The Function of the Mirror Image in the Perception of the Self in Virginia Woolf's Fiction

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Literary Studies: English Literature and Culture

By

Heleen Buchner

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Supervisor: Prof. dr. P.T.M.G. Liebregts

Second reader: Dr. L.E.M. Fikkers

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Introduction

The notion of the self and of identity are central themes in Virginia Woolf's novels. Woolf understands identity to be something that is constantly evolving rather than something that is fixed once a person reaches adulthood (Howard 48; Myk 108). She also believes that identity is complex and that multiple selves can exist alongside each other in one person (Howard 48; Richter 114). Therefore, the different sides that make up one person's identity are often highlighted in her fiction. Additionally, Woolf emphasises the inherent subjectivity of the self. She raises the question whether anyone can be truly known at all, either by others or by themselves. She tends to show this by ambiguously presenting information about the characters by means of the way in which the texts are narrated, while the characters themselves also question their identities. As such, Woolf's understanding of the self and of identity reflects the Modernist ideas of subjectivity and relativity.

Previous research has related Woolf's understanding of the notion of the self to different theories of and approaches to the self. One approach that is connected to her work is Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, which focusses on the forming of identity in childhood. According to Lacan, the moment a child sees itself in the mirror for the first time is significant in its formation of a sense of self. Before this moment, the child is only able to see itself partially because through the eye it can only perceive parts of the body and never the complete form. Thus, when the child looks into the mirror, it is able to see itself in its entirety for the first time, which, according to Lacan, turns the "fragmented image" the child has of its own body into an image that shows the "form of its totality" (78). Moreover, this mirror image gives the child the idea that it is a complete, separate self. However, as Mansfield points out, this sense of wholeness is defined by something outside of the child, namely by the image that is reflected back. Therefore, the crux of the mirror stage is that even though the mirror image gives the child a sense of a separate self, still the only way to obtain this sense

of self comes from something that is situated outside of its body, and thus "other" (43). As Lacan claims, the mirror stage establishes "a relationship between an organism and its reality" (78). It defines the moment in which the child realises its sense of self while also realising that, as a subject, it is always inevitably related to and defined by external factors (Mansfield 43).

In Woolf's fictional texts, reflections on the self are often accompanied by, or prompted by, an actual reflection of the character in a mirror. Additionally, two or more characters also tend to mirror each other as well. The use of this mirror image in Woolf's fiction is generally seen as a way to comment on the societal difference in the perception of men and women (Chapman 334; Deppman 31; Squier 274). However, the mirror can also be seen as a "metaphor for perceiving reality" (Chapman 336). As Olk points out, Woolf uses mirrors to emphasise the impossibility of "any kind of direct and unmediated vision" which in turn "emphasises subjectivity" (56), and therefore underlines that the characters cannot perceive themselves or others objectively.

Like Lacan's mirror stage, the mirror image of the characters in Woolf's novels is an external image that gives them some deeper understanding of themselves. As Taylor argues, the mirror can be seen as "a re-establisher of identity" (64), which suggests that it is used as a mode through which the character's self-perception is revaluated. Likewise, according to Mansfield, the self is always perceived in relation to other external objects or people (3). As a mode situated in between the self and the other, the mirror can provide a different perspective on the character's perception of their self. Moreover, both the actual and the metaphorical mirror image stimulate the characters to examine and possibly to adapt themselves.

This thesis will examine the use of the mirror image in the reflection on the characters' sense of self in Virginia Woolf's novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), and her short stories "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) and "The Lady in the

Looking-Glass: A Reflection" (1929). For the analysis, the method of close reading will be applied and notions of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage will be employed. The first chapter will show the ways in which both the actual and the metaphorical mirror images enhance the characters' reflections on their identity in childhood as well as in adulthood. In the second chapter these realisations about the self will be explored, which will emphasise the relation between the self and the Modernist themes of subjectivity, relativity and epistemological questions. The third chapter will focus on Woolf's use of stylistic devices to underline the importance of perspective in the perception of a character. Together, these chapters will highlight the significance of the mirror image in the characters' sense of self.

Chapter 1: The Mirror Stage

1.1. The Mirror Image

As mentioned in the introduction, the characters in Woolf's fiction often contemplate their sense of self while looking in a mirror. Although Lacan's mirror stage refers to the moment a child looks in the mirror for the first time and starts to form its sense of itself as a subject, in relation to Woolf's understanding of the self as constantly evolving, these moments can occur in adulthood as well. In fact, in her fiction they seem to have more significance in adulthood.

As an example, we may consider the moment Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway* looks into a mirror, which enables her to collect "the whole of her at one point, … seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself" (40). For her, seeing herself reflected in the mirror signifies a moment of self-reflection in which she is able to draw together the parts that make up her identity. However, although the mirror image can be seen as the reflection of the character's inner life it can also be a reminder that her reflection might not actually show her true self. According to Varga, Lacan's mirror stage is a process of "misidentification" because the reflection in the mirror is a composition of the subject's desired self instead of the "real" one (292). Clarissa

> pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self – pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, she … had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her – faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions[.] (40)

As this shows, rather than seeing herself, Clarissa sees the woman other people see when they look at her. Therefore, while looking in the mirror she does not only see her own reflection, but more importantly, she sees the reflection of how she thinks others perceive her. In this case, the moment Clarissa looks into the mirror signifies a re-establishing of her public self, not necessarily her private self. However, she does not just recognise this distinction, she

emphasises the effort she makes to appear this way. She wants others to perceive her as “one woman”, which means that she is continuously repressing certain aspects of her self in order to be able to appear in public like the ideal self she sees in the mirror. Therefore, she is aware of her fragmented self, but she makes an effort to appear as a united self nonetheless. Her desired self is constantly reinforced by the other characters’ perception of her.

In Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall”, the function of the mirror image in this process of misidentification is reversed. In this short story, the first person narrator argues that people tend to dress “up the figure of [themselves] in [their] own mind[s]”, while being careful not to make it “too unlike the original to be believed in any longer” (58). According to Hercend, as people tend to take at face value what they are shown, “our very identity rests on a suspension of disbelief” (90). He argues that Woolf’s story deplores a world in which the image is valued over “the inner experience” (92). However, as opposed to blaming the mirror image for this idealisation, in “The Mark on the Wall” it is suggested that the mirror actually helps to overcome this. According to the narrator, “suppose the mirror smashes, the image disappears”, what would remain is “only that shell of a person which is seen by other people”, which would make this an “airless, shallow, bald, prominent world … not to be lived in” (58). This suggests that the mirror image, which also just shows the outside of a person, is indeed able to signify a deeper layer of a human being that cannot be seen or reached without the mirror. However, it also implies that the way in which a person appears to the outside world is often merely a façade that the encounter with the mirror image is able to see through. Additionally, according to the narrator of the story, the mirror does not show a single reflection of one person, but rather “an almost infinite number” (58). Therefore, it is a combination of these many fragmented images that constitutes a whole. All the different ways in which a person might be seen by others combine into what Hercend describes as “the illusion of one complete character” (90).

In *Mrs Dalloway*, in spite of Clarissa's efforts to show a single identity, over the course of the novel it is emphasised that the other characters do not actually know what Clarissa is really like. As Peter Walsh realises, after all the years that he has known her, he can still only describe Clarissa as "a mere sketch" (85). Even Clarissa, during her party when she feels as if she is not herself, she "oddly enough [has] quite forgotten what she looked like" (187). As Varga points out, the mirror image can give an insight into things that would otherwise remain unseen (293). Likewise, Clarissa Dalloway, while collecting a complete picture of herself for the outside world, is aware that there are other parts that remain unseen, and understands that others do not, and cannot, see all these parts of her.

Where Clarissa Dalloway uses her mirror image to remind herself of who she is, in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay tries to avoid her reflection in the mirror. For her, looking in the mirror seems to be a struggle as she "[makes] herself look into the glass" (108). When she does look in the mirror, Mrs Ramsay is reminded of the things she is unhappy with: "When she looked in the glass and saw her hair grey, her cheek sunk, at fifty, she thought, possibly she might have managed things better – her husband; money; his books" (10). However, when she is talking to her children later that day, and thus not looking at herself in the mirror, her perception of herself is different: "But for her own part she would never for a single second regret her decision, evade difficulties, or slur over duties. She was now formidable to behold" (10). There is a distinction between Mrs Ramsay's perception of herself when she is actually looking at herself in the mirror, and her perception of herself when she is reminded of her mirror image later when she is surrounded by other people. While she reflects back on her mirror image, she realises that she is not unhappy about herself or her life after all. Mrs Ramsay's reflection of herself in the mirror shows her perception of herself when she is alone and when she does not appear to be shaped by others.

