

# THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 29

**Mrs Dalloway III: Scholarly Debates**

Hello learners and welcome to the third lecture in our discussion of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the first two lectures, I briefly introduced a very important context for understanding how this novel was written and how it can be best understood and appreciated. That context was the historical event of the influenza pandemic, which ranged from 1918 to 1919. I also began by closely reading the opening sentences of the novel, which gave us a very unique perspective on what this one individual was doing, that is, Clarissa Dalloway, what she was up to on one fine morning in the month of June in the locality of Westminster in London. We began by tracing in great detail the thoughts and the activities of this character. I will continue to do that and I will spend an extraordinary amount of time on the opening pages of the novel but that is because these pages are crucial to setting the tone and giving us as readers the right tools with which to understand and appreciate the remainder of the novel.

In today's lecture, I will continue to do that but I will complicate the story we have received so far by adding a very important character, someone who contrasts and in some way compliments and also challenges what we have seen so far through the introduction and the progress of the character Clarissa. This second character is named Septimus, Septimus Smith, and before I go on and discuss the character, I want to introduce some key framing ideas.

Traditionally, *Mrs. Dalloway* has been read as a novel about a human tragedy. The tragedy that the novel seems to be most concerned with is the fate of Septimus. Septimus is a young man who has fought for England in the First World War. He has been permanently damaged through his experiences of serving on the battlefields in Europe. He has survived, that is to say he has come back without any visible disability and is situated in a so-called normal life in London. But beyond this visible or so-called normalcy hides a deeply painful and disabling sickness. This sickness is so invisible and in fact so difficult to perceive that

most medical practitioners, most physicians in the time that the novel was written even failed to see it. They failed to understand what was wrong with Septimus. Now, it has been later understood with the hindsight of later developments in psychology and the medical profession more generally that Septimus was one of several hundreds, if not thousands, if not millions, of young men who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, i.e. they had experienced certain events while serving on the battlefields of the First World War, which made them traumatized. They had been through traumatic experiences and the stress associated with those traumatic experiences continued to afflict them for the rest of their lives and so it was almost a permanent and lifelong sickness even though they appeared to be healthy or not suffering from any obvious disabilities.

Now in this novel, Septimus has a very tragic fate because by the end of the novel we learn that Septimus has taken his life. This news, the information that a young man named Septimus has taken his life, reaches Clarissa at the party that she ends up hosting. Now, we saw in the opening pages of the novel that Clarissa was preparing to host an event at her house for which she was going to buy the flowers herself. By the last page of the novel, we see that this event, which Clarissa is about to host, does actually get hosted and it is at this event, Clarissa hears the news that a young man named Septimus has taken his life. This information produces a profound psychological impact, which the novel describes for us in great detail, and in a way, this is the source of the novel's power and also its lasting influence.

So, you can see from this, factual, very bare-boned and factual summary how Septimus' character can be related to Clarissa's and most scholars of the novel so far have traditionally read the novel in one particular way. In that mode of reading, Clarissa is a foil for Septimus. That is to say, we read about Clarissa's journey, her life, her thoughts, her experiences, in order to fully understand something other than those experiences, in order to fully understand and appreciate Septimus' fate. So, Clarissa is sort of window or a lens which allows us to perceive the difficulty with which Septimus struggled. This is also a perceptual problem because it is not so much that the novel reveals what Septimus is going through, but rather it reveals how difficult it was for others to understand, to recognize, to truly relate to and sympathize with what Septimus was going through.

So, in that context, in the challenge to demonstrate for readers the invisibility of the suffering that Septimus and men like Septimus underwent, Clarissa's description of her day, of her life, of her thoughts becomes a useful tool. Now, this has been the traditional mode of reading the novel, and this is a very persuasive mode of reading the novel. It does

get at most of the power and complexity of the novel, and there is nothing incorrect or missing per se from this mode of reading the novel. However, recently, there has been some effort to come up with newer, more innovative ways of reading the novel. We will spend some time trying to understand those ways and we will adopt, in fact, a slightly different way of reading the novel. Instead of seeing Clarissa simply as a foil or as a tool or as an instrument that sheds light on something more difficult, more important and more invisible, that is to say, Septimus' fate, we will see both as frames for each other. So, in order to do that, we need to first account for some factual differences between these two characters, differences which actually connect them and differences which actually enable them to shed light on each other. So, what are some of these differences?

