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Examining the Depiction of Loneliness in Virginia Woolf's, 'Mrs Dalloway'

SWEEKRUTHI PRABHAKAR¹

ABSTRACT

This research paper looks into the world of an upper-class woman from the 1920s, Mrs Dalloway, based on the book by Virginia Woolf. A single day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway reveals the underlying themes of loneliness, fear of death, communication and more. This paper deals especially with the theme of loneliness and how it is portrayed in the main characters. The story of Mrs Dalloway revolves around Clarissa Dalloway and her past as well as the story of Septimus Warren Smith. Septimus is a war veteran, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). His struggle with his mental disorder and how it affects his family is crucial to the story. The essence of the novel is about how connected these two individuals are having never met one another. Mrs Dalloway's psyche is on full display every time she has a flashback into her past. Her memories reveal a lot about her lifestyle and personality. Even though the story revolves around the happenings of a solitary day, through time jumps and different perspectives, more of the narrative is revealed. This paper thoroughly investigates the minds of these characters and how they interact. The constant but subtle notion of loneliness within these characters is brought to light in this research paper.

Keywords: Loneliness, Memories, War

I. ABOUT AUTHOR

Adeline Virginia Stephen was born on January 25, 1882, in a privileged English household. Taking up the pen name Virginia Woolf she became an author. Woolf's parents were quite modern thinkers. As a young girl, Mrs Woolf took up writing and published her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, in 1915.

She married Leonard Woolf and stayed married from 1912-1941, in the midst of which she had a ten-year-long side affair. This affair was with a woman named Vita Sackville-West.

In her personal life, she suffered from melancholy, now known as depression. There were several times she was institutionalised. It was well known that Woolf had tried to kill herself at least twice. Her illness could have been bipolar disorder, but sadly there was no effective

¹ Author is a student at Symbiosis Law School, Hyderabad, India.

intervention during her lifetime. At the age of 59, in 1941, Woolf died. She suicides by drowning herself in the River Ouse at Lewes.

II. ABOUT NOVEL

The book *Mrs Dalloway* was written in 1924 and published on 14 May 1925. Woolf was widely praised and received excellent reviews for *Mrs Dalloway*, her fourth novel. The critically acclaimed story interweaves inner monologues and raises modern issues of, mental illness, lesbianism, and feminism in post-World War I England. It is a pioneering novel in stream-of-consciousness narration. Woolf invented a narrative form that imitates the workings of the brain and the minds' perception of the world. This psychological fiction story challenges ideas of how a novel could be fabricated and what language could unveil about the inner workings of the self. *Mrs Dalloway* was adapted into a 1997 film, starring Vanessa Redgrave. The novel inspired other movies including *The Hours* (2002), which is an Oscar-winning movie. Woolf reveals the soul's loneliness in almost every interaction between characters. She represents the conflict between inner dialogue, privacy and the desire to communicate.

III. INTRODUCTION TO MAIN CHARACTERS

- **Clarissa Dalloway**

The protagonist of the story. The novel revolves mainly around Clarissa's views. Her perspective is followed more closely than that of another character. Clarissa is preparing for a party she is throwing that evening. She is animated and overly cares for how she is viewed by people, but she also has low self-esteem. She is very self-reflective. She is a silent observer and often questions the true meaning of life. Clarissa often wonders whether happiness is truly attainable. She has her highs and lows. She loves and dreads life at the same time. This affects her finding a steadiness between her immense desire for privacy as well as her dire need to communicate with others. All day Clarissa is seen reflecting on her past. Especially the summer she chose by marrying her husband, Richard Dalloway, instead of her fiery suitor Peter Walsh. Even though she's seemingly satisfied with Richard she can't help but wonder whether her choice was right. She also had a friend, Sally Seton, whom she was once in love with and they even shared a kiss.

- **Peter Walsh**

He is a close friend of Clarissa's. Peter was once desperately in love with Clarissa. She had rejected Peter by denying her hand in marriage when she was eighteen. He moved to India and had not been seen in London in five years. Being highly critical of others, he is conflicted about

almost everything in his life. He has an old habit of playing with his pocketknife. He is very sensitive and he cries easily. It's quite usual for him to have romantic problems with women and is currently in love with a married woman in India named Daisy. He is seen with a bow tie, horn-rimmed glasses and was once a Socialist.

