

THE SYMBOLISM OF VIRGINIA WOOLF: A Study of the Progressive  
Use of Symbol in Virginia Woolf's Night and Day,  
To the Lighthouse, and The Waves

by

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf is recognized for her innovative contributions to the literary world of the early twentieth century. Although her work is often approached according to pre-determined perspectives--Feminism, Freudianism, Bloomsbury, and so on--Woolf's diaries and essays indicate that for her, one of the most ongoing concerns was technique. Many stylistic and formal changes mark Woolf's development as a novelist, but none, perhaps, is as arresting as her use of symbol. The focus of this thesis is the progression of Woolf's use of symbol from the early stages of her career through to a short story written just before her death.

The introduction establishes the definitive scope and range of the word "symbol" as it is used in the thesis. The basis of this definitive focus is Woolf's diary, and particularly the excerpt in which Woolf distinguishes between her earliest symbols, which she classifies as "set pieces," and her more mature technique where the stress falls upon the suggestive and associative powers of the symbol as it relates to Woolf's concept of "vision." In the former, the symbols serve much the same purpose as props and scenery serve in a dramatic production. They point up character traits, emphasize atmosphere, perhaps enhance theme, and so on. As for the later use of symbol, it is less-defined and more impulsive, but decidedly more important. In Woolf's later novels, the symbol is central.

Chapter one discusses Woolf's use of symbol in her 111 early novel Night and Day, focusing on the definition of "set pieces" established in the introduction. Weather and landscape are considered as symbolic vehicles which comment upon various characters' states of mind, and character props (clothing, personal items, accessories) are examined as symbols which provide comedy. Night and Day is examined as the first step to Woolf's more mature technical art.

The second chapter examines To the Lighthouse as the first novel in which the symbol is central. Because of this shift in importance, it becomes necessary to re-define the phrase "set pieces," and to consider Woolf's character props without the comic framework of Night and Day. The focus in this chapter, however, is the two dominant symbols employed in To the Lighthouse--the Lighthouse and Lily Briscoe's painting--and their relationship to the central question which is, "What is the meaning of things?" The two central symbols are seen as vehicles of reconciliation which, when realized or attained, produce a sense of unity and give the novel a celebratory ending.

Chapter three examines The Waves as the novel which carries Woolf's symbolic art to its peak in importance. Set pieces and character props are again re-defined slightly, and the central question has narrowed to "Who am I?" but the focus, as in chapter two, is the novel's central symbol: the waves. More powerful than the Lighthouse or Lily Briscoe's painting, the waves advance a more negative

vision, suggesting that symbols are, perhaps, inadequate in the final analysis. Rather than unity and reconciliation, the waves advance a frightening sense of relentlessness, such that the novel's ending seems ominous.

The conclusion to the thesis considers all three novels, and particularly the ending of The Waves, in light of Woolf's short story "The Symbol," published shortly before her death. It is suggested that though Woolf admits the inadequacy of symbol, she is more concerned with the fact that the symbol exists at all, and that it exists to be challenged.

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On the outskirts of every agony sits some observant fellow who points; who whispers as he whispered to me that summer morning in the house where the corn comes up to the window, "The willow grows on the turf by the river. The gardeners sweep with great brooms and the lady sits writing." Thus he directed me to that which is beyond and outside our own predicament; to that which is symbolic, and thus perhaps permanent, if there is any permanence in our sleeping, eating, breathing, so animal, so spiritual and tumultuous lives.

(The Waves 168)

Virginia Woolf is recognized, primarily, for her innovative contributions to the literary world of the early twentieth century. Whether one appreciates her work from the vantage point of the feminist, or the psychoanalyst, or places her within that literary classification known as Modernism, whether one prefers to establish her solidly within the artistic circle of Bloomsbury, there can be no doubt that Woolf's experimental fiction marks a transition from the rigid confines of the traditional Victorian novel. It is an important transition--one which glows at the centre of a great deal of modern literary criticism, yet one which is greatly manipulated and misunderstood.

In March of 1932, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary: "Two books on Virginia Woolf have just appeared--in France & Germany. This is a danger signal. I must not settle

into a figure" (Diary IV: 85). Notwithstanding Woolf's 2  
desire to avoid classification--literary, social, even  
political--there are volumes of criticism which bespeak the  
relevance of this approach. Indeed, it is more than likely  
that the modern reader who selects a volume of Woolf  
criticism from the shelf will encounter, within the first  
two chapters, terms of the sort Woolf sought to elude,  
terms like "Modernism" or "Feminism," "Bloomsbury" or  
"psychoanalysis." Still, the warning in Woolf's diary is  
not to be taken lightly. After all, she did not settle  
herself into a figure. Literary criticism did; and it is  
important to remember that "Modernism," "Feminism," and the  
like, as literary classifications, did not exist in Woolf's  
lifetime. The point, then, is that while these perspectival  
approaches to Woolf's fiction are decidedly useful and  
relevant, they can and often do crowd out primary issues.  
What did Woolf promote and discuss frequently in her  
diaries, essays, and lectures? It would seem that she  
devoted a great deal of time and effort to that which was  
most immediate: her own writing. Certain innovations of  
form or technique set Virginia Woolf apart from her  
contemporary writers. Foremost is her use of symbol.

Critics have long recognized the importance of Woolf's  
symbols and symbolic techniques. In fact, some of the best  
introductory studies related to this topic were published  
within a decade of Woolf's death. David Daiches'  
commentaries, for example, are among the earliest to light

upon the parallel between Woolf's developing symbolic techniques and her development as a novelist in general. Daiches proposes that the minor and external symbols in Woolf's early fiction--symbols indicative of social status, wealth, atmosphere, and so on--are largely a by-product of the Victorian literary tradition from which these novels emerge. Accordingly, as Woolf moves away from this heritage, developing her successive lyrical and visionary works, the symbols and symbolic techniques follow suit, creating a unique texture and structure "with symbolic significance that is much more than a mere sense of mood" (12). Daiches' summary of these later works does not openly acknowledge Woolf's symbolic art, but the passage is certainly appropriate:

If we argue that her [Woolf's] finest and most characteristic novels make their appeal to that twilight mood of receptive reverie...if they steer us toward a new kind of knowledge through the rendering of almost familiar moods where we feel a deep sense of recognition and acquiescence and at the same time a sense of wonder and surprise; if they give us a general sense of meaning and relevance even before we have discovered what the meaning and relevance really are, that is all part of the intention.

(Critics on Virginia Woolf 12)

Daiches' contemporary, John Graham, approaches

Virginia Woolf's symbolism with a sharper focus. His article, "Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf" (1949), proposes that a temporal dichotomy, a dichotomy composed of "linear time" (past, present, future) and "mind time" (imagination, thought processes, inner consciousness), structures all of Woolf's fiction, and as such, influences her symbolic techniques also. Like Daiches, Graham sees a division between the designs of the early fiction, where the symbols are minor and external, and the later novels, where they play a much deeper and multidimensional role. In the former, he argues, the temporal dichotomy is stated but not resolved, so the symbols receive little chance to develop. To the Lighthouse stands out as the first radical departure because here Woolf establishes the abyss between linear time and mind time, and then skillfully closes it by developing a number of varying relationships toward "a central and eternal reality" (35) which is the symbolic lighthouse. Graham further notes the correlation between symbol and quest in this novel: the sea voyage to the lighthouse represents the physical quest which occurs in linear time, while the completion of Lily Briscoe's visionary painting marks the successful spiritual quest which takes place in the realm of mind time. That the two symbolic quests end simultaneously, advancing a powerful conclusion of triumph and synthesis, affirms that the temporal dichotomy in To the Lighthouse has been resolved.

The solution is short-lived, however. Graham

maintains that Woolf's later novel The Waves re-establishes <sup>5</sup> the abyss between linear time and mind time, and in contrast to To the Lighthouse, fails to arrive at any sort of merger. He proposes that the dominant mood is "one of anguished effort, suffering, and disillusionment: the total vision of the book is undoubtedly tragic" (35). This being the case, the symbols are markedly different from those in the previous novels. Graham sees Percival, the idolized seventh figure viewed only through the eyes of the book's six main characters, as the potential hero, or the magnetic centre--indeed, as the lighthouse itself, guiding the others through their individual darkneses. But Percival dies. The light over the sea of life disappears, and so the characters are forced to contend with the unyielding terror of the waves--the novel's major symbol.

The compendium of Woolf criticism also includes a number of shorter commentaries which aim to clarify Woolf's symbolic techniques in specific novels<sup>1</sup>, and there exist several books and articles which explore the subject from perspectives which are not necessarily literary. Based upon the theories of cognitive psychology, for example, Jean O. Love's Worlds of Consciousness (1970) discusses the development, structure, and function of Woolf's symbolic images and image clusters in terms of prototype, plurisignificance, and mythopoetic thought. Love maintains that literary critics have been incomplete in their assessments and interpretations of Woolf's symbols because

they have erroneously limited their judgements to the realm of empirical thought, which is reductive, where Woolf's symbols are expansive. If one can ignore Love's over-critical attitude, Worlds of Consciousness offers an interesting approach. The glossary of 'difficult' terms included with the book, however, might be taken as a warning for readers with little or no background in psychology.

Feminists have long found a supportive voice in Virginia Woolf, and certain feminist readings of her work also address the question of symbolic technique. Herbert Marder's Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf (1968) has been increasingly de-valued because of out-dated and inexpedient feminist theories, but where Marder interprets Woolf's theory of the androgynous mind for its potential impact upon her technical achievements (including her use of symbol) the commentary proves most useful. More recently, Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship (1987) offers a collection of theoretically updated essays focusing on Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Gertrude Stein, and other ostensibly feminist writers. While none of the commentaries centres explicitly on symbol or symbolic technique, Shari Benstock's "Beyond the Reaches of Feminist Criticism: A Letter from Paris" relates the topic to her discussion of the modernist language fascination, and Jane Marcus' "Still Practice, A/Wrested Alphabet: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic" briefly examines To the Lighthouse as a vehicle for various theories

of sexual difference.

Oddly enough, for all that the various critical and scholarly approaches to Virginia Woolf's fiction acknowledge the importance of her symbols and symbolic techniques, the commentaries cited thus far share a somewhat negative common denominator: a decidedly limited scope and range. Daiches and Graham are insightful and unquestionably worthwhile, but where they introduce the reader to Woolf's symbolism, they do not proceed beyond this introductory level. The same can be argued of such modern commentaries as Howard Harper's Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virginia Woolf (1982) or Makiko Minow-Pinkney's Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject (1987). Shorter, more focused essays, on the other hand, tend to isolate Woolf's symbolic achievement within a single novel, ignoring the larger context of her fiction as a whole. Where a specific vantage point such as Feminism or psychological theory is acknowledged, there are equally obvious limitations of scope and range, although these are usually deliberate and pre-conceived.

There has been at least one attempt at a fairly extensive study of Virginia Woolf's symbols, but N.C. Thakur's The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf (1965) does not do its title justice. While Thakur's discussion of Woolf's early novels The Voyage Out and Night and Day is admittedly commendable, his inferences about her later work are stiff, almost mathematical, in their formulaic calculations.

Thakur is over-interpretive to the point where almost every object and incident is endowed with symbolic meaning. Hence a passage such as this discussion of To the Lighthouse:

This trait of his [Mr. Ramsay's] character, along with the way he almost knocked over Lily's easel, becomes symbolic of his aversion to beauty, as well as to the creation of it....Unable to see beauty and realize truth, intellect remains interested in 'ugly academic jargon' and, unlike aesthetic creation, it lacks peace and reconciliation and produces restlessness. Mr. Ramsay's habit of walking up and down the terrace, alone or in the company of Charles Tansley, becomes symbolic of the restlessness of intellect.

(75)

or another along the same lines:

The Carmichaels and the fairy story of the Fisherman and his Wife, which Mrs. Ramsay reads to James, become the symbols of the inadequacy of human relationships of which Mrs. Ramsay had been conscious. The inadequate relationship of the fisherman and his 'good Ilsabil,' who disagrees with him, symbolizes the flatness and dissonance of human relationships.

(110)

A third example, from Thakur's discussion of The Waves,

punctuates this all too deterministic approach:

9

...Neville is 'scissor-cutting, exact', and his knife, like the knife of Peter in Mrs. Dalloway, becomes a symbol of intellect. Of all the characters in The Waves he alone is delicate. He easily gets tired and then is sick. This delicate health is also symbolic...Neville wants to feel 'the crystal, the globe of life' to be hard and cold to the touch. His first words about seeing 'a globe', therefore, attain symbolic value too...

(110)

The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf avoids the important issue of Woolf's technical development through the use of symbol. Thakur limits his role to that of translator, and this is his downfall.

