

Clarissa Dalloway's Introspection in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Virginia Woolf insists that life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. In an ordinary day, she argues, that thousands of ideas immerse through the human brain where thousands of emotions meet, collide, and disappear in a seemingly astounding disorder. Amid this hectic interior flux, the trivial and the vital, the past and the present, are constantly interacting; there is endless tension between the multitude of ideas and emotions rushing through one's consciousness and the numerous impressions scoring on it from the external world. Thus, even personal identity becomes evanescent, continually reordering itself as the atoms of experience fall upon the mind. It follows, then, that human beings must have great difficulty communicating with one another, for of this welter of perceptions that define individual personality, only a tiny fraction can ever be externalized in word or gesture. Yet, despite their frightening isolation as unknowable entities, people yearn to unite both with one another and with some larger pattern of order hidden behind the flux, to experience time standing still momentarily, to see matches struck that briefly illuminate the darkness.

Clarissa Dalloway is a woman fifty-two years old and chic, but disconcerted over life and love. A June day in her late middle years is upsetting to Mrs. Dalloway, uncertain as she is about her daughter and her husband's love, her own feelings for them, and her feelings for her former fiancé, lately returned from India. Peter Walsh had offered her agony and ecstasy, though not comfort or social standing, and so she had chosen Richard Dalloway. Now, seeing Peter for the first time in many years, her belief in her motives and her peace of mind are gone. Engaged

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in preparations for a party, she knows her life is frivolous, her need for excitement neurotic and her love dead. Meeting her best friend, Sally Seton, also makes her realize that their love was abnormal as is her daughter's for an older woman. Although she knows that her husband's love for her is real and solid, she feels that death is near, that growing old is cruel, that life can never be innocently good again.

Clarissa Dalloway is the principal character of *Mrs. Dalloway*, since it is her party that gives definition to the narrative and her point of view dominates the book. She was born Clarissa Parry, and the day the novel takes place, she is approximately fifty years old. Her husband is Richard Dalloway, and they have one child, Elizabeth. The overwhelming impression Clarissa gives is that she is a solitary, even isolated, being, and that she is often consumed with thoughts or feelings of death and mortality. This is not only because her thoughts of friends are for those of her youth and not present ones, but also because she seems to desire isolation. She chooses Richard Dalloway over Peter Walsh as a husband not because she loves him more, but because she believes Richard will not consume all of her personality and time, or all of her emotional and intellectual reserves. Clarissa sleeps in her own room, in a small single bed that is likened to a coffin, and such suggestions and imagery of isolation and death surround her throughout the book.

The reader gains a sense of Clarissa's character both from her own thoughts and from what other characters, especially Peter, think about her. Besides the fact that she has inspired love, which speaks well of her, she is also someone whom others, and herself, think flawed. Peter's notion that she is the "perfect hostess" sums up this suspicion of her weakness. Clarissa is well-off and does not work, putting her in a position to cultivate her preferences, which are the pursuits of beauty and social harmony. While she knows that these are worthy pursuits, she and her friends nevertheless wonder whether this is a wholly ethical way to live. The question she and they ask is whether or not she should be more like her husband or Lady Bruton and take a more obviously practical role in public and political life.

Mrs. Dalloway, the eponymous heroine plans a party, shops, meets

old friends, and makes her grand entrance at the party, all the while rethinking her life, her choices, her problems with identity, her sense of self, and the conflicting demands of love. Like Irish writer James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), this is a "stream-of-consciousness" novel, but the book really illustrates Virginia Woolf's notion of the webs of humanity, love, hate, and even apathy that connect all people. The book also clearly focuses on the metaphor of "the bubbles of selfhood" that surround people and that even those who love them have difficulty penetrating.

Like Joyce's, Woolf's style is impressionistic in the sense that she uses interior monologue (characters' thoughts and feelings) and individual glimpses that illuminate the hearts and souls of her characters while the pace of the plot pauses. To Virginia Woolf, time, selfhood, existence, and the soul or psyche are interrelated and thus must be dealt with intrinsically, each a component or crucial facet of the other. By presenting apparently unrelated bits and pieces of characters, their actions and choices, and their interactions with others, Virginia Woolf forged an unforgettable and wonderful new writing style that has changed the direction and focus of much twentieth century literature.

Thus, Mrs. Dalloway's character may be symbolic of purity, sensitivity, and reason, all of which lead her to accept her life without question, while her double, Septimus Warren Smith, poignantly represents destruction, apathy, and a passionate rejection of the fraud of civilization, the needs of love, and the despair of life itself. Their juxtaposition is at the heart of Woolf's attempt to reveal Clarissa Dalloway's true character as a woman in search of her self, threatened by the demands of love and apathy, passion and reason. Whereas Smith commits suicide by leaping out of his apartment window, Clarissa's is an emotional suicide that allows her a chance to believe that she is in control of her self, her nature, her identity.

Clarissa and Septimus never meet but are connected by the streets and activities of London and by the much-repeated Shakespearean line "'Fear no more the heat o' the sun/ Nor the furious winter's rages,'" which clarifies Woolf's focus on love, hate, apathy, and fear. The phrase is from *Cymbeline* (c. 1610), a play about deceit and marital infidelity

which ends in love and reconciliation. Its recurrence in Mrs. Dalloway may suggest the author's ironic view of love as a threat to one's sense of self. For Woolf, erotic love is much too demanding of one's identity, particularly if one is female. In her own life, she helplessly watched as her emotionally demanding father killed first his wife and then Woolf's older sister with his incessant need for totally unconditional acceptance and support. Her own marriage to Leonard Woolf was often too much for her, since his sexual demands were unwelcome and frightening, despite his otherwise kind behavior. For Mrs. Dalloway, too, erotic love requires too much of one's heart and soul; it was far better to marry the undemanding Richard, who did not care whether she loved him or not, than to risk her fragile sense of self with the passion of Peter or the purity of Sally.

Perhaps the most important aspect of *Mrs. Dalloway*, as in all of Woolf's texts, is her concern with the role of women that has been the legacy of the Victorian and Edwardian era. Although her quarrel is not discussed until later in explicitly feminist terms, her concerns are directly reflected in her desire to invent a new way of representing female characters that would capture their subjectivities. In her novels, Woolf's aesthetic theories come to incorporate gender and genre, feminism and modernism to show how as religion, conduct, politics, and literature change, so do human relations.

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