Part One

Narrative Progression and Narrative Discourse: Lyric, Voice, and Readerly Judgments
Character and Judgment in Narrative and in Lyric: Toward an Understanding of Audience Engagement in The Waves

In this essay, I focus on the relation between textual phenomena and audience response, proposing a distinction between lyric and narrative that has less to do with particular formal features of texts than with particular ways in which audiences respond to those features. Developing a point I learned from Sheldon Sacks many years ago, I propose that the key difference between the genres is in the role of judgments by readers: narrative requires audiences to judge its characters; lyric requires audiences not to judge its speakers. I relate this insight to the theory of character and progression I proposed in Reading People, Reading Plots (the summary in this essay is also relevant to later chapters) and then sketch how these ideas begin to explain the complicated invitation for engagement offered by The Waves, the way it both draws us in and pushes us away from Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Jinny, Neville, and Louis. I want to stress the word begin in the previous sentence: I realize that there's much more work to do with the complexities of Woolf's narrative experiment.

It [the novel of the future] will resemble poetry in this that it will give not only or mainly people's relations to each other and their
activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. For under the dominion of the novel we have scrutinized one part of the mind closely and left another unexplored. We have come to forget that a large and important part of life consists in our emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death, and fate; we forget that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone; we are not entirely occupied in personal relations; all our energies are not absorbed in making our livings. The psychological novelist has been too prone to limit psychology to the psychology of personal intercourse. . . . We long for some more impersonal relationship. We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry.

—Virginia Woolf, Granite and Rainbow

I am not trying to tell a story.

—Virginia Woolf, Writer’s Diary, 28 May 1929

An Approach to Character and Narrative Progression

Although it is a critical commonplace to think of The Waves as a lyrical novel, and although Woolf’s experiment has received much insightful commentary about both her themes and her techniques (especially by Freedman, Graham, Richter, Fleishman, Caws, and Dick), we do not yet have an adequate account of the reading experience the novel offers. Central to any account of that experience will be an understanding of how we respond to Woolf’s six speakers. Just what kind of emotional and intellectual engagement does Woolf ask her implied audience to have with Bernard, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Neville, and Rhoda as she presents their voices against the backdrop of the interludes? Is J. W. Graham overstating the case or getting at something important about our response when he claims that, since The Waves is an antinovelistic work, “such critical terms as ‘plot,’ ‘character,’ and ‘setting’ are the wrong instruments for exploring its nature as fiction” (193)?

I think that these questions about character in Woolf’s novel are best approached after addressing some broader theoretical issues. To decide whether it is appropriate to call Woolf’s speakers “characters,” we need some working conception of that term, so I will begin by re-
viewing a model for understanding character in narrative that I have developed elsewhere. To decide whether our designation of *The Waves* as a lyrical novel captures something important about our response to the characters, I will first extend the model to include an account of character in the lyric and then apply those findings, with the necessary modifications, to Woolf’s experimental work. Although I will be sketching an interpretation of *The Waves* here, my purpose is less to offer a new reading of the work than to develop a new understanding of the conditions of our response to it, especially the principles upon which Woolf has constructed her characters.

The model for analyzing character I develop in *Reading People, Reading Plots* has three main parts: (1) Character consists of three components—the mimetic (character as person), the thematic (character as idea), and the synthetic (character as artificial construct). (2) The relationship between these components varies from narrative to narrative. The mimetic may be undermined by the foregrounding of the synthetic, usually for some thematic purpose (as in some metafiction); the mimetic may be highly developed and the synthetic kept covert (as in most realistic fiction), but then either the mimetic or the thematic may be finally given greater emphasis. To account for the variety of characters and relationships, I distinguish between *dimensions* and *functions*, between the potential to signify in a certain way and the realization of that potential. On the mimetic level, a character may have dimensions without functions when s/he has traits that do not coalesce into the portrait of a possible person (e.g., Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver, whose traits change in each of his journeys as Swift adapts new targets for his satire). On the thematic level, a character may have dimensions without functions when traits are not thematized, not made part of the work’s ideational content. On the synthetic level, dimensions are always also functions, but they may be more or less foregrounded. Thus, within the terms of this model, Graham is overstating the case when he claims that “character” is an inappropriate term to apply to *The Waves*. Woolf’s speakers have mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components; on the mimetic level, it may be debatable whether they have functions or only dimensions, but they are still characters. (3) The relations between the components are determined by narrative progression, the way in which the narrative initially
establishes certain issues or relationships to be the center of its implied audience’s interest, and the way in which the narrative complicates and resolves (or fails to resolve) those interests. Progressions are generated in two ways: through instabilities, that is, some unstable relationships between or within characters and their circumstances, and through tensions, that is, some disparity of knowledge, value, judgment, opinion, or belief between narrators and readers or authors and readers. Let me leaven this dense description of the model with the discussion of a concrete case.

