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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

Mrs. Dalloway: Themes and Stream of Consciousness

Jyoti Dahiya

Maharishi Dayanand University
Rohtak-124001,
Haryana

Mrs. Dalloway is the story of Clarissa Dalloway getting ready for her party. She goes to different stores throughout the day to get things that she will need for her party that night. After she returns from shopping, one of her ex-lovers, Peter Walsh, comes by her house unexpectedly. Mrs. Dalloway is now a part of an upper class family and is married to a man named Richard and they have a daughter together named Elizabeth. Peter is still very much obsessed with Mrs. Dalloway after she denied his marriage proposal. Mrs. Dalloway is a complex piece of art, thus it allows a number of interpretations. The novel depicts the subjective experiences and memories of its central characters over a single day in post-World War 1 London. Divided into parts, rather than chapters, the novel's structure highlights the finely interwoven texture of the characters' thoughts. The novel gain a measure of commercial and critical success.

Introduction :-

The story of Mrs. Dalloway was written by Virginia Woolf in 1925, and closely relates to her own life. Woolf was born on January 25, 1882 into an upper-class family. At the age of 13, Woolf's mother died, which was the beginning of her bouts with mental illness. Two short years later, Woolf's older sister and primary care giver Stella also died. After her death Virginia Woolf began suffering from more severe depression and manic episodes that would stay with her intermittently for the rest of her life. In Mrs. Dalloway, the narration and point of view changes from one character to the next often. This was not just Virginia Woolf's writing style, but rather a technique she used to emphasize the importance of certain characters. Virginia Woolf's motive in writing this novel wasn't just to present to us the ins and outs of high-society housewife, or to explore homosexuality or feminism, but to take the reader on a psychological whirlwind journey that takes postmodernism and realism to a new level which hadn't been portrayed in Victorian novels.

The story starts off in the perspective of Clarissa Dalloway. Immediately the narration becomes what she is thinking and what she observes, like when she opens her French window and "*feels the still air*". The narration especially the fact that it jumps from one thought to the next seems much more realistic because it is told how a person would actually think, which we refers to as "stream of consciousness". We can tell Clarissa will be the main character she is the narrator and thoughts that are conveyed are her thoughts. Occasionally the narration is taken to the perspective of a different character, but for the main part, Clarissa narrates. Chapter One

concentrates on the shuttle of the clock time and the psychological time, which forms a “*double narrative*” by recording both the characters’ external and internal activities. This special arrangement of time enhances and enriches the structure and patterns of the stream of consciousness.

Another important character who comes up in the story is Peter Walsh. The first mention of him is when Mrs. Dalloway is standing at the open window and thinks of him. Later on, in the story, we find out that Peter once loved Mrs. Dalloway. Hugh Whitbred is the next character that is introduced. He and Mrs. Dalloway have known each other since childhood. Through a thought we are introduced to Richard Dalloway, Clarissa’s husband. These three people; Peter, Hugh, and Richard, are the lover’s of Clarrisa Dalloway.

While in the flower shop, an explosion in the streets caught the attention of a mass of people. In the car were people of unknown identities. The people of the town who watched as the car drove by thought that it would be people of royalty. In reality, inside were the shell shocked war veteran, Septimus Warren Smith, and his Italian wife, Lucrezia Smith. For a whole the point of view switches to that of Septimus, as he watches an airplane spell letters into the sky. Mrs. Woolf herself wrote in her diary: “*I adumbrate the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side—something like that.*” (Oct 14, 1922)

Virginia Woolf helped to pioneer the writing style known as stream of consciousness, and this technique is prevalent in the wondering sentences of Mrs. Dalloway. Stream of consciousness is characterized by the thoughts of the main character and the dialogue taking place weaving seamlessly together to give the narrative a rambling, dream-like quality. Woolf implements several techniques in order to achieve this goal, including long, adjective-laden sentences. Woolf use of dialogue also contribute the stream of consciousness effect: the actual spoken dialogue and what the various characters are thinking and written intentionally similar, differentiated only by the presence of quotation marks. Also, there are very frequent shifts of points of view between the characters, giving readers insight into what each character is thinking. Together, these elements blur together what is actually happening and what is happening in the minds of the characters, creating a more visceral and realistic mood of the novel.

