

# **The Construction of Character Image in *The Waves*: An Analysis Based on Literary Pragmatics**

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**Abstract:** This thesis provides modern and contemporary fiction writers with creative writing perspectives by investigating into the compositional methods applied by Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* and analysing excerpt samples with literary pragmatics. The author's wording "blurs" the appearances of the six main characters within the novel, her writing background and the audience's reading context. Meanwhile, she "magnifies" the six main characters' languages and behaviours. Moreover, both approaches cover multi-dimensional characterization and contribute to narrowing the gap between the author's characters and the audience, which facilitates the latter to become empathetically engaged and further their relationships with these fictional figures more effectively.

**Keywords:** *The Waves*; Virginia Woolf; Literary Pragmatics

## **1. Introduction**

*The Waves* has been extensively studied since its publication. Among all inquiries, three issues are being largely discussed, including the fragmentary narration of the novel, the theme of life consciousness and the problem of identity awareness in the novel.

As for the fragmentary narration of the novel, the author described it as "a series of dramatic soliloquies" and hoped "to keep them running homogenously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves".[1] These opening descriptive passages of depersonalized prose are interwoven with nine sections together, which record the growth of six characters from childhood to maturity.[2] Each chapter involves one stage of life independently but together they manage to convey a vivid expression of the ever-changing and complex life of the characters.

As for the theme of life consciousness in the novel, the author emphasizes human beings "in relation to reality" where the attention is transferred "from the inner life to the common

life".[3] Individuals inevitably face mortality, however, human beings as a whole transcend finitude because of their ever-lasting knowledge and perception.

As for the problem of identity awareness in the novel, a chaotic world in which the characters have conflicting emotions is established. Nonetheless, they attempt to speak and contemplate in order to relate themselves to their traumatized identities.[4] Characters are presented with numerous options of life choices, which serves as an indication of the endless possibilities when it comes to creating their own identities.

Additionally, literary pragmatics has become a favourite for analysis on the practical application of literature work. Different pragmatic frameworks represented by speech act theory, conversational implicature, politeness theory and relevance theory, have been demonstrated to provide invaluable insights to the study of literary texts. Besides, the process of analysing literary texts has led to the development and the elucidation of the pragmatic theories themselves[5].

However, little research ever attempted to examine *The Waves* with literary pragmatics. Thus, it is the purpose of the present paper to offer investigations into the writing methods applied by Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* to refine compositional perspectives. Furthermore, writers can benefit from the results and strengthen the audience's connections with their characters with efficiency.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 "Blurring"**

In this essay, "blurring" is defined as using minimal languages to write about one element.

#### **2.1.1 "Blurring" the Appearances of the Six Main Characters**

The novel does not offer words to detailed descriptions of the characters' own appearances from a third-person perspective. For instance,

the first chapter directly begins with “‘I see a ring,’ said Bernard, ‘hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.’”, which is apparently irrelevant to the character, Bernard’s look and only of his direct speech. The same are true when it comes to other five characters as the novel goes on.

According to literary pragmatics, four maxims elucidate how the co-operative principle functions, including the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relevance, and the maxim of manner.[6] Here by “blurring” one key element of conversation which is the appearances of these characters, the maxim of quality is lowered and the co-operative principle is violated, reaching a particularized implicature. This coincides with the reality. That is to say, one is not able to see one’s own face all the time and that’s how audience are inclined to feel at one with the characters, resulting in firm understandings of them.

#### 2.1.2 “Blurring” the Writing Background

The novel sets no boundaries between the author and the audience breaking the barriers of time and space. Knowledge of historical and social context of the author’s is not required for her will to compose this literature is an eternal philosophical theme for all humans.

Since 1900s, Bloomsbury Group, an informal circle of artists, was joined by Virginia Woolf. The writers group met on Thursdays for drinks and conversation but more importantly, they longed for a formal innovation in the arts. With Woolf at the forefront of these efforts, she conceived the writing style out of opposition against normal conventions and restraints. This advocacy of free exploration has prevailed among all people as history proceeds. Thus, by “blurring” a particular theme of a specific time or space, this distinct writing form for all humans in *The Waves* becomes easy for audience from any place at any time to grasp.

#### 2.1.3 “Blurring” the Reading Context

The novel manages to embrace all probable reading contexts by applying the metaphor of waves. Firstly, waves, a symbol of flows and motions, are commonly familiar to all potential readers. Instead of setting the environment at a certain place or time, Woolf manages to lower the reading barriers for all audience. As demonstrated in the novel, a person is composed of a series of waves carrying the stream of consciousness. Secondly, the change of waves at different time of one day through nine chapters

engages the audience in an experience of a whole life within a short period. From “The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky.” in the first chapter to “Now the sun had sunk. Sky and sea were indistinguishable.” in the last chapter, [7] a whole human life from being born to deceased is depicted.

According to literary pragmatics, a poetic effect is a peculiar effect of an utterance attaining most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures. The broader the array of potential implicatures and the greater the hearer’s accountability for creating them, the more poetic the effect and the more creative the metaphor. Therefore, a good creative metaphor is accurately one in which a multiplicity of contextual effects can be retained and understood as weakly implicated by the speaker.[8] The metaphorical description of the waves to indicate the change of time at the beginning of each chapter succeeds in transcending the cultural and social context where audience live by “blurring” specific signs of time and space. Only as the audience continues reading, can they slowly discover the indication of life behind the words, which achieves an effect of poetry.