- **Septimus Warren Smith**

He was a World War I veteran who was shell shocked. He was married to Lucrezia, an Italian woman. He struggles, just like Clarissa does, to maintain both his need to communicate as well as his privacy. He seems insane at first glance but Septimus and Clarissa have similar views on English society. Septimus and Clarissa share so many similar traits. His appearance is pale, he has a terrible posture and wears an overcoat that's quite shabby. Pre-war, when he was young he dreamed of becoming a poet. Post-war, he considers humans and their nature to be evil. It seems like he believed he is guilty of the death of his fellow officer, Evans. He finds himself unable to feel the world anymore. He eventually gives up on life and to escape it he commits suicide.

(A) Research methodology

This research is being done to look intricately at the characters from the novel *Mrs Dalloway* and how Virginia Woolf, its author, so brilliantly brings out the theme of loneliness in a subtle but profound way. In order to conduct this research, the researcher will be using the qualitative method of research as it will be done by first-hand observation from the novel itself, as well as, articles and commentaries on the novel. Views of the authors of said articles and commentaries will be taken and interpreted by the researcher. This story deals with two different timelines as well as multiple perspectives which gives the reader better insight into the feelings and emotions of the characters. Love is a very important aspect of the novel which is driven mainly by the loneliness of the souls of the main characters. It is a modernist novel of the psychological fiction genre that was not explored too much in the 1920s, especially from the female perspective. The importance of this research is to bring forth emphasis on the importance of the minuscule details on the big picture or the central story.

(B) Literature review

The researcher used other qualitative methods of research other than the Novel *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. Many articles and blogs were analysed for the researcher to come to a conclusion on the depiction of loneliness in this novel.

In the journal article "Socialization in *Mrs Dalloway*" (Blanchard, 1972), there is an analysis of Virginia Woolf's writing and why she is a visionary in feminism. The article also looks at

the interaction and isolation that different characters of the novel face when they are socialising. “The theme of Mrs Dalloway” (Samuelson, 1958), another journal article, has an in-depth analysis of all the themes of the novel. But more importantly, this article compares different works of Woolf as well as analyses her real-life diary where she has written about her process of writing her novels. The article, “Modernism and Virginia Woolf’s novel Mrs Dalloway” (Simon, 2014), focuses on Virginia Woolf’s modernist take on writing with special reference to her book Mrs Dalloway. The article also looks at Woolf’s storytelling techniques as well as the content of the stories themselves. In “Difference and Continuity: The Voices of Mrs Dalloway” (Garvey., 1991), concentrates on the feminist aspect of Woolf’s writing and the way she portrays female characters and their voices. In “Narrativizing Characters in Mrs Dalloway” (Edmondson, 2012) the analysis of the characters is mainly given. This helped in understanding the mind frame of the characters. “Mrs Dalloway and the Social System” (Zwerdling, 1977) article looks into the portrayal of the social system in the novel and compares it with the real world in the 1920s. There is a study on how the characters’ actions and feelings reflect the times and classist system. The article “Mrs Dalloway Revisited” (Higdon, 1974), analyses the side characters like Doris Kilman, Lady Bruton and more. Parts of the story one might have missed on a single read is highlighted in this article. From the article “A Single Day: Isolation and Connection in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway and Christopher Isherwood’s A Single Man” (Williams, 2013) by Hannah Williams focuses, the researcher uses the analyses of the importance of Woolf’s views and decisions in writing her book Mrs Dalloway. The webpage Privacy, Loneliness, and Communication as a theme in Mrs Dalloway summarise the explicit mentions of loneliness by the characters. (Privacy, Loneliness, and Communication, 2021)

IV. ANALYSIS

Clarissa Dalloway, a woman in her 50s was preparing for a party she would host that evening. “...though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness.” (Mrs Dalloway, 1925, p. 1) Despite her sickness, we see her brushing that aside for a party that seems very important to her. Her day began with her purchasing the flowers for the party. All morning, she had thoughts of death as well as doubtful thoughts on why she chose to marry Richard Dalloway instead of her blazing former lover, Peter Walsh, all those years ago. This stays hidden as thoughts. A lack of conversation of the character's inner struggles can be seen. This is the reason that all the characters are lonely in some way or the other.

Meanwhile, the second storyline involves the war veteran, Septimus Smith, who is with his wife, a foreigner, an Italian, Lucrezia. Septimus struggles with the aftereffects of the war. He

was hearing voices and felt like life had lost its meaning. Loud noises triggered him. It would take him back in time to when he was in the war and his mate, officer Evans was killed. He could not express the intensity of his situation as PTSD, was then looked at as shell-shock, the disease of war veterans. His character feels isolated and lonely, enough for his thoughts to become dangerous. The readers see Septimus having suicidal thoughts which take over him in the latter half of the novel. At the same time Lucrezia “was very lonely, she was very unhappy!” (Mrs Dalloway, 1925, p. 72) “His wife was crying, and he felt nothing” (Mrs Dalloway, 1925, p. 73), Septimus only felt hopelessness. They loved each other and were always together, yet they were distant due to Septimus’ condition.