In order that this discussion may continue, the problem of definition must be addressed. What is a symbol? For the sake of clarity, perhaps, one might define symbol as something which stands for or represents something else. A gold ring on the third finger of a woman's left hand, for example, is commonly accepted as a symbol of her married state. In the same sense, owning a Porsche automobile may be interpreted as a symbol of wealth. There is nothing terribly difficult about this kind explication, but this is precisely its shortcoming. It is misleading to place the term "symbol" in such a straight-edged box, for it has

widely different meanings, and is used with varying intentions in varying disciplines.

Since this particular discussion concerns the symbols and symbolic techniques of Virginia Woolf, the definitive focus here will be literary. Yet even within this narrowed focus, the term "symbol" defies straightforward definition, for it shares its boundaries of existence with such closely related devices as image, metaphor, allegory, and so on. Moreover, the interpretation of "symbol" has varied within literary history. C. Hugh Holman's A Handbook to Literature delineates between what Holman calls Romantic symbolism, where "the details of the natural world and the actions of people were used to suggest philosophical ideas and themes" (437), and the French symbolism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where "the poet is reduced to the use of a complex and highly private kind of symbolization in an effort to give expression to his or her ineffable feeling" (437). Currently, the Post-Structuralist movement has taken a quite different view of symbol. Maintaining the instability of all language, the Post-Structuralists propound that the literary symbol is groundless. That is to say, a mere substitution of one sign or set of signs for another, the literary symbol constantly disposes, defers, and divides so that meaning can never be approached.

Of course, one could ruminate about the nature and scope of symbolism for quite some time, but that is not the intention here. Nor is it the intent of this study to

categorize Virginia Woolf's particular use of symbol into an existing definition, for her technique is dynamic and developing, rather than static. Indeed, Virginia Woolf's theory and practise of symbol might be said to have fluid definition: it changes shape according to the vehicle which contains it. From no source is this more apparent than Woolf's own diary and essays. 11

In February of 1931, shortly after completing the first draft for The Waves, Virginia Woolf writes the following in her diary:

What interests me in the last stage was the freedom & boldness with which my imagination picked up used & tossed aside all the images & symbols which I had prepared. I am sure that this is the right way of using them--not in set pieces, as I had tried at first, coherently, but simply as images; never making them work out; only suggest.

(IV: 10)

An appropriate introduction to Woolf's use of symbol, the passage serves two purposes. First, it establishes the scaffolding of Woolf's own terminology vis-a-vis "symbol" and "image." If there is a differentiating quality between these literary devices, Woolf apparently ignores it, for she blurs the defining line by means of the collective reference "them": "this is the right way of using them," and again, "never making them work out" (emphasis added). It is quite possible that this practise draws upon the fairly

straightforward idea that "symbol" simply refers to an image which is endowed with stronger evocative power than usual. In any event, Virginia Woolf freely and frequently substitutes one word for the other throughout her diaries. Second, the quotation provides a general overview of Woolf's progressive use of symbol from the early novels onward. That is to say, in such early works as The Voyage Out and, in particular, Night and Day, Woolf uses symbols in a fairly limited and clearly defined manner--as "set pieces" which progress "coherently" and "work out" prior to the novel's end. "Set pieces" is a particularly appropriate description, for these symbols and images serve much the same purpose as props and scenery serve in a dramatic production. They point up character traits, emphasize atmosphere, perhaps enhance theme, and so on; and yet the work is by no means dependent upon them. In effect, were these 'accessory' devices withdrawn, the work would suffer little or no disruption of unity, and the reader's comprehension would not be shaken.

As to Woolf's later works, the diary excerpt of February 1931 indicates a less-defined and more impulsive use of symbol or image. Describing this particular mode, Woolf's choice words are "freedom and boldness." Appropriately, after Night and Day, her technique shifts from clarity and coherence to suggestiveness. Images and symbols are not made to "work out." They are, to use Woolf's own description, "picked up used & tossed aside." They remain deliberately

vague, and the reader is left to ponder his or her own interpretation. In light of Woolf's technique in these later works, two additional diary excerpts prove useful. In February of 1926 Woolf writes:

Then I see the mountains in the sky: the great clouds; & the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great & astonishing sense of something there, which is "it"--It is not exactly beauty that I mean. It is that the thing is in itself enough: satisfactory, achieved...But on this showing which is true, I do fairly frequently come upon this "it"; & then feel quite at rest.

(III: 62)

In September of that year, she continues along much the same lines:

...it is not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with. It is this that is frightening & exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is: One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none I think...by writing I don't reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind.

(III: 113)

It is significant that these passages were written at a time when Woolf was labouring over To the Lighthouse, her

fourth novel, since this novel marks the beginning of the 14  
major technical shift in Woolf's use of symbol. In other  
words, To the Lighthouse makes limited use of the "set  
pieces" technique, but it is clear that for the first time  
the suggestive power of the symbol takes precedence over  
coherence. The significance, then, is the parallel  
preoccupation between diary and novel. In the former,  
Woolf appears hypersensitive. The mountains against the sky,  
the magnificent clouds, and the moon over Persia spark  
within her an arresting emotional response. And yet, as she  
admits, the vista itself is not responsible for the reaction.  
Rather, it is "a great & astonishing sense of something  
there," something within the scene: a sense, a suggestion.  
It is what Woolf herself cannot completely describe, only  
suggest. "not exactly beauty...It is that the thing is in  
itself enough: satisfactory; achieved." Such sentiments  
are largely responsible for the intensity of To the  
Lighthouse. Indeed, the entire novel revolves around them.  
That is to say, the novel revolves around two symbols or  
symbolic centres (the Lighthouse and Lily Briscoe's  
painting) which ultimately generate a similar intensity of  
feeling. And, like the vista in Woolf's diary, these symbols  
emerge as things within themselves; things which, by the  
novel's end, appear "satisfactory; achieved." So, where  
Woolf finally feels "quite at rest" with the intensity of the  
sky, clouds, and moon over Persia, it follows that her  
characters experience a corresponding sense of resolution

in their triumphant achievements. In fact, Lily Briscoe's final words--the words with which the novel ends--could very well footnote Woolf's diary excerpt:

With a sudden intensity as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done, it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (191)

Despite the increasing importance attributed to symbol or image at this point in Woolf's career, there emerges an equally strong preoccupation with the inadequacy of symbol. As Woolf speculates in the September diary excerpt, "What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none I think...by writing I don't reach anything." An earlier entry displays this same apprehension: "Suppose one could catch them [one's thoughts] before they became works of art....Of course one cannot; for the process of language is slow & deluding" (III: 102). Foregrounding the difficulties of language and literary device as such, Woolf's observations seem to address a very important Post-Structuralist dilemma: that writing can only ever be a "second-hand mode of communication" (Eagleton 130), undeniably removed from the writer's consciousness. This dilemma is one to which Woolf returns time and again. Nonetheless, for all that Woolf acknowledges the problems of language, its divorcing characteristics, the shortcomings of symbol or image, one senses that she accepts the brighter

side of the situation. It is a given that literary symbols <sup>16</sup> can only be expressed and described in language, but when presented successfully, their suggestive power is perhaps stronger and richer than that of 'ordinary' language--language employed simply to advance the story, for example. It is, once again, this power of suggestion which sets Woolf's images or symbols apart from the rest of her prose. As Pamela J. Transue speculates,

Certain key images in Woolf's work...have a haunting resonance. Part of the magic of these images is that they can never be fully explained. Although one can hardly avoid viewing them as symbolic, critics can never agree on just what it is that they symbolize. This is due in part to the seemingly endless complex of associations which they generate.

(15)

As Woolf's symbolic technique develops, so too does the importance that she places upon it. It has already been suggested that the symbols in Night and Day are fairly insignificant, insofar as the novel is quite functional and unified without them. But the same cannot be said of To the Lighthouse. Here, the two dominant symbols have taken on a central and unifying position such that were one to remove them, the entire work would more or less collapse. In effect, one might say that Night and Day appears to be a composition where story is the central concern, and the symbols are

secondary offshoots, while in To the Lighthouse story exists because of and in relation to the symbols.

In Woolf's later novel, The Waves (1931), the symbol reaches its peak in importance. It remains at the centre of the work, and stands out, once again, in the title, yet further technical development sets The Waves apart from all that has come before. Returning momentarily to the diary entry of February 1931, one recalls Woolf's own perception of this transition: "I am sure that this is the right way of using them [symbols and images] ...never making them work out; only suggest." The extent to which the suggestive power of the symbol has increased since To the Lighthouse becomes evident in a comparative examination of the endings of these two novels. Despite the "seemingly endless complex of associations" which characterizes the central symbols in To the Lighthouse, one senses that those symbols are, nonetheless, made to "work out." As Lily Briscoe places the final stroke of paint on her canvas, and as the lighthouse journey--a journey which begins speculatively on the first page of the novel--finally takes place, one acknowledges a feeling of completion: the quests have been successful, and the story is ended. In To the Lighthouse there is little immediate apprehension as to what the future holds. The Waves, conversely, is very much open-ended. Since the central symbol seemingly opposes the idea of a quest, the likelihood for resolution stands minimal. That is to say, the waves as symbol exist outside the boundaries of the

novel, and outside of the time sequence contained therein, and unlike To the Lighthouse, where the symbols interact directly with the characters (Lily actively paints her picture, and James, Cam, and Mr. Ramsay actively journey to the Lighthouse) one is very much aware that there is little or no direct interaction between the waves and the lives of the characters that they qualify. Hence, while the novel itself ends, one senses--not without some apprehension--that the symbol does not:

Death is the enemy. It is death against whom  
I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying  
back like a young man's, like Percival's, when  
he galloped into India. I strike spurs into my  
horse. Against you I will fling myself,  
unvanquished and unyielding. O Death!

The waves broke on the shore.

(200)

The very essence of the waves is repetition and continuity.

Virginia Woolf's essays are well-respected in their own right, although they are often employed as commentary upon the workings of her fiction. Concise, well-argued, and easily understood, these essays express the opinions and speculations of a writer acutely aware of the changing literary landscape around her. In light of Woolf's symbolism, one essay in particular stands out. "Modern Fiction," written in April 1919, shortly after the completion

of Night and Day, appeared in Woolf's Common Reader series in 1925. Scrutinizing the fiction of the early twentieth century, Woolf observes:

...for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nonetheless, we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two-and-thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds.

(188)

"[T]he vision in our minds"--whether she elects to call it "the essential thing," or "the thing we seek," or even that "great & astonishing sense of something there, which is 'it'"--the vision is a central concern in the scheme of Woolf's literature. The frustration inherent in the passage from "Modern Fiction" issues from the writer's inability to embody the vision in an appropriate literary form. Past techniques, techniques which appear always to produce a construct of two-and-thirty chapters, are no longer suitable. They are, in Woolf's analogy, "ill-fitting vestments" from a bygone era. This tension between form and artistic vision surfaces frequently in Woolf's non-fiction, and in fact the quotation from "Modern Fiction" only hints at a formal

dichotomy of great importance. As her writing matures, this dichotomy becomes more clearly defined, so that by 1932, she can look back upon her techniques with the following insights:

What has happened of course is that after abstaining from the novel of fact all these years--since 1919-- & N[ight] & D[ay] indeed, I find myself infinitely delighting in facts for a change, & in possession of quantities beyond counting. though I feel now & then the tug to vision...

(Diary IV: 129)

The novel of fact versus the novel of vision--although these classifications cannot be clearly defined, it is certain that Virginia Woolf placed Night and Day among the former; and since she criticizes this work for being "flat" (Diary III: 37), and lists among other shortcomings its reliance upon traditional narrative form (in the Jane Austen sense), one surmises that these qualities are, at the very least, influential in her definition. Indeed, the novel of fact appears to be one which proceeds in a predominantly linear fashion, taking note of external details and focusing on 'outer' story progression as opposed to the simultaneity of life and 'inner' character sensations. The novel of fact is very much the traditional Victorian novel<sup>2</sup>. The novel of vision, by comparison, represents the artist's ambition to capture, in language, the imaginative fictions housed in the brain, maintaining the fewest possible artificial conventions or impositions. It represents the attempt to embody life's

simultaneity, the thought process, the inner self as opposed to the social self, and so on. The Waves stands out in this definition, for the novel of vision, as Woolf defines it, also tends to the poetic. Hence this diary entry concerning The Waves:

I could perhaps do B[ernard]'s soliloquy in such a way as to break up, dig deep, make prose move-- yes I swear--as prose has never moved before: from the chuckle & babble to the rhapsody. Something new goes into my pot every morning-- something that's never been got at before.

(IV: 4)

and a passage written before the novel existed on paper:

The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole, whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought, sensation; the voice of the sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional. Why admit any thing to literature that is not poetry--by which I mean saturated.

