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Engl 31

18 November 2023

Nature Against Individualism in *The Waves*

It is recognized that society, specifically capitalism in Western beliefs, encourages division and an individualistic mindset rather than community and unity -- which was a prominent, modernist stance during the 1931 publication of Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*. This mindset separates humanity from nature, the world, and other human beings instead of recognizing how everything is connected and requires support from others to thrive. Bonnie Kime Scott, the author of the published literary criticism *In the Hollow of the Wave*, acknowledges this separation of humanity and nature, examining how Woolf rebels against this norm and utilizes nature despite the novel's modernist take. Furthermore, due to society's ingrained ideology of modernism, nature is frequently depicted as the opposition of society and modernity; however, in the novel *The Waves*, Woolf proposes the notion of how both nature and society are integral to the individual human experience and collective community, especially when examining the symbolism of the naturalistic imagery presented in all of the interludes included between the chapters.

The modernist movement was propelled by the First World War and the inventions of technological advancements, which inspired artists to focus their work on characterizations like, but not restricted to, individualism, absurdism, and experimentation with writing styles and narratives -- i.e. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness writing style and multiple-character narrations. With the emphasis on modernity, nature was overshadowed and deemed as separate from society and humanity. Scott elaborates, in her book, on the perception of nature as clashing with society,

emphasizing that nature was “dangerously unacknowledged in the twentieth century, as predominant culture delighted and indulged in modernity – its various aspects including technical invention, urban development, rapid transport, global capitalism, militarism, and the empowerment of masculine assertion, based on Western values,” (Scott, p 2). This progression of capitalism and urbanization is demonstrated with the characters as they grow and integrate themselves into modern society, where their craving for community and struggle with self is emphasized, contrasting with their closeness when the characters are younger and surrounded by a more natural environment.

Woolf diverts from individualism when writing naturalistic imagery that underscores the idea that humanity and nature are linked and connected with change and natural repetition. Nature is an integral aspect of humankind, with the moon controlling tides, which in turn impacts the movement of waves; alongside the tides, various studies linked the moon cycles with menstruation and sleep cycles in people, proving the invisible tie of connectivity amongst all things in the natural world. This concept of connectivity in nature is further demonstrated in the interludes, where there are descriptive, scenic passages that follow the movement of the sun throughout the entirety of a day. The sun's movement is utilized to chronologically parallel the lives of Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, Louis, Bernard, and Neville, where the day is the beginning of their lives, midday is their midlife, and sunset is the end of their lives, displaying the passage of time and life cycles. The symbolism and comparison of a day and the expanse of life heightens the impact of the ending by having the last line finish the cycle of the day, "*The waves broke on the shore.*" (Woolf, p 220). Moreover, the formation and collapse of waves mimic the character's death and the repetitive life cycle of living things. Woolf demonstrates this when people are born, which is the beginning of the wave, then people are in midlife and the depths of humanity and

relationships, the height of the wave, and finally, aging and inevitable death, the breaking descent of the wave. This cyclical passage of time and progression is in various aspects of nature, revealing similarities in the supposed inanimate, linking everything together in unity.

Works Cited:

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3. Woolf, Virginia, et al. *The Waves*. Mariner Books, 2006.