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Trauma and Character Formation in Virginia  
Woolf's *The Waves*

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**INDEX**

1. Introduction: Trauma and the Construction of Identity.....	1
1.1. Individual and Historical Trauma.....	1
1.2. Trauma from a Psychological Point of View.....	3
2. Virginia Woolf and the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century English Literature.....	4
2.1. Trauma in Woolf's Novels as Affective Representation of Trauma.....	5
2.1.1. Critical Literature about Trauma and Virginia Woolf's Writing.....	6
3. <i>The Waves</i> : Themes.....	7
3.1. Ontology and Epistemology in <i>The Waves</i> .....	8
3.2. Stream of Consciousness in <i>The Waves</i> .....	10
4. Characters' Development in <i>The Waves</i> .....	11
4.1. Male Identities.....	13
4.2. Female Identities.....	14
5. Conclusions.....	16
Works Cited.....	18

## **1. Introduction: Trauma and the Construction of Identity**

Virginia Woolf was one of the great figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature. In many of her works, she reflected her concerns about the psychological development in her character's lives. Perhaps one of her most recognized novels is *The Waves*. For this reason, in this essay, I will discuss the relationship between the traumatized characters in *The Waves* and the way Woolf creates them within the pages of the aforementioned novel. The main objective will be to draw conclusions about the possible relationship between these traumata and the construction of the identity of each character in Virginia Woolf's literature. It will be seen if the example provided by the novel *The Waves* can be extrapolated in order to form an opinion on these issues.

To accomplish all that has just been exposed, the present essay has been divided into six well-differentiated sections. On the one hand, as a way of introduction, the concept of trauma will be defined as well as how it has been developed theoretically by different authors who take into account psychological aspects in its treatment. Then, the figure and work of Virginia Woolf will be contextualized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature, emphasizing the concept of trauma reflected in her novels as an affective representation of the traumatic experiences that the author herself suffered throughout her life. To do this, as a starting point it will be taken what some specialists in Woolf's work such as Suzette Henke and David Eberly (32) explain in their articles. Later, the novel *The Waves* and the characters that are part of it will be analyzed to find out if Woolf implied her reality with the literary works she created. Finally, a series of conclusions on all these issues will be established and it will be checked if it has been possible to meet the objectives established.

### **1.1. Individual and Historical Trauma**

When defining the word trauma, it must be taken into account the two possible differences that are found within this term, according to different psychological and theoretical issues. I am talking about what experts have considered as individual trauma and historical trauma. Each of them must be analyzed adequately before entering Virginia Woolf's literary works that will occupy the main part of this essay.

First of all, it must be stated that the general idea of trauma can be understood as an emotional shock that also produces lasting damage, following Barandaran and Roshanzamir (70). Similarly, these critics stated that trauma can also be viewed as a strong, long-lasting negative emotion or impression. In their article "Traumatized

Construction of Male and Female Identities in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*" Baradaran and Roshanzamir (71) stated that these two definitions of this word of Greek origin coincide with the ideas established by the critical theories of Cathy Caruth. One of the scholars on this subject that she followed the most was Martin Charcot, who was the first to establish the different types of trauma, despite being answered by the well-known Sigmund Freud. According to Baradaran and Roshanzamir, Freud's studies chose to defend the concept of trauma as an individual process, including an interesting quote from Cixous and Clement (200):

Based on such an idea trauma engenders a wound or a crisis by which the traumatized subjects cannot normally define or delineate themselves as they are. This type of trauma, in general, is considered as individual trauma. Such trauma as an external force filtrates their psyches and mind to the end that it "splits the mind, lodging itself in a part of the mind that cannot be assimilated". (69)

This concept of trauma, in fact, what it does is a kind of abduction of the traumatized mind so that it is not able to understand the reality that occurs in terms of its own personal development. As it was explained by Henke and Eberly (75), Woolf suffered from this type of trauma due to everything that happened during her life and her literary career. Both authors also explained that it was this vital disorder and personal chaos that emerged from her personal life and were reflected in the characters of her novels, such as the case of *The Waves* that will be the object of study in the following sections of this essay. These ideas can be confirmed, according to Baradaran and Roshanzamir, in the following paragraphs, where they even quote some interesting sentences from Henke and Eberly (7)

Respecting the influence of trauma and aftereffects of traumatic events in the form of responses and reactions, Suzette Henke and David Eberly (2007), the critics who have submitted some critical essays about the effects of trauma on Virginia Woolf's life and her literary career and work, assert that:

[i]n response to the shock of trauma, the brain, stability to integrate experience falls apart. The consequences of this breakdown are physical as well as mental, affecting not only basic biological responses, but also the psychological processes upon which our sense of personal identity is established. (68)

However, the concept of historical trauma must be taken into account to be able to establish the differences between this and the one that has just been explained above. In the case of historical trauma, we are referring to a specific relevant event such as a war, a racial or ethnic aggression that involves violence and that has as a consequence a transformation or suffering of any person. Traumatic events that are related to this event will lead to psychological disorders that can also affect the people who experience them, according to Baradaran and Roshanzamir (114). This may have been the case of the author. It cannot be ignored the fact that Virginia Woolf had to live in a difficult time, situated between two world wars. These events undoubtedly modified her point of view as a writer about the reality that she wanted to reflect in her novels. In a difficult time like that, it was clear that literature could not reflect positivism or joy, but quite the opposite.

### **1.2. Trauma from a Psychological Point of View**

If everything that has just been explained above is taken into account, it will be possible to establish some very interesting theoretical conclusions that will help to analyze the work of Virginia Woolf and the role that psychology and trauma played in designing the characters in her novels. If literature is the reflection of the reality of a writer and the concern about everything that wants to convey to the readers, it is clear that the concept of trauma will be very present in such representative works of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it is the case of those of Virginia Woolf. The traumatic events that people of this time lived through can be described by the same principles with which the American Psychiatric Association called the main causes of any trauma, mentioned by Baradaran and Roshanzamir:

A psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience [...] would be markedly distressing to almost anyone, and is usually experienced with intense fear, terror, and helplessness [...] either a serious threat to one's life or physical integrity, a serious threat to harm to one's children, spouse, or other close relatives or friends; sudden destruction of one's home or community; or seeing another person who has recently been, or is being seriously injured or killed as a result of an accident or physical violence. Traumatic events include natural disasters (eg. Floods, earthquakes), accidental disasters (e.g., car accidents with serious physical injury, airplane crashes, large fires, collapse of physical structures), and deliberately caused events (e.g. bombing, torture, death camps). (70)

These ideas draw the possibility that mental disorder and chaos are closely related to trauma, because they share something fundamental: the mental ability of humans when it comes to behaving in front of them. For this reason, mental problems caused by trauma are clearly intertwined with the construction of the personal identity of each individual. As stated by Baradaran and Roshanzamir, “[t]he true sense of self and identity through psychological responses to traumas is associated with fragmentary recognition and image of self-identity defining operationally a criterion and providing the ground for the traumatized identity” (70).

Now, it will be analyzed the more specific case of Virginia Woolf and her best-known literary work *The Waves*. Firstly, from a general analysis of her work to delve more specifically into the male and female characters of the aforementioned novel. It will be seen if the construction of the identity of each one of them reflects, in a certain way, the turbulent life of the author.

## **2.- Virginia Woolf and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature**

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was one of the most important literary figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature, as well as one of the forerunners of the international feminist movement. During the interwar period, Woolf was a member of the Bloomsbury literary group, essential to the understanding of English culture at that time. Her most recognized works may be *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Waves* (1931) and her short essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The latter was considered a key work for the feminist movement since it exposes the difficulties that female writers of her time had to experience. Some of the main influences that Woolf received and that she knew how to apply in her work came from authors such as Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Henry James (Gill 55). Among all their teachings and Woolf's own peculiar literary style, it is worth highlighting the way in which the author puts aside the dominant realism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature to give her stories a different imprint.

It was after publishing *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* when literary critics began to praise her unique and original style, more typical until then in works of poetry, because of her use of language and different techniques, such as metaphors.

Woolf eliminated action and intrigue from her novels, experimenting with the “stream of consciousness”, the psychological issues of the characters and their emotional attitudes. It could be said that her works are highly experimental, since many events

almost never occur in her novels, but instead she focused on the receptive consciousness of her characters.

Among all her novels, *The Waves* will be analyzed, because it has been considered her most deeply experimental work. For this reason, it will be easier to extract the importance of trauma in the design and development of her characters. It will be in the following chapters where more emphasis will be placed on these issues.

