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***Right You Are! (If You Think So): Percival, the ‘absent but spoken about’ character in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves****

The concept of character (cf. Greek ‘pròsopon,’ and Latin ‘persòna,’ i.e. mask) in literature is strongly associated with the idea of a fictional entity representing somebody who does not exist but that, for various reasons, must be or is wished to be something more than words in the text. In this paper I look at how Percival, one of the seven characters in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* is presented. In this ‘dialogical’ novel, Percival is an exceptional figure, as he not only never speaks, but he is entirely other-presented through the soliloquies of the other six speaking characters. The principal aim in this paper is to research to what extent we can construe or re-construe the ‘true’ Percival through what the other characters say, think and feel about him. The approach adopted draws upon cognitive linguistics that argues that our understanding of literary character is derived from the combination of bottom-up processes (textual cues) and top-down processes of inferencing (social schemata). If, on the one hand, such a model may be useful to define Percival, as an other-presented character, on the other hand we should also be able to account for the ontological gap between reality and fictionality inherent to fictional worlds in which a character also fulfills actantial and thematic functions within a plot in a possible text world. The analysis makes use of computer-aided methods in order to identify quantitatively the occurrences of the name Percival and pronouns referring to him in the other six characters’ speeches and then to pin down the shared aspects and/or the differences deriving from their viewpoints, as well as their diverse wish-worlds derived from their personality traits and individual backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, characterisation, text world theory, cognitive linguistics.

## 1. Introduction

Character in drama possesses a make-believe identity performed by an actor, who when playing it, loses his own identity to become the 'character.' Authenticity (the actor) and pretence (the character) merge to the point that what is the actor off-stage disappears to become the character with which he identifies himself. Similarly, a character in a literary text is a fictional entity, not in the actual world but in a possible world that is imagined and created by the author to be functional to the progression of the story. The character can then be inserted in possible sub-worlds that are imagined, believed, or wished for by the characters of the story. Their interaction between each other is 'fictional', as if in a truth-falsehood game, often cruel but always human, in which interpersonal relationships are woven and which we also experiment with in our everyday life.

The complex theme of truth-authenticity is perfectly exemplified by Pirandello's (1917) play *Right You Are! (If You Think So)* as is the case with many of his works, such as *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* (1926). *Right You Are!* revolves around the morbid curiosity of provincial middle-class people who question and produce conflicting versions of the identity of Mr. Ponza's wife. His mother-in-law (Signora Frola) claims that her son-in-law went mad when her daughter, his first wife died. He then remarried but he fantasises the new wife is his old wife. In turn, Ponza himself claims that Signora Frola could not accept her daughter's death, went mad, and only survives because she believes that his second wife is in truth her living daughter; she says that it is for this reason that Ponza is so jealous and does not want to show her in public. To unravel the intricate question (who is Signora Ponza?) she will be made to appear in public and will baffle everybody by saying: 'No! I am she whom you believe me to be.' This work is paradigmatic of how a character, already invented by its author, represents a further projection of 'inauthenticity' derived from our beliefs, expectations, and fantasies.

In this paper the 'apparent reality' vs the 'evident fictionality' of character in a literary work is investigated through the presentation of Percival, one of the seven characters in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. I will briefly consider some major issues in regard to the ontological status of character in possible worlds and the possibilities of analysing character in a storyworld and its modes of presentation, then I will move onto the major focus: Who is Percival? After placing this character in the narrative architecture of *The Waves*, and counting the occurrences of the name Percival and the pronouns referring to him in each of the six speakers *via* concordances, I will select the 'authentic' and converging information that the

speaking characters ascribe to him. Eventually, I will look at how each character projects onto Percival their wish-worlds according to their personal traits, social roles and experiences.

## **2. Characters and Characterisation in the storyworld**

One of the major points of discussion in literary theory rests on the ontological status of character. Drawing upon possible world theory (PW hereafter), Doležel (1980; see also Eco 1984; Lewis 1986) stresses the radical incompleteness of fictional worlds as entities that don't possess the same ontological fullness as the real world, it is useless to ask, for example, how many children Lady Macbeth had, because the number of her children is never specified; this lack of information forms an ontological gap inherent to fictional worlds.