In *The Waves*, during the dinner where the characters say goodbye to Percival, all characters pass a mirror as they enter the restaurant. As the characters note, only some of them actually look in the mirror while the others pass it either being ignorant of its presence, or are being aware of it and deliberately not looking into it. However, deciding not to look into the mirror does not necessarily signify insecurity or unhappiness. Both Bernard and Percival do not look into the mirror as they pass it, which appears to be an active decision. The other characters do not see this as a sign of their insecurity but rather as a sign of confidence. Bernard and Percival's decision to ignore the mirror is not rooted in fear for the reflection of themselves, and neither do they seem to feel the need to be reassured by their mirror image.

On the other hand, Louis says that he needs a certain confirmation from his mirror image. He needs to look at himself to make him feel as if he belongs to the rest of the group. He is less insecure about himself when he can look at himself in the mirror and can be reminded of his ideal self. As Olk argues, his mirror image reminds him of who he thinks he needs to be in order to be accepted by the other characters (95-6).

Like Mrs Ramsay, Rhoda in *The Waves* avoids her own reflection as well. When she sees herself in the mirror she hides behind Susan, stating that she "ha[s] no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. … 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" (31). Rhoda continuously struggles with her sense of self and her presence in the world. As Olk argues, this is because she wants to be part of reality but at the same time does not know how she can do that (95). As the mirror is often seen to reflect reality (Olk 93; Varga 293), Rhoda has conflicted feelings about her mirror image. Howard argues that Rhoda fears her mirror image because she has not been able to experience the mirror stage successfully. This means that she is unable to

"differentiat[e] herself from the world around her" (51). Her fear of reality might signify her fear for confrontation with her mirror image, and thus her self. Therefore, Rhoda's apprehensiveness towards her mirror image is not merely based on insecurity but rather in a larger discomfort with her place in the world and in her own skin.

During the second reunion dinner, Jinny remembers looking into the mirror earlier that day. However, unlike Rhoda, Jinny's confrontation with her mirror image reassures her rather than anguishes her: "I look at my face at midday sitting in front of the looking-glass in broad daylight, and note precisely my nose, my chin, my lips that open too wide and show too much gum. But I am not afraid" (170). As Taylor points out, for Jinny, her mirror image "stabilises her sense of identity" (63) rather than that it is a starting point for her realisation of fragmentation and consequently for her sense of self falling apart. Where for many other characters the confrontation with the mirror image signifies a crisis of identity, for Jinny it does not. Although Jinny looks in the mirror at a point of uncertainty about herself, the mirror does not emphasise this insecurity but seems to solve it. This also shows the contrast with Rhoda's continuous crisis of identity. According to Taylor, Rhoda cannot "accept her unified reflection" (66), whereas Jinny embraces it (63). Therefore, Jinny prefers mirrors in which she can see herself entirely to the mirrors that show just her face: "So I skip up the stairs …, to the next landing, where the long glass hangs and I see myself entire. I see my body and head in one now" (30).

Looking into a mirror reminds Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* of her age. She is "a little resentful" she has grown old "by her own fault" (108). Additionally, Mrs McNab, a minor character who appears in "Time Passes" in *To the Lighthouse*, also looks into the mirror and compares her reflection to what it used to be when she was younger. Similarly, in *Mrs Dalloway* Clarissa reflects on ageing while looking in a mirror. Although female characters more often reflect on their ageing self, male characters do as well. For instance, in

The Waves Bernard sees himself in the mirror, "an elderly man, rather heavy, grey above the ears" (225). In these instances, the reminder of their age while they look at themselves often has a negative impact on the characters' sense of self. Contrarily, it seems that in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* the younger characters are not concerned with their mirror image at all. Although both *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* do largely revolve around a middle-aged woman, other older characters, like Mrs McNab in *To the Lighthouse* and Miss Kilman in *Mrs Dalloway* for instance, focus their thoughts on their mirror image as well, whereas younger characters like Elizabeth Dalloway or Lily Briscoe do not. The older characters might focus more on their age because of how much they have changed on the outside over the years, while their sense of self might not have changed, thus creating a contrast between what they see in the mirror and what they feel.

Additionally, in the middle part of *To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes", the emptiness of the mirror is pointed out. Contrary to earlier examples, the mirror is not empty because the characters refuse to look into it, but because there are barely any human beings present in this part of the novel. In the empty house, only the objects that have been left behind "[keep] the human shape and in the emptiness indicate how once they were filled and animated, … how once the looking-glass had held a face; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure turned, a hand flashed, the door opened, in came children rushing and tumbling; and went out again" (141). The absence of a face in the mirror could merely signify that the house is abandoned by humans, but it might also emphasise Mrs Ramsay's death. In this part of the novel, Woolf describes human life as something that is happening in the background, but the empty mirror could also show the empty space Mrs Ramsay has left after her death. Additionally, this might also signify the loss of self the other characters experience because Mrs Ramsay is not there anymore to remind them of who they are. According to Reed, a lack of reflection in the mirror can represent the mourning of the "primary object" (1). Even more,

she argues that the lack of reflection can be an "unconscious identification with the dead mother" (22).

The fact that the part where the mirror seems to be featured most prominently in *To the Lighthouse* is "Time Passes", the part of the novel where the main characters are not present, seems to be significant. Olk argues that the empty mirror emphasises that it is unable to provide the characters with any insight into the truth (94). Similar to "Time Passes", the interludes in *The Waves* also do not revolve around human life. Like "Time Passes", these parts also describe the presence of a mirror and the lack of a human reflection in it. Olk points out that in the last interludes the empty mirror shows the "disappearance of life from the novel" (94), which could also be what it signifies in *To the Lighthouse*, as not only Mrs Ramsay dies, but Prue and Andrew as well. According to Olk, "the mirror demands the immediate presence of its object of representation" (92), which is not possible if the character has died.

Likewise, "The Lady in the Looking-glass" begins with a description of an empty mirror. In this short story, an unknown narrator describes a woman's reflection in the mirror. However, at the beginning of the story, the subject of the narrator's examination is in the garden and cannot be seen through the mirror, which draws attention to the mirror as an object that "mirrors its own status as a mirror" (Bal 266). After the narrator contemplates what the main character might be like, at the end of the story the woman finally appears in the mirror: "Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in the pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty" (80). Therefore, the emptiness of the mirror at the start of the story might foreshadow her void personality. Similarly, in "The Mark on the Wall", the narrator emphasises that the world would be meaningless if "the image disappears" from the mirror (58). In these examples, an empty mirror seems to suggest a lack of depth.

1.2. Metaphorical Mirrors

In addition to the actual mirror images, Woolf also often employs metaphorical mirrors that reflect some part of the characters' personality. Through adding a character who is an antagonist of another character, certain elements of these characters are highlighted (Richter 118). These mirror characters might manifest similarities or differences about the character, or the mirror characters might reveal a hidden or repressed side of the character (E. Asher 229; Squier 284). As opposed to the mirror image that reflects the character itself, according to Davis, the double is someone who is external to the character (95).

Probably Woolf's most famous example of literary doubles are Clarissa and Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*. As Marcus argues, they do not necessarily represent a hidden or opposite part of each other but instead certain links in their lives and personalities are drawn between them (364). According to Wang, Woolf hints at the connection between Clarissa and Septimus through their mutual interest in the natural world, something that most other characters do not share with them (187). An example of their mirrored personalities, as Richter argues, is that Septimus's irrationality mirrors Clarissa's rationality (120). Additionally, Clarissa's reaction to the news that Septimus has committed suicide emphasises their connection, even though they have never met. Clarissa "felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living" (204). This connection between them reveals something about Clarissa's mental state that is hinted at throughout the novel. Richter points out that both Clarissa and Septimus at times "exhibit the failure to feel", even though they express this in different ways (118). According to Squier, Septimus acts as a mirror for Clarissa because his struggles and his consequent death make her aware of her own struggles with life. However, as opposed to Septimus, this reminder enables her to see the beauty in life again (282).

Another character in *Mrs Dalloway* who acts as a double for Clarissa is Peter Walsh. Unlike Septimus, whom Clarissa never meets, she has a long history with Peter. Although at the day the novel describes they meet again after thirty years, the bond that existed between them is still there. When they talk to each other for the first time, their thoughts during the conversation are mirrored as they both imagine what the other person must think of them, which the other's thoughts then either confirm or deny. They continuously challenge each other in their understanding of themselves and the other person (*Mrs Dalloway* 48).

Clarissa is aware of the effect Peter has on her self-perception: "It was extraordinary how Peter put her into these states just by coming and standing in a corner. He made her see herself; exaggerate" (184). According to Richter, Clarissa is surrounded by characters "who, like mirrors placed at various angles, send back different aspects of herself" (111). Moreover, Clarissa is aware of the effect others have on her but the other characters' specific behaviour towards Clarissa in the novel also tells the reader something about her character.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay is mirrored by Lily Briscoe. Squier argues that Mrs Ramsay is Lily's "mirroring mother figure", whose loss signifies Lily's misidentification. In restarting and finishing her painting she tries to "recreate her own image" while eventually painting Mrs Ramsay's portrait (282-3). Similarly, Lily Briscoe and Mr Ramsay mirror each other in the novel's third part "The Lighthouse" in their attempts to come to terms with the loss of Mrs Ramsay. Their struggle to move on is represented by their initial inability to reach their respective goals of finishing the painting and reaching the lighthouse. In the first part of the novel, when Mrs Ramsay is still alive, both characters mirror her and, through this, their sense of self is largely dependent on her. When she falls away, the characters have to find a way to deal with losing her but also with their loss of self, which they eventually do by finishing the painting and reaching the lighthouse. According to Squier, the mirror encounter between Lily and Mr Ramsay "assist[s] the characters in their attempts to accept the full,

varied life of the self" (284). Moreover, they both have to reinvent themselves without the presence of Mrs Ramsay as a double. As E. Asher argues, for Lily, coming to terms with Mrs Ramsay's death is actually just another way in which she is able to explore a part of herself that was lost or repressed before (220). At the end of the novel, both characters have to overcome their loss of self that is related to Mrs Ramsay's death in order be able to succeed.