## **2.1. Trauma in Woolf's Novels as Affective Representation of Trauma**

In many of Virginia Woolf's novels, both the most fictional and the non-fictional ones, readers will be able to mark a very clear path in some issues that impose pain, terror, and scenes that are closely related to trauma. Taking various of her works as an example, Woolf's characters are vulnerable due to childhood traumata, such as the sexual abuse she suffered (Gill 75) In any case, readers who do not contextualize Woolf's works within her period and her cultural casuistry are not going to be able to trace the relationship that her characters have within their community.

In *The Waves*, male and female characters show sign of trauma, but they are also victimized by the society they are living in. For this reason, they have an obsession with things that are out of the ordinary and they adopt strange ways of relating to others in society, trying to appear as normal as possible. Woolf, in her way, as the author of trauma-related themes and identity, portrays her characters in her own image and likeness. In fact, the novel that is being analyzed in this essay is a good example of this.

The characters in Virginia Woolf's novels are members of a chaotic world, as it can be extracted from all the historical events that happened at that time. They all have conflicting emotions and feelings close to emptiness and loneliness. For this reason, it seems that they speak to themselves with the intention of relating to their own identity. This fact lies in opinions such as those enunciated by Baradaran and Roshazamir:

It is believed that Woolf wrote *The Waves* to connect herself to her dear brother's death, Thoby who died of typhoid fever, and her other traumas. All in all, she represents her character's post-traumatic stress disorders as traumatic responses to their traumas. Utilizing Caruth's critical views in the novel, the researchers strive to demonstrate what affects traumatically the construction of the characters' identities and makes their identities traumatized. (74)

It will be in the next section where it will be analyzed in a little more detail the point of view of two other specialists in the work of Virginia Woolf to verify the relationship between the author, her life and her career.

### **2.1.1. Critical Literature about Trauma and Virginia Woolf's Writing**

Among the group of authors and literary critics who worked on the relationship between the concept of trauma and Virginia Woolf's life and her literary career are Suzette Henke and David Eberly. After reading some of their articles, all their ideas should be taken into account in order to explain some of the main topics in this essay. Henke and Eberly themselves affirmed in one of their works that:

In response to the shock of trauma, the brain, stability to integrate experience falls apart. The consequences of this breakdown are physical as well as mental, affecting not only basic biological responses, but also the psychological processes upon which our sense of personal identity is established. (7)

This fact confirms again that the trauma that Woolf, her characters and her literary works brought about transcended the simple psychological facts in order to go further into more depth topics. The disorder and chaos that they lived through in this interwar period used to be related to personal trauma and fear. Woolf recalls in her works some of the main features of previous literary movements such as English Romanticism. It should be remembered and considered that in this period some authors tried to fight against a reality that suffocated them and against a feeling of loneliness and sadness always present in their works, both literary and cultural of various kinds. As it has been previously said, the presence of WWI and WWII changed the minds and the behavior of everyone who lived during this period.

The traumatic experiences lived by the characters in Woolf's works led them to physical and psychological problems, as happened to the author in her real life. For this reason, the reflections of Henke and Eberly were so adequate when they try to relate Woolf's psychological problems with the construction of her own personal identity (70). The true sense of her own identity and her responses to the traumata that she had to experience were a recurring theme in her works. *The Waves* was a clear exponent of all these problems.



Now, it is going to be analyzed in more detail the novel under study in the present essay, *The Waves*. It will be explained several of its most important themes and the reasons why this novel has been chosen to exemplify the concept of trauma with the characters and Virginia Woolf's life.

### **3. *The Waves*: Themes**

After a careful reading, readers will realize that they are in front of the most experimental novel of Woolf's. It is made up of the monologues of the six main characters in the book, which will be cited in the following sections of this essay. A section will also be dedicated to the seventh character named Percival who, although he does not physically appear in the plot, is evoked by the rest of the characters until he becomes someone very recognized by the readers. The reflections of these characters have characteristics very close to what could be called "prose poems" and very far from what is known as a novel with a central plot. Each of the characters' thoughts can be framed in what was called "stream of consciousness", in which readers are participants in the ideas that come to their minds without a clear order and randomly.

Woolf deals with themes such as individuality, the self and the feeling of community within these pages. Despite the fact that each character has its own personal features, the image of the monologues of all of them makes up a kind of summary of a central and silent conscience. It should also be noted that each of these sections into which the novel is divided is interrupted by nine coastal scenes that serve as a parenthesis to what each character is narrating. It will be seen that these brief interruptions develop throughout different parts of the day: from dawn to dusk.