In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* the synthetic component of character remains in the background, and the mimetic is foregrounded as the progression introduces and complicates the instabilities created by the entrance of Bingley and Darcy into the Bennets’ neighborhood. (Further instabilities are introduced by the arrival of Collins and Wickham, but these are eventually tied to the main line of the progression.) As the progression develops, the implied audience is asked to see Lizzy’s various traits as forming the portrait of a possible person and to respond to her accordingly, that is, to become actively involved in her dilemmas and choices, and eventually to feel emotional satisfaction in her engagement to Darcy. At the same time, Austen sets the action in a context that focuses our attention not just on general thematic issues of pride and prejudice but more particularly on what it means for a woman to get married—or not—in this society. Thus, after we read the famous first sentence (“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife”), and after we see such actions as Charlotte Lucas’s decision to marry Collins and Lady Catherine’s attempt to tell Lizzy that she is not worthy of marrying Darcy, we respond to Lizzy’s final happiness not only for its mimetic power but also for its thematic significance, for the way in which it signals Austen’s belief in both the necessity and the possibility of marrying for the right reasons in the face of all the pressures that operate on a woman to marry for the wrong reasons.

Within this general construction of the narrative, Austen builds many nuances that I cannot go into here, but my main point is that the model for analyzing character and progression improves our understanding of how we relate to Austen’s characters and how we generally participate in the narrative as we read from beginning to end.
Reading People, Reading Plots seeks to develop and substantiate the model's power by analyzing a broad range of characters, progressions, and audience involvements. But the book does not address the issue of character in the lyric, something that needs to be done for an adequate understanding of character in The Waves.

**Distinguishing Lyric from Narrative**

In her essay "Lyric Subversions of Narrative in Women's Writing: Virginia Woolf and the Tyranny of Plot," Susan Stanford Friedman invokes a generally held conception of the difference between lyric and narrative. "Narrative," she says, "is understood to be a mode that foregrounds a sequence of events that move dynamically in space and time. Lyric is understood to be a mode that foregrounds a simultaneity, a cluster of feelings or ideas that projects a gestalt in stasis. Where narrative centers on story, lyric focuses on state of mind, although each mode contains elements of the other" (164). As the final clause indicates, this account of the difference between the modes indicates tendencies in each, but does not adequately capture their essential difference. It is an easy matter to think of lyrics that "move dynamically in space and time" ("Because I Could Not Stop for Death") and of narratives that focus on states of mind (Ulysses and its progeny). Furthermore, if we think of progression not just as something internal to the text (a question of whether a character or a speaker "goes" anywhere between beginning and end) but also as something linked to its audience's understanding of the text, then the opposition between story and gestalt in stasis also becomes less than adequate: the very temporality of reading means that the effects of both narrative and lyric depend in part upon sequence. If the opposition between sequence and stasis does not adequately pinpoint the difference between lyric and narrative, if the difference cannot be fully located in the content or the arrangement of that content, then we must shift our attention elsewhere. Since the material of lyric and narrative can so easily overlap, I suggest that we look to discriminate between them according to the attitudes we are asked to take to that material. I want therefore to examine the interaction between character and judgment...
in the two modes. I will anchor the discussion in two well-known poems by Frost: “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” in which the speaker is not individualized and is not placed in any specific situation, and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” in which the speaker is somewhat individualized and speaking in a clearly specified situation.

Suppose, first, that a character in a traditional narrative were to make an argument for the evanescence of beauty that began with the description of particular things in nature (“Nature’s first green is gold / Her hardest hue to hold / Her early leaf’s a flower / But only so an hour”), invoked some notion that this is the Order of Things (“So Eden sank to grief”), and ended with a generalization about that evanescence (“Nothing gold can stay”); suppose, that is, that the character uttered the text of Frost’s poem. Our response to that utterance would follow the same logic as our response to any other speech by that character: the response would be mediated powerfully by our previously established sense of the character. If this character has frequently been exposed as lacking in understanding, then we would either suspect that the author did not stand behind the argument contained in this new utterance or, depending on other cues in context, that the author wants to suggest some alteration in the character’s understanding. In either case, the poem would be important for its contribution to the characterization of the speaker and to the sequence of judgments we are making about her. Furthermore, that characterization and those judgments would be required for anyone who wanted to participate in the experience offered by the narrative’s design. In that sense, the judgments would be internal to the narrative itself, part of the logic of its construction. We might later evaluate whether being asked to judge the character as we do for the reasons that we do enhances or detracts from the value of the text, but such an evaluation obviously depends on our having understood the characterization and made the judgment. In that sense, such an evaluation would be an external judgment.