Narrative theorists have tried to make clear the implications of PW theories (Ryan 2012) for the ontological status of literary characters. For example, Margolin (1983: 1-2) offers multiple approaches to the study of fictional character. He states that character is generally conceived as "an actant, a role, a narrative device and an individual or person." The terms "actant" and "role" suggest that character is a purely semiotic construct or some abstract dimension; while the terms "individual or "person," inspired by PW theory, highlight the mimetic or make-believe properties of character: "endowed with inner states, knowledge, and belief sets, memories, attitudes and intentions—that is, a consciousness, interiority and personhood" (Margolin 1990: 455). The possibility of integrating the 'incompleteness' of fictional character, and investing it with the ontological fullness of the real world, can "be answered by an interdisciplinary research bringing together textual analysis and the cognitive sciences" (Fotis 2012: 42).<sup>1</sup>

Within stylistic approaches we find scholars who view character as a mental representation constructed out of the interaction between the text and the reader's background knowledge (Chatman 1978: 118; Toolan 1988: 92; van Peer 1989a: 9; Culpeper 2001: 9-12). Culpeper (2001; see also Fotis 2012; Balossi 2014) brings together a cognitive model for a stylistic approach to character and characterisation in which top-down processes of inferencing and bottom-up processes of perception interact and combine to allow readers to infer character in a storyworld. In simple terms, if our impressions are mainly derived from top-down processes (using our previous knowledge, principally social schemata) we obtain a category-based (i.e. flat) character; whereas, if we rely more on bottom-up impressions (i.e. textual cues) we obtain a person-based category or individualised fictional character. However,

the category-based or person-based category used in character perception can also be integrated with the categories of 'dramatic role,' which account for the functional or actantial roles of the formalist-structuralist approach, i.e. character is seen as realizing a function such as that of helper, hero and so on. These additional categories do not exclude the social ones applied to our knowledge of real people, which can indeed provide supplementary information for dramatic roles. Fotis (2012: 31) defines characterisation as the process of "ascribing information to an agent in the text so as to provide a character in the storyworld with a certain property or properties." The reader can derive the properties attached to a character explicitly, when characters present themselves without any apparent interference from an omniscient narrator, or indirectly from information provided by other characters and narrators. The issue that rises in indirect presentation is that readers may question the authenticity of the properties that either characters or a narrator attribute to a character.

Percival, the non-speaking character in *The Waves*, is presented entirely through the other six speakers' soliloquies, and in assessing the validity of the information they give of Percival, we tend to accept that what they say or think about him is real/authentic. However, this principle may be true only partially as we must also take into account that the perception a character has of another character is dependent, as in real life, on his/her own personal traits and social roles and experiences just as it happens with the characters in Pirandello's *Right You Are! (If You Think So)*.

### **3. The speaking voices and the non-speaking voice in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves***

In *The Waves*, the lives of six characters, three females and three males, are presented by means of soliloquies delivered by each at different stages of their lives from childhood to old age. Each stage of life is framed by an interlude in which a part of the day is described, moving from sunrise to sunset in sequence, corresponding symbolically to the life stages depicted in the soliloquies starting with the characters' childhood and moving progressively to their adolescence, early adulthood, adulthood, and finally to their old age. Each stage is also marked by a macro event such as in childhood the six characters are all together at boarding school, in their adolescence the males are at college and the females at a finishing school. The characters' individual soliloquies are clearly demarcated by reporting clauses (e.g. 'said Susan,' 'said Jinny,' 'said Rhoda,' etc.), which are the only sign of the narrator's presence in the novel. Woolf leaves the entire space to her characters to present themselves, but she also construes

a completely different character, Percival, who is both present in some parts of the novel and absent (after his death) in some other parts. Compared to the presence occupied by the six characters in the narrative Percival holds a marginal position within the narrative as he is present in the fictional world only in his early youth and early adulthood. Percival makes his first appearance in the story in the characters' adolescence, when the males all go on to public school, where they meet him. The females will not meet Percival until early adulthood when the group gather at Hampton Court to say goodbye to him before leaving for India. This gathering is followed by his death in India, which represents the climax of the novel since from this moment on all the six speakers start their 'fall' toward old age and death. Even when present in a particular soliloquy, Percival is always silent and entirely other-presented. So the reader's processes of inference can only take place through what the six speaking voices say about him.