Additionally, Mrs Ramsay acts as a mirror to many other characters. The novel emphasises the different ways in which she is perceived by others, and also what the effect of her presence is on them. For instance, in addition to Lily and Mr Ramsay, Mrs Ramsay acts as a mirror to Mr Bankes and Charles Tansley as well. As E. Asher points out, more so than the other characters, Mrs Ramsay means "many things to many different people" (228). Mrs Ramsay's personality often complements the other characters, albeit in different ways. E. Asher emphasises that Mrs Ramsay has a "multifaceted self", which enables her to reflect different things to different people and, through this, fill "whatever void she might perceive in others" (231). As a mirror character, Mrs Ramsay is able to detect what is missing and add something to another character's fragmented sense of self, which provides them with a sense of wholeness. Likewise, Brown notes that Mrs Ramsay is a "unifying presence" to Lily (46). Moreover, Mrs Ramsay seems to signify the importance of an external point of view in the forming and maintaining of identity.

The epitome of Woolf's use of multiple doubles to express the multiplicity of the self is the composition of the six main characters in *The Waves*. Although presented as six separate characters, they are often seen to represent different sides of one person, forming a collective identity (Richter 117; Ronchetti 77). Therefore, unlike for instance Clarissa and Septimus, who, as Marcus emphasises, are still two distinct characters and merely highlight aspects of the other's personality (364), the characters in *The Waves* represent various parts of the same person. Additionally, Percival, who is present in the characters' thoughts and

conversations throughout the novel but who is conspiciously absent as a speaker, also acts as a mirror character for the others. According to Richter, “like the mirror itself, Percival is never seen”. What the reader knows about him is merely what the other characters reflect about him (110).

Of Woolf’s novels, the characters in *The Waves* come closest to experiencing the mirror stage in childhood. The novel starts with the characters in their early childhood, even though their exact age is not specified. In the novel, they do not actually look into the mirror but they look at the others. The fact that they grow up in close proximity to each other emphasises how they adapt their sense of themselves to their perception of the others. The formation of each of their identities is mostly related to the way in which the others’ identities are formed rather than what they are able to see of themselves in the mirror. As Richter argues, what is said and thought by the characters early in the novel, and early in the characters’ lives, “reflect[s] viewpoints and emotions which the character will display in adult life”. Thus, the earliest thoughts depicted in the novel can be seen as the start of the forming of the characters’ identities (101).

In addition to the characters in *The Waves* who represent separate parts of one whole, within this collective identity pairs of characters mirror each other as well. This shows the complexity of Woolf’s understanding of the self. It emphasises that, although the characters represent distinct aspects of one identity, some parts might overlap or show similarities to others within that single identity. For instance, the three women mirror each other, as do the three men. Louis and Rhoda mirror each other in their insecurities about their place in the group and in society in general, which is a connection that is recognised by the others as well as by themselves. Both Louis and Rhoda feel the need to look at the other characters in order to know how to be themselves. According to Howard, Louis’ strongly defined idea of who he should be mirrors Rhoda’s incredibly weak self-image (50).

Additionally, the characters in *The Waves* also perceive themselves to be interchangeable with the others. It is not always clear for the reader who is who but, as a statement by Bernard points out, it is also often unclear for the characters themselves. He says: "I went into the Strand, and evoked to serve as opposite to myself the figure of Rhoda, … to find which she had gone; she had killed herself". He then imagines to stop her from committing suicide: "In persuading her I was also persuading my own soul. For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, or Rhoda – so strange is the contact of one with another" (216). Moreover, the characters are aware of the interconnectedness of their identities: "I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (212). The characters' overlapping characteristics show that they are constantly evolving as human beings as their fluctuating selves are sometimes more alike than at other times.

Apart from characters who mirror other characters, the characters in Woolf's novels also encounter people who, just by looking at them, make them reflect on themselves. Because of this, when the characters look at themselves in the mirror this, too, is always filtered through somebody else's eyes. As Bernard in *The Waves* realises: "To be myself … I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self" (87). As such, he and the other characters can use other people to reflect on themselves but they also need other people around them to provide them with any sense of self at all. Like Mansfield also argues, this presence of another person can reveal a stronger sense of self while it at the same time shows that the subject is inherently connected to others, and therefore that a sense of self cannot be seen as something that is merely internalised (43).

Similarly, as Olk points out, Peter Walsh perceives Clarissa to adapt the way she sees things to the way in which her husband sees things (93), "[w]ith twice his wits, she has to see

things through [Richard's] eyes" (*Mrs Dalloway* 84). Likewise, Bernard also points out that the look of another person also reminds him of how he wants others to perceive him. As Bernard calls it, the "pressure of the eye" (*The Waves* 226) emphasises the distinction between who he is and who he pretends to be.

1.3. The Mirror Stage

As my analysis has shown, in Woolf's fictional texts the mirror images and the characters' reaction to them can be compared to Lacan's mirror stage, in which the subject at the same time sees itself whole while also realising that it is not in fact whole (78). Woolf's use of both the actual mirror image and the metaphorical mirror image emphasises the necessary relation of the self to something that exists outside of it. In the moment a character looks into a mirror they expect to see a complete picture of themselves, or rather, get a sense of wholeness from it. However, the mirror image most often merely reminds the characters of their fragmented self.

Therefore, in Woolf's novels, the mirror acts as a symbolic other. The mirror provides a mode through which the characters can re-examine themselves and question who they are. At the same time, it also provides an opportunity for the reader to gain insight into the characters' thoughts on their sense of self. Like the actual mirror image, the mirror characters, too, are a mode through which the other characters are able to re-examine themselves. However, the mirror characters are further removed from the subject than the actual mirror image.

As Varga argues, the mirror is often seen as a "trope of mimesis (a tool that always tells the truth)" or as something that can provide "access to that which one would normally not see". However, at the same time it can also be seen as a way to underline "the fragmentary and incoherent nature of the subject facing his or her mirror image" (293). Although Varga

focusses on the mirror's function in autobiographical works, such as *To the Lighthouse*, this contradiction is also present in the use of the mirror image in Woolf's other texts.

Moreover, Woolf's texts show that, in order to know oneself, one needs other people around them. As Mansfield also argues, the subject always exists in relation to others (3), which means that without others the self cannot be known. Woolf also emphasises that others can never truly know or see the other characters as they are. According to Richter, "[w]hat the sum of mirror images suggests is that the way in which people perceive the object may yield the most truthful expression of themselves" (100). Therefore, it might be that only through others, whether other people or the mirror image acting as a symbolic other, the characters can know themselves.

Chapter 2: Modernist Reflections on the Self

2.1. Subjectivity

As the analysis in chapter 1 shows, the mirror image emphasises Woolf's understanding of the self as subjective. A prevalent Modernist notion is that there is no such thing as an objective reality and therefore it is impossible to depict reality objectively in art as well (Childs 3). Childs points out that, as opposed to the "shared world" of Realism, for Modernists, "reality was as varied as the individuals who perceived it" (46). In Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall", the narrator imagines that the novelists in the future will leave "the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted" (56). Moreover, there are many different ways in which reality can be perceived and experienced, and therefore there are also many different ways in which reality can be depicted in literature. In her fictional texts, Woolf explores the subjective nature of experience. Through this, she also emphasises the subjectivity of the self, as she points out that others do not, and cannot, have an objective perception of another person.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many established ideological and scientific models were undermined because of new developments in different scientific fields, such as physics and psychology (Childs 20). In line with the sense of confusion this brought, people also started to question their own identities, which led to "feelings of alienation and existential angst" (Childs 46-7). Without a frame of reference that provides a clear, objective understanding of the world, the understanding of the sense of self was complicated as well.

One of the ways Woolf shows this subjectivity is through her use of the mirror. This differs from the way in which the mirror is used in nineteenth-century Realist literature. According to Olk, in the Realist tradition, the mirror was connected to "the ideal of empirical accuracy" (92), as it was seen to have a mimetic function, which would mean that it could represent the subject objectively, as it 'really' is (Olk 92; Varga 293; Childs 3). However,

because for Modernists the notion of an objective representation was undermined, the image of the mirror was used to highlight this new perception, and, as Olk indicates, Woolf in her fiction uses the mirror in an inverse manner to object to the tenet of objectivity of Realist literary conventions (92).

