“Of course, we are animals”:
The Reconciliation between Humans and Animals in *The Waves*

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Introduction

In Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, as Gillian Beer remarks, “the characters inhabit a world in which all that is traditionally central to narrative has been peripheralised or obliterated” (56). One of the most significant events in the novel is Percival’s accidental death in the middle section. Percival, the hero for the six main characters, is often regarded as a symbolic figure, associated with imperialism, patriarchal society, the last of the Grail kings, or Woolf’s own brother Thoby. However, what should be emphasized about him is the accident itself. Percival dies and the horse survives: “He is dead, [said Neville.] He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown. . . . His horse stumbled; he was thrown. The flashing trees and white rails went up in a shower. There was a surge; a drumming in his ears. Then a blow; the world crashed; he breathed heavily. He died where he fell. . . . Percival fell; was killed; is buried” (88–89).¹ The horse he rides is, as Bernard and Rhoda say, “a flea-

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¹ All the quotations from *The Waves* are taken from the Oxford University Press edition. In all further references to the book, only the page number will be noted in brackets.
bitten *mare*” (79, 80, emphasis mine), a female horse. In Woolf’s earliest fiction, as Diana L. Swanson explains, “nonhuman nature serves a traditional function” as simile or metaphor, which “describes human beings—*usually marginalized people such as women or the lower classes*” (59, emphasis mine). Indeed, although *The Waves* was published later in Woolf’s career in 1931, in a traditionally metaphorical sense, Percival, the emblem of masculinity, is subverted by the female figure that has been suppressed by patriarchal society. In a literal sense, which is also important, the human hero is overthrown by the animal that he has been riding and controlling, and his death “topples ontological or species hierarchies” (Tromanhauser 82).

Besides the mare, a variety of nonhuman animals appear in *The Waves*, whether figuratively or literally, such as dogs, birds, fish, and insects. Critics have discussed animals in Woolf’s works in the context of post-humanism, though most of their studies focus on *Flush: A Biography*, a biographical novel about Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s spaniel. Despite increased attention to animals in Woolf’s works, animals in *The Waves* have been overlooked. However, as Louise Westling remarks, Woolf “sought to

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2 It is worth noting that moths were one of the inspirations for writing this novel. Julia Briggs points out that a letter from Vanessa “described the moths that were invading” the villa where she stayed with Duncan Grant and Angelica, and that “[h]er letter focused on two primal urges that link human behaviour to the world of nature – the sexual instinct and the maternal instinct (241). On 8 May 1927, Woolf answered the letter that “[Vanessa’s] story of Moths so fascinates me that I am going to write a story about it” (Letters 372). See also Richter, Sarfield, and Alt.

3 Craig Smith, for example, evaluates the novel, which has been excluded from the canon, by suggesting that “it represents Woolf’s attempt to exercise modernist literary techniques in the mapping of a canine subjectivity, as an experiment worth performing for its own sake” (349). Derek Ryan, in *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory*, explores “the relationship between human and nonhuman animals” in *Flush* “in the light of contemporary theories of animality” (20).

4 The *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* issued in 2013 features “Woolf and Animals,” in
portray the non-human, or . . . the ‘more-than-human’ world within which we are tiny and only momentary presences” (856), and from an early stage in her career, she tried to show that “the human world is no longer the center of her writerly universe” (Swanson 54). It is important to note that the protagonists in *The Waves* often identify themselves with animals, and they “gain a sense of self only by dissolving identity into the fabric of more-than-human” (Waller 149). This paper will draw attention to Woolf’s descriptions of animals in *The Waves*, and will show that she tries to deconstruct the Cartesian dichotomy between the human and animal worlds.

### 1. Anthropocentric Cruelty

To begin with, we will briefly examine the characters’ cruelty to animals as representative of anthropocentric behavior. This paper suggests three modes of cruelty: capturing, possessing, and eating animals. In the first section—in childhood—some of the characters capture insects, as Woolf herself, in childhood, collected and classified butterflies and moths with her siblings (Alt 3; Scott 10). Louis, hiding from the other children and identifying himself with a stalk, sees Bernard, Neville, Jinny, and Susan “skim the butterflies,” and “[t]heir nets are full of fluttering wings” (6). Though they do not kill the insects, they intend to make the butterflies specimens, as Woolf did (Alt 31); capturing them in nets implies that humans can confine nonhuman animals and sway their destiny.⁵ In another scene in the same section, Bernard finds a fly in a web and asks himself “Shall I free the