The whole architecture of the novel is designed on a complex scheme of fictions. First is the 'fiction' of the interludes, in each of which the intense impressions of a distinct part of the day are conveyed anonymously. They function as metaphors for the development of the characters' lives. Second, is the 'fiction' of the dramatic soliloquies themselves in which the six characters express bluntly and sincerely their thoughts, judgements, impressions and feelings through life and in both public and private, but the juxtaposition of their consecutive speeches creates the impression that there is no communication between them. The author leaves to the reader the task of judging their 'fictionality' whenever they judge the other characters and their common experiences and events. The characters of *The Waves* are a mixture of fiction and authenticity even when they try to conceal themselves from the other characters and from themselves.

#### **4. The naming of Percival**

Percival's indirect presentation is also testified by the frequency of occurrences of his being named by the six characters and referred to by pronominals (Margolin 1995: 374) from his first appearance at public school until the end of the story.

The frequency of overt naming of Percival and the third-person masculine pronominals referring to this character was obtained through the programme WMatrix (Rayson 2007). Tables 1 and 2 list the frequencies of the name Percival and the pronominals respectively and

are displayed according to the characters' life stages and major events (e.g. The first reunion) in which they occur, with the female characters coming first, and the males second.<sup>ii</sup>

**Table 1 The naming of Percival**

Character	Phase of life	Event	Freq.
<b>Susan</b>	Growing old	Settled life	1
Corpus size 5,800 (8.3%)			<b>Tot. 1</b>
<b>Jinny</b>	Early adulthood	The first reunion	2
Corpus size 6,077 (8.7%)	Growing old	Settled life	1
			<b>Tot. 3</b>
<b>Rhoda</b>	Early adulthood	The first reunion	3
Corpus size 8,094 (11,6%)	Adulthood	Percival's death	8
	Growing old	Settled life	2
	Growing old	The final reunion	1
			<b>Tot. 14</b>
<b>Louis</b>	Adolescence	Public school	7
Corpus size 8,541 (12.2%)	Early adulthood	The first reunion	2
	Adulthood	Settled life	1
	Growing old	Settled life	3
			<b>Tot. 13</b>
<b>Neville</b>	Adolescence	Public school	7
Corpus size 9.678 (13.2%)	Late adolescence	At university	1
	Early adulthood	The first reunion	11
	Adulthood	Percival's death	1
	Adulthood	Settled life	4
	Growing old	The final reunion	2
			<b>Tot. 26</b>
<b>Bernard</b>	Adolescence	Public school	1
Corpus size 31,385 (45.1%).	Late adolescence	At university	2
	Early adulthood	The first reunion	9
	Adulthood	Percival's death	4
	Growing old	Settled life	1
	Adulthood	The final reunion	1
	Old age	Bernard's summing up	14
			<b>Tot. 32</b>
<b>Tot. words 69,575</b>			<b>Tot. naming 89</b>

Table 1 shows that the naming frequency varies according to the speaker and stage of life. The occurrence of the name Percival in the female characters' speeches is overall much lower than in those of the male characters, except that Rhoda (14) refers to him one time more than Louis (13). Amongst the females, the naming frequency in Rhoda's speeches (14) is much higher than in Susan's (1) and Jinny's (2). Susan mentions Percival only once towards the end of her life. In Jinny's speeches, we find the name Percival used when all the six friends meet at the

first reunion at Hampton Court, and in the same phase of life as Susan, when Jinny is a mature woman; while Rhoda's highest naming frequency is especially high (8) when she learns about his death. For the male characters the naming frequency is much higher. This may be partly explained by contextual reasons: they all meet him for the first time at public school, though Louis and Neville mention him seven times each, while Bernard only once. Bernard and Neville name him seven times on the first reunion. Bernard's naming is the most prolific (32), and higher in his summing-up when he is the only speaker left on stage recollecting his life and that of the other characters. Overall, the phases of life in which the name Percival appears and which contribute most to the other-presentation of Percival are 'Late adolescence,' 'Early adulthood,' and Bernard's summing up in 'Old age.'

