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# Collective Consciousness; Sharing Being Through Phenomenology, Sensation & Perception in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

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## **Collective Consciousness:**

Sharing Being through Phenomenology, Sensation & Perception

in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

and in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

Nalani S Kopp

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts at the City College of the City University of New  
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## **Introduction:**

### **Gazing Beyond Narcissus' Pool**

"There was a pool, limpid and silvery / ... / Spellbound he saw himself, and motionless / Lay like a marble statue staring down" (Ovid 407, 419-420). Captivated by his reflection, Narcissus is consumed by his image reflected in a pool. Forever recognized as the ill of egoism, the Narcissus myth warns that if we do not look beyond ourselves, we will perish as a civilization. Conversing with the Narcissus within us all, Bernard replies, "We are not single," in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (67). Being human is not an individual experience; we are reflections of our society, family, and of one another. Both George Eliot in *Middlemarch* and Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* attempt to describe human experience through literature. In the subtitle of her novel, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, Eliot alludes to how she will study the life of each Middlemarch resident. Both Eliot and her characters are engrossed in ontological pursuits, just as the six narrators in Woolf's *The Waves* are constantly in flux attempting to understand what it means to be human. Eliot and Woolf create a collective consciousness between characters, between characters and readers, and between themselves as writers to extend the human gaze beyond the self in pursuit of our being. Eliot's narrator connects the Middlemarch residents with history in order to show the importance of shared being across time while Woolf weaves a collective consciousness narrated by six different voices. Though at

times individuals experience a violent convergence with the collective consciousness, shared being is necessary to socially evolve. Broadening beyond the foreground of individual existence, Eliot and Woolf explore how our background (our interconnections with others, perceptions, and sensations) make us whole.

Collective consciousness is the belief that as humans we exist on a common plane through our sensory experiences and perceptions of reality. As authors, Eliot and Woolf also share a collective consciousness in fiction. Though writing almost 70 years apart from one another, both novelists aim to accurately describe human experience. In “How Should One Read a Book” Virginia Woolf describes the relationship between works of fiction, “Books have a great deal in common; they are always overflowing their boundaries; they are always breeding new species from unexpected matches among themselves” (64). Virginia Woolf revealed a great appreciation for Eliot’s works. After reading Eliot’s volumes in their entirety, she writes the bold statement, “no one else has ever known her as I know her”.<sup>i</sup> According to Woolf’s own determination that all books “overflow their boundaries,” we can consider that the relationship between Woolf and Eliot is more than sheer influence. The two authors share consciousness: Eliot leaves *Middlemarch* open-ended for Woolf to continue her exploration of human interconnectivity. By examining character interconnectivity, and their phenomenological experiences, as well as the purpose of the poetic sections in

*The Waves*, and the quotes prefacing each of *Middlemarch*'s books, the reader can understand how the authors manipulate their fictional worlds in order to replicate human experience.

Though certain characters, such as Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate, are often abstracted from *Middlemarch* as social heroes in literary criticism, each of Eliot's characters is significant in her *study* of the provincial town. Without Dorothea's encounters with Celia, Mr. Casaubon, and several other Middlemarch residents, Dorothea would simply not be Dorothea. Eliot communicates her novel's purpose in sly asides by herself or through her narrator in Book One:

Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* [main characters] folded in her hand. Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement...but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence... some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; while a few personages or families that stood with rocky firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity, and altering with the double change of self and beholder (88).

Eliot acknowledges the averse, old provincial society, but also notes the characters that are “constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence” (88). Understanding that change within social evolution is imperceptible within our own lifetimes, Eliot focuses upon the rapid movement internally within her characters. Under her microscope, Eliot will examine the relationships between the citizens of Middlemarch, especially when new characters are introduced to the town, such as Tertius Lydgate. One such character could physically enter a room without influencing any change upon the social sphere, but at the same time create chaotic change upon the consciousness of the characters within the room. Some of the Middlemarch citizens will alter under the perception of others “with the double change of self and beholder,” while others will maintain their “rocky firmness” and attempt to swallow the social anomaly entering the room (Eliot 88). Ultimately, Eliot explores the violence of assimilation or maintenance of individuality within the public sphere. If new citizens, such as Tertius Lydgate and Will Ladislaw, do not participate in Middlemarch in an acceptable way, they will become social pariahs, who are banned from actively contributing to the society. In order to reflect human experience, Eliot explores the dynamics of interconnected characters beneath the lens of perception and sensation.

“One sensation strikes and then another,” Louis narrates as time passes in his youth (Woolf 39). Woolf calls *The Waves* in her diary, “an abstract mystical

eyeless book: a play-poem” (Cited by Randles 45).<sup>ii</sup> Each of her characters will perform monologues and soliloquies. Woolf ensures that each character has equal agency within the narration; the overall, combined voice is not masculine, nor feminine—it is human. Her intention is to create “many characters and only one; and also an infinity, a background behind” (Cited by Randles 53).<sup>iii</sup> Therefore, Woolf acknowledges that a single character cannot formulate their entire being in isolation. The act of intermingling voices joins the experience of the characters, creating a collective consciousness that defies gender boundaries and takes in account more than the narcissistic foreground. Often times, one character’s interior thoughts will translate to another and then impact the entire circle of friends. Bernard describes the collective experience in the first section of the novel: “We melt into each other with phrases... We make an unsubstantial territory” (Woolf 16). Woolf implies that as a people we are incorporeal without our relationships with others; we “melt into each other” in order to define our being (16).

Eliot introduces the idea of indefinite being in the Prelude of *Middlemarch* by describing the purpose of some people’s lives as “inconvenient indefiniteness,” meaning their lives are discordant with reason, morals, or ethics causing troublesome, *undefined*, and unlimited qualities in society. Notably, Eliot first introduces the phrase when discussing women’s purpose in society: “Some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with



which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of women: if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude” (Eliot 3-4). To paraphrase, some have argued that God created women discordant to reason, moral, and ethics causing their troublesome qualities of being undefined and being limitless. Eliot proposes that if there are any women with even the slightest competence, then she will consider the social behavior scientifically in order to determine their character more accurately and dispel the “inconvenient indefiniteness” surrounding their being. Eliot continues,

Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than any one would imagine from the sameness of women’s coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse. Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are disperse among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed (4).

Until scientific observation is performed the “indefiniteness” and lack of distinction between types of women remains. Eliot acknowledges that even

though women look alike and enjoy similar love-stories, there are many variations to their being. Possibly invoking the Danish fairy tale, “The Ugly Duckling,” by Hans Christian Andersen, published in 1843, Eliot describes with passing time a woman resembling a “cygnet,” or young swan, is “reared uneasily” amongst the ordinary ducklings (4). “Here and there is born a Saint Theresa,” who attempts to achieve unattainable “goodness,” but is unable to found anything substantial (Eliot 4). Tragically, Eliot acknowledges how one person is limited in their ability to influence social evolution. Eliot’s nihilistic view of Saint Theresa explains the reader’s dissatisfaction with the ending of the novel. The reader desires hope for change, especially when escaping into the imaginary world of fiction. Yet, unlike Andersen’s fantastical tale, which culminates in the cygnet maturing into a beautiful swan, Eliot’s novel concludes in the pragmatic reality that one person cannot change an entire society.

Woolf deduces that Eliot’s heroines “bring out the worst of her, lead her into difficult places, make her self-conscious, didactic, and occasionally vulgar”(“George Eliot” 4). Therefore, Woolf sees the problematic heroine as a replication of Eliot’s own struggle in Victorian society. Just as Shakespeare would set his historical plays in the past in order to avoid displeasing the monarchy, Eliot applies her theories in her scientific study of the “provincial life” of Middlemarch 30 years before her time. Kate Millett, as quoted by Elaine Showalter in “Queen George”, writes that Eliot was the leader who “lived the

revolution...but did not write of it” and continues that Dorothea “is an eloquent plea that fine mind be allowed an occupation; but it goes no farther than petition” (72). Eliot is a woman discovering her place in society and questioning her purpose in life, but not yet reacting directly against gender roles.

