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A Cognitive Approach to Literary Character:
Percival as Individual and Hero in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

Abstract
The understanding of literary character has been, since Aristotle, an issue of debate amongst different schools of thought which, in broad terms, have viewed characters in the novel either as representations of human beings, or as types such as the hero and the false hero, the protagonist and the antagonist, or as explicating a narrative function necessary to plot development. Modernist authors created characters that represent both individuals and heroic types: Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses* is an ordinary individual incarnating the failure of the Homeric hero. Also in Woolf's *The Waves*, we encounter a character whose name is that of the heroic figure of the medieval chivalric romances: Percival, an entirely silent character in an otherwise extremely dialogical and "eyeless book" (*i.e.* without an 'I' narrator; Woolf 1925: 203), who is entirely other-presented by the six speaking characters across their lives. This article aims to suggest how through a cognitive stylistics approach our understanding of Percival arises on the one hand from our background knowledge of the classical/medieval hero, and on the other from the information derived from the six flawed Edwardian characters that construe him. The analysis of Percival carried out here demonstrates how through the six speakers' indirect presentation our inferencing of this exceptional fictional character calls for a continual process of refreshment from the outset that contributes to forming a mental image of Percival as an individual and as the hero of *The Waves*.

Keywords: indirect characterisation, cognitive linguistics, quantitative and qualitative methods, Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*.

1. *Understanding literary character through a cognitive approach*

Enquiry into the ontological status of character dates back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384 BC–322 BC) and since then its status has been amply debated and investigated according to different tenets and methods, most recently the structuralist and semiotic approach, the hermeneutic, the psychoanalytical or the cognitive (Eder *et al.* 2010: 5; Balossi 2014: 19-39).

In broad terms, character has been regarded as a textual construct by some schools of thought or as a person-like individual by others (Chatman 1978: 96-145; Margolin 1983; 1990; Phelan 1989). However, as pointed out by Eder *et al.* (2010: 6), the way we conceive of a character is not only important for theoretical issues "but also in quite practical terms, for the definition influences how we analyse characters: If we regard Sherlock Holmes as a person-like being, we are likely to focus on his personality traits; if we see him as a sign, we will concentrate on the textual structures of his presentation".

The approach I employ in the present article to investigate Percival, the silent and entirely only spoken about character in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) draws upon cognitive linguistics in which our understanding of a fictional character arises not only from what is written in a text and what we infer from it (van Peer 1989: 9), but also from a dynamic process taking place in our minds. This cognitive dynamic is very similar to that we apply to people we meet in real life (Gerrig and Allbritton 1990; Culpeper 2001; Schneider 2001). In a nutshell, our understanding of a literary character arises from the activation of top-down processes of inferencing (*i.e.* using our schematic knowledge of real people) and bottom-up processes of perception (*i.e.* the textual cues from which we gather information about a literary character). Depending on the way a fictional character is constructed we may fit it into one of our acquired mental schemata, (*e.g.* the hero, the university don, the perfect mother, *etc.*) that may be confirmed or disregarded by the textual information we have access to during our reading process. We may indeed form an idea of a more individualised character and consequently abandon the initial impression of a category-based character, and we are therefore subjected to a process of refreshment, which implies that the initial categorisation assigned to the literary character is being re-categorised or even cued to a piecemeal integration, if none of the categories can be fully assigned to it. With direct characterisation, our impression-formations are derived from the properties explicitly attached to a character. Ideally, we take at face value what a character says or thinks, but

things become more complex with indirect characterisation, as we may question the authenticity of the information coming from other characters or narrators.

Our accumulated background knowledge of real people, and the schematic knowledge we have of social categories (Jannidis 2009: 14-29; Eder *et al.* 2010: 30-41) are not easily triggered in the perception processing of Percival, as he is silent and only spoken about.[1] Percival is other-presented by the six speaking characters' consecutive soliloquies delivered in a seemingly unchanging rhetorical high style from their childhood to their old age. Though formally their soliloquies are in the form of direct speech and who is speaking is always marked clearly (*e.g.* "I see a slab of pale yellow," said Susan; "I hear a sound," said Rhoda"; "I see a globe," said Neville" (7)),[2] their speeches are more redolent of thought presentation, given the fact that the six characters do not seem to really speak to one another. Therefore, by default, we tend to consider what they say/think as genuine. However, what we learn about themselves and from them about Percival lacks clear explicit references to their identities, family background, social positions, *etc.* (Moody 1963: 51; Beer, in Woolf 1998: xxvii), though we are able to recognise Bernard, Neville, Louis, Rhoda, Jinny and Susan as middle or upper-class characters, raised in Edwardian times, still strongly dichotomised by gender and also flawed for different reasons. Apart from this difficulty, we must not underestimate that the name Percival distinguishes itself from the other six names, and this fact is on its own sufficient enough to activate *a priori* the schema for the monomyth hero (Campbell 1990).

