

Thoughts on the
triangle of author,
reader, and character
in virginia woolf's
'mr...



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Mention Virginia Woolf and almost inevitably the words 'stream of consciousness' will appear. But what does this actually mean, and how does Woolf distance herself from both reader and Clarissa, and, indeed, does she bother? Mrs Dalloway is, we are frequently told, a radical new form of prose breaking the mould of 19th century fiction. Virginia Woolf herself predicted 'we are trembling on the verge of one of the greatest ages of English literature' as she and James Joyce struggled to define a new method of capturing character. She argued here that 'all human relationships have shifted' as a result of the Great War, rendering the Edwardian character portrait obsolete. The entanglement of reader, author, and character were as much a part of this new effort to depict personality as a 'multi-layered self, in which dreams, memories, and fantasies were as important as actions and thoughts' as they are vital to reading the novel. Using as a copy text edited by Stella McNichol this essay will boldly set forth in an attempt to determine the subtle web of relationships woven between these three combatants. Woolf felt her greatest breakthrough in the composition of Mrs Dalloway was her discovery of a 'tunnelling process' by which she learnt to 'dig out beautiful caves behind my characters ... the idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment.' . As it developed, she believed it to gain a 'more analytical and human ... quality' and so her depiction of character developed. She frequently had discussions with the painter Jacques Raverat about fictional form, who said the problem with writing was that it is 'essentially linear'. It is almost impossible to express the way one's mind responds to an idea, where, like a pebble being thrown into a pond, 'splashes in the outer air' are followed 'under the surface' by 'waves that follow one another into dark and forgotten corners'.

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This idea of the far-fetching depths of the mind and the multiple consequences of an action were relatively unknown in literature's caricatures before this time. Woolf replied that it is 'precisely the task of the writer to go beyond the "formal railway of sentence", and to show how people "think or dream ... all over the place" '. Her tunnelling concept allowed her to move from linear characters to a form, which gave 'the impression of simultaneous connections between the inner and the outer world, the past and the present, speech and silence: a form patterned like waves in a pond rather than a railway line' . This development of characters is what catalyses the generation of new, extraordinarily complex spider-web of attachments and links, which insane Septimus sees all around him: They beckoned; leaves were alive, trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. (page 24) And yet it is not only Septimus who is connected on this vast web of inter-linked consciousness and thought, but Clarissa as well. Upon his death she reflects 'death was an attempt to communicate'. The two characters seem drawn together in a way more deep than their mere casual common acquaintance with Sir William Bradshaw would allow. It is a debatable question to what extent Woolf is personally involved with her characters. It is always dangerous to assume that an author's work is based on their life, as the distinction between poet and persona, and playwright and character in other mediums shows. Desdemona may have died, but it would clearly be absurd to say that this was because Shakespeare did not like women. However, perhaps it should not be attempted to strip a work down to its bones and deny the fundamental relationship between author, a creator, and her

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creations. The text of Mrs Dalloway and some of the experiences of Woolf's life appear, and this is by no means certain, to be related. It has often been suggested that many of her characters seem based on people within the scope of her experience. Clarissa's world is a social arena of parties and hostesses, much like the one into which the eligible Miss Stephen found herself dragged by her cousin George Duckworth and Kitty Maxse, a family friend. Virginia Stephen found Kitty superficial and many critics have considered that she could have been the template for Clarissa. It is certainly a convincing argument that Woolf is not creating an impression of herself in Mrs Dalloway and evidence for this is provided by her confession that she 'found Clarissa in some way tinselly' and that 'some distaste for her persisted' throughout the novel's composition. Also in the novel, even in the opening pages, are phrases, even in the opening of the novel, which appear in what must be Clarissa's thoughts, and yet are sharply at odds with Woolf's socialist tendencies: Heaven only knows why one loves it so ... but ... the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same (page 4) Here the ascorbic blame inherent in the phrase 'drink their downfall' seems unlikely to come from Woolf, the friend of the working classes. Mrs Dalloway is a society woman, superficial, and self-contained, and a development of an earlier character from another story. Other parallels with the adolescent Woolf can be seen in the description of Sally Seton, who was based on her cousin, Madge Symonds. When she was fifteen she was apparently 'in love' with Madge and on one occasion 'Virginia ... gripping the handle of the water-jug in the top room at Hyde Park Gate ... exclaimed to herself: "Madge is here; at this moment she is actually under this roof."' The young Woolf never acted on her feelings, much the same as <https://assignbuster.com/thoughts-on-the-triangle-of-author-reader-and-character-in-virginia-woolfs-mrs-dalloway/>