As stated earlier on, characters are also referred to through pronominals. Yet, identifying all the occurrences of the pronouns that the six characters employ to refer to Percival was not an easy job. Firstly, I had to obtain the statistics of all of the third person singular masculine pronouns, secondly I had to produce concordances for each pronoun and delete all the instances of he-pronouns that did not refer to Percival. In some cases it is difficult to understand, even from the co-text, whether the pronouns refer to Percival, while in others the he-pronouns appear to implicitly refer to Percival, or rather they hint at an idealised wish-world that a character projects onto Percival; for example, when Susan imagines her hero/Percival coming back from the battle with trophies: '**He** will come home, bringing trophies to be laid at my feet. **He** will increase my possessions' (Woolf 1931: 123).<sup>iii</sup> As part of my analysis aimed to look at how each character projects onto Percival their wish-worlds, the statistics of the pronouns also include these instances. A further issue was about the inclusion of the he-pronouns and exclusion of other pronouns such as 'you,' which may refer to Percival. Although my choice was to focus on the occurrence frequencies related to the name Percival and the most obvious he-pronouns, we must also take into account the possibility that other pronouns may contribute to this, though not so frequently.

The frequencies of the he-pronouns referring to Percival are displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2 He-pronouns**

Speaking section	Phase of life	Event	Pronouns		
			he	his	him
<b>Susan</b>	Growing old	Settled life	2	1	x
Corpus size 5,800			<b>Tot. 3</b>		
<b>Jinny</b>	Early adulthood	The first reunion	1	x	x
Corpus size 6,077	Growing old	Settled life			
			<b>Tot. 1</b>		
<b>Rhoda</b>	Early adulthood	The first reunion	4	x	1
Corpus size 8,094	Adulthood	Percival's death	2	2	1
			<b>Tot. 10</b>		
<b>Louis</b>	Adolescence	Public school	3	4	2
Corpus size 8,541	Early Adulthood	The first reunion	1	x	x
	Adulthood	Settled life	2	x	x
			<b>Tot. 12</b>		
<b>Neville</b>	Adolescence	Public school	32	12	5
Corpus size 9,678	Late adolescence	At university	3	3	x
	Early adulthood	The first reunion	8	1	1
	Adulthood	Percival's death	11	3	2
			<b>Tot. 81</b>		
<b>Bernard</b>	Late adolescence	At university	5	x	x
Corpus size 31,385	Early adulthood	The first reunion	8	4	1
	Adulthood	Percival's death	16	4	7
	Growing old	Bernard's summing up	13	7	8
			<b>Tot. 73</b>		
<b>Tot. words 69,575</b>			<b>Tot. he-pronouns 180</b>		

Similarly to what resulted from the naming of Percival, Table 2 shows that the frequency of occurrence of he-pronouns referring to Percival is higher for Rhoda (10) compared to the Susan (3) and Jinny (1), and much higher for Neville (81) and Bernard (73) compared to Louis (12). From the concordances obtained these pronouns are also most often employed in the same stages of life in which also the name Percival occurs (cf. Table 1).