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[1] This article builds upon some other publications and my long-standing interest in Woolf's characterisation in *The Waves* (*cf.* Balossi 2014; 2016).

[2] Page numbers refer to the e-text of *The Waves* from the Oxford Text Archive (1995).

2. The schema for the hero

If *nomen omen*, *i.e.* if the name is a sign, the name Percival speaks for itself and encourages readers to activate the schema for a mythical, heroic and romantic figure (McConnell 1971; Graham 1983; Booker 1991; Hite, in Woolf 2006: lv-lxi). Percival is the archetypal knight of the Round Table in *Le Roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes (XII century), the legendary knight in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485) and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885) or Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882). In Western culture the figure of the hero (Bell 1970; Campbell 1990) is deeply rooted in the archetypal model of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in which a hero is a male who distinguishes himself from the *laoì*, the soldiers at his orders. His supremacy is partly determined by his divine origins from the Greek Pantheon and by his inborn qualities; thus he is predestined since birth to a superior rank in his society which in the Greek, Roman and medieval worlds implies aristocratic lineage. His privileged status must be proven during his life and approved by the judgment of other heroes and by his subjects both in peace and war. The test bed is war, in which victory or defeat is not established by the number of warriors competing but by the clash in a duel between two heroes, as that between Achilles and Hector, in Book XXII of the *Iliad*, in which only the two most valuable warriors of the opposing sides, the Achaeans and the Trojans, remain on the Trojan field. The duel ends with the defeat and death of Hector favoured, amongst other things, by Apollo's intervention. What distinguishes the two contenders, and all the other heroes in the Homeric poems, is first of all their physical strength, which should not be confused with brutality such as that displayed by Polyphemus in Book IX of the *Odyssey*. In contrast, the Homeric hero is blessed with superior intellectual gifts that assist him in his actions: he can fly into a rage whenever his honour is threatened (*e.g.* think of the consequences of Achilles's rage in Book I of the *Iliad*), but he participates in the assembly of his peers and advises them (*e.g.* think of Odysseus or Nestor). The approval of his peers sanctions his *aretè* (physical and moral excellence)

that is based on *aidós,* the feeling of reverence and fear of negative judgment by the members of the group the hero belongs to, which encourages him to take part in intrepid adventures and accomplish great deeds beyond human strength that must meet the members' consent. This, in turn, generates his *kléos,* the glory that perpetuates his memory and heroic deeds over time.

Strongly associated with the heroic world are the great Olympic Games institutionalised between the VIII-VIIth centuries B.C. where the aristocracy transferred the ideals of the heroic world into the antagonism of athletic competitions. Such ideals and sports activities, when revived by the modern Olympic Movement in 1896, rapidly spread as a mass phenomenon and were regarded as fundamental male prerogatives in the cultural *milieu* of Anglo-Saxon public schools and colleges in the early years of the twentieth century, where cultivation of the classics, as well as physical strength, sporting competition and leadership formed the homosocial expectations of the Oxbridge man (Deslandes 2005). It is in the light of these ideals and their associated historical and cultural social assumptions that Virginia Woolf had the speakers construe Percival as their heroic embodiment, and the reader construes Percival accordingly.

3. The occurrences of the name Percival and the he-pronouns

Proper names are one type of textual cue that gives information about a character in the story world (Margolin 1995: 374; Eder *et al.* 2010: 37; Balossi 2014: 31-32). With a silent character such as Percival, presented in a completely indirect mode, the most obvious source of information about him comes from text where he is referred to by his proper name or by he-pronouns by the six speaking characters from his outset in the story until the end. The investigation of these lexical items, their occurrence and distribution throughout the story is facilitated by the use of corpus-aided techniques (Stubbs 2005: 5-24; Adolphs 2006) which allow, among other

things, a researcher to produce frequency profiles for the textual cues under investigation in the target corpus (here the text spoken by the six characters in the Soliloquy part of *The Waves*) and to analyse qualitatively the results through concordances. Within the scope of the present article, the quantitative results obtained will serve the purpose of carrying out an intra-textual analysis (Adolphs 2006: 65-69) since the focus of my analysis is on an individual text and on how, within it, the six speakers construe Percival.