(III: 209)

Clearly, the symbolic techniques practised in the novel

of fact will differ from those invested in the novel of vision. The latter, with its strong inclination towards the poetic, would seem an ideal environment for intensely evocative or, to use Woolf's term, "saturated" symbols and images; symbols and images so intense, at times, that they remain indefinite and somewhat elusive. The novel of fact, on the other hand, appears best-suited to the fairly conventional symbol, easily recognized and easily understood. David Daiches affirms this suggestion in his description of Night and Day: "In writing Night and Day, Virginia Woolf is still sufficiently traditional in her technique to use certain external symbols as devices for indicating the ebb and flow of the plot pattern" (28). The dichotomy of fact and vision, then, stands relevant to Woolf's own interpretation of symbolic technique. the novel of fact maintains its "set pieces"; while the novel of vision expands upon the suggestive power of the symbol. Bearing this in mind, as one advances through Night and Day, then To the Lighthouse, and finally The Waves, where Woolf most successfully presents her novel of vision, one might affirm that, technically, "it is as though an abstract, expressionist painter felt he must prove himself the master of classical figure-drawing before he discarded the representational" (Rose 96).

appeared in October 1919. Though successful, Woolf seems to have recognized the work's limitations fairly early on, for by November of the same year, she is calling herself "Jane Austen up to date" (Diary II: 314). To what extent this designation was entirely of Woolf's own volition may be questioned, particularly since it came forth only after she read Katherine Mansfield's critical review, published in the Athenaeum on November 26:

We had thought that this world was vanished for ever, that it was impossible to find on the great ocean of literature a ship that was unaware of what had been happening [WWI]; yet there is Night and Day, new, exquisite--a novel in the tradition of the English novel. In the midst of our admiration it makes us feel old and chill. We had not thought to look upon its like again.

(Critical Heritage 82)

Nonetheless, the description is appropriate to Night and Day. This is indeed "a novel in the tradition of the English novel," insofar as one is using Jane Austen as a measuring guide. In other words, like Emma or Pride and Prejudice, Night and Day explores the theme of marriage in terms of a number of recognizable Victorian social milieus, focusing predominantly upon a particular female character of the upper middle class. This heroine, Katherine Hilbery, comes forth amidst the same "rattle of teacups" (Daiches 23) which

so often announces the presence of Austen's Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennett.

24

Critics who consider the Jane Austen type of social comedy inherent in Night and Day, however, are also quick to recognize the points of departure. In particular, where Austen limits the action and arrangement of plot to one level of social comedy, Woolf develops a second level of conflict with a deeper range. The reader confronts both class tension and personal tension (Blackstone 33) or, as Daiches phrases it, an "apparent plot pattern" (29) which embodies the social comedy, and the "real plot pattern" (29) through which Woolf aims to explore the flow of ideas, human behaviour, and personality. As Daiches explains:

...the actions of the chief characters spring not from prejudice or habit, but from their own speculations about the nature of reality. "It is life that matters, nothing but life--the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process," says Katherine Hilbery to herself as she walks abstractedly along a London street. Emma Woodhouse could never have said that without rending the fabric of the novel of which she is the heroine.

(27)

Regrettably, in Night and Day the two levels of plot compete with one another, causing a certain amount of confusion for the reader, and only limited success for the

novel. Night and Day is best examined as a transition 25  
piece--one employed by Woolf in order to come to terms with  
the immediate literary past, but also to experiment with  
techniques which ultimately account for much of the brilliance  
of her later works.

This then is the background against which Woolf practises  
a fairly rudimentary symbolic art, further indicative of "a  
novel in the tradition of the English novel." That is to say,  
most of the symbols in Night and Day are flat or static,  
carefully but recognizably contrived, and secondary to plot.  
They are used primarily as a means of emphasizing certain  
traits of character or atmosphere, or to underscore a  
particular event in the story,

Recalling Woolf's own terminology, the phrase "set  
pieces" comes to mind as one sets forth to explore the  
symbols in Night and Day. To begin with, particulars such  
as weather and landscape are used in conjunction with various  
characters' moods and states of mind. The description in the  
following passage, for example, is clearly intended as a  
comment upon Ralph Denham's disillusionment after learning  
of Katherine's engagement with Rodney:

He sat himself down, in spite of the chilly fog  
which obscured the farther banks and left its  
lights suspended upon a blank surface, upon one of  
the riverside seats, and let the tide of dis-  
illusionment sweep through him. For the time  
being, all bright points in his life were blotted

out; all prominences levelled...The old 26  
romance which had warmed his days for him, the  
thoughts of Katherine which had painted every  
hour, were now made to appear foolish and enfeebled.  
He rose, and looked into the river, whose swift  
race of dun-coloured waters seemed the very spirit  
of futility and oblivion.

(146)

As if to ensure that the reader will make the connection between environment and state of mind, Woolf's technique here is quite blatant, indeed almost cliché in its reliance on phrases such as "the tide of disillusionment" or "the spirit of futility and oblivion." It would seem that, insecure at this early point in her career, Woolf does not trust the imagery to speak for itself. The narrative voice steps in to guide the reader's interpretation.

The same might be said of this passage, a description of Cassandra's state of mind during her expedition at Hampton Court:

The fresh air of spring, the sky washed of clouds and already shedding warmth from its blue, seemed the reply vouchsafed by nature to the mood of her chosen spirits. These chosen spirits were to be found also among the deer, dumbly basking, and among the fish, set still in mid-stream...Silently the shadows of the trees lay across the broad sunshine; silence wrapt her heart in its folds.

The quivering stillness of the butterfly on  
the half-opened flower, the silent grazing of the  
deer in the sun, were the sights her eyes rested  
upon and received as the images of her own nature  
laid open to happiness and trembling in its ecstasy.

(428)

The meaning inherent in this symbolic landscape is clearly stated in the last line: "the sights her eye rested upon and received as the images of her own nature" (emphasis added). Once again, the narrative voice undertakes to guide the reader's interpretation.

There are also situations in Night and Day where Woolf draws attention to a particular landscape detail more than once, modifying the description to indicate an altered outlook or changed status between characters. When Katherine discusses the necessity of ending her engagement to Rodney, for example, Woolf emphasizes the dead beech leaves scattered in heaps around these two characters:

The idea came to her [Katherine] that they were like the children in the fairy tale who were lost in a wood, and with this in her mind, she noticed the scattering of dead leaves all around them which had been blown by the wind into heaps, a foot or two deep here and there.

(228)

Tangled in Katherine's hair, and scattered across Rodney's coat, surrounding the couple in their tears of sorrow and

consolation, the dead beech leaves obviously signify the 28  
end of a relationship. It is interesting that within seven  
chapters, the reader encounters a similar scene suggesting a  
completely different atmosphere. This is the description of  
Katherine and Ralph, walking at Kew Gardens:

The warmth of the afternoon, the first of spring,  
tempted them to sit upon a seat in a glade of  
beech trees, with forest drives striking green  
paths this way and that around them....While she  
breathed and looked, Denham was engaged in  
uncovering with the point of his stick a group of  
green spikes half smothered by the dead leaves.

(307)

Given the symbolic value of dead leaves in the previous  
passage, Ralph's gesture here, his movement to clear the  
leaves away, is significant in terms of his attitude towards  
Katherine's relationship with Rodney. More important, the  
"green spikes" of the strong new plant Ralph uncovers in the  
process emerge as a symbol for the new and growing alliance  
that he himself has found with Katherine. The modified  
landscape details, then, signify the change in relationships  
between characters. And while it is doubtful that any reader  
would fail to recognize this significance, the narrative  
voice once again guides the reader's interpretation by way of  
a symbolic cliché, "the first of spring," which, through the  
history of literature has come to be associated with new  
growth, new life, and so on.

A considerable amount of symbolism in Night and Day 29 involves passages such as those above, where details of weather or landscape provide symbolic "set pieces" for character situations and states of mind. Second to this technique, Woolf makes use of character props--objects which are repeatedly associated with a particular character to the extent that they become distinctive representations of that character. Mr. Clacton's Suffrage Society leaflets, didactic, concise, and decidedly masculine, provide a symbolic mockery of his position in the Suffrage office, just as Aunt Charlotte's white knitting wool, which always appears off-coloured and dull, provides telling information about her personality and status.

It soon becomes apparent that a certain degree of mockery accompanies many of the character props in Night and Day. This is particularly true of the minor characters, and certainly the best case in point is Mrs. Seal. An over-zealous Suffrage worker whose entire life has been a jumble of committee service--"Waifs and Strays, Rescue Work, Church Work, C.O.S.-local branch-besides the usual civil duties" (78)--Mrs. Seal is appropriately identified with the blue-pencilled newspaper clippings that occupy so much of her time:

Mrs. Seal wandered about with newspaper cuttings, which seemed to her either "quite splendid" or "really too bad for words." She used to paste these into books, or send them to her friends, having first drawn a broad bar in blue pencil down the

margin, a proceeding which signified equally 30  
and indistinguishably the depths of her reprobation  
or the heights of her approval.

(75)

The sense of disarray--snippets of paper removed from this news source and that--and the emphatic "broad blue bar" down the margin, signifying the highest or lowest emotional state, but never a middle ground, provides the reader with a comical albeit believable representation of Mrs. Seal. However, an even more appropriate character prop for Mrs. Seal appears a few pages earlier:

Dressed in plum-coloured velveteen, with short grey hair, and a face that seemed permanently flushed with philanthropic enthusiasm, she [Mrs. Seal] was always in a hurry, and always in some disorder. She wore two crucifixes, which got themselves entangled in a heavy gold chain upon her breast, and seemed to Mary expressive of her mental ambiguity.

(72)

Two crucifixes, as opposed to the usual one, gives a good indication of the degree of over-enthusiasm with which Mrs. Seal maintains all of her convictions, and two crucifixes entangled in yet a third chain affirms her lack of order. It is a clever symbol, potentially subtle and suggestive, yet by tagging Mary's interpretation onto the end of the description, just as she augments the previous quotation with

a note of narrative explanation, Woolf disrupts the 31  
subtlety. Again, it appears Woolf wishes to ensure that  
the reader will arrive at the 'correct' interpretation. In  
other words, just as Mary feels that the tangled crucifixes  
signify Mrs. Seal's "mental ambiguity," it is fairly certain  
that the reader will reach a similar conclusion based on  
Mary's judgement.

Caught between the highly civilized world of Victorian  
ethics on one hand, and the personal desire for recognition  
as a poet on the other, the symbolic prop most often  
associated with William Rodney is clothing. As government  
clerk, gentleman, and scholar, William Rodney appears  
"scrupulously well-dressed" (47) with "a pearl in the centre  
of his tie" (47) and a light overcoat which makes him appear  
fashionable in a crowd (57). The other extreme of character  
finds him in "a faded crimson dressing-gown, and a pair of  
red slippers" (65). And, in keeping with Rodney's character,  
the question of dress demands the strictest attention:

Three times that afternoon he had dressed himself  
in a tail-coat, and three times he had discarded  
it for an old dressing gown; three times he had  
placed his pearl tie pin in position, and three  
times he had removed it again....The question was,  
which would Katherine prefer on this particular  
afternoon in December? He read her note once  
more, and the postscript about the sonnet settled  
the matter. Evidently she admired most the poet

in him; as this, on the whole, agreed with 32  
his own opinion, he decided to err, if anything,  
on the side of shabbiness.

(126)

In addition to the laughter generated by this description, Rodney's near obsession with clothing conveys two of the stronger traits of his character: his insecurity, and his ongoing concern with outward appearances.

Woolf's use of clothing as a symbolic prop extends to several other characters in Night and Day: Henry Otway's reputation for non-conformity, even eccentricity, is affirmed by the fact that "he went without a tie for a whole year, and had six shirts made of black flannel" (194); Ralph's sister Joan communicates patience and resignation in "her high green dress with the faded trimming" (29); and Mary Datchet's self-darned stockings (Ralph professes that Mary must be "the only woman in London who darns her own stockings" [44]) convey both practicality and individuality. In fact, when Katherine further associates Mary's attire with that of "a Russian peasant girl" (330), she emphasizes these traits with more clarity. That is to say, the ostensible allusion to the Russian revolution of 1917 establishes Mary's practicality and individuality against a silhouette of social reform, and social reform marks her raison d'être in the novel.

There can be little dispute as to the static nature of Woolf's symbolic art in Night and Day. Scenery, character props, physical appearance and dress, when called forth to

perform beyond the literal duties of novelistic technique, 33 do not furbish the reader with a completely new and deeper level of meaning, but advance, merely, an extension of that which has already been given--namely plot or character. Moreover, as these symbols or symbolic techniques are usually explained to the reader, either by the character perceiving them or by the novel's narrative voice, there is little to be said for their "suggestiveness." One might speculate, as it has been put forth already, that this shortcoming (which is a shortcoming only in light of the later novels) is largely the result of Woolf's untried skills, and the mistrust or insecurity with which she employed them. Notwithstanding, on two occasions in Night and Day, Woolf does work up a symbolic technique which anticipates her more mature art, and the reader encounters the complexity of an added dimension. Here indeed, as Daiches has suggested, the difference between Austen and Woolf manifests itself, for the social configurations of Night and Day give way to deeper concerns about life and the nature of reality. This change is first apparent in the symbolism derived from the title of the novel, and second in the pen and ink image which Ralph Denham creates in an attempt to come to terms with his relationship to Katherine.

