



“Wave” As a Metaphor for Sequence, Narrative and Identity in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

The *Waves* dramatises the tension between sequence and non-sequence. Bernard who is infatuated by his art of story-telling believes that sequence is everywhere and this sequence is metaphorised by the relentless movement of the waves. The actual waves in the novel are a metaphor for narrative and will-to-identity in terms of their continuous, incessant and sequential movement, where one wave follows another to form a pattern. The sequential pattern of the waves dissolves and dies out on the shore in complete silence, echoing the narrator Bernard’s claim that “solitude is my undoing.” When waves rise and form a definite shape, they stand for self-constitution and when they crash into shapelessness and nothingness on the shore they stand for the dissipation and dissolution of identity. Bernard who is infatuated by his art of story-telling believes that sequence is everywhere and this sequence is metaphorised by the relentless movement of the waves. He openly links identity to the chain-like structure of sequential language. He claims that without this narrative pattern, he is “nothing,” i.e., he has no identity. The sequential pattern of the waves dissolves and dies out on the shore in complete silence, echoing the narrator Bernard’s claim that “solitude is my undoing.”

Background of Study

The actual waves in the novel are a metaphor for sequence and accordingly narrative in terms of their continuous, incessant and sequential movement where one wave follows another to form a pattern. This charged metaphor presupposes Woolf’s concept of self-formation and also signifies and creates a natural language based on music and rhythm.

Methodology

Sequence imposes arbitrary rules for arranging words, which postpones the expression of words; it gives priority for some words to be expressed first. Woolf’s non-sequential method of expressing the world and words allows her to think about things-in-themselves, or the things actually signified. Woolf in *The Waves* explores and proves the possibility of a different type of language, which moves away from the pure masculine language of the symbolic order. This so-called non-sequential language is not time-bound and does not necessarily use words and grammar to describe things and the world. The masculine language is sequential and follows arbitrary rules. Little language is on the other hand non-sequential and does not follow these arbitrary rules. Therefore, little language connects characters to the world without the interference of sequential language, which distances them from the immediacy of things.

Conclusion

Waves in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* stand simultaneously for sequence, narrativity and identity. Bernard, who is the story-teller at the beginning and middle of the novel and the one who is extremely proud of his phrase-making, turns to non-sequential language—little language or Woolf’s things-in-themselves and silence. Woolf’s concept of things-in-themselves neatly corresponds with what we term non-sequential language. Finally, there is a correspondence between Bernard’s progression towards this “little language” and the deconstruction of his well-defined identity.



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