In Woolf's "The Lady in the Looking-glass", the unidentified narrator notices that the mirror reflects the objects "so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality inescapably" (75), therefore describing the function of the mirror in Realist art to give the one true representation of reality. However, as Deppman points out, the story eventually disproves this realistic reflection as it underlines that the narrator's representation of Isabella is not objective at all (51). Moreover, although the narrator suggests that the mirror has the ability to show reality and reveal Isabella's true self, in this story Woolf actually emphasises that any description of reality is always subjective. Although presented as a factual description, in order to describe Isabella, the narrator admits that he or she has to use his or her imagination to make up the facts about Isabella as there is no other way to access her thoughts, which therefore accentuates that this does not provide an objective description of Isabella's character at all.

Additionally, the mediation of the mirror also emphasises the difference between looking at someone directly or indirectly. The self would have to be perceived directly, without any interference, in order to be considered objective. As Mansfield also points out, the mirror image does not show the object directly but rather in relation to some external factor (43). As mentioned in chapter 1.3, although someone can see his or her self in the mirror image, the mirror is still a mode through which this perception takes place. In the mirror, there is always someone who is watching, even though it is oneself. Likewise, Olk argues that looking into a mirror "always involves the idea of being seen by somebody" (91). The mirror does not provide a factual, unfiltered image of the self because it is produced

outside of the self. Moreover, it is still an image and therefore a reproduction, which emphasises its subjectivity. As Olk indicates, it is the mirror "that sees" rather than the person looking into the mirror (91).

According to Lacan's mirror stage, the mirror is seen as the only way in which people can see themselves whole, but this still cannot provide them with a direct, and thus objective, view of themselves. Olk argues that the "unmediated vision" that the mirror provides shows that the object of the mirror image is never directly attainable (56). Lacan's mirror stage is based on the notion that people cannot see themselves entirely because the eye cannot see the entire body all at once (Mansfield 43). People can never see themselves entirely without the mediation of a mirror, and because of this, they cannot perceive themselves directly.

At the end of *The Waves*, Bernard notices that "Now no one sees me and I change no more. Heaven be praised for solitude that has removed the pressure of the eye, the solicitation of the body, and all need of lies and phrases" (226). Therefore, the constant reaffirming of one's identity, according to Bernard, happens mostly because of the presence of other people who look at him, and judge him. His sense of self is relative to who sees him, and consequently his own idea of himself is influenced by other people's idea of him. Moreover, the mirror image, either metaphorically or actually, remains a mode that mediates between the self and the image of the self.

2.2. Relativity

The characters in Woolf's fiction are often aware that their sense of self is relative. Everyone's perception is considered in relation to other things and people they know. Similarly, the mirror image does not show a multidimensional picture. What one sees is still relative to the position of the object and the subject, and thus on perspective. The narrator in "The Mark on the Wall" points out that looking at others has a mirroring effect as well: "As

we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror[.] … And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number" (56). This emphasises how many different perspectives there are of the same person. Every person who looks at you will perceive you differently.

In her fictional texts, Woolf describes a variety of perspectives, in which she does not seem to value any one perspective over another. Luttrell argues that the perceived realities in Woolf's fiction are equally valid as she "offers the possibility of connection with others through shared vision, an outcome that is still subjective" (72-3). This suggests that all perspectives are subjective, but that does not necessarily mean that everyone lives disconnectedly from the others. In fact, the characters actually seem to need a connection to others in order to know their selves.

Similar to Bernard, Neville in *The Waves* notices the influence of the presence of another person on his sense of self: "How curiously one is changed by the addition … of a friend" (61). He feels that his self becomes "mixed up, becomes part of another" (61). According to him, his self adjusts in relation to the other people present. He even suggests that something is being taken away from him when others are present. Later, Bernard says that "different people draw different worlds from [him]" (100). This idea that any impression is relative is especially explored through the metaphor of the many-sided flower in *The Waves*. During the dinner scenes, there is a flower on the table, which is "seen by many eyes simultaneously. … A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled … – a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution" (95). Like the flower, the characters see different sides of the same being. Even though the flower is seen at the same time, it is still "many-petalled". As everyone's perspective differs, although perhaps only slightly, everyone's perception is different as well.

"The Mark on the Wall" emphasises this relativity by constantly changing the narrator's interpretation of the mark on the wall. The narrator starts out by thinking it is a mark made by a nail, then considers that it is an actual nail, while eventually it turns out that it is a snail. Likewise, in "The Lady in the Looking-glass", the narrator wonders what sort of communication might be in the letters brought in by the mail carrier, but it turns out at the end of the story that they are just bills. Through the thought processes of the narrators, these short stories show that any knowledge is relative and subjective. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the characters have very different interpretations about who might be in the car that passes by, as well as about what the airplane is writing in the sky, both of which the reader does not find out. Additionally, the characters in *The Waves*, especially at the beginning of the novel, often describe objects or experiences differently from the others, even though they are experiencing or looking at the same thing. Therefore, Woolf shows that there are many different interpretations based on one's position and experience.

The way in which the characters in Woolf's fictional texts define their self is also subject to the moment. As the characters' ideas of themselves are constantly changing, the way others perceive them has to adjust constantly as well. According to E. Asher, "each character's perception of himself and the world is restricted to whatever phase he is in at the moment" (227). She argues that the true or "real" self depends on the phase a character is in, which is why one can never see "the full picture all at once" (227). In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa thinks that the parts of people that appear to others "are so momentary compared with the other, unseen part of us, which spreads wide" (167). Likewise, the mirror image is just a reflection of one instance. According to Chapman, the mirror shows life as something that is "removed from the flux and caught within the frame, static" (336).

Additionally, the mirror image shows a contrast between the assumed fluidity of identity. The mirror image is a static image, which fails to reflect the dynamic identity Woolf

believes people have. What the mirror reflects is only a moment and does not incorporate any changes in the self. Although the characters feel as if they are continuously changing, this is not necessarily reflected in the mirror image. Therefore, even though the mirror is seen as a way to gain insight into one's self, it does not give a complete picture.

Therefore, what the mirror presents, and what is revealed about a character in this way, is also entirely dependent on perspective. Because, as Olk underlines, the mirror "confines the field of vision to a segmented part of the world" (91), while showing the character a whole image of their self, the mirror image is also limited in what it can really show a character. Unlike an objective perception that gives a conclusive definition, the characters cannot be defined in one way. Additionally, the way in which Woolf describes the perceptions of her characters does not make one perception truer than the other. As everything seems to be relative, it simply depends on the context. As Deppman argues, the mirrors in Woolf's fiction "stand for only a fragment of a perspective and thus speak of partial truth" (47). As the mirror in the mirror stage suggests, the perception of the self is not direct and does not represent a "true self".

2.3. Multiplicity

As mentioned in the introduction, Woolf understands identity to be something that continues to evolve throughout a life. As Myk argues, for Woolf, identity is always "in process" instead of reaching an end point (108). Because of this, her characters' identities are also "never stagnant" (*The Waves* 97). Woolf emphasises this fluidity of the self by giving her characters multiple selves (Howard 48; Richter 114). Woolf explores this notion both through the depiction of mirror characters, such as in *The Waves,* as well as by describing characters who realise that there are more sides to them that might not be seen by others.

In *The Waves*, Bernard comments, "to be contracted by another person into a single being – how strange" (66). Although Woolf's characters might have a fragmented sense of self, it seems that others feel the need to create a whole picture of them in order to understand them. On the other hand, the characters often feel that they have the complete picture of themselves, their "true" selves, one that others are unable to see. Either way, fragmentation is often seen as a negative thing. The contradiction between seeing themselves as complete beings and others wanting to see them whole shows the complexity of the notion of the self. It suggests that any understanding of either oneself or others is ambiguous because the self is multiple and always changing, which complicates the wish to be whole.

Although Woolf does not necessarily seem to value any of the perspectives over others, in most of her fiction her characters do make the distinction between their "true self" and the "assumed" self that others see (*The Waves* 58), or a superficial one which they present of themselves like Clarissa Dalloway does. Additionally, in both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*, the difference between these selves is likened to the distinction between the public self and the private self, which is highlighted in the characters of Mrs Ramsay and Clarissa Dalloway. The person they present themselves as, or the person who they want to be perceived as in public, is not always the same as the person they are in private. In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay compares her public self with the stroke of light from the lighthouse, and her private self with the dark phase of the lighthouse, which is thus never seen (69). Mrs Ramsay thinks, "one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (69). This also suggests that she thinks her private self is the more true form of the self.

However, the public self is not necessarily an empty façade, or entirely distinct from the private self either. As Nussbaum points out, the public self is still "a crucial constituent of the self" (740). E. Asher argues that, because of the difference between the private and the

public self, and because the private self cannot be seen by others, “a true sense of wholeness, a strong sense of self can therefore never be attained” (228). This also emphasises the characters’ struggle to see all those different parts of the same person at once. When seen by someone else, one’s identity is always perceived incompletely.