The first difference is that of class. Clarissa, as we've seen so far, belongs to the aristocracy. She is married to a very powerful man, that is to say Richard. They live in Westminster and we have seen many indications of the privileged, wealthy upbringing and lifestyle that Clarissa lives in the previous lecture. Compared to this, Septimus is very solidly middle class. Septimus has fought in the war, has received some sort of financial remuneration, receives some sort of government support. and is comfortable, that is to say, does not have to struggle to make ends meet, is not living from hand to mouth, is comfortable, but is nowhere near Clarissa's level of aristocracy. That is one big difference, not a plus. Another difference is that of their social words. Clarissa is very well connected to many different people. She has a very wide circle of friends, professional contacts, family and this also includes the professional network that her husband Richard, who works in the British government has.

Clarissa is what can be safely said to be a society hostess. It is precisely because of this wide network of social contacts that she is able to host this kind of a party. It gives her great pleasure, but also it exerts its own degree of pressure and it takes its own toll, as we will shortly see. Compared to this kind of a widely connected social network, Septimus is a loner. Septimus, perhaps because of the psychological impact of his experiences in the war or for some other reason, again, which we will see shortly, does not have this kind of a social network. In fact, he is chronically isolated. Another very obvious difference is that of gender. Clarissa is a woman; Septimus is a man. And another very obvious difference comes from their social and professional roles. Septimus is a veteran; Clarissa is a civilian.

So, we can see that these two individuals almost occupy two halves of the social, economic and cultural universe that England in the early 20th century comprised. So, by focusing on these two characters, in a way the novel is able to represent the experiences of a great many

individuals who may not share the names or the genders or the addresses or any other attributes of these two individuals. So, the novel becomes representative by choosing to focus its attention on these two individuals.

There's another thing that the novel does by focusing on these two individuals. The problems that Septimus is undergoing. Now, those problems, we will talk in great detail about them in a subsequent lecture. But right now, we can summarize them as being both mental and physical. And the medical profession at the time that Woolf was writing was only beginning to recognize and appreciate these problems. Now, it was beginning to appreciate and understand something called trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder.

However, it did know and the history of the understanding of PTSD emerges from a recognition that being in traumatic experiences like wars does have an almost invisible and sometimes everlasting impact on individuals who suffer those experiences. So, in the case of Septimus, while the details of the condition and the problem that Septimus was undergoing were not very well known and this becomes the cause of Septimus' suffering. Something was very well known, which was that Septimus was involved in the war.

Now, this becomes a sort of foil. Septimus becomes a foil for Clarissa when we compare how the war occupied a very big and obvious place in the public consciousness and how the experience of being ill did not occupy a comparable chunk of the public consciousness. That is to say, to briefly recall the arguments that Virginia Woolf had made in the essay *On Being Ill*. While wars are talked about a great deal and people understand and sympathize with the consequences and the suffering that wars entail, a similar appreciation and recognition of the experiences of being ill is absent from contemporary literature as well as writing more generally. The relationship, in the narrative between Clarissa's character, between what we know about Clarissa and what we don't know about Septimus, the dynamic this creates addresses directly the problem that Virginia Woolf writes about in *On Being Ill*. That is to say, everything that we don't know about Septimus' condition, that is to say, when we struggle to understand why Septimus is failing to get the kind of care and treatment that he so sorely needs, we see reflected and mirrored in a more heightened manner in Clarissa's character.

In the case of Clarissa, we are privy to some information. We know that she has suffered from influenza in the recent past. Because of that, her heart has weakened. We know that even though she has recovered, she has survived, she still experiences many long-lasting after effects. She is often quite white, she is quite pale, sometimes she is very weak and the

fear and the fact of death is ever-present. So, in a very important way, we will better understand the novel if we can understand how, it is not just that Clarissa is a foil for Septimus, but rather Septimus is a foil also for Clarissa. Now, the latter perspective that the war veterans' experiences become a threshold or a lens which magnify for us and clarify for us the experiences of suffering from influenza. This will become a much more powerful way of expanding our horizons of sympathy.