Read in its usual context, as a lyric by Frost, “Nothing Gold Can Stay” obviously has a very different effect. The speaker’s character is not a functional part of the poem; instead, it fades back into the image of the implied author. In other words, the distinction between speaker and author does not exist here. If we describe the speaker as having the
mimetic dimension of possessing the belief in the evanescence of beauty, we are also describing the implied author. If we describe the implied author as having certain powers of expression as exhibited in the poem's diction, rhythm, and rhyme, we are also describing the speaker. With the conflation of the nondramatized speaker and the implied author, our attention is directed away from any mimetic representation of that speaker and toward the poem's thematic point about beauty. We are not asked to judge the speaker and use that judgment as part of our overall understanding of the poem, but instead are asked to take in, understand, and contemplate the speaker's argument for its own sake. To be sure, Frost presents the argument as something of value, and our response to the poem is not complete until we make some judgment of that value. This judgment will necessarily include some judgment of the speaker. But this judgment is not internal to the poem but external to it: it is part of evaluating what we are asked to take in and, in effect, it is an evaluation of the implied author and the poem itself. In short, a crucial difference between narrative and lyric is that in narrative internal judgments of characters (and narrators) are required, while in lyric such judgments are suspended until we take the step of evaluation.

Now what of lyrics where we have dramatized speakers and thus situations that more closely resemble narratives? A poem such as Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is at first glance strikingly different from "Nothing Gold Can Stay" because it presents a speaker in a specified situation that calls for—and receives—some response from him. Indeed, the poem has the ingredients of narrative: a character, an unstable situation, a resolution of the instability. Furthermore, it is helpful to think about the design of the poem in terms of the speaker's character and the progression of his emotions and thoughts. The first three stanzas, with their descriptions of the woods, the snow, the wind, and the darkness, gradually reveal the instability: the speaker's desire to stop traveling, to give himself up to the woods, the snow, and the darkness, a desire that finds its veiled expression in the first line of the last stanza—"The woods are lovely, dark and deep." The last three lines then resolve the instability as the speaker voices his decision not to yield to the desire. The poem is complete once the choice is made: the repetition of "And miles to go before I
sleep” in the last two lines signals both the power of the desire—the decision needs to be restated—and the finality of the resolution.

The poem nevertheless remains lyric because of the way characterization and judgment work. Speaker and author are not identical here, as we can see by reflecting that we intuitively assign the rhymes of the poem to Frost rather than to the speaker. Our covert awareness of Frost’s presence through the rhymes is also a sign that the synthetic component of the speaker’s character remains in the background. Yet the mimetic component of the speaker’s character is highly restricted—his main trait is his desire for surcease. This restricted characterization allows readers to project themselves into the poem, to experience vicariously the speaker’s desire and choice. As Rader says about the dramatic lyric in general, “The figure in the poem is imagined from within, so that we participate in his mental activity as if his eyes and experience had become the poet’s and our own” (142).

This effect is also possible because once again we are not asked to make an internal judgment of the speaker. Neither his desire nor his decision are held up for evaluation by Frost, though of course we may come to think of that desire and that decision—and thus, the whole poem—as trivial, profound, sentimental, inspiring, or something else. What Elder Olson says about “Sailing to Byzantium” applies as well to “Stopping by Woods”—the speaker performs an act of choice “actualizing and instancing his moral character” (286)—but that choice and that character are presented not for us to judge but to project ourselves into. Consequently, experiencing the progression here is closer to experiencing the progression of “Nothing Gold” than to experiencing that of a narrative such as “Magic”: we do not develop hypotheses about the motivation for the telling nor expectations or hopes or desires about the resolution of the instability. Furthermore, the thematic dimensions of the speaker do not become functions. We do not thematize the desire of the speaker in “Stopping by Woods” the way we thematize the maid’s motivations in “Magic,” and we do not consider whether Frost is sympathetic or unsympathetic toward him the way in which we must consider whether Porter is sympathetic or unsympathetic toward the maid. (It is, of course, possible for the speaker of a lyric to describe his or her situation in thematic terms as, for ex-
ample, Matthew Arnold’s speaker does in “Dover Beach,” but this thematicizing is a variable rather than an essential of the lyric situation.)