Dorothea Brooke is the St. Theresa of *Middlemarch*; she desires achievement beyond the scope of a typical female and compels herself to “goodness” (Eliot 4). Already in Book One, Eliot recognizes Dorothea as a St. Theresa, who desires to overcome her “indefiniteness”: “For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make life greatly effective...hardly more than a budding woman, but yet with an active conscience and a great mental need” (Eliot 26). Dorothea expects that her worldly acts, such as building adequate housing for the poor, will make her life “greatly effective,” or significant. Though Dorothea desires purpose, Eliot foreshadows her tragic fate to become a “foundress of nothing” by simply naming her St. Theresa. Despite her sister Celia’s pragmatic approach to marriage, when Dorothea meets Mr. Casaubon for the first time she believes that their union will culminate in her achievement of “goodness” (Eliot 4). Instead of the “indefiniteness” that has “oppressed” and hung heavily in her mind, the entrance of Mr. Casaubon aids Dorothea in defining her being because instead of becoming a common housewife, she expects to be able to aid a linguistic scholar in his seemingly monumental work (Eliot 26).

Dorothea's introduction to the newly arrived Mr. Casaubon influences her development as a human being. Ironically, Mr. Casaubon's failure as a writer can be connected to Eliot's own anxieties as a female novelist in the Victorian Period.

Sympathizing with Eliot, Woolf sees greatness in her "searching power and reflective richness" ("George Eliot" 6). Pointing to the relationship between Woolf and Eliot, Showalter believes that Woolf related to Eliot's position in Victorian society as the "first woman of the age," an anachronism imprisoned by her time (295, 296).<sup>iv</sup> Woolf comprehends the internal struggle within Dorothea and interprets her "indefiniteness" as the author's own objective. She also remarks in "George Eliot", a critical eulogy, that Dorothea's story is an "incomplete version of the story of George Eliot herself" (6). Though Dorothea's indefinite condition may relate to Eliot's plight as a writer, at the same time, Eliot distances herself from Dorothea through her third person omniscient narrator by tangentially describing other characters in the town.

How Eliot builds character relationships throughout *Middlemarch* in order to construct the expectations of the provincial town, relates directly to how Woolf's characters perceive and react toward the city of London. In *The Waves*, Susan describes the bustling city as a

triumphant procession; this is the army of victory...They are better than savages in loin-cloths...These broad thoroughfares—  
Piccadilly South, Piccadilly North, Regent Street and the

Haymarket—are sanded path of victory driven through the jungle.  
I too, with my little patent-leather shoes, my handkerchief that is  
but a film of gauze, my reddened lips and my finely pencilled  
eyebrows march to victory with the band (Woolf 194).

Even though Susan often describes London in disgust in other scenes in the novel, she acknowledges that by dressing and applying her makeup in a particular manner reinforces the city's expectations and gender roles. Metaphorically, London is an "army of victory" marching towards progress and Susan believes her participation in the city is vital for the victory of mankind. Therefore, not only do characters share a collective experience amongst themselves, their dwellings are personified in order to reflect the importance of the community as success against mortality. If we progress forward as a species, we will be able to evolve over time.

Rhoda's reaction opposes how Susan readily participates in the society; she says, "I am nobody. I have no face. This great company...has robbed me of my identity" and "I will seek out a face, a composed, a monumental face, and will endow it with omniscience, and wear it under my dress" (Woolf 33). Rhoda does not feel as if she exists. She has been violently assaulted, "robbed" of her "identity" (Woolf 33). Since she is unable to determine her being under the pressures of others, she shifts and assumes the face of another in order to survive in a society that wants to assimilate and define her.

Eliot also personifies the town of Middlemarch several times in her novel. One of the most significant instances is when the narrator discusses Lydgate's abrupt interjection into the town. Lydgate has come to Middlemarch to practice new forms of medicine, but he is not warmly welcomed by the community since many of his ideas oppose the traditional standards set by previous doctors. While discussing Lydgate's plight, the narrator remarks that "Middlemarch, in fact, counted on swallowing Lydgate and assimilating him very comfortably" (144). Instead of allowing progress in the medicinal field, the town desires to swallow and assimilate Lydgate, once again returning to Eliot's nihilistic point of view upon social evolution (144). Both Middlemarch and London gain agency through their personification, reminding the reader not to examine the characters solely on the microscopic level, but to also consider the macro evolution, or de-evolution, of the society as a whole.

Liana Piehler argues that Eliot's intent is made more apparent by focusing on the spatial development of the setting. She considers how Dorothea's physical relationship with others illuminates to her internal desires while also analyzing how Dorothea's spatial arrangement influences her metamorphosis. Agreeing with Woolf, Piehler recognizes the parallelism between Dorothea's contemplations and struggles within the novel and Eliot's experience in the Victorian literary society. Using the Prelude's introduction of a St. Theresa, Piehler concurs that Dorothea longs to understand her purpose in life and of her

“enclosures”(106). I would further the argument, by noting that Dorothea particularly desires education because knowledge will give her the power to evolve her position within society. Piehler believes Dorothea’s failure is necessary as an impetus for the reader to “require courage and a developed sensitivity” in order to change the future outside of fiction (106). With an artistic analysis of the enclosures surrounding various female characters, Piehler conveys the parallelism of spatial dynamics and internal limitations within the novel. For example, when Dorothea first moves to Lowick Manor, she is disinterested in changing the gothic style of its rooms, though it is considered a fiancée’s duty and privilege to furnish their new home. Piehler sees this inaction as a means to “offset the submissions that will occur later” when Dorothea is a wife; in other words, she sees Dorothea’s inaction in setting up her future household, as concurrent with how Dorothea will act as a wife (112). Piehler postulates that her spatial choices reflect her “skewed focus” and they symbolize her internal growth (112). However, Piehler neglects to mention that Dorothea may simply not be concerned with frivolous things, such as earlier in the novel, when she declines assuming her mother’s jewelry. By denying her female responsibilities to assume material items, Dorothea can focus on unlocking the mysteries of knowledge, or the “internal growth” that Piehler briefly acknowledges.

Both Eliot and Woolf take a phenomenological approach when studying their characters’ “internal growth” and formation of being. Pulling away from

their reflections and moving beyond Romantic notions of internal exploration and individualism, Eliot and Woolf consider the collective consciousness of their characters in order to readily emulate human existence through sensory experience and perception.



## Chapter One:

### Phenomenology Within *The Waves* and *Middlemarch*

According to David W. Smith in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Phenomenology addresses “the meaning things have in our experience, notably, the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others, as these things arise are experience in our ‘life-world’” (2). Therefore, our experience is more than sensation, but how we perceive and interact with people in our “life-world”. Smith acknowledges that we do not experience all that we see; it would simply be impossible to perceive everything our senses encounter in a minute (4). The characters of *Middlemarch* and *The Waves* constantly reflect upon their experiences, especially those that impact their growth as beings. Susan’s consciousness is forever altered after she witnesses Jinny kissing Louis in their grade school years. Her reaction extends beyond her body into the natural phenomena surrounding her:

But she is blind after the light and trips and flings herself down on the roots under the trees, where the light seems to pant in and out, in and out. The branches heave up and down. There is agitation and trouble here. There is gloom. The light is fitful. There is anguish here. The roots make a skeleton on the ground, with dead

leaves heaped in the angles. Susan has spread her anguish out  
(Woolf 14).

By spreading "her anguish out," Susan is able to cope with the impact of Jinny kissing Louis (Woolf 14). Susan's phenomenological experience reveals a deeper understanding of her emotions through the nature surrounding her—"the branches heave up and down," and the "light seems to pant" as she gasps for breath. Susan's reaction to Jinny's kiss is violent, she is jarred from daily experience by witnessing sexual chemistry for the first time. She is frightened and "anguished" by the scene as many people fear the changes they experience especially during their childhood development.

Usually phenomenological experiences are not fleeting, but lasting in our memory. There are several instances later in the novel where Susan reminisces on this moment of sexual awakening. Sometimes even one of the other narrators, such as Bernard, remarks on the severity of Susan's reaction. Woolf's description of experience relates specifically to Naturalistic Constitutive Phenomenology, which considers the impact of natural phenomena, while maintaining that consciousness is a part of nature (Smith 10). It is likely that Woolf was exposed to Husserl's works, *Logical Investigations* (1900-01) and *Ideas I* (Book One, 1913), before composing *The Waves* in 1931. In *Ideas I*, Husserl terms "noema" the "content or meaning of the experience" (Smith 6). *Noema* can also be "the object as intended" (Smith quoting Husserl 9). The *noema* of Susan's experience

is jealousy; she is separated for a moment from her classmates when she realizes they are capable of selfish acts. Jinny kissing Louis is an act of violence, which for a moment severs the girls' combined being. Susan's experience is just one of many the characters encounter in *The Waves*; each character reacts in relation to their natural setting in order to determine the *noema* of their phenomenological experience.