Many critics such as Richardson came to analyze *The Waves* in all its complexity, taking into account the different points of view in the novel. It should be noted to contextualize all his statements in order to understand the depth of the novel in its entirety. Richardson himself stated that:

In any case, *The Waves* is complex primarily because point of view, or points of view, keep shifting, so that within the fictive world of the work taken in its entirety (and as distinct from the historical world of the author and the reader), several fictive worlds proliferate and inter- penetrate in ways that are neither conventional nor clearly defined. (691-709)

In the next two sections of this essay, it will be analyzed three key concepts to understand *The Waves*. Firstly, I will talk about the dichotomy between "ontology" and "epistemology" in the book and, secondly, it will be seen in more detail the importance of this "stream of consciousness" of the characters and how Woolf analyzed it in the rest of her work.

### **3.1. Ontology and Epistemology in *The Waves***

According to Monson, the implication of various philosophical issues in Woolf's works is widely recognized (172). In this way, concepts such as ontology and epistemology appear on the pages of her books. In this section, it will be analyzed the presence of both concepts in the novel that is studied in the present essay, *The Waves*. However, before continuing, a definition of the concepts of ontology and epistemology must be proposed in order to fully understand them, following Monson (172). Firstly, ontology can be known as the part of metaphysics that studies the human being in general, including all its own properties. Furthermore, it must be born in mind that, although the science of the human being has existed since the time of Parmenides, the term ontology appears for the first time at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Secondly, if the concept of epistemology is defined, it can be specified by affirming that it is a part of the philosophy that studies the principles, foundations, extension and methods of human knowledge.

When readers enter the pages of *The Waves*, they will perceive, for example, the commitment of Bernard's character to the language, subjectivity and the situation of the history and society of his time (Monson 172). This will be discussed in the fourth chapter of this essay more deeply. In summary, after analyzing *The Waves*, a conclusion has been reached. The way Bernard speaks about the characters that surround him is a way of comparing epistemology and ontology in Virginia Woolf's literary style. As Monson further explains:

It will highlight the symbolic nature of totality as it is expressed in Bernard's narrative, with language, history, and convention grouped together as the home of the singular self, and the decentering of this self-figured through the problematization of representation, teleology, and social structures. The philosophy staged through Bernard's subjective experience will be shown to reveal the paradox of selfhood along with the inherent violence

of representation in all its forms. This will, in turn, raise associated questions regarding the ethics of representation and of the writer's task. (175)

Undoubtedly, this subjectivity which has just been mentioned has a very close relationship with the field of ontology. Furthermore, after finishing reading *The Waves*, it will be seen the relationship that this novel maintains with epistemology and human knowledge, without forgetting the analysis of the interior of the characters that populate it. This was confirmed by Mattison when she says that:

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) questions epistemology and ontology and, in so doing, becomes a novel concerned with the "thing-in-itself." Kant, in *Critique of Judgment* (1790), posits that we can never reach the "thing-in-itself" because the intuition which would give us a full understanding or experience of this "thing" is impossible. However, within the framework of modernist philosopher Henri Bergson's theory of metaphysics, we will recognize how we might intuit the "thing-in-itself." Rhoda asks in *The Waves*: "'Like' and 'like' and 'like'—but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?" Like Rhoda, we want to "see the thing" (163), and, while we have been told by Kant and others that we will never be able to approach the "thing" fully, Woolf's writing suggests otherwise. (72)

Nevertheless, in the next chapter of this essay, the focus will be on this topic more thoroughly. Moving on to the next topic, it could be confirmed that the central metaphor of this novel focuses on a cyclical model of subjectivity, a process of creation and dissolution represented by the figure of a wave, which represents the life of any human being, as Monson states in the following paragraph:

Indeed, the central metaphors of the novel suggest a cyclical model of subjectivity—a process of self-constitution and dissolution represented by the image of a wave rising and then crashing, only to be drawn back into the sea where it rises once more; of a drop forming, becoming heavy, tapering to a point, and then falling, followed by the next drop. Each wave, each drop, embodies a stage in the individual's life; each stage is precipitated by a loss of self-preceding the formation of another, reconfigured self. At its formation, the wave or drop is characterized by heaviness and presence, and associated with an unproblematic relation to language, social structures, and conventions. (174)

This first theoretical approach to these two philosophical concepts opens the door to better interpret *The Waves*. The ideas of epistemology and ontology provide a precise framework when it comes to being aware of Virginia Woolf's developed a kind of psychological prose and her purpose of analyzing the personal thought of her characters. Knowing their behaviors a little bit better, it will be understood the importance of trauma in Woolf's creation process. To do this, it is also needed to know the importance of the language characters use in the novel, which is described by the Modernist technique "stream of consciousness", explored in the next section of this essay.

