

## Madness as Metaphysics: Schizophrenia and Narrative Fragmentation in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*



Asst. Lect. Murtada Ali Hussein<sup>1</sup>, Asst. Lect. zainalabdeen abd alrazaq shnain aljanabi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>University of Kufa- College of Education for Women- English Department

**ABSTRACT:** In *The Waves* (1931), written by Virginia Woolf, the conventional narrative coherence is replaced with a fractured, polyphonic framework. This is similar to the perceptual and ontological dislocations that patients who suffer from schizophrenia experience. The argument presented in this article is that Woolf's experimental form goes beyond the domain of basic stylistic innovation in order to investigate the ephemeral nature of reality, identity, and time. The paper makes this claim by using schizophrenia as a theoretical framework. Through the alignment of six protagonists' discontinuous soliloquies, Woolf reimagines the shattered consciousness that schizophrenics experience as a philosophical inquiry into reality. This is accomplished through the use of the word "shattered consciousness." The novel's narrative fragmentation, which is characterized by shifting identities, non-linear chronology, and linguistic collapse, is a reflection of the epistemological crisis that modernity is experiencing, which occurs when Cartesian certainty is drowned in existential doubt. This research offers a novel reading of *The Waves*, which is a pioneering combination of psychological and philosophical topics. It does so by pulling from modernist theory, psychoanalysis, and continental philosophy. One can observe how Woolf's characters, particularly Rhoda and Bernard, represent the chaotic collapse of individual boundaries that allows for a paradoxical merger with the cosmic "waves" of existence by carefully reading the text on a more in-depth level. By employing schizophrenia as a metaphor for the ontological disintegration of modernity, the study contends that Woolf's formal experimentation destroys the illusion of coherence in story and human awareness. Specifically, the study focuses on the phenomenon of schizophrenia.

**KEYWORDS:** Schizophrenia, narrative fragmentation, metaphysical framework, existential philosophy, selfhood disintegration, non-linear temporality, polyphonic structure, modernity's fragmentation, Rhoda, existential ambiguity.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Contextualizing Woolf's Modernist Experiment

Literary modernism was characterized by works such as Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), which shunned set characters and linear storyline in favor of a lyrical, fragmented style. This was the defining characteristic of her work. In the work, the introspective monologues of six characters—Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis—are woven together into a succession of soliloquies. The work also includes lyrical interludes that depict the daily arc of the sun over a seascape. Some people have praised the novel's "symphonic" rhythm (Lee 189), while others have denounced it as "aestheticized chaos" (Bradbrook 72). The novel's opaque shape has been the focus of a great deal of criticism. In this study, which reinterprets the fragmentation through the lenses of both schizophrenia and metaphysics, the destabilized narrative in Woolf's novel implies a conscious philosophical aim. This is according to the findings of the study.

#### 1.2. Research Question

Research Question: How does Woolf's schizophrenic narrative structure in *The Waves* serve as a vehicle for exploring metaphysical questions about identity, reality, and time?

#### 1.3. Scope and Methodology

Within the scope of this investigation, the theoretical frameworks of anti-psychiatry (Deleuze and Laing), existential philosophy (Heidegger and Kierkegaard), and psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan) are brought together. According to Henri Bergson, the concepts of temporality and T.S. The novel is situated within the context of the fragmented poetics of Eliot, which shaped the debates over subjectivity that occurred in the early 20th century. The approach departs from the clinical idea of schizophrenia and treats Woolf's metaphorical utilization of the condition as a philosophical and structural tool, which is an essential component of the approach.