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⁵ The boasting boys at school, whom Louis and Neville want to join and follow, are more savage. They “leave butterflies trembling with their wings pinched off” (27).
fly? Shall I let the fly be eaten?” (8). In these scenes, the characters have authority over the lives of insects as if they were God, and this reminds us of Nancy in *To the Lighthouse*, who brings “darkness and desolation, like God himself, to millions of ignorant and innocent creatures” by holding her hand over a pool (63). The butterflies, the fly, and the aquatic animals are trapped and confined in a small world. The characters see them struggling from an omnipotent perspective, but they are not aware that the animal world is a miniature version of the human world in which they themselves are also confined.

Susan, who is the most related to animals of the six characters, desires to possess everything: “In this hot afternoon, [said Susan,] here in this garden, here in this field where I walk with my son, I have reached the summit of my desires. . . I possess all I see” (112, emphasis mine). Direct possession of animals means dominion over them. Derek Ryan remarks “the relationship between human and pet becomes one of ownership and control, where pets are dependent on humans for almost every aspect of their life, resulting in a thoroughly unequal power dynamic” (*Animal Theory* 87). In her childhood, Susan has “my doves and the squirrel whom I left in the cage at home for the boy to look after” (23). She confines the animals in a cage, despite the fact that she hates confinement in school and hopes “my freedom will unfurl, and all restrictions that wrinkle and shriveled—hours and order and discipline, and being here and there exactly at the right moment—will crack asunder” (30). Even though she says she loves them, she depends on them only “for emotional consolation” (Ryan, *Animal Theory* 88), and deprives them of their freedom and wildness.

One of the cruelest behaviors toward animals is to kill and eat them. *The
Waves is replete with eating scenes, such as the farewell party for Percival, the reunion after Percival’s death, Rhoda’s meal before she hears a choral concert, and Bernard’s summing-up, in which he dines with a man whom he hardly knows. In almost all of these scenes, the characters eat meat without awareness of the fact that the meat came from living animals before being processed. It is a greengrocer on the other side of the river who shows most directly the relationship between animals and meat. After the reunion, Bernard imagines the shopkeeper “goes into the little garden and looks at the giant rabbit couched in its wooden hut [before putting out the lights]. That is the rabbit they will have for Sunday dinner” (139). The shopkeeper fattens this “giant” rabbit only to eat its meat for dinner, and he regards it as both a living animal and meat. Moreover, he thinks “I have posted my letter . . . to the Sunday newspaper. Suppose I win five hundred pounds in the football competition? And we shall kill the rabbit. Life is pleasant. Life is good. I have posted the letter. We shall kill the rabbit” (139). While posting the letter is a cultural activity, killing the rabbit is a primitive one. He is satisfied by these ambivalent behaviors. Woolf’s description of meat eating reminds us that, for us to eat meat, someone has to slaughter animals, and we incorporate those animals into ourselves.

Although they eat animal meat, Louis and Rhoda are often identified with and on the side of animals. They are the only children who do not capture

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6 In addition, Louis dines at an eating-shop (53), and in the summing-up part Bernard recalls spending a whole week at an inn with “nothing but mutton and mutton and again mutton for dinner” (154).

7 For a detailed study of meat eating in The Waves, see Tromanhauser.

8 Tromanhauser remarks that Susan takes “an active role in the cultivation and preparation of food” and “oversees the entire production process from the field to the table” (78).
the butterflies in the first section, and they are self-conscious about their identification with animals. They regard themselves as “naked” or “the most naked” (56, 61). Louis, who becomes a stalk and assimilates himself into nature, is found, kissed, and caught in a net by Jinny. She says, “Is he dead? I thought, and kissed you . . . I dance. I ripple. I am thrown over you like a net of light. I lie quivering flung over you” (7, emphasis mine). Jinny’s kiss haunts him throughout his life, and it is juxtaposed with Percival’s blow and Rhoda’s tears, which Bernard connects to their deaths (173). Another leitmotif of Louis’s is the image of a stamping beast with its foot chained, which suggests he realizes his own inherent wildness. When he sees wild birds, “impulses wilder than the wildest birds strike from my wild heart. My eyes are wild” (33). Furthermore, he identifies himself with an animal standing against humans: he, like a domesticated animal, has “a stigma burnt on my quivering flesh by a cowled man with a red-hot iron” (55), and during the farewell party he thinks “I am the little ape who chatters over a nut, and you are the dowdy women with shiny bags of stale buns; I am also the caged tiger, and you are the keepers with red-hot bars. That is, I am fiercer and stronger than you are” (74–75).

