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Vision and Violence in Virginia Woolf's The Waves

Virginia Woolf describes her artistic goal in The Waves as an attempt to create "an abstract mystical eyeless book." Yet, in creating her eyeless book, one that eschews a single narrative perspective, Woolf amasses abundant visual details. For each of her six characters, visual images mark significant moments of being. In fact, Woolf emphasizes the characters' capacity for sight as a vulnerability that allows them to be violated and wounded over and over. This article analyzes connections between visual imagery and themes of violence in the novel to demonstrate how they cohere into an extended metaphor for the ways in which acts of looking can elicit powerful emotions that threaten to fragment individual identity in painful ways. While Woolf's novel has received critical commentary that focuses on the role of vision in the narrative and critics have also noted how violence in the text supports other themes, the explicit relationship between sight and violence has not yet been fully explored. A close examination of the visual imagery in key scenes of the novel demonstrates how Woolf engages the reader to participate in the characters' deepening sense of fragmentation as they are repeatedly assaulted by experience, as the eyes themselves become symbols of the twin dynamics of desire and destruction.

key words: Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, visual imagery, violence

That Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* defies conventions of plot, character, and setting is a given. The novel fits the modernist artist's agenda of questioning not only the representation of reality but reality itself. David Bradshaw, in his 2015 introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of the novel, points to passages from Woolf's diaries and critical essays to show how the author intentionally set out to create in this work an alternative genre, neither prose nor poetry nor drama but an altogether different and more accurate invocation of lived experience (xvi). Woolf's own description of modernist fiction can be said to illustrate her artistic goal in *The Waves* as well as other novels, such as *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse*, to mention only two. She writes, "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" ("Modern Fiction" 154). Thus she lays out her personal experiment with fiction, her desire to produce an alternative to the novel as she knew it. *The Waves* indeed tests the limits of language, constituting what many consider a "lyrical tour de force" (Bradshaw xii).

Woolf's experiment with narrative led her to question the relationships between fiction and the other arts, painting and music in particular. As she says in "A Sketch of the Past," it is not necessary to separate one art from another nor ourselves from the arts: "[T]he whole world is a work of art . . . we are parts of the work of art" (62). As an artist of words, she envisioned a book that would immerse the reader in the sensory impressions – the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures – of the lives of abstract characters. Rendering experience through images that would evoke strong emotion was her goal, the goal of a poet as much as a novelist. She records her own

immersion in sensory impressions in "A Sketch of the Past." Here she details a childhood moment of singular experience with light and sound: "It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive" (64-65). She goes on to say, "Sound and sight seem to make equal parts of these first impressions" (66). Her senses, however, she acknowledges, have the power to wound as well as delight. In this first instance, she recalls her received impressions of sight and sound as "ecstasy," yet in another reminiscence from the same piece, she describes the horror of suddenly catching sight of an apple tree in moonlight. She recalls feeling assaulted by this sight that she connects with having just overheard her parents talking of a neighbour's suicide. Woolf refers to this and other horror-inducing sights and sounds as "shocks" and describes a compulsion even in adulthood to "take away the pain" by "put[ting] the severed parts together" through writing (71-72).

In *The Waves*, Woolf's desire to transform powerful fleeting sensory impressions into a transcendent whole is evident in the character of Bernard, whom numerous critics describe as her artistic alter-ego (Fand, Griffin, Ender, Kelley). Ender remarks how Bernard "evokes . . . the persistence of violent non-integrated sensations. Looking at paintings, he sees them as emblems of pain" (211). For the characters in the novel, pain is inherent in perception, often experienced as an act of violence. In the episodes related through the voices of her six characters, Woolf reveals a paradoxical premise; i.e., that in perceiving this work of art that is the world, the perceiver will be wounded. A reading of the novel, therefore, must take into account not only the novel's signature narrative structure, a mosaic-like juxtaposition of images, but also the many ways in which sensory apprehension, even of the most enchanting sights and sounds, brings pain.

