

## VOLUNTARY DEATH IN THE WORKS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF – A GAME OF THE SUBCONSCIOUS

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***Abstract:** The present article aims to investigate how the issue of suicide is portrayed through the character of Rhoda in Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Waves*, a representative literary sample of 20th century literature. Woolf's preference for understanding psychological processes, explaining emotional turmoil, seeking existential meaning, and exploring consciousness compels her to create an atypical character, struggling with undefined emotional states. Through soliloquy, the author captures the inner experiences of several characters with different temperaments, including Rhoda 'the faceless', socially misfit, who ultimately commits suicide by drowning. The appearance of the subjective, psychological, analytical novel, whose main characteristic is the predisposition towards analysing and probing the depths of the inner life, towards introspection, leads to placing the emphasis more on complex individual motivations, and less on social determinism. Therefore, Rhoda is not an emblematic character, but unique, with an inconsistent affective dynamic, marked by intellectual and metaphysical disturbances, and suicide becomes the expression of the way of relating to the past reality through the filter of her consciousness. Compared to Susan and Jinny, poses that do not raise problems as they are adapted to everyday life and the way of society, Rhoda bears the imprint of a sensitive, fragile temperament, marked by the burden of anxiety, being a character who fails to give meaning to existence or to create her own identity. She always lives in the shadow of the other female poses, trying to copy their way of being and acting, admiring, and envying their sensuality at the same time. Of the six main characters, Rhoda is the outcast, having, since childhood, suicidal tendencies, being raised in an orphanage. Focusing on the human interior, replacing uniformity with fragmentation, and suppressing the demiurgic character of the narrator allow access to the deepest turmoil of the characters. If in the objective novel, the suicide is devoid of mystery, the narrator pointing out the conclusive events that can justify and clarify the psychological mechanisms that lead to a somewhat expected end, in the subjective novel, the character seems impenetrable. The female characters are relativized and ambiguous, so that voluntary death can no longer be attributed to a logical causality, representing, in fact, a multilateral mixture of motivations and determinants. Thus, the present research paper constitutes an incursion into the female human subconscious, plagued by unhealed and tormenting depression, accentuated by the social environment, and ultimately proving fatal.*

**Keywords:** depression, suicide, female character, subconscious, soliloquy

### **1. Introduction**

Since the century of industrialization, great scientific discoveries and the expansion of education, suicide is complexly received in different but interrelated registers: a problem of psychopathology for medicine, a lack of integration for sociologists, a question of will or a form of nihilism for some philosophers and all

together in literature. The social and psychological aspects highlighted in the multitude of scientific studies, statistics or clinical investigations also compete with the theological and philosophical ones, making the phenomenon of suicide more and more incomprehensible, beyond an apparent clarification of the problem.

Positivism, dominant until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, characterized by trust in man's power to scientifically explain the phenomena of the surrounding world, receives a strong blow at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Freud's psychodynamic or psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the representation of suicide as the result of directing aggression caused by frustration at oneself. In 1920, he postulates the existence in each individual of an instinct of death, which tends to restore the state prior to life, inorganic, but of an instinct of life and reproduction. Freud claims that man is not guided in his actions by reason alone and emphasizes the complex and uncontrollable force of the subconscious.

In this context, literature moves away from the surface of life, and the attraction to the mysteries of the human interior becomes a defining characteristic in the literature of the beginning of the twentieth century. The interest in disconcerting psychologies, the anxiety of existence, the investigation of human consciousness, the search for meaning in a chaotic world are evident in the writings of Virginia Woolf. The social environment no longer represents the main force in the formation and motivation of the individual, the writer creating characters who are singular and whose reactions are influenced by the instincts of the unconscious. Thus, suicide no longer mirrors a reality, but becomes a reality in itself, an enigmatic and polysemic act. Although suicide seems rationally unmotivated, the act of self-suppression is being prepared within the being, at the end of a slow, unbearable, and underground process. Incidents that may seem trivial to the reader play an overwhelming role in the dynamics of the character's mental processes.

## **2. The subjective, psychological, analytical novel – *The Waves***

In the novel *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf explores, through soliloquy, the inner experiences of six characters with distinct personalities, among which we find Rhoda 'the faceless', the one who will commit suicide by drowning. The novel is focused on the theme of the passage of time, the writer trying to reproduce the very image of the succession of days, months and seasons, following one another like waves and leading all to an inevitable end. An obvious theme of the book is that of identity, around which the monologues of the six characters revolve. Everyone relates to others to define themselves, building their impression of themselves through comparison.

