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English 188T

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### Consciousness and Mysticism: A Séance to Unification

With a focus on the disembodied, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* acts as séance in many regards, though instead of bringing back the dead, the collective voice of these narrators bring to life a vivid yet precariously fragmented world, always on the cusp of unity.

This concept of fragmentation can be seen by Nalani S. Kopp, describing the myth of Narcissus as warning towards egoism. Kopp writes, "There was a pool, limpid and silvery / ... / Spellbound he saw himself, and motionless / Lay like a marble statue staring down" (Kopp 3). Some of the narrators pride themselves on individuality rather than unity. Neville states, "I am one person — myself"; Susan says, "I cannot be divided, or kept apart" (Woolf 62, 70). Earlier, Bernard contemplates Louis and Neville's character, saying, "...Both are absorbed. Both feel the presence of other people as a separating wall", later reflects, "I do not believe in separation. We are not single" (Woolf 47, 48). Kopp defines Bernard's: "Collective consciousness is the belief that as humans we exist on a common plane through our sensory experiences and perceptions of reality" (Kopp 4). Taylor Godfrey asserts this through writing of mysticism as a unifier, reciting Woolf's wish: "'An abstract mystical eyeless thing'... The Waves would be 'a book of ideas about life,' (Godfrey 6). Godfrey discusses "the wave" itself as a symbol of humanity, not unified through belief or ritual but through the "spirit" of their collective being.

Julie Kane references how Woolf wished to avoid this idea of mysticism yet goes on to define "mystical experience" as "loss of self; merger with a greater unity; the apprehension of

numinousness, timelessness, transcendence, and intensified meaning” which are themes found in her novels and diaries (Kane 332). This definition too overlaps with the language used by Bernard, found even in the novel’s first line, “I see a ring...” — echoing this sentiment of unification. Allison Hild discusses Woolf’s use of language and voice, stating, “The language of these friends defines both individual consciousness and membership within a communication” (Hild 69). Where there is this struggle to separate oneself, the language of the narrators themselves cannot help but finish each other’s thoughts and images, the conjuring and perception of the world. Hild goes on to describe this battle between the self and community, writes, “But because the child’s growing awareness of the exterior world necessarily results in an enlarging sense of self as well” which leads to the formation of their separate identities acting at times in opposition to this collective consciousness (Hild 70). Madeline Moore questions the writing of *The Waves*, asking “Was her mysticism preverbal or was it transverbal?” believed to be the former, echoing this sentiment of writing from nonplace (Moore 98). Overall, continuing this sense of the mystical within *The Waves*, and positioning of collective consciousness.

Through the disembodied voices of these narrators, Woolf highlights the state of the world, both separate and connected through the body of humanity, bringing it to life in *The Waves*.

## Works Cited

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