FIRE AND THE SELF

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Abstract

The present paper continues our analysis of the self as built in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, an analysis rooted in the relation between the four temperaments and the four primal elements (Fand, 1999). The 'facet' of the diamondlike self we concentrate on is Jinny – the element of fire, a carpe diem character who defines her self by means of a language of seduction, of the impact of a displayed eroticism on the audience of men fueling her passion for life.

Keywords: selfhood, fire, physicality, seduction, audience, shared language

In "'The Burden of Individual Life': Urban Character in *The Waves*", Eric Sandberg (2009:1) claims that Virginia Woolf is a "writer of character", her fictional and non-fictional writing being centered on "issues of characterisation" while furthering the dichotomy between essence and relation. There are "two poles of Woolf's vision of character", adds Sandberg "the relational and the essential, or character oriented outwards towards the clarity and activity of the social world and character oriented inwards towards darkness and silence".

From a different perspective, character creation is to be seen not only as an intellectual, artistic challenge, or as a mere literary experiment Woolf indulges in, but also as a self-mirroring of the writer herself. Going even further, Mulas asserts that the six woolfian characters represent aspects of their author's personality, as well as aspects of the human personality (78):

> She is in love with words, like Bernard: in love with books, like Neville: a lover of action, like Louis: like Susan feminine, earthy, nature-loving: like Jinny sensual and sociable: like Rhoda hypersensitive and solitary – must one anticipate and say that like Rhoda she was to kill herself? She is all this, and now one aspect, now another predominates.
>
> *(Guiguet qtd in Mulas 78)*

> The imaginative impulse (Bernard), the desire to impose order upon material things (Louis), delight in personal relationships (Neville), pleasure of the body (Jinny), joy in motherhood (Susan) and the life of solitude (Rhoda).
>
> *(C.B.Cox qtd in Mulas 78)*

Going back to Sandberg's approach, the Woolfian character we focus on would mirror the outwards-oriented self, "a perpetual day self", as Roxanne Fand puts it, always in need of an audience to display the image of her body to. In our analysis, we make use of Fand's (55-62) perspective on the characters in the novel, according to which the

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poetic language of the characters' inner discourse (carrying their dominant traits) brings forth the doctrine of the four basic elements: Bernard→ air, Jinny → fire (her perpetual motion, her passion and energy), Rhoda→ water, Susan, Neville and Louis → earth. Fand also acknowledges the fact that this theory of personality is not considered a scientific one nowadays, yet it "helps both to clarify the qualitative differences among them and to obscure the gendering of such qualities" (55).

Jinny is the character in permanent motion, to some extent suggesting the self that resents being anchored and also the self that is not fragmented by the intrusion of outward reality. On observing Miss Lambert, she envisions herself in a red dress wrapping her body, entering the room "pirouetting" (*W* 24), and then, as she sits down in this "gilt chair", her dress "would make a flower shape". This image is reiterated throughout the novel, gathering in it liveliness, desire to stand out (to be "in the middle of the room"), to display beauty and stir imagination, to be admired, thus emphasizing the power of sexual attraction Jinny delights in. It is "a barren nerve-racked sexuality […], not a rich, warm bodily life" that is suggested by means of the images Woolf uses in portraying this character (Bloom 113).

Goldman (72) sees Susan and Jenny as "rural and urban versions of women subordinated to the male order", Jinny also being referred to as "an object of erotic contemplation". Indeed, both characters define their selves in connection to men, Susan representing the domestic submission to male order, while Jinny represents the somehow promiscuous display of eroticism.

Jinny likes mirrors; yet aware of the imperfections of her face ("my lips are too wide", "my eyes are too close together", "I show my gums too much when I laugh" [*W* 30]) she needs long looking-glasses, one that she could see her entire body reflected in ("I see myself entire. I see my body and head in one now" [30]), resenting the "small-looking" ones that mutilate the reflected image, leaving the body fragmented, a hiatus that does not result in a complete image of the self when seen in relation to one's own body. She is not a static, passive character that indulges in solitude – she needs the others to echo her image of the body, to see herself reflected in their eyes/responses to her. Jinny is defined by movement, aliveness, enjoying life to the fullest: "I move, I dance; I never cease to move and to dance" (30), "all is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph" (33). To her, life translates in running, moving, dancing, and triumphing, all these thinning out her body (33). Still, being like this, continuity is altered, language and thinking are interrupted, never complete, brought to a halt: "Yet I cannot follow any word through its changes. I cannot follow any thought from present to past"; imagination (broader than the image of the red dress) is suspended as well: "I do not dream". She resents darkness and sleep as they bring about interruption, fragmentation of her restlessness, implying stillness and not being seen by the others (her audience), opposing her need for movement. Further reference to Jinny's need for motion is made in the third part of the novel; to her the time the others need to rest, when they "put out the lights

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and go upstairs" is "a dark moment", a "momentary pause" (75) she needs to 'survive', waiting for the day to come.