### **3.2. Stream of Consciousness in *The Waves***

The way Woolf created her literary style is very important for understanding her novels and in getting to know her characters better. The case of *The Waves* is paradigmatic within Woolf's works. Since the read of the novel is started, it can be noticed how "stream of consciousness" works in the novel. In *The Waves*, Woolf introduces us to a group of six friends whose reflections are closer to inner monologues. Some examples of them could be seen in the quotes that will appear in this chapter. This atmosphere created by the reflections of her characters can be likened to the swaying of a wave, according to Gill, the "stream of consciousness" in this novel, that is, the preconscious stream of ideas as it appears in the mind differs from what could be considered as a traditional monologue (35).

If the following fragment from *The Waves* is taken as an example, it is seen a set of images and thoughts that collide and float in Rhoda's mind. In her memory, it can be verified the intensity of that supposed wave,—until it finally dissolves. Woolf writes in *The Waves* the following paragraph:

The mule stumbles up and on. The ridge of the hill rises like mist, but from the top I shall see Africa. Now the bed gives under me. The sheets spotted with yellow holes let me fall through. The good woman with a face like a white horse at the end of the bed makes a valedictory movement and turns to go. Who then comes with me? Flowers only, the cowbind and the moonlight-coloured May. Gathering them loosely in a sheaf I made of them a garland and gave them—Oh, to whom? We launch out now over the precipice. Beneath us lie the lights of the herring fleet. The cliffs vanish. Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears. The white petals will be darkened

with sea water. They will float for a moment and then sink. Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me. (40)

It is interesting to see in this paragraph how Rhoda is seeing herself outside the center of a metaphorical circle and how Woolf's literary style is full of poetical images that can be associated with these supposed waves that illustrate the title of this novel. Another good example of this "stream of consciousness" that resembles the swaying of a wave and that illustrates Virginia Woolf's literary style occurs near the end of the novel when Bernard's depression appears and his declaration of resisting death. The narrator presents this fragment to us as follows:

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 advancing against 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! (84)

On this occasion, we have in front of us another example built with the image of the force of a wave that has just vanished. This narrative rhythm that Woolf uses throughout the novel coincides with the organic patterns of the readers' thinking, which is really the model under which this "stream of consciousness" was built. Once we have in mind the principles of this Modernist technique under which Woolf created her characters, it is possible to analyze their own essence to find the key to the concept of trauma and its importance when developing the action of *The Waves*. To do this, in the next section we will get to know each of the characters more specifically.

#### **4. Characters Development in *The Waves***

In *The Waves*, readers will find a series of monologues of the six characters that populate this novel, which will be speaking alternately. In these pages, some concepts will be discussed, such as the development of the individual and the relationship with the community that surrounds them. It is true that each character in *The Waves* is different

from the others, but together they are very similar to what Virginia Woolf's literary imagination was supposed to be.

The novel has six main characters: Bernard, Neville, Louis, Rhoda, Jinny and Susan. Here the concept of focalization can be mentioned when Woolf presents these characters. Kumar explains this concept when he said:

In *The Waves* a number of focalizers operate. The reader is invited to share the experiences of different characters through focalization. The use of variable focalization in this novel gives a sense that people experience reality in their own individual way and they have different ways of seeing the reality. (4)

For this reason, while reading the pages of *The Waves*, readers will realize the different perspectives each one of the characters had. Moreover, it should be remembered that focalization helps the character to center on their feelings. It is also important to remark that there is a clear difference between the person who narrates an event and the one who is taking part in it. This should be taken into account to contextualize the importance of the characters in *The Waves*.