#### 4.1 Meeting Percival

The quantitative results for the name Percival and the pronominals referring to this character are the textual clues that help identify his salient physical, psychological traits, interests and experiences, though being rather sparse and scattered throughout the six characters' soliloquies.<sup>iv</sup>



- **Percival is beautiful and young:** 'this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty' (104). 'I remember his beauty' (111); 'He had the kind of beauty' (172)
- **Percival is strong:** 'He is heavy' (26); 'Percival lying heavy among us' (27).
- **Percival is gross in the ways he breathes, speaks, laughs, or moves:** 'He breathes through his straight nose rather heavily' (25); 'His slovenly accents' (27); 'His curious guffaw' (27); 'his surly and complaining accents' (60).
- **He is conventional:** 'There is Percival in his billycock' (43; a type of hat which became fashionable after Edward VII had adopted it); 'He is conventional' (88).
- **He is unintellectual and lazy:** 'He is allied with the Latin phrases on the memorial brasses' (25); 'He reads a detective novel' (52). 'I have just pulled Percival out of bed [...] as I pull the blankets off his feet; he burrowing like some vast cocoon meanwhile' (60).
- **He is athletic and his main interest is cricket:** 'He is thinking of nothing but the match [...]. He despises me for being too weak to play' (34).
- **He loves Susan:** 'when he takes his seat by Susan, whom he loves' (88);<sup>v</sup> 'not Susan, whom he loved' (112); 'I think sometimes of Percival who loved me' (137).
- **Neville loves Percival** 'It is for that that I love him' (43); 'Neville suffers. He loved Percival' (112).
- **Percival goes to India** 'We shall say good-bye to Percival, who goes to India' (83); 'he is about to leave us, to go to India' (88); 'Percival is going [...] India lies outside' (97); 'Percival advances; Percival rides a flea-bitten mare, and wears a sun-helmet' (97); 'Percival, riding alone on a flea-bitten mare, advances down a solitary path' (98).
- **Percival dies in India:** 'Percival is dead' (109); 'Percival by his death' (114); 'Percival has died' (121); 'He is dead' 'He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown' (105); 'He died where he fell' (108); 'I have lost friends, some by death – Percival' (139); 'Percival fell; was killed; is buried' (108); 'Percival's death' (129); 'Percival died' (137); 'after Percival died' (146); 'Percival comes no more' (160). 'The door will not open; he will not come' (150); 'Into this crashed death -- Percival's (186); 'But now Percival is dead' (205); 'Here on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell.' (205)
- **Percival as the hero and the catalyst:** 'His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander' (26); Look at us trooping after **him, his** faithful servants, to be shot like sheep' (27); 'He is a hero' (88); 'He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were -- what indeed he is -- a God. (97); Percival '[...] was adored' (173); '**He** is remote from us all in a pagan universe. But look -- **he** flicks **his** hand to the back of **his** neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime. Dalton, Jones, Edgar and Bateman flick their hands to the back of their necks likewise. But they do not succeed' (87).

Through the information coming from the six speakers, we can build up a personalized character: Percival is well built, beautiful, though gross in his manners (he prefers cricket to Latin). Percival is charismatic, a god-like figure, and a perfect leader, who everybody follows and tries to imitate. Yet, Percival is above all a category-based character, a stock character, and a literary type: he is the leader, the hero, the catalyst, the pagan God who inspires deep "obedience, respect [and] adoration" (Hite, in Woolf 2006: lviii). Everybody follows him and tries to imitate him. He embodies the physical and psychological qualities of manliness

(especially for the male characters), and the conventional roles for males associated with heroism; in serving in the British army Percival accomplishes the ideology of British imperialism. Percival, as a category-based character also embodies familial conventions: he loves Susan who embodies the traditional male fantasy of the perfect wife and mother.

All these qualities are emblematically represented in the Arthurian name Percival that encourages the readers to regard him as a mythical, heroic and romantic figure (McConnell 1971; Graham 1982; Booker 1991; Hite, in Woolf 2006: lv-lxi). Percival is the name of one of the most famous Knights of the Round Table. He is mentioned in several great European works from the French chivalric novels of Chrétien de Troyes (ca. 842-1300) and Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485) to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1953) and finally Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882). Intensely personal authorial autobiographical meanings have also been attached to the name Percival that go beyond these mythical associations; for example, Hussey (1995: 213) notes that "[f]or many readers, Percival is another attempt by Woolf at writing some kind of elegy for her dead brother Thoby Stephen." Gordon (1984: 241) suggests "the name may have associations with Spencer Perceval, a Tory Prime Minister who was assassinated in 1812 and died in the arms of Woolf's great-grandfather."