In a considerably over-simplified discussion of the symbolic design inherent in the title Night and Day, Thakur maintains the following:

Night and Day not only suggests Rodney's fluctuating affections for Katherine and Cassandra,

but also symbolizes the varying joy and dismay 34  
that Katherine and Ralph experience during their  
uncertainty....Portraying thus the shifting  
relationship of the characters, and their changing  
moods from misery to happiness, Night and Day  
becomes a symbol of the night and day of their  
feelings and emotions.

(14-15)

By no means incorrect, Thakur's interpretation is  
misleading because it falsely limits the range of the title's  
dialectic to the realm of clear-cut emotions: joy and  
dismay; misery and happiness. What is more important, it  
would appear that Thakur has ignored one of the key passages  
in the novel, the passage upon which the title is based:

Why, she [Katherine] reflected, should there  
be this perpetual disparity between the thought  
and the action, between the life of solitude and  
the life of society, this astonishing precipice  
on one side of which the soul was active and in  
broad daylight, on the other side of which it was  
contemplative and dark as night? Was it not  
possible to step from one to the other, erect,  
and without essential change?

(315)

As Katherine meditates upon the 'light' and 'dark'  
aspects of existence, she reveals the deeper symbolic design  
of the title: the disparity between thought and action;

between solitude and society; between the soul's active 35  
or pragmatic side (associated with day), and its contemplative  
counterpart (associated with night). Beneath the facade of  
Victorian social graces, this is the substance of the novel,  
and the fundamental concern therein is a question of synthesis:  
"Was it not possible to step from one to the other, erect,  
and without essential change?" In other words, could not  
the day and night elements of life co-exist, aware of and  
in harmony with one another? Unfortunately, the surface plot  
of mis-matched alliances, family relations, and tea-taking,  
overpowers the potential behind these more fundamental issues,  
one result being that the symbolic implications of the title  
are not immediately apparent, or not as apparent as they  
might be. It is primarily in retrospect, if one is able to  
perceive through the haze of the surface plot, that Woolf's  
intended designs for "night" and "day" become evident.

It becomes evident, for example, that most of the  
scenes established in the night setting involve romance,  
idealization, and contemplation. This is first apparent  
early in chapter two, when Ralph walks home from the Hilbery  
estate:

His own experience underwent a curious change.  
His speed slackened, his head sank a little towards  
his breast, and the lamplight shone now and again  
upon a face grown strangely tranquil....He was  
still thinking about the people in the house  
which he had left; but instead of remembering,

with whatever accuracy he could, their looks 36  
and sayings, he had consciously taken leave of  
the literal truth.

(20-21)

Katherine Hilbery, in particular, is the object of Ralph's  
idealization.

He increased her height, he darkened her hair;  
but physically there was not much to change in  
her. His most daring liberty was taken with her  
mind, which, for reasons of his own, he desired to  
be exalted and infallible...

(21)

And while Ralph, moreso than the other characters in the  
novel, incessantly chooses the night milieu over the day,  
he is not the only one who succumbs to the mysterious pulls  
of darkness. Mary Datchet strikes a similar pose in her  
contemplations of Ralph:

She herself was not attentive. She was glad of  
the movement along lamp-lit streets in the open  
air. She was fingering, painfully and with fear,  
yet with strange hope, too, the discovery which  
she had stumbled on unexpectedly that night...

(417)

Finally, Katherine Hilbery frequently loses herself in  
nighttime meditations of a related nature:

Into that same black night, almost, indeed, into  
the very same layer of starlit air, Katherine

Hilbery was now gazing....She had come out into 37  
the winter's night, which was mild enough, not so  
much to look with scientific eyes upon the stars,  
as to shake herself free from certain purely  
terrestrial discontents.

(179)

At the opposite extreme, there is a balancing of scales. Woolf manipulates the daytime situations to embody duty, pragmatism, empiricism, and other related qualities, qualities which counterpoint the nocturnal temperaments presented in Night and Day. Pensive and Romantic by night, Ralph Denham appears punctual, habitual, and self-sufficient in the nine-to-five world of "Messrs. Grately and Hooper" (115). Indeed, under the brighter light of the daytime world, Ralph "could very plausibly demonstrate that to be a clerk in a solicitor's office was the best of all possible lives, and that other ambitions were vain" (117). Mary Datchet, equally dedicated to the daily routines of office life, abandons her deeper contemplative self by degrees as she approaches the Suffrage office. Seated behind her typewriter or her letters, she too appears the epitome of commitment:

She sat herself down to her letters, and very soon all these speculations were forgotten, and the two lines drew themselves between her eyebrows, as the contents of her letters, the office furniture, and the sounds of activity in the next room gradually asserted their sway upon her. By eleven

o'clock the atmosphere of concentration was running so strongly in one direction that any thought of a different order could hardly have survived its birth more than a moment or so.

(72-73)

Katherine Hilbery, battling daily with a collection of letters, manuscripts, books, and pens, further illustrates the symbolic intentions of the daytime environment. Motivated by a certain amount of dedication to the family heritage, and by her mother's spontaneous and disorganized methods of literary composition, Katherine compels herself to the task of organizing the Richard Alardyce biography. Her approach is both practical and pragmatic:

Katherine had resolved to try the effect of strict rules upon her mother's habits of literary composition. They were to be seated at their tables every morning at ten o'clock....They were to keep their eyes fast upon the paper, and nothing was to tempt them to speech, save at the stroke of the hour when ten minutes for relaxation were to be allowed them. If these rules were observed for a year, she made out on a sheet of paper, that the completion of the book was certain...

(37)

Despite the fact that characters such as Ralph, Mary, and Katherine figure at both ends of the symbolic dialectic of night and day, it is clear that all of the characters in

the novel are structured to dominate one pole more than 39  
another. Katherine, with her love of mathematics and  
astronomy, and her skill at running household affairs, is  
undeniably a 'day' character, straying into the world of  
'night' consciousness only occasionally. Ralph Denham,  
preferring dark streets and dimly lit corners, counterpoints  
Katherine. Lesser characters, however, are unable to transact  
in both worlds of consciousness, and display a comical  
adherence to one or the other extreme. Mr. Hilbery, for  
example, is consistently and comically logical and pragmatic.  
He edits a well-respected business journal titled Critical  
Review, and is known to talk "a great deal of sense about  
the solicitor's profession" (11). Even Mr. Hilbery's interest  
in literature is scrupulously funny, for, sitting at his  
desk, he places together documents,

...by means of which it could be proved that  
Shelley had written "of" instead of "and" or that  
the inn in which Byron had slept was called the  
"Nag's Head" and not the "Turkish Knight," or that  
the Christian name of Keats' uncle had been John  
rather than Richard, for he [Mr. Hilbery] knew  
more minute details about these poets than any  
man in England.

(99)

Mrs. Hilbery, constantly confused between the facts  
and fancies of the past, is comic at the opposite extreme.  
She is a dedicated romantic:

She liked to perambulate the room with a duster 40  
in her hand, with which she stopped to polish  
the backs of already lustrous books, musing and  
romancing as she did so. Suddenly, the right  
phrase or the penetrating point of view would  
suggest itself, and she would drop her duster  
and write ecstatically for a few breathless  
moments...

(36)

True to her 'night' personality, Mrs. Hilbery follows emotion rather than logic. Like Ralph, she idealizes that which is most important to her--late nineteenth century society--and like Ralph, she views love as the ruling force in life.

"Was it not possible to step from one to the other, erect, and without essential change?"--It has been suggested that the heart of the symbolic day/night dichotomy in Night and Day is a question of synthesis. Beneath the superficial concerns of the surface plot, the novel questions "the value, reliability, and relationships between mythopoetic [night] and empirical-theoretical [day] schematization in worlds of consciousness. What is fantasy and what is fact?" (Love 109). These concerns surface briefly in Woolf's descriptions of the failed or tolerated relationships of the elder Hilberys and Otways, and they reach a peak in the relationship between Katherine and Ralph. Although the novel closes in the atmosphere of night consciousness, implying that a synthesis has not been completed (yet?),

Katherine and Ralph together come closest to this desired 41 goal. It is appropriate, then, that the symbol attributed to their relationship is, like the title, one of the more thought-provoking and multi-dimensional symbols in the novel. The image of the "blot fringed with flame" (453), which Ralph draws almost subconsciously in an attempt to come to terms with his relationship to Katherine, is "the first instance we have of Woolf's ability to evoke...sensations which resist verbal explanation" (Transue 45).

Only after words have failed him does Ralph create the "blot fringed with flame," and initially, his reaction to the motif is somewhat simple: he is reminded of Katherine's head, and "perhaps the entire universe" (453) as well. Later, in his shame and despair at seeing Katherine contemplate the drawing, he realizes that the image is much more complex:

He was convinced that it could mean nothing to another, although somehow to him it conveyed not only Katherine herself, but all those states of mind which had clustered round her since he first saw her pouring out tea on a Sunday afternoon. It represented by its circumference of smudges surrounding a central blot all that encircling glow which for him surrounded, inexplicably, so many of the objects of life, softening their sharp outline, so that he could see certain streets, books, and situations wearing a halo almost perceptible to the physical eye.

Perhaps it is this variety of associations, the fact that 42  
the image ultimately defies complete translation, that  
renders it so acceptable to Katherine. Her words of recog-  
nition--"Yes, the world looks something like that to me too"  
(458)--run into one of the most spontaneous and poetic  
passages in Night and Day. Woolf momentarily discards the  
prosaic and decidedly structured style which accompanies  
the traditional "set pieces" of the novel, and the reader,  
along with Ralph and Katherine, experiences the beauty of  
synthesis between these two key characters. The "blot  
fringed with flame," a symbol both elusive and associative,  
"draws together everything of importance which has been said  
or done in the entire course of the novel" (Transue 46).

He [Ralph] received her assurance with profound  
joy. Quietly and steadily there rose up behind  
the whole aspect of life that soft edge of fire  
which gave its red tint to the atmosphere and  
crowded the scene with shadows so deep and dark  
that one could fancy pushing farther into their  
density and still farther, exploring indefinitely.  
Whether there was any correspondence between the  
two prospects now opening before them, they shared  
the same sense of the impending future, vast,  
mysterious, infinitely stored with undeveloped  
shapes which each would unwrap for the other to  
behold...

(458)

Stylistically, the means by which Woolf presents and expands upon the "blot fringed with flame" anticipates the symbolic art which is so striking in the later novels.

In Night and Day then, despite an obvious reliance on the literary tradition of the late nineteenth century, one senses that the symbolic techniques which characterize Woolf's mature art are beginning to develop. Regrettably, as Transue insightfully points out, "in Night and Day these strategies account for only a few pages of a five hundred page book. This is a very conventional novel, and not a particularly good conventional novel" (47). It is significant that very shortly after completing Night and Day, Woolf writes that famous essay, "Modern Fiction," in which she discusses the tension between literary vision and the terribly artificial literary form which continues to produce novels of "two-and-thirty chapters." Although Night and Day is a novel of four-and-thirty chapters, Woolf's frustration is clearly aimed in that direction. At this point in time, she is beginning to experience the conflict between vision and form; between what she wants to say, and the tools at hand with which she might express herself. As the essay "Modern Fiction" implies, form is still very much a question of "perseveringly" and "conscientiously" following an existing design. By the time Virginia Woolf writes To the Lighthouse, this has changed considerably.

...like everything else this strange morning the words became symbols, wrote themselves all over the grey-green walls. If only she could put them together, she felt, write them out in some sentence, then she would have got at the truth of things.

(To The Lighthouse 138)

To the Lighthouse, first published in May 1927, is often cited as Virginia Woolf's greatest work of fiction. Despite a few negative reviews, it received high praise from contemporary novelists and critics, including Hugh Walpole, Ford Madox Ford, and F.R. Leavis who, in 1932, described the novel as "a work expressing the finest consciousness of the age, fit to rank with 'The Waste Land' and Ulysses" (Leavis 25-26). Celebratory recognition of To the Lighthouse has continued, indeed increased, over the years, and critics now more than ever attempt to write towards an explanation of the novel's brilliance and success. For many, this truly is "the book which marks the perfection of Virginia Woolf's art" (Daiches 77). At the very least, one is compelled to agree with Pamela Transue: "...for the first time we feel that Woolf has discovered the form and techniques that best suit her aesthetic goals and that she is fully in control of them" (65).

To the Lighthouse is a novel of change: both in terms of plot or substance, for the story explores the changes brought upon human beings and their world by the hands of

time, and also in terms of technique, for Woolf's writing 45 style has clearly undergone a metamorphosis since the appearance of Night and Day. In fact, in the years following the publication of Night and Day, there is also a significant shift in the substance of Virginia Woolf's essays and diary entries, a shift which critics have either ignored or failed to notice in spite of its apparent relevance to the transformations taking place in Woolf's fiction.