Rhoda is haunted by visions of attack by a tiger, but the carnivore symbolizes the human life to which she is committed: “With intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea” (37). Rhoda, as Tromanhauser remarks, “lives like a prey animal fearing the predatory leap of the human tigers around her” and “too readily identifies with the edible” (83). Like Louis, she also stands against humans. After Percival’s death, she realizes the present Percival has given her, “this humiliation—faces and faces” (93). Rhoda has no face and “no body
as the others have,” and for her “[t]he human face is hideous” (12, 93). Human faces disgust her; moreover, her hostility toward humans is clearly articulated when she is climbing a mountain in Spain:

‘Oh, life, how I have dreaded you,’ said Rhoda, ‘oh, human beings, how I have hated you! How you have nudged, how you have interrupted, how hideous you have looked in Oxford Street, how squalid sitting opposite each other staring in the Tube! Now as I am climbing this mountain, from the top of which I shall see Africa, my mind is printed with brown-paper parcels and your faces. I have been stained by you and corrupted. You smelt so unpleasant too, lining up outside doors to buy tickets. . . . What dissolution of the soul you demanded in order to get through one day, what lies, bowings, scrapings, fluency and servility! How you chained me to one spot, one hour, one chair, and sat yourselves down opposite! How you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour and rolled them into dirty pellets and tossed them into the wastepaper basket with your greasy paws. Yet those were my life.’ (120–21)

Of course, Rhoda is also a human being, but the human world is, for her, “experienced as a place of incipient violence, unleashed ferocity, and personal insecurity” (Poole 201).

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9 Mark Hussey regards Rhoda as “at the furthest extreme of unembodiment of all Woolf’s characters,” and claims that “The gulf between what she calls ‘myself’ and the body by which she is recognized in the world is wide and deep” (16).
2. Fear of Becoming Animals

As we have seen, several characters dominate nonhuman animals and attempt to define the boundary between humans and animals. Their dominant behavior seems to be attributed to their fear of becoming an animal; when they are associated with animals, they recognize and experience their vulnerability and fragility.

From early childhood, Susan reiterates the sentiment that she shall die as an animal, and she fears such death. When she sees Jinny kissing Louis and despairs, she says, “I shall sleep under hedges and drink water from ditches and die there. . . . I shall eat grass and die in a ditch in the brown water where dead leaves have rotted” (7). Neville also mentions death in the brown water. However, it is not an animal but a man who is found dead in the gutter, and the dead man’s “jowl was white as a dead codfish” (13, emphasis mine). This overlapping of the images of death in a ditch and a gutter indicates the possibility that humans also die as miserably as animals.

When exploring around Elvedon, Bernard and Susan fear being “nailed like stoats to the stable door,” and she thinks “if we died here, nobody would bury us” (9). They encounter “the sleeping daws who have never seen a human form . . . and a giant toad in the undergrowth” (9, emphasis mine). They still maintain human form, but while escaping from the gardener, they seem to turn into animal form: “We shall be shot like jays and pinned to the wall! . . . Follow without looking back. They will think we are foxes” (9). When they find themselves safe, they recover human form and “can stand upright again” (9, emphasis mine). Being an animal poses a risk of being killed easily, and this episode also implies that humans kill animals mercilessly.
The six protagonists can become both hunters and prey animals. In terms of the former, they are often identified with the birds in the interludes, whose violence Woolf emphasizes: “one of [the birds] . . . spiked the soft, monstrous body of the defenceless worm, pecked again and yet again, and left it to fester . . . they plunged the tips of their beaks savagely into the sticky mixture [of slugs]” (43). In the fourth interlude, the birds “tapped the shell” of a snail “furiously, methodically, until the shell broke” (63). Like the birds, the characters often behave violently, especially toward nonhuman animals. It is also worth noting, however, that they are connected to snails as well, which fall prey to the birds’ ferocity in the interludes. Louis and Rhoda have respectively “snail-green eyes” (14) and “unseeing eyes the colour of snail’s flesh” (118), and furthermore, as Bernard says, the characters form a shell “upon the soft soul, nacreous, shiny, upon which sensations tap their beaks in vain” (153). While they dominate other animals, they must defend their own souls from human society with a snail shell, fearing attack.