However, Percival contradicts the archetypal version given by the six characters and some critics; he does not die in battle; ironically his death is caused by an accidental fall from 'a flea-bitten mare' (97). Thus Percival, whose name Bernard says, 'is ridiculous' (109) is also an anti-modern hero, representing the failure of military *virtu*. In this regard, Little (1983: 77) states that Percival represents "a mythos, a narrative or 'sequence' that gives shape to a culture and to individuals within the culture [...] a mock grail-hero [he] mocks the very notion of story, of legend."

#### **4.2 Percival: the six characters' wish-worlds**

In the previous section I looked at the textual cues that give factual or 'authentic' information about Percival without taking into account the characters such information came from. In what follows, I look at how Percival is presented from the viewpoint of each character and how each of them (especially the males) uses Percival "as a model to define themselves" (Booker 1991:36) and projects onto him their own wish-worlds (Eco: 1984) depending on their social roles, personal traits and experiences.

The six characters' lives are differentiated according to the stereotypical expectations of the early twentieth century, when the social and moral codes of the Victorian age were still influential. The three males and the three females are separated according to gender and sent to different schools, after which only the males go to university and can participate in important professions. Louis becomes an important businessman, respected for the authority he achieves, he also cultivates a profound interest in poetry that he keeps hidden from his public life; Neville represents authority and conformity to social roles (he becomes an academic don); Bernard, like Neville, is a professional writer and deeply devoted to telling and writing stories (McNichol 1990: 133; Lucenti 1998: 84).

If apparently, the males comply with their society's conventions on the private side they possess evident flaws. Louis's Australian origins and accent make him an outsider; he spends his life trying to imitate, look and sound like a member of the English upper-class and compensates for his diminished self-esteem by fantasising being at turns one of the major figures from history and literature. Neville is the character "who forms the most intense attachment to Percival" (Booker 1991: 37), and his apparent "conformity to social behaviour is destabilized by his same-sex desire for Percival" (Clements 2005: 169). As Bernard (the novelist) grows up he starts questioning the potentialities of language. The females are instead denied the possibility of participating in literary occupations or interests. Susan, for the most part of her life, embodies the perfect stereotype of a female (a devoted mother and wife), but also instinctiveness and the desire for possessions; Jinny departs radically from this stereotypical image as her priority in life is to be sexually attractive and find sexual pleasure. Rhoda, like Louis, feels an outsider, torn between her wish to fit into a social role and her inability to do so, be it one unconventional for the time, like Jinny's, or stereotyped, like Susan's.

#### **4.2.1 Susan's wish-worlds: love and possessions**

Susan, the devoted mother and wife, instinctive and in pursuit of possessions in her maturity, when her desires have been accomplished, envisages Percival not as the hero/warrior who returns from battle after accomplishing a spiritual deed, but as the hero who has won 'trophies' (material things) and increased her 'possessions' (Campbell 1988). Her wish-worlds are nevertheless disregarded because Percival never accomplishes such deeds because he dies.

Sleep, I say, desiring sleep to fall like a blanket of down and cover these weak limbs; demanding that life shall sheathe its claws and gird its lightning and pass by, making of my own body a hollow, a warm shelter for my child to sleep in. Sleep, I say, sleep. Or I go to the window, I look at the rook's high nest; and the pear tree. 'His eyes will see when mine are shut,' think. 'I shall go mixed with them beyond my body and shall see India. He will come home, bringing trophies to be laid at my feet. He will increase my possessions.' (122)

#### 4.2.2 Jinny's wish-worlds: everlasting youth and beauty

Jinny's priority in life is directed towards being beautiful and sexually attractive. For her, Percival represents the embodiment of the beautiful young hero.

