

AN INTRODUCTION TO

MRS

DALL

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An Introduction to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

By

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‘I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual.’

(From Virginia Woolf’s diary, 17 February 1922).

The life of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

Adeline Virginia Stephen was born in 1882, to Leslie Stephen and his second wife Julia. Her father was a distinguished intellectual: an author, literary critic and philosopher; the original editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and a pioneering mountaineer. Julia had been a model for photographers and Pre-Raphaelite artists, and had worked as a nurse.

Virginia had three full siblings, Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian; and four half-siblings. The family lived at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington, where the young girls received home tuition. From 1897-1902 Virginia took classes in Greek, Latin, History and German in the King’s College Department for Ladies, London. She loved to write from an early age, contributing to the family newspaper, *The Hyde Park Gate News*.

Tragedy struck when her mother passed away in 1895. Virginia experienced her first major period of mental illness, and was to suffer from mania and severe depression for the rest of her life. There was further trauma just two years later, when her half-sister, Stella, died. Her father followed in 1904, then her beloved Thoby was taken from her by typhoid fever in 1906. In addition to these devastating losses, Virginia claimed that she was sexually abused during her childhood by her half-brothers, George and Gerald, particularly the former.

After Sir Leslie Stephen's death, Virginia, Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian moved to 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury. Here Thoby organized Thursday evening meetings for the discussion of intellectual and cultural matters. This coterie became 'The Bloomsbury Group'. Virginia married one of the members, Leonard Woolf, in 1912, despite informing him that she did not find him physically attractive.

Leonard proved to be an attentive husband, eager to nurture her talents and to create a calm environment that would be conducive to her writing. Her first novel was *The Voyage Out* in 1915. Subsequently the Woolfs set up the Hogarth Press in Richmond, in 1917. This enabled them to print their own efforts and to commission texts that tended to be rejected by more commercially-

mindful publishers: for example, they published Katherine Mansfield and T.S. Eliot. Virginia's other novels were: *Night and Day* (1919), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), *The Years* (1937), and *Between the Acts* (1941).

Woolf was an innovative writer. Throughout her career she experimented with theme and form, producing thoughtful essays about the nature of prose fiction and the challenges it posed. Her critical works include: 'Modern Fiction' (1919); her famous plea in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) for women to have independence and privacy to write, and *Three Guineas* (1938) which was broadly on the theme of women's place in the world and their opportunities for education.

There were five major bouts of debilitating physical illness and nervous breakdowns, and Woolf repeatedly attempted suicide. She killed herself in 1941, leaving notes in which she expressed her feelings of guilt about spoiling Leonard's life.

Losing the plot

Mrs Dalloway is set in London, mainly in the affluent neighbourhood of Westminster. The action takes place on a single

day, Wednesday, 13 June 1923. Clarissa Dalloway is preparing to host a party, and the reader shares her sense of anticipation; but a visit from an old flame, Peter Walsh, disturbs them both. The perspective changes to a war veteran, Septimus Warren Smith, who has serious mental health issues and is due for an appointment with an eminent psychiatrist. At the end of the novel many of the characters assemble at Clarissa's party. Hearing that Septimus has killed himself, she retreats to reflect upon his actions.

Woolf wanted to avoid a neat, linear plot. On 15 October 1923 she described a 'tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments as I have need of it'. The text is divided into parts, rather than chapters. She employs free indirect discourse, a technique that describes the interior memories, thoughts and feelings of characters whilst using third-person singular pronouns. The method of relaying these thoughts is known as 'stream of consciousness'. Her narrative approach has been described as cinematic, because Woolf utilizes techniques such as close-ups, flashbacks and montage.

In the 1920s people were flocking to the cinema houses. Woolf wrote an essay on 'The Cinema' (1926), in which she declared that this medium 'has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression'. She was also

influenced by the art of the Post-Impressionists, and perhaps by Cubist painters who tried to present objects from different perspectives. For example the aeroplane functions as a literary device in *Mrs Dalloway*, enabling us to witness the reactions of a range of characters. Skywriting (in which smoke is used to write words in the sky) was a new phenomenon, first used in London in August 1922.

As the novel conveys, people were trying to come to terms with the aftermath of World War I. Many were feeling disillusioned with the class system. There was a sense that the old values and certainties were hollow. ‘This late age of the world’s experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing.’

The genesis and evolution of Mrs Dalloway

In a diary entry of February 1922 Woolf stated: ‘I have made up my mind that I’m not going to be popular, & so genuinely that I look upon disregard or abuse as part of my bargain. I’m to write what I like; & they’re to say what they like.’ Six months later she

commented: ‘There’s no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice; & that interests me so that I feel I can go ahead without praise.’ She drafted her new novel in notebooks, which are now held at the British Library, and referred to it many times in her journals. This has enabled readers to share her evolving thought processes.

The character Clarissa Dalloway had actually featured in *The Voyage Out* (1915). Later, in 1923, a short story, ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’, was published in *The Dial*. Woolf had originally meant it to be the opening chapter of a novel, provisionally entitled *At Home* or *The Party*. She had intended to contrast a society hostess with the Prime Minister, then gradually veered away from that idea.

Initially Woolf planned a series of separate vignettes, but gradually she was drawn to the concept of a fusion, a web, an organism. Her diary entry for 14 October 1922 explains this: ‘Mrs Dalloway has branched into a book; & I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide: the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side – something like that. Septimus Smith? Is that a good name?’

