

“Mrs. Dalloway”: Symbol of Contrast between Virginia Woolf and Society

Lobar B. Bozorova

Teacher

Gulistan State University

Gulistan, Syrdarya Region

Uzbekistan

Abstract

Woolf said about writing Mrs Dalloway that she wanted to ‘criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense’. Woolf forms a social and political critique of her time through the course of an average day in the life of high society woman, Clarissa Dalloway. She uses her characters to make a social point, through the ways in which they interact with others in her narrative. The structure of the novel itself, is Woolf’s strongest tool. Her modernist stream of consciousness style allows the reader a deeper look into her characters and simultaneously defamiliarizes the reader to every day assumptions. This technique gives Woolf the space to reintroduce the readers of the time to their own society, outside the context of their biases. Originally titled, ‘The Hours’, Woolf’s portrayal of time as an overarching driving force in the novel is compared with the imposing forces in society.

Keywords: Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf, symbol, class system, internal sentiment, rigid society

1.0. Introduction

Each character has a role in enforcing or questioning the class system. Clarissa is the main symbol of contrast between internal sentiment and socially enforcing the rigid class system. She ‘invites such figures as Sir Harry and Jim Hutton to her parties for their social value’ and yet there is ‘something solitary and impersonal [that] coexists with her social self’ (Ronchetti, 2004). Clarissa’s social role, defined by the social identifier of her class, is concerned with her status and appearing with the right people. In contrast, her innermost thoughts are individualistic and unconcerned with the perceptions of others. Blanchard (1972) expresses that Peter, Septimus, and Clarissa ‘all have internalised societies judgements enough to carry within themselves a contradiction between socialized impulses and genuine impulses’. Zwerdling (1977) conveys the vacillation between a fixed social order and one beginning to change through his interpretation of Clarissa’s duality which he describes as ‘essentially a laminated personality made up of distinct layers... she has both a conformist and a rebellious side, a public and a private self’. The ultimate expression of a character symbolising society is Septimus’ suicide. His feeling that in order to save himself he must destroy himself can be seen as a parallel to what Woolf thinks needs to happen - in order for society to be healed, its foundations must be destroyed.

2.0. Comparative Analysis

Unlike the drastic example set by Septimus, the political situation of the time was changing while the social structure remained as it was. The political characters scattered throughout the novel act as representatives of traditional values, Liberalism, and Conservatism. Within the political context of the rise of the Labour Party, as the newly solid opposition, Zwerdling notes ‘that the ruling class under examination in the novel are living on borrowed time’. Zwerdling is clear that ‘the Empire was crumbling’ and closer to home there was a ‘putative threat to the governing class’. Virginia Woolf is seemingly contradictory in this matter, by having the class system seem solid and in contrast displaying the political unrest. She exposes an internal and external perspectives of the ruling class.

Despite the political shift, the rigidity of class structures is demonstrated through the structure of the novel and Woolf’s use of given circumstances. Blanchard (1972) makes the point that by restricting the novel spatially and temporally (the map of London and use of Big Ben), Woolf sets up a ‘confining atmosphere in the novel’. She goes on to argue ‘relations between persons... depend upon everyone being kept in their place’. The immediate comparison between the concrete temporal and spatial constraints, and the social restraints emphasise her frustration at society’s lack of evolution in relation to class structure.

The character of Lady Bruton represents a range of contradictions and double standards in relation to expectations and understanding of gender. On the one hand, she’s very vocal about how women “ought” to behave and on the other, she is ‘anything but an embodiment of feminine charm’. Even her name, Millicent Bruton, ‘seems to suggest aggressively masculine qualities of militancy and brutality’ (Bowlby, 2011). Lady Bruton has a strong notion of the duty of women and yet the liberty to interact with others through her seemingly masculine traits. In contrast, by taking on the parental

duties of her husband in addition to her own, Clarissa takes on the duties of both sexes and yet has to interact with society through being a woman. Even the title, Mrs Dalloway, positions her primary role as a wife.