All the senses are exaggerated in the novel, but the sense of sight especially exposes the characters' vulnerabilities. The author's own description of her artistic goal reveals a preoccupation with sight. In an attempt to wrench fiction away from the hold of novelistic conventions such as the single narrator and the linear narrative, Woolf imagined her book as "an abstract mystical eyeless book" (*Diary* Volume 3). Her choice of the word "eyeless" here is fraught with contradiction, for, even as she works to escape the limitations of a conventional realist narrator, to escape the limits of a single perspective in order to avoid violating the truth of lived experience, she uses the characters' capacity for sight to violate and wound them over and over again. Those impressions, "engraved with the sharpness of steel," that mark significant moments of being for Jinny, Percival, Neville, Bernard, Susan, and Louis are repeatedly experienced as violence and represented through images of violence. In fact, in *The Waves*, images of violence cohere into an extended metaphor for the ways in which acts of looking can elicit powerful emotions that threaten to fragment individual identity in painful ways.

While Woolf's novel has received critical commentary that focuses on the role of vision in the narrative and critics have also noted how violence in the episodes supports other themes, the explicit relationship between sight and violence has not yet been fully explored. For example, critics who have analyzed *The Waves* through its memes of sight have tended to focus on the eye as a metaphor for the self-creating self, as in Luttrell's "Virginia Woolf's Emersonian Metaphors of Sight." Luttrell contrasts Woolf's depiction of the relationship between the working of the eyes and the working of the mind with Emerson's version, Woolf's being characterized as inward-oriented while Emerson's is outward-oriented (72). She says that for Emerson, sight moves from the circle of the eye to the circle of the horizon and then beyond to the transcendental. Woolf, however, according to the critic, posits that in focusing close-up on a material object (its colour, shape, mass), there is promise of achieving momentary transcendence, especially if in the

company of others also focusing on the object. While there are moments in the novel when an object draws the six characters into temporary communion, as in the dinner scenes of sections four and eight, I argue that such moments, rather than emphasizing the temporary transcendence achieved through apprehending a striking object, highlight instead the opposite as the characters quickly return to their own separate, isolated musings. As to analyses of violence, critics who have examined relevant images in the novel, notably knife and blade, have usually done so only tangentially in support of other assertions about the characters' fragmentation. Monson, for example, relying on Kristeva's philosophy of the subject-in-process and Levinas's ethical philosophy, proposes a reading of violence in the novel as a metaphor for the inherent violence of subjectivity, wherein the subject, Bernard in this case, attempts to use language to reduce the others to his story of them while also constructing himself as something distinctly other than his friends. According to Monson, both selfhood and language are revealed in the novel to be "necessarily violent modes" (183). When Bernard finally "acknowledges the violence of perception," Monson claims, it is the realization that what he sees no one else sees in the same way (189). The "infinity of [Bernard's] experience . . . is reduced in the eyes of another to a single signifier: that of 'a rather heavy, elderly man, grey at the temples'" (189). While Bernard may have figured himself as a type of artist-redeemer, the one who will make sense of all their lives through language, he is struck in this moment by the power of an observer to reduce him to a caricature.

Although it has much in common with the critics mentioned above, this study focuses neither on the self-creating function of sight in the novel nor on the violence that a perceiver necessarily inflicts on the object of vision but rather, from a counter perspective, on the ways in which images from the world and those who inhabit the world inflict violence on the perceiver. Through the symbolic use of sharp weapons, bladed and blade-like objects, many of them drawn from myths and fairy tales, Woolf demonstrates how the act of seeing inflicts psychic pain in the lives of six personalities, all struggling with perceptions that threaten to deconstruct their illusions of a stable and thus knowable reality. Seeing implies light, light invites recognition, but recognition is thwarted by constant changes in an unstable world. Through a series of dramatic monologues, Woolf invites the reader to participate in the characters' deepening sense of fragmentation as they are repeatedly assaulted by experience, as the eyes themselves become symbols of the twin dynamics of desire and destruction.