Clarissa's feelings for Sally Seton, although Woolf did later break out of the sexual restrictions she felt upon herself and have such a relationship with another woman. Other current acquaintances have been identified as characters in the books. Lydia Lopokova the dancer was 'observed' as 'a type of Rezia', and Lady Bruton was probably based on Woolf's knowledge of Lady Colefax, who declared 'I have been tolerant too often. The truth is people scarcely care for each other.' This mirrors the woman who can 'domineeringly bush aside all this unnecessary trifling'. There are, then, a lot of silhouettes, if not caricatures, of Woolf's friends and acquaintances in the characters of the novel. Clarissa's world is similar to Woolf's in a way that Septimus' is not. But she has infiltrated the character of Septimus at a far deeper level than mere social surroundings. She declared 'I adumbrate here a study of sanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and insane side by side.' In this character she drew on the memories of her own intermittent states of madness, which had led, in 1895 and 1915, to suicide attempts. The intensity with which she evoked her own experience can be seen in that in September 1923, while writing about Septimus, she had a 'mental tremor', threatening to recall her periods of insanity. That the madness of Septimus equated to Woolf's own experience can be ascertained from the accounts given by Quentin Bell and Leonard Woolf. The former explained 'her symptoms were of a manic depressive character', whilst the latter referred to his wife's illness as 'manic depressive insanity', although 'the doctors called it neurasthenia ... a name which covered a multitude of sins, symptoms, and miseries.' His alarmingly clinical categorisation of her symptoms include progression from exhaustion and insomnia to high excitement, violence and delusions alternation with comatose melancholia, <https://assignbuster.com/thoughts-on-the-triangle-of-author-reader-and-character-in-virginia-woolfs-mrs-dalloway/>

depression, guilt, and disgust at food, all of which have points of similarity in Septimus' delusions and misery. He hears: A sparrow ... sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime (page 26) This corresponds to Woolf's recollections of her own madness, where she listened to the birds singing in Greek and imagined that King Edward VII lurked in the azaleas using foul language. Another parallel can be seen in Woolf's hostility to her doctors, particularly to Sir George Savage, on whom Sir William Bradshaw. Clarissa and Septimus form the two pillars of Woolf's 'study of sanity and suicide'. The one character circulates in an eerie facsimile of Woolf's own history and surroundings, the other displays some of her more alarming traits. Her alteration of her original title, 'The Hours', shows how she was having to manipulate the centres of interest in her book and alter the title as she began to focus her attention on the characters rather than the structure of the day. The emphasis now clearly falls on Clarissa, although Woolf works hard to make sure that she does not overshadow any of the other themes in the book giving each of her characters and ideas equal attention (for evidence of this, consult the plot summary in Lee, 1977, p 96 - 98). As to the 'stream of consciousness', what can be seen from the first few pages is that whilst the novel deceptively seems to provide the start for a conventional 'story', we are plunged into Clarissa, much as she 'plunges' into the day (page 3). The pleasure of the morning reminds her of similar feelings at Bourton, making her think of Peter Walsh, and instructing us that he is soon to return from India. Already, as Lee puts it, 'we are made aware that the past is not in contrast with the present, but involved with it.' Clarissa provides the link between past and present as her consciousness swims between them, feeling the same, recognising Peter Walsh make remarks <https://assignbuster.com/thoughts-on-the-triangle-of-author-reader-and-character-in-virginia-woolfs-mrs-dalloway/>

about vegetables and playing with his pocket-knife. As she remembers ' his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness', she herself is evaluated by Scrope Purvis even in the act of evaluating the past. This external view of Clarissa as a ' jay, blue green, light, vivacious,' is balanced with the emotional life with which the reader is involved. Clarissa exists on different levels to the reader, to the other characters, and also, perhaps, to Woolf. One of the things that must be determined when reading Mrs Dalloway is the certainty that none of the characters are lying to the reader, or mistaken. We see different views of Clarissa, and yet must be confident that Scrope Purvis and Miss Pym are not lying, or merely unreliable. Both of these characters bring to our attention the facts of Clarissa's age and frailty, making perhaps more painful the irony of her love of life and vitality. There are innumerable other views of Clarissa seen through the eyes of the other characters; Sally says she is ' hard on people'; Richard imagines that she ' wanted support,' (page 129). At the party also there are many more views from Sir Harry who likes her in spite of her damnable, difficult, upper-class refinement, which made it impossible to ask Clarissa Dalloway to sit on his knee (page 194) to Jim Hutton who thinks her ' A prig, but how charming to look at!' (page 195). Clarissa does then exist as a creature in the eyes of others, and these views help Woolf to guide the reader. Woolf shows us her without personal comment, emphasising the ' streaked, involved, inextricably confused' and the chaos of human existence, whilst at the same time providing the reader with the multi-layered consciousness of the internal Mrs Dalloway. From the outside, Clarissa is a society hostess, but we are warned against the dangers of judging people so singularly on appearance by the character herself, who states the dangers of saying ' of anyone in the world ... that they were this or