In January 1920, the following entry appeared in Woolf's diary:

...happier today than I was yesterday, having this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another...doesn't that give the looseness & lightness I want: doesn't that get closer & yet keep form & speed, & enclose the human heart - Am I sufficiently mistress of my dialogue to net it there? For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time. not scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist.

(II: 13)

Although this passage is closer in time to Jacob's Room (1922) than To the Lighthouse, it gives a good indication of the direction of Woolf's artistic intentions. "[T]he heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire

in the mist"--in "Modern Fiction," written at the same time, one notes a similar accumulation of words: "life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing." The point is this: increasingly, in her discussions about the nature of fiction, Woolf returns to and emphasizes the importance of an almost indescribable inner force, a driving inspiration, a "vision" which she strives to capture in words. And whether she calls it "a great and astonishing sense of something there, which is 'it'" (Diary III: 62), or "something in the universe that one's left with" (Diary III: 113), Woolf's intensifying struggle to articulate this vision in some sort of literary form has a direct impact upon the development of her use of symbol.

Sensitive readers will recognize a fleeting glimpse of Woolf's artistic aims in that spontaneous and poetic description of the blot fringed with flames from the end of Night and Day. But what comes forth as the deviation from technique in the earlier novel becomes the essence of technique in To the Lighthouse. The scaffolding of plot begins to crumble, and the symbols, elusive and associative, increase in intensity as Woolf approaches her vision.

Following even the most superficial reading of To the Lighthouse (if such a thing is indeed possible), it becomes obvious that one must abandon much of the definitive 'baggage' used in discussing Night and Day's symbols. The phrase "set pieces" is one such piece of baggage. Symbolic milieus, details of weather and details of landscape, while they

provide telling reflections of a character's state of mind in the 1919 novel, play a very small role, if any, in To the Lighthouse. Rather, Woolf "reduces the particularizing details of setting to a minimum" (Daiches 81) and works to create several fleeting impressions of place. The reader, then, receives only enough information to visualize an out-of-focus or incomplete backdrop to the story, which eventually allows the key symbols to expand. Moreover, the interpretive voice which tends to interrupt in an attempt to guide the reader's way of comprehending the set pieces in Night and Day has by now been silenced. Woolf relies on the force and associative power of the images alone--to the extent that her description of "town" is not the photographically detailed account which one would expect to find in the pages of Ralph Denham's world, but merely an incomplete list of items which the reader or a character might associate, symbolically, with his or her own definition of town: letters, stamps, tobacco, writing-paper, a hand-bag (15). This method of association, much more subtle than anything from the early novel, ultimately affects the key symbols also.

It is further significant that the story is situated on a remote island in the Hebrides, as opposed to the easily recognized London setting of Woolf's early novels. It is a symbolic setting, a microcosm, completely self-sufficient. As Bernard Blackstone explains, "the scene is set on an island. Human life, family life, real as it is, is something

isolated in the midst of a greater reality" (105). Mrs. 48  
Ramsay considers this:

...the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, "I am guarding you - I am your support", but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself lightly from the task actually at hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorsefully beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment into the sea...

(20)

Just as the remote and self-sufficient island might sink into the sea, so too might the reality of human life and human love be "engulfed in the greater reality" (Blackstone 106). It is questionable whether or not this actually occurs in To the Lighthouse, but it certainly becomes a key issue in Woolf's later novel, The Waves.

In Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style, Transue writes,

Beginning with Jacob's Room, and certainly in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, she [Woolf] has learned to subordinate the moral issues by

submerging and displacing them in images,  
symbols and a multitude of points of view.

49

(92)

This would account for a second development in Woolf's use of symbol since Night and Day, and the necessity of re-defining another piece of definitive baggage: "character props."

The framework within which the character props in Night and Day function is relatively shallow, comedy, not to be confused with satire, being the most obvious end result. In To the Lighthouse character props exist within a much more serious framework. While Woolf continues with the technique of associating particular objects with particular characters on an individual level, she does so using the broader context of male and female stereotypes. The character props function as symbolic representations of what the novel defines as typically male and typically female. Thus, on an individual level, the reader comes to associate William Bankes with a "white, scientific coat" (47) of cleanliness, logic, and impersonality; and Charles Tansley with shag tobacco (16) or academic jargon--"the words, here and there... dissertation ..fellowship... readership...lectureship" (16); and Mr. Ramsay with the logical and structured A to Z arrangement of the alphabet, while simultaneously, on the larger scale of male and female stereotypes, the reader notices that these descriptions bespeak order, logic, structure, and so on--stereotypically male qualities.

Further, there is a character prop of common denomination which unites the males<sup>3</sup> in To the Lighthouse. Mr. Ramsay initially comes forth "standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one" (10), and Charles Tansley puts everyone on edge with his "acid way of peeling the flesh and blood off everything" (13). Even James, as a young boy, follows suit by cutting "the picture of a pocket knife with six blades" (20) from the Army and Navy catalogue, and much later as a young man by expressing hatred of his father's unreasonable demands: "then I shall take a knife and strike him to the heart. He had always kept this old symbol of taking a knife and striking his father to the heart" (170). The knife image is telling: the male perspective in To the Lighthouse is a destructive one.

"But did he notice the flowers? No. Did he notice the view? No. Did he even notice his own daughter's beauty..." (67). Just as the cluster of images associated with the male characters in To the Lighthouse symbolizes a stereotypically male perspective, so too do the images collectively associated with with the female characters conjure up the traditional female stereotype. The reader comes to associate Cam, Mrs. Ramsay's youngest daughter, with nature, and in particular, flowers: "She was picking Sweet Alice on the bank. She was wild and fierce..." (25). In much the same way, one mentally connects Rose with beautiful jewels: "for this little ceremony of choosing jewels, which was gone through every night, was what Rose liked best" (76-77).

And of the many character props associated with Mrs.

51

Ramsay, one that is stereotypically female, signalling warmth and motherly protection, occurs most often. The shawl (69,77,88,106) is pulled tighter around the shoulders when Mrs. Ramsay senses an emptiness in conversation; it is thrown over the skull of a wild animal to soothe her frightened children; and, like Mrs. Ramsay's jewels, it is something that the children might choose for their mother as she dresses for dinner.

There is also a symbol of common denomination which unites the female characters just as the image of the knife symbolically unites the males: art. Female perception in To the Lighthouse involves "the whole effort of merging and flowing and creating" (79) as symbolized by varying patterns, shapes, and colours, now intense, now softened, now distinct, now blended, which punctuate each of the female characters' visions.

For Mrs. Ramsay, the importance of art and artistic perception extends from a simple articulation about the past:

...her grandmother's friends, she said, glancing discretely as they [Mrs. Ramsay and Charles] passed, took the greatest pains; first they mixed their own colours, and then they ground them, and then they put damp cloths on them to keep them moist.

No, she said, she did not want a pear. Indeed, she had been keeping guard over the dish of fruit (without realizing it) jealously, hoping nobody would touch it. Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the low-land grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene ..

(100)

Mrs. Ramsay's perception of the bowl of fruit comes across as if it were a still life painting.

Lily Briscoe's perception is perhaps more acute than Mrs. Ramsay's, for "[s]he saw colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral" (48), yet there are striking similarities between the two women. Each pronounces a strong dislike of the contemporary artist Paunceforte; Mrs. Ramsay because,

Since Mr. Paunceforte had been there, three years before, all the pictures were like that... green and grey, with lemon-coloured sailing boats, and pink women on the beach.

(17)

and Lily because of his use of "thinned and faded" colours (48) and "etherealized shapes" (48). Moreover, Lily's perception of the vision which becomes her painting is not unlike Mrs. Ramsay's perception of the fruit bowl:

53

...the problem of space remained, she thought, taking up her brush again. It glared at her. The whole mass of the picture was poised upon that weight. Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing....And she began to lay on a red, a grey, and she began to model her way into the hollow there.

(159)

Through Cam's eyes also the reader notices a strongly artistic mode of perception:

Her hand cut a trail in the sea, as her mind made the green swirls and streaks into patterns and, numbed and shrouded, wandered in imagination in that underworld of waters where the pearls stuck in clusters of white sprays, where in the green light a change came over one's entire mind and one's body shone half transparent enveloped in a green cloak.

(169)

Cam's vision, like her mother's and Lily's, comes forth as if fixed in paint on a canvas.

"learned to subordinate the moral issues by submerging and displacing them in images, symbols, and a multitude of points of view," the importance of character props in To the Lighthouse becomes much more evident. The issue here, one which lies at the heart of most of Woolf's fiction, centres upon a comparison of male and female perspectives. The male world of To the Lighthouse is destructive: Mr. Ramsay dashes his youngest son's hopes for a lighthouse journey by insisting that the weather will be bad; James, in turn, dreams of stabbing his father through the heart; Charles Tansley delights in ridiculing Lily by whispering in her ear, "Women can't paint. Women can't write..." (48). The male symbol, the symbol of the knife, is appropriate because it bespeaks destruction. Against this, there is the female world of To the Lighthouse. To achieve reconciliation or synthesis, artistic unity, unity within the strife and stress of the human world--this is the desire which rises time and again in the thoughts and actions of the female characters in the novel. Their symbol, the symbol of art, bespeaks vivid perception, the ability to see things separately, as the distinct colours on a palette, and again, the ability to mix and blend, to create unity, as red and blue create purple. And so, the women in the novel can be found restoring what the men have destroyed: Mrs. Ramsay soothes her little boy's grief at the postponement of his journey; Lily appeases Charles Tansley's hostilities at the dinner party; and so on.

Woolf's subtle technique in To the Lighthouse continually 55  
plays one world against the other, and therein, the female  
images against the male. And it is a subtle technique, for  
when William Bankes must brandish his penknife in order  
to examine Lily's painting--he "tapped the canvas with the  
bone handle" (51)--the narrative voice remains objective,  
but a symbolic statement, female creativity versus male  
destruction, has definitely been made.

The third and most important technical advancement  
since Night and Day is Woolf's use of a strong and unifying  
symbolic centre: the Lighthouse. The Lighthouse cannot  
be divorced from the novel without destroying the novel, for  
its presence is felt, by reader and characters alike, even  
when it is, itself, absent from the events on the page. The  
Lighthouse remains constant despite all of the changes that  
take place in the world around it, and as the key to under-  
standing the novel, it is the key to Woolf's vision also.

There appear to be as many explanations of the Light-  
house as symbol as there are critics. By way of introduction,  
one may wish to consider Daiches' broad approach:

The lighthouse itself, standing lonely in the  
midst of the sea, is a symbol of the individual  
who is at once a unique being and a part of the  
flux of history. To reach the lighthouse is, in  
a sense, to make contact with a truth outside  
oneself, to surrender the uniqueness of one's  
ego to an impersonal reality.

interpretation:

The lighthouse has been associated throughout the novel with a merging of masculine and feminine, the phallus and the eye. As Marder [Herbert Marder, Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf] notes, at times the lighthouse is "erect" and "stark," at other times "misty" and "yielding." As characters reach it, personal grudges fall away...

(Transue 91)

Jean O. Love traces the Lighthouse back to Ralph Denham's blot fringed with flames, concluding first that "the lighthouse as a discrete structure symbolizes a general dialectical antithesis by means of alternation and opposition of light and darkness" (180); and second that.

All meanings previously seen to be contained within the image, in its specific or attenuated representations, are syncretically present: light, steadfastness, and stability; understanding, truth, knowledge; order and reconciliation, security; and--sometimes--danger.

(190)

From these and other interpretations, there is at least one certainty. the Lighthouse as symbol has no single limited meaning. Indeed, the novel itself makes this explicit:

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see 57  
the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and  
straight, he could see that it was barred with  
black and white....So that was the Lighthouse,  
was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For  
nothing was simply one thing. The other was the  
Lighthouse too...

(172)

Woolf observes and communicates the Lighthouse  
objectively through the eyes and consciousnesses of various  
characters and voices at different points in time. Because  
it is both associative and elusive, because its significance  
is always changing, the Lighthouse as symbol remains largely  
mysterious and notably powerful. Its power, moreover,  
resides in the fact that it embodies a wide range of  
dialectics: light and dark, as indicated by the strokes of  
light and intermittent gaps of black; male and female, as  
discussed in Love's interpretation above; safety and danger,  
the guiding beacon in a dreadful sea storm; and what is  
both real and ideal. This last and perhaps most important  
dialectic is introduced within the first two pages of the  
novel

Initially, the reader glimpses the lighthouse as ideal--  
an ideal which, at this early stage, occupies the conscious-  
ness of six year old James: "the wonder to which he had  
looked forward for years and years it seemed" (9). It

attracts him as a mysterious and unknown foreign entity; 58  
a part of the larger world outside the realm of his own  
experience; and as a piece of that profound puzzle known  
as tradition (for it appears that voyages to the Lighthouse  
occur, like vacations, on a yearly basis). Despite early  
efforts to realize his ideal, however, James' much-anticipated  
journey to the Lighthouse is put off by bad weather--"There'll  
be no landing at the Lighthouse to-morrow" (12)--and it is  
not until years later that he finally makes the voyage.