From the novel's very beginning, Woolf poses the mystery and vulnerability inherent in the act of seeing. She invites speculation about issues of illusion-reality by centring the novel on a basically unchanging scene that nevertheless appears to change before the reader's eyes as the novel progresses. Placing readers inside the narrative eye, she first projects a world in darkness, where the "sea [is] indistinguishable from the sky" (7); then, as we watch, the gathering light gradually exposes colours and shapes, creating a landscape. Throughout the nine sections of the novel, lyrical interludes establish the visual effects of the sun's rising and setting through time. Woolf paints the same scene over and over, showing the perceptual effects of sunlight on objects in much the same way Monet returned to his haystacks again and again to explore the distortions created by sunlight playing upon objects, where the question of the real haystacks is rendered absurd. They remain the same even as they change under the artist's eye. Similarly, Woolf, in *The Waves*, establishes a scene that will both change and remain the same throughout the novel.

At first lyrical and subdued, this changing scene, over the time span of the novel, reveals increasingly disturbing images of violence and death. In the beginning, sunlight striking objects of the landscape gradually focuses on the house, which, along with its garden, provides a grounding image for ensuing interludes. The children playing in the garden imagine the familiar

activities of their day as adults rise and a meal is prepared. Yet in the background, "the great brute on the beach stamps" (10). Soon after in this section, a second and fantastically forbidding house appears: Elevedon, where a "lady sits between the two long windows, writing" (17) and also where, "if we died here, nobody would bury us" (17).[1] The children have encountered images of both life and death in the garden, from which the two houses are visible. As if to emphasize the complexity of this act of seeing through the narrative eye, Woolf has the encroaching light in succeeding interludes gradually reveal also a mirror in the house on the dining room wall, which, by section eight, has taken on the form of another kind of eye: "Rimmed in a gold circle the looking glass held the scene immobile as if everlasting in its eye" (208).[2] In the various scenes of the novel, the author invites readers to look in, not from one perspective only, but through an eye that changes constantly, each character reacting to a personal vision and doggedly attempting to draw a circle around the illusion, to wall it in, to contain it and hold it steady.

While the scenes of the opening interludes of the nine sections of the novel function as a useful stylistic device for investigating effects of the passage of time through days, seasons, and years of the characters' lives, they would be far less memorable if not for their emotionally packed and highly evocative, many times frightening, mythic images.[3] Each interlude is threaded with suggestions of violence and disintegration that create mounting anxiety as the novel progresses. In the opening interlude, for example, Woolf describes the sunrise in foreboding terms: "The light struck upon the trees in the garden" and the "sun sharpened the walls of the house" (8). In the second interlude, "sharp stripes" shadowed the grass and "broader blades" lay upon the house as flower buds "split asunder" while "the concussion of the waves breaking" sounded on the shore (9). In interlude three, the reader perceives a new image, "the ribs of the eaten-out boat" (73), and hears a new song, fearful and anxious, as the birds begin "pecking each other" (74). A sense of horror arises ("their eyes became gold beads") as violence erupts: the birds "spiked" and "pecked" a worm, then "plunged the tips of their beaks savagely" into the soft bodies of slugs (74). Meanwhile, the waves have been transformed into "turbaned warriors . . . with poisoned assegais" (75).[4]

Through repetition and variation of violent imagery, each interlude resonates in the section that follows it, and each section in turn builds upon preceding sections through memories and experiences provided by the narrative voices. Borrowing from patterns of symphonic composition, Woolf uses these interludes to set the mood and establish the themes to be elaborated in the six-voiced choruses that follow; for the mounting tension revealed in the scenes of the interludes has its response in the unfolding lives expressed, each stage marked by the

[1] Could the woman be Virginia Woolf's way of including herself in the novel, as Roxanne Fand suggests? This would add an interesting dimension to the story, calling attention to the process of fiction-writing itself and the creation of character. If we are to understand the characters as fictions only, with no pretense to reality, then Bernard's statement that "if we die here, no one will bury us" becomes a witty assertion.

[2] N.C. Thakur's *The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf* compares Woolf's use of the mystic eye to various ideas in Persian, Christian, and Buddhist mystical writings but does not try to establish her direct borrowing from these works. Thakur also cites Nietzsche's Ring of Recurrence as a similar idea. Using these symbols that exist so widely in myth seems to be part of Woolf's agenda to render the workings of the human mind.