So, we can graduate from treating one character as a foil for another and transition from that position to seeing, to understanding suffering, and illness in a much more composite and wide manner. And ultimately, this is the novel's larger goal. The goal of the novel is to take human experience and to expand the reader's perspective on how they can understand human experiences. There was a sort of injustice going on in the way public sympathy skewed disproportionately towards the experiences and the sufferings of war, but did not look with as much honesty and as much care at the experiences of being ill. The novel addresses this injustice, addresses this unequal distribution of public sympathy through bringing together these two characters on one street of London on a very clear morning of June. Now, with that preface, we will now return to the novel and we will continue reading the experiences and the thoughts that Clarissa had as she walks down Bond Street and as she looks at the various shops, trades people and just normal life around her. Woolf writes, and I quote,

Her only gift was knowing people almost by instinct, she thought, walking on. Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; All this must go on without her. Did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?

Now, this is only one of the many, many references to mortality, death and dying which we will come across in this novel. Now, the interesting thing is that these references to death will be much more ever-present not in reference to war or not in reference to more obviously dangerous and obvious markers of physical violence, but rather these references to mortality, death and decay will pop up in the most unexpected places such as this. This is unexpected because just a moment before, we have seen how much Clarissa has been enjoying herself, remembering the shops where her father used to buy his suits, looking at fishmongers where she's admiring a freshly cut piece of salmon placed on an ice block, and just generally rejoicing in the exuberance of life around her. Now, in the midst of such exuberance, Clarissa gets this thought that she is happy, not in a blind or an unconscious manner, but she is happy despite and because of her consciousness that all of this will cease

absolutely, that what she is happy about and happy for, she will soon lose the ability to experience that happiness. Not only that she will die, but the material world around her, which human beings have constructed, it will eventually be succeeded. It will succumb. It will give up its hold on this earth to the growth of nature and the natural world. Now, this idea that everything that gives us happiness will end, that death will consume everything, in itself might be a cause for despair, but in Clarissa's case, it is actually a cause for greater calm, not happiness, but a degree of peace. And Clarissa gets peace from knowing that what exists around her will not last forever and therefore the happiness that it provides her is even more valuable because it is going to be so short-lived.

Now, while walking, she comes across a bookstore and notices a book that is kept open in the display window, and here is what she reads:

But what was she dreaming as she looked into Hatchard's shop window? What was she trying to recover? What image of white dawn in the country, as she read in the book spread open: Fear no more the heat of the sun, nor the furious winter's rages. This late age of 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.

Now, the two sentences of poetry in the centre of this passage are from Shakespeare's play, *Cymbeline*, and they refer to two characters who are lying supposedly dead in front of the audience. And the speaker of these lines is describing and consoling characters who they think, that is the speaker and the audience think, have died.

Now, one of these characters is Imogen, who is not actually, not in fact dead, but merely unconscious because she has ingested a kind of potion. But of course, not everyone knows this and so to the knowledge of everyone in that scene in Shakespeare's play, these two characters are dead and to the dead or the dying, the speaker of these lines speaks these consoling words. And what is the consolation that's offered to dead or dying individuals? That they should fear no more the heat of the sun, nor the furious winter's rages.

Now, these are only two lines that have been taken out of a longer speech and it is very telling that Clarissa remembers these two lines. Or not only does she remember these two lines, but these are the two lines that strike her as remarkable. These are the two lines that ingrain themselves into her consciousness. And these are the two lines that the narrator reproduces for us. These are the two lines that the narrator chooses to have us visualize Clarissa thinking, remembering and going over.

Now, after this moment, when she comes across these lines in the bookshop's display window, she will remember and quote and recite to herself these two lines at least four or five times in the remainder of the novel. which goes to show how deeply Clarissa herself was looking for a kind of consolation. Now, what kind of consolation is this? This is a consolation that seeks to reconcile two forms of suffering, which both lead to the inevitable end of all human life, that is death. But there is a fundamental difference between the cause of death in these two kinds.