Mrs Ramsay describes the moment she feels like she can be her true self as being beneath the surface of the water. She needs the space and stillness to be able to access her self: “Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by” (69). Woolf often refers to the selves other people see as “our apparitions” (*To the Lighthouse* 69). In *Mrs Dalloway* as well, Clarissa and Peter Walsh make the distinction between their “apparitions” and the parts of them that are “unseen” (167). Like Mrs Ramsay, Peter compares Clarissa’s self to something “fish-like” which “inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities” until “suddenly she shots to the surface” (176). Moreover, this emphasises that there are more parts of a person, which cannot be seen all at once.

Similar to Mrs Ramsay, Clarissa Dalloway is also aware of the distinction between her private and her public self, but she uses a different metaphor. As mentioned in chapter 1.1, at the moment she looks into a mirror she collects all parts of herself into one being. She describes the collection of her selves to meet in “one centre, one diamond” (40). The image of the diamond signifies the multiple reflections that she radiates. Olk argues that “[t]he condensed reflection Clarissa encounters in the mirror at the same time contracts and expands the image of herself” as it emphasises that many people see her in many different ways (93). Likewise, Lady Bruton in *Mrs Dalloway* compares the way in which she is perceived to a diamond as well: “this object round which the essence of her soul is daily secreted becomes inevitably prismatic, lustrous, half looking-glass, half precious stone; now carefully hidden in

case people should sneer at it; now proudly displayed" (119). The multifaceted nature of a diamond represents the fragmentation of a person's self, which is different from every angle.

The multiplicity of the characters in *The Waves* also emphasises that the characters are unable to see themselves whole in the moment of the mirror stage. In *The Waves,* the characters realise that they are not separate beings:

> It is Percival … who makes us aware that these attempts to say, 'I am this, I am that', which we make, coming together, like separate parts of one body, and soul, are false. Something has been left out from fear. Something has been altered, from vanity. We have tried to accentuate differences. From the desire to be separate we have laid stress upon our faults, and what is particular to us. But there is a chain whirling round, round, in a steel-blue circle beneath. (103)

This also establishes Percival's function as the mirror in their relationship: because of him, they can see themselves at once, as part of a collective identity rather than six separate people, thus signifying the mirror stage in the forming of their identity. As K. Asher points out, the characters in Woolf's fiction often need other people in order to make sense of themselves (117), similar to the function of the mirror image in Lacan's mirror stage. As the different characters are presented as part of a whole, and because each character is internalised in this whole, the characters cannot see themselves entirely at the same time, just like the eye is unable to see the entire body. Therefore, because Percival falls away, they cannot look at themselves, or any one of the other five characters, and see their collective identity all at once. This might also emphasise that looking into the mirror, either physically or metaphorically, presents a fragmented self, which the mirror reflects but cannot solve.

2.4. Epistemology

As the characters in *The Waves* also realise, their multifaceted identity highlights that to know oneself and others is complicated. For instance, Bernard says, "I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or

how to distinguish my life from theirs" (222). Therefore, this multiplicity of the self underlines that the self is ultimately unknowable.

As the certainties of the nineteenth century disappeared, people became less sure of their own identities as well (Childs 47). As mentioned in chapter 2.1, because people's perceptions of the world and of reality could no longer be determined according to certain models, this also complicated the ways in which people could understand their identities. Central to this sense of alienation people experienced was the question of knowledge.

In the twentieth century, there was an increasing interest in epistemology, the study of knowledge (Childs 147). As Buchanan argues, because epistemology scrutinises the "origin, possibility, and constitution of knowledge", it is also concerned with themes such as the truth of and doubts about the nature of reality ("Epistemology"). These epistemological questions were often addressed in Modernist literature (Childs 147), and could be applied to many different subjects. As it questions whether there is any certainty in our knowledge, in relation to the self epistemology raises questions such as how one can know oneself or others, and whether one can even know oneself or others at all.

In "The Mark on the Wall" Woolf explores this notion of epistemology. The first person narrator thinks: "nothing is proved, nothing is known. And if I were to get up at this very moment and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really – what shall we say? – the head of a gigantic old nail … what should I gain? – knowledge? … And what is knowledge?" (58). Therefore, the narrator describes the ambiguity of knowledge, and questions what it exactly means to gain knowledge. In contrast with this, moments later, the narrator notices that "here is something definite, something real" (59). Like the narrator in "The Lady in the Looking-glass", the narrator in this story also searches for facts that can provide some certainty. This shows the struggle with epistemological doubt and the uncertainty that is associated with it.

As mentioned in chapter 2.1, Woolf emphasises that the characters are never completely known to others. In *To the Lighthouse,* Lily Briscoe expresses how difficult it actually is to get to know another person: “How, then, did one know one thing or another about people, sealed as they were?” (57-8). Likewise, in *Mrs Dalloway,* Sally Seton admits that “she knew nothing about [her friends], only jumped to conclusions, as one does, for what can one know even of the people one lives with every day?” (211). This also raises the question how one gets to know another person, and more importantly, whether one actually can know another person. Similarly, in *Mrs Dalloway,* Peter Walsh looks back at the frustration he used to share with Clarissa years ago of “not knowing people, not being known” (167).

Woolf’s characters question the nature of reality and knowledge as well. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for instance, Peter Walsh thinks that “nothing exists outside us except a state of mind. … But if he can conceive of [Clarissa], then in some sort she exists” (62). This idea of solipsism underlines a part of subjectivity that argues that there is no certainty except that one’s own mind exists. As Buchanan points out, “only the self can be known with any certainty” (“Solipsism”). Therefore, the solipsistic perception is inherently subjective. In this theory, an objective self does not exist as everything only exists in one’s head, and as such can never be seen objectively. Because only the self is known, it suggests that objective reality, the world, and the people in it cannot be known. K. Asher argues that many of Woolf’s characters examine their selves in a solipsistic manner. According to him, “the authenticity of being is ratified to an audience of one” (115). Although Asher emphasises the egotism of Woolf’s characters, Peter’s insistence that Clarissa must exist in some way because she exists in his mind seems to suggest that he has a desire to know and connect with other people.

The character of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, who is a scholar of epistemology himself, shows this epistemological conflict with the notion of the self. When Andrew describes his father's work to Lily Briscoe, he says: "Think of a kitchen table … when you're not there" (28). Therefore, Mr Ramsay's work is also related to solipsism as it questions the relation between the external and the internal world. However, in spite of his study on the "subject and object and the nature of reality" (28), he seems almost less sure of who he is and what is real than any other character. Even though he spends years searching for the nature of reality, he is filled with doubts. According to Brown, "[f]or all of his acquired knowledge, Mr Ramsay struggles with the fact that he cannot understand himself or the world" (51). This may suggest that the more someone studies the notion of knowledge does not necessarily mean that they will gain more knowledge as such. Despite Mr Ramsay's years of trying, he cannot "reach R" in the alphabetical system he has created for himself based on the knowledge he has gained, in which every letter signifies a step in his progress (*To the Lighthouse* 39). Brown argues that the R stands for reality (51), thus suggesting that Mr Ramsay still has no real insight into the nature of reality.

The struggle to know another person is emphasised in "The Lady in the Looking-glass". The narrator points out "how very little, after all these years, one knew about her" (76), because "Isabella did not wish to be known – but she should no longer escape" (78). The narrator insists that there must be something true to say about Isabella as "there must be truth; there must be a wall" (76). In the narrator's opinion, the observer is entitled to this information. It is suggested that the mirror will be able to provide such knowledge about Isabella, and at the end of the story, initially it indeed seems to do so: the mirror "began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and leave only the truth. … Here was the hard wall beneath" (80). This suggests that the truth lies behind the mirror rather than in it. Contrary to the mirror, the

wall cannot be seen through, which therefore might present the facts. Still, as mentioned in chapter 2.1, the narrator does not give a factual description of Isabella, but rather an imagined one.

The characters in Woolf's fiction often experience the confrontation with their mirror image as a moment of insight. However, in most cases the ambiguity of these insights is pointed out. According to Olk, "mirrors express epistemological uncertainty and emphasise the fragility of any construction of the self" (91). Similarly, Deppman argues that Woolf uses the mirror to challenge the idea of "sight as a mode of knowing" (47). Woolf shows that insights into reality or truth cannot be extracted merely by looking at something. According to Deppman, looking at something does not automatically provide knowledge of the thing (56). As Olk points out, the treatment of the mirror in "The Lady in the Looking-glass" "presents a kind of visible proof of seeming objectivity and truth in exposing facts about a character" while it at the same time disproves this as any description of a person that is "based on objective fact" is meaningless (99). Even though the mirror might help a character re-establish their sense of self, it cannot provide any certainty. Moreover, the insistence on objective truth emphasises that this is something that simply cannot be known.