[3] Woolf's essay "The Sun and the Fish" discusses the mental process of recording memory and establishes an essential connection between visual image and emotion in the individual's long-term memory. Also, details recorded in her diary about an experience of watching a solar eclipse may have been source material for this novel as well.

[4] *Assegais* are slender hardwood spears with iron tips of African origin.

increasingly painful awareness of separation and individuation from the other voices.[5] Woolf's language increasingly poses *seeing* and *being seen* as acts of violence in themselves.

The painful revelation of identity begins in section one when Jinny kisses Louis and he feels the violence of the act that separates him from the others, along with a sense of revulsion at his physical response: "I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered" (13). Susan, too, is shattered by the divisiveness of the act: "I saw her kiss him . . . Now I will wrap my agony inside my pocket-handkerchief" (13). For Susan, this awareness of vulnerability through the connected acts of seeing and feeling leads immediately to an awareness of death: "I love . . . I hate. I desire . . . I shall eat grass and die in a ditch in the brown water where leaves have rotted" (15).

Woolf expands the theme of painful self-recognition by showing the effects of the kiss on the other characters. Bernard notices Susan's agony and follows her, absent-mindedly taking Neville's knife, "the sharp one that cuts the keel," and leaving Neville powerless (19). Metaphorically, Neville will spend the rest of the novel searching for his lost power, not even sure what power it is that the keen blade of the knife symbolizes.[6] Bernard creates a story and leads Susan on an adventure, to take her mind off her grief, showing her the forbidden house and garden beyond the wall where the bearded gardener sweeps brown leaves; they run back together, fearing that, if he catches them, he might kill them and nail their bodies to the wall. These horrible images lie buried in the consciousnesses of Bernard and Susan, emerging in their language at times of crisis. That same night, Bernard has his own painful self-revelation when his nurse squeezes water from a sponge over his body, making him feel "arrows of sensation shoot on either side" (26). These sensations, he notes in section four, mark the beginnings of his own recognition of separateness and vulnerability, the moment when he "became clothed in this changing, this feeling garment of flesh" (124). Each voice in its own way in section one experiences a fall from innocence that is equated with seeing and being seen, with a shock of recognition that combines perception and emotion in such a way as to preserve itself forever in the memory of the individual.

Through these initial experiences, each voice awakens to the understanding of the fragmentation that marks his or her humanity.[7] Only Rhoda refuses identity, as symbolized in her resistance to looking into mirrors. In a desperate effort to avoid the pain of her own identity, she lives in dreams, identifying with the one white petal that sails alone in the basin where the broken blossom floats. She will finally only "trust solitude and the violence of death" (231). Woolf emphasizes Rhoda's desire for non-identity through details such as the vacant moon of her face, her identification with darkness and sleep, and the absence of a father. She unequivocally claims, "I am not here. I have no face" (43). True to her self-image, Rhoda finally takes her own life near the end of the novel by leaping from a high place (289). Her confidante is Louis, the outsider who speaks with a different accent and who hates being laughed at, who wears a belt with a snake buckle; Louis identifies himself with discord and claims rejection as his signifier.

Although the progress of the novel pivots on increasingly painful perceptions of separation for these characters, the scenes in which they receive the most violent shocks of self-awareness are those in which they come together as adults to share a meal, in scenes where

[5] A number of critics (Bradshaw, Clements, Cuddy-Keane, Ferguson, Thakur) describe Woolf's conscious making of the form of this novel into a kind of symphonic poem to incorporate elements of music into the work.

[6] Neville's knife is also symbolic of his sexuality, his intense attraction to Percival being physical as well as idealistic.

