

Superficiality in mrs. dalloway



**ASSIGN
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' Clarissa could not be wider of the mark when she " thank(s) heaven" that " the war was over". Virtually every character we encounter is to some degree a living casualty of the class-based superficiality that led to the conflict and continues to dominate society.' Explore and discuss. The war and its effects were far from over by June 1923; they were simply put out of mind by the upper classes in order to return to a sense of pre-war normality .

Furthermore, the problems that caused the war still permeate Mrs Dalloway's society with an unquestionable resonance. These problems repeatedly manifest themselves in Mrs Dalloway and her guests and although stemming from a variety of factors, the problems for London in 1923 stem largely from superficial attitudes held in society. However, behind the superficiality of an extremely class based London there exist brief ' moments' and subtle indications that society recognises the problems and that change both has and will continue to come. The attitude held in society before entering the war still continues to dominate Clarissa's life. Her surname, Dalloway, has implications of the word dally and ' dally' eloquently describes how she leads her life. She tells us in her own interior monologue at the beginning of the novel that " she had a passion for gloves" and " Bond Street fascinated her" indicating the materialism that engulfs her world . Furthermore, her verbal exchanges with characters are inevitably full of falsities such as the note written to Peter Walsh in wildly exaggerated language, " heavenly to see you", which lacks any sincerity. Her exchange with Hugh Whitbread in the park by the government buildings is equally false. Rather than listening to what Hugh Whitbread says she is " conscious of her hat". Hugh's description of Evelyn's continued illness in the same paragraph contrasts with Clarissa's thoughts and further makes us aware of

her 'apparent' superficiality. Peter Walsh, although biased, comments twice that Clarissa is "insincere". Her reply to Lady Brunton at her party that she was "perfectly well" is equally false and she only gives this reply because "Lady Brunton detested illness in the wives of politicians." We are reminded throughout the novel that "there was always something cold in Clarissa" further suggesting a lack of real compassion. The novel builds up to Clarissa's party and the stream of consciousness in her own internal monologue throughout the party focuses on names and positions of people rather than real human emotion. The "Portuguese Ambassador" and the "Prince of Wales" are significant only in what they represent in terms of society and Clarissa does not once consider them as emotional human beings but rather positions in society. Equally the "Prime Minister" remains nameless, further highlighting the importance for Clarissa of position in society rather than real 'human qualities'. The repeated mention of the "Prime Minister" twenty nine times in Clarissa's thoughts in one day is a repeated and poignant reminder of the emphasis she places on positions in class and society. Equally, the names given to those surrounding Mrs Dalloway are intended to amuse and poke fun at the pomp and superficiality of Clarissa's life in the upper reaches of high society. The names "Willie Titcomb", "Milly Brush" and "Lady Needham" all serve to belittle their elevated and rather antiquated attitudes and actions. By the time we reach Clarissa Dalloway's party we are in no doubt that all Virginia Woolf's characters are in differing degrees casualties of the class-based attitude that continues to reign supreme in Mrs Dalloway's post-Victorian London.

However, the focus of the novel on Clarissa makes her appear the worst affected. Even before the party her class-based superficiality is made more

blatant through the mention of "Lords, Ascot" and "Ranelagh", all of which are typically upper class events. Her sentiment that "she felt nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? But she loved her roses" helps to suggest that she is really as fake as she appears due to the contrast between something that is internationally influential and a bouquet of inconsequential roses. The narrative focuses on colours in the first description of Clarissa Dalloway, mentioning "white", "blue-green" and "pink". The mention of how she looked (especially in terms of colours) instead of focusing on emotion or thought helps to symbolise Clarissa's superficiality further. Early descriptions of Clarissa as "very upright" and "vivacious" strengthen our sentiment towards a superficial, self-elevated lady because a lack of real emotional description means we are unable to picture her in an emotional sense. Furthermore, her description is often given to the reader in a rather animalistic way. By page four we hear that there is "a touch of the bird about her" and adjectives such as "picked" and "permeated", which lack any human qualities are used to describe her actions and suggest that she is emotionless. We are presented with a main character that shows all the signs of being a casualty from the war and the superficiality that caused it. However it is not just Clarissa who appears to be glaringly superficial. Peter Walsh is flippant in his obsession with the "news from India". However, Peter Walsh illustrates and symbolises eloquently the troubles within the Empire as well as the social problems inherent in Mrs Dalloway's society. He describes himself with extremely exaggerated imagery such as "tortured" and considers that Clarissa hated "frumps, fogies, failures, like himself presumably." The use of alliteration punches home his apparent lack of self-esteem, which he hides behind an outer shell. The choice of the word "

