

The changing society of mrs. dalloway



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What is the novel about?" *Mrs Dalloway* is a novel so rich and complex in its imagery, and the issues to which it gives rise are so many and so varied, that to assign one distinctly defined meaning to it, as one might for a Victorian or Edwardian novel, is to miss the point of Woolf's style. Woolf was adamant that the literary conventions of her Edwardian predecessors, such as reliance on material evidence and external fact, had been rendered obsolete by the radical changes in society following the War: 'For us,' she asserted, 'those conventions are ruin, those tools are death.' The novel is a consciously intellectual piece of writing: Woolf was throwing down the gauntlet to the critics of the day who, like the characters in the book, were reluctant to admit to themselves that society had changed. On 18th February 1922 she writes in her Diary, 'I'm to write what I like; and they're to say what they like': this attitude to life is apparent throughout the novel, presented as an ideal in the figure of Sally Seton. Woolf's portrayal of time in *Mrs. Dalloway* is key to this idea of change following the War: it is always characterised in an oppressive light, beginning in the first passage of the novel: 'There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air'. The use of 'irrevocable' really sets the tone that will continue throughout the novel whenever the concept of time is mentioned, as it frequently is. Woolf gives the impression that life in London during the early 1920s is governed by time: it is a case that 'the clock', as Lord Tennyson wrote, 'beats out the little lives of men'. This concept is underlined when Woolf links the English obsession with time to Sir William Bradshaw's ironical goddess, 'divine proportion': 'Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the

supreme advantages of a sense of proportion, until the mound of time was so far diminished that a commercial clock...announced...that it was half-past one." Proportion', in Sir William Bradshaw's eyes, means conformity in a very sinister Brave New World sense: 'Worshipping proportion, Sir William...made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion' Thus Woolf blames doctors for being the instruments by which England secludes anybody with a condition which is not understood or considered to be against the public interest: anything which reminds society of the effects of the war. By locking up shell-shock victims out of the public eye society can ignore them and the gender issues that they raise. This attitude is propagated not only by the medical profession; but by the same people that consider it necessary to have clocks at every street corner, always regimenting the lives of all that pass: the section of society personified in the absurdly pompous Hugh Whitbread. The link between Hugh and the medical profession that Woolf so despised is made clear the first time Clarissa meets him: 'They had just come up...to see doctors. Other people came to see pictures; go to the opera; take their daughters out; the Whitbreads came "to see doctors"...Times without number Clarissa had visited Evelyn Whitbread in a nursing home'. Woolf is scathingly critical of Hugh throughout the novel, using an ironic voice to undermine what she termed 'the highest tide of the finest societies' greatest season all the superlatives that mean nothing to me'. Hugh with his 'little job at court', whose only talent is 'the art of writing letters to the Times'. He is the worst kind of frivolous: 'He did not go deeply. He brushed surfaces' he approves of commercial clocks and the manipulation that they

represent on a subconscious level. Woolf is enraged at people of this type: she is disgusted that anybody could be so shallow in the aftermath of the War; and she knows they manage it by ignoring the fact that anything has changed at all. This attitude is apparent on page five, where Clarissa exclaims in her thoughts: 'but [the war] was over; thank Heaven over. It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace. And everywhere, though it was still so early, there was a beating, a stirring of galloping ponies, tapping of cricket bats; Lords, Ascot, Ranelagh and all the rest of it...' Clarissa is wrong: the war is far from over. English society has tried to go back to exactly the way it was before the war, relying on the old bastions of English upper-middle class life to do it 'Lords, Ascot, Ranelagh' but it is impossible: it was such a world-changing event that much as people might try to forget it, below the surface there is a cauldron of unresolved issues just waiting to bubble over. Again the passage converges on the very personification of pre-war England: 'her old friend Hugh the admirable Hugh!' This attitude is an analogy for the repressed emotional state of many of the characters we see in the novel, especially the men. A good public school upbringing teaches one never to express emotion because it is not 'proper', just as it teaches one the importance of being on time. It is characters' preoccupation with the helplessness they feel because of the unidirectional nature of time that causes them to be so caught up in the past and in their own memories. The upper-middle class characters we see in the novel are used to having everything their own way; to being in control of all aspects of their lives. The only thing that they can't control is time, so they obsess about being young again, that time in their lives when anything was still possible and they had not yet made any concrete decisions on the direction that their lives were to

take. It is only characters that are unhappy with their lives that seem to do this, however (admittedly, this is most of the people in the novel). This is one of the methods that we see throughout the novel that society uses to avoid accepting the reality of the world around them, and that that world has changed. It is another method of blocking out the war. Sally Seton is the one person that is happy with her life, and although the time at Bourton meant a lot to her, she does not need to dwell on it because she is content with the decisions she has made: ' But going to Bourton had meant a lot to her had kept her sane, she believed, so unhappy had she been at home. But that was all a thing of the past all over now' . Some might say that she has sacrificed her passion and independence, and her rebellious side, in order to be happy; but because she is happy, she does not need to be rebellious. However, to the discredit of society, the only times when characters seem to be truly happy in the novel are when they throw off the constraints of being on time and the regimentation of 1920s life and do things on a whim. The most striking example of this is Elizabeth's omnibus ride, where she for once steps out from under her mother's control and the control of Doris Kilman and makes her own decisions. The statement, ' Elizabeth stepped forward and most competently boarded the omnibus, in front of everybody' , seems rather laughable, but in fact it is a deliberate use of irony by Woolf: Elizabeth would not normally be allowed to go off on her own, and probably has not used an omnibus very many times, so it is fair for her to be excited and somewhat anxious about doing something unfamiliar in front of others. It is a damning indictment of upper-middle class English society that something so insignificant as taking an omnibus and walking up the Strand should inspire thoughts of pirates and ' reckless, unscrupulous' adventures. The omnibus is

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a symbol of liberty and of independence, 'insolent', 'bold' and 'arrogant', its own master. This inspires Elizabeth to dream, which might seem a silly extravagance but gives for a moment a glimmer of hope for the new generations trying to shed the shackles of nineteenth century social stereotypes. However, this apparent freedom is not quite true all the time Elizabeth has in the back of her mind her mother's party, which she must not miss. Society has done its work well, and it is significant that as soon as her thoughts turn from dreams to 'real life', she wonders: 'But what was the time? where was a clock?' Immediately Elizabeth becomes more cautious, retreats into herself and suddenly is looking 'shyly', considering herself a 'stray'. Crucially, the narrative then switches back to her mother, and we see that Mrs. Dalloway has no concept of what her daughter is like we have just had a glimpse of the real Elizabeth, the living Elizabeth waiting to break out, yet for most of the time this side is suppressed because it is not considered 'proper'. Hugh, Richard, Peter and Septimus are all products of the same system of imposed emotional repression, but the degree to which it has ultimately damaged them is proportional to the amount of stress under which it has been put. Hugh and Richard have never had problems beyond having somewhat sterile marriages; but Peter had to deal with being rejected by Clarissa, and couldn't cope: he has never been able to deal with his feelings of rejection because he has never been able to admit them fully. As a consequence he has never been able to settle down and be happy, never been able to love another woman because he compares every one to Clarissa. He calls it 'the terrible scene which he believed had mattered more than anything in the whole of his life', and afterwards, instead of dealing with his feelings, he runs away: 'It was over. He went away that night. He

never saw her again.' Septimus had to undergo the greatest test of his emotional 'mettle', and found his capacity for repression to be too great. Instead of coping with his friend Evans' death, he completely passes over it; feels nothing: 'Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself on feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime'. This repression of feeling (described ironically by Woolf as '[developing] manliness') has far-reaching effects, however: having repressed his love for Evans (see footnote 16, below), Septimus is now left unable to love anybody or anything. Having gone to war for love, the love of Shakespeare and 'Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square', his whole war has now been stripped of meaning, and he is left with the worst feeling of all: indifference. In an attempt to save himself, he married Lucrezia 'when the panic was on him that he could not feel'. He has no concept of the passage of time as dictated by Big Ben: he lives completely in the past, for the war affected him in such a profound and serious way that every other experience that he has had since has been insignificant in comparison. Septimus' suicide is a complicated issue. It seems initially that he has done it for loathing of himself and of society, having thought, 'He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst...he had married his wife without loving her; had lied to her; seduced her; outraged Miss Isabel Pole...The verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death' and shortly before: 'it must be the fault of the world then that he could not feel.' He then proceeds to rant about how 'Shakespeare loathed humanity' and how 'the business of copulation was filth to [Shakespeare] before the end...One cannot bring children into a world like this'. However, the real reason for Septimus' suicide is that it is the only

way in which he can take control of his life and win over Holmes and Bradshaw, who are ironically characterised by Septimus as 'human nature'. 'Human nature' really means popular opinion: it is our old friend 'the admirable Hugh!' again all the people that want to hide Septimus' condition from the world. It is damning of society that Septimus, who professes 'He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot', is forced to kill himself to escape 'human nature', 'men who...saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted'. This is a key theme in the book: it is analogous with people who know nothing about the war passing judgement over it and ignoring the important lessons that have to be learnt: as King Lear said, 'a dog's obeyed in office'. Septimus accepts the inevitability of his death, just as Clarissa does her own: Septimus' 'Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more' is very similar to Clarissa's 'Fear no more the heat of the sun'. However, their reactions are different because their situations are different: Septimus acknowledges that 'Life was good. The sun hot', but he has no reason to continue living because he cannot feel, like King Lear, who dies after the death of Cordelia because without her love he has no reason to carry on living. Clarissa's moment in 'the little room where the Prime Minister had gone with Lady Bruton' is a very liminal one: it has many similarities to Septimus' last moments and it is conceivable that Clarissa could throw herself out of the window, too. As she sees the old lady in the room opposite getting ready for bed, she sees a vision of her future self, alone, with the sound of the clock striking in the background to remind her of time passing that can never be regained, and realises the inevitability of her death. But Clarissa, unlike Septimus, has a reason to live: she has Peter and Sally. It is the thought of them that finally pulls her out of the trance-like

moment, as she thinks, ' But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter . And she came in from the little room.' In this moment of tranquillity Clarissa thinks, ' It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed alone.' She is able to step back from the hubbub of the party and see into another world, to the larger sense of life and death occurring around her. This is also part of Woolf's theory of ' connectedness', in which every part of life is interlinked in some way . 'Moments' like this are very important within the novel's structure, and within Woolf's philosophy on life. Woolf depicts life as a series of defining ' moments', instances of intense feeling that change one's life forever, interspersed with everyday life. One such moment in the novel is what Clarissa describes as ' the most exquisite moment of her whole life', when Sally kisses her on the lips next to the stone urn one night at Bourton. When characters reminisce, they remember things as ' moments' not remembering everything about a particular period, but having intense and vivid memories of specific defining ' moments'. And really, that is what the novel is about: life. In her short story An Unwritten Novel (1920), she also writes of life: ' Life's what you see in people's eyes; life's what they learn, and, having learnt it, never, though they seek to hide it, cease to be aware of it – what? That life's like that, it seems'. Life, for Woolf, is spontaneous and undefined, unlike the Edwardian and Victorian views that focussed on facts as the basis of life. After the war, the security that was present before is gone; nothing is the same. The passage about ' the solitary traveller' debates whether it is possible in a post-war world to have a civilised life? Only, he decides, if we never go back to the way things were before the war: ' may I never go back to the lamplight; to the sitting

room; never finish my book...rather let me walk straight on to this great figure, who will, with a toss of her head, mount me on her streamers and let me blow to nothingness with the rest.' In this way it is analogous to the novel as a whole, but its conclusion is ambiguous: it seems to prophesy another world war, with the women knitting reminiscent of the fates, and the men digging (trenches) in the garden, 'as if some August fate, known to them, awaited without fear, were about to sweep them into complete annihilation.' Crucially, in its ambiguous, 'But to whom does the solitary traveller make reply?' the verdict has not been passed yet: it is up to the people to decide their own fates, to learn from the lessons of the War. If they do not, they are indeed engineering their own annihilation. In Mrs Dalloway, Woolf portrays life on a personal level as a battle for independence against the oppressive force of time, which devours life constantly and methodically, and for control over one's life. This is represented throughout the novel by Woolf's use of water imagery, such as the fountain in the scene where Clarissa rejects Peter: water is never quite under control; always there is a hint of danger, of unpredictability. It is unrelenting, and can be channelled, but not confined. Above all, it is always changing, never keeping the same form or appearance from moment to moment: such is life.