The statistics for the name Percival and the he-pronouns were obtained through WMatrix (Rayson 2007) and followed by a concordance analysis for the he-pronouns in order to remove all he-occurrences not referring to this character. Though I was aware that other pronouns, such as 'you' singular, or that, in some cases, obscure occurrences of 'he' may also refer to Percival, I decided to consider only the most obvious he-pronouns that refer to him unambiguously (*e.g.* when Susan imagines her hero/Percival coming back from the battle with trophies she says: "He will come home, bringing trophies to be laid at my feet. He will increase my possessions" (124)). The final outcome, displayed in Table 1, lists the frequencies of the name Percival and the he-pronouns in descending order of occurrence in each characters' life stages and major events (*cf.* Balossi 2014: 59-63 for a detailed illustration of the narrative framework of *The Waves*).

Table 1 The frequency distribution of the name Percival and the he-pronouns

Phase of life	Character	Percival	He-pronouns	Tot. freq. for each character
Adolescence: At public school	Neville	(7)	he (32) his (12) him (5)	**56**
	Louis	(7)	he (3) his (4) him (2)	**16**

	Bernard	(1)	X	**1**
Late adolescence: At university	Neville	(1)	he (3) his (3)	**7**
	Bernard	(2)	he (5)	**7**
Early adulthood: The farewell to Percival	Neville	(11)	he (8) his (1) him (1)	**21**
	Bernard	(9)	he (8) his (4) him (1)	**22**
	Louis	(2)	he (1)	**3**
	Rhoda	(3)	he (4) him (1)	**8**
	Jinny	(2)	he (1)	**3**
	Susan	x	x	**x**
Adulthood: Percival's death	Bernard	(5)	he (16) his (4) him (7)	**32**
	Neville	(5)	he (11) his (3) him (2)	**21**
	Louis	(1)	he (2)	**3**
	Rhoda	(8)	he (2) his (2) him (1)	**13**
	Jinny	(2)	he (1)	**3**
Growing old: The fi-	Neville	(2)	x	**2**

nal reunion	Bernard	(1)	x	**1**
	Louis	(3)	x	**3**
	Rhoda	(3)	x	**3**
	Susan	(1)	he (2) his (1)	**4**
	Jinny	(1)	x	**1**
Old age: Bernard's summing up	Bernard	(14)	he (13) his (7) him (8)	**42**
Tot. words 69,575		**Tot. 89**	**Tot. 180**	**Tot. 272**

The results in Table 1 show that the explicit naming frequency varies according to the speaker and stage of life, and that the distribution frequency is much higher in the males' speeches (237) than in the females' (35). A high occurrence is noted in Neville (107) and Bernard (105) compared to that of Louis (25). The first mentioning of Percival is recorded, for the males, in 'Adolescence' when Percival enters the scene at public school, with a higher frequency for Neville (56) and Louis (16), but not for Bernard (1). The next occurrences are signalled in Neville (7) and Bernard (7) in 'Late adolescence', where Louis is absent from university and when Percival reappears. References to Percival are made by all the males in 'Early adulthood' (Bernard (22); Neville (21); Louis (3)), coinciding with the farewell party where all the speakers meet to say goodbye to him before he leaves for India, where he will die in the bloom of life. The tragic event is recorded soon after in 'Adulthood', and remembered long after in the 'Growing old' stage at their last reunion. The last references to Percival occur in Bernard's final summing-up soliloquy in his 'Old age' (42) in the absence of all the other speakers. Amongst the females, the naming frequency in Rhoda's

speeches (24) is much higher than in Jinny's (7) and Susan's (4), and especially evident in 'Adulthood' (13) when she learns about his death. Susan does not mention Percival until the end of her life (4). In Jinny's speeches, we find references to Percival used when all the six friends meet at the farewell meeting, 'Adulthood' (3), when Percival dies (3), and eventually, like Susan, in the 'Growing old' stage (1). The higher frequency of occurrences of the name Percival and the he-pronouns occurring in the male characters in some stages of life may be explained by obvious contextual reasons, *i.e.* the shared experience at college, for all of them, and at university, for Bernard and Neville. Percival's death also appears to have a stronger impact on Bernard and Neville, but also on Rhoda; Bernard's marked reference to Percival in the final section may perhaps be explained by the fact that he is the story-teller (Lucenti 1998: 84) of *The Waves*, who at the end of the narrative takes up the role of providing resumés of the lives of all the characters in the story; a further explanation may lie in the text size spoken by Bernard in his old age, which is nearly as large as the text he speaks in the preceding phases of life (*cf.* Balossi 2014: 86-89). Apart from this, we should take into account that the higher reference to Percival in the male characters hints at the fact that Percival is mainly construed from Oxbridge men, as pointed out before.