*The Waves* could be called an anti-novel, since here the author assumed the enormous risk of dividing the human personality into six complementary consciousnesses, whose relations with reality are questionable. But 'novelists have no reason to think that a novel is good just because the plot is well handled or the heroes come from the normal world. On the contrary, a novelist must beware of the easy options provided by imitation, as well as the false resources of character analysis, psychology, or social history. It is within himself, in his inner dream, that

he can best reach the mysterious reality whose revelation can only take place in the novel'<sup>1</sup>. Woolf investigates in this novel what actually occurs rather than what should occur. Her understanding of the complicated relationship between dispositions, awareness, and the external world gives her readers access to incidents of experience that would otherwise be concealed from them.

The author's intention is to render as well as possible the idea of mirroring the simultaneous existence on two planes of reality. Thus, *The Waves* is a novel divided into nine parts delimited by lyrical interludes, real prose poems that describe the movement of the sun on the sky, a symbol of the inevitable flow of human life from birth to death, and the life of the three male characters and three feminine is presented to us in chronological order with the help of inner monologue.

### 3. Rhoda – the expression of depression

Unlike the other female characters, Jinny or Susan, whose portraits can be more easily outlined due to adaptation to everyday life, Rhoda is marked by anxiety and emotional fragility, being a prisoner in a meaningless existential womb, without the chance to build her own identity: '*As I fold up my frock and my chemise,*' said Rhoda, '*so I put off my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny. But I will stretch my toes so that they touch the rail at the end of the bed; I will assure myself, touching the rail, of something hard*'<sup>2</sup>. Of all the characters in the novel, Rhoda is painted as a dreamer unable to accept the process of life. Her condition seems to have as its fundamental spring a tension of the being in search of meanings that are inexistent in the real world.

She exists as an individual only in the world of dreams and imagination: '*Now I spread my body on this frail mattress and hang suspended. I am above the earth now. I am no longer upright, to be knocked against and damaged. ... Out of me now my mind can pour. I can think of my Armadas sailing on the high waves. I am relieved of hard contacts and collisions. I sail on alone under the white cliffs. Oh, but I sink, I fall!*'<sup>3</sup>. For her, life is nothingness and impossible to understand, to which she cannot adapt. The writer places her, from the beginning of her life, under the sign of a painful fatality. In her second soliloquy, she complains about her inability to solve a math problem, which all the other children have been able to answer, and is left alone to stare at the blackboard. Here, Rhoda creates a spatial and temporal world from which she excludes herself. Daily existence consequently becomes a torture, living somewhere outside the ordinary unfolding of time and events: '*The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying*'<sup>4</sup>; '*Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is soft like wax near the flame of the candle. I dream; I dream*'<sup>5</sup>. For Rhoda, there is no evolution or process. Her conception of life is purely aesthetic, an ideal vision with the inability to communicate.

The character loathes people as well as communicating with them and struggles with the pain of invisibility in their midst: '*Oh, to awake from dreaming! Look, there is*

<sup>1</sup> M. Blanchot, *Into Disaster: Chronicles of Intellectual Life*, 1941, New York, Fordham University Press, 2014, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, New York, Harcourt, 1931, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26.

*the chest of drawers. Let me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled; I am stretched, among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing*<sup>6</sup>. Her thoughts reveal a structural maladjustment. Since childhood, Rhoda is introverted and highly sensitive, avoiding interactions with other children and losing herself in her imagination, later using it as a means of escaping society: *'I have a short time alone, while Miss Hudson spreads our copy-books on the schoolroom table. I have a short space of freedom. I have picked all the fallen petals and made them swim. I have put raindrops in some. I will plant a lighthouse here, a head of Sweet Alice. And I will now rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may ride the waves... One sails alone'*<sup>7</sup>. To compensate for the lack of social interaction, Rhoda creates a fantasy world, one in which she can mature and evolve. Her imagined world is not an imitation of the real one, but Rhoda's fantasy and reality form a relationship of interdependence.