frump”, which is normally reserved for women and foggy, which implies an elderly person helps to further heighten our awareness of the depth of Peter Walsh’s self-loathing. His pocket knife takes the role of a quasi-weapon against his emotional hurts and insecurities. Furthermore, his pocket knife is described to the reader on the first page and from then on whenever he thinks of Clarissa “out came his pocket knife”. We realise right from the moment we first encounter Peter Walsh that although not present for the war he has been affected by the superficiality surrounding it. Richard Dalloway serves to demonstrate and symbolise the political snobbery and frivolous nature of London in 1923. The description of his “humble reforms” and the repeated emphasis on the fact his name was “at the end of letters to the Times” illustrates the lack of real substance and sincerity of Richard Dalloway, the conservative government and the world of politics he represents. The fact Richard is not mentioned in the novel for the first twenty pages, despite his quasi-important role in politics and his role as the husband of the protagonist further suggests he is not as important as he sees himself. Peter Walsh’s often-misguided insights into London life in 1923 are surprisingly accurate in regard to Richard Dalloway. He comments that Dalloway has “a great deal of the public-spirited, British Empire, tariff-reform governing lass spirit” in him. Richard’s actions inevitably support this sentiment and it becomes increasingly clear that like Clarissa and Peter Walsh, Richard Dalloway is a casualty of the shallow, class-based snobbery that caused the war and continues to dominate society. One could “know to a tittle what Richard thought by reading the Morning Post”. Similarly, in stark contrast to Septimus’ thoughtful views on Shakespeare, Richard Dalloway flippantly states “that no decent man ought to read Shakespeare’s sonnets

because it was like listening at keyholes". Equally, it is commented on Richard's insistence on sleeping after lunch simply "because a doctor had ordered it once" further suggesting that Richard has been given these points of view and that he does not know how to really think for himself. He continues to use antiquated language, such as "luncheon" and this heightens the air of pomp and falsity his character creates as he has clearly learnt these words to impress rather than picked them up naturally. The joke at Bourton where Peter and Sally mimic his voice ("my name is Dalloway") strengthens our opinion that Mr Dalloway, like his Wife and Peter Walsh, is simply a victim of the superficial attitude in society at the time. Similarly, Elizabeth's adventure on the omnibus in Victoria street hints at an escape from the restraints of a superficial society. She realises "she so much preferred being left alone to do what she liked in the country" and that "she was delighted to be free". Furthermore, the absence of Big Ben or any mention of time throughout this passage creates a less oppressive tone to the section and we are given a glimpse of a less superficial society, where deadlines and class-based politics are no longer relevant. The Strand is the setting of Elizabeth's walk and this contrasts with Conformist Westminster making the point that she is attempting to escape from being a victim of conforming to the materialism that dominates society. However, Elizabeth's freedom from the social customs thrust on her by the society that surrounds her is short-lived and she quickly returns with the sentiment that "she had to go to parties". It is evident that a trivial dilettante attitude engulfs her thought processes in a similar way to all the other characters in the novel. Thoughtless comments such as "she might be a doctor. She might be a farmer. Animals are often ill" re-establish the suggestion that, in common

with most of the older characters in the novel she lives life and will continue to be trapped in the social customs that surround her. However, it is not just the central characters that suffer from this extreme superficiality.

Significantly, in the opening pages when “The motor car stopped opposite Mulberry’s shop” and “everyone looked”; it is obvious that social expectations control English society. The car and its mysterious occupant are used to highlight the fact everyone is very curious of something rather unimportant. Furthermore, the car is symbolic of the English people looking at it in the fact that it has a glossy exterior but the interior of the car (like the inner self of most of Virginia Woolf’s characters) is hidden from the world. Reiza suggests “the English people she admired in a way” when she’s looking at the people staring at the motor car her tone and the situation prompts the reader to an even more sceptical outlook on London society. The use of focused, intricate details such as “boys on bicycles (who) sprang off” and the repeated use of phrases and words such as “veil-like”, “curious” and “whose face was it?” highlight the interest something so unimportant has caused. Even as it drives down to Piccadilly it was “still ruffling the faces on both sides of the street.” Equally Dr Holmes’s blasé attitude to Septimus’ shell shock implicates the medical profession into a role in a superficial, thoughtless London suggesting that Septimus is “in a funk.” This is an entirely unprofessional and unresearched statement, but Holmes is adamant he is right. The fact that Dr Holmes refers to Septimus as “the coward” indicates the hollowness of his professional views.