### **Naturalistic Constitutive Phenomenology**

Susan acknowledges her relationship with nature early in the novel: "But who am I...I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground. I am the seasons...I cannot be tossed about, or float gently, or mix with other people...I feel the weight that has formed itself in my side" (Woolf 98). Always desiring to return to the countryside and abandon London, Susan is rooted in the nature of her agrarian hometown. She experiences life as if she were Mother Nature, determining the seasons and illuminating the natural state. What has formed in Susan's side is a desire to return to the most natural state of being; ultimately, she hopes to become a mother and to reap the benefits of the soil in the country. Susan opposes London because the city's pollution and industrialization is unnatural, but also because it is the center of progress in the country. Logically,

Susan fears change and desires to return to a more simplistic, natural state of living.

Susan is not the only narrator who connects with nature; Louis literally is rooted within the ground: “I go beneath ground tortuously” (Woolf 202).

Grounded in nature, Louis understands himself through natural phenomena because he originates from the earth. Rhoda also directly experiences nature:

Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. 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 (Woolf 206).

Directly connecting to Woolf’s title, Rhoda references her relationship with the sea. The water imagery reflects human experience; it is fluid, constantly shape-shifting, as we experience each other and the various phenomena surrounding us. Rhoda’s *noema* of the fluid experience is violent; she is unable to cope with the constantly shifting boundaries of being within herself. That is why in the first pages of *The Waves* Rhoda peers at her white ships in a bowl of water; she must control the waves of experience within the confined space of the basin (Woolf 18-19). “And I will now rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may

ride the waves. Some will founder. Some will dash themselves against the cliffs. One sails alone. That is my ship,” Rhoda narrates, attempting to control her reality. Rhoda also appears to be drowning beneath the waves of experience in this passage. She is resisting change by floating on top of the water; yet, she ends up falling and “dissolving” later in time (Woolf 206). Only a few pages later, Rhoda again recounts dissolving: “As silence falls I am dissolved utterly and become featureless and scarcely to be distinguished from another” (Woolf 224). The *noema* of dissolving reveals how the characters share being. It is likely that Rhoda must commit suicide at the close of the novel because her being has been completely dissolved into the others. Rhoda is indistinguishable from her fellow narrators; “I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell” (Woolf 64). For Rhoda, water represents the hurdle of shared identity and experience. She cannot cross the puddle because the *noema* of the puddle is the collective formation of being. Rhoda’s phenomenological experience with the puddle most likely is inspired by Woolf’s personal ontological pursuits. She writes exclusively about *The Waves*—“Autobiography it might be called”—on May 28, 1929 in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (229). On September 30, 1926 she reminisces upon a childhood memory directly relating to Rhoda’s feelings on identity: “I used to feel this as a child—couldn’t step across a puddle once I remember for thinking, how strange—what am I?” (*Diary* 113). Purposefully using the word “this” to describe the ambiguity of expressing being,

the *noema* of the puddle is actually Woolf's reaction to her reflection. Like Narcissus, Woolf is perplexed by her reflection and wonders about her state of being. Instead of becoming lost in her individual experience, Woolf attempts to describe the collective experience of multiple characters in *The Waves*. The pool is a phenomenological impetus for Woolf's ontological pursuits. When conceiving the "story of the Moths," which eventually becomes *The Waves*, Woolf writes on June 18, 1927 that her "play-poem idea" should be an "idea of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ships, the night & c, all flowing together" (139).<sup>v</sup> Woolf acknowledges how natural phenomena will not only provoke the human conscious, but also determine our being.

Beverly Schlack Randles considers the significance of Woolf's water imagery in her essay "The Waves of Life in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*". She agrees that Woolf has a "vision of life as a changing, diversified, restless, profound phenomenon, the sea proved a superb vehicle for concretizing metaphysical and ontological concerns" (Randles 47). Woolf symbolically connects the ever-changing form of being to the shifting movement of the waves. Randles also relates the waves to human consciousness: "the primal ocean as [a] source of *thought* as well as *life*...the eternal tide of reality...breaks on the shore of consciousness" (49). Therefore, not only does the water represent a phenomenological experience, it is a representation of how we form consciousness through thought. What is important to add to Randles' argument is

that consciousness is a constantly shifting internal process that is affected by others and the phenomena we encounter.

Water imagery is also utilized by Eliot to remark on the fluid state of consciousness and being in *Middlemarch*. After marrying Mr. Casaubon, the narrator reflects on Dorothea's mindset: "But in Dorothea's mind there was a current into which all thought and feeling were apt sooner or later to flow—the reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth, the least partial good" (Eliot 190). The thoughts and feelings within Dorothea's mind are related to a "current" because they are constantly shifting and hoping to fulfill the greatest unattainable "goodness" within her life (Eliot 4). Understanding how solitary her role is as a new wife, Dorothea realizes for the first time her regret for marrying Mr. Casaubon: "she was inwardly seeing the light of years to come in her own home...and feeling that the way in which they might be filled with joyful devotedness was not so clear to her as it had been" (Eliot 190). Ironically, though Naumann and Ladislaw believe Dorothea is enraptured by the Roman statues in the museum, the statues signify the *noema* of the inescapable, solid boundaries of her marriage.

Eliot also utilizes light imagery earlier in the museum scene, just as Woolf relies on the cycle of the sunrise to sunset in her poetic sequences; Eliot uses the sunrise to illuminate change in Dorothea's consciousness:

the light had changed, and you cannot find the pearly dawn at noonday. The fact is unalterable, that a fellow-mortal with whose nature you are acquainted solely through the brief entrances and the continuity of married companionship, be disclosed as something better or worse than what you have preconceived, but will certainly not appear altogether the same (Eliot 183).

The light is the *noema* for change and Dorothea's shifting perception of a "fellow-mortal" is Mr. Casaubon; he "will certainly not appear altogether the same," the narrator comments (Eliot 183). Essentially, Dorothea witnesses more of Mr. Casaubon's harsh, solitary character once they arrive in Rome for their honeymoon. The narrator uses Dorothea as an example to remind the reader that not all people are as we first perceive in their "brief entrances," into our lives (Eliot 183). Since our personalities are multi-layered, it is impossible to consider someone's entire character in a few "brief" conversations (Eliot 183). The light falling upon Dorothea in both scenes in Chapter Ten of Book Two represents how Dorothea's inner being changes with time and with further exposure to Mr. Casaubon. When discussing Eliot's authorial process, Woolf writes, "All experience filtered down through layer after layer of perception and reflection, enriching and nourishing" ("George Eliot" 3). Woolf also noticed the narrative affect of having multiple layers of "perception," and may have been inspired to



further Eliot's narrative framework into her own experimental design within *The Waves*.

Bernard notes that, "Bodies...already begin to look ordinary; but what is behind them differs—perspective" (Woolf 154). What is unique in a being for Bernard is not their external appearance but their interior thoughts on the world. Each person has a different experience and reaction to the world around them. However, in order for a society to exist, at times our views of the world must coincide in order to avoid perpetual chaos through opposition. The characters in *The Waves* "have made a dwelling-place," says Rhoda, just like the provincial town of Middlemarch exists if each citizen performs a particular function (Woolf 164). Only a few pages later, Jinny comments, "Between us, you say, we could build cathedrals, dictate policies, condemn men to death, and administer the affairs of several public offices. The common fund of experience is very deep" (Woolf 175). We must not only act together as a people to progress but also join our experiences to create our being. If we perceive someone is looking at us we begin to change beneath their gaze. Also, how we perceive others forms our opinions of ourselves as beings; we determine who we are either in opposition to others or by finding how we fit into the puzzle of society.

## **Generative Historicist Phenomenology**

Though Eliot uses some natural imagery, generally she studies characters' experiences through Generative Historicist Phenomenology, understanding experience is collective across history (Smith 10). Many scholars have considered Eliot a historicist because she explores the affects of political, social, and economic currents upon the citizens of Middlemarch. Eliot, overstepping the barriers of her narrator by switching to first person (singular and plural) point of view, remarks,

We belated historians must not linger after his example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp-stool in a parrot-house. I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe (Eliot 132).