4. *Percival the individual with the hallmarks of a hero in life*

The quantitative output of the name Percival and the he-pronouns referring to him looked at in their co-text provide evidence for his actions, and specific personal and psychological traits.

Percival is described by the male characters as strong, gross in the ways he breathes, speaks, laughs, or moves: "He is heavy" (27); "He breathes through his straight nose rather heavily" (26); "His slovenly accents" (28); "His curious guffaw" (28); he is "conventional" (89); and unintellectual: "He is allied with the Latin phrases on the memorial brasses" (26); "He

reads a detective novel" (52); he is lazy ("I have just pulled Percival out of bed […] as I pull the blankets off his feet; he burrowing like some vast cocoon meanwhile" (61)). He embodies familial conventions; he loves Susan, the perfect wife and mother ("when he takes his seat by Susan, whom he loves" (89)). His strength embodies the required qualities of the competition of the strongest in cricket: "He is thinking of nothing but the match" (35). He is the catalyst, the charismatic, god-like figure, and the perfect leader, who everybody follows and tries to imitate, he inspires "obedience, respect [and] adoration" (Hite, in Woolf 2006: lviii): "Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep" (28); "But look -- he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime" (27). He leaves for India to accomplish British imperialist ideals ("We shall say good-bye to Percival, who goes to India" (84); "he is about to leave us, to go to India" (89); "Percival is going […]. India lies outside" (98)). From these textual cues our impression of Percival confirms him as an individual bearing some of the stereotypical qualities of the upper middle-class man raised in Edwardian times, and also of the ordinary masculine sport-loving man. At the same time his marked charisma and power of leadership are traits that can be associated with qualities that fit the schema for the classical and mediaeval hero. Such hallmarks are further confirmed by the information that hints explicitly at Percival as a hero. He possesses *aretè* ("His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander" (27); "He is a hero" (89), who receives the approval of all his friends who meet to celebrate his departure for India where Bernard envisages him as "remote from us all in a pagan universe" (27); "He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were -- what indeed he is -- a God" (98). However, his *kléos* is disproved by his death, reported by all the speakers except Susan, not as valorous and heroic but as fatal ("Percival is dead" (110); "Percival has died" (122)), which is uncelebrated and accidental ("He died where he fell" (109); "Percival fell; was killed; is buried" (109); "He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown" (108)), and even 'tragically' ironic because he fell from "a flea-bitten mare" (98).

Through the textual cues analysed our impression-formation of Percival has come up with a certain difficulty of categorisation that may remain unresolved until our reading of his ironic unheroic and untimely death triggers re-categorisation. His death seems to contradict the archetypical image of the hero and activate that of a mock hero. Unlike Achilles, he doesn't fight savagely against the Trojans, and unlike the medieval hero he does not prove his trial of manhood to his lord, neither does he meet the ideals of manliness of the Edwardian man expressed through imperialistic ambitions (Levine: 2007; Brady 2005).

5. The post-mortem *nostalgia for Percival and his transfiguration into a hero*

Percival's death represents the key event in the story world of *The Waves* for it sheds light on the functional or actantial role this character holds in the narrative, which also unravels the subjective view each of the six speakers had of this silent character.

Percival's death marks the climax of the narrative and the start of the ageing process of the six characters, symbolically represented in the Interludes that parallel the Soliloquy sections by depicting the sun at its zenith and then its gradual descent towards night. Despite his now acknowledged physical absence in the narrative, he is still referred to by all the speakers in their adulthood and growing old stages of life (*cf.* Table 1). From what we still learn of Percival we must discount the fact that he represented for each of them a "model to define themselves" (Booker 1991: 36) and that his failed *kléos*/glory triggers in them the full realisation of their flaws and failure of their beliefs and ideals. Susan, who for most of her life, is firmly set in her role of wife and mother idealised Percival as the hero, who has won trophies (material things; Campbell 1990) imagining how she would increase her possessions if she had married him, but also as the man who loved her and could have spared her the toil and disillusionment of her chosen role ("At night I sit in the arm-chair and stretch my arm for my