Furthermore, the ironic name beset on him by Virginia Woolf, with its implications of Sherlock Holmes and the greatness that accompanies the detective belittles the doctor and highlights that he is clearly a victim of

superficiality. Doris Kilman becomes symbolic of the teaching profession's superficiality and is portrayed as a predatory character "fingering the last two inches of a chocolate éclair" in a very animalistic way. She is described in a heightened physically grotesque way in order to suggest her pompousness and falsity. Parts of her body are highlighted and we are told she "projected her chin", "the thick fingers curled inwards" and "the great hand opened and shut". All these sinister physical images help to suggest that important distinctions such as the fact "she had her degree" and that "her knowledge of modern history was more than respectable", which put her in a certain class are negative, materialistic factors that continue to dominate society. It repeatedly appears that wherever the focus of Virginia Woolf's impressionistic like portrayal of London in June 1923 we are bamboozled with images, suggestions and direct references to the flaws in London society and it becomes clear that all the characters are victims of an extremely shallow, class-orientated society. However, there are brief moments where it is evident that change, away from social etiquette and snobbery both has and will continue to happen. The novel uses three different perspectives to examine the change. Clarissa and her surroundings, the role of Septimus Warren-Smith and the use of clocks and time. Big Ben continually reminds us of the inexorable movement of time and the clock becomes increasingly symbolic of change that is happening in society. The subtle way "Big Ben strikes" continually in the background reflects the stirrings of change in society away from the present class-based society. The differing descriptions of the clock's sound help us to see that change is currently happening and will continue to happen "unquestionably". The first description of Big Ben, ("There! Out it boomed. First a warning musical; then

the hour irrevocable.”) suggests through the inclusion of the word “irrevocable” that it cannot be undone and change will continue to happen. However, there is an air of unthoughtful, over-inflated granditude in the description of the clock: the words “boomed” and “irrevocable” give a far more grandiose image than the Clock rightly deserves. This reflects the people in Mrs Dalloway’s circle exactly in the sense they are over-inflated and superficial. Furthermore, one of the last descriptions of Big Ben, “volumously” and “tremulously” is a more thoughtful description. We realise that as Big Ben’s description becomes more thoughtful, real and accurate and loses its over inflated description so the people in London’s upper classes are beginning to see that they are superficial and false. It is clear that the way Big Ben is viewed is symbolic of the changing attitude in London. Furthermore the “clocks of Harley Street” and the “commercial clock, suspended above a shop in Oxford” both mirror in a parallel way the symbol of Big Ben and go to suggest that the change we see in Big Ben is a universal change throughout London. The inclusion of other clocks gives a more universal sense of change and help with a comprehension of the change happening in London society. Notably, Clarissa begins to realise that she is a casualty of her society’s falsities and superficialities. At her dinner she finally notices an “air of false composure” and that being just “nice looking” was not quite as important as she had started the day thinking. The description of the party through Clarissa’s eyes is both belittling and slightly derogatory. This is in contrast with the way Peter Walsh still views the party and this contrast heightens our awareness of Clarissa’s changing perspective and suggests to the reader that she is emerging from the shallow attitude that she previously held. The use of the word “little” repeatedly instils a

sense of belittlement at Clarissa's own party. The sentence syntax puts the emphasis on "Little service", highlighting her movement away from a society she has always embraced. The repetition of "little tables" three times consolidates this sentiment. The word "little" is mentioned seven times in three pages and use of other words such as "subterranean" and "gluttonously" strengthen the feeling that Clarissa is about to embrace change because she is no longer a victim of the superficialities and pomp of society. However, the culmination of Clarissa's self-realisation is not until her reflection on the old lady during her party. The reader can only be fully aware of Clarissa's realisation once she herself compares her life to that of the lady and realises herself the implications of this comparison. Even before the party Clarissa shows signs of moving away from her past. The past for Clarissa becomes ever increasingly muted, indefinite and speculative. She continually thinks, "was that it?" and "he must have said it" indicating she has moved on from her past. Furthermore, as Clarissa becomes more aware of the fact that she is a casualty of society's rules, Virginia Woolf's description of her becomes more in tune with her surroundings. For instance, at the beginning of the novel we are presented with a "very white" lady, who has been through "illness" and this contrasts strongly with the "masses of carnations" and "bunches of lilac" in the florists as well as the "whirling young men and laughing girls" in the park. Her description is almost the antithesis of the surroundings she puts herself in and the month. In contrast, by the end of the novel, she is described with words such as "passionately" and "devoted" suggesting a tendency in Clarissa towards real emotion rather than keeping up appearances in the way she used to.