## 2.2 “Magnifying”

In this essay, “magnifying” is defined as using maximal languages to write about one element.

### 2.2.1 “Magnifying” the Languages of the Six Main Characters

In the novel, all dialogues are illustrated from a first-person perspective in form of direct speech, which displays the six characters’ experiences, feelings and contemplations in a chronological order as they gradually mature under the same environmental circumstances. Not only can they be viewed as people’s different reflections on the same object, but also as one particular person’s different sides of thoughts on the same matter, which presented the infinite possibilities of humans both as an independent individual and a collective group.

For starters, Bernard, is the first character to initiate talking in seven out of nine chapters. He always speaks with strong positivity and act upon rational senses. His outlook appears to be a standard model with sound social functions. According to literary pragmatics, literary speech acts hold the belief that saying is acting and words are deeds. Thus, words with truth

conditions signify the actions which people would ordinarily perform. [9] For instance, in the beginning of the second chapter where all six characters are going to elementary school, Bernard says, “I must not cry. I must behold them indifferently. I must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and the stare of housemaids, the stare of clocks, staring faces, indifferent faces, or I shall cry.” [10] This opening settles the readers onto the path of standard acts when it comes to leaving home and going to school. That is to say, normal human beings would also have the similar reactions as Bernard by containing their nostalgia for previous childhood in this case.

Moreover, Bernard says, “It becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many.” Unlike Bernard, other five characters unveil discussions of their humanly traits. In the novel, Louis constantly discusses about his identity as an Australian descendant. For instance, he says, “I cannot boast, for my father is a banker in Brisbane, and I speak with an Australian accent.” [11] At the same time, Bernard apparently has no complaints for his identity. Louis’s clear inferiority could be deducted from his language and this feeling may result from several causes. Louis might possess subjective awareness of his identity difference from other people. Or he loathes his own Australian cultural background. Or even, he has received hatred because of his identity from the outside world. All these potential guesses are not specified by the author in the novel but they could be the audience’s interpretations of Louis when they compare Bernard and Louis on the topic of identity discovery. By “magnifying” Louis’s language of his identity crisis, the author achieves the goal of provoking conflicts on the audience’s thinking. Guided into different routes of understandings, they will finish the novel with their minds writing and complete the stories with the author together.

#### 2.2.2 “Magnifying” the Behaviours of the Six Main Characters

In the novel, all acts are illustrated through the characters’ dialogues which are all from a first-person perspective in form of direct speech. To put it another way, characters voice their upcoming movements within their speaking words.

For instance, Bernard says, “Now we are safe. Now we can stand upright again. Now we can

stretch our arms in this high canopy, in this vast wood.” [12] All predicate verbs above are used by the character himself to remind himself to act upon the target actions, instead of issuing orders and making requests onto the audience, so that it is easier for them to take in the message. According to literary pragmatics, in order to maintain dignity, the narrator has to articulate in a moderate tone. Thus, a set of five possibilities for the speaker to accomplish this ranging from the best case to the worse is suggested. [13] By adapting negative politeness strategy, the author “magnifies” the characters behaviours and leaves the audience a choice. She rejects to affect the freedom of the other party’s actions. Her job here is only to make recordings of the characters’ deeds through their talking.

The author embraces the dynamic nature of the reading experience. Her goal is no longer to feed the audience a definite answer, but to introduce a spiritual space to them where they are ought to discover their own possibilities. When reading, the audience can achieve a therapeutic aim by regaining the creative power of establishing themselves. They are given the chance to break their own personal sense of reality down. After reading, readers say farewells to the fictional characters and return to their own real-life identity. Then, they begin to reflect on their own thoughts.

### 3. Conclusions

As is stated above, by applying literary pragmatics into analysing *The Waves* written by Virginia Woolf, this paper tries to present modern and contemporary fiction writers writing angles.

Firstly, by “blurring” the appearances of the six main characters within the novel, the lowered maxim of quality led to the violation of the co-operative principle functions, which is consistent with the factual reality where people are not able to see their own faces. Therefore, the audience are opting to empathize with the characters.

By “blurring” the writing background, the author chose to write about the opposition against conventional restraints which has been an eternal topic. Therefore, the audience can relate to her compositional purpose.

By “blurring” the audience’s reading context, the metaphor of waves at the beginning of all the nine chapters as a portrayal of time shift is of contextual effects which can be comprehended as weakly implicated by the speaker. It exceeds

the difficulties of traveling over time and across space. Therefore, the audience are able to capture its poetic metaphorical effect.

Secondly, by “magnifying” the six main characters’ languages, their oral words can indicate their possible actions, which place the audience into different assumptions of the characters’ goals behind. Together can the audience finish the completion of the novel with the author.

By “magnifying” the six main characters’ behaviours, negative politeness strategy was adapted by the author. The nature of the audience’s reading experience is well-preserved. The ultimate aim of writing here is no longer to feed the audience a certain answer, but to introduce them to a spiritual space with them discovering their own possibilities. Besides, the audience is encouraged to forget about their own identity in the process of reading and afterwards they can return to their real life to start reflecting on their own identity construction.

All above approaches conform to the objective of closing the gap between the characters and the audience, which applies assistance to readers to foster a relationship with these fictional figures effectively. As for the authors today, it is an innovation to revive the skills once used by Virginia Woolf in this experimental novel, *The Waves*.

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