Chapter 3: Narration and the Perception of Characters

In addition to Woolf's thematic treatment of the self, in her fictional texts she also emphasises her interpretations of selfhood and subjectivity through the stylistic devices she uses. As a Modernist author, Woolf experimented with new techniques that would depict the new, modern understanding of the world (Childs 3) and which would reflect what it is like to perceive reality. According to Childs, many Modernist authors including Woolf rejected the conventions of classic Realism, such as a reliable narrator and "the depiction of a fixed and stable self" (22).

3.1. Unreliable Narrators in "The Mark on the Wall" and "The Lady in the Looking-glass: A Reflection"

Woolf's short stories "The Mark on the Wall" and "The Lady in the Looking-glass" both question the reliability and authority of a central narrator. "The Mark on the Wall" has a first person narrator. Often assumed to be partly autobiographical (Cyr 202), the narrator is generally referred to as female. As also mentioned in chapter 2, this story is entirely concerned with the narrator who is wondering about the identity of the mark that she has noticed on the wall. As Hercend notes, the use of the word "perhaps" in the opening sentence of the story "already undermines the narrator's authority" (86). Even though the narrator might not be intentionally ambiguous, the narration of "The Mark on the Wall" emphasises that her account is subjective. Although the story is not entirely unreliable, it is made clear that it is narrated from a subjective, limited point of view, even if only because the narrator does not get out of her chair to examine the mark more closely.

Moreover, the narrator acknowledges her own lack of knowledge. She uses her imagination to determine the origin of the mark and expresses the epistemological uncertainty of knowing where exactly it has come from: "[I]f I got up and looked at it, ten to one I

shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened. O dear me, the mystery of life! The inaccuracy of thought!" (54). According to K. Asher, Woolf in this story examines "the problematic nature of perception itself as it is filtered through a distorting membrane" (113). Woolf emphasises that the distorting membrane, the narrator's subjective thoughts and imagination, complicates any search for truth. Hercend notes that the uncertainty of the narrator means that, rather than blindly rely on the narrator, "the reader is made to question authority, to deal cautiously with the text" (94). Eventually, another person does identify the mark. However, this, too, is not a conclusive answer as the narrator does not confirm this for herself. It could also be questioned whether the other person has identified the mark correctly, and whether the reader can completely trust this person's account. In this short story, Woolf explores the narrator's process of gaining knowledge, which shows how much this can be influenced by other elements, both internal, like the narrator's state of mind, and external, like the other person identifying the mark.

In contrast, as mentioned in chapter 2, "The Lady in the Looking-glass" is narrated in the third person. The narrator is unknown to the reader, but overtly present in the narrative. His or her personality dominates the reader's perception of Isabella, which emphasises that the narrative is much more dictated by the narrator's own subjective views than by any objective description of the main character. As Chapman points out, the scene is seen and "filtered through [the narrator's] consciousness" (331). As there is no presentation of Isabella's own thoughts, even though the narrator aims to present the facts about Isabella, at the end of the story the reader has only learnt about her what the narrator has chosen to tell, but also what information the narrator had access to.

In this short story, the narrator sets out to "pri[se] [Isabella] open" (78). Just by looking at Isabella's mirror image, the narrator wants to recover the truth about the main character. According to Deppman, because the narrator assumes the position of a naturalist

narrator this "gives the narrator a privileged position for observation" (49). Yet, the narrator can only presume where Isabella goes and what she is doing once she leaves the frame of the mirror. Similar to the narrator in "The Mark on the Wall", the narrator uses his or her imagination in order to provide the reader with any information about Isabella's personality, and is thus limited. According to Deppman, the realisation that the narrator is unable to describe Isabella objectively "challenges the credibility of the narrator and the result of his search" (52). The narrator might seem to be an omniscient narrator at the beginning of the story, but the way in which the story is narrated mainly highlights that Isabella cannot be fully known by others, which includes the narrator. Therefore, the third person narrator is undermined as an authorial figure who has access to or any knowledge of the character. As Chapman argues, the story is more concerned with the ambiguity of perception than that it wants to define the character of Isabella (331).

Additionally, because of the focus on the mirror image of Isabella, Woolf also undermines the Realist understanding that things can be represented as facts, and thus that there is someone, a narrator, who is able to do this. As mentioned in chapter 1, the mirror used to have a mimetic function in art. The narrator in "The Lady in the Looking-glass" expects to find the truth about Isabella in the mirror. As Deppman points out, "the narrator relies *only* upon the reflection of the looking-glass to expose what he considers to be the indisputable 'fact' of her state of being" (53). By both undermining the narrator as an authorial voice as well as the mirror as a representer of truth, Woolf uses conventional signifiers of a truthful representation only to undermine them and to emphasise that they are actually insufficient to convey the truth.

In both "The Mark on the Wall" and "The Lady in the Looking-glass", the narrator is explicitly present and in both cases their judgment and overall knowledge is questioned. Traditionally, a narrator has an authorial voice that can be used to provide the reader with

certainties about the characters (Childs 66). Through her treatment of the authorial narrators, Woolf comments on the Realist, conventional way of treating truth and reality. Both short stories provide the reader with only a single perspective, namely the narrator's. Although there is an external figure identifying the snail in "The Mark on the Wall", this information, too, is presented to the reader through the first person narrator. Therefore, these perspectives are subjective and limited, undercutting the conventional all-knowing position of the narrator.

Additionally, in both "The Mark on the Wall" and "The Lady in the Looking-glass", the reader is provided with information initially presented as facts. However, in "The Lady in the Looking-glass", it is eventually explicitly acknowledged that these are actually not facts. Although the narrator is looking for the "facts" about Isabella, it is pointed out that everything the reader learns about Isabella is the narrator's subjective opinion (76). Similarly, in "The Mark on the Wall" the reader is cautioned not to trust the narrator and therefore to question all the facts presented to them. The epistemological uncertainty the narrator experiences in this story is transferred to the reader. Although in different ways, both stories question the nature of objective truth, and emphasise the discrepancies between the internal and external, and the inability to access other objects and people directly and objectively.

3.2. Free Indirect Speech in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*

Woolf's consecutively published novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* share similarities in the position of the narrators. Both novels are written in the third person and are narrated by a seemingly omniscient narrator. In addition to this, Woolf uses free indirect speech to present the characters' inner thoughts as well. Free indirect speech, also referred to as free indirect thought or style, represented speech or indirect interior monologue (Ferguson 234; Snaith 135), is a technique in which a character's thoughts are presented as part of the narrator's observations. Unlike direct speech, which is placed within quotation marks, in free

indirect speech the narrator presents a character's point of view in the third person. The character's thoughts are reported verbatim, structurally represented as direct speech, but usually do not include a phrase signalling that these are the character's thoughts and not the narrator's (Aarts; Rundquist 3; Snaith 134). According to Snaith, what differentiates free indirect speech from stream of consciousness is that in free indirect speech a narrator is present, whereas in stream of consciousness writing there is not. As she notes, free indirect speech is "always reported, mediated" (136). Snaith argues that, as opposed to direct speech or thought, the narrator presents the character's thoughts, and thus mediates between the character and the reader, but at the same time presents these thoughts in the character's own words and therefore takes the reader "into the private mind" of the character (137).

The use of free indirect speech was not a new innovation as it was also used in the nineteenth century (Snaith 135). However, Woolf did reinvent this technique by constantly shifting between different characters' perspectives and the narrator's descriptions (Auerbach 536; Snaith 135). An example of such switches can be seen in *To the Lighthouse*:

> 'Nonsense,' said Mrs Ramsay, with great severity. Apart from the habit of exaggeration which they had from her, and from the implication (which was true) that she asked too many people to stay, and had to lodge some in the town, she could not bear incivility to her guests, to young men in particular, who were poor as church mice, 'exceptionally able', her husband said, his great admirers, and come here for a holiday. (10)

This fragment is presented in the third person, but phrases such as "poor as church mice", "his great admirers" and the parenthetical "which was true" suggest that this is focalised by Mrs Ramsay, rather than the central narrator. It is not always clear whose perspective is represented at what point. For instance, "which was true" might be Mrs Ramsay's point of view, but it could also be one of her daughters' underscoring their point that she invites too many people. Especially since the phrase is placed between parentheticals, this might suggest that it introduces a different perspective. According to Cui, Woolf might use parentheticals to further undermine "a coherent narrative viewpoint" (185).

Similarly, Woolf employs free indirect speech in *Mrs Dalloway* as well. For instance, Clarissa meets Hugh Whitbread on the street in London:

> They had just come up – unfortunately – to see doctors. Other people came to see pictures; go to the opera; take their daughters out; the Whitbreads came 'to see doctors'. Times without number Clarissa had visited Evelyn Whitbread in a nursing home. Was Evelyn ill again? Evelyn was a good deal out of sorts, said Hugh, intimating by a kind of pout or swell of his very well-covered, manly, extremely handsome, perfectly upholstered body (he was almost too well dressed always, but presumably had to be, with his little job at Court) that his wife had some internal ailment, nothing serious, which, as an old friend, Clarissa Dalloway would quite understand without requiring him to specify. (6)

The first sentence is likely to be directly from the conversation, spoken by Hugh Whitbread himself. Then, the next sentence seems to be Clarissa's unspoken reaction to what Hugh has just told her, repeating his phrase between quotation marks. The sentence after that might be either the central narrator or still Clarissa's focalisation, but "times without number" seems to express Clarissa's opinion. The next part describes the conversation between Clarissa and Hugh again, but in the middle of the sentence, Clarissa starts to focalise again when she describes his appearance Therefore, within one paragraph, the perspective switches multiple times between Clarissa, Hugh and the narrator. As this shows, although sometimes the point of view of the speaker is quite clear, often the shifts are ambiguous.