Furthermore, Septimus Warren-Smith is symbolic of a tendency away from

social values in Mrs Dalloway's society. Although 'apparently' insane due to shell shock he has a greater understanding of the real values of humanity than most of the other characters and is not under the same "profound illusion". His assertions on Shakespeare, although wrong, ("how Shakespeare loathed humanity") have been thought through properly and this is indicated by the fact he actually reads the plays in contrast to both Richard's and Peter Walsh's flippant comments on Shakespeare's sonnets and plays. Furthermore, unlike the other main characters, his level of self-realisation is far greater. He accepts he is "too weak to kill himself" and understands he cannot entirely "feel" and that he could only "reason". He avoids a lacquer of 'social varnish' to hide these apparent imperfections. He has no time for the same materialistic sentimentality Clarissa shows when she says, "she had a passion for gloves" and in stark contrast "ices chocolates, sweet things had no relish on him". Ironically Septimus is far more balanced and genuinely more insightful than his 'sane' counterparts and his name Septimus Smith, combining an old antiquated, rarely heard name with perhaps the most common English surname, helps to consolidate this feeling of balance and sincerity. Septimus also has a great deal of real insight into the superficiality of others. He recognises Holmes for what he really is; "a brute with red nostrils" and repeatedly hints at his initial assertion that "once you stumble human nature is upon you". Septimus clearly understands Reiza's comment that the "English cannot feel" more fully than she would ever be able to. He is the only character to really "implore the gods" and he has a religious and spiritual depth to him none of the other characters could boast of. His friendship with Evans is deep and heartfelt, proven by Septimus' mention of his name on forty six different

occasions and the war they shared together is mentioned directly by Septimus on thirteen different occasions. This contrasts strongly with Clarissa's rather false conversations with her like-minded 'society friends'. The depth and honesty in Septimus' public emotions are exhibited by the dynamic descriptions of Septimus' many range of emotions. He is "laughing", "shouting" and "shy". Countless other descriptions such as these create a colourful character who does not hide behind the correct etiquette vital to society life and perhaps this is why he is ousted somewhat by London society. Although ultimately he is a victim due the fact that he is pressured into suicide, we feel he is no longer a victim. This is because his suicide is one final act of control, allowing him to choose how and when he dies rather than life surrounding him dictating his demise. However, it is when Clarissa hears news of Septimus' death that we realise fully she is no longer going to continue to be a victim of her surroundings and this is because she directly compares herself to Septimus." She felt somehow very like him the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air." This shows clearly that Clarissa has realised the problems of her current lifestyle. Furthermore, the inclusion of Big Ben with an extremely poetic and meaningful description brings the three major strands of the realisation of superficiality together. Connecting them and for a brief "moment" we see that change, although discrete, has been present and will continue to preside in Mrs Dalloway's society bringing about further change. Furthermore Septimus echo's Clarissa's soundbyte taken from Cymbeline," Fear no more the heat o' the sun Nor the furious winter's rages." When he says before his death " Fear no more says the heart in the body; fear no

more." The similarity of these lines, which are important to both characters (Clarissa because she repeats hers and Septimus due to the fact it is spoken soon before his imminent death) suggests that the pair have similar perspectives. It also suggests that perhaps Mrs Dalloway is beginning to realise Septimus' view that they are all casualties of the class system in London and that change from this has and must continue to come. Ultimately, the enigmatic last line of the novel, " For there she was", sums up Clarissa's situation. The use of the perfect historic rather than the present, which is predominant over the concluding pages of the novel, makes this phrase stand out. The phrase is almost questioning and suggests to the reader that Clarissa is beginning to see the shallowness of her life in London. Most significantly, this last phrase invites the reader to question if the other characters are " there". The significance of the stream of consciousness style then becomes important. Through a continually changing narrator we can examine the attitudes of other characters and finally understand that each character is experiencing the effects of the superficiality in London society to different extents and are therefore " there" to different extents.