I came in, certain re-arrangements took place. 'Here's Bernard!' How differently different people say that! There are many rooms – many Bernards. (Woolf 1931, 200)

The wearing out of his boots and the use of the verb "scoring" show that Bernard's physicalexistence creates and indent on the world he traverses. The longer

his presence, the deeperhis indent and the more physical impact there is from his existence. This fixity however iscontrasted with the flux of "re-arrangement." He acknowledges the transformative natureof the self. He then goes on to more deeply consider the definition of the self:

> What I was to myself was different; was none of these. I am inclined to pin myselfdown most firmly there before the loaf at breakfast with my wife, who being now entirely my wife and not at all the girl who wore when she hoped to meet me a certain rose, gave me that feeling of existing in the midst of unconsciousness such as the tree-frog must have couched on the right shade of green leaf. 'Pass' … I would say. 'Milk' … she might answer, or 'Mary's coming' … – simple words for those who have inherited the spoils of all the ages but not as said then, day after day, in the full tide of life, when one feels complete, entire, at breakfast. (Woolf 1931, 200)

While Bernard acknowledges that his identity depends on the various ways he appears, his deeper sense of community, and of identity, is found with the one who knows him most intimately – his wife. In attempting a definition of himself, Bernard chooses to "pin [him]self down" in his current quotidian interactions with his wife. He acknowledges that she too isno longer who she once was. They are most defined by who they are to each other and not by who they once were.

Returning to the opening of the chapter, Bernard's interlocutor "you" is not identified. The mission of summing up is given a sense of urgency by the repetition of "now". Though Bernard still remains strongly characterised, there is a sense of the ending having already begun. Bernard is ready to summarise his existence and hand it over as a story – which would not be compatible with continuing to live it. Analysing Ricoeur's view of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past,* Jansen states "there is a double movement: forward, the growing up of a young man, and backward, the remembrances" (Jansen 2015, 21). In this chapter, the forward movement is much lessened with only few new elements entering into the narrative. The narrative is created from re-examination and re-contextualisation: a re-telling of the story that summarises it out of communicative concern.

> Bernard reflects on the linguistic and narrative difficulties of storying his life: 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. How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole – again like music. (Woolf 1931, 197)

The comparison to music underscores the compositional and artistic aspect of story-telling.The images of fish and a bubbling cauldron show life, his object, as something alive and in perpetual movement. Bernard partakes in the artistic project of extracting a partial, static object from an entire, moving experience. The challenge of making an account of one's lifeis the same challenge met in the creative process of art.

The preceding passage also shows the importance of the other characters for Bernard. Throughout the final chapter his mind returns to the experiences he shared with them – including a re-telling of the first chapter:

> In the beginning, there was the nursery, with windows opening on to a garden, and beyond that the sea. I saw something bright-en--no doubt the brass handle of a cupboard. Then Mrs Constable raised the sponge above her head, squeezed it, and out shot, right, left, all down the spine, arrows of sensation. (Woolf 1931, 184)

The events are initially narrated by Bernard as follows:

> Mrs Constable, girt in a bath-towel, takes her lemon-coloured sponge and soaks it in water; it turns chocolate-brown; it drips; and, holding it high above me, shivering beneath her, she squeez-es it. Water pours down the runnel of my spine. Bright arrows of sensation shoot on either side. (Woolf 1931, 18)

The initial telling conveys a sequence of sensations, whereas the re-telling also offers more contextual information. The presence of the sea is established in the beginning of the novel but at the time of initial narration, the characters do not name the place they are in as a nursery – this is a retrospective framing.[1] Autobiographical retrospection results in "tensions and ambiguities" (Cohn 1978, 145). Variation in distance with prior events affects the construction of the focal character's mind: "by omitting clear signals of quotation, they run together their narrator's past and present thoughts, thereby suggesting that their ideas on a certain subject have remained the same" (Cohn 1978, 164). Bernard's retrospective view encapsulates the sequence of feelings and ties them to the place where he experienced them. Time and space are linked:

> Sense of time affects sense of place. To the extent that a small child's time is not that of an older person, neither is his experience of place. An adult cannot know a place as a child knows it, and this is not only because their respective sensory and mental capacities differ but also because their feelings for time have little in common. (Tuan 1977, 186)

While the adult cannot live in the same way the child can, the removed perspective of ageing creates the capacity for story telling: "Since small children are seldom able to reflect on their experiences and describe them, we need to make use of the recall and observations of adults" (Tuan 1977, 185). This narrative creation is more than a simple possibility, however; it is a human need: "To strengthen our sense of self the past needs to be rescued and made accessible" (Tuan 1977, 187). Later on in the final chapter, Bernard sits down to wait for his train. Suddenly his mind brings up images from his childhood: "And by some flick of a scent or a sound on a nerve, the old image – the gardeners sweeping, the lady writing – returned" (Woolf 1931, 206). The involuntary resurgence of images shows that they still play a role within his psyche as an old man and also shows their need to be integrated.

> 1 In the first telling the word nursery appears indirectly via the labelling of an object as belonging to it: "that is the nursery looking-glass" (Woolf 1931,19).

Woolf's investment in character development means that Bernard is able to carry characterisation through ageing and death, showing these moments as belonging the individual despite their simultaneous cultural value.

**Old Age in the Mind/Body Problem**

Exploring the period of old age at the individual level, and one's perspective of it, also brings forth the problem of duality between mind and body. Though ageing is often paired with a retreat into the inner, mental realm and Woolf's writing is associated to a psychological shift, the body and the physical realm still have an important role to play in this closing chapter.