[7] Harvena Richter's *The Inward Voyage* discusses this effect in Woolf's work and points out a reference to the ideas in Woolf's essay "The Moment: Summer's Night."

knives and forks repeatedly catch the light, appearing as strange sorts of weapons against disillusionment. The first dinner scene occurs in section four as the six friends gather for a farewell to Percival, who is leaving for India. Percival never speaks in the novel and he alone never sees – "His blue, and oddly inexpressive, eyes are fixed with pagan indifference upon the pillar opposite" (36) – although he draws all eyes to himself. Percival has no substantive identity, not even a shadow, as revealed in Louis's comment, "A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind him" (37); yet, paradoxically, he is adored by all (37). Percival is the symbolic lost knife for which Neville, "scissor-cutting, exact" (117), has been searching since the first scene of the novel. Waiting for Percival to appear, Neville stares at his dinner knife, straightens his fork (120). Of Percival, Louis says that his presence turns one's heart into "a file with two edges" (37). He is the true knight on a quest for the Holy Grail. When he takes his seat at the table, the kingdom is in order. But this sword has a double edge, for in its blinding light is death.

The interlude for this dinner scene is appropriately filled with lances, swords, claws, beaks, knives, and daggers as the midmorning sun bears down on the beach. Seeing has clearly become dangerous: "A jar was so green that the eye seemed sucked up through a funnel by its intensity (110). Percival functions in the same manner as the jar, as an icon. With his arrival, chaos is undone, the pain of separation is sucked away: "He has imposed order. Knives cut again" (122). Percival is portrayed not as an identity but as the ideal that brings them together and endows them with meaning: "We have come together . . . to make one thing, not enduring – for what endures? – but seen by many eyes simultaneously" (127). Yet the "authentic ones" – Louis and Rhoda, the outsiders who prefer solitude – resist Percival's fascination, not duped by the false illusion. They seem to know that Percival's reality is death itself (he will, in fact, die in India before the next scene) as they whisper together about the others. Louis says, "Their eyes are like a moth's wings moving so quickly that they do not seem to move at all" (140); like moths, they are attracted to the flame that draws them toward death. These two alone are aware of how soon the celebration festival for the coming of the hero can end in a slanting shadow, a cold urn, where "[d]eath is woven in with the violets" (141).

The next dinner gathering occurs in section eight, where the six meet again, middle-aged now, years after Percival's death. With Percival dead, their illusions have died as well, and the light of idealism has dimmed: "Custom blinds [their] eyes" (212). The friends, who as children were shocked by the pain of their first seeing, now ironically seek a replacement for the razor edge of brilliance they have lost, for the flash of Percival that once drew them. Only Rhoda has gained meaning from his death; looking at his grave, one stone placed on another, she has found it a "perfect dwelling place" (163). The stones that mark his grave are the reality she has recognized. She has answered her own question, "[B]ut what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? . . . Percival, by his death, has made me this gift, let me see the thing" (163). She tells Louis that they can "trust only in solitude and the violence of death" (231). Finally understanding that the only way to escape the prison of the body and the pain of seeing is through death, she chooses suicide.

With Percival gone, the other friends attempt to piece their diminished worlds back together in their own separate ways. As they look for meaning, their searches are expressed in caricatures of the hero's weapons. Louis, a successful businessman, loves the "sharp edge" of his desk and his appointment book with its appointments at four-thirty "sharp"; he wears "the sharp-pointed pyramid" of responsibility on his shoulders (202). Susan sees her identity in motherhood, the children whose "eyes will see when mine are shut" (172), who sleep while she pushes the needle through the cloth and snips with the scissors. Jinny and Neville look to sex for fulfilment. Jinny pencils in her eyebrows at a sharper angle to attract new lovers while Neville lives with the

constant threat of abandonment by his lover, imagining disaster with each public appearance: "We were cut up, we were dissevered by all those faces . . . I sat staring" (178).