There are several parallels between Woolf and Dalloway in regards to sexuality and female independence. Woolf is known to have had an affair with fellow authoress Vita Sachville-West, making her a target for the rampant homophobia and biphobia at the time. Similarly, Dalloway remarks that the best time of her life was spent with Sally Seton, and even several years later, seems bemused over the intensity of her feelings for Sally. In addition, while Dalloway is not actively involved in the suffrage movement as Woolf was, Dalloway expresses her desire to accomplish things for herself, such as buying the flowers and mending her dresses, enforcing the feminist concept of female autonomy.

Mr. Albert has said that Mrs. Woolf's "*keen mind and magnificent artistic sense makes her able to weld the parts into a unified artistic whole of subtle portraiture. Her studies of moods and impulses are handled with the almost scientific precision and detachment, with great lyrical and poetic gift.*"

The parallels between mental illness as it is presented in the book and Virginia Woolf's own disease are undeniably present. Woolf did not hesitate to publicly criticize the treatment of mental illnesses in post-war London. In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf uses Septimus' character to admonish medical professionals who dismissed or ignored the speaking the outcries of mentally ill and shell shocked patients. This was Woolf's way of publicly speaking about the treatment of the mentally ill in London during this time. The similarities between Septimus' character and Virginia Woolf herself are represented when Woolf describes Septimus' hallucinations of birds, which is a hallucination she was known to have as well. The most obvious similarity between Virginia Woolf and Septimus, however, is they ended their own lives due to the mental illness they shared.

Joan Bennett has pointed out : "*within the book there is a poetic pattern, probing to that deeper level at which the mind apprehends timeless values, as well as the prose pattern wherein the reader is given a picture of the modern world with its destructive forces of class struggle, economic insecurity and war.*" On the poetic plane the theme of novel is not the individual story of Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway or Septimus but human life itself, "*its tension between misery and happiness and its inevitable consummation in death.*" From this point of view the fabric of the novel spins between the idea of these Shakespearean lines :-

"Fear no more the heat of the sun

Nor the furious winter's rages....."

And

"If it were now to die

Twere now to be most happy."

Throughout Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa, Septimus, Peter, and others struggle to find outlets for communication as well as adequate privacy, and the balance between the two is difficult for all to attain. Clarissa in particular struggles to open the pathway for communication and throws parties in an attempt to draw people together. At the same time, she feels shrouded within her own reflective soul and thinks the ultimate human mystery is how she can exist in one room while the old woman in the house across of hers exists in another, even as Clarissa celebrates the old woman's independence, she knows it comes with an inevitable loneliness. Peter tries to explain the contradictory human impulses toward privacy and communication by comparing the soul to a fish that swims along in murky water, then rises quickly to the surface to frolic on the

waves. The war has changed people's ideas of what English society should be, and understanding is difficult between those who support traditional English society and those who hope for continued change. Meaningful connections in this disjointed postwar world are not easy to make, no matter what efforts the characters put forth. Ultimately, Clarissa sees Septimus's death as a desperate, but legitimate, act of communication.

Thoughts of death lurk constantly beneath the surface of everyday life in Mrs. Dalloway, especially for Clarissa, Septimus, and Peter, and this awareness makes even mundane events and interaction meaningful, sometimes even threatening. At the very start of the day, when she goes out to buy flowers for her party, Clarissa remembers a moment in her youth when she suspected a terrible event would occur. Death is very naturally in her thoughts, and the line from *CYMBELINE*, along with Septimus's suicidal embrace of death, ultimately helps her to be at peace with her own mortality. Peter Walsh, so anonymous young woman through London to forget about it. Septimus faces death most directly. Though he fears it, he finally chooses it over what seems to him a direr alternative—living another day.

Oppression is a constant threat for Clarissa and Septimus in Mrs. Dalloway, and Septimus dies in order to escape what he perceives to be an oppressive social pressure to conform. It comes in many guises, including religion, science, or social convention. Miss Kilman and Sir William Bradshaw are two of the major oppression of the novel : Miss Kilman dreams of feeling Clarissa in the name of religion, and Sir William would be like to subdue all those who challenge his conception of the world. Both wish to convert the world to their belief systems in order to gain power and dominate others, and their rigidity oppresses all who come into contact with them. More subtle oppressors, even those who do not intended to, do harm by supporting the repressive English social system.

On the poetic surface the theme of the novel is love and death and the diminishing beauty of the world. Like poetic drama novelist here suggests more than what is described and asserted. The conflict between life and death, love and hope, misery and beauty, hope and despair, individual freedom and social contact etc. are suggested through imagery, symbol and rhythm. Mrs. Virginia Woolf's reporting of the stream of consciousness of her character is different from the traditional novel.

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