The functioning of the mind might be understood from a study of the language one uses – an aspect explored in the field of cognitive linguistics and applicable to narratology:

> Language arises from our conceptualizations of the world, and analysis of language and language use is therefore crucially linked to our minds and how they interact with our nonmental environment. (Fludernik 2010, 925)

The interface for the interaction of the mind with the "nonmental" world is the body. Hence the representation of sensory experience must also be taken into account. As can be observed via the ageing characters, and hence ageing interior monologues, in *The Waves*, our interaction with the environment changes as we age.

> Bernard's attitude towards his ageing body does however still shows the cultural tendency to associate the decline of the body in old age with more investment of the mind: But no more. Now to-night, my body rises tier upon tier like some cool temple whose floor is strewn with carpets and murmurs rise and the altars stand smoking; but up above, here in my serene head, comes only fine gusts of melody, waves of incense, while the lost dove wails, and the banners tremble above tombs, and the dark airs of midnight shake trees outside the open windows. When I look down from this transcendency, how beautiful are even the crumbled relics of bread! (Woolf 1931, 223)

Mind and body are dissociated, with the mind breaking off from the body's heaviness and physicality and rising above – offering the transcendent view previously mentioned. Bernard also describes himself as follows: "Yet I was preserved from these excesses and have survived many of my friends, am a little stout, grey, rubbed on the thorax as it were" (Woolf 1931, 186). Stoutness shows an excess solidity – a consolidation and density of being. "Grey" and "rubbed" point to a loss of sharpness – time has brought erosion; the self is lessdefined (in contrast and contour).

The body being our interface with the world, its state and our relation to it influencethe mental process of perception:

> Perception is corporeal; it is mediated by our bodies and the technological extensions employed by the body (such as walking sticks, spectacles and hearing aids, and even clothes). The body is more than the site of the sense organs and the brain, but forms a fundamental part of the perception process. Its size and orientation, its locomotion and its own sensuous capacities (balance, for instance) are important issues for perception. (Rodaway 1994, 25)

Hence, the ageing body cannot only be considered in its aspect of diminishing. The experience of the ageing body brings particular modes of perception. The body still informsthe construction of a self still in progression, even in later stages of life. This construction ispointed to with arboreal metaphor of growing rings:

> The mind grows rings; the identity becomes robust; pain is absorbed in growth. Opening and shutting, shutting and opening, with an increasing hum and sturdiness, the haste and fever of youth are drawn into service until the whole being seems to expand in and out like the mainspring of a clock. (Woolf 1931, 198)

Haste and fever are exchanged for sturdiness. This transformation echoes an excerpt from Woolf's diaries: "Perhaps I've washed off something of the sentimentality of youth, which tends to makes things melancholy" (Woolf 1985, 91). Youth is given to the motion of emotion, whereas ageing, with its physical fixity, brings a more stable view of life.

Stability is lost, however, when we become uncertain of our knowledge of the physical world. As Falcus and Sako write on dementia:

> Memory loss fundamentally challenges our understanding of the relationship between past, present, future and of the life course, imagined, most often, as a continuous and coherent unfolding of events and self. (Falcus and Sako 2019, 24)

Bernard does not suffer from dementia but does illustrate deterioration. While his monologue is largely composed of retrospective, he also shows some uncertainty in his account:

> It is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs. (Woolf 1931, 212)
> For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, or Rhoda – so strange is the contact of one with another. (Woolf 1931, 216)

When Bernard thinks back on his relationships, the other characters have become images in his mind (both for him and the reader). Narrative in *The Waves* is dematerialised, anchored physically only by the verb "said" and the name of a given speaker. The presence of multiple speakers confirms an implied reality via cross-reference. In the final chapter, however, Bernard is alone. Any physical reality can only be believed from his speech. The decline in his sense of self hence brings a decline in the stability of references. As Rodaway indicates: "Perception is a social, or shared experience, as well as an individual one" (Rodaway 1994, 35). Narrative space in *The Waves* only exists insofar as it is shared by the different characters.

These passages also show the importance of community in old age. It is because Bernard no longer has his life-long friends that he doubts their existence and his own. The search for solidity might occur though interaction with objects – as Tuan states "Objects anchor time" (Tuan 1977, 187). Other studies have identified the importance of objects and places in old age (Goyal and Charon, 2010). Bernard anchors himself to the physical world when overwhelmed by time passing:

> Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? a last ripple of the wave? A trickle of water in some gutter where, burbling, it dies away? Let me touch the table – so – and thus recover my sense of the moment. (Woolf 1931, 205)

Sense of the moment and sense of self are intrinsically linked. Both are more easily lost in isolation.

Though Woolf's narrative does not overly focus on objects and physical actions, the importance of physicality is expressed via Bernard's problems stemming from dematerialisation and the consequences of unattachment. Loss of self in ageing is most keenly felt in the solitude born from loss of community.

The final chapter of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* offers a portrayal of old age that does not rely on stereotypes. It gives the reader a representation of a singular character's unique experience while also bringing forth universal themes. As a character, Bernard is inserted both within the progression of his own lifespan and the larger movements of natural cycles. His expansive character psyche is solidly constructed and transports the reader through various epochs and considerations – all contributing to a characterisation that holds firm in the final chapter. While the novel accurately shows the retreat into the mind that can happen as the body decays, it also complexifies the mind/body duality by affirming that even as our material being wanes, our sensorial experiences still shape our minds and thus partake in the construction of our character – a dynamic that holds throughout life and until the end, both in and out of the pages of fiction.

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