If we begin to analyze male characters in this novel, it can be noticed that Bernard takes the role of narrator in the novel, always trying to find a complex and elusive phrase with which to communicate. Louis, on the contrary, is a strange character who is always looking for acceptance from others and success. For his part, Neville is constantly looking for love and, for this reason, he seeks it among various group of men. Jinny differs a bit from the other characters, since she is a person who is already socially successful and has a commented physical beauty, despite being insecure. Susan is escaping from the city to the countryside where she faces motherhood and the doubts it poses to her. Finally, Rhoda is a character overwhelmed by anxiety, who always rejects the relationship with others. To this set of characters, Percival can be added, the seventh character in the novel who is drawn as a kind of God, but with moral flaws, and who can be considered as the hero of the rest of the characters. This character is not going to be seen in action, but the others are going to mention Percival several times throughout all the pages of this novel. They miss him because they don't see him from their graduation, but the problem is that Percival disappeared from their lives since he went to India for military services. It should also be considered the point of view of Barandaran and Roshanzamir when they stated

that “Historically speaking, Woolf has experienced England’s situation throughout the Great War that Britain had a huge and ruling empire in India.” (71).

This sentence can illustrate about the way Woolf introduced some details of her personal life in her literary works. In any case, let's move on to analyze each one of them more specifically, to see if the presence of trauma in their behaviors and attitudes is true, and if this fact affected the way in which Virginia Woolf developed her literary style in *The Waves*.

#### **4.1. Male Identities**

In this section, it is going to be analyzed the way in which Virginia Woolf drew the trauma in the male characters of *The Waves*. According to Baradaran and Roshanzamir, Woolf experienced the trauma of the two World Wars that she had to live during her existence (70). The role that England played in the empire of India was clearly reflected in the protagonist of Percival, that seventh character that everyone talks about, but that will not be heard throughout the novel. He died in India in a horse race. For this reason, he is considered by the rest as a hero. Woolf centers the concept of historical trauma on Percival, caused by wars and imperialism.

According to Warner, the characters in this novel are developed through their specific dimensions through which their own identities develop (58). Furthermore, they are victims of their own time. They lived in a war period and this fact had two clear consequences: their future was complex and they lived with a lot of doubts and fears. For this reason, they carry anxiety and problems implicit when it comes to relating to the reality that they have had to live.

For example, this happens with another male character in this novel: Bernard, who is also the narrator of this story. Bernard writes down each phrase in his notebook so that he does not feel separated from his friends. The trauma comes from what he considers to be abandonment by Percival, who left him alone when going to India. In the last meeting that the six characters of the novel have, Bernard himself affirms that:

I wish, after this somnolence to sparkle, many-faceted under the light of my friend’s faces. I have been traversing the sunless territory of non-identity. A strange land I have had one moment of enormous peace. This perhaps is happiness. I think of people to whom I could say things: Louis, Neville, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda. With them I am many sided. They retrieve me from darkness. We shall meet tonight. Thank Heaven. Thank Heaven, I need

not to be alone. We shall dine together. We shall say good-bye to Percival, who goes to India. Yet they drum me alive. They brush off these vapors. I begin to be impatient of solitude. Oh, to toss them off and be active. I am to dine with my friends tonight. I am Bernard, myself. (84)

In this quote it is seen how Bernard suffers for his loneliness and for not having a marked identity that allows him to develop on his own. Instead, he feels joy when he is together with his group of friends.

If the character of Neville is analyzed, it can be observed another type of trauma. He is in love with Percival and he admires him as an idealized figure. Woolf draws through his behavior an individualized trauma, which is transformed due to Percival's death in India. Neville, upon hearing the news, thinks his world has ended. As he himself affirms in the novel:

He is dead, said Neville. He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown. The sails of the world have swung round and caught me on the head. All is over. The lights of the world have gone out. There stands the tree which I cannot pass. This is the truth. This is the fact. (109)

Due to this death, which was a traumatic loss for Neville, he feels lonely. He faces the truth of his friend's death through various flashbacks that take him back to the sight of his inert body.

All of them are joined by the character of Louis. In his case, we are dealing with a character who has an identity crisis regarding his origin and his Australian accent when speaking and communicating with the rest of the people around him. He himself wishes to be considered by his English friends as an equal. For this reason, he calls himself a “foreigner”. He faces what would be considered a historical trauma, related to the role of England and her empire in the time that Woolf tries to narrate. It could be possible that there is something specifically male in the traumata of this group of characters. This will be mentioned in the last chapter of this essay, when some conclusions will be reached about the characters of *The Waves* and their relationship with trauma.

#### **4.2. Female Identities**

If the female characters of *The Waves* are analyzed, it will be noticed that Virginia Woolf herself drew them under a deeply feminist prism, which revealed her as



a groundbreaking and novel writer during her time. Both Rhoda, Jinny and Susan have a very strong and clear identity, which can be verified with the turn of the pages and the knowledge of their attitudes.

