

Connecting the caves

Mrs Dalloway

Stephanie Forward
analyses doubleness
in Virginia Woolf's
Mrs Dalloway

Rupert Graves as Septimus
Warren Smith and Amelia
Bullmore as Rezia in *Mrs
Dalloway* (1997)

On 30 August 1923, Virginia Woolf wrote 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.

Two characters who became 'connected' were Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, and the novel was retitled *Mrs Dalloway*.

Woolf constructs her novel within the period of a single day: Wednesday, 13 June 1923. Clarissa is to host a party, and there is a sense of anticipation as preparations are made. For the introverted war veteran Septimus, the day proves momentous

in a very different way, culminating in his suicide. Despite their differences in sex, age and class, their narratives are juxtaposed meaningfully.

Double vision

Woolf's notes tracking the crafting of *Mrs Dalloway* have enabled readers to share her thought processes as the novel evolved. Initial plans for a series of completely separate vignettes were

AQA (A) Literature: 'World War One literature'

OCR Literature: 'Poetry and prose 1800–1945'

WJEC: 'Prose study'; *Jacob's Room*

shelved, as she focused instead on the idea of a fusion, a web, an organism. Her diary entry for 14 October 1922 explains:

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 a literary work, one character sometimes echoes, mirrors or contrasts with another. Woolf decided that Septimus would function as Clarissa's double, or counterpart: an alternative

urging him to pull himself together and get out and about. He recommends bromide and porridge, cricket and the music hall.

Despite these differences in their circumstances, there are a number of similarities between Clarissa and Septimus. Scrope Purvis observes that Clarissa has 'a touch of the bird about her, of the jay'. She regards herself as having 'a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's', and the first description of Septimus notes that he is 'beak-nosed'. Both characters have supportive partners. Both dread people who crave authority: men like the Harley Street specialist Sir William Bradshaw, whose goddesses are Proportion and Conversion; and religious zealots like Miss Doris Kilman, who has 'become one of those spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants'.

A matter of life and death

Memorable motifs and skilful use of imagery forge links between Clarissa and Septimus. For example, intimations of death abound. Early in the day, Clarissa recalls a time in her youth when she had a sensation that something dreadful would happen. In Hatchards' shop window she sees a book spread open at the words: 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages.' The quotation from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is cited repeatedly as the day proceeds. The lines are from a funeral song, celebrating death as a comfort and relief after life's troubles. The words occur to Clarissa again when she is told that Richard is lunching with Lady Bruton, and that she is not included

in the invitation, and then recur when she sews her torn dress.

The *Cymbeline* quotation is an example of prolepsis: the foreshadowing of an event. Later, when Septimus is in the sitting room, watching Rezia making a hat, he has a moment when his fears abate: 'Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more'. It is the sudden arrival of the dreaded Dr Holmes that triggers his leap to death.

Ideas connected with 'heat' similarly permeate the novel. Septimus feels horror-stricken after the explosion of noise from the car passing opposite the florist: 'The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames.' Rezia recalls an incident at home when he wanted her to hold his hand and 'prevent him from falling down, down...into the flames!'

The language of flowers

The 'heat o' the sun' has sexual connotations, evoking images of fruition, blossoming and harvest. Flowers feature prominently in this book, from the very first sentence: 'Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.' We glean information about the characters by observing how they respond to flowers. In Regent's Park Septimus thinks that red flowers are growing through his flesh. His thoughts flit to 'the thick red roses' on his bedroom wall. When Clarissa feels 'suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless', she is, nonetheless, conscious that the day outside is 'flowering' and that the morning is 'soft with the glow of rose petals for some'. One of her vivid memories of Sally Seton is her boldness



Vanessa Redgrave as Mrs Dalloway

'version' of her. Clarissa would see the truth; Septimus would see 'the insane truth'. Momentum would grow as Clarissa prepared for the party and as Septimus became increasingly disturbed.

The text conveys the subjective experiences and memories of its central characters, and Woolf uses the technique of free indirect discourse to relay their inner thoughts about themselves and their perspectives on other people. There is a sense of Clarissa and Septimus being at turning points in their lives. Woolf's initial intention was to end her novel with the heroine's death, but this was another aspect of the book that underwent a major change: Septimus would die, instead of Clarissa. Although Clarissa and Septimus never actually meet each other, Woolf digs tunnels between their caves, linking their stories.

Differences and similarities

The title of the novel is significant, because it suggests that Clarissa is someone who is defined by her marriage: a kind of appendage, rather than a person in her own right. As she walks in London, she experiences a strange feeling of invisibility: 'this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs Richard Dalloway' (p. 8). At times she has an acute awareness that her lifestyle has been superficial. Now in her fifties, she is conscious of her mortality.