#### **4. The influence of childhood on Rhoda's behaviour**

Rhoda comes from an unhappy family and experiences a childhood marked by anguish and isolation. She did not always feel like she belonged to her family and she considered herself an outsider. In her monologues, Rhoda reflects on the impact her relatives' words and actions have on her fragile self: *'Travelling through darkness I see the stretched flower-beds, and Mrs Constable runs from behind the corner of the pampas-grass to say my aunt has come to fetch me in a carriage. I mount; I escape; I rise on spring-heeled boots over the tree-tops. But I am 15 now fallen into the carriage at the hall door, where she sits nodding yellow plumes with eyes hard like glazed marbles'*<sup>8</sup>. The novel emphasizes the stream of consciousness and emotional states of the characters, which makes direct descriptions of Rhoda's childhood and family limited. It is suggested that as a child, Rhoda felt neglected and misunderstood. Despite this lack of detail, Rhoda's childhood and family exerted a significant influence on how she developed and related to others in her adult life. Childhood experiences and traumas formed the character's emotional background and contributed significantly to the unique perspective within the novel.

As a sensitive child, Rhoda dreamed extensively and thought about dealing with existential problems, as if the problem of the turmoil of life was inscribed in her blood, genetically transmitted from parents who failed to order their existential principles. She is a young woman of uncertain origins. Without claiming another role, she lives under the oppressive stigma of childhood trauma. Rhoda takes shape in the eyes of the reader to the extent that he chooses to perceive her and understand her depressive nature. Her melancholic and pensive mood similarly engenders her marginalization by the group she belongs to, since, being accustomed to her meditative state, they are no longer interested in knowing what her mind is or understanding her, taking for granted the fact that she is different from others. Since childhood, she has felt her intimate space brutally invaded, even by her own friends.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

Rhoda is subjected to a deep inner struggle and experiences a series of difficult emotional states throughout the novel, a process that begins in childhood and culminates in adulthood. At some point, Rhoda and Louis become lovers: *'there Rhoda sometimes comes. For we are lovers'*<sup>9</sup>, but she is terrified of intimacy with a man and leaves him. She cannot identify with the physical sensations that other women experience with men. The striking figure of the mother as the only female presence of her childhood seals her fate, reinforcing her inclination towards lesbianism. She has no comprehension of how to interact with men as she has not been exposed to this type of behaviour. Although Rhoda's sexual orientation is not explicitly mentioned, she finds sensual the gesture of her female friends to roll the socks on their feet, looking at them each time with silent admiration. The character does not fit into traditional social patterns in any way, but she cannot find an adequate language to express her sexuality and desire.

Rhoda is oppressed by the hostility and indifference of strangers, towards whom she feels all the carelessness of the world: *'But here the door opens and people come; they come towards me. Throwing faint smiles to mask their cruelty, their indifference, they seize me. ... I am thrust back to stand burning in this clumsy, this ill-fitting body'*<sup>10</sup>. She wants to integrate into various social groups, but always remains on the outside: *'Jinny in front and Rhoda lagging behind'*<sup>11</sup>; *'But here I am nobody. I have no face. ... I will seek out a face, a composed, a monumental face, and will endow it with omniscience, and wear it under my dress like a talisman and then (I promise this) I will find some dingle in a wood where I can display my assortment of curious treasures. I promise myself this. So I will not cry'*<sup>12</sup>. She is a solitary being and feels that she finds herself only when she isolates herself from others: *'This is life then to which I am committed'*<sup>13</sup>. Rhoda constantly questions her presence in the space she occupies and does not find its relevance. She lives in self-exile, as she fails to establish a connection with the realities and mental dynamics of society.

Her most characteristic gesture, even among friends she has known since childhood, is to look out of the window, lost in imagination: *'Rhoda, with her intense abstraction, with her unseeing eyes the colour of snail's flesh... stands at the window and looks at the chimney-pots and the broken windows in the houses of poor people'*<sup>14</sup>. She also feels like a stranger among her friends, with whom she grew up and spent a good part of her life: *'They are only men, only women. ... They have faces. They become Susan and Bernard, Jinny and Neville, people we know. ... Now what a shrivelling, what an humiliation! The old shivers run through me, hatred and terror; as I feel myself grappled to one spot by these hooks they cast on us; these greetings, recognitions, pluckings of the finger and searchings of the eyes. Yet they*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 122.

*have only to speak, and their first words... shake my purpose*<sup>15</sup>. Rhoda feels deeply isolated and different from others. This state of alienation amplifies her need to discover her own identity and connect with her own essence. Although from childhood she faces indifference from those around her, she does not learn even in adulthood to manage situations in which she is placed in the sphere of inferiority, being marked by an existence full of dark thoughts. Through deep introspection and reflection, Rhoda explores her emotions, thoughts and feelings, seeking understanding and revelations about herself. She is in a constant search for the inner dimension.