In Rhoda's case, it can be established her trauma in relation to her isolation from other people around her and her dissociative behavior. She herself is aware that she is outside the life that was marked up to that moment. According to Micalé and Lerner, this trauma begins to relate the individual concept to become something related to the rest of the people and community that surrounds it (75). Actually, this character might not experience any serious event in her life that causes her a mental disorder, but she is traumatized by the behavior of the men of the time. Perhaps Woolf was trying to denounce the complex relationship of patriarchy and women. Some authors, like Mraz, confirmed this idea:

The society of *The Waves* has no room for women who do not fit its strict guidelines. In the end, the only option for Rhoda is death because there is no place for her in a male dominated world. Women like Rhoda, who do not fit into the role designated for women, have no place in society; however, men who did not live up to the —masculine standard created by the hegemony could still successfully navigate. (42)

As for the character of Jinny, it must be first taken into account her narcissistic character, which can be a kind of trauma that affects one's personality and identity. She really has personal relationships with the rest of the community. She wants to get noticed and needs to be seen by others. Perhaps she needed to secure her identity through the gaze of other males. This fact reduces the credibility of her own personal development, hence she herself is the victim of her own insecurities. She focused on exposing her physical body and sexuality. This can be considered something related to female stereotypes at this period. Jinny is looking for the admiration of others and she is trying to present herself as far as she can. This can be seen reflected in fragments of the novel such as the following one when Jinny herself states that:

All is exact, prepared. My hair is swept in one curve. My lips are precisely red. I am ready now to join men and women on the stairs, my peers. I pass them, exposed to their gaze, as they are to mine. (73)

Finally, Woolf also draws a clear trauma in the character of Susan. In the first part of the novel. Susan faces a scene that causes her problems and that traumatizes her. She herself states in the novel:

I saw her kiss him. I raised my head from my flower-pot and looked through a chink in the hedge. I saw her kiss him. I saw him, Jinny and Louis kissing. Now I will wrap my agony inside my pocket-handkerchief [...] and die there. (40)

As it can be seen, Susan is obsessed with the kiss she just saw between Jinny and Louis. She repeats it throughout the novel on many occasions. In fact, having seen that kiss causes her to be imprisoned between love and hate, which creates a clear disorder, from which she cannot distinguish reality from what is considered fiction. This complex relationship between female characters' expectations and the reality is also another important topic in these pages. This could help to consider that there is a clear difference between males and females' traumata in *The Waves*

In short, as it has just been seen, Virginia Woolf draws the characters of *The Waves* as isolated and lonely beings who do not know how to face the reality that they have had to live. They are fragile and weak, since the world around them has endowed us with the basic tools to be able to face the situations to which they are forced. Either way, after this detailed analysis, the time has come to draw a series of general conclusions about the trauma and character formation in *The Waves*.

## **5. Conclusions**

In general terms, after having analyzed the characters of *The Waves*, both male and female, and after having defined the theoretical concepts that anchor Virginia Woolf's literary style in this novel, a series of conclusions can be established that will help to answer the questions with which this essay started.

According to the varied theoretical literature on this subject, Virginia Woolf dumped her own personal traumata in her literary works. For this reason, her characters were a kind of reflection of what she herself suffered during her life. It is true that *The Waves* is a literary example of a complex era such as the interwar years. Europe was facing a new period without being clear about the outcome of two historical events as important as the two World Wars.

For the reasons discussed throughout these pages, I believe it has been proven that both the narrator and the main characters in *The Waves* show their own traumata through their thoughts. Each one reflects a different point within society. Hence, the readers of this novel can be aware that psychological problems are gender and class-specific in that period.

What I do want to highlight is the way in which Virginia Woolf describes her female characters, since gender is a key element in her writing. While men are the dominant characters, women are much more complex and they suffer in a very different way from the reality in which they have lived. Woolf's feminist prism is clearly demonstrated after reading this novel.

In short, *The Waves* is an experimental work that is based on purely philosophical concepts to analyze trauma and destruction of a complex society such as that of interwar Europe. The author herself also serves as a reflection of what her personal life was like and what she portrays in her works. What is undeniable is her literary quality and how she was able to break the conventions of a genre such as the novel to innovate and present a first-rate literary work that will continue to be read over time with the same admiration as when it was published.

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