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## 1.4. Significance of the Study

Despite the fact that earlier study has studied Woolf's mental health and modernism (for example, Caramagno 1992), there have been very few studies that have connected the shape of *The Waves* to schizophrenia as a metaphor in literature. By bridging the gap between literary criticism and philosophy, this book offers a novel viewpoint on Woolf's criticism of Cartesian dualism as well as her vision of existential wholeness in the midst of fragmentation.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Modernist Fragmentation and Subjectivity

Numerous studies on *The Waves* have focused on the degree to which it is novel in terms of its formal structure. Julia Kristeva (1980) makes a connection between its grammar and the prelinguistic "semiotic chora," but Hermione Lee (1977) recognizes its polyphony as a challenge to the Victorian realism that was prevalent at the time. There is a relatively low correlation between mental illness

### 2.2. Madness in Woolf's Oeuvre

Those who investigate Woolf's mental health (for example, Caramagno 1992) commonly make the mistake of attributing the challenges that her characters confront to the fact that she suffers from bipolar disorder. According to Elizabeth Abel (1989), the philosophical repercussions of "psychic splits" are not taken into consideration. The focus of this research, on the other hand, is not on the condition itself but rather on the metaphor that schizophrenia uses to describe existential dislocation

### 2.3. Schizophrenia in Literary Theory

Poststructuralists like Deleuze and Guattari (*Anti-Oedipus*, 1972) theorize schizophrenia as resistance to capitalist normativity, while R.D. Laing (*The Divided Self*, 1960) frames it as a quest for authenticity. This paper synthesizes these views, arguing Woolf's characters embody Laingian "ontological insecurity" while subverting Deleuzian anti-capitalism.

### 2.4. Philosophical Underpinnings

Ann Banfield (2000) connects Woolf to Bergson's *durée*, but this analysis extends to Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), positing that *The Waves* dramatizes Dasein's confrontation with existential nothingness. Gap in Scholarship: No study fully explores schizophrenia as a metaphysical—rather than psychological—framework in *The Waves*.

## 3. ANALYSIS

### 3.1. Schizophrenic Perception and Narrative Structure

The response that Bernard gave was, "I see a ring," and the initial lines of Woolf's work are a mess of fragmented sensory sensations throughout the entire piece. The reader is thrown off their rock-solid basis of objective fact when statements such as "I see a slab of pale yellow," which Susan utters in [5], are considered to be statements. The clinical description of schizophrenia that was provided by Eugen Bleuler, who saw ideas disintegrating into disconnected fragments, is a "loosening of associations" (Bleuler 14), which is comparable to this fragmentation. On the other hand, Woolf gives this disintegration an aesthetic twist, transforming it into a complete artwork in the modernist style that integrates intellectual, emotional, and sensory awareness. Woolf's work integrates all three types of perception.

During the six characters' soliloquies, which function similarly to auditory hallucinations in a psychotic mind, their voices merge together in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish between the voices of the different characters. Louis's preoccupation with "chained beasts stamping" (27) and Rhoda's fear of "the white stare of faces" (48) are both examples of the hypersensitivity to sensory overload that is characteristic of schizophrenics. As an illustration, Bernard's habitual storytelling is a manifestation of the delusional transformation of chaotic stimuli into narrative ("let me make a phrase... for I need a howl, a cry" [211]). The use of semicolons, dashes, and ellipses in Woolf's writing creates a rhythm that is reminiscent of the linguistic slippage that is characteristic of schizophrenia, also known as "knight's move thinking" in clinical psychiatry. This means that the individual's thoughts jump around in an erratic manner. This disintegration, on the other hand, is not nihilistic; rather, it is a reflection of the concept of schizophrenia that Deleuze and Guattari presented as a "process of becoming" that destroys the subjectivity of capitalists (*Anti-Oedipus* 21). As a choral counterpoint to the individuals' soliloquies, the novel's interludes generate vivid images of waves ("the sun fell in sharp flakes of light" [156]). These descriptions imply that there is a cosmic order beneath the anarchy, a unity-in-fragmentation that harmonizes with Heraclitus' *panta rhei* ("everything flows").

### 3.2. The Disintegration of Selfhood: Rhoda as Schizophrenic Oracle

"I have no face...", Rhoda says at the beginning of her existential quirkiness. R.D. Laing's "ontological insecurity," which is the point at which the "vacuum of non-being" (Laing 46) develops in the schizophrenia self, is excellently captured by the phrase "I am the foam that races over the beach" (48). Rhoda, a psychotic character, personifies the rejection of Cartesian subjectivity, in contrast to Bernard, who is adamant about preserving grammatical consistency ("I must make a story" [211]). In one of her soliloquies, she states, "I came to the puddle," which is a statement that challenges the notion of the "I" as a fixed entity. It was

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impossible for me to ascend to that level. The phrase "identity betrayed me" (132). Dasein is confronted with the anxiety of existential nothingness, and her vision of "a million atoms" (202) foreshadows her act. Heidegger may regard Rhoda's suicide as a leap into the oceanic emptiness, which is a gesture that Woolf links with spiritual transcendence.