Eliot notes the limitations of previous historians, such as the novelist Henry Fielding, and desires to focus more on “unravelling” the human condition. Just as Woolf believes her characters are interwoven like “fibres,” Eliot believes that human beings can only be studied if we concentrate on their “web,” rather than

considering the entire universe (Eliot 132). In the words of Eliot, “have not these structures some common basis from which they have all started” (139)?

One particular point where Eliot studies historical phenomena is in Book Two where Dorothea visits a Roman museum alone on her honeymoon. Dorothea stands staring at various sculptures. The narrator acknowledges the *noema* of experiencing the ancient city: “To those who have looked at Rome with the quickening power of a knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shapes, and traces out the suppressed transitions which unit all contrasts, Rome may still be the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world” (Eliot 181). After experiencing the museum the reader witnesses Dorothea in tears and the narrator sympathizes: “I am sorry to add that she was sobbing bitterly” (Eliot 180). The narrator explains how Dorothea is completely overwhelmed by the neglect of her new husband. Relating to the epigraph immediately preceding the passage, Dorothea is a “child forsaken, wakening suddenly” (Eliot 180). Cleverly beginning with “yet,” in the next paragraph the narrator discusses Dorothea’s awakening. Not only is she “in the midst of her confused thought and passion,” but she also determines “the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty” (Eliot 180). Therefore, beyond Dorothea’s personal angst, she is also experiencing the overwhelming emotions of her spiritual awakening. The *noema* of Dorothea’s experience within the Roman museum is her realization of

her own naïveté of the world surrounding her. Dorothea is beginning to realize Eliot's own desire to explore human existence through history. Similar to the affects of nature in *The Waves*, Rome influences Dorothea's sensations and she eventually realizes her union with Mr. Casaubon is not as grand as she imagined. Rome represents Dorothea's symbolic connection with history. The statues are the "historic shapes" that enlighten Dorothea with knowledge. Experiencing the affect of the artwork, the connection Dorothea has to antiquity is beyond her five senses. "A growing soul" is "breathed" into these statues as the viewer experience knowledge. Secondly, the knowledge also makes us aware how we as humans are interconnected across history.

Eliot does not believe in the power of a single individual, but continually refers to the sameness of human beings across history. The affect of Rome is a lasting phenomenological experience for Dorothea: "Forms...fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years" (Eliot 181). Like the memories of youth impressed upon the characters in *The Waves*, Rome leaves an impression on Dorothea's memory and she has "no such defence against deep impressions" (Eliot 181). Just as Susan recalls her violent exposure to sexuality in her youth and Rhoda is overwhelmed by the impact of others upon her identity, Dorothea is unable to escape the weight of history.

Louis is also plagued by the affects of history in *The Waves*. The chained beast that stomps on Louis' shore represents his anxiety over his connection to the past. He narrates:

I am not a single and passing being. My life is not a moment's bright spark like that on the surface of a diamond. I go beneath ground tortuously...My destiny has been that I remember and must weave together, must plait into one cable the many threads, the thin, the thick, the broken, the enduring of our long history (Woolf 202).

Not only is Louis rooted in nature, as previously discussed, he is connected to the "threads...of our long history" (Woolf 202). Both Woolf and Eliot acknowledge the impermanence of sole beings—they determine that each being participates in a grander scheme of things, otherwise known as human history. Louis is not a "single and passing being;" he is connected to the entire living and breathing world and the past. Louis is a conduit for Woolf's idea of connecting people across history: "I have fused my many lives into one," he remarks (168). Not only is Louis a part of history during his life, he also notes "all deaths are one death" (Woolf 170). We are all born and we all die in the same way, therefore, we are connected in life and in death. Woolf, connecting with Eliot's nihilism, reveals the limitations upon an individual to change history, the crawling social evolution of man.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Hermeneutical Phenomenology & The Collective Consciousness**

Though Eliot has a Generative Historicist Phenomenological lens and Woolf is rooted like Louis in Naturalistic Constitutive phenomena, both authors examine society and human relations through Hermeneutical Phenomenology. Understanding experience through engagement with phenomena and our relations with others (hermeneutical phenomenology), allows both authors to focus on the importance of the interconnectivity of human beings (Smith 10). After being away at college and finishing school, Woolf's six characters meet at a reunion. As the friends wait for each narrator to enter the restaurant, each seated person's identity changes as the door opens and another character appears. Susan remarks at Jinny's entrance, "Now she sees us, and moves, and all the rays ripple and flow and waver over us, bringing in new tides of sensation. We change. Louis puts his hand to his tie. Neville, who sits waiting with agonised intensity, nervously straightens the forks in front of him" (Woolf 121). Upon Jinny's gaze, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, and Susan all "change" under her glance: the men shift uneasily in their seats, while the women attempt to withdraw from the sensation (121). The five narrators share a hermeneutical phenomenological experience—one character alters their perception of their own identities. Jinny's force, in relation to sea imagery is as strong as a wave moving each speck of sand on the shore.

A similar scene occurs in Eliot's novel, at the reading of Mr. Featherstone's will, Mr. Rigg appears as the heir to the fortune, astonishing the Middlemarch citizens. The effect of Mr. Rigg's presence correlates with the reactions of Woolf's characters as the restaurant door opens and closes. The narrator describes the rising "uncertainty," within the room because the citizens do not yet understand Mr. Rigg's significance (Eliot 312). Responding to the reactions of Featherstone's relations, the narrator comments, "We are all humiliated by the sudden discovery of a fact which has existed very comfortably and perhaps been staring at us in private while we have been making up our world entirely without it" (Eliot 312). Mr. Rigg's presence generates the same ripple effect upon the other characters as Jinny: he makes the inhabitants of the room uncomfortable because his purpose is indefinite and as humans we fear the unknown.

Heidegger evolves the field of phenomenology in *Being and Time* (1927) by connecting our understanding of experience to the formulation of our being—renaming the process *fundamental ontology* (Smith 12). Heidegger believes that by defining ourselves in opposition to others, we determine our existence (Smith 12). Yet, disbanding from "the norm" or the collective consciousness to create an individual self can be a violent act. Neville comments on how we change when another person comes into our consciousness, "How curiously one is changed by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend...how painful to be recalled...to have

one's self adulterated, mixed up, become part of another. As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody—with whom?—with Bernard?" (Woolf 83). Facing the difficulty of maintaining his individuality, when Bernard approaches him on the lawn, Neville relates the pain he experiences during the hermeneutic phenomenological process of being "mixed up" with his friends (Woolf 83). Mr. Rigg entering the room in *Middlemarch* is also a violent act. For several pages, the narrator painstakingly describes how each familial relation waits anxiously for the death of Mr. Featherstone in order to determine what he has bequeathed them in his will. Mr. Rigg's ripple effect violently overturns all of the family members' expectations. The narrator comments on the violent meeting of consciousness, "Mortals are easily tempted to pinch the life out of their neighbour's buzzing glory, and think that such killing is no murder" (Eliot 194). Relating directly to the removal of a bee's wings, an act which paralyzes and causes its agonizing death, Eliot remarks how cruel society can be in its attempt to assimilate others.

Neville a few pages later explains Percival's violent affect on him, "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...How strange to feel the line that is spun from us lengthening its fine filament across the misty spaces of the intervening world." (Woolf 89). Even though Percival is Neville's object of affection in the text, Neville still



experiences a “devastating” and “strange” violence when Percival approaches (Woolf 89). The violent imagery of his “presence—dragging [Neville] open, laying bare the pebbles on the shore of [his] soul” reveals how Neville is torn apart by his shared experience with Percival and how the collective experience can be forceful for an individual. Neville explains the violent affect on his “soul” to illustrate the joining into a collective consciousness.

There is also an incredible amount of discussion about the soul in *Middlemarch*. After Dorothea criticizes Lydgate’s science while he tends to Mr. Casaubon on his deathbed, she says, “Oh, you are a wise man, are you not? You know all about life and death” (Eliot 272). Dorothea’s tone is critical of Lydgate’s knowledge and reveals her speculation of science, common in the Victorian period. After Dorothea’s words, the narrator interjects the affect upon Lydgate’s consciousness: “For years after Lydgate remembered the impression produced in him by this involuntary appeal—this cry from soul to soul, without other consciousness than their moving with kindred natures in the same embroiled medium, the same troublous fitfully-illuminated life” (Eliot 272). Not only is Dorothea susceptible to impressions, she is also capable of leaving impressions upon others (reconsider the affects of the Roman statues upon her character). The narrator directly connects to the idea that we as humans share a collective consciousness that transcends perception by describing “this cry from soul to soul,” which affects Lydgate for many years (Eliot 272).