The reality of the Lighthouse, for the Lighthouse  
also exists as a physical object with a purpose, standing  
on a small island somewhere in the Hebrides, is equally  
negative in its initial presentation. This reality is  
articulated by Mrs. Ramsay in one of her more didactic moments,  
addressing herself to her daughters:

For how would you like to be shut up for a whole  
month at a time, and possibly more in stormy  
weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn?  
she would ask; and to have no letters or news-  
papers, and to see nobody; if you were married,  
not to see your wife, not to know how your children  
were...to see the same dreary waves breaking week  
after week, and then a dreadful storm coming, and  
the windows covered with spray, and birds dashed  
against the lamp, and the whole place rocking,  
and not to be able to put your nose out of doors  
for fear of being swept into the sea? How would

(10-11)

It is not possible to discuss the Lighthouse as symbol without considering the importance of these two initial perspectives. The world as it appears in Woolf's novel is primarily a world of disparate forces. Conflict is the norm, and conflict increases. The individual caught up in the flux of life becomes more and more unbalanced, and reaches that crucial stage where there is only one question of any importance: "What does one live for? Why, one asked oneself, does one take all these pains for the human race to go on? Is it so very desirable?" (84); "What was the value, the meaning of things?" (113); "What does it mean then, what can it all mean?" (137); "What does one do? Why is one sitting here after all?" (138). Woolf's response in To the Lighthouse appears something like this:

So that is marriage, Lily thought, a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball...And suddenly the meaning which, for no reason at all, as perhaps they are stepping out of the Tube or ringing a doorbell, descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative, came upon them, and made them in the dusk standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife. Then, after an instant, the symbolical outline which transcended the real figures sank down again, and they became, as they met

them, Mr and Mrs Ramsay watching the children 60  
throwing catches. But still for a moment...

(69)

For a moment, what is immediate and real merges with what is symbolic or ideal and eternal. In the world which is primarily composed of conflict, then, there can be a brief but overwhelming reconciliation of disparate forces, a reconciliation such as Woolf herself experienced at this time when she wrote in her diary about that "great & astonishing sense of something there, which is 'it.'" Such moments are rare, but they are the essence of To the Lighthouse, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the image of the Lighthouse itself.

It is significant that the first two depictions of the Lighthouse, James' ideal and Mrs. Ramsay's didactic description, carry negative undertones, for in neither of these situations does the fleeting moment of synthesis occur. When next the Lighthouse appears, however, there is a profound sense of celebration. With the youngest children finally tucked away in bed, Mrs. Ramsay enjoys a moment to herself, recollecting the day's events, and in particular, James' reaction to the cancelled Lighthouse voyage. She articulates the harsh reality of the situation in one very concise line: "Children never forget" (60), but almost immediately, as she looks out to meet the long, steady stroke of the Lighthouse, the frustration she is experiencing vis à vis her little

...and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour, one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at - that light for example. And it would lift up on it some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind like that - "Children don't forget, children don't forget"...

(61)

What is real--both the light of the Lighthouse and the certainty that "children don't forget"--is absorbed by Mrs. Ramsay's vision. Her frustration is calmed by the stroke of the Lighthouse, soothed to the extent that she experiences a moment of synthesis with it. Mrs. Ramsay internalizes the symbol, and through this internalization becomes acutely aware that life's frustrations can be reconciled by a greater reality: life's gratifications;

...she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor)...she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough!

(62-63)

An equally overwhelming flash of unity occurs later that evening during Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party, and once again this is placed within the context of the Lighthouse, for as everything and everyone at the party come together, Mrs. Ramsay describes the experience:

It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out

(she glanced at the window with its ripple of 63  
reflected lights) in the face of the flowing...  
Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made  
that remains for ever after. This would remain.

(97)

The Lighthouse, then, although it advances many levels of meaning, ultimately represents the reconciliation of disparate forces. Though Mrs. Ramsay participates in its significance, since she too is a vehicle for pacifying and unifying various conflicts in the world around her, it becomes apparent in the second part of the novel that she herself has been absorbed into this larger signification. Indeed, in "Time Passes," the second segment of To the Lighthouse, Woolf's characters fade into the background, and details about them, details which would have been foregrounded had they appeared in the first part of the novel, are presented as minor parenthetical statements--Mrs. Ramsay's death, for example.

The focus of "Time Passes" is exactly that which it suggests: Time's assault upon the world that people have created, in this case, the Ramsay family and their summer cottage as it stands deserted during the war. As the walls of the cottage begin to crumble, and swallows and rats invade the interior, while outside poppies intrude upon the garden, all hope for the building and the return of the remaining Ramsays (for Andrew and Prue, like their mother, are dead) appears lost. And yet,

despite this overwhelming sense of decay and dilapidation, Mrs. Ramsay's words--"there is a coherence in things, a stability, something...is immune from change and shines out..."--hold their meaning, for against the ravishes of time there is still the Lighthouse:

64

There were things up there rotting in the drawers...The place was gone to rack and ruin. Only the Lighthouse beam entered the rooms for a moment, sent its sudden stare over bed and wall in the darkness of winter...

(128)

The Lighthouse is the only constant in the novel's three sections.

The third and final part of To the Lighthouse concerns the voyage that James was denied as a boy, ten years earlier. As in the first part of the novel, the dominant atmosphere is one of conflict: Mr. Ramsay expresses anger because the children are late--"What's the use of going now?" (137); and the children, James and Cam, strongly resent their father's tyrannical attitude: "In their anger they hoped that the breeze would never rise, that he might be thwarted in every possible way, since he had forced them to come against their wills" (152). However, as they near the Lighthouse, which represents something different for each of them, their grudges fall away; and upon landing, the sense of reconciliation experienced formerly by Mrs. Ramsay

alone, is experienced now by her husband and two youngest 65  
children:

What do you want? they both wanted to ask.  
They both wanted to say, Ask us anything and  
we will give it you....He [Mr. Ramsay] rose and  
stood in the bow of the boat, very straight and  
tall, for all the world, James thought, as if  
he were leaping into space, and they both rose  
to follow him as he sprang lightly like a  
young man, holding his parcel, on to the rock.

(190-1)

There is, however, another equally important and  
symbolic reconciliation occurring at this point in the novel.  
Progress toward the Lighthouse is carefully synchronized  
with the completion of Lily Briscoe's painting, and Lily  
experiences a moment of vision which surpasses even Mrs.  
Ramsay's communion with life and the Lighthouse. In  
fact, Lily draws everything together, for as she visualizes  
Mrs. Ramsay on the canvas, she simultaneously visualizes  
Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James as they sail toward the  
Lighthouse and the reconciliation which it represents:

...she felt curiously divided, as if one part  
of her were drawn out there - it was a still  
day, hazy; the Lighthouse looked this morning  
at an immense distance; the other had fixed  
itself doggedly, solidly, here on the lawn.

(147)

Art, then, is the answer that Lily Briscoe offers, 66  
art as a means by which one might reconcile life's  
conflicts, and give shape to chaos:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was - her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something....She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.

(191-2)

The fact that the novel ends here, affirming the unifying nature of art, and celebrating that very important word "vision," is significant. Many critics consider the landing at the Lighthouse to be the primary event, but Love's interpretation offers considerably more insight:

The Lighthouse as image becomes subservient to the painting--to art--although the trip to the Lighthouse ostensibly is the primary event. Artistic vision enables Lily to recall Mrs. Ramsay and to obtain her magical powers to order and unify the world. In turn, art is symbolic of the magical force that makes it

possible for Mr. Ramsay, James, and Cam to reach the Lighthouse and to be reconciled with one another. The Lighthouse as an image shrinks in importance as the painting grows in significance; the former becomes more discreet in its meaning, the latter more and more multiple. Thus art becomes the broad and totally syncretic phenomenon, eclipsing and subsuming even the Lighthouse...

(194)

Artistic vision, then, or indeed any vision through which the chaos of life is temporarily unified--this is the essence of Virginia Woolf's fourth novel. The fact that such moments of vision are rare is overpowered by the fact that they exist at all. And even as the symbols of achievement and reconciliation--both the Lighthouse and Lily Briscoe's painting--are realized, attained, conquered, there is a celebration and affirmation, as if, by materializing what the symbols represent, the individual becomes part of them, and becomes, therefore, eternal. Sadly, in Woolf's next novel, this vision becomes something of a nightmare.

But if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it. 68

(The Waves 180)

Published in 1931, The Waves was described by Virginia Woolf as "an abstract, mystical, eyeless book" (Diary III: 203). It is indeed difficult and intense, and even moreso than To the Lighthouse it is a novel of vision, for plot exists as a mere thread, fragile, delicate, and at times invisible, and all events are superseded by the worlds of consciousness of the six main characters, their sensations, thoughts, and perceptions.

To verify the abstract and mystical nature of The Waves, one need only examine the variety of critical opinions and interpretations offered since the novel's publication. On one hand, there is Daiches, who maintains that this is "the most eloquent and least communicative of Virginia Woolf's novels" (105), while on the other hand, one might consider Jean O. Love's challenging response:

..it is probable that the last part of Daiches' paradox will be the predominant impression and the novel will be mistaken for an experiment in form, as sometimes has occurred. Regrettably, it is also probable that much of the novel's abundant content will be overlooked.

(195)

...plot, dialogue, exterior descriptions--all disappear. She [Woolf] has achieved a new mode of communication. And what is communicated is not action, or sayings, or thoughts even, but pure being: the hidden life. The nerves of her six characters are laid bare, not by the scalpel, but by the X-ray of intuition.

(165)

Responses were equally mixed when the novel first appeared, ranging from the glowing praise of a letter written by G. Lowes Dickinson on October 23, 1931:

Your book is a poem, and as I think, a great poem...For there is throbbing under it the mystery of which all the poets and philosophers worth mentioning have felt and had their little shot at. I have only read it once and I see and know that it ought to be read often...

(Critical Heritage 271)

to Louis Kronenberger's review in the New York Times.

The question still remains, however, as to just how good this book is...certainly it contains much distinguished and beautiful writing; certainly it reveals exquisite sensibility. These qualities make it good enough to deserve the most careful scrutinizing, when high standards of comparison must be brought into play. And measured by those

standards, though it survives as something rare and unique enough, it emerges as minor writing. 70

(Critical Heritage 275)

The most diverse critical responses, however, are those which consider the final segment of The Waves, the segment in which Bernard the writer attempts to come to terms with his own life, and by implication, the lives of his six friends. Is it indeed "with a song of glory that the book ends" (Blackstone 180), or is Woolf's vision one of futility in the final analysis? Does Bernard's address to death affirm human continuity (Thakur 124), or is his heroic resolve undercut by the final sentence of the novel (Transue 144)? Transue, in fact, is one of the few critics who approaches the conclusion of The Waves in terms of the role of the artist and, more importantly, the function of language. In the final analysis, it is primarily these two considerations which elucidate the symbols and symbolic techniques of this, Virginia Woolf's most powerful novel.

The Waves is divided into nine chapters, each of which is introduced by a prologue. The sequence of chapters follows the lives of the novel's six characters, Bernard, Neville, Susan, Rhoda, Louis, and Jinny, from childhood through to old age, while the prologues correspond by following the progression of a single day from dawn to just after sunset. From beginning to end, each prologue is highly stylized, rich in imagery, and symbolic.

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was

indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes...

(5)

If this is indeed a "set piece" (and Daiches uses the phrase several times in his discussion of these prologues [Daiches 100-01]) it is a far cry from the often clichéd symbolic milieus of Night and Day, and even since To the Lighthouse there has been some obvious development. That is to say, Woolf has advanced from what is immediate and specific--heaps of dead leaves, young plants pushing through the ground, the swift race of dun-coloured waters in Night and Day--to an almost impressionistic and associative technique in To the Lighthouse, to what is timeless and universal or even primeval here. The prologues in The Waves present a setting which is both one day and all days, the final picture showing the vast, impersonal, and indifferent world of nature, and more importantly, a world where human-kind has no ascendancy. As Frank McConnell explains, these prologue descriptions:

present a phenomenal world without the intervention of human consciousness, a world of blind things which stands as a perpetual challenge to the attempts of the six monologists to seize, trans-

(126)

Insofar as these are set pieces, then, for all appearances they mark an inversion or reversal of the function attributed to the set pieces in Night and Day. That is to say, they do not harmonize with the characters in the novel. They do not provide a backdrop which corresponds with a character's particular state of mind. Rather, they present conflict: the challenge to each character to find his or her place in the impersonal setting--if indeed there is a place. In turn, the challenge that the set pieces offer indicates that Woolf's focus has narrowed even more since To the Lighthouse. The central concern is no longer a question of "What was the value, the meaning of things?" (To the Lighthouse 113). Now, it is a question of "Who am I?" (The Waves 55,56,59).