3. Reconciliation between Species

The Waves, as J. W. Graham remarks, emphasizes “the dilemmas of the alienated self” (14), and the alienated humans from society and the alienated animals from the human world are similar figures. The protagonists in this novel would not be the heroes but the marginalized characters in conventional stories, like “minnows” swarming round “a stone fallen into

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10 The quotations from the interludes will be italicized, as in the original text.

11 Rhoda is also identified with a butterfly, the insect that other children capture with a net. According to Louis, “Her shoulder-blades meet across her back like the wings of a small butterfly” (11), and after she leaves Louis, she “feared embraces. With Fleeces, with vestments, I have tried to cover the blue-black blade” (121).

12 See Kunio Shin (153–58).
a pond” (79). Although the characters attempt to establish a boundary between themselves and animals, they cannot help realizing their similarity with animals, especially after Percival’s death. As seen above, Percival does not heroically “die in battle” as Louis expects (21), but instead he falls from a horse and dies a “meaningless death” (90). His death makes them realize human vulnerability and finitude, indicating that humans, even heroes, can die meaninglessly and without purpose, which is what they have been afraid of. They are no longer in a higher position, but are on the same level as other animals, eliminating the species hierarchy.

As we have seen, meat eating implies not only human cruelty but also human primitiveness or animality. One of the most vivid descriptions of eating meat involves Neville at the farewell party. As he eats, he becomes embodied and regresses to a primitive state, losing knowledge: “But I eat. I gradually lose all knowledge of particulars as I eat. I am becoming weighed down with food. These delicious mouthfuls of roast duck, fitly piled with vegetables, following each other in exquisite rotation of warmth, weight, sweet and bitter, past my palate, down my gullet, into my stomach, have stabilized my body. I feel quiet, gravity, control” (80, emphasis mine). This distinctly depicts the incorporation of other flesh into his body, and meat gives stability to his body, which is compared to “silhouettes, hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background” (71). When watching them eat, Louis and Rhoda, the conspirators, compare them to “naked men with assegais” : “Like the dance of savages, [said Louis] round the campfire. They are savage; they are ruthless. They dance in a circle, flapping bladders. The flames leap over their painted faces, over the leopard skins and the bleeding limbs which they have torn from the living body” (82). Bernard
also recognizes a savage man inside himself when he tries to show his life and recalls various moments:

There is the old brute, too, the savage, the hairy man who dabbles his fingers in ropes of entrails; and gobbles and belches; whose speech is guttural, visceral—well, he is here. He squats in me. Tonight he has been feasted on quails, salad, and sweet-bread. He now holds a glass of fine old brandy in his paw. He brindles, purrs and shoots warm thrills all down my spine as I sip... He jibs if I keep him waiting for dinner. (173)

They attest to the primitiveness inherent to humans. Although it does not suggest a completely equal relationship with animals, it offers recognition of “the shared animality of human and nonhuman” (Ryan, *Animal Theory* 53).

Several characters gradually become aware that they are moving closer to animals, and regard themselves as marginalized. It is Rhoda who has been afraid of the leap of a tiger, but when he receives the news of Percival’s death, Neville feels “solitary” (88) and falls prey to an imaginary carnivore, a metaphor of the outer world or passing people: “Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob” (89). For Neville, the world without Percival becomes temporarily a place of violent humanity, as it is for Rhoda.

Jinny “stands as the most fully embodied of all Woolf’s characters,” and the most sexual being (Hussey 5). She has “lived my life... perilously, like

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13 Tromanhauser quotes the same passage and points out Bernard’s ambivalence about Freud’s internalized animal (75).
a mountain goat, leaping from crag to crag” (102), but when she is mature, she looks at her body in a looking-glass and despair at “[h]ow solitary, how shrunk, how aged!” it looks. At this point, she temporarily identifies with a small animal: “Little animal that I am, sucking my flanks in and out with fear, I stand here, palpitating, trembling” (114). She collects herself quickly, but her aged figure makes her conscious of death and the marginalized self: “Millions have died. Percival died. I still move. I still live. But who will come if I signal?” (114). As Bernard remarks, she is “honest, an animal” (159).