The behaviour of Septimus, meanwhile, suggests that he is suffering from deferred war neurosis. Dr Holmes is dismissive about his physical, emotional and psychological problems,

in cutting the heads off flowers, then putting them into bowls of water: an act regarded by Aunt Helena as 'wicked'. The 'most exquisite moment' of Clarissa's life had occurred when Sally picked a flower then kissed her on the lips.

Clarissa and Septimus share a reverence for trees. Clarissa believes that she remains 'part...of the trees at home', and the soul is a 'leaf-encumbered forest'. Septimus thinks of leaves and trees as being alive, 'the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body' — therefore, 'Men must not cut down trees'. Returning home after purchasing her flowers, Clarissa feels 'blessed and purified': 'moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness'. In Regent's Park Septimus believes that the trees are talking to him: 'The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first, that trees are alive; next, there is no crime; next, love, universal love...'

All at sea

Water imagery also suffuses the text. In the water imagery and the heat imagery there is ambiguity, as positive and negative ideas can be evoked. The sea has different 'moods': at times it is associated with joyful, beautiful or peaceful moments; at others, it has a threatening connotation. One person may float along competently and happily; another may sink. In the opening sequence the morning is 'fresh as if issued to children on a beach', and Clarissa thinks: 'What a lark! What a plunge!' She recalls mornings long ago at Bourton, when the morning air was 'like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave'.

In Piccadilly, Clarissa feels young and old at the same time:

She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone.

At the florist the soothing beauty and fragrance of the flowers flows over her like a wave. Fear of 'the dwindling of life' is described as:

an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break, but only gently split their surface, roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn over the weeds with pearl.

As Clarissa mends her dress, in readiness for the party, a quiet calm descends:

So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall...
Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall.

Later, at the party, Peter Walsh watches Clarissa escorting the prime minister. She wears 'a silver-green mermaid's dress':

Lolloping on the waves and braiding her tresses she seemed, having that gift still; to be; to exist...But age had brushed her; even as a mermaid might behold in her glass the setting sun on some very clear evening over the waves.

A tussle between life and death

Septimus, in Regent's Park, thinks of himself as being high up on a rock, 'like a drowned sailor'. Heat and water imagery are

Online archive



Relevant articles in past issues of THE ENGLISH REVIEW are listed below. Ask your teacher if your school subscribes to TheEnglishReviewOnline Archive.

- Courtney, J. (2012) 'Being Clarissa', Vol. 22. No. 3
Day, S. (2000) 'Mrs Dalloway and the context of critical reception', Vol. 11, No. 2
Forward, S. (2011) 'Kill or cure: medical remedies in literature', Vol. 22, No. 2
Schröder, L. K. (1996) 'The politics of Englishness in Mrs Dalloway', Vol. 6, No. 3

interwoven here: just as a sleeper 'feels himself drawing to the shores of life', Septimus is conscious of 'the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, something tremendous about to happen'. The simple beauty of ordinary things becomes 'the truth'. Dr Holmes cannot 'touch this last relic straying on the edge of the world, this outcast, who gazed back at the inhabited regions, who lay, like a drowned sailor, on the shore of the world'.

After his appointment with Sir William Bradshaw in Harley Street, Septimus goes home and lies on his sofa. Imagery of water, flowers and trees is mixed again, and the words of Shakespeare come to him: 'Fear no more'. There is a brief respite, in which he seems more like the old Septimus: 'Miracles, revelations, agonies, loneliness, falling through the sea, down, down into the flames, all were burnt out...'. Ultimately, however, Septimus finds it impossible to maintain 'a perfectly upright and stoical bearing'. He makes an active choice to kill himself, because he cannot endure the prospect of living through another day.

The news of Septimus Smith's death stuns Clarissa. When she ponders about his suicide, she reflects that death is actually a defiant attempt to communicate. In a moment of epiphany, Clarissa feels genuine empathy. Like Septimus, she understands what it means to experience terror: 'there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear'. Then, parting the curtains and watching the old lady in the room opposite, Clarissa recalls the words: 'Fear no more the heat of the sun', and does not feel pity for Septimus. On the contrary, 'She felt somehow very like him — the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it.' Ultimately, Clarissa is reconciled to the thought of her mortality.

Hermione Lee has noted Woolf's 'persistent urgent tussle between life and death, her vision of her own existence as a battle-ground between these two forces' (Lee, p. 474). Woolf's comment in her diary on 17 February 1922 illuminates our reading of *Mrs Dalloway*: 'I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual.'

References and further reading



- Lee, H. (1997) *Virginia Woolf*, Vintage.
Showalter, E. (1994) 'Mrs Dalloway' in J. Briggs (ed.) *Virginia Woolf: Introductions to the Major Works*, Virago Press.
Woolf, V. (1992) *Mrs Dalloway*, Vintage.

Stephanie Forward is an associate lecturer with the Open University.