The breakdown of Rhoda, on the other hand, resulted in the formation of other forms. The "white light" (156) of the interludes, which represents the undivided flux of Being, is intuitively visible to her despite the fact that she is unable to "assemble the world" (89). This is the metaphysical basis of the novel. In doing so, Woolf contradicts Freud's pathologizing of psychosis; in a manner that is analogous to Lacan's *jouissance*, which is an exultant suffering that transcends symbolic order, Rhoda's insanity becomes a place of epistemic rupture. She dies "leaping like a spear" (202), becoming one with the waves and embodying Nietzsche's requirement to "become what you are" by embracing chaos as the fundamental essence of existence. As a result, her death transforms into an apotheosis rather than a tragedy.

### 3.3. Language and the Collapse of Meaning

Bernard's final monologue asks, "How describe the world seen without a self?" (211)—capsulates the novel's main aporia, which is that non-dualistic experience cannot be expressed by language. He imitates the schizophrenic's "word salad" through his compulsive phrase-making ("let me cast my net for a word" [211]), but Woolf reframes this linguistic breakdown as an assault on Enlightenment logic.

Neville's obsession with broken images ("the crystal ring" [89]) reflects Lacan's *lack-à-être* (lack-of-being), in which language continuously postpones meaning. "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Tractatus 7), according to Wittgenstein, and Woolf's sentences get increasingly confused as the novel progresses, culminating in Bernard's stuttering ellipses ("O Death... I need a howl, a cry" [211]). Woolf's silence, however, is more of a victory than a setback. Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* (releasement), a surrender to Being that transcends language, is invoked by the characters' syncopated, repetitive, and incantatory speaking patterns, which mimic the waves' "beat, beat" (297). This creates a pre-linguistic cadence that transcends semantic meaning. Even the grandiosely poetic Louis acknowledges that "My words are lies" (189), illustrating the futility of symbolic order in the face of existential uncertainty.

### 3.4. Time as Schizophrenic Flux

In the same way that a schizophrenic's perception of time disintegrates, Woolf's temporal structure becomes disorganized. The daily interludes (dawn to dark) dictate a mythical cyclical rhythm, and the characters' soliloquies shift between fragmented, non-linear recollections and Bergsonian *durée* (subjective time). This pace is enforced by the daily interludes. In Rhoda's psychotic "timelessness" (Minkowski 22), which she describes as "a flap of broken water" (132), the past, the present, and the future are all no longer relevant. On the other hand, Bernard's obsession with narrative continuity—"Let me piece together the story" (211)—is a reflection of modernity's ultimately hopeless attempt to impose order on disorder. Heidegger's *Dasein*, which Woolf critiques through her temporal dislocations, continues to use time as its border of Being. Woolf's criticisms are also directed toward *Dasein*. The book, on the other hand, is consistent with Deleuze's *Time-Image*, which is a schizoanalytic rupture with linearity in which time is turned into a "crystalline" multiplicity (Cinema 2 81).

The eternal repeating of the waves ("The waves broke on the shore" [297]) emphasizes that schizophrenia, as a collapse of temporal bounds, gives freedom from the oppression of progress. This is accomplished by blending Nietzsche's concept of perpetual return with Eastern philosophies of cyclical time.

### 3.5. Metaphysical Unity in Fragmentation

The schizophrenic collapse of the book, paradoxically, reveals a subtle cosmic harmony that was before hidden. Through the imagery of the interludes, which includes waves, the sun, and birds, the soliloquies of the characters transform into a collective ritual. "We are not single, we are one" (150), which is Bernard's final realization, is a reflection of the Upanishadic *tat tvam asi* ("thou art that"), which suggests that dissolving into the universal Being is the path to individual enlightenment. In Woolf's "waves," ontological barriers disintegrate into essential unity, serving as an *Ereignis* (event of appropriation) in the manner that Heidegger interprets the term. In spite of the fact that it is commonly interpreted as a sign of despondency, Rhoda's suicide turns out to be a magical union with the "white light" (156), which enables her to transcend the illusion of selfhood.