Bernard alone, the writer, continues the heroic search for a vision that will, as Percival did, hold the promise for something good and whole in their fragmented lives. Just as he once comforted the wounded Susan as a child by creating a story, he now searches for a symbol, something to pull out whole from the depths, something like a live fish. But the moving fin that would break "the leaden waste of waters" eludes him (245). Hoping for insight, he gazes at the sea; he looks through his wine glass, but finally wonders, "Are there stories?" (187). He suspects that his attempts to capture all the moments of being in a person's life as a set of connected instances, one following the next, of placing one word after another to make a coherent narrative, may be an illusion. In the final scene of the novel, Bernard desperately attempts to heal them all by setting the story of his own life whole before a stranger in a restaurant late one night. The scene has the effect of a caricatured Last Supper. The interlude for this scene includes images of garden, broken vessel, rotten apples, adder's skin, nail and thorn tree. The story that Bernard tells is full of violent language – broken, tattered, arrows, skeletons, holes, growling, scratching, flicking, cutting, smashing, splintering, evisceration. Having offered up his life to the stranger – "If it were possible, I would hand it you entire. I would break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes. I would say, 'Take it. This is my life'" (238) – Bernard feels as though he is disintegrating into "a dust dance," a shadow talking of shadows. Just as he has finally begun to find transcendence in the illusion of the moment, he suddenly catches the eye of his listener. Then he sees himself in a mirror. The two instances of seeing shock him into a painful return to self-awareness – "the blow you have dealt me" (293) – that echoes the childhood bath scene in which he first recognized the sensations on his bare skin as manifestations of an embodied self. Now at the dinner gathering, noticing the greasy knife on the table, he becomes even more intensely aware of his humanity: "We have been taking into our mouths the bodies of dead birds. It is with these greasy crumbs, slobbered over napkins, and little corpses that we have to build. Always it begins again . . ." (293). The "it" in his statement suggests "the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again" (297) of the waves that have dominated the imagery of the novel from the first scene.

So, fully recognizing the futility of words, Bernard nevertheless takes them up again. Once again, he begins his story: "It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's . . . I strike spurs into my horse" (297). Having faced death both personally in the loss of Percival and existentially in his realization of a simple fact of humanity, Bernard understands that to live is the painful daily flinging of oneself against the enemy, the daily allowing of oneself into the sensory onslaught that eventually consumes all. As day breaks and the waves break, he acknowledges his status as "an elderly man, stand[ing] in the street looking up rather dizzily at the sky" (296). He will not call it dawn because a dawn implies teleology, a destination. Instead, sunlight strikes the eye once again. To the assault of another day breaking he responds with a counter assault. Rather than tell a story, he chooses to juxtapose the two images: an elderly man looking dizzily at the sky and a young man riding into battle. The composite image is a caricature, a comic image of an aging Don Quixote.

Considering this caricatured figure that Bernard's words suggest, one is reminded of Woolf's self-expressed artistic purpose, to "take away the pain" of what one has seen and recognized by "put[ting] the severed parts together" to create a new artistic form ("A Sketch of the Past" 71-72). Bernard realizes the absurdity of what he intends to do yet is compelled to relieve his anxiety by constructing a new image of himself in the world. As Ender notes, Bernard is Woolf's alter ego. He understands the connection between vision and violence. When looking

at paintings, he "sees them as emblems of pain" (211), perhaps as attempts, like the author's, to take away the pain of dis-integration. In Woolf's expression of her desire to write a novel based on "myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" ("Modern Fiction" 154), the phrase "engraved with the sharpness of steel" seems an apt expression of her rendering of the experiences of Jinny, Neville, Bernard, Susan, and Louis as they recount and revisit the images of childhood that inhabit their maturing consciousnesses. Those images, as has been elaborated, are often violent and leave the characters with impressions of fragmentation that they continue to try to repair throughout their lives. Bernard, in the end, remains struggling to create something whole of the "myriad impressions" of his life.

Roy Johnson in his review of Sarah Latham Phillips's *Virginia Woolf as a "Cubist Writer"* refers to *The Waves* as "a narrative often described as a mosaic of fragments" (Johnson). The "mosaic of fragments" that Johnson describes captures both the visual elements and the violence that characterize Woolf's experimental novel. From fragments, disjointed images from the characters' lives that represent moments of painful realization, she has created a complex, balanced composition that, rather than attempting to soften the jagged angles of the pieces, juxtaposes them in ways that invoke both emotion and contemplation. Like the cubist artists, Woolf created in *The Waves* a piece that is both absurd and beautiful, her text made of images evoked in words. Recognizing that these images are presented in patterns that specifically and consistently combine vision and violence throughout the novel supports a reading that reveals the novel's artistic unity as well as its linguistic virtuosity.

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