Let us hold it for one moment, [...] love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of **Percival**, of youth and beauty. (104)

But the idealised beautiful and young hero/Percival dies, which disproves her fantasy of staying young and beautiful forever, and brings about the realization of her physical decline in old age.

Here I stand [...]. But look -- there is my body in that looking glass. How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young. I am no longer part of the procession. [...]. Millions have died. **Percival** died. I still move. I still live. But who will come if I signal? (137)

#### 4.2.3 Rhoda's wish-worlds: search for an identity and aim in life

For Rhoda, Percival represents the means through which she can attain a social dimension to her identity, an opportunity however destroyed by his death, which gives her a 'terrible' gift: the awareness of being a misfit. Rhoda's awareness of her inability to fit into a social role reaches its culmination on Percival's death. This is also evidenced by the obsessive effect of the many repetitions of the name Percival (14) that occur for the character Rhoda on Percival's death.

**Percival**, by his death, has made me this present, has revealed this terror, has left me to undergo this humiliation [...]. (131)

**Percival**, by his death, has made this gift, let me see the thing. (134)

#### 4.2.4 Louis's wish-worlds: integration in society

For Louis, Percival represents on the one hand his idealized expectations of power and authority. In the quote below, Louis, describing Percival's bravery on the cricket playing field, renders him in terms of worship and military and religious magnificence similar to those of a 'mediaeval commander;' on the other hand, Louis rejects all this ('I resent the power of Percival intensely' (27)) and through Percival's 'flaws' ('slovenly accents'), Louis reveals his own flaws: his Australian accent which is the stigma of his being positioned as a colonial by British cultural imperialism; but at the same time Percival's defects can make him feel 'his superior,' which is what Louis wants in life.

**His** magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind **him**. Look at us trooping after **him, his** faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for **he** will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle. My heart turns rough; it abrades my side like a file with two edges: one, that I adore **his** magnificence; the other I despise **his** slovenly accents -- I who am so much **his** superior -- and am jealous. (26-27)

The following quote restates the opposing perception that Louis has of Percival. In the attempt of Louis to write poetry at public school, Percival 'destroys' it with his gross manners ('as **he** blunders off, crushing the grasses' (28)). Yet Louis sees in Percival the source for poetic inspiration. As in epic poems, the poet would address the muse for inspiration; in the same way Louis (the would-be poet) attaches to the mythical Percival the power of inspiring poetry.

This I see for a second, and shall try to-night to fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel, though Percival destroys it, as **he** blunders off, crushing the grasses, with the small fry trotting subservient after **him**. Yet it is **Percival** I need; for it is Percival who inspires poetry. (28-29)

#### 4.2.5 Neville's wish-worlds: anti-conformity and same-sex desire

Amongst the male characters, Neville is the one who talks about Percival most frequently (cf. Tables 1 and 2). Since public school Neville projects onto Percival his alter ego. Percival represents what Neville, the perfect scholar and academic, is not. He says that Percival despises him 'for being too weak' (34) at the match. Percival 'is brutal in the extreme' (28), 'he cannot read' (34) Shakespeare and Catullus, he reads detective stories. Neville does not meet the social expectations for manliness and imperialistic ambitions embodied by Percival and those like him. Later in life, long after Percival's death, Neville acknowledges with distress that he was unable to be like the boys (included Percival).<sup>vi</sup>

Alas! I could not ride about India in a sun helmet and return to a bungalow. I cannot tumble, as **you** do, like half-naked boys on the deck of a ship, squirting each other with hose-pipes. (128)

Neville also attaches to Percival qualities such as sensibility to 'detect insincerity' (27) and the ability, despite his ignorance, to understand everything ('yet understands everything' (52)). The qualities that Neville projects onto Percival are also derived from his homosexual attraction towards him. When the male characters leave public school, Neville 'expresses' his same-sex desire openly:

We are about to part [...]. **He** will forget me. **He** will leave my letters lying about among guns and dogs unanswered. I shall send **him** poems and **he** will perhaps reply with a picture post card. But it is for that that I love **him**. (43)