Although I have been focusing on the text of “Stopping by Woods,” I have also been articulating the set of conventions we bring to the reading of lyric. It would be misleading to argue that the “text itself” is the sole basis upon which we will experience the poem as lyric rather than as narrative. Part of the difference in experience is also a consequence of our choice to employ the conventions of lyric rather than those of narrative in our reading of the poem. At the same time, the fit between the conventions of lyric and the text is tighter than the fit between the conventions of narrative and the text: as in “Nothing Gold Can Stay” and in contrast to “Magic,” there is no textual material that moves us toward internal judgments of the speaker.

Speech and Lyric in The Waves

Consider now the episode of “the primal kiss” (Fleishman, 156) in section 1 of The Waves. The episode contains material with the potential to establish instabilities that could be the source of much of the later narration—instabilities between Jinny and Louis (when she kisses him, he says, “all is shattered”), between the two of them and Susan, who witnesses the kiss and is pierced with anguish, between Susan and Bernard, who goes to comfort her, and between Bernard and Neville, who resents Bernard’s leaving him to comfort Susan. Although the episode is referred to several times later, its potential to set in motion a chain of events is never actualized. That potential is never actualized because of what Woolf has done before this incident, because of how she treats the incident itself, and because of what she does later.

The influence of the first “stream” of narration, the impersonal narrator’s description of the sun rising over the ocean waves and gradually illuminating a garden and a house, is subtle but powerful even in the first section. The impersonality of the voice, especially its distant psychological stance, provides a context of distance within which we read the voices of the characters in the second “stream” of narration. This distance combines with the juxtaposition of the scene
in nature with the characters' speeches to move us away from a full involvement with any developing story involving the characters and toward the thematic connections we can make between the juxtaposed scenes. More important, the initial group of speeches establishes the separateness of the speakers:

“I see a ring,” said Bernard, “hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.”
“I see a slab of pale yellow,” said Susan, “spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.”
“I hear a sound,” said Rhoda, “cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.”
“I see a globe,” said Neville, “hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.”
“I see a crimson tassel,” said Jinny, “twisted with old threads.”
“I hear something stamping,” said Louis. “A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.” (9)

We do not have different perceptions of a common phenomenon or different participations in a common action, but rather different consciousnesses with different perceptions (some hear, some see, but no perceptions overlap) following one another in sequence. This separateness of the speakers is reinforced by the stylized language and by Woolf’s technique of simply shifting our attention from one speech to the next without providing any narrative presence that might comment on the speeches or relate them to each other. The pattern of separate consciousnesses reporting by turns is solidified in the next few rounds of speech, where even imperatives spoken by one character are not responded to by the others: When Bernard says, “Look at the spider’s web,” or when Jinny says, “Look at the house,” the next voices do not comment on the web or the house. This feature of the discourse prompts one to label even these opening speeches soliloquies (although that label does not apply to all the speeches of the text, for sometimes characters clearly address and respond to each other).

Since we are not reading the speeches as responses to each other, we are invited to adopt the perspective of each one much as we are invited to adopt the speaker’s perspective in the lyric. That is, we are asked to see the world through the speaker’s eyes without making a judgment on that vision. Woolf maintains the same effect throughout
the incident of the primal kiss, as we can see by looking at Neville’s speech, which closes the incident.

"Where is Bernard?" said Neville. "He has my knife. We were in the tool-shed making boats, and Susan came past the door. And Bernard dropped his boat and went after her taking my knife, the sharp one that cuts the keel. He is like a dangling wire, a broken bell-pull, always twangling. He is like the seaweed hung outside the window, damp now, now dry. He leaves me in the lurch; he follows Susan; and if Susan cries he will take my knife and tell her stories. The big blade is an emperor; the broken blade a Negro. I hate dangling things; I hate dampish things. I hate wandering and mixing things together. Now the bell rings and we shall be late. Now we must drop our toys. Now we must go together. The copy-books are laid out side by side on the green baize table." (19)