Though I agree with Heidegger that often times we must distinguish ourselves from others in order to resolve the question, “Who am I?” it is also necessary to consider that our being is constituted of others and influenced by the society we reside within. Heidegger would agree that we should not “bracket” experience like Hiesl because meaning should be determined by the context of the world we inhabit (Smith 12). Sitting alone in a London restaurant, Louis narrates in *The Waves*, “The streamers of my consciousness waver out and are perpetually torn and distressed by their disorder” (Woolf 93). The “disorder” that Louis experiences is the people constantly passing him while he eats dinner and simultaneously attempts to look like an English man instead of a “son of a banker from Brisbane” (Woolf 93). The collective consciousness constantly interrupts us, especially if we act as someone we are not beneath the gaze of others. Louis excludes himself from the group of friends constantly because of his obsession over being Australian rather than English. He attempts in this scene to blend in as an Englishman, but is unsuccessful because he simply tries too hard to be someone he is not. After he leaves the restaurant, he is embarrassed since he has over-tipped his waiter and walks in disgrace home. Woolf comments upon how often the collective consciousness violently pressures our contribution to a collective experience and the perception of others causes us anxiety about our individuality.

“I am not, at this moment, myself,” says Bernard on page 115; as a writer, he is more accepting of the universal experience and wholeness of the collective consciousness than Louis and Rhoda (Woolf 115). He continues, “Yet behold, it returns. One cannot extinguish that persistent smell. It steals in through some crack in the structure—one’s identity” (Woolf 115). Bernard acknowledges how our collective consciousness is fleeting and may only last for a few brief moments until our identity reforms.

The collective consciousness is impermanent for two reasons: we must eventually be able to distinguish ourselves from one another in order to provoke social evolution in the human race since consciousness is constantly shifting. Bernard acknowledges how we distinguish ourselves after a moment of collective consciousness:

To be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people’s eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self. The authentics, like Louis, like Rhoda, exist most completely in solitude...I wish then after this somnolence to sparkle, many-faceted under the light of my friends’ faces. I have been traversing the sunless territory of non-identity. A strange land. I have heard in my moment of appeasement, in my moment of obliterating satisfaction, the sigh, as it goes in, comes out, of the tide that draws beyond this circle of bright light, this drumming of insensate fury.

I have had one moment of enormous peace. This is perhaps happiness. Now I am drawn back by pricking sensations; by curiosity, greed (I am hungry) and the irresistible desire to be myself...With them I am many-sided (Woolf 116).

Most likely, Bernard desires the collective consciousness due to his “curiosity” as a writer; he desires to know everything about everyone in order to construct his phrases about existence (Woolf 116). He is unsure what his self actually consists of considering he needs the “illumination of other people’s eyes,” or the perception of others, in order to understand his being (Woolf 116). He then begins to differentiate himself from Louis and Rhoda in an attempt to define his own being. Since he is driven by the perception of others around him, he differs from Louis and Rhoda, who “exist” in “solitude” (Woolf 116). After lingering on Louis and Rhoda’s actions, hence the ellipses, Bernard longs to wake from his “somnolence” to “sparkle” under the gaze of his other friends (Woolf 116). Yet, before he returns, he connects to the sublime experience of the tide rolling upon the shore. Since he is having such an inexplicable thought about identity it is only befitting that he retreats to a sublime display of rushing water. The waves represent the multiple identities that make up the body of water; forming a collective experience. Bernard retreats for a brief moment from “this circle of bright light,” his friends’ illuminating eyes, but then returns with his own sensations of curiosity and literal hunger (Woolf 116). Bernard must compose

himself before the friends' reunite in the next scene because in front of them he is "many-sided," constantly absorbing parts of their identities into his own being (Woolf 116).

Jinny considers the fleeting quality of the impermanent consciousness: "I flutter. I ripple. I stream like a plant in the river, flowing this way, flowing that way, but rooted, so that he may come to me" (Woolf 102). Once again relating to wave imagery, Jinny acknowledges how she is constantly shifting within the collective consciousness. She is "rooted" through her own identity and does not "dissolve" like Rhoda, but flows in many directions as a male figure approaches (Woolf 102, 224). Jinny is a significant character for Woolf because she is constantly performing beneath the gaze of other characters.

Will Ladislav's connection to Dorothea's consciousness is also represented in physical sensations when she enters the room, "he started up as from an electric shock, and felt a tingling at his finger-ends...every molecule in his body had passed the message of a magic touch...the subtlety of those touches which convey the quality of soul as well as body" (Eliot 363-364). Ladislav connects to Dorothea both through his soul, and his body, therefore, he has a microscopic reaction—to his very "molecule"—within his body. Playing with the idea of physical chemistry between people and the field of chemistry, Eliot describes their connection as electrifying, causing Ladislav to tingle to his very fingertips at Dorothea's approach.

Dorothea also connects consciously with Ladislav just before they are reunited in the library at the end of the novel: “What she was least conscious of just then was her own body: she was thinking of what was likely to be in Will’s mind, and of the hard feelings that other had had about him. How could any duty bind her to hardness?” (Eliot 758). Dorothea loses the hardness of her body as she transports herself into the mind of Ladislav in order to understand his motivations. Befitting to Eliot’s previous electrifying imagery, a “vivid flash of lightning,” a striking natural phenomena, brings them together (Eliot 761).

Dorothea has the same searching quality as Bernard and Jinny, directly related to St. Theresa in the Prelude of *Middlemarch*, she desires to find “consciousness of life beyond self” (Eliot 3). Claiming all of her actions are for the well-being of others, Dorothea also attempts to find herself through the characters she encounters. Upon meeting Mr. Casaubon for the first time, the narrator describes: “Dorothea by this time had looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr. Casaubon’s mind, seeing reflected there in vague labyrinthine extension every quality she herself brought; had opened much of her own experience to him, and had understood from him the scope of his great work, also of attractively labyrinthine extent” (Eliot 22). Dorothea opens herself to connect with Mr. Casaubon’s mind; she descends into his “ungauged reservoir” to explore how they are connected as beings (Eliot 22). After conversing with Mr. Casaubon, Dorothea remarks to herself, “He thinks with me...or rather, he thinks

a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror” (Eliot 23). At first, Dorothea acknowledges their participation and collaboration in a collective universe. However, she retracts her statement by degrading the quality of her own thoughts to the miniscule worth of two pence in relation to his superior conception of the world. Early in her development and early in the novel, Dorothea doubts the worth of her own thoughts and turns to Mr. Casaubon to be her guide; she hopes he will “deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path” (Eliot 26-27). Dorothea’s reliance on Mr. Casaubon is often criticized by feminist scholars, but how can Dorothea “find herself” in a restrictive Victorian society that does not promote her quest for knowledge? Arguing for herself, Dorothea might retort, “I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by” (Eliot 27). Knowledge is Dorothea’s link to history and she reinforces Eliot’s historical approach to ontology. Dorothea defies the general construct of marriage for social, political, or economic reasons and determines she will marry Mr. Casaubon to promote her intellectual pursuits—just this simple act of defiance is a feminist assertion.

Dorothea is as out of context in *Middlemarch* just as Eliot is “the first woman of her age” within the Victorian Age (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf* 321-22). She is the key to determining Eliot’s opinion on her sex, or at least is her interpretation of the woman question. Dorothea is a girl that dresses as a novice:

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments (Eliot 7).

Dorothea's dress reflects her desire to disconnect herself from the prototypical female role of her class and focuses upon the furthering of her academic pursuits. Celia, Dorothea's sister, acts as her constant foil throughout the novel, as she is driven by directly opposite motivations such as material ambition and physical arrogance. At the very beginning of the novel, Celia approaches Dorothea in hopes that they can divide their deceased mother's jewelry amongst themselves. However, Dorothea's reluctance reveals her disassociation with material items and it is only after forceful measures that Celia is able to give any items to Dorothea. One of Dorothea's ambiguous remarks is, "Souls have complexions too: what will suit one will not suit another" (Eliot 12). The brilliance of her statement is its dual meanings: Dorothea is rejecting her mother's cross because she does not believe religion can be narrowed down to an idolatrous "trinket," and she is remarking upon how different she is from her sibling (Eliot 12). The sisters particularly vary in their approaches to marriage; Celia considers social advancement in marriage, while Dorothea considers marriage for intellectual



advancement: “The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it” (Eliot 10). Though Celia attempts to influence Dorothea into marrying the more attractive Sir Chettam, ultimately, she chooses Mr. Casaubon to fulfill her academic aspirations.

