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Engl-188T

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Percival: Godly, Idyllic, and Patriarchal

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* is a novel with most of its content being dialogue and character interaction. Molly Hite, in her introductory essay to *The Waves*, writes about mysterious Percival, a character who “does not ‘speak’ at all” (lvii); Woolf “keeps him radically separate rather than enmeshed in the fine web of relationships and ideas” (lix) that the other characters intermingle in, posing as nearly god-like by Bernard’s own assertion (Woolf 98). According to Laurie Leach in her article “‘The Difficult Business of Intimacy’: Friendship and Writing in Virginia Woolf’s ‘The Waves’”, Percival is viewed by the other characters as “the most well-adjusted member...[and] leader of the group” (58). The reason for this “leadership” is not because Percival participates constantly in the group—he dies mid-way through the novel (Woolf 109)—but instead because of characters' reactions to his existence. Patrick McGee, in his essay “The Politics of Modernism Form: Or, Who Rules ‘The Waves’”, asserts that Percival is the “link [of] all the characters...to the patriarchal imperialist subject as the form of their collective identity” (663); this connection to the patriarchy and imperialism is because “[h]is conventionality, leadership, charisma, and...his choice of career in colonial administration” (Hite lix).

However, Bernard and Neville have much more of a visceral response to Percival. Bernard’s attachment stems from his desire to *become* Percival. In the essay “Percival and the Porpoise: Woolf’s Heroic Theme in *The Waves*,” John F. Hulcoop writes that Bernard’s

character and his ideals could easily turn one into “a snob” (472) or something of “a bully or a tyrant.” Bernard’s admiration of Percival implies his character embodies traits similar to ones Bernard wants to emulate. These traits, while attractive to men upholding imperialistic views, are patriarchal in nature because they make one powerful. Igor Webb’s essay “‘Things in Themselves’: Virginia Woolf’s ‘The Waves’” notes that, in response to Percival’s death, Bernard gains insight on death and art, two things which he highly respects, recognizing that “words of bereavement...violate experience” (572) because “the transmutation of life into art” in turn causes life to become “obscured and distorted.” In turn, Neville’s attraction to Percival is more romantic in nature than Bernard’s: According to Tamar Katz’s essay “Modernism, Subjectivity, and Narrative Form: Abstraction in ‘The Waves’”, Neville possesses “homosexual desires for Percival” (239) which possibly are related to Neville’s need to defy authority structures. The irony is Percival represents the structures that Neville wishes to defy, because Percival *is* the embodiment of them. This patriarchal upholding does not prevent Neville from feeling “anguish” (698), as Robert O. Richardson asserts in his essay “Point of View in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” stating “Neville’s response to the news of Percival’s death is largely a matter of characterization” as it is Neville’s defining life experience, shaping the way in which he perceives himself and others.

Percival is undeniably one of the driving forces behind Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* through his patriarchal connections to imperialism and the male characters’ obsession with him.

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