In a traditional narrative, we would be asked to evaluate Neville and Bernard in light of this speech: is Bernard insensitive for leaving Neville "in the lurch," or is Neville selfish for resenting Bernard’s following Susan? In this narrative, the issue does not arise, both because of the pattern already established and because of the way Woolf handles the link between Neville’s expression of resentment and his confession of hate. Woolf uses Neville’s resentment of Bernard primarily as a way to reveal something about Neville—"I hate dangling things. . . I hate mixing things together"—rather than as a way to build some future conflict between the two that the narrative will focus on and develop. As flesh-and-blood readers we may of course judge Neville for his resentment, but Woolf never makes that judgment functional within the progression of the narrative. In this passage, after revealing Neville’s feeling, Woolf takes things in a new direction—back to narration—and so we are left contemplating Neville rather than anticipating any consequences of his feelings for the later action. This effect is reinforced by the beginning of the next speech in which Louis, who has last said, "all is shattered," makes no reference to anything that Jinny, Susan, or Bernard have done, but begins this speech with the clause, "I will not conjugate the verb" (19). Through this jump in Louis’s consciousness, Woolf signals that we have now moved into a new lyric moment.
Progression and Audience Engagement in *The Waves*

To say that the speeches often function as lyric utterances is only to take a first step toward understanding our engagement with Woolf’s narrative. There are several ways in which this view needs to be complicated or supplemented. First, the utterances often follow the pattern of Neville’s and move from narration to lyric revelation and back again. The narration always functions to give us information about some situation or action in which the characters are placed; sometimes it also functions to advance our sense of the character’s particular way of perceiving things. When the characters’ speeches are giving us information about their situation rather than their particular perceptions, the speeches work to invite thematic connections between the situations they describe and the scene in nature described in the previous interlude. Take, for example, Louis’s description of the boys’ last day at school. Although it becomes lyric by the end (“I see wild birds, and impulses wilder than the wildest birds strike from my heart”), initially the speech is not important for what it reveals about Louis’s perspective; instead, it focuses our attention on a particular stage of the boys’ lives as an analogue to the stage in the sun’s progress toward the horizon we have read about before section 2:

“Now we have received,” said Louis, “for this is the last day of the term—Neville’s and Bernard’s and my last day—whatever our masters have had to give us. The introduction has been made; the world presented. They stay, we depart. The great Doctor, whom of all men I most revere, swaying a little from side to side among the tables, the bound volumes, has dealt out Horace, Tennyson, the complete works of Keats and Matthew Arnold suitably inscribed.”

(57–58)

A second important supplement in our understanding of lyric in *The Waves* is that Woolf varies the kinds of lyric utterance she gives to the speakers. Sometimes, she orchestrates a revelation of feeling such as we have seen in Neville’s speech, a revelation triggered by some action or situation—often described in the first few sentences of the speech—external to the character. At other times, Woolf orchestrates a lyric of perception and sensation, exemplified in miniature by the opening speeches and exemplified more fully by Bernard’s description
of being bathed: "Water pours down the runnel of my spine. Bright arrows of sensation shoot on either side. I am covered with warm flesh. My dry crannies are wetted; my cold body is warmed; it is sluiced and gleaming. Water descends and sheets me like an eel" (26). The consequence of this variation is that Woolf is able to incorporate an enormous range of experiences into the text. Thus, for example, Susan's utterances range from the revelation of her intense reaction to Jinny's kissing Louis to the report of her baking bread in her country kitchen, and Bernard's range from his cool assessment of Dr. Crane to the revelation of his deeply mixed emotions at the combined news of Percival's death and the birth of his son.

A third complication is that the same material will sometimes be revisited and rendered differently. This movement helps Woolf adapt the lyric utterances to her larger narrative purpose because it shows the speakers in a changed relation to the original material as they move through life. Nevertheless, the sense of lyric remains strong because the new relation is not presented as more valid than the old; it is different in a way that reflects the different stage of the speaker's life. When Bernard, for example, remembers his bath, he is less concerned with the sensations he captured so vividly the first time than he is with their consequences: "Mrs. Constable raised the sponge above her head, squeezed it, and out shot, right, left, all down the spine, arrows of sensation. And so, as long as we draw breath, for the rest of time, if we knock against a chair, a table, or a woman, we are pierced with arrows of sensation—if we walk in a garden, if we drink this wine" (239).

