

Focalization and Point of View in *The Waves*

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Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to understand the use of Focalization and Point of View in Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*. Virginia Woolf was concerned with developing a new perspective of the human world. She tries to reveal the consciousness of her characters through the technique of point of view/focalisation. Focalization is a term coined by the French narrative theorist Gerard Genette. It refers to the perspective through which a narrative is presented.

Key Words: Consciousness, Focalization, Point of View, Narrator.

Focalization is a term coined by the French theorist Gerard Genette. Focalization is the perspective through which a narrative is presented. Genette does not consider 'point of view' as a comprehensive technique to reveal all the aspects of narration. He is of the opinion that there may be a difference between the one who narrates an event and the one who sees it. Genette tries to highlight this difference by coining the new term i.e. focalization. Focalization helps in presenting which character the focus is on and then continues to show what that character's focus is about. Gerard Genette calls it the relation between 'the vision' and that which is 'seen'. According to Mieke Bal: "It is derived from photography and film" (147)

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* presents the story of six characters/six childhood friends Louis, Jinny, Rhoda, Neville, Susan and Bernard. It traces different stages of their life. Here an attempt has been made to understand the use of focalization in *The Waves*. There is an extensive use of Internal focalization.

The novel begins with an italicized prologue given by an unidentified narrator. All the sections of the novel are preceded by prologue. As the novel begins we see different character focalizers. In the very beginning of the novel six characters are presented through variable focalization:

‘I see a ring’; said Bernard, ‘hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.’

‘I see a slab of pale yellow’, said Susan, ‘Spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.’

‘I hear a sound’, said Rhoda, ‘cheep, chirp; cheep chirp; going up and down .’

‘I see a globe,’ said Neville, hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.’

‘I see a crimson tarsel,’ said Jinny, ‘twisted with gold threads.’

‘I hear something stamping,’ said Louis. ‘A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps’(8).

In this section the six characters namely: Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis speaks in their own individual manners. Though the six characters are expressing themselves through internal focalization but the presence of external narrator can also be seen here. The phrases like ‘said Bernard’, ‘said Susan’, ‘said Rhoda’, ‘said Neville’, ‘said Jinny’, and ‘said Louis’ highlight the intrusion of external narrator. This pattern continues in all the sections of this novel. But most of the narrative is presented through the six characters ‘individual perspectives.’

In the sequence of different sections, the different stages of development of six characters are presented through variable focalization. In the second section Bernard focalizes that he along with other characters is going to school: “Everybody knows I am going to school for the first time (25).” and continues focalizing his thoughts:

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. There is Louis, there is Neville, in long coats, carrying handbags, by the booking office. They are composed but they look different. (25)

Here in the above quoted lines of the text, Bernard as a child is able to note the reactions of different people when he along with his friends is leaving for the school. The housemaid is surprised to see Bernard going to school. Bernard also notes that Louis and Neville are looking composed and different. But as the narrative continues the reader may note the reaction of other characters about Bernard. This is done beautifully through variable focalization.

‘Here is Bernard’, said Louis. ‘He is composed; he is easy. He swings his bag as he walks. I will follow Bernard, because he is not afraid. We are drawn through the booking office on to the platform as a stream draws twigs and straws round the piers of a bridge. (25)

Through internal focalization of Louis, we are able to note that Louis is of timid nature. He declares that he wants to follow Bernard. According to Louis, Bernard is a composed personality and he is also fearless. Here the consciousness of the characters is focalized through variable focalization. It is through this consciousness we are able to peep into a character’s life and understand him. Joan Bennett in *Virginia Woolf: Her Art as Novelist* notes: “what is presented is the solitary consciousness, the reception of experience rather than its issue in action (111).

A gradual development of the consciousness of the six characters is presented in *The Waves*. One can look at different stages of their life. Susan prefers to stay at home. It seems she is bodily at school but her mind always moves at the home:

‘At home the hay waves over the meadows. My father leans upon the Stile, smoking. In the house one door bangs and then another, as the summer air puffs along the empty passages. Some old pictures perhaps swings on the wall. A petal drops from the rose in the jar. The farm wagons strew the hedges with tafts of hay. (33).

Here Susan focalizes many things of her home life. It seems she wants to return to her home as soon as possible. She seems to be crazy about the things associated with her home. But

the excitement of life for Bernard and Neville is at the college not at the home. Both Bernard and Neville try to seek an answer to the basic question associated with human life: what am I? Bernard tries to find an answer:

Who am I thinking of? Byron of course. I am, in some ways, like Byron. Perhaps a sip of Byron will help to put me in the vein. Let me read a page. No; this is dull; this is scrappy. This is rather too formal. Now I am getting the hang of it (63).