"A perfectly neat table; a curtain pulled methodically straight; a paper-knife dividing a French volume - nobody, I thought, ever changes the attitude in which we saw them first, or the clothes" (The Waves 184). An insight into the methods of human perception and recollection, Bernard's words also appropriate Woolf's use of character props in The Waves. The particular items and postures which the reader (through Woolf's subtle manipulation) associates with each individual character as he or she appears in the opening chapter of the novel, stay with that character throughout the course of the work, and indeed, come to represent the essence of that

particular personality. As in To the Lighthouse, the framework for these character props is serious rather than comic, and much of the success of the technique resides in the reader's powers of association. Thus, as Rhoda appears for the first time "rocking petals to and fro in her brown basin" (12), so the reader will recognize her by the same token as a young woman: "Alone, I rock my basins; I am mistress of my fleet of ships" (71), and in middle age, the same character prop foreshadows her suicide:

The sea will drum in my ears. The white petals will be darkened with sea water. They will float for a moment and then sink. Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me.

(139)

With Bernard, for whom words and phrases are so important, the character prop is a notebook:

When I am grown up I shall carry a notebook - a fat book with many pages, methodically lettered. I shall enter my phrases. Under B shall come "Butterfly powder". If, in my novel I describe the sun on the window-sill, I shall look under B and find butterfly powder.

(25)

And like Rhoda, as Bernard ages, the symbolic prop appears and reappears, initially, with the optimism of youth: "My book will certainly run to many volumes, embracing every

known variety of man and woman" (46). Then, in middle age: "I have made up thousands of stories; I have filled innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when I have found the true story..." (126). And finally, towards the end of life: "My book, stuffed with phrases, has dropped to the floor. It lies under the table, to be swept up by the charwoman..." (199).

The pattern applies to the other characters also: Susan's prop is a twisted handkerchief (9,96,168); for Neville, neat and exact in his habits, it is a knife (13,99,121,184); vibrant clothing--"there are gauzes and silks illumined in glass cases and underclothes trimmed with a million close stitches of fine embroidery, Crimson, green, violet..." (131)--characterizes Jinny, who dances and ripples with the vigour of the moment; and the chained beast stamping (6,7,37,45) represents Louis, frustrated by his inability to break away from the past, frustrated by his lack of self-confidence. For each of these six characters, the particular prop becomes so familiar that it is possible for the reader to recognize the individual without being given his or her name.

The context of male and female stereotypes within which the character props in To the Lighthouse function is certainly evident in The Waves also. Bernard's notebook, for example, is arranged methodically, indeed alphabetically, recalling Mr. Ramsay's logical (masculine) A to Z ordering of existence (To the Lighthouse 35), just as Rhoda's flower

petals or Jinny's vibrant feminine clothing clearly fit 75  
the female stereotype. Whether, as Transue argues of To the Lighthouse, Woolf is subordinating male/female issues (male destructiveness versus the female tendency to reconciliation, for example) by displacing them in these symbols, however, is not as clear as it was in the earlier novel. Primarily, this is because the strong note of criticism in To the Lighthouse, especially criticism directed towards Mr. Ramsay or Charles Tansley, does not appear to figure with either the males or the females here, despite the obvious stereotypes. Although Transue argues that Woolf is simply being more subtle in her criticism (128), in fact, she is actually showing more intuition regarding the nature and complexity of the central question, "Who am I?", for in a letter to Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson she admitted, "...but I did mean that in some vague way we are all the same person, and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one" (Critical Heritage 271). It could be argued, then, that what each character prop represents is simply a different aspect of the same highly complex self.

The question of identity in The Waves is further explored by means of a third symbolic technique. At various points in the novel Woolf illustrates the essence of each character (or the different aspects of the highly complex self) by cataloguing the varying responses of all six to a given object or event (Transue 131). When this occurs, it is not the object or event which becomes symbolic, as is the

case in the technique of character props. Instead, the responses themselves, the six different ways that the object or event is perceived, attain symbolic value. Thus, from the simple statement, "The willow tree grew by the river" (168), emerges a collection of perspectives, symbolic of six different approaches to the central question, "Who am I?" Bernard, for example, views the tree in abstract terms:

Its shower of falling branches, its creased and crooked back had the effect of what remains outside our illusions yet cannot stay them, is changed by them for the moment, yet shows through stable, still, and with a stillness that our lives lack. Hence the comment it makes; the standard it supplies, and the reason why, as we flow and change, it seems to measure..

(170)

while Neville, exact and precise in all he says and does, sees something else:

The scene was cut out with such intensity and so permeated the quality of his [Neville's] vision that for a moment I [Bernard] could see it too; the punt, the bananas, the young man through the branches of the willow tree.

(170)

Jinny, on the other hand, "flashed her fire over the tree" (170). Since she lives only for the vibrancy of the moment, Jinny's perception carries a strong sense of immediacy:

She made the willows dance, but not with illusion; for she saw nothing that was not there. It was a tree; there was the river; it was the afternoon; here we were; I in my serge suit; she in green. There was no past, no future; merely the moment...

(171)

And Rhoda, preferring solitude, fearing identity, offers yet another perspective: "The willow as she saw it grew on the verge of a gray desert where no birds sang. The leaves shrivelled as she looked at them, tossed in agony as she passed them" (170). Louis, identifying himself with the business world of the city, does not or cannot see the tree at all: "Through his landscape the tram squealed; the factory poured its acrid fumes" (171), and Susan's response at this point, intentionally or otherwise, is not given.

This cataloguing technique repeats, like the character props, at different stages in the lives of the six characters to the effect that, once again, the way in which the reader perceives each individual early on remains consistent despite the fact that the individual develops and matures. In other words, where Woolf catalogues the six childhood responses to afternoon tea here:

...and I [Susan] lap the sweet milk. I am not afraid of heat, nor of the frozen winter. Rhoda dreams, sucking a crust soaked in milk, Louis regards the wall opposite with snail-green eyes;

Bernard moulds his bread into pellets and calls 78  
them "people". Neville with his clean and  
decisive ways has finished. He has rolled his  
napkin and slipped it through the silver ring.  
Jinny spins her fingers on the table-cloth, as  
if they were dancing in the sunshine, pirouetting...

(17)

the reader recognizes, in these responses, the seeds of  
individuality which recur in subsequent years. Jinny  
dances her fingers on the table-cloth as a child, just as  
she delights in the thrills of dancing as a young and even  
middle-aged woman; indeed, just as she is seen to make the  
willows dance. Neville, likewise, is neat and exact in  
returning his used napkin to the silver ring, just as,  
later in life, he is "neat as a cat" (121) in his habits.

It has been suggested that The Waves is a novel  
which deals with the individual's attempt to come to terms  
with the flux of life, and that similar to, but with a  
more particular focus than To the Lighthouse, this attempt  
takes the form of an identity quest: "And now I [Bernard]  
ask, Who am I?" (195); "What am I?" (51); "Who am I  
[Neville]?" (56); and "But who am I [Susan]?" (66). One  
may speculate further that as in To the Lighthouse, this  
all-important question revolves around one central symbol  
of intensity, in this case, the waves. However, before  
the intensity of the waves as a central symbol is realized  
by the reader, the question of identity hovers around a

Louis explains,

It is Percival, sitting silent as he sat among the tickling grasses when the breeze parted the clouds and they formed again, who makes us aware that these attempts to say "I am this, I am that," which we make, coming together, like separated parts of one body and soul, are false.

(92)

Percival is the mysterious seventh character in The Waves, a character who, having no speaking part, is shown only through the thoughts, words, and actions of the other six. He is, perhaps, a manifestation of the other six as they come together in one highly complex self, the self that Woolf had in mind when she wrote, "[t]he six characters were supposed to be one." In any case, at ease with himself and the rest of the world, Percival is a born leader, and, as his name suggests<sup>4</sup>, a hero: "Look now how everybody follows Percival. His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander..." (25). Neville loves Percival (87); Bernard praises his god-like qualities (92); and even Louis, who resents Percival's powers and charms, recognizes too his own need to acknowledge and accept him: "Yet it is Percival I need, for it is Percival who inspires poetry" (27).

As a symbol, Percival functions in much the same way as the Lighthouse and Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse. Because he is at ease with himself and the flux of life,

when Bernard, Neville, Rhoda, and the others gather 80  
around him, they experience that all-important fleeting  
moment of unity and reconciliation. To carry the similarity  
from To the Lighthouse further, it is significant that this  
moment occurs at a dinner party held in Percival's honour,  
a dinner party not unlike Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party,  
particularly in its presentation of this moment:

"Let us hold it for one moment," said Jinny;  
"love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this  
globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth  
and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us  
that we shall perhaps never make this moment out  
of one man again."

(98)

As Neville elucidates further, in Percival's absence,  
"...there is no solidity. We are all silhouettes, hollow  
phantoms moving mistily without a background" (82), while  
in his presence, "all oppression is relieved. All  
impediment is removed. The reign of chaos is over. He has  
imposed order" (82).

The problem, however, is that Percival goes to India,  
and having just reached the age of twenty-five, falls from  
his horse and dies. For the six remaining characters,  
the harsh reality of the event is overwhelming. All had  
assumed Percival's immortality, or at least his longevity,  
and now, in desperation, all come face to face with the  
abruptness of death, the meaningless of life, and the loss

of a symbol, indeed, the loss of the unified self. When Mrs. Ramsay dies, there is consolation in the fact that, ostensibly, she is absorbed into, and made permanent by, the symbol of the Lighthouse. Thus, in the remainder of To the Lighthouse, as each character comes to terms with the latter, he or she also experiences a sense of communion with the former. To the Lighthouse concludes, for the most part, with a sense of completion and celebration. Here, when Percival dies, he too is absorbed into the central symbol of the novel, as Rhoda so clearly indicates:

...there is the river; there are ships that sail to India. I will walk by the river. I will pace this embarkment, where an old man reads a newspaper in a glass shelter. I will pace this terrace and watch the ships bowling down the tide....Into the wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth, I throw my violets, my offering to Percival.

(110-11)

However, this is as far as the similarity with To the Lighthouse carries, for as each character attempts to come to terms with the larger reality which is the waves, there is no celebration; there is no reconciliation; there is, primarily, despair.

between the waves and the symbolic centres employed by Woolf previously is that the waves exist within the realm of nature. That is to say, they are not human, like Mrs. Ramsay or Percival, nor are they human-made, like a lighthouse or Lily's painting. By their very definition, in fact, the waves are much more complex than any of the symbols used in Woolf's earlier novels: containing life, they are not themselves alive, nor are they dead, although they certainly contain death, they are always moving toward a shore, but again, they are continually pulled back also; and so on. It is, no doubt, because of this complexity of definition that Woolf was attracted to the waves as a symbol. Anything less difficult would not and could not have contained the urgency of her vision, which is so powerful in this novel.

On one level, the waves represent both the individual consciousnesses of the six characters, each character belonging to the larger sea of life, and the life flow itself. As Rhoda explains early in the novel, "...life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea. It is to this we are attached; it is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses" (44). Thus, the rhythmical rising and falling, the surging and churling, manifests itself in, and is discussed by, each character as each character discusses his or her own life. One might consider, for example, the manner in which Neville describes his arrival

I will not anticipate what is to come. The huge uproar is in my ears. It sounds and resounds, under this glass roof like the surge of a sea. We are cast down on the platform with our handbags. We are whirled asunder. My sense of self almost perishes; my contempt. I become drawn in, tossed down, thrown sky-high...

(48-49)

or the way in which Bernard discusses Neville's criticisms:

That confidence I shall keep to my dying day. Like a long wave, like a roll of heavy waters, he went over me, his devastating presence - dragging me open, laying bare the pebbles on the shore of my soul...

(60)

or even Jinny's description of settling down after winning a trivial childhood game:

Now the tide sinks. Now the trees come to earth; the brisk waves that slap my ribs rock more gently, and my heart rides at anchor, like a sailing-boat whose sails slide slowly down on to the white deck. The game is over. We must go to tea now.

(31)

At these early stages of life, what the waves represent does not pose a threat to the six characters,

for they have their youth, their futures before them, and 84  
of course they have their Lighthouse: Percival. Even  
Rhoda, who struggles more than the others and from a  
much earlier stage, even she in her youth, is able to  
acknowledge at least a semblance of order, whether it  
is simply the continuity of passing from June to July  
(43) or the achievement of crossing the great grey puddle  
which represents her identity:

I came to the puddle. I could not cross it.  
Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said,  
and fell....Then very gingerly, I pushed my  
foot across. I laid my hand against a brick  
wall. I returned very painfully, drawing  
myself back into my body over the grey, cad-  
averous space of the puddle.