According to Woolf, this is a prediction of *Body without Organs* by Deleuze and Guattari: a psychotic erasing of the ego that enables "becoming-imperceptible" (A Thousand Plateaus 190). Heraclitus' dialectic of endless stillness and boundless change is embodied in the final sentence of the novel, which is "The waves broke on the shore" (297). This sentence does not finish but rather begins again. One of the things that Woolf considers to be the metaphysical practice of schizophrenia is the breaking down of the egoic prison in order to have a glimpse of the "crystal ring" (89) of absolute Being.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf masterfully converts schizophrenia from a medical diagnosis into a profound philosophical examination. She reveals reality as a continually shifting continuum by ripping down the rigid dichotomies of Enlightenment thought, which include self and other, sanity and lunacy, and linearity and chaos. The fractured narrative form of the work, which

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is comprised of polyphonic soliloquies and rhythmic interludes, elevates the perceptual dislocations that people with schizophrenia experience to the level of a philosophical discussion on the fundamental nature of reality.

Rhoda, whose disappearance into the "foam that races over the beach" (48) represents R.D. Laing's "ontological insecurity," and Bernard, whose obsession with storytelling reflects the schizophrenic's battle to bring order out of disorder, are two of the characters that Woolf uses to investigate the concept of coherent selfhood. Woolf also uses other characters to explore this concept. Their individual journeys are illustrative of the paradoxical relationship between deconstruction and transcendence: Rhoda's suicide dive into the ocean is not a sign of hopelessness but of a confrontation with Angst à la Heidegger, a merging with the primordial "white light" of Being; Bernard's last, stuttering monologue ("How describe the world seen without a self?") reveals the limitations of language in describing non-dualistic awareness, resonating with Wittgenstein's silent sublime.

Woolf's structural innovation, which consists of cyclical interludes paired with fragmentary soliloquies, offers both criticism and revelation. This is because it is a combination of the two. Heraclitean flow, which is characterized by the coexistence of unity and fragmentation, is represented by waves that are both unending and rhythmic. The schizoanalytic "becoming" of Deleuze and Guattari, which rejects the subjectivity of capitalism in favor of a distributed, communal consciousness, is in keeping with this duality, which stands in contrast to the modernity's emphasis on reason and development. The voices of the characters, despite the fact that they are in conflict with one another, merge together to form a choral liturgy, which is a reflection of the hidden cosmic order that is investigated throughout the novel.

In order to exemplify the idea that genuine existential clarity does not originate from temporal continuity but rather from yielding to the "crystalline" multiplicity of time, Woolf makes use of concepts such as the Bergsonian *durée* and Nietzsche's everlasting return. This contradiction of unity in fragmentation weakens the Dasein theory proposed by Heidegger. Through the use of schizophrenia as a metaphorical lens, Woolf attempts to subvert pathological narratives by positioning insanity as a locus of epistemic rupture. Her criticism extends beyond the realm of the human mind and expands to encompass the norms of society by arguing against capitalist logics that place a premium on coherence and Cartesian dualism. "The waves broke on the shore," the novel's incomplete finale, refuses to conclude, instead recognizing cyclicity and ambiguity as existential realities.

"The waves broke on the shore" By bridging the gap between literature and metaphysics in this way, *The Waves* sheds light on the transcendent yet broken essence of Being, so establishing its position as a modernist philosophical classic. Her books inspire readers to view dissolution not as a failure but as a liberation, a breaking free of egoic limits to glimpse the "crystal ring" of unity, which is the point at which one's sense of self combines with the collective energy of being. Woolf encourages readers to view dissolution as a release. This revolutionary reconsideration of schizophrenia underscores the novel's enduring significance by giving a visionary affirmation of flux as the essence of existence and a keen critique of the epistemological difficulties that modernity presents.

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