Although the different perspectives of the characters are emphasised, there still is a central narrator present, who can provide the reader with something that cannot be extracted from the characters' points of view only. According to Levenson, the narrator of *To the Lighthouse* has "a power only available to a larger-than-individual perspective", something which "finite points of view can never guarantee" (25). Although there is still a central narrator in both novels, the narrator is less overtly present than in "The Mark on the Wall" and "The Lady in the Looking-glass". Because Woolf uses free indirect speech, the narrator is more often describing a character's thoughts than conveying his or her own interpretation. Ferguson argues that the omniscient narrators in Woolf's novels never reveal everything

about the characters and their actions as they "must resort to speculation rather than definite assertion" (244). Stressing the Modernist themes of uncertainty and ambiguity, "the authorial narrator is reliable only insofar as the truth may be defined, and he reminds us of this limitation in his rhetoric" (245). Even though the narrator might have a more complete knowledge of the characters' inner thoughts and motivations, this is not communicated to the reader. The narrator often does not provide the reader with knowledge that is not otherwise available through the characters' thoughts.

Therefore, the narrators take a more subjective stance in both *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. According to Auerbach, at this time "the writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae" (534). As Levenson argues, although Woolf does not employ the omniscient narrator like many nineteenth-century authors did to reveal an objective truth, in *To the Lighthouse*, "the assertion of the privileges of omniscience is everywhere" (21). However, the narrators do not use this knowledge to show the reader the true self of a character, or to convince the reader that one particular point of view should be seen as the truth.

Unlike *Mrs Dalloway*, in the middle part "Time Passes" in *To the Lighthouse*, the central narrator is more overtly present. As in this part the main characters are absent, there is less shifting between characters' consciousnesses than in the other parts of the novel or in *Mrs Dalloway*. Although free indirect speech is used, with Mrs McNab for instance, it is not used nearly as often as in the rest of the novel. As Levenson suggests, in this part of the novel, the narrator "assumes the perspective of eternity" (26). However, according to Levenson, this mainly emphasises "the limits of finite perception" in "The Lighthouse". In the third part of the novel, the narrator's infinite perspective is "replaced by near-total reliance on a few individuals" (27-8) as opposed to many different perspectives in "The Window". Therefore,

in the last part, the novel deals with the unknown minds of others more so than in the first part.

Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* and Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway* are arguably the main characters of these novels. Although Mrs Ramsay only physically appears in the first part of the novel, the narrative still mainly revolves about her, or her absence, in the other parts. Even though the novels centre around them, and while they do provide the reader with descriptions of the characters' thoughts, the reader never fully gains access to their minds.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa's character is not accessed entirely through interior monologues, but neither is she only described from an external, objective point of view. Although the use of free indirect speech may seem to give the reader a more internalised, direct understanding of a character, it does not necessarily have to. According to Edmondson, one of the most forming experiences for Clarissa – the death of her sister – is not described by Clarissa herself, but by Peter Walsh. Edmondson calls this "narrativization" or "theory of mind", by which she means that Peter "theorizes about Clarissa's mental states based on evidence necessarily obtained from an external perspective" (18). Because this event is recounted by Peter rather than Clarissa herself, the reader only becomes aware of its significance through the mediation of Peter, in addition to the mediation of the narrator. He practices theory of mind and projects his own interpretation of Clarissa's experience and consequently her mental state. According to Palmer, what he calls "double cognitive narratives" are "the versions of characters' minds that exist in the minds of other characters" (12). In *Mrs Dalloway*, Peter Walsh's is only one such example of a double cognitive narrative. Most, if not all characters whose point of view is included in the novel project their mind, and their narrative, upon others. As Edmondson points out, the characters who create these narratives "are often first affected by an encounter with another" (26). Similarly, Palmer argues that "our identity is situated among the minds of others" (15). Therefore, the presence

of others is significant in our perception of the characters. In Woolf's depiction of her characters, the importance of the combination of both internal and external points of view is emphasised.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the characters interpret the others' thoughts as well. Levenson notes that every character "[offers] perspectives on the perspective of the other" (20). Auerbach argues that "there is an attempt to approach [Mrs Ramsay] from many sides as closely as human possibilities of perception and expression can succeed in doing" (536). Therefore, every character projects their own thoughts and experiences when explaining another character, but their interpretations are also continuously adapted. The story they tell about others keeps being adjusted according to new insights. As Levenson points out, this is especially evident in the description of what the characters see. He uses the example of Lily describing what Mr Bankes sees in *To the Lighthouse*, and suggests that this places the characters "within a network of glancing reactions, suggesting that identity is a perpetual negotiation" (24). This connects the narration of *To the Lighthouse*, and *Mrs Dalloway*, to the theory of the mirror stage, where everything is defined in relation to external reference points as well. As each reference point is different, the perception of the self constantly adjusts as well.

Likewise, in *Mrs Dalloway*, the reader is also left to interpret Clarissa's mental states with the information provided to them, which, as mentioned before, is incomplete. Similar to perceiving and interpreting another person, in Woolf's texts the reader also does not have full knowledge of the characters and therefore always projects his or her own feelings on them. Goldman argues that every one's reading of Woolf's texts is different, which makes every reading different and unique (32). According to Edmondson, rather than "providing her reader with one individual's fully realised interiority", Woolf is "ultimately more interested in the question of how people attempt to account for other minds as they exist in reality" (20). By

not providing inconclusive information about the characters, Woolf accentuates the myriad of ways in which reality can be perceived.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf employs even more different focalising characters than in *To the Lighthouse*. While Clarissa walks through London, different people focalise their perception of her. These might be people who reappear later in the novel as well, but some of these focalisers only appear once, such as Miss Pym. Even though she might not be an especially important character, Miss Pym's point of view is presented as well in detail:

> [S]he breathed in the earthy garden sweet smell as she stood talking to Miss Pym who owed her help, and thought her kind, for kind she had been years ago; very kind, but she looked older, this year, turning her head from side to side among the irises and roses and nodding tufts of lilac with her eyes half closed, snuffing in, after the street uproar, the delicious scent, the exquisite coolness. (13-4)

Although much of this part is focalised by Clarissa, the comment on her age seems to be the point of view from Miss Pym, as she specifies the difference with a previous year, and as she observes Clarissa's behaviour in the flower shop. Therefore, in *Mrs Dalloway*, by giving voice to many different minor characters, Woolf employs multiple points of view, and provides the reader with different perspectives on the same character.

Therefore, the reader gains knowledge of Clarissa's character through her own thoughts as much as from the other characters' perception of her. As Edmondson argues, Woolf does not provide the reader with a "complete inside view" of Clarissa Dalloway, but she provides both internal and external perspectives of the character as she "exists as much in the minds of others … as she does in her own, 'private' existence" (21-22). In her notes from working on *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf writes that Clarissa "must be seen by other people" (*The Hours* 420). This again shows the importance of others in establishing a sense of self.

The multiple perspectives also emphasise that, in both novels, the characters are not completely known to the reader. As Levenson points out, almost all "of our information about any character comes from the [multiple] reflected points of view of other characters" (23).

The reader's knowledge of the characters is an accumulation of information extracted from many different sources. As E. Asher also underlines, the reader learns about the characters largely through other characters, whose memory is "shifting and unreliable" (220). Similarly, Sotirova argues that these reconstructions of other minds present "varying degrees of accuracy" (9). Therefore, the reader is not presented with a complete image of the characters. At the same time, the reader perceives the character to be more complete because of the observations of both the characters themselves and of the other.

Additionally, the narrator in both *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* does not value one perspective over another. There are often discrepancies between what one character's thoughts or motivations are and what others think these thoughts or motivations are, thus emphasising the ambiguity of interpreting another person, but these differences are rarely judged as true or false by the narrator. As Hite points out, there is no "overarching authority" who orders all different perspectives (36), which means that there is no one who gives a conclusive answer as to who any character actually is. This does not necessarily show that one view is wrong, but rather that every character's observation comes from a different point of reference and is therefore relative. Hite argues that, even though the narrator holds an authoritative position, he or she does not "obliterate the other point of view" (40), leaving the judgment of character up to the reader.

