

## Multi-Perspectival Technique Manifested Through Bernard's and Neville's Points of View in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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In *The Waves*, Bernard always leads the discussion and tells the story of all six friends. Neville, not fully persuaded by Bernard's narration, often follows Bernard's remarks with a slight mockery of Bernard's narration: "Let Bernard begin. Let him burble on, telling us stories. Let him describe what we have all seen so that it becomes a sequence" (Woolf 36). The tension between Bernard and Neville emerges from each of their firm belief in contrasting ways of narration: Bernard mainly dedicates his narration to depicting the universality of human nature with his "sympathetic understanding" (51), while Neville focuses on his need for individual emotional exclusiveness as expressed through his attention to Bernard and Percival. Woolf's multi-perspectival technique, however, allows the reader to see Bernard from Neville's point of view and Neville from Bernard's.

In this paper, I will analyze the way Neville both understands Bernard accurately and yet also misunderstands Bernard's dependency on others. As early as elementary school, Neville and Bernard begin to reflect on each other's narration. Neville's comments show that he has a correct interpretation of Bernard's "extraordinary understanding" (70) as well as his inability to touch upon individual interiority, but they also show that Neville misunderstands Bernard's not needing others. After approaching Bernard from Neville's point of view, I will focus on Bernard's interpretation of Neville, as well as himself. In college, Bernard confronts Neville's prejudiced remarks "You are not Baron; you are yourself" (89) with a self-reflection on his investment in writing and narrating. He then uses his description of an "old, unsteady woman" (91) to demonstrate his ability to observe others and to point out the limitation of Neville's point of view. Moreover, the moment when Bernard desires to bring everyone together to hold a farewell dinner for Percival highlights Bernard's needy dependency on his friends, as in contrast to Neville's

understanding of him. After a close examination of texts selected from *The Waves*, I will incorporate the point of view the reader achieves into Woolf's multi-perspectival technique. Without an omniscient narrator to orchestrate the perspectives of characters in the novel, readers have a need for each character to better understand the novel as a book of other people.

As early as elementary school, after Bernard "escapes without a ticket" (69), Neville imagines Bernard telling stories to other people and hence comments on Bernard's storytelling and writing with displeasure that:

"We are all phrases in Bernard's story, things he writes down in his notebook under A or under B. He tells our story with extraordinary understanding, except of what we most feel. For he does not need us. He is never at our mercy." (70)

It is noticeable that Neville starts his understanding of Bernard by borrowing Bernard's own words, recalling the moment when Bernard as a child expresses his passion for writing and his preparation of "future reference" (36) for his novel. Neville recognizes Bernard's "extraordinary understanding" of what he sees from others, and yet points out Bernard's inability to perceive "what [others] most feel"—those internal differentiations of others. I agree with Neville's remarks because Bernard aims to seek a universal way to describe human nature and he even openly admits his difficulty in representing the interiority of others. For instance, Bernard abruptly ends the story of Dr. Crane with a self-conscious rejection to enter the internal world of others: "But stories that follow people into their private rooms are difficult. I cannot go on with this story" (51). As in distinction to Neville's negative judgement of Bernard's narrative inadequacy, I regard Bernard's self-aware difficulty in representing others' internal complexities as an aesthetic triumph to signal the state of facing a difficulty in

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literary experiments.

From Neville's point of view, we can see that Bernard does not value the "profound distinctions" (49) of human beings or cannot perceive subtle shifts of others' interiority. As they grow up and enter college, the novel presents more on Neville's interests in refuting stories told by Bernard and Bernard starts to incorporate his response to Neville's refutations into his narration of others. When facing Neville's negations that: "You are not Baron; you are yourself" (89), Bernard confronts Neville by refuting that: "With their addition, I am Bernard; I am Byron... I am more selves than Neville thinks" (89). Then Bernard comes up with a story of an old woman under the window to demonstrate his remarkable understanding of others and to point out the limitation of Neville's point of view, aiming to show that "[his] scope embraces what Neville never reaches" (90):

"An old, unsteady woman carrying a bag trots home under the fired windows. She is hard afraid that they will fall on her and tumble her into the gutter. Yet she pauses as if to warm her knobbed, her rheumatically hands at the bonfire which flares away with streams of sparks and bits of blown paper. The old woman pauses against the lit window. A contrast. That I see and Neville does not see; that I feel and Neville does not feel." (91) Bernard only captures women's momentary worry ("afraid")—the interiority Neville values, but he spends more efforts in delineating "old, unsteady woman's" action and appearance. Her "afraid" of falling over, her "rheumatically hands" and her "pauses" consistently suggest her aged quality and her slow movement. The description starts with her "under the fired-red windows" and suddenly ends at the same scenario as she "pauses against the window." Then there comes "a contrast." What does Bernard mean by the contrast? I interpret it as a vivid contrast generated by the woman's shift between her movement and pause. The woman's shift between moving and pausing presents a physical dynamism against the still background, which further sets a contrast between the character and the setting. The visual contrast not only embodies Bernard's attentiveness to external details, but also shows his extraordinary ability to orchestrate observational "phrases" (70) and to reproduce vividness of others without touching up their interiority.