Now, in Shakespeare's play, the two characters who are lying dead, one of them has died of a wound from a sword, that is to say, a weapon of military conflict and warfare. The other individual is a woman who has not experienced that kind of military conflict, but is still lying on her deathbed, supposedly. So, this contrast between death from military conflict and death from so-called normal life, it speaks directly to the experience that Clarissa has recently undergone and more importantly has witnessed all around her. And not just Clarissa, but pretty much the whole of England, as has the whole of Western Europe and North America, due to the pandemic. And the reconciliation that Clarissa is looking for seeks to combine these two forms of suffering in some way. And the answer that she finds in Shakespeare is that both these forms of suffering may lead to death, and death actually has a great deal of comfort. There is a reduction in the fear in the heat of the sun as well as the bitter chill of the winter. So, death as a source of comfort. This comes to Clarissa from the window of a bookshop while she is walking and admiring all of these very tony grocery stores and upmarket shopping plazas.

Now, immediately after that, there's a reference to illness and how Clarissa has been struggling to find a modicum of normalcy throughout her everyday life, given her recent experience with influenza. Woolf writes, and I quote,

It rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster. to hear twigs cracking and feel hoofs planted down in the depths of that leaf-encumbered forest, the soul, never to be content quite or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be stirring, this hatred which, especially since her illness, had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine, gave her physical pain, and made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well in being loved and making her home delightful rock quiver and bend as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots.

Now this paragraph describes most accurately and with the highest degree of clarity the combination of hope and despair, which arrives from an awareness of the vulnerability of

the human body, a vulnerability of which Virginia Woolf, like her protagonist, Clarissa, had become very painfully aware in the early decades of the 20th century. The key sense here is that on one hand, there is death lurking at the corner. There are death takes the form of a monster. But this monster has a very particular kind of quality. It is not a real monster. It is not a monster that can be seen or felt or understood and then blocked. It is a sort of specter. It is a hazy and very intangible sort of monster. That is one thing. Now, sometimes it can be felt in the soul, right? And, the presence of this monster in the soul is described as an animal with hooves who tears down the leaf encumbered forest of the soul. And further, but this is not the only manifestation of the monster. This monster also manifests in a kind of physical pain. There is hurt in her spine. This is the pain in the spine refers to a very common symptom of influenza, which is a lot of muscular pain, fever, body ache, muscular pain. These are symptoms that all human bodies display when there's a virus that's making its way through it.

So, a very, very visceral reminder of how long the after effects of influenza last in the human body and how deeply aware an individual like Clarissa was. Further, what makes this monster so pervasive and what makes the after effects of influenza so much to be dreaded is the sense that even when it is not present, that is to say, even when there are no physical symptoms, such as muscular pain or other physical symptoms, even when there is the complete absence of pain and the presence of pleasure, love, etc. pleasure in beauty, friendship, the experience of being well, being loved, making her home delightful, etc. Even when Clarissa was engaging in these kinds of so-called pleasure, pure happiness, these were made impure.

There was something very contaminated about the kind of pleasure and happiness Clarissa experienced, given that she had, in the recent past, experienced the pain of influenza. So, this is a visibilization and a metaphorization of sickness and it describes how big a presence, the influenza had become in the consciousness. It was a psychological presence. Even though Clarissa is no longer sick, she continues to remember and fear the experience of being sick and that leads to a different tinge in her perception of happiness.

Now, we will return to these psychological factors when we read more about Septimus, because the key difference between Clarissa and Septimus is that while in the case of Clarissa, we understand the psychological implications of having been sick, in the case of Septimus, the knowledge versus ignorance equation is reversed. In the case of Septimus, we know that he has been through war, but we completely fail to know that even though he has been through war, he still experiences the war. And through this contrast, the novel



achieves its empathetic vision of recognizing and describing a wide variety of human experience.

Now, while Clarissa is making her way down these streets, while she is admiring the shops, and while she is deriving a great deal of happiness, tinged, of course, with a kind of despair, we encounter Septimus. Clarissa does not see Septimus, but Clarissa encounters a traffic jam on the street because there is a car that backfires, which produces a sound like a gunshot and a lot of people gather because the sound is so alarming and people find out that it was the prime minister who was driving down that car and the car malfunctioned or somehow produced this sound. Now, because of the commotion, Septimus could not cross the street. This is what the narrator tells us and this is how the novel brings these two characters in proximity. We will continue reading in the next lecture about how the narrator introduces Septimus, but for now we should note how deeply ingrained in the architecture and the map of London this novel is.

It brings together these characters. In fact, these characters are brought together precisely because they were using the same street in this locality of Westminster in London.

We will continue in the next lecture.

Thank you!