Catherine Golden explores Dorothea’s desire to gain knowledge by marrying Mr. Casaubon and acknowledges the decision to choose a mismatched mate as typical to Victorian literature. She juxtaposes Dorothea to Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, contrasting how the Casaubon marriage proves fatal. Golden focuses on Dorothea’s illusionary notions that under the wing of Mr. Casaubon she will be able to gain knowledge beyond that of a typical female. At one point, Golden argues that Dorothea wants Mr. Casaubon to “form her mind” without any textual evidence. I disagree with this statement, as Dorothea is clearly aware she is choosing Mr. Casaubon in hopes of academic prowess, therefore, she is intelligent enough to determine her own opinions on the knowledge she will obtain. Golden also argues that she believes their marriage fails because Dorothea desires actual knowledge, while Mr. Casaubon is too focused on himself as an eminent scholar. She notes that as Dorothea reads more Greek and Latin, she understands Mr. Casaubon’s failings and nonsensical wanderings in his project, similarly to her enlightenment within the Roman museum.

Regardless of Dorothea's own masked intentions, Eliot winks at the protagonist's desire to challenge her own mental capacity. Dorothea is certainly what Eliot describes in the Prelude as a Saint Theresa whose "inconvenient indefiteness" reflects female nature (Eliot 3). *Middlemarch* is Eliot's scientific epos that will critically study Dorothea in relation to others and how her minute determinations are a realistic path toward a greater purpose for women universally. Eliot remarks that "to common eyes [her characters'] struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness" acts, but with close observation of how deeply wound the provincial society is, the reader will understand the significance of Dorothea's actions (Eliot 3). Eliot uses ambiguity concerning Dorothea's aspirations as her own personal commentary on the Woman Question. Eliot's "inconvenient indefiteness" reappears through each female character of the novel, but most strikingly with Dorothea as she is the woman who has the most unique thought processes. Dorothea's mindset could arguably be feminist, considering she pushes against societal norms in an attempt to define herself.

Jeanie Thomas sources a personal letter written by Eliot after *Middlemarch* was published; Thomas notes Eliot's "aesthetic" function, which hopes to rouse an emotional reaction from her readers, such as reacting to the unequal education of women. This letter proves that Eliot is a more influential and realistic feminist because she appeals to all genders. While feminists desire Dorothea to be the main force of the novel, Eliot's agenda deals with more than a

single woman, but upon the woman's working position within the entire collective community. Thomas exemplifies how Dorothea must deal with her grief over the death of Mr. Casaubon and reminds us that we might not view her immediate feelings because she is in the public sphere at all times. She also includes how Dorothea's roles are constantly being assigned, first as a wife, then as a widower, and then as an aunt to Celia's son. It is as if the male characters, such as Chettam, must label her in some relation to another male in order to make sense of her purpose in the society. What is most compelling about Thomas' argument is the recollection of three events in which Dorothea attempts to resume her life after being widowed and restore herself: first, she attempts to find any sort of affectionate note from Mr. Casaubon in his study to prove his love for her was genuine and to soften his accusations in the codicil; second, Dorothea returns to her "immediate duties" in hopes that Lydgate will make her feel useful; and finally, she seeks an emotional connection to Ladislav. Thomas displays these accounts, but does not thoroughly explain how these actions make Eliot a feminist; she only notes that Eliot is "exposing" the internal and external influences upon Dorothea. With an analysis of the critical omniscient narrator, Thomas' argument would align with Eliot's enterprise.

By considering the dependence of wives upon husbands in the Victorian Period, the reader can acknowledge that a marital union determines a woman's future. At the very beginning of the novel, Dorothea begins her feminine

awakening—she is cognizant of her indistinct purpose in life, considering her gender orientation. The writer-narrator critically remarks, “—she, hardly more than a budding woman, but yet with an active conscience and a great mental need, not to be satisfied by a girlish instruction comparable to the nibblings and judgments of a discursive mouse” (Eliot 26). Eliot’s “discursive mouse” is a Victorian society that does not provide reasoning for its decisive gender categories; Dorothea is unsure about her participation in society, because her “active conscience” and “great mental need” question its foundations (Eliot 26). Therefore, Dorothea determines her union with Mr. Casaubon will, “deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance” with a “guide who [will] take her along the grandest path” (Eliot 27). Feminist critics believe Dorothea’s decision to marry hinders her individual development, though alternative options for a woman’s survival were limited in the Victorian Period. Clearly women in the nineteenth century “were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on” (Eliot 9). Eliot understands the limits upon female opinion in her era, but also remarks how even male opinions were limited in how much they could change. Once again, Eliot makes a nihilistic point that one person’s actions reduce to nothing; there is no significance in a sole person changing our social evolution.

Louis, understanding the weight of human existence, reflects on his experience later in his schooling in *The Waves*: “The weight of the world is on our

shoulders; its vision is through our eyes” (Woolf 169). Both Woolf and Eliot understand the “weight of the world” depends on human existence and how we live our lives through a collective experience. Woolf also acknowledges the act of perceiving the world is essential for our continuance as a species because perception provokes change no matter how miniscule.

### **Chapter Three:**

#### **Narrators and Readers Sharing Consciousness**

The characters of *Middlemarch* and *The Waves* are not the only beings sharing consciousness through perception, sensation, and experience. Eliot's narrator implores the reader on several occasions to participate in a collective consciousness: "Will any one guess towards which of those widely different men Mary had the peculiar woman's tenderness?—the one she was most inclined to be severe on, or the contrary?" (Eliot 382). Perhaps also just making sure her reader is paying attention to many weaved connections between her characters, Eliot asks her reader to predict plot points, engaging their perception of social scenarios through enquiry.

Both Woolf and Eliot consider reader participation in the construction of their narrative framework. Structurally, they both write preludes to each chapter or section of their texts. Woolf uses lyrical poetic sections, while Eliot quotes historical figures and literary works (and even sometimes herself!). Both authors' preludes both contain important clues on how to decipher the subsequent passages. Just as understanding Eliot's actual Prelude is essential to understanding Dorothea's character and Eliot's nihilistic approach, the preludes of both novelists reveal insightful connections for the reader to study. Woolf writes in one of her literary essays, "we are worked upon as if by music—the senses are stirred... The

rise and fall of a sentence immediately soothes us to a mood...in which the near fades and detail is extinguished”(Cited by Randles 47).<sup>vi</sup> Both novelists desire their readers to reflect upon their sensory experiences while approaching each of their works as poetic art forms.

Eliot defines a poet’s purpose through the words of Ladislav in *Middlemarch*:

To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that the discernment is but a hand playing with finely-ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge (209).

By Eliot’s definition, both novelists are successful as poets; they consider all “shade[s] of quality” through specific characterization and an examination of their characters’ emotions (Eliot 209). Their “knowledge” of human existence “passes instantaneously into feeling,” further illuminating knowledge (Eliot 209). Hence, by Eliot studying provincial life and Woolf studying each of her narrators, both authors allow their readers to feel for each character, furthering everyone’s knowledge of human existence. Woolf agrees that, “George Eliot makes us share their lives, not in a spirit of condescension or of curiosity, but in a spirit of sympathy” (“George Eliot” 4).

Eliot's narrator is very often sympathetic to the nature of each character. With an apostrophe, the narrator exclaims in Book One, "Poor Dorothea! ... so much subtler is a human mind than the outside tissues which make a sort of blazonry or clock-face for it" (Eliot 9). The narrator asks the reader to sympathize with Dorothea early in the text in order to allow their participation. How the reader perceives Dorothea is defined by their relations with others as well as the narrator's opinion. The narrator also defends Mr. Casaubon: "with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure" (Eliot 78). Eliot's narrator acknowledges the pressures of society upon Mr. Casaubon. Just like Louis, Mr. Casaubon is obsessed with the past and not always focusing on the present.