Through the way both *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* are narrated, the inaccessibility of these characters is emphasised. Because the narrator does not provide the reader with all information, Woolf underlines the unknowability of a person. In these novels, she does not provide objective access to her characters by employing an objective narrator. Rather, she indicates that there are multiple perceptions that different characters can have of the same person. The characters have impressions of the other characters, but they ultimately do not know them. According to Nussbaum, this shows that our knowledge of other people is

never without a doubt because it is always based on reading or interpretation (474). By imitating this doubt in the narration of the novels, Woolf creates the same epistemological uncertainty for the reader as the characters in her novels experience.

3.3. Third Person Soliloquys in *The Waves*

Woolf's most experimental novel *The Waves* has an entirely different structure than her earlier novels. The main body of the text consists of soliloquys alternately spoken by the six main characters. The novel is divided into different parts that indicate the characters' stages in life, and each stage is divided by an interlude. In these interludes, a third person narrator describes landscapes or situations where barely any human beings appear. Both the narrator and the descriptions seem unconnected to the main narrative. There is no narrator who comments on the soliloquys, or who connects the switches between the characters in some way.

The soliloquys are written in the first person. However, every switch between speakers is introduced in the third person, such as "said Bernard", or "said Susan" (*The Waves* 5). Although the verb "said" indicates that it is a conversation, there does not seem to be any real interaction or communication between the characters in the text. Because of the inconsistency between the first person perspective and the third person verb, Chun calls the soliloquys "non-mimetic". According to her, the soliloquys do not "imitate naturalistic speech" (54). Similarly, Hite argues that although each soliloquy is "grammatically represented as dialogue, with quotation marks" (45), the soliloquys do not appear to be actual dialogues between the characters. Although the characters sometimes do address each other, either by name or in the second person, the narrative never seems to be a representation of a normal conversation. Hite suggests that these soliloquys are more likely to be thought than said out loud, even though

they do appear between quotation marks (45). However, the third person verb does indicate a mediation, which suggests it does not give the reader direct access to the characters.

Therefore, the fact that there is apparently no interaction between the characters might suggest a solipsistic mental state. In the soliloquys, for each character, their own mind is central. Even though most perspectives in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* are subjective, the interaction with other minds is key in understanding the characters, and for the characters to understand themselves. In *The Waves*, the characters do interact with each other, which is described in the soliloquys, but this interaction does not happen directly in the narrative. There is no direct description of the characters' conversations, for instance. Even though this appears to emphasise the inaccessibility of other people's minds and therefore suggest a solipsistic presentation of the self and of reality, Woolf does stress the importance of the connection with other people. As Ronchetti suggests, shared elements, such as associative colours, images and motifs, combined with "the uniform cadence of the six voices" of the characters, assist "to underscore the evolving collective identity shared by the six characters" (77). Although the characters' voices are separated in the narrative, the novel as a whole does represent them as a collective, rather than six characters living disconnected from each other. The lack of connection between the soliloquys shows a contradiction with how intimately connected the lives of the characters actually are. This might suggest that the separation of the internal and external is necessary in order to be able to form an identity. Moreover, as the characters represent different sides of the same person, the speakers might have to appear separately because they cannot perceive themselves all at the same time without an external figure.

Because there is no central narrator who comments on the soliloquys, the characters' descriptions are ambiguous. As opposed to the external input from the narrator that adds value to our knowledge of the characters in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, there is no such

information available to the reader in *The Waves*, as there seems to be no exterior perspective. According to Hite, because of this, the reader is not given a "clear outside indication" of how to interpret the characters and their narratives (44). Although the characters do often describe the same event, their accounts can be very different. There is no objective point of view in the central text, which emphasises the characters' many different subjective perspectives. Therefore, the novel shows how people can interpret or experience things and people differently. As Hite argues, the only way for the reader to evaluate a character's statements in *The Waves* is through the soliloquys of the other characters, which are "equally limited [and] equally biased" (5).

Additionally, like *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the perspective in *The Waves* constantly switches as well, even though in this novel it is clearly indicated who is speaking. This means that there is not a single perspective the reader is meant to identify with. By constantly switching between points of view, the reader is asked to adjust their identification with the characters as well. According to Hite, because there is no authorial narrator who tells the reader how to interpret the characters, the reader "must continually shift attitudes toward certain characters and their actions" (58). The character's identities seem to be changing as one reads the novel, which means that the reader's perception constantly has to adapt as well.

3.4. The Mirror Stage

In Woolf's fictional texts, the reader does not access the character directly. Rather, Woolf uses stylistic devices to underline the importance of perspective in the perception of a character. She undermines the truth of a single perspective, and employs multiple perspectives in her novels. The effect of this way of representing a character is that the reader, too, sees a fragmented image. Like the other characters, the reader only gets a partial image of the characters, and does not access them directly. Therefore, in none of these fictional texts can

the reader extract a definitive understanding of a character. Moreover, the characters cannot be seen all at once, not by the other characters but also not by the reader. While emphasising the inability to know others objectively, the narration also suggests the fragmentation of the self. In addition, the mirror stage indicates that an external source is always needed to get a more complete perspective. By showing as many different perspectives as she does, Woolf highlights the importance of an external reference point in the perception of the self and others.

By undermining the authority of the central narrator, Woolf even further underlines our ambiguous knowledge of others. As she takes away the certainties that an omniscient narrator might supply, she highlights the epistemological uncertainty of identity. Perhaps Woolf also undermines the idea that sight is "a mode of knowing" (Deppman 47) by not showing the reader the entire picture of a character. Because the reader cannot perceive the character objectively, Woolf emphasises that seeing someone does not automatically equal knowing someone. Moreover, there is always a mode through which the reader perceives the characters.

Conclusion

This thesis has shown that Woolf's understanding of the self and of identity, and the ways in which she employs these in her fictional texts, relates to Modernist concepts of subjectivity, relativity and epistemology. She explores these notions through the image of the mirror and through the depiction of metaphorical mirror characters. This thesis provides an analysis of these themes and of the different forms of mediation between the self and the perception of the self in Woolf's fictional texts "The Mark on the Wall", *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, "The Lady in the Looking-glass: A Reflection" and *The Waves*.

By looking at their mirror image, the characters in these texts are able to explore their sense of self. These encounters might be reassuring experiences for them, such as for Jinny in *The Waves*. However, more often, rather than reassuring the characters by confirming their identities, the mirror image establishes the characters' lack of a coherent sense of self as they become more aware of the distinction between their public and their private selves. The mirror image reflects the way in which the characters might be seen by others, which rarely appears to be the same as what the characters themselves think or feel. As opposed to the nineteenth-century use of the mirror image in which it served as a mimetic depiction of reality, Woolf emphasises that there are many possible, equally valid, representations of reality.

Woolf's fictional texts reflect the contemporary sense of fragmentation that was prevalent in early twentieth-century society due to the undermining of previous certainties. In most cases, the characters' confrontation with their mirror image accentuates the contrast between their fragmented self and the outward appearance of being whole. It seems as if people are unable to accept the other's fragmented self and, because of this, imagine him or her to be whole, even though this might not be true. For many characters, there seems to be a

constant struggle between wanting to appear whole, and being aware of and unable to overcome their fragmented self.

Like the actual mirror image, the use of mirror characters in Woolf's texts emphasises that the characters are fragmented as well. However, even though the mirror characters call attention to yet another, possibly unknown or repressed, fragment of the character's self, the doubles at the same time attribute to making the characters feel less fragmented. Through their similarities or differences, different doubles might highlight different parts of the same character. The realisation that these other parts exist as well can help the character to acknowledge that there are multiple sides to their identity, and through this might come to terms with their fragmented selves. Therefore, by using mirror characters, Woolf's fiction also underscores the multiplicity of the self. In different ways, Woolf points out that her characters all have layered selves, and that their identity is never stagnant.

The discrepancy between what other people see and what the characters themselves see is highlighted by the narration of the texts. In most of her fiction, Woolf uses multiple perspectives, through which she emphasises that there are many different points of view, none of which are entirely objective. Because of this, her novels reflect the reality of the perception of the self: there is no ultimate way of knowing another person or oneself. Although Woolf gives many insights into the interior lives of her characters, in none of the analysed texts does she give the reader complete access to the character's mind. Much of the knowledge the reader gains of a character is presented through the other characters' subjective and relative perception of them. Consequently, there is no conclusive answer to the question of a character's identity.

In conclusion, Woolf revises the use of the mirror image as a mode through which the characters can access information according to the new, Modernist understanding of the notions of subjectivity, the nature of reality, and selfhood. Similar to Lacan's theory of the

mirror stage, the fictional texts that are discussed in this thesis demonstrate that the only way to overcome the mirror stage, and therefore to form or re-establish a sense of self, is through an external reference point. This can be another person in general, a mirror character, or the mirror image itself. To create a sense of self that is completely separate from others is not possible, because others are an inevitable part of the process. It is thus necessary that a certain form of mediation takes place in order to be able to see oneself entirely. Woolf also emphasises this by always placing some form of mediation between the character's thoughts and the reader's perception of that character. Therefore, in Woolf's fictional texts, both the actual and the metaphorical mirror function as a mediator between the characters and their sense of self, which allows them to gain a more complete perception of themselves.

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