### 5. Rhoda – in a permanent search for identity

The character is in a constant search for identity due to her introspective and sensitive nature. In Rhoda's inner monologues, she often reflects on herself and tries to understand her place in the world and her own existence. She is faced with a series of questions and uncertainties, and this search for identity is an expression of her desire to know herself and find the meaning of her life: *"If I could believe,' said Rhoda, 'that I should grow old in pursuit and change, I should be rid of my fear: nothing persists. ... I am afraid of you all. I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do—I cannot make one moment merge in the next. ... I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life. ... But there is no single scent, no single body for me to follow. And I have no face. I am like the foam that races over the beach or the moonlight that falls arrowlike here on a tin can, here on a spike of the mailed sea holly, or a bone or a half-eaten boat"*<sup>16</sup>. She does not find her purpose even in adulthood, nor does she conceive that her existence is endowed with the great capacity to decide her own destiny.

Rhoda never identifies with anyone in society, never assumes an identity that is not her own. However, she envies the existence of those around her, feeling that she has achieved nothing in her life: *'I hate, I love, I envy and despise you, but I never join you happily. Coming up from the station, refusing to accept the shadow of the trees and the pillar-boxes, I perceived, from your coats and umbrellas, even at a distance, how you stand embedded in a substance made of repeated moments run together; are committed, have an attitude, with children, authority, fame, love, society; where I have nothing. I have no face*<sup>17</sup>. Rhoda does not identify herself in the social parameters of the time and finds her place neither in the family, nor among friends or even strangers. Lacking the consciousness of individuality, she has no sense of belonging to herself.

From a young age, she finds a spiritual shelter in nature, far from the faces of people, dreaming of plants that flourish in the depths of the sea. She is unhappy with her own appearance and tries her best to avoid mirrors: *"That is my face,' said*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78-79.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

Rhoda, *'in the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder—that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy. They say Yes, they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second. If they meet a housemaid she looks at them without laughing. But she laughs at me. They know what to say if spoken to. They laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it'*<sup>18</sup>. She experiences anxiety and restlessness and is in a constant search for her own identity and the meaning of life. The character's thoughts and inner monologues explore themes such as time, death, loneliness, and alienation. She easily passes from one state to another, a fact that tires her at some point, so that her greatest desire is, simply, to cease to be, to cease to exist. As an identity, Rhoda evaporates. She only exists when she is self-analysing, but not for those around her.

The character is, in fact, the exact description of anxious and depressed beings with suicidal tendencies: *'Oh, life, how I have dreaded you,' said Rhoda, 'oh, human beings, how I have hated you! How you have nudged, how you have interrupted, how hideous you have looked in Oxford Street, how squalid sitting opposite each other staring in the Tube!'*<sup>19</sup>; *'And,' said Rhoda, 'we had no more to live.'*<sup>20</sup> Her monologues are always coordinated by the thought of suicide. The novel must be read, implicitly to understand the nature of the socially maladjusted pose, taking into account the biographical aspects of the writer, which Woolf decides to project into Rhoda's being.

She continues to quantify the events around her through the lens of the melancholy eye. Her thoughts materialize in bizarre behaviour dominated by frustration. However, the ease with which her friends accept her behaviour and their indifference to her plight causes her to sink deeper and deeper into loneliness: *'Rhoda comes now, from nowhere, having slipped in while we were not looking. ... We wake her. We torture her. She dreads us, she despises us, yet comes cringing to our sides because for all our cruelty there is always some name, some face, which sheds a radiance, which lights up her pavements and makes it possible for her to replenish her dreams.'*<sup>21</sup>; *'Louis was disgusted by the nature of human flesh; Rhoda by our cruelty.'*<sup>22</sup> A world of constant refusal, non-integration, and ultimately lack of interest in continuing to live is born around her.

## 6. Rhoda's suicide - a game of the subconscious

In the course of time, her imagination leans towards the suicide solution. The imminence of death that she increasingly senses does not make her back down. For her, life means pain. Rhoda chooses to kill herself after she turns forty, throwing herself off a cliff into the void, ending up in the sea, an emptiness she has lived with her entire life

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24-25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 137.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 148.

and which she embraces in the most terrible way: '*Rhoda, with whom I shared silence when the others spoke, she who hung back and turned aside when the herd assembled and galloped with orderly, sleek backs over the rich pastures, has gone now like the desert heat.*'<sup>23</sup>. Unable to find the ascension dimension of her being, she commits suicide when the ideal of life seems irreparably compromised.