In the following, when Bernard comes up with a comparison between himself and Neville: "That I see and Neville does not see; that I feel and Neville does not feel," the difference he means is more than his vivid representation of visual contrast and observational details. Bernard distinguishes himself from Neville from the moment he chooses to portray an unknown woman—an entire stranger, because Neville's narrative mainly centers on people who he has attachments to—Percival or has dissatisfaction with—Bernard. Neville will not pay attention to "an old, unsteady woman" under the window, nor will he dedicate his narration to depicting an unknown character or create a literary contrast for her. Neville's stress on the inapproachable individual interiority reveals his inner emotional exclusiveness of others outside his

friend circle. On the other hand, Bernard's notable repetitions of "Look!" in the novel signals his consistent curiosity of observing and writing down whatever intrigues him. The inclusiveness of Bernard's investment in writing gives out each common person the equal worthiness of being written about. Bernard's sympathetic gesture to include every person as characters extends his pursuit for literary universality from subjects' human nature to the objects being written about, which at the same time produces a larger social web of others woven through Bernard's narration of his friends.

Bernard's investment in depicting both the friend other and social other directly refutes Neville's remarks: "He does not need us." (70). Bernard's dependency on others is not only revealed through his interest in depicting others, but also embodied in his understanding of himself from others. He even asserts that: "The truth is that I need the stimulus of other people" (80). Noticeably, it is Bernard who arranges the farewell dinner for Percival and who offers an opportunity for a reunion of his friends. The dinner for Percival does not come out of a sudden impulse, but out of Bernard's internal need for his friends—those others:

"To be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure why I am myself... Now I am drawn back by pricing sensations; by curiosity, greed (I am hungry) and the irresistible desire to be myself. I think of people to whom I could say things; Louis, Neville; Susan; Jinny and Rhoda. With them I am many-sided... We shall dine together. We shall say good-bye to Percival." (115-116). Bernard's soliloquies elucidate his need for others, his desire to be himself and the reliance of his self on the existence of others. A long-time separation from his friends hence confuses himself of "why he is [him] self" and arouses his "irresistible desire" to understand himself again. He thinks of his friends whom he "could say things" to: Louis, Neville, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda. Each of his friends constitutes part of him so that with friends Bernard becomes a many-sided representation of others: he is "not one and simple, but complex and many" (76). Bernard refuses to live "in separation" (67), but prefers to live as a mirroring image of every other around him and to add his collective observations "upon the true nature of human life" (67). Bernard's active arrangement of a farewell dinner for Percival offers a site for a friend reunion and an emotional exchange. Besides Bernard, everyone else—including Neville—takes advantage of this opportunity to interact with and interpret each other. For example, the moment Bernard comes into the dining room, Neville immediately comments on Bernard that: "He half knows everybody; he knows nobody (I compare him with Percival)" (121). Thus, Bernard further extends his pursuit for narrative universality by stressing on the indispensable co-dependency between self and other in the social web.

Woolf's multi-perspectival technique keeps the point of view of each character so that we can see Bernard from Neville's point of view and see Neville and social others from Bernard's. Just as

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Bernard needs others to understand and to constitute his self, the reader also rely on the characters to understand the novel as a book of other people. There are imperfect aspects of characters' narrations in *The Waves*: Neville excludes social others from his narrow-scope narration and misunderstands Bernard's dependency on others; Bernard's narration focuses on the universality of human nature and fails to perceive the interiority of others. However, there is no judgement of whose narration is better than the other. The reader still values these narrative inadequacies as well as each's

narration because they offer useful literary data to understand the plot dynamics and interrelationship in the novel. Without an omniscient narrator in *The Waves*, the reader does not have another access to understand the social background, the character as others and the relationship within the social web, besides each character's first-person narration. Borrowing Neville's remarks, I will conclude my paper by saying that the reader needs characters and the reader is at their mercy.

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