sewing; and hear my husband snore; and look up when the light from a passing car dazzles the windows and feel the waves of my life tossed, broken, round me who am rooted. I think sometimes of Percival who loved me" (138)). Jinny idealised Percival as the perfect embodiment of her priorities in life: physical beauty and physical attraction. At the farewell party, she exalted Percival's youth and beauty ("this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty" (105)); nevertheless his death ("Millions have died. Percival died" (138))[3] brings about the realisation that she cannot stay young and attractive for eternity ("Here I stand. […] How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young" (138)). As for Rhoda, on whom Percival's death has a strong impact (*cf.* Table 1), her idealisation of Percival was that of someone who would compensate for her need for love ("Did he love me?" "More than he loved Susan?" (115)), and of someone who could make up for her lifelong inability to fit into a social dimension and identity ("Percival, by his death […] has revealed this terror" […]; "by his death, has made this gift, let me see the thing" (115)). For Louis, the successful business man, Percival's magnificence, as a medieval commander, realised his own fantasy of being one of the major figures from history and literature that could compensate for his lifelong need, as an outsider, to be accepted by upper-class English society. Yet, if Percival's death does not shake his recognised position ("Percival died […]. But I shall live to be gaunt and sere, to tap my way, much respected, with my gold-headed cane along the pavements of the city" (154)), he will not attain the "permanence" that Percival had ("Perhaps I shall never die, shall never attain even that continuity and permanence" (145)). Percival uncovered in Neville, the perfect scholar and academic don (but also a man with same-sex desire for Percival), his failed manliness. At college, Neville remarked that Percival

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[3] This may be also read as a reference to the First World War given the fact that Woolf started to think about *The Waves* in 1926. However, if in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf condemns militarism and war, in *The Waves* we do not find clear evidence of it; we rather find a world still much anchored to the old Victorian ideals that were crumbling away.

was "brutal in the extreme" (29) at the match, and that Percival despised him "for being too weak" (35). His death triggers definitely Neville's inability to fit in such a role: "Alas! I could not ride about India in a sun helmet and return to a bungalow. I cannot tumble, as you do, like half-naked boys on the deck of a ship, squirting each other with hose-pipes" (129),[4] but also the nostalgia of someone like Percival who was able to transmit a sense of unity when at their first reunion ("But there was another glory once, when we watched for the door to open, and Percival came" (153)).

Bernard is the character who already defined Percival in life as a "God" (98), a "hero" (89) and as the centre of unity, symbolically rendered through the image of the red carnation: "The flower […], the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives (169)"; "We became six people at a table in Hampton Court" (198). Yet, it is not until his long, final soliloquy that the elderly Bernard takes on the task of accomplishing Percival's unrealised *kléos* by engaging himself in a heroic duel between life ("Life is pleasant. Life is good". (193)) and death ("Death is the enemy" (212); *cf.* Balossi 2014: 178-181):

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! (212)

If for Neville, Louis, Rhoda, Jinny and Susan their *most-mortem* nostalgia for Percival represents their own unattained *kléos*, that of Bernard is not; in fact, Bernard's imagined transfiguration into Percival celebrates him as the hero of *The Waves*, and invites us to re-categorise him as such.

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[4] This is an example that lies outside my corpus as detailed in Table 1. It is through our accumulated contextual knowledge that we infer that 'you' is referring to Percival.

5. Conclusion

In this article I hope to have shown how the application of the cognitive model of characterisation may be a viable method for understanding the complex dynamics that underpin the construction of a literary character *via* other-presentation. And I believe that the analysis of the character Percival through a cognitive approach has made up for the lack of exhaustive analyses so far carried out in the literary arena (see, for example, McConnell 1971; Graham 1983; Hussey 1995: 213-214). The bottom-up processes of character perception through quantitative and qualitative methods combined with top-down processes of perception (namely, the schema for a hero and the background knowledge for the stereotypical Edwardian male) have proven useful in showing the dynamic quality of Percival as a fictional character. It may be argued that the analysis of Percival could have benefitted from an extra-textual analysis of my target corpus against other reference corpora, as is customarily done in Corpus Linguistics (see, for example, Viana *et al.* 2011). Such a possibility has not been considered here, since for the set aim, my corpus was conceived not as representative of language as a system (Sinclair 1991: 171; Balossi 2014: 41-43) but as unique and thus not suitable to be studied against the norm. Lastly, I hope that the application of the cognitive paradigm to the study of indirect-presentation of Percival and the focus on the heroic theme have contributed to the stylistic research of literary character and characterisation. Yet, the ontological status of such a complex character still remains open to further investigations, amongst which I would consider his actantial role (a function I have just hinted at). This would entail regarding him as a textual construct rather than a human-like being.

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