A fourth complication is that the speakers' utterances function not just to reveal themselves and their perspectives but also to reveal the other characters more fully. Because of what Neville says in section 1, for example, we see not only Neville but also Bernard in a new way. More generally, Woolf uses each character's view of the others to help us form our understanding of each, and thus we can have a greater participation in their lyric utterances as the work progresses. We develop this understanding through a fusion of the perspectives offered by the other characters and the perspectives we gain from our inside views of each. In this way, we develop a sense of these characters as individuals that is far greater than anything that occurs in any dramatic lyric such as "Stopping by Woods." The question about the mimetic component
of Woolf's speakers can now be resolved: Each of the six has a fully developed mimetic function, one that, though easily recognized in the reading, is not easily summarized.7

**Mimetic, Synthetic, and Thematic Components of The Waves**

We can move from this account of the characters' speeches to a fuller account of our response to them. The lyric mode of their utterances invites a very strong mimetic involvement with them and their visions of the world. Yet this mimetic involvement is itself complicated by the way in which Woolf's technique makes us aware of the synthetic component of the characters and by the way the progression makes us respond to them thematically. In the first section, the gap between the speakers' ages and their powers of expression calls attention to the artifice of the text. That their voices remain largely the same from childhood to middle age further reinforces that artifice. That the language of one speaker sometimes overlaps with the language of another or with the language of the interlude narrator is a third strong sign of their artifice. Because the artifice of Woolf's technique shows through in these ways, our mimetic involvement is juxtaposed with—and somewhat diminished by—our awareness of Woolf's experimenting with narrative form here.

I said above that the first stream of narration distances us from the second. The distance derives in part from the impersonality of the voice and in part from what the voice describes. As we follow the descriptions of the sun, the waves, the birds, the garden, and the house as the day proceeds from sunrise to sunset and the seasons proceed from spring to winter, we read the second stream with an awareness that the characters lack: we see them as like the sun, waves, and birds, i.e., as unwittingly following some natural laws that are governing their movement from childhood to death.8 Furthermore, because we always read the characters' speeches against the situation in nature described in the interludes, we come to view the individual lyric utterances as part of this overall progression of the six characters from childhood to death. Consequently, the characters become representa-
tive figures as well as mimoetically differentiated individuals, figures of Childhood, Young Adulthood, Middle Age, and figures of Responses to Life Events such as marriage, birth of children, the death of a friend. This heightening of the thematic component also contributes to our overt awareness of the synthetic component of the characters and thus works against a full mimetic involvement of the kind that we have in either a dramatic lyric such as “Stopping by Woods” or in a narrative such as “Magic” or Pride and Prejudice.

Why should Woolf want to involve us in her characters in this way, to ask us to participate in the mimetic sphere while also giving us signals that work against that participation? The reason, I think, can be found in her larger thematic intention. As noted earlier, Woolf uses the characters’ utterances to express many different kinds of experience at many different stages of life. In doing that, she is also able to explore many thematic issues: the nature of identity, the difficulty of connecting with others, the intensity of life, its chaos, its beauty, its pain, its ordinariness, its strangeness, its value. But the juxtaposition of these explorations with the impersonality of the interludes leads to a larger emphasis on a double vision: the lyric utterances collectively insist on the intensity and value of life, while the distance between them and the interlude descriptions implicitly questions the significance of those lyric moments. This point is made perhaps with its greatest impact at the very end of the narrative, when Bernard’s ringing defiance of Death, “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” is juxtaposed with the impersonal description of inexorable nature, “The waves broke upon the shore.”

The point is also made for us in the experience of reading the text as we move from a strong engagement with the characters, their visions, and emotions to a more detached assessment of them as constructs serving Woolf’s thematic and synthetic purposes. They matter intensely to us as individuals, and then again they don’t. They live intensely and diversely, but their lives do not make a dent in the universe. To experience the narrative fully we need to experience both sides of Woolf’s vision.

If the previous analysis is at all accurate, then Woolf has offered us a most unusual kind of engagement with her characters. We are asked not only to be simultaneously and overtly aware of their mimetic,
thematic, and synthetic components but also to refrain from making judgments of them or to develop attachments to them of the kind we develop toward Elizabeth Bennet that makes us expect and desire certain outcomes for them. It is, I think, the very peculiarity of our response that leads critics such as Graham to say that the term **character** is the wrong instrument for discussing Woolf’s creation. But I hope that this essay has shown that we do better justice both to *The Waves* and to our reading experience if, rather than turning away from the term, we deepen our understanding of what character is and of the complicated relations that readers can have to it.