Eliot also notes her narrator's limitations; in Book IV, Eliot speaks, "And I am naturally led to reflect on the means of elevating a low subject...the diligent narrator may lack space, or...may not be able to think of them with any degree of particularity" (Eliot 320). Eliot mentions the restrictions of her opinionated narrator to describe the "low people" (320). She defends her interjection further by acknowledging that these "low people, may be ennobled by being considered a parable" (Eliot 320). By interjecting, Eliot reconnects her authorial mission, which is to write a domestic epic with relatable characters.

Woolf equally divides the agency of narration between her six narrators, yet, still expects readers to interpret of each scene within the novel. Eliot's novel was carefully organized into Books and Chapters during the serial publication.



When composing *The Waves*, Woolf acknowledges in her diary on January 26, 1930 the necessity of a minimal structure in her novel. The characters' maturity with the passing of time are organized across particular sections of the work. However, desiring to remake the novel's structure, Woolf does not classify the prefacing italicized prose-poetry portions as dividing chapters. Woolf explains "[my] interludes are very difficult, yet I think essential; so as to bridge & also give a background—the sea; insensitive nature—I don't know" (285). Woolf's preludes "bridge" or connect portions of the narrators' lives, considering time and "insensitive nature" the driving forces of human existence (Woolf 285). The "sea" also provides a "background" for her characters to connect to natural phenomena. I use the phrase Poetic Intermissions to describe the sublime poetic sections within *The Waves* because of how Woolf explains the collaborative reading experience in her essay, "How Should One Read a Book". Woolf enforces how readers are not only consuming a piece of literature, but they are also juxtaposing the text to their daily routines. For example, while reading *The Waves*, I am contemplating the various tasks within my day, including responsibilities and other art forms that I am encountering. Especially, in regards to other pieces of literature, I am currently reading, such as *The Iliad*, Woolf believes my reading experience is altered and even intensified by my daily activities. Therefore, Woolf's Poetic Intermissions, to be referenced hereafter, are Woolf's way of interrupting, yet, at the same time, building upon your novel reading experience.

Clearly, the Poetic Intermissions break the text not only in terms of the purely natural imagery, but also in regards to the poetic phrasing and symbolism. Yet, I would argue that if we apply Woolf's ideas on the reading experience, the Poetic Intermissions add a sublime experience for the reader; broken from the narrative, the reader must let the waves and horizon scenery wash over them to gain understanding. At the same time, Woolf references characteristics of her characters within these Poetic Intermissions, solidifying the structure of the seemingly opposing prose and poetry. In the third Poetic Intermission, the "quivering mackerel was darkened" represents when Bernard later mentions "Canon, Lycett, Peters, Hawkins, Larpent, Neville—all fish in mid-stream" (Woolf 73, 77). Only four pages later in the text, Bernard compares his college mates to fish gathered together like the mackerel darkening the water considering their close proximity to each other in the sea. Connecting the reader's thoughts in the Poetic Intermission to the continuation of the prose allows for a more streamlined experience, minimizing the dissonance between prose and poetry. Just as Woolf describes sublime moments of nature in these Poetic Intermissions, so follows the reader in her footprints in the sand. Woolf is leading us to contemplate our place as humans upon the Earth and in relation to not only one another, but to the natural world we inhabit.

Connecting to the previous discussion concerning the joining of souls in *Middlemarch*, Eliot quotes herself at the beginning of Book Three, Chapter 28:

“For souls made one by love, and even death / Were sweetness, if it came like rolling waves / While they two clasped each other, and foresaw / No life apart” (Eliot 256). Eliot’s epigraph also directly relates to a passage on the opposing page, “the delicious repose of the soul on a complete superior had been shaken into uneasy effort and alarmed with dim presentiment” (Eliot 257) Elaborating on how within the collective consciousness, our souls leave impressions upon others, Eliot’s notion of human interconnectivity relates to the rolling waves of sensation. Eliot believes our souls share a collective experience especially when we unite in love or in death. By reproducing the theme of souls on the opposing page, Eliot reinforces her idea and hopes her readers will carry her message into their interpretations of further passages in the novel. For example, since Eliot believes in the fusion of lovers’ souls, her quote foreshadows the collective consciousness Dorothea and Ladislav share when they are reunited and discover their love for one another later in the novel. Eliot’s epigraphs function similarly to Woolf’s Poetic Intermissions since both preludes depend upon and solicit reader participation. Eliot’s reader must actively connect her epigraphs to her text in order to fully conceptualize the collective experience between reader and writer.

Just as Eliot introduces key themes in her prelude quotes, the “fibres” of Louis’ being, previously discussed, are introduced previously in Woolf’s first Poetic Intermission: the air is “fibrous” at sunrise and all of the “fibres” of a bonfire become “one haze” (Woolf 7). The fibres relate to Louis’ use of the word

only a few pages later; he exclaims, “I am all fibre” (Woolf 10). Since Louis connects to the Poetic Intermission directly, we can assume that Woolf’s repetition of the word is intentional. All of the “fibres” become “one haze,” just as all of the narrators become one narrator in the final segment of the text and Eliot’s lovers combine souls within *Middlemarch*.

The rippling Jinny, discussed in Chapter One, is also initially characterized in Poetic Intermission One. Only two pages after a Poetic Intermission, referencing the sky joining with the sea at sunrise, Jinny kisses Louis and narrates, “I ripple. I am thrown over you like a net of light. I lie quivering flung over you” (Woolf 13). Woolf relates Jinny to the image of a net flung over Louis, “quivering” in sexual excitement (13). Her image of combined forms relates to the Poetic Intermission: “the sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it” (Woolf 7). Not only is the sea “indistinguishable” from the sky, but so is Jinny once she flings herself upon Louis. By providing direct relations between her Poetic Intermissions and the rest of her prose, Woolf requires the reader to connect the repetitions in order to understand the sensational and sublime value of her entire novel. Jinny and Louis become one as Dorothea and Ladislaw share their soul.

Eliot applies her historical approach to an analysis of human souls in the quote prefacing Book One, Chapter Nine:

1st Gent.      An ancient land in ancient oracles  
                     Is called ‘law-thirsty:’ all the struggle there  
                     Was after order and a perfect rule.  
                     Pray, where lie such lands now?..

2nd Gent.      Why, where they lay of old—in human souls

(Eliot 67).

Quoting herself, Eliot imagines two gentleman discussing civilization. The first gentleman recalls the “law-thirsty” struggle of ancient civilizations for “order” and asks the second gentleman where this struggle exists in modern times (67).

The second gentleman makes the astute reply that the struggle for order continues internally within “human souls” (Eliot 67). Using a brief call and response, Eliot articulates her thoughts on the consciousness of her contemporaries. She believes our souls are responsible for the task of governing and maintaining civilization, therefore, by participating in a collective consciousness, we can continue to evolve socially. As a historicist, she also determines that our consciousness extends across centuries and we should connect ourselves with our ancestors in antiquity. After setting up the reader’s mindset, Eliot continues to discuss how we are interconnected by our souls (once again, reconsider the soul passages connecting Dorothea and Ladislav discussed in Chapter One). Eliot allows the reader to participate by leaving room for interpretation of the quote as well as allowing it to permeate in the reading of the remainder of her novel.

## Conclusion:

### The Light at the End

Though clearly not the same person, nor writers in the same era, both Eliot and Woolf share meaning in the endings of their novels, *Middlemarch* and *The Waves*, respectively. Both authors are consumed with the idea of human mortality and evolutionary limitations. As their novels progress chronologically alongside their characters' maturity, similar to the structure of a *bildungsroman*, it seems fit that they discuss the overwhelming pressure of time and the inevitability of death at the close of their works: “‘And time,’ said Bernard, ‘lets fall its drop. The drop that has formed on the roof of the soul falls. On the roof of my mind time, forming, lets fall its drop’” (Woolf 184). Woolf asks us: what is the purpose of life if “time tapers to a point,” and we will eventually die (184)? Bernard struggles with his approaching death in his last section of the novel because inevitable time forms on “the roof” of his soul. Naturally, as we age and approach death, we begin to contemplate our life's purpose.

Mr. Casaubon encounters death sooner than expected in *Middlemarch*:

upon the understanding of his inevitable death, “found himself looking into the eyes of death—who was passing through one of those rare moments of experience when we feel the truth of a commonplace, which is as different from what we call knowing it,

as the vision of waters upon the earth is different from the delirious vision of the water which cannot be had to cool the burning tongue. When the commonplace 'We must die' transforms itself suddenly into the acute consciousness 'I must die--and soon,' then death grapples us, and his fingers are cruel; afterwards, he may come to fold us in his arms as our mother did, and our last moment of dim earthly discerning may be like the first (Eliot 398).