The same wish-world (Percival as the object of sexual desire) is evident at the first reunion, when Neville is looking forward to seeing Percival:

'It is now five minutes to eight' [...] I have come early. I have taken my place at the table ten minutes before the time in order to taste every moment of anticipation; to see the door open and to say, 'Is it **Percival**? No; it is not **Percival**.' There is a morbid pleasure in saying: 'No, it is not **Percival**.' I have seen the door open and shut twenty times already; each time the suspense sharpens. This is the place to which **he** is coming. This is the table at which **he** will sit. Here, incredible as it seems, will be **his** actual body. (84)

#### 4.2.6 Bernard's wish-worlds: the storyteller and the (anti)-hero

Bernard's wish-worlds are more difficult to pin down as his role does not only belong to the individuality of fictional *personae*, but also to the set of universal roles within the structuralist-formalist view of narratives. Indeed Bernard, the novelist, at the end of the story, summarizes the life of his friends and his own and among other things, what Percival represented for all the characters. Ideally, Bernard accomplishes his wish to be a novelist, by retracing the various moments of their life, and by attaching to Percival their collective wish-worlds. Percival represented for all the boys at public school and college a charismatic figure that everybody tried to imitate.

**Percival** sat staring straight ahead of **him** that day in chapel. **He** also had a way of flicking **his** hand to the back of **his** neck. **His** movements were always remarkable. **We** all flicked our hands to the backs of our heads -- unsuccessfully. (172)

Percival was the means whereby the six characters reached unity at the first meeting at Hampton Court.

The flower [...], the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when **we dined together with Percival**, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives. (162)

**We became six people** at a table in Hampton Court. We rose and walked together down the avenue. (197)

Such unity vanished when Percival died:

**We sat here together.** But now Percival is dead [...] **we are divided**; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt I am you. (205)

Bernard who becomes the anti-hero takes up the sense of unity that Percival guaranteed to all six characters, which came less after his death, at the end of the story. He, unlike Percival, never accomplishes great enterprises, he marries, has a family and has children and he is ordinary. As noted by Flint (1931: XXXV) Percival is the “absent centre, who fascinates the other characters with his physical, masculine beauty and aura, but who is never allowed a voice.” Bernard is instead allowed a voice until the end, he who regarded Percival as the “hero” (88) and a “God” (97) becomes the anti-hero (not a mock hero), and unlike Percival, he reaches the end of his life idealizing it by taking up Percival’s heroic role:

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! (211)

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested a number of possibilities for the investigation of a silent character in a literary work. I hope to have shown that such a literary character may perform different functions: it may be viewed as functional to plot development, it may also be perceived as an individualized, a category-based character, but also as the projection of other characters’ wish-worlds. Much of Virginia Woolf’s work was devoted to creating a new idea of character, and through Percival the non-speaking but spoken about character, she put into practice the manifold meanings that a character in a storyworld may be invested with. In a

fictional work such as *The Waves*, Percival, like Signora Ponza in Pirandello's *Right You Are! (If You Think So)*, is what the other characters, the readers and the critics want him to be:

'I am **she/he** whom you believe me to be.'

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<sup>i</sup> Citations from Fotis indicate the paragraph number and not the page number.

<sup>ii</sup> Tables 1 and 2 show only the life stages in which the occurrences of the name Percival and pronominals related to him is present and spoken about by the other; for the complete narrative structure of *The Waves*, see Balossi 2014: 60-63.

<sup>iii</sup> Page numbers refer to the e-text of *The Waves* from the Oxford Text Archive (1998).

<sup>iv</sup> For reasons of space, I will cite the most representative examples.

<sup>v</sup> At the first reunion at Hampton Court Bernard observes that Percival loves Susan (88). Apart from this reference we do not find any information about Percival meeting and loving Susan before this event.

<sup>vi</sup> This is an example that lies outside my corpus as detailed in Tables 1 and 2. It is through our accumulated contextual knowledge that we infer that 'you' is referring to Percival.