The means by which she chooses to die betrays her psychological need for escape from the society she finds so oppressive and her prerequisite for freedom. Even her death is treated superficially: '*...the figure of Rhoda, always so furtive, always with fear in her eyes, always seeking some pillar in the desert, to find which she had gone; she had killed herself*'<sup>24</sup>. It is so superficially mentioned as if it were the most natural thing to happen, consequently it surprised no one. Rhoda decides to completely break away from the world she was a stranger to anyway. The decision of self-suppression comes as a result of the search for peace, being, in fact, a separation from the hustle and bustle of existence and the few friends she had, by entering death. Her radical choice does not have to be interpreted literally as a naive act of escape, but rather metaphorically as a self-aware human being withdrawing in order to discover an alternative psychological environment that, in this case, allows for revision and alteration of the conventionally defined identity.

Exploring Rhoda's disintegration and trying to understand the valences of the fantasy world she creates to escape reality leads to the revelation of the motivations behind her suicide. Sadness was part of her being, a feeling she no longer feared, but considered necessary and liberating. Rhoda's suicide may be interpreted as an act of commitment and a means of learning about the causes and consequences of her nervousness and tension. Rhoda's largely unaccounted-for suicide, which Woolf only suggests through the thoughts of other characters, or, to use Annette Oxindine's more empathetic word, her 'disappearance'<sup>25</sup>, needs to be seen as an act of defiance of the restricting social order presented in *The Waves* through her profound observations.

Despite her apparent silence, Rhoda's perspective brings emotional depth to the story and contributes to the subtle exploration of the human condition. She is a complex and fascinating character with a distinct voice in the novel *The Waves*. Her presence brings a unique texture and depth to the novel's exploration of psychological and existential themes. Of the six main characters, Rhoda is the outcast. Her suicide represents a means of transcendent rebellion, one that frees Rhoda from an oppressive, patriarchal society that imposes rigid social norms. She becomes, in fact, a mirror image of her creator, especially as they both ended up committing suicide.

## 7. Conclusions

The character represents the conception of feminine identity, together with its dynamic development over time. As noted by Roxanne J. Fand, 'being a woman was not without ego boundaries, but rather feeling ego as an imposition, empowered

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172.

<sup>25</sup> Annette Oxindine, *Rhoda Submerged: Lesbian Suicide in The Waves in Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*. Ed. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer, New York, New York University Press, 1997, p. 203.



for a man, disempowered for a woman'<sup>26</sup>. To define 'ego', Shannon Sullivan points out that 'throughout history of philosophy, philosophers have claimed that there is an essential 'core' in humans that underlies all of their cultural and other differences. Some have called this core 'Reason'; others, 'the Universal Mind'; and still others, 'the Transcendental Ego.'<sup>27</sup>. Rhoda exemplifies the feminist challenge of maintaining a feeling of non-unitary personality without submitting to its pre-defined origins or having it normalized or established by others.

Water plays a significant role in her life and perception. For Rhoda, water represents a means of transformation and liberation. Since childhood, always playing with water, she observes how water flows in waves and constantly changes, suggesting the idea of fluidity and the passage of time. This representation of water can be associated with Rhoda's inner states and experiences, which are always moving and changing. Water also creates a sense of depth and mystery to it. Rhoda is often drawn to the depth and stillness of water, and this attraction reflects her very search for the meaning of life. Water is a form of refuge and peace for Rhoda, where she can feel safe in her own inner world.

Although it is also felt as a generalized concept of life, the sea also appears as a symbol of death<sup>28</sup>. Considering that Virginia Woolf also resorted to suicide by drowning, Rhoda can be regarded as a reflection of the writer and her vision of human existence, encouraging the waves to wash away all the dissatisfaction and bitterness gathered throughout life.

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<sup>26</sup> Roxanne J. Fand, *The Dialogic Self: Reconstructing Subjectivity in Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood*, Selinsgrove, Susquehanna University Press, 1999, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> Henri Wald, *Dialectica simbolului*, în *Semantică și semiotică*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1981, p. 21-29.