Even after he becomes successful in business, Louis “keep[s] my attic room” (99). Louis has imitated other people to be accepted by the human world, because he is an outsider with an Australian accent whose father is a banker in Brisbane: he “tries to imitate Bernard softly lisping Latin” (11) and “tr[ies] to look like the rest” in an eating-shop (53). In the human world, he must disguise himself as “an average English man” and “an average clerk” (54). The attic room is for him the place where “I divest myself of my authority” to be himself (118); this is where he hides himself from people’s eyes and sees Rhoda and lean cats. Even after she leaves him, he likes to see the slinking cats “scraping their mangy sides upon blistered chimney-stacks” (131), for which, according to Bernard, “Louis perhaps poured out milk in a saucer” (164). Louis prefers being with the cats to being among other people: only the attic room and the cats are connected to his true self.

After he gets married and has his own family, Bernard says, “[f]or many years I crooned complacently, ‘My children . . . my wife . . . my dog,’” but “I do not want possessions now” (110, ellipses in original). He ceases possessing even “his” dog. He continues, “Let a man get up and say, ‘Behold, this is the truth’, and instantly I perceive a sandy cat filching a piece of fish
in the background. Look, you have forgotten the cat, I say” (111). While people exclude cats or animals from the truth, Bernard indicates that the filching cat is part of the truth and of the world. Thus, in the final section, he is aware of Louis’s cat and notices that he incorporates animal bodies: “We have been taking into our mouths the bodies of dead birds. It is with these greasy crumbs, slobbered over napkins, and little corpses that we have to build” (175, emphasis mine).

When he recalls their school days, Bernard admits that life is the sequence of ordinary events. Even in such intolerable boredom, they “grew” and “changed; for, of course, we are animals. We are not always aware by any means; we breathe, eat, sleep automatically” (147). He says that even an ordinary man in good health “likes eating and sleeping . . . [and] the snuff of fresh air and walking at a brisk pace down the Strand. Or in the country there’s a cock crowing on a gate; there’s a foal galloping round a field” (157). He repeats that life is pleasant (139, 154, 157), probably signifying “human life,” but here “life” seems attributed to both humans and animals in the same way.

In the previous section, we have seen Susan’s fear of dying in a ditch. The association between animals and ditches appears in Bernard’s summing-up. Bernard, the phrase-maker, summarizes his life to a stranger, whom Bernard might have met once before. Just before he starts his story, he confesses “[h]ow tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases” (143). He needs “some little language” now, and “[I]lying in a ditch on a stormy day,” he regards himself as a “forgotten, minute” being (143). After he ends the whole story, he repeats, “I need a howl; a cry. When the storm crosses over the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie in the ditch unregarded. I need
no words,” and he wishes to be silent “like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake” (176). Lying in a ditch like an animal, or his inherent savage “whose speech is guttural, visceral,” Bernard, who has made phrases to communicate with the human world, does not have to make phrases any more (173). At the end of the novel, he leaves his book, which is “stuffed with phrases,” “under the table, to be swept up by the charwoman” (176). As dawn breaks, Bernard becomes aware of “a new desire,” which is something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O death! (177, emphasis mine)

Bernard rides an imaginary horse, the animal which caused Percival’s death. However, as he uses the first-person plural “we,” Bernard and the horse fight together against their common enemy, death.

**Conclusion**

In the same way as animals have always tended to be deprecated both in the novel and in its critical history, the main characters in *The Waves* are alienated and marginalized in the human world. In other words, the animals are a negative image of the six characters.

(14)
Several protagonists in the novel do cruel things to animals. They capture and classify butterflies as Woolf herself did in her childhood, and the insects can only flutter in the nets. Also, humans, like Susan, have a desire to possess animals, and this possession makes their positions in the species hierarchy clear. The pets and domesticated animals are also imprisoned in cages and deprived of freedom. Although the characters see the confined animals struggling, they do not acknowledge that the insects and animals can represent their own selves struggling in human society. When Woolf depicts meat eating scenes, we renew our awareness of the relationship between meat and animals. Although almost all of the characters do not notice, they incorporate animals into themselves.

Indeed, they dominate, kill, and eat animals, but their cruelty paradoxically represents their fear of being treated like animals; at the same time, they unconsciously recognize that they can be animals. Thus, they are conscious of the vulnerability and finitude of animals, and they realize that they must protect their own souls.

Through Woolf’s descriptions of diverse animals in *The Waves*, we can read the analogy between these animals and her human characters, both of whom are alienated from the human world. When the characters acknowledge that they have similarities with the marginalized animals, and that they share “life” with them, they seem to blur the boundary between human and nonhuman.

**Bibliography**
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"Of course, we are animals" (Harada) — 803 —