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were that'. Perhaps, then, this external self is a mockery of the inner, true self, yet at the same time it is a valid aspect of Clarissa. Interestingly Clarissa also thinks of 'herself' as a 'character' and sums herself up as though in the third person. She looks in the mirror and sees herself 'pointed; dart-like; definite' (page 42). She recognises that her face and herself is the sum of many different and incompatible parts. But it is this whole self which others see as the woman who 'could not think, write, even play the piano ... muddled Armenians and Turks.' Underneath Clarissa's perfect hostess exterior lies her emotional self, composed of her love for Sally Seton and Peter Walsh, and of her feelings for those around her: Richard, Elizabeth, Miss Kilman, her party, and life alone. There is a continual conflict between her desires to reach out to others, to 'combine, to create' (page 135), and her desire to withdraw and respect 'the privacy of the soul'. Her party represents her love of drawing people together, or harmonising, (page 140), and this perhaps equates with the passion of the 'match burning in the crocus' (page 36) and her hating of Miss Kilman. And it is the act of this passionate hating which brings and energy and life; 'It was enemies one wanted, not friends' (page 193). On the other side, Clarissa's tendency to withdraw 'like a nun who has left the world' (page 33), going upstairs to her narrow bed like 'a child exploring a tower' (page 35) leaves her failing Richard sexually, unable to abandon herself, feeling her part in the world dwindling because Lady Bruton has not asked her to lunch. This cold, restrained, restrictive world is best shown in contrast with the passion of the memories Peter evokes in her, and in an image Woolf provides us with: It was all over for her. The sheet was stretched and the bed narrow. She had gone up into the tower alone and left them blackberrying in the sun. (page <https://assignbuster.com/thoughts-on-the-triangle-of-author-reader-and-character-in-virginia-woolfs-mrs-dalloway/>)

523) Deeper inside Clarissa is her belief in her connection to the world through the same, intangible web that Septimus feels: Somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, ... part of people she had never met (page 12) There is a feeling that Septimus' death perhaps 'redeems the hollowness of her life' and the 'corruption, lies, chatter' (page 204) which surrounds her. Woolf's portrayal of Clarissa is, perhaps, less charitable. The image of Lucy, Clarissa's maid, 'taking Mrs Dalloway's parasol, handled it like a sacred weapon in which a goddess, having acquitted herself honourably in the field of battle, sheds, and places it in the umbrella stand' (page 34). The Royalty, Empire, and Government (which make Clarissa stiffen with pride when she suspects that the queen may be passing) are made to look ridiculous. Equally, Woolf treats some of the characters that Clarissa admires with vicious satire: She had the thought of Empire always at hand and had acquired from her association with that armoured goddess her ramrod bearing, her robustness of demeanour (page 199) Clarissa herself is even attacked from within her world, her society. Peter Walsh says of her 'Here she's been sitting all the time I've been in India; mending her dress; playing about; going to parties' (page 46). He attacks her 'timid, hard, arrogant, prudish manner on page 66, and the 'effusive insincerity' of her party air on page 185. Similarly Doris Kilman attacks her 'air of freshness and fashion' (page 138), much like Woolf labelling her 'tinselly'. From her own mouth, too, is she condemned, when she considers that by loving her roses she is helping 'the Albanians, or was it the Armenians?'. Here Woolf invites the reader to attack her triviality and ignorance and hollowness. Mrs Dalloway is a character partly evoking sympathy and partly distaste. She is used to illustrate to the bewildered

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reader the levels of emotion and character of which humanity is constructed; and, although we are in her head, Woolf still skilfully manipulates the character so that she is immediately intriguing. The author's interest in character is clear, and it is instructional to see to what extent it is possible that she drew on her own experiences and acquaintances to create the figures in the book. The characters are also used to expose some of the main ideas in the book; social awareness, an invisible web of mutual-connectivity, and the conflict between passion and respectability. From all this the reader is left to draw his own conclusions.