Clarissa returns home and remembers a special friendship she had shared in her youth with Sally Seton, a headstrong, slightly scandalous young woman. The two shared a special friendship, their bond bordered on a crush, and Clarissa recalls a kiss they shared.

Clarissa receives an unexpected visit from Peter Walsh, her former suitor. Clarissa and Peter talk to each other about the present, but their underlying thoughts are of their past and the choices they made to end up to that moment.

Peter finds himself in the park where Septimus and his wife were also rambling. Soon Peter heard the couple arguing about suicide. Peter views this as simple banter taken too far by a loving couple. But he does not realise that there was more, that Septimus was mentally unstable and Lucrezia had appointed Sir William Bradshaw, a specialist, to see Peter. This specialist assigns Septimus to be put in an asylum so he can be analysed further, not understanding the intricacy of his problems.

Richard Dalloway goes to lunch with Lady Bruton, a member of high society, which Clarissa was not invited to. This bothered her very much, and she takes it very personally, believing that she was not valid enough to be invited. During lunch, Richard feels a weight in his heart to tell his wife how much he loves her but he does not find the words as it had been a long time since he had expressed his love and gratitude for her. Even within the couple, they are lonely, isolated and lost. One can see that Clarissa is an overthinker who is excessively self-aware and is constantly living in the past as well as the present, reminiscing old lovers and preparing for a party that is so important to her, yet she realises how trivial it all is.

Clarissa’s daughter Elizabeth, to her, feels like Elizabeth is being stolen by her tutor Doris Kilman. Poor Elizabeth is caught up in this mess when she “preferred being left alone” (Mrs Dalloway, 1925, p. 110) in fact, she liked being alone in the countryside as she was so accustomed to it. Clarissa despises Doris calling her a monster for this reason and the feeling is

mutual from Doris' end. The hate between them was fuelled by class and wealth, one showing their superiority and the other expressing their inferiority only to be mocked.

Septimus and Lucrezia on the other hand were awaiting the arrival of the asylum attendants who would take Septimus away for treatment. Lucrezia feared one thing and that was "to be alone forever" (Mrs Dalloway, 1925, p. 118), this drove This is when the seemingly different stories collide. Septimus decides to escape the attendant. He attempts suicide by jumping off the balcony only to die an honourable death, that was in his control as opposed to having his life taken away while confined in an asylum.

Finally, Clarissa's party takes place with a good turnout of guests. Many of Clarissa's friends from the past were in attendance. Lady Bradshaw and Sir William arrive late to the party. They explain that one of Sir William's patients, Septimus had killed himself. This brings about a sudden clarity to Clarissa. She goes away to think and contemplate this patient's suicide. "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death." (Mrs Dalloway, 1925, p. 151) These thoughts of Clarissa makes it clear that she realises she identifies with him and understands that his act was required and right, to preserve his soul. In a way, loneliness equates to death. Surprisingly, Clarissa is left underwhelmed and disappointed that her party was a success.

V. CONCLUSION

The novel focuses on the life of a 52-year-old woman in the upper-middle-class society of the 1920s. To write with the main character such as her was rare in those days making Virginia Woolf so popular with the masses as they probably for the first time saw themselves within some of these characters. Clarissa comes off as someone going through a mid-life crisis. 'Mrs Dalloway' is a modernist novel, especially with views on sexuality and mental illness and societal pressures.

In almost every interaction among characters, Woolf portrays the soul's loneliness as she contrasts people's deep inner dialogues with their often mundane, failed attempts at communication with one another. Richard tries to say "I love you" to Clarissa but is unable to do so as he hasn't expressed his emotions towards her in a while and instead gave her flowers. Clarissa at the end of the story is understood to give up trying to fit in and seem esteemed as she connects to Septimus and the lonely, old lady across the street compared to another.

The basis for loneliness is love. With Clarissa, she is haunted by her past memories of Peter Walsh, Sally Seton, her husband Richard Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread. She is not sure

whether she has made the right choice in choosing her husband. She feels as though she has lost her identity and is now just Mrs Dalloway. Peter is also confused and lost, feeling like he doesn't belong in this part of the world or in India where he has fallen in love with a married woman. He has a very radical outlook and doesn't focus on petty things, making him feel misunderstood. Septimus is confined within his person, within his mind unable to be understood by people around him. Lucrezia feels lonely as the person who's dearest to her isn't really present mentally. This way all the characters are lonely and feel isolated. Each character is seen requiring privacy. This innate feeling brings about their interactions to be the way they are.

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