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ENGL31: Readings in British Literature

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Six People, One Humanity

In Virginia Woolf's experimental Modernist novel, *The Waves*, she beautifully links together six characters, Bernard, Neville, Louis, Ginny, Susan, and Rhoda, through shared experiences of time, nature, and humanity.

The novel progresses through the cycle of life as it develops, following the six characters from childhood to death. In the final chapter, Bernard reflects on these people he has known all his life, saying, "The wax—the virginal wax that coats the spine melted in different patches for each of us." He goes on to list several images, concluding that "our white wax was streaked and stained by each of these differently" (Woolf 241). Metaphorically, the "virginal" and "white" wax depicts youthfulness, that energy we all have in childhood, and evokes images of purity and innocence. By saying that the wax has "melted" and "stained" Woolf is illustrating the way that the six characters have been changed by life's trials, emphasizing that although they have been affected differently, they have all been affected equally by the passage of time.

Throughout *The Waves*, Woolf describes images of nature and writes about the characters' interactions with nature. Bernard, remembering his childhood with the six other characters, says, "In the beginning, there was the nursery, with windows opening on to a garden, and beyond the sea." (Woolf 239). The nursery connects this to the infancy of the characters and reminds the reader that the lives of these people have always been linked to nature. Specifically this house,

garden, and sea is a powerful image revisited by Woolf throughout the novel, demonstrating how the characters are all linked by the sounds, sights, and smells of their previous home.

Finally, Woolf addresses the connectivity of the human spirit as a link between the six characters. When they all meet in a restaurant to say goodbye to a friend, Bernard says, “Here and now we are together ... We are drawn into this communion by some deep, some common emotion” (Woolf 126). Here, Woolf is talking about the way humanity is deeply connected by emotion. Humans are unique in the way they can express feelings, and there is a profound sense of community found when a group of people feel the same emotion. This is the case for the characters of *The Waves*; throughout the novel, their spirits are linked through experiences of love, hate, and loss.

In the same way that Bernard, Neville, Louis, Ginny, Susan, and Rhoda are unified in *The Waves*, so are humans united at their core. Experiences of time, nature, and emotion are universal and unavoidable. By exploring these ideas of communion between the characters, Woolf also reflects on the natural communion between people, that intangible link that can only be described as ‘being human.’

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. New York, NY. Mariner Books, 1959.