(43)

However, as each character experiences more and more  
of life, as dreams fade and aging becomes apparent, and  
most of all, as death, through Percival, becomes a  
reality, Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Louis, and  
Rhoda are compelled to examine all facets of life, and of  
course the question of identity more closely. They are  
forced to confront the central symbol of the novel without  
the safety of previous illusions, for the reality is that  
what lies beyond Percival is the waves, and perhaps  
only the waves--relentless and impersonal in their rising  
and falling, and unlike the Lighthouse, potentially

Rhoda, by Percival's death, is the first of the six to attempt to come to terms with the waves:

Look at the street now that Percival is dead. The houses are lightly founded to be puffed over by a breath of air. Reckless and random the cars race and roar and hunt us to death like bloodhounds. I am alone in a hostile world....I shall ride rough waters and shall sink with no one to save me.

Percival, by his death, has made me this present, has revealed this terror...

(107)

Excessively insecure, easily frightened, and always out of place in society, Rhoda's response to the waves is one of terror, and finally extreme despair. She reacts in the only way that is possible for her: by flinging herself into the heart of the chaos. She reacts by committing suicide.

Susan's response is more accepting, for she recognizes that her children will live on after her own death (115), but there is no joy for Susan. It is an almost mechanical, unemotional acceptance:

Now I measure. I preserve. At night I sit in the arm-chair and stretch my arm for sewing; and hear my husband snore....And feel the waves of my life gather, churling, and

tossed, broken, round me who am rooted; and 86  
hear cries, and see other's lives eddying like  
straws round the piers of a bridge while I  
push my needle in and out and draw my thread  
through the calico.

I think sometimes of Percival who loved me.  
He rode and fell in India. I think sometimes of  
Rhoda. Uneasy cries wake me at dead of night.  
But for the most part I walk content with my sons.

(130)

Neville, Louis, and Jinny, too have each their own way  
of dealing with what the waves represent, Neville's response  
being perhaps the most optimistic, though by no means  
glorious.

Time passes, yes. And we grow old. But to sit  
with you, alone with you, here in London, in  
this firelit room, you there, I here, is all....  
There can be no doubt, I thought, pushing aside  
the newspaper, that our mean lives, unsightly  
as they are, put on splendour and have meaning  
only under the eyes of love.

(119-20)

For Neville, it is love which unifies life and makes life  
worthwhile, and so Neville spends his years looking for  
love, and remembering always his most important love,  
Percival.

It is Bernard, however, who tries most persistently

to come to terms with life, death, and the question of identity--the rise and fall of the waves. Sensitive and perceptive even as a child, it was he alone who sensed Susan's distress when Jinny kissed Louis. Indeed, it was he who attempted to comfort Susan and restore her world to unity by inventing stories about Elvedon and the magic wood. In fact, language--stories, words, phrases--is for Bernard the greatest source of unity. He grabs hold of language and uses it to structure his own self, the lives of his friends, and indeed his entire world. As he admits while still a boy in school:

I must open the little trap-door and let out these linked phrases in which I run together whatever happens, so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another.

(33)

and later as a young man: "when I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke round me I am in darkness - I am nothing" (89). With age and loss, however, Bernard too must face the reality of the waves, and as he struggles, yet again, for the right word, the right phrase, he realizes that in fact there may not be one:

Who and what are these unknown people? I ask. I could make a dozen stories of what he said, of what she said - I can see a dozen pictures. But what are stories? Toys I twist, bubbles

I blow, one ring passing through another.

88

And sometimes I begin to doubt if there are stories. What is my story? What is Neville's? There are facts, as, for example: "The handsome young man in the grey suit...." That is the truth; that is a fact, but beyond it all is darkness and conjecture.

(97)

Bernard realizes that unity in life, unity through language, is perhaps just an illusion after all. There is always, so to speak, a sandy cat stealing a piece of fish in the background: "Let a man get up and say, 'Behold this is the truth,' and instantly I perceive a sandy cat filching a piece of fish in the background. Look, you have forgotten the cat, I say..." (126). Bernard's realization seems to suggest a problem in communication. Language should unify thought and articulation, but it does not always succeed.

And so, in Bernard's final summing up, which saturates the last forty pages of The Waves, Woolf explores the difficulty and paradox of her own art; for one should not lose sight of the fact that as a writer herself, she, like Bernard, must also search for the right word, the right phrase, the right story. More important, the terror of the waves was very much a part of her own life. In her diary of September 18, 1923, for example, she described a short but alarming mental tremor during which she envisioned

cat II

the image of a fin rising above the waves (III: 214), 89  
and three years later, on September 15, 1926, she wrote  
the following under the heading, "A State of Mind".

Woke up at perhaps 3. Oh it's beginning, it's  
coming--the horror--physically like a painful  
wave swelling about the heart--tossing me up. I'm  
unhappy, unhappy! Down--God, I wish I were dead.  
Pause. But why am I feeling this? Let me  
watch the wave rise. I watch...Wave crashes I  
wish I were dead. I wish I were dead! I've  
only a few years to live, I hope. I can't face  
this horror any more. (This wave spreading out  
over me.)...

(Diary IV: 110)

Thus, as Bernard the writer attempts to come to terms  
with the waves, one suspects (not without certain pre-  
cautions and reservations) that at many points in the  
monologue he is inseparable from Woolf the writer. And  
when he acknowledges the illusionary nature of language  
as unifier--"Let us pretend that we can make out a plain  
and logical story, so that when one matter is dispatched -  
love for instance - we go on, in an orderly manner, to the  
next" (170)--he is, perhaps, providing a footnote for  
The Waves itself, as envisioned by Virginia Woolf, and  
indeed for all literature. But if language is inadequate  
in the final analysis, what remains? Bernard returns to  
the same answer time and again; initially, when he

realizes that the overwhelming power of first love cannot 90  
be approached by words:

Here again there should be music...a painful,  
guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like,  
pealing song to replace these flagging, foolish  
transcripts - how much too deliberate! how much  
too reasonable! - which attempt to describe the  
flying moment of first love....What is the use of  
painfully elaborating these consecutive sentences  
when what one needs is nothing consecutive but  
a bark, a groan?

(169)

Then, when Percival dies:

But for pain words are lacking. There should be  
cries, cracks, fissures, whiteness passing over  
chintz covers, interference with the sense of  
time, of space; the sense also of extreme fixity  
in passing objects...beneath all of which appears  
something so very important, yet remote, to be  
just held in solitude.

(178)

And finally, when he drops his notebook to the floor, a  
piece of litter to be swept up by the charwoman:

I need a little language such as lovers use,  
words of one syllable such as children speak  
when they come into the room and find their  
mother sewing and pick up some scrap of bright

wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz. I need 91  
a howl, a cry.

(199)

What remains, that which seems most likely to offer permanence, is something beyond or outside the ordered and unified world, something pre-linguistic--a bark, a groan, a cry, and possibly a symbol, for Bernard, in summing up, discusses the latter of these as well:

On the outskirts of every agony sits some observant fellow who points; who whispers as he whispered to me that summer morning in the house where the corn comes up to the window, "The willow grows on the turf by the river. The gardeners sweep with great brooms and the lady sits writing." Thus he directed me to that which is beyond and outside our own predicament; to that which is symbolic, and thus perhaps permanent, if there is any permanence in our sleeping, eating, breathing, so animal, so spiritual and tumultuous lives.

(168)

And more important, Woolf transfers to him the symbolic vision that she described in her diary of September 1923:

Looking over this parapet I see far out a waste of water. A fin turns. This bare visual impression is unattached to any line of reason, it springs up as one might see the fin of a porpoise

on the horizon. Visual impressions often communicate thus briefly statements that we shall in time come to uncover and coax into words.

92

(The Waves 128)

The visual impression, like the bark, the groan, the cry, exists before language and communicates more than language ever can--something indeed "so very important, yet remote." The paradox, of course, is that this is a novel, and as such, the visual impression can only be conveyed through words. In the final analysis, then, where does the symbol as Woolf sees it stand? Since the quest for identity is the essence of The Waves, it would appear that the symbol is used in an attempt to come to terms with the all-important question, "Who am I?" Ironically, what it teaches in this novel is that "I am nothing," that is, the individual is insignificant. To elucidate this, one must consider the final passage of the novel:

And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back....What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I fling myself, unvanquished

The waves broke on the shore.

(200)

Bernard's challenge to death is heroic, and it is commendable, but it is ultimately futile, for riding against death, he compares himself to Percival riding in India. By implication, Bernard will not defeat the enemy. He will die as Percival died. In the end, then, man or woman does not figure. There is only the relentlessness of the waves, and ironically, the words on the page, the linguistic symbols on the page, employed to describe them. An adamantly pessimistic vision? Perhaps not.

"The old cliches will come in very handy."

94

("The Symbol" 290)

Virginia Woolf admitted that " many people say that it [The Waves] is hopelessly sad - but I didn't mean that. I did want somehow to make out, if only for my own satisfaction, a reason for things..." (Critical Heritage 271). Her use of symbol seems to be part of that reason, and it is not until March of 1941 (a short time before Woolf's suicide) that the complete picture emerges. It was in March of 1941 that Woolf published "The Symbol," a short story originally titled "Inconclusions." It is the story of a mountain:

"The mountain," the lady wrote, sitting on the balcony of the hotel, "is a symbol..." She paused. She could see the topmost height through her glasses. She focused the lens, as if to see what the symbol was....She had written the mountain was a symbol. But of what? In the forties of the last century two men, in the sixties four men had perished; the first party when a rope broke; the second when night fell and froze them to death. We are always climbing to some height; that was the cliché. But it did not represent what was in her mind's eye; after seeing through her glasses the virgin height.

(288-89)

What the mountain represents is a very important need, the need to strive towards and challenge something that is out

of reach: another human being, a Lighthouse, a vision. 95

The unnamed woman in "The Symbol" describes it thus:

The mountain just now reminded me how when I was alone, I would fix my eyes upon her mother's death, as a symbol. I would think if I could reach that point - when I should be free - we could not marry as you remember until she died - A cloud then would do instead of the mountain...

(289)

Regardless of what the individual chooses as a symbol, then, the important thing is that the symbol exists at all, and moreso, that it exists to be challenged. The development of symbol in Virginia Woolf's writing gives a good indication that for her, this importance increased and became much more immediate as her career, and her life, progressed. That is to say, in an early work such as Night and Day, the blot fringed with flames, a representation of Katherine Hilbery's and Ralph Denham's desired goal of synthesis in love and marriage, appears only at the end of the novel. Moreover, although it is powerful, it exists within a context of superficial images which tends to undermine it. With To the Lighthouse, the challenge--both the Lighthouse journey and the completion of Lily Briscoe's painting--begins at the beginning of the novel, and carries through the entire work. In fact, striving towards these symbolic centres is the essence of To the Lighthouse, and when the goal is met, the novel ends. The Waves addresses the idea of challenge

with considerably more force than its predecessors, for 96  
Woolf locates the central symbol of the waves in a context  
of life and death, agony, loss, and for the first time,  
defeat. It has been suggested that the relentlessness of  
the waves makes for a conclusion devoid of hope, but in light  
of "The Symbol" this should, perhaps, be reconsidered, for  
there is an ostensible parallel between the implications  
of Bernard's challenge to the waves, and the outcome of  
the challenge made by the climbers in this story:

"They are roped together. One I think I told you  
was at the same school with Margaret. They are  
now crossing a crevasse...."

The pen fell from her hand, and the drop of  
ink straggled in a zig zag line down the page.  
The young men had disappeared.

It was only late that night when the search  
party had recovered the bodies that she found the  
unfinished letter on the table on the balcony.  
She dipped her pen once more; and added, "The old  
clichés will come in very handy. They died trying  
to climb the mountain....And the peasants brought  
spring flowers to lay upon their graves. They  
died in an attempt to discover..."

(290)

If, in the final analysis, that which the symbol represents  
is not as important as the attempt to achieve it, then

Bernard's determination, despite the implications of 97  
the novel's final sentence, is a manifestation of victory.

1 These include James Hafley's "Symbolism in The Voyage Out, and Irene Simon's "Some Images in Mrs. Dalloway" and "The Sea in To the Lighthouse."

2 In this case, I am referring to the style of such Victorian novelists as Anne Bronte or George Eliot, coming out of the Jane Austen tradition.

3 The exception is Augustus Carmichael. As a poet, he has more in common with the female characters who show artistic sensitivity and perception. Augustus Carmichael is productive rather than destructive, and this sets him apart from Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley, and the other males in the novel.

4 In reference to the Grail legend, it is the knight named Percival who succeeds in obtaining the Grail and presenting it to King Arthur.

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Title of Thesis: THE SYMBOLISM OF VIRGINIA WOOLF: A Study of the Progressive Use of Symbol in Virginia Woolf's Night and Day, To the Lighthouse, and The Waves

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Kathy L. Markham

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