The others' admiration is the incentive she needs so that she could feel alive, so that she could vibrate; she is a flame that needs to burn continuously, fueled by men's desire, a character "centered in the here and now of her body" (Fand 57) achieving "completion in each encounter" (ibid. 58). At a certain point in the novel her image reflected on the shining glass in the tunnel triggers the reaction of a gentleman. Communication is established only at a visual level, initiated by the outward reality of her body and the response (the image of her own beauty reflected in this 'mirror') makes her body resonate, and also brings about the awareness of the power of her body on the others: "He smiles at my reflection in the tunnel. My body instantly of its own accord puts forth a frill under his gaze. My body lives a life of its own" (*W* 46); "I open my body and I shut my body at my will. Life is beginning" (47). It is this fire which burns inside her that defines her self, making her feel "rooted", yet flowing (76), a search for love that is not limited to one man only: "I shall not let myself be attached to one man only. I do not want to be fixed, to be pinioned" (40).

Her passions are but "moments of ecstasy", flames which turn to ashes when they end up in indifference/dead fire, momentary pauses whose stillness she needs to oppose. One such ecstatic moment is the one Woolf describes in the third part of the novel, "the most exciting moment I have ever known", says Jinny (76) when the flow of words that "crowd and cluster and push forth" mirrors the burning desire; the relationship between the self and the body is again focused on and so is the one between the self and the shared language. The fading away of passion is translated in terms of the awareness of their bodies:

> Words crowd and cluster and push forth one on top of another. It does not matter which. They jostle and mount on each other's shoulders. The single and the solitary mate, tumble and become many. It does not matter what I say. Crowding, like a fluttering bird, one sentence crosses the empty space between us. It settles on his lips. (77)
>
> That is my moment of ecstasy. Now it is over.
> Now slackness and indifference invade us. Other people brush past. We have lost consciousness of our bodies uniting under the table. (78)

Jinny is a *carpe diem* character, always prepared for the moment to come ("I am prepared, I am arrayed […] The fiddlers have lifted their bows" [75]), protected thus against the feeling of being vulnerable, not in control. While Louis' ring is one of steel, hers is one of light mediated by her body. The reality of her self is thus the reality of her physicality: "I can imagine nothing beyond the circle cast by my body. My body goes before me, like a lantern down a dark lane, bringing one thing after another out of darkness into a ring of light" (96).

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Woolf's characters oscillate between the "day self" and the "night self" (to use Fand's classification), a wavelike movement from coherent to incoherent identity, and Jinny is not an exception. Now that the sun "had sunk lower in the sky" (139) and "all for a moment wavered and bent in uncertainty and ambiguity" (140), as we find out in the descriptive passage of the seventh section of the novel, Jinny hesitates too. The mirrors she enjoyed seeing her image reflected in (whether inanimate or animate mirrors) show now a body marked by the passage of time, aged, "solitary" and "shrunk", one that ceases to be reflected in her audience's eyes. Despite her "attractiveness and confidence, time brings vulnerability", and Jinny needs now "effort of mind to prepare herself to see the identity she wishes to have reflected back to her" (Flint in Briggs 237) – indeed, vulnerability and fear overcome Jinny: she is no longer part of the young ones, of that "procession", as she calls it, of bodies that stir admiration, always answered to when they signal. She is now one of "the soundless flight of upright bodies down the moving stairs like the pinioned and terrible descent of some army of the dead downwards and the churning of the great engines remorselessly forwarding us, all of us, onwards" (*W* 148). But fear is chased away, the physical decay that the passage of time inevitably triggers can be concealed: the preparations she makes in front of the mirror make her feel part of a "triumphant procession" which offers her and the others the illusion of beauty her body longs for. She is now "equipped, prepared, driving onward" (149).

"My imagination is the body's" (169), says Jinny who is unable to see beyond the present moment, the body and the ecstasy found in the encounter with the other. The world she can create and in which she can anchor herself, is given by the capacity of the body to inspire, to 'burn', while the emotional torment is annihilated in the encounter of the bodies. Jinny's creation is her own body, her face, which she needs to 'prepare', now that it has come to reflect the passage of time, the changes that she makes on it being meant to beautify the aged body, to give the illusion of preserved youth and beauty, a frail victory against time.

Worth mentioning here is Roxanne Fand's assertion that the act of 'beautifying' the individual body (which, in our reading, can no longer offer the needed identity 'anchor') is not done for "her private conquests anymore, but as a badge of pride in being part of that great collective (un)consciousness beyond her individual body" (79). Collective identity becomes, thus, a refuge, once individual identity (framed here by the character's physicality) has weakened.

Woolf's perspective on life is superbly reflected in her characters' understanding of the complexity of existence; the individual's life comes to be envisioned as "a solid substance, shaped like a globe" (193), or as a door hiding and/or revealing images of the past or of a near future, granting or blocking access to them; it is also contained in the image of a net thrown into water that brings to the surface all the encounters, feelings, events etc. of one's life; or it is a tiger chasing its prey. The myriad-faceted life of a diamondlike self.

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