Bernard's fascination of making phrases and becoming a writer or artist is reflected through his internal focalization. His dissatisfaction with his progress is leading him towards a greater goal in life.

Neville is also having the same tendency. He also joins the college with Bernard. He seems to be in love with life: "oh, I am in love with life! (65)". He like Bernard, also wants to make his own identity and in search of literary pursuit:

Now begins to rise in me the familiar rhythm; words that have lain dormant now lift, now toss their crests, and fall and rise, and fall and rise again. I am a poet, yes. Surely I am a great poet (65-66).

Louis, Rhoda and Percival also express themselves at different stages. Louis works as a clerk at a shipping firm in London. He has some observations of everyday life. He is also very conscious about his own self and accepts the reality of life: "I am an average Englishman; I am an average clerk (74)." Rhoda and Louis are in love with each other. But she is somewhat introvert. She feels frightened in public: "The door opens; the tiger leaps. The door opens; terror rushes in; terror upon terror, persuing me."(83)

Percival is a common friend to all the characters. Everbody admires him and he has become an ideal figure for all the friends. Percival likes Susan but does not propose her. Jinny wants to lead a glamorous life. She pays a great attention to her physical beauty. For Jinny the bodies communicate: "I feel myself shining in the dark. Silk is on my knee. (80)."

Joan Bennett observes:

Internal focalization like stream of consciousness and Interior Monologue provides a platform where the reader develops an intimacy with characters. The first hand experience of characters is presented to the reader by using such techniques. It is true that the six through whom that consciousness is conveyed are in some ways alike and are in some ways exceptional. Each of them is capable of full self-development and, therefore, of that rare integrity which can attain self-knowledge. Each is capable of a sensitive and finely distinguishing response to the experience of living (108).

As the narrative unfolds further the character develops to maturity. All the friends assemble in a restaurant to bid farewell to Percival who is to go to India. Everybody has a great regard and love for Percival but Neville is really passionate about Percival:

I have seen the door open and shut twenty times already; each time the suspense sharpens. This is the place to which he is coming. This is the table at which he will sit. Here, incredible as it seems, will be his actually body. This table, these chairs, this metal vase with its three red flowers are about to undergo an extraordinary transformation (94).

Such innermost strange feelings of Neville are revealed through internal focalization. Neville focalizes his passion for Percival. Another aspect of his psyche is focalized in the next part of the narrative. Neville is totally devastated when he hears the news of Percival's death. He accepts the reality of life and death: "This is the truth. This is the fact"(119).

All these moments of fragmentary experiences are felt by every character in this novel. Every character has a different response to these fragmentary experiences. The news of Percival's death acts as a great shock to Bernard also. He gets this news when his son is born. Bernard does not know how to react in such a situation:

'Such is the complexity of things, that as I descend the staircase I do not know which is sorrow, which joy. My son is born; Percival is dead. I am upheld by pillars, showed up on either side by stark emotions; but which is sorrow, which is joy (120)?

His emotions are focalized through his monologue. These focalized emotions suggest how deeply he was attached to Percival. Bernard also realizes the reality of life and death i.e. if

something has gone, something new will arrive. He counsels himself: “There will be new things; already my son (122). Time has come for Bernard to face some darker sides and truths of life:

The truth is that I am not one of those who find their satisfaction in one person or in infinity. The private room bores me, also the sky. My being also glitters when all its facts are exposed to many people. Let them fail and I am full of holes, dwindling like burnt paper (146).

At this particular moment of life, the six friends seem to disintegrate. But the integration of multiple consciousnesses continues till the end. It is the life which compels them to move on. It is the life which makes human beings capable of any kind of suffering. The words of Bernard one less to expose the meaning of life, one needs to explore the life itself. Pursuing his exploration and facing the harsh realities of life, Bernard finds himself satisfied with life: “Life is pleasant. Life is good. The mere process of life is satisfactory (206)”.

The consciousness of the six friends is reflected in Bernard. It seems that Bernard has become a representative of their intermingled consciousness. In the last part of the novel Bernard is not only focalizing his own experiences but the experiences of his group: “I am not one person: I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am- Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs (218).”

In *The Waves* a number of focalizers operate. The reader is invited to share the experiences of different characters through focalization. The use of variable focalization in this novel gives a sense that people experience reality in their own individual way and they have different ways of seeing the reality.

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