In order to approach inexplicable death more readily, Eliot personifies the life process and describes it paradoxically. Death's "fingers are cruel," but he also will "fold us in his arms as our mother did" (Eliot 398). Eliot describes death paradoxically in order to represent the limits upon human comprehension of mortality. The process of dying is "cruel," but when we actually die, Eliot believes the moment completes our life cycle and returns us to the moment of our birth (398). Describing death cyclically, Eliot considers the life process in a historical notion (we must die in order to live). "We must die" becomes "I must die" because the actual process of death is individual (which is another reason we consider it cruel). At first, Mr. Casaubon feels death as a collective experience—"a commonplace," however, with time he loses the collective experience and must endure death as an individual (Eliot 398). It is only until after his death that Mr. Casaubon will resume being part of the collective consciousness. Haunting his

widow post-mortem, he commands Dorothea not to engage with his cousin Ladislaw in his codicil.

The death of a loved one is another experience entirely for those who survive him. In *The Waves*, Neville is unable to cope with Percival's death and even hallucinates in order to feel the presence of his deceased beloved. On page 151, Neville explains how, "my past is cut from me" and "we are infinitely abject, shuffling past with our eyes shut" (Woolf). Neville feels abject from the living world because Percival's death impacts him incomprehensibly. Why do humans fear death? The act of dying in these works is describes as physically and emotionally painful and violent. The definiteness of death is also inexplicable even for crafters of writing; we cannot understand death, therefore, we fear it. Once again, the pooling of time returns upon Bernard's soul.

"Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? a list ripple of the wave? ... 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," continues Bernard in the last segment of *The Waves* (Woolf 267). Should either novel end or *does* either novel end? Representing human life at its purest form, through sensation, experience, and perception, Woolf and Eliot both understand the resonance of novels relates to the continuance of human life. "After Monday, Tuesday comes," Bernard recalls that even after death, life approaches with the



continuation of time (Woolf 267). Relating back to wave imagery, the ocean does not cease to flow and neither does human being nor consciousness.

On the next page Bernard asks, “It goes on; but why?” (Woolf 268).

Human life continues in order to oppose time and mortality, we must move beyond inevitable death and experience life (*carpe diem*). Earlier in the novel, Bernard, Neville, Susan, and Jinny triumph over time for a brief moment in the garden (Woolf 228). Jinny explains, “Time’s fangs have ceased their devouring. We have triumphed over the abysses of space, with rouge, with powder, with flimsy pocket-handkerchiefs” (Woolf 228). They have triumphed over time because they have built civilization and come together collectively. Relating to Susan’s discussion of London, mentioned in Chapter One, Jinny believes that by participating in the society, it will be victorious. As a species we can oppose mortality by continuing our race.

In the last Poetic Intermission of *The Waves*, the sun sets completely:

“Now the sun had sunk. Sky and sea were indistinguishable” (Woolf 236). Just as death is described as synonymous to birth in Eliot’s passage about Mr. Casaubon, Woolf completes the natural cycle. The sun must set, so that the sun will rise; humans must die, so that we can live. Not only do the sky and sea become “indistinguishable,” so do other objects such as the chairs, which “melt...into one huge obscurity” (Woolf 236). Pairing with the Poetic Intermission, the last section of *The Waves* “dissolves” into the single voice of

Bernard. Yet, instead of focusing on himself for the remaining 59 pages, Bernard narrates mainly about his fellow characters. He provides each character with their own conclusion (Louis is successful in his career, Susan has a family, Rhoda commits suicide, Neville continues to wonder about Percival, and Jinny flits between relationships). Some might argue that becoming one voice, a male voice, goes against Woolf's entire objective of allowing agency for each gender equally. I would argue that Woolf is solidifying her collective consciousness into one voice and though Bernard is narrating, his being is composed of Louis, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, and Jinny. Bernard defines his wholeness: "I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (Woolf 276). "What I call 'my life,' is not one life that I look back upon," Bernard clarifies (Woolf 276). Bernard even acknowledges the significance of Percival's life and death: "We saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget" (Woolf 277). Percival related to each of the six narrators in a different way, but when they were all together with him, they were whole. It took Percival's death for the narrators to realize the importance of their collective consciousness. Bernard continues to explain the narrators' shared consciousness through experience:

'Who am I?' ...Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together...As I talked I felt, 'I am you.'...Here

on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell. Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eyes fill with Susan's tears. I see far away, quivering like a gold thread, the pillar Rhoda safe, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt (Woolf 288-289).

Bernard feels wholeness amongst his fellow narrators; he imagines himself present at Percival's death, he feels Jinny kiss Louis, he senses Susan's tears, and he trembles as Rhoda does before plunging to her death. Each significant moment in the characters' lives is important in constructing Bernard's being. All of Bernard's narration relates directly to the Poetic Intermission that asks the reader to reflect on the sunset.

The last book (Book VIII) of *Middlemarch* shares the sublime experience of the sunrise and sunset in *The Waves*—it is literally titled “Sunrise and Sunset”. Interestingly, Eliot does not include a prelude quote before the Finale of *Middlemarch*. Possibly, like the Preface she wishes the Finale to speak for itself. The last prelude quote in the novel is written in the original French and is taken from Victor Hugo's *L'homme qui rit*. The Oxford Edition translation reads:

The heart is saturated with love as with a divine spice which preserves it; hence the inviolable attachment of those who have loved each other from the dawn of life, and the freshness of old loves which still endure. There is such a thing as the embalment

of love. Daphnis and Chloë become Philomen and Baucis. Such, then, is old age, like evening resembling the dawn (810).

The quote relates to the cyclical nature of love and human existence. Love is embalmed (preserved) over time, just as evening resembles dawn (810). Hugo's words relate directly to the title of Book VIII and also to Woolf's message about the persistence of time. Eliot, once again, takes a more historical approach to Woolf's natural imagery, but their message is the same. Eliot believes that through love, through the combination of souls, and by sharing a collective consciousness, we will progress as a race.

At the end of *Middlemarch*, Eliot writes that human existence transcends time through love, while at the end of *The Waves* Woolf relates our state of being to the cyclical nature of the sunrise and sunset. Both authors share meaning even in their very last paragraphs. Eliot writes:

[Dorothea's] finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to

the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs (Eliot 785).

While Bernard narrates:

Yet, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again. And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him 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 will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!

*The waves broke on the shore* (Woolf 297).

If we look at these passages side by side, both authors' intentions overlap and the use of water imagery becomes immediately apparent. Focusing on one character, Eliot's St. Theresa, the narrator relates Dorothea to King Cyrus from the Bible. According to the prophecy of Isaiah, Cyrus vowed to break the River Gyndes' strength by spending an entire summer season digging 180 trenches on each side

of the river to divert the water into 360 weaker channels (Isaiah 44:27). Just as Cyrus diverts the River Gyndes, Dorothea spreads her “nature” into “channels” over the course of her lifetime in order to impact others (Eliot 785). The “effect of her being” was “incalculably diffusive”, or widely spread, and even though she is seemingly insignificant, “the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts” (Eliot 785). Ultimately, Eliot asks the reader to appreciate the “greatness” of the seemingly immaterial people with “unvisited tombs,” for they are the ones who grow the “good” in the world (Eliot 785).

Woolf utilizes the water imagery in her last paragraph as a call to action. The wave that rises and falls within Bernard is the “desire” to defeat our enemy, “death” (Woolf 297). Using imagery, Bernard literally rides on death’s back; he does not “dissolve” like Rhoda beneath the waves, but charges himself forward. Ending in an apostrophe, we pause for a moment to contemplate Woolf’s message. Then, following the waves, we all charge forward together.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Quoting Woolf in Showalter, Elaine. "Queen George." 69.

<sup>ii</sup> Sourced from Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: New American Library, 1953), p. 134; 7 November 1928 entry.

<sup>iii</sup> Randles quotes from John Lehmann, *Virginia Woolf and Her World* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), p. 79.

<sup>iv</sup> Sourced from Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, II, 321-22.

<sup>v</sup> Woolf's journal entry on October 23, 1929 reveals how the story transforms into *The Waves*: "The Moths; but I think it is to be the waves," she inscribes (*Diary* 262).

<sup>vi</sup> Cited from "DeQuincey's Autobiography," in *Collected Essays*, 4:20.

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