Another interesting juxtaposing force in Mrs Dalloway is Woolf's use of technology. Her pervasive technological references and link to modern society have been interpreted, for the most part, in two ways by critics: as a representation of alienation in the context of the fast paced post war world, and as a part of moments in which people from all walks of life engage in collective experience. Clarissa, while watching taxi cabs, has a sense of being 'out to sea and alone' whereas in an interaction between Peter and his car, he is able to 'deconstruct the social constrictions and failures that his public status connotes in London society and, more specifically to Clarissa'. These conflicts represent Woolf's view towards post war society. The consciousness of obscurity and the inability to enact change is felt alongside empowerment and societal evolution.

Woolf's manipulates time. She firstly contrasts the hours of the day to the characters' experiences of time, then the present day to the characters flashbacks, and finally through characters' experience of the changes of London. Banfield (2003) pushes the contradicting notions of time in Mrs Dalloway further, considering Woolf's impressionist portrayal of moment in time, single day, real time of the novel in contrast to the mental relationship with time. While Banfield is concerned with how the 'ceaseless ticking of the minutes and striking of the hours renders the briefness of life' Woolf's manipulation of time serves a social purpose. Woolf uses the limitation of time, as suggested above, to add to the sense of constraint and by contrasting "real time" with "mind time" suggests external imposition of a construct, similar to the social construct of classism. Woolf's use of Big Ben is crucial to the novel. While often analysed by critics as a symbol of the relentless passage of time and inevitability of death, Big Ben equally serves a social purpose in the novel, standing as the English monument of unchanging conservatism.

Woolf uses the characters' experiences with time to examine what has and hasn't changed in society. Peter, having returned to London after five years, finds that very little has changed. He still relates to society, knows central London, and feels strongly about Clarissa. And yet, society has unrefutably changed. Technology has advanced, the war has come and gone, Clarissa is married. Woolf uses this contradiction to highlight the consistency of upper middle class London society.

Woolf, who was a pacifist, uses the contrast of characters' casual but melancholic contemplation of lives lost to the passionate sense of fulfilled duty to England to highlight the waste of the war and irrational method of WWI remembrance in the period. Peter, when watching, and admiring, boys in uniform notes their 'expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England'. Despite Peter's inability to relate to the sentiment he feels compelled to respect it. The default status of respect demonstrates the insidious portrayal of nationalism in the novel. The asyndetic listing in this quote mimics the rhythm of the marching, revealing how drummed in the message of love for one's country is. The fact that 'so many of the descriptions of day-to-day life in the novel are couched in military language' (Bradshaw, 2016) creates a sense of the immediate recollection of the war. The image of tragic patriotism is also seen in the character of Septimus enlisted 'to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress'.

Ronchetti (2004) suggests the novel could be considered 'Erfahrungsroman, or novel of experience, in which adults assess their lives, the choices they have made, and the impact of events that have befallen them.' This is reflected in the complex relationships which mirror the complexity of society. Zwerdling outlines the inherent contradictions in Clarissa's feeling for Miss Kilman 'She hated her: she loved her'. The contradictory nature in her attitude towards Miss Kilman is mimetic of her contradictory feelings towards society. Bowlby outlines that, 'Clarissa, Richard, Peter, Sally and Hugh – had and have their loves; and for some of them those possibilities 'once' that were not fulfilled, or not settled into a marital future, are still active now as a part of their day-to-day experience.' (Bowlby, 2011). This again represents Woolf's strained feelings towards society. The 'most exquisite moment in [Clarissa's] whole life' is when Sally kisses her. The reader is presented with Clarissa's most blissful moment in a forbidden romance, again emphasising the misery of societal restrictions and code.

3.0. Conclusion

Woolf argues her point in a compelling way that would resonate with readers of the time and doesn't turn the novel into a piece of propaganda. Under the simple pretence of showing things "how they are" she is able to insert her social/political views without detracting from the entertainment of the piece. However, were it published today, it would be misconstrued. Schiff (2004), speculates that Mrs Dalloway has been often reworked in part because the novel is 'concerned with the ambiguity of sexual identity and desire, a subject that has even greater currency within a contemporary world.' Similarly, to sexuality, mental health, the role of women, classism, the interaction between society and politics, pacifism, and most of the points raised in Mrs Dalloway are still, and increasingly, relevant, today. That has resulted in retrospective obfuscation the novel and would happen more so today. All in all, the text, now and in its original context, offers an extensive and effective social critique of post WWI London upper class society.

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