In 1923 the novel bore the working title *The Hours*: indeed in the final version Big Ben chimes throughout, signalling the passing of time and highlighting its ephemerality. The characters are all in its

grip. On 30 August she noted in her diary: 'I should say a good deal about The Hours, & my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour; depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, and each comes to daylight at the present moment.' As the work progressed, two characters who became 'connected' were Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith.

Clarissa and Septimus: 'Double' trouble

The depiction of Clarissa Dalloway was inspired by Kitty Maxse (née Lushington), who had been a frequent visitor to the Stephen household after Stella's death in 1897. When Kitty was unenthusiastic about the Bloomsbury set, the friendship lapsed. In 1920 Woolf wrote a piece entitled 'Am I a Snob?', in which she described Kitty in these words: '...a lady of the most delicate charm, of the most ethereal grace so that the great, whom she introduced, were sprayed and disinfected and robbed of their grossness'. In truth, Woolf found her 'tinselly'; but two years later Kitty died at the age of fifty-five, in a suspected suicide, and Virginia was saddened.

The novel's eponymous title is significant, because Mrs Dalloway is defined by her marriage: as an appendage to Richard, rather than a person in her own right. Now in her fifties, Clarissa is mindful of her mortality, 'feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless', and is concerned that her life-style has been superficial. She is conscious of the essential loneliness of existence: 'There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room.'

When Woolf first imagined Septimus she envisaged a madman who believed that he was Christ, and who planned to assassinate the Prime Minister. As the character developed, he became increasingly associated in her mind with the War. His behaviour suggests that he is suffering from deferred war neurosis; yet Dr Holmes is dismissive about his 'headaches, sleeplessness, fears, dreams'. He urges Septimus to pull himself together, advocating that he should 'notice real things, go to a music hall, play cricket'. A Harley Street nerve specialist, Sir William Bradshaw, wants to separate him from his long-suffering wife Rezia.

In a literary work, one character may mirror another or, alternatively, contrast with them. Septimus functions in *Mrs Dalloway* as Clarissa's 'double': another 'version' of her. There are a number of differences between them. Obviously he is male and she is female. He is much younger than Clarissa, and they hail from

different classes: Septimus has had to work for a living, and has fought in the war; whereas Clarissa has led a life of upper-class comfort. Whilst she still finds meaning in traditional symbols of English society, Septimus considers them meaningless. Her demeanour is calm, contrasting with his inability to cope. At the same time, they share characteristics.

There are some physical similarities, conveyed by bird imagery. They have supportive partners. Woolf uses memorable motifs to forge links between Clarissa and Septimus: ideas connected with 'heat' permeate the novel; so do references to flowers and trees, fruition, blossoming and harvest. The text is suffused with water imagery. Instinctively they dread zealots like Sir William Bradshaw and Miss Doris Kilman. They love Shakespeare, and a quote from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is cited repeatedly: 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages.' The lines are from a funeral song, celebrating death as a comfort and relief after life's troubles.

Woolf's initial intention was to end her novel with the heroine's death, but she changed her mind. Septimus would die, instead of Clarissa. The news of his suicide stuns Mrs Dalloway: in a moment of epiphany, she feels genuine empathy. Although Dr Holmes condemns the act as cowardice, she responds positively:

‘Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate...’.
‘She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it.’ Clarissa elects to survive and endure, and returns to her guests.

The ‘rest cure’, Virginia Woolf and Septimus Smith

In 1904 Leslie Stephen’s friend Dr George Savage, who specialized in mental disorders, recommended that Virginia should undergo a treatment known as the ‘rest cure’. This had been devised by an American neurologist, Dr Silas Weir Mitchell. It was mainly prescribed for female patients, and involved a stringent regime that was designed to make them dependent upon their doctors. For six weeks they were isolated and denied the opportunity to stretch themselves creatively or intellectually.

Mitchell permitted only ‘passive exercise’ (via massage and the use of electricity), and imposed a programme of ‘excessive feeding’ to promote weight gain and lethargy. He maintained that a physician should ‘seize the proper occasions to direct the thoughts of his patients to the lapse from duty to others, and to the selfishness which a life of invalidism is apt to bring about’. Down through the

years Woolf was advised to follow the rest cure by at least twelve medical practitioners. Towards the end of her life she had a female doctor, Octavia Wilberforce, and specifically asked her not to arrange another rest cure. When she became aware that it was proposed again, she drowned herself in the River Ouse.

The rest cure was also prescribed during World War I for servicemen who had breakdowns. Perplexed military leaders were concerned that soldiers were behaving in a cowardly way. It was thought that they had experienced trauma because of their proximity to exploding shells ('shell shock'), and they were treated with a range of therapies, including electric faradization and Mitchell's rest cure. A more enlightened approach involved advanced Freudian ideas of psychoanalysis, as practised by Dr W.H.R. Rivers at Craiglockhart, a military hospital near Edinburgh. He looked after Siegfried Sassoon, who was admitted after his highly controversial 'Declaration against the War' was read out in the House of Commons. The poet visited Woolf in 1924, and it is thought that Septimus Smith may well owe something to Sassoon - including his alliterative name.

Woolf also drew on her own experiences of mental breakdown. Her biographer Hermione Lee has written: 'Her illness is attributable to genetic, environmental and biological factors. It was periodic, and

recurrent.’ Lee noted Woolf’s ‘persistent urgent tussle between life and death, her vision of her own existence as a battle-ground between these two forces’.

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