

# Viewing mrs. dalloway through the lens of "modern fiction"

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In “Modern Fiction,” Virginia Woolf comments on the flaws of modernist writers such as Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy. Their narrow focus on the material and lack of affinity for the spiritual or realistic, is evidence enough that they have fallen short in the literary sense. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf explores connections with truth, reality, and that which is above the material through her narrative techniques, complex imagery, and provoking themes, thus emphasizing through *Mrs. Dalloway* what she has so adamantly called for in “Modern Fiction.”

Woolf possesses the ability to create a work of fiction that evokes a pleasant reading experience for the reader without utilizing a central plot. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf chooses to explore the narrative possibilities of bringing several characters through one single day in time. This narrative technique works well in a text that mainly focuses on *Mrs. Dalloway*’s world view, her inner workings, and her exploration and sensory experience of the world surrounding her.

The organizational structure of the novel challenges Woolf to create characters that are deep enough to be realistic while dealing with only one day of their lives. Woolf creates within the character of Clarissa the inherent sense of the magnanimity of living one day in time. Clarissa “had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day” (16).

Through Clarissa, Woolf creates a sense of the complexity each day is capable of bringing to individual characters, thus calling her readers to “look

within life...examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fanstastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel” (3). Clarissa, through her sensory perception of the world around her, feels the danger of living even one day.

Woolf’s embrace of the realistic and spiritual aspects of the world, asserted in “ Modern Fiction,” are set up within this novel so that those views will be challenged. Through the character of Clarissa, struggling through one day in time, Woolf compels the reader to consider the possibilities beyond the material world. This narrative technique moves the action forward, and simultaneously delves into the life and inner workings of Clarissa, baring her soul to the reader and opening up the possibilities and realities of the spiritual world.

Woolf also employs imagery that similarly challenges the reader to explore the possibilities of what lies beyond the material. The imagery of death is quite prevalent in the text, and these images are mainly viewed through Clarissa, as she makes sense of her life. Critic Jacob Littleton, in his article, “ Portrait of the Artist as Middle-Aged Woman,” asserts that because Clarissa possesses a “ heightened view of existence,” she always possesses a “ preternaturally vivid awareness and fear of the termination of the existence she loves so much” (38).

Clarissa’s “ fear of termination” resonates most clearly in her isolated attic bedroom. The image of her bedroom symbolizes loneliness and death, and serves as a place where Clarissa frequently contemplates these subjects. Her bed, “ no longer the marriage bed symbolizing fertility, is symbolized by

her fertile mind as shrinking into her world in a way that other outlooks available to her do not" (40). She has no one but herself in which to rely, and this is evidenced through her continual fascination with the concept of death and the end of existence.

Clarissa's transcendental theory, which she uses as a reference to inform herself of the realities of the spiritual realm, causes her to surmise that "since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentarily compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death...perhaps—perhaps" (79). The image of the spiritual transcending death through means of apparitions is another powerful image within the text, and interlocks with the image of death and presents itself simultaneously.

In the case of Septimus, Clarissa is able to feel a connection with him after he has died that seems to transcend death. She assimilates herself with him after he took his life. She knows that "she felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away...He made her feel beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble" (185). Mrs. Dalloway sees herself in Septimus, even though she has never encountered him face-to-face; she sees something in Septimus that she desires for herself.

Woolf, through Clarissa's transcendental theory and interactions with the image of Septimus, uses Clarissa's experience to assert her own views on the spiritual aspect of reality. There is something far above the material that causes Clarissa to feel this affinity with Septimus. There is something

beyond herself that calls her to him, thus causing her to desire his fate for her own. The power of the imagery of death and the ability to transcend it is fully realized in the doubling of Clarissa and Septimus.

Lastly, Woolf uses themes that connect reality with the spiritual realm in an attempt to further her thesis in "Modern Fiction," for fiction to be modern and worth reading, it must explore that which is above the material world. Woolf's main concern in the novel seems to be the inner workings of Mrs. Dalloway, her thought processes, and how she engages with the world surrounding her. Woolf juxtaposes Clarissa's internal self with her external world, thus setting up one of the most prevalent, resonant themes within the text, and it is "against this system that Woolf places a world of private significance whose meaning is wholly irreducible to facts of the external world" (37).

This struggle between the internal and external surrounds not only Clarissa, but her double, Septimus, and thus permeates the novel. Personality, according to Ellen Bayuk Rosenmann, in her article, "The Invisible Presence," seems to be a "private fact," which is far "alienated from public and political culture" (77). Society at large is able to neither appreciate nor understand the inner workings of the soul, and thus stands at a distance.

Woolf asserts in "Modern Fiction," that "Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide" (3). In essence, the separation between the internal (soul) and the external (material world) is not navigable. Mrs. Dalloway is forced to break down the

material barriers that bar her from knowing herself, and delve into the depths of her soul to find the spiritual, the truth.

Another fascinating theme within the text is the intriguing concept of human interaction. Characters within the novel are being continually merged together through their experiences and through their own imaginations and memories as well (Littleton 39). One of the most interesting examples of this is the relationship between Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus. Clarissa never visually sees Septimus, yet he is the most significant part of her day. Clearly, Woolf is merging the two characters together, yet she blurs the lines a bit, thus furthering her assertions in "Modern Fiction," that "life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (4).

Septimus is a part of Clarissa's consciousness, even though she does not realize it. His life has a large impact on Clarissa, and he is the sole character that compels her to remain true to her soul. Critic J. Hillis Miller, in his article, "Repetition as Raising the Dead," explains that "no man or woman is limited to him or herself, but each is joined to the others...diffused like a mist among all the people and places he or she has encountered" (173). The characters are connected on various levels, and Woolf shows this connection quite acutely through the lens of Lady Bruton as she muses about the way in which Hugh and Richard remain with her after they leave, "as if one's friends were attached to one's body, after lunching with them, by a thin

thread, which...became hazy with the sound of bells, striking the hour” (112).

This statement furthers Woolf’s ideal that there is an inherent spiritual connection within human beings, a “thin thread” which connects humanity. The interaction between the characters is remarkable, as Woolf continues to assert that there is a spiritual connection between human beings that surpasses any material, physical connection (8).

Through means of narrative technique, fascinating imagery, and compelling themes, Woolf continues to assert her thesis in “Modern Fiction,” that fiction must be concerned with the reality of life, its inherent truth and spirituality. If fiction is only willing to explore the material, it will do a disservice to humanity, for there is a world beyond the material that begs to be explored. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf explore this other world, and brings to light fascinating possibilities